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Measuring Gaps in Customer Service at Spas:

Are we offering our customers what they want?

Patricia Mittelstadt

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## PART ONE

### Introduction

In the United States, people are always looking for methods of relaxation in the fast paced environment we currently inhabit. An example of these methods is visiting a spa. According to the International Spa Association (ISPA), in 2006 spa revenue in the United States was \$9.4 million. Statistics also show that 1 in 4 Americans have been to a spa (International Spa Association, 2007).

Spas are a way for people to relax, escape, decompress, and vacation. A key component to a spa is the environment that is offered. (P. Melton, personal communication, April 10, 2008). Within that spa environment, people expect a great facility, great treatments, great amenities, and a great staff offering exceptional customer service.

According to G. Summers (personal communication, April 8, 2008), Regional Spa Director for the Morgan's Hotel Group, clients are looking for exceptional customer service from the moment they make their appointment to the time they leave. The service they receive from the employees will set the stage for the guests' experience during and after their treatment, and if they choose to return. A marketing team can have a brand or marketing campaign that is successful at bringing people in, however if the level of service is not there from that first staff encounter (either by phone or in person) the likelihood of a person to return to the establishment diminishes.

In service industry businesses, such as spas, customer service is the aspect that will make or break your business. It is the component that will get you a write- up in "Us Weekly" or a "For Sale" sign on your front door. If businesses do not listen to their clientele, then what are they in business for? Management needs to take a step back to see what their clients expect and give it to them. It seems like an easy concept, but one that is most forgotten. In knowing all of this about spas and its clientele, are we really offering the clientele what they want?

### *Purpose*

Currently, there is no academic standard or format that spas use to rate themselves against other spas, not is there one for spas to rate themselves on improvements based on previous surveys. This paper will offer a format for each individual spa and groups of spas, to find what the clientele's expectations are. It will also determine if the spa is meeting or exceeding these expectations, and will create a format for all spas to use, based on the SERQUAL analysis developed by Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991). This tool will allow spas to survey their customers to see if their offerings are what is expected, and where they need to improve. Once completed, a group of spas could analyze and compare results.

### *Justifications*

This paper will create a format for all spas to be able to use gap analysis. For the purpose of this paper, gap analysis is the difference between what customers expect to receive compared to what is actually received in terms of customer service. Analysis shows this has been done for restaurants; however, it has not been done for spas. Customer service is such an important standard in the spa business; this format for doing gap analysis is relevant and is needed for the spa industry. It will set the standard in customer service gap analysis for spas. In having this tool for doing gap analysis for spas it will allow spas to provide their customers what their expectations are and a format for comparisons to similar spas.

### *Constraints*

It is imperative to create a forum for people to survey. You do not want to hinder the spa experience by soliciting people to take the survey when they walk in the door, or when they are leaving. Your guests need to enter and exit the spa feeling relaxed and refreshed. You will want to collect surveys upon the reservation stage of a guests visit. Ask them to fill it out before they arrive.

Then, send the second part of the survey after they have left. An incentive to complete both parts will be helpful in getting these complete. For example, a discount to return or a special at home spa gift to be sent upon completion of both surveys.

### *Glossary*

Customer service is defined as “the provision of service to customers before, during and after a purchase” (Wikipedia, 2007).

The origin of the spa is not always agreed upon. Some theories are that spa comes from the Walloon word for fountain, “espa”, which derived from the name of a Belgium town where a hot spring was found in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Tubwegen & Linden, 2002). It has also been said that spa comes from “spagere”, a Latin word, meaning to scatter, sprinkle, or moisten (Tubwegen et al, 2002). Others have said that the word comes from an acronym, “Sanitas per aquas”, meaning health through water (Tubwegen et al, 2002).

Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml (1988) use the terms reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy throughout their articles, they are defined as follows:

Reliability: “Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately” (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1988, p. 23).

Tangibles: “Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel” (Parasuraman et al, 1988, p. 23).

Responsiveness: “Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service” (Parasuraman et al, 1988, p. 23).

Assurance: “Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence” (Parasuraman et al, 1988, p. 23).

Empathy: Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers” (Parasuraman et al, 1988, p. 23).

### *Types of Spas*

The following is a list of different spa types, defined by the International Spa Association:

**Club Spa:** A facility whose primary purpose is fitness and offers a variety of professionally administered spa services on a daily basis.

**Cruise Ship Spa:** A spa aboard a cruise ship providing professionally administered spa services, fitness and wellness components, and spa cuisine menu choices.

**Day Spa:** A spa offering a variety of professionally administered spa services to clients on a daily basis.

**Destination Spa:** A destination spa is a facility with the primary purpose of guiding individual spa-goers to develop healthy habits. Historically a seven-day stay, this lifestyle transformation can be accomplished by providing a comprehensive program that includes spa services, fitness activities, wellness education, healthful cuisine, and special interest programming.

**Medical Spa:** A facility that operates under the full-time, on-site supervision of a licensed health care professional. Their primary purpose is to provide comprehensive medical and wellness care in an environment that integrates spa services, as well as traditional, complimentary, and/or alternative therapies and treatments. The facility operates within the scope of practice of its staff, which can include both Aesthetic/Cosmetic and Prevention/Wellness procedures and services.

**Mineral Springs Spa:** A spa offering an on-site source of natural mineral, thermal, or seawater used in hydrotherapy treatments.

**Resort/Hotel Spa:** A spa owned and operated within a resort / hotel providing professionally administered spa services, fitness and wellness components, and spa cuisine. In addition to the leisure

guest, this is a great place for business travelers who wish to take advantage of the spa experience while away from home.

## PART TWO

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

If relationships are not built with your customer, you will not have any business. Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml (1991) state that “customer relationships are central to exceeding customer expectations” (p. 44). Good customer service is the key to building lasting relationships with your customers. It is the “glue” that holds a service industry business, such as a spa, together. Personal perception is irrelevant in comparison to the guests’ perception because, “customers are the sole judge of service quality” (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1990, p. 29). If the customer perception is that your company is not up to par with their level of customer service then you, as a company, are wrong, and they, the customer, are right. The customer has the power not to return, and the possibility of losing the guests’ business is evident.

#### *Executive Gap*

A company always wants to believe the best in their company as evidenced in the article *The Quality Gap* where “seventy percent of the executives said their hotels met customer expectations ‘all the time’ or ‘almost all the time’” (Anonymous, 1993, p. 12). However, the same article also found that this “conclusion was shared by only 40 percent of hotel guests in general” (Anonymous, 1993, p. 12). With this gap in expected levels of customer service from the executive level to the guests, there is no doubt that this gap exists with front line employees as well. Frontline employees have the most interactions with guests. If high level executives think guests are getting what they want “all the time” or “almost all the time”; there are definitely missed opportunities to improve customer retention and overall guest satisfaction with the company.

In that same group of guests, “more than four out of five (84 percent) believe that companies value profit over quality” (Anonymous, 1993, p. 12). If a customer has the perception that a company values them for their wallet, rather than as a guest, something is missing in terms of the message being delivered to its guests. Companies need to be cognizant of the messages they are delivering via employees, facilities, marketing, etc. to ensure it is the message they want delivered is what the guest is receiving. This is the message guests’ walk away with and pass on to other potential and future guests. The message that should be delivered in everything a company does is one that shows how much they value their guests.

In the same article, all of the executives from the companies that were discussed felt their organization was perceived in a much more positive way than was actually the case (Anonymous, 1993, p.12). This perception gap from the company to the guests needs to be changed. Executives need to be realistic with what their company is offering their guests in terms of service and give the guests what they want. They need to be listening to their guests, and not hearing what they want. There is always something bigger and better being built. If companies do not increase their service levels based on guest’s expectations, guests will go elsewhere.

### *Customer Satisfaction*

In the article *The Quality Gap* (1993) guests were “more satisfied” with the physical plant of the hotel than the actual service they received from the employees of the hotel (Anonymous, p. 12). Guests who are more satisfied with your establishment from a facility perspective, show room for improvement when it comes to levels of customer service. A spa can be the best in terms of facility and amenities. What is going to make them return once they have seen it? If customer service is not being delivered correctly from the spa, nothing will bring them back?

Ellis and Pizam (1999) found that “customer satisfaction is essential for corporate survival” (p. 326). If a company wants to survive in the service industry, they must stand out above the rest. There is no time for companies to be lackadaisical with their customer service policies, standards, and training. If service companies want to keep their customers, they must give the customers what they demand.

### *Customer Expectations*

Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991) found that price was a key influence for customer’s expectation (p. 40). If a customer can go somewhere else where the facility may not be as good, but the service is better and less expensive then they will go elsewhere. In the same article they discussed that guests do not feel a lower priced option is no excuse for lower levels of customer service, however they felt the more the guest pays the higher their expectations are (Parasuraman et al, 1991, p. 40). If a company puts out a high price point, they better deliver on the service. Customers will no longer put up with bad customer service from a company’s employees, regardless of the price point. There is always a company with a better price, and better service.

Customers expect that when they walk into the door they will be taken care of not pushed aside, “simply put, customers expect service companies to do what they are supposed to do” (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml, 1991, p. 40). When walking into a spa they want to be treated “first-class”, not like “second class citizens”. They want to companies to deliver on the promise on the expectation. Customers also “expect fundamentals, not fanciness; performance, not empty promises” (Parasuraman et al, 1991, p. 40). When customers go to a place like a spa they are “paying good money, and the company should provide good service in exchange” (Parasuraman et al, 1991, p. 40). Customers are using their discretionary income to pay for this extravagance. Spas are not a necessity, but a “treat”. If a spa is not going to live up to an expectation, they are going to find a better “treat”.

## *Survey Method*

### *SERVQUAL*

SERVQUAL was created by Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991) to measure and analyze the gap between expectations customers have what they are receiving. They found that “customer service expectations can be categorized into five overall dimensions: reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy” (p. 41). They said that “while reliability is largely concerned with the *service outcome*, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are more concerned with the *service process*” (Parasuraman et al, 1991, p. 41). Parasuraman et al (1991) also found that while “customers judge the accuracy and dependability (i.e. reliability) of the *delivered* service, they judge the other dimensions as the service is *being delivered*” (p. 41). With this overall process of judgment by the customer a spa will be able to get a more accurate picture of what their customer’s expectations are and deliver. A spa will be able to look at all the categories created, determine which category, or categories, their customers find most important and then compare that to how they delivered in those areas. They will be able to see if they are delivering to expected levels or falling short. If the spa is falling short they will be able to take corrective action to make sure next time they meet that expected level.

Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991) research from *Understanding Customer Expectations of Service* (p. 41) article suggests “that although reliability is the most important dimension in *meeting* customer expectations, the process dimensions (especially assurance, responsiveness, and empathy) are most important in *exceeding* customer expectations” (Parasuraman et al, 1991, p. 41). For each spa it may be different. The research done prior is to be used as a guideline for spa. Research prior to this was used for restaurants, so one could not expect the same outcomes for a spa, although they are similar.

Consistent customer is another key element to meeting and exceeding service expectations. “Customers access service by comparing the service they receive (perceptions). A company can achieve a strong reputation for quality service only when it consistently meets customer service expectations” (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1990, p. 29). It is not good enough to deliver some of the time. Companies must deliver great service all the time. This is the only way to ensure customers return.

A company has significant opportunities “to improve their service reputations simply by delivering a higher percentage of the time the basic service customer’s think they are buying” (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml, 1991, p. 41). With the surveys presented in this paper, spas will be able to get an understanding of what their customers are expecting and compare it to what is being delivered. It will be able to give them the edge on customer service to put them, and keep them, at the top.

## PART THREE

### Introduction

#### *Methodology*

Utilizing the SERVQUAL customer service analysis, two surveys will be created (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The first will measure customer service expectations. The second will measure customer satisfaction after the service was provided. Both surveys are based on service dimensions created by Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991), but changed to verbiage relative to the spa environment. Where they discuss telephone companies in the first of the two surveys, spa has been substituted. For the second of the two surveys, the main parts of the surveys were not changed because it discusses “XYZ Company”. Each individual spa would put their name in this area.

Demographic and prior spa history questions were also asked at the end of each survey. These questions included: age, sex, annual income range, residence, and if they visited a spa in the last year, and if so to list those spas. These demographic questions will allow a spa to determine if there are trends based on age, sex, income, or regional location. The spa history questions could be looked at to see if regular spa goers have different expectations than someone who has never been to a spa or someone who does not go to a spa on a regular basis.

The first survey will be given prior to a client receiving any treatment, and if at all possible, prior to entering the spa. Ideally, the client will be asked if they can provide an email address or home address so that a survey could be emailed or mailed to them. If an email address or home address is not given, the guest could be asked to fill out the survey when they check in for their appointment. Kiosks could be set up in the lobby of the spa so guests could complete the survey upon arrival. With all three methods of delivery for the first survey, an incentive should be given to complete the survey.

Incentives could be a discount on the service they currently have booked, a discount on an additional service of their choosing or one established by the spa, or a take away gift from the spa. These incentives should also be tracked to find out how many people are completing the survey and redeeming their discount or gift. Special promotion codes would be set up in the system the spa is using to be able to track this for each individual person.

When the client finishes their appointment and is checking out, they will be asked if they would fill out a follow-up survey by doing it right then at a kiosk or by emailing it or sending it in the mail. Keep in mind it is ideal to keep the actual completion of the surveys out of the spa, so the experience of being at the spa is not interrupted.

With the completion of the second survey an additional incentive, or thank you, should be offered. This incentive could be more tailored to the guest that completed the survey. At this point you would have both of their surveys and could make sure to offer the guest something that they would want based on the answers to their surveys. If the spa finds that “tangibles” are more important to a guest, an item or service from the spa that relates back to “tangibles” would be given as a thank you. For example, different aromatherapy blends could be created that relate back to one of the five dimensions. These personalized aromatherapy blends could then be used in a massage that you offer at a discounted price for these “special guests” that have completed both surveys and then also give them a lotion of the same blend. This way you are customizing your incentive to what your customer’s expectations are. This incentive would also be tracked for redemption at the spa.

Once completed, analysis of both surveys, individually and together, can be done using regression analysis. You will need to determine from the first survey what is important to the guests, so it can then be analyzed with what the customer satisfaction survey says was experienced. After all

analyses are completed, a spa could then take the information and use it to create new customer service standards, tweak the amenities, or make changes to the facilities.

The spa could also do analysis on the demographic information collected. A spa could determine from which region they pull most of their business, or if certain regions have certain expectations. Spas could also look at the expectations of certain income levels, age brackets, or if there are different expectations based on gender. All of this analysis would be useful for a spa to improve their service quality.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Since this is just the format for spas to use to analyze gaps in customer service the first step in future research would be to have a spa conduct the surveys and do the analysis. A follow-up paper could then be written with the results and outcomes. A paper from this could also be written detailing an action plan to correct the deficiencies in customer service at the spa.

To take this another step further, research could be done with a large group of spas. Results could be compared to find similarities in spa customers. Trend analysis could then be done by region or demographic characteristics.

Employee participation in customer service and the development of a survey to include employee thoughts and perceptions on customer service could also be done in conjunction with this. A study of focus groups after the information found from doing the SERQUAL analysis could also be beneficial.

Once analysis at a particular spa has been done on a regular basis and trends found a spa could conduct focus groups with their clientele to take the service one step further. Creation of a format for this would also be a good topic for discussion in a paper.

### *Conclusion*

Results will vary from spa to spa depending on their customer base, customer expectations, and the level of customer service given. Each spa would need to determine individually the standard they wish to set. One spa may feel a certain percentage level of given customer service is acceptable, while another spa may feel that level would be too high or too low. Spas will also find that what one customer base expects and feels is important, is different from another spa and therefore will need to concentrate on that area to improve scores.

Customer service is a key component to any spa. Management needs to stay on top of what their clientele wants, or the client will go elsewhere. Using a spa is not a necessity, but a luxury. People use their discretionary income to visit the spa and therefore have high expectations of what experience they will have. If a spa wants to continue to attract and keep their clientele, they need to be tuned into their clients' wants and needs and be willing to change them accordingly.

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## Appendix A

“Insert Spa Name Here”

## Customer Service Expectation Survey

**Directions:** Based on your experiences as a customer of spas, please think about the kind of spa that would deliver excellent quality of repair service. Think about the kind of spa with which you would be pleased to do business. Please show the extent to which you think such a spa would possess the feature described by each statement. If you feel a feature is *not at all essential* for excellent spas such as the one you have in mind, circle the number “1”. If you feel a feature is *absolutely essential* for excellent spas, circle “5”. If your feelings are less strong circle one of the numbers in the middle. There are no right or wrong answers—all we are interested in is a number that truly reflects your feelings regarding spas that would deliver excellent quality of service.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1. Excellent spas will have modern-looking equipment.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
2. The physical facilities at excellent spas will be visually appealing.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
3. Employees of excellent spas will be neat-appearing.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
4. Materials associated with the service (such as brochures and menus) will be visually appealing in an excellent spas.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
5. When excellent spas promise to do something by a certain time, will do so.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
6. When customers have a problem, excellent spas will show a sincere interest in solving it.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
7. Excellent spas will perform the service right the first time.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
8. Excellent spas will provide their services at the time they promise to do so.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
9. Excellent spas will insist on error-free records.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
10. Employees of excellent spas will tell customers exactly when services will be performed.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
11. Employees of excellent spas will give prompt service to customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
12. Employees of excellent spas will always be willing to help customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
13. Employees of excellent spas will never be too busy to respond to customer requests.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
14. The behavior of employees of excellent spas will instill confidence with customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
15. Customers of excellent spas will feel safe in their transactions.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
16. Employees of excellent spas will be consistently courteous with customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
17. Employees of excellent spas will have the knowledge to answer customer questions.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
18. Excellent spas will give customers individual attention.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
19. Excellent spas will have operating hours convenient to all their customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
20. Excellent spas will have employees who give customers personal attention.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
21. Excellent spas will have their customers’ best interest at heart.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
22. The employees of excellent spas will understand the specific needs of their						

customers.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

23. Please state your age: \_\_\_\_\_ years.

25. Sex (please circle one): Female Male

26. In which state do you currently reside? \_\_\_\_\_

27. Annual income (please circle one):

Under \$25,000

\$25,001 - \$50,000

\$50,001 - \$100,000

\$100,001 - \$200,000

Over \$200,001

28. Have you been a customer at a spa in the past year? (Circle One) Yes No

29. If you answered "yes" to question 28, at which spas have you been a customer at in the last year?

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Appendix B

“Insert Spa Name Here”

Service Survey

**Directions:** The following set of statements relate to your feelings about XYZ Spa. For each statement, please show the extent to which you believe XYZ Spa has the feature described by the statement. If you feel a feature is *not at all essential* for excellent spas such as the one you have in mind, circle the number “1”. If you feel a feature is *absolutely essential* for excellent spas, circle “5”. If you feelings are less strong circle one of the numbers in the middle. There are no right or wrong answers—all we are interested in is a number that truly reflects your feelings regarding XYZ Spa’s quality of service.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| 1. XYZ has modern looking equipment.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 2. XYZ’s physical facilities are visually appealing.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 3. XYZ’s employees are neat appearing.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 4. Materials associated with the service (such as brochures and menus) are visually appealing at XYZ. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 5. When XYZ promises to do something by a certain time, it does so.                                   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 6. When you have a problem, XYZ shows a sincere interest in solving it.                               | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 7. XYZ performs the service right the first time.   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 8. XYZ provides its services at the time it promises to do so.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 9. XYZ insists on error-free records.   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 10. Employees of XYZ tell you exactly when services will be performed.                                | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 11. Employees of XYZ give you prompt service.   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 12. Employees of XYZ are always willing to help you.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 13. Employees of XYZ are never too busy to respond to your requests.                                  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 14. The behavior of employees of XYZ instills confidence in customers.                                | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 15. You feel safe in your transactions with XYZ.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 16. Employees of XYZ are never too busy to respond to your requests.                                  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 17. Employees of XYZ have the knowledge to answer your questions.                                     | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 18. XYZ give you individual attention.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 19. XYZ has operating hours convenient to all its customers.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 20. XYZ has employees who give you personal attention.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 21. XYZ has your best interests at heart.   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 22. Employees of XYZ understand your specific needs.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| 23. Please rate how important each of the following is in terms of your perception of XYZ Spa.        |               |

Weigh each category below, in percentages, so that the **total in all five categories is 100%**.

- a. Appearance of equipment and facilities: \_\_\_\_\_%
- b. Reliability: \_\_\_\_\_%
- c. Responsiveness: \_\_\_\_\_%
- d. Assurance: \_\_\_\_\_%
- e. Empathy: \_\_\_\_\_%

24. Please state your age: \_\_\_\_\_ years.

25. Sex (please circle one): Female Male

26. Have you been a customer at XYZ in the past year? (Circle One) Yes No

27. Do you reside in the same city in which XYZ is located? (Circle One) Yes No

28. If you answered "no" to question 27, in which city do you reside? \_\_\_\_\_

29. In what state do you currently reside? \_\_\_\_\_

30. Annual income (please circle one):

Under \$25,000

\$25,001 - \$50,000

\$50,001 - \$100,000

\$100,001 - \$200,000

Over \$200,001

31. Have you been a customer at another spa in the past year? (Circle One) Yes No

32. If you answered "yes" to question 31, at which spas have you been a customer at in the last year?

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