

How to Maximize Customer Service Quality *and* Department Resources Originally published in *Service News*, March 1997

Is your technical support department operating at peak efficiency in delivering service to your customers? Whether you answer 'yes' or 'no,' chances are you haven't looked closely enough at the quality of your department's service delivery to really know. To have an accurate assessment of overall service, your department must look at each service attribute and determine its relative impact on customer satisfaction.

Any service business, whether it's in the retail, consumer or business-to-business sector, can be broken down into individual service attributes. For a technical support department, these attributes would likely include efficiency of call routing, wait times, courtesy of the technician and effectiveness of the solution provided. These attributes, of course, will vary according to the product and/or services the company provides. Service attributes can be categorized based on whether they are *critical* to customer satisfaction, or *add value* once the critical service attributes have been adequately executed. An example can serve to clarify this concept: You're in a fast-food restaurant - "fast" being the operative word - and you've waited almost ten minutes in line just to order your food. After your food is ordered, you have to wait another ten minutes to get your food. You're not happy - you came to the restaurant to get a quick bite to eat. Sure, the place is clean and the employees are courteous and pleasant, and your food is actually pretty good. But if you were asked to rate your overall satisfaction with the restaurant, you'd give it a below average rating. Why? Because the restaurant didn't meet your basic expectation of getting your food quickly. The cleanliness of the restaurant and the courtesy of the employees were nice to have, but they were merely *value-adders*. The critical service attribute was quick order and delivery of your food, and this wasn't met.

This same concept applies to technical support service. There are going to be critical service attributes that must be delivered at a certain level of quality in order to have satisfied customers, and then there are the value-added attributes that add to customer satisfaction *only after* acceptable levels of service have been delivered in the critical service areas.

So how do you determine these attributes? Many service companies, often taking advice from their research firm, will simply ask their customers what are the most important service attributes - e.g., 'how important to you are short wait times?,' 'how important to you is efficiency of the call routing system?' This seems reasonable. However, often customers don't really know to what degree the various service attributes are truly affecting their overall satisfaction. The field of psychology tells us that we often don't know ourselves what motivates our actions. Similarly, we often don't know to what degree an individual service attribute affects our overall satisfaction with a company's service.

A straightforward but very effective method for assessing how service attributes are impacting overall satisfaction is to apply regression analysis to customer satisfaction survey data. Without getting into the statistical details of how it works, what regression analysis does is categorize the department's service attributes as either 'critical' or 'value-added.' These attributes are then weighted based on the strength of the effect they have on overall satisfaction, and the weights are then calculated against the actual survey ratings of each attribute. (The critical attributes, if falling below acceptable levels, will always have priority for attention over value-added attributes). The practical application of this type of analysis is that a department manager gets a clear picture of which service attributes are most important and, with the survey ratings results, can then efficiently allocate department resources (e.g., 'should we focus more resources on technician training or call routing/processing hardware and software?'). This type of approach and analysis can be very powerful, because it provides the information a department manager needs to maximize both customer satisfaction *and* the department's use of its resources.