

**PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMERS ON SERVICE QUALITY OF POST OFFICES
-A COMPARITIVE STUDY**

*Dr.K.Rajeswari **Mrs. K.J.Sunmista

*Associate Professor & Head, Department of Commerce, The SFR College for Women

**Lecturer, Department of Commerce, The SFR College for Women,

Sivakasi, India.

ABSTRACT

This article based on the research study compares the customers' perceptions of service quality of post offices in Virudhunagar district and Madurai district. Indian postal service provides many services like general or registered mail, parcel post, speed post, express post, e-post and special courier service known as EMS-speed post. They also offer a number of post office savings schemes like National Savings Certificate, Kisan Vikas Patra, Recurring Deposits and Term Deposits. In view of heavy competition from private couriers, alternative modes of communication, measurement and management of service quality has become the motto of this research study. The service quality of post offices is measured using SERVPERF dimensions and service sector based measures. The result of the study shows that the customers of Virudhunagar district are more satisfied with the postal services than that of the customers of Madurai district.

Key words: Customers, Dimensions, Perception, Postal service and quality

INTRODUCTION

Services are increasingly attracting attention from academicians as well as practitioners. The proliferation of services not only provides business opportunities, but also poses high level competitive threats to service marketers. In fact, many researchers and marketers have focused their attention on customer evaluations of services to find ways to improve service quality. However, despite the considerable amount of research under the rubric of service quality that has accumulated over the years, only few studies have examined customer perceptions of service quality in postal services in an international setting and still less in the Indian context.

This issue is of paramount concern to service marketers because the perceived service quality often reflects customers' levels of satisfaction and intention to repatronize the services. If service quality perceptions are standardized, service departments may choose to control costs by standardizing operations and marketing strategies. Service quality is a function of customers' expectations and perceptions about the service. This study compares customers of Virudhunagar district and Madurai district postal service in terms of their service quality perceptions and repatronizing intentions.

GOVERNANCE AND ORGANIZATION OF POSTAL SERVICES

The postal service comes under the Department of Posts which is a part of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology under the Government of India. The apex body of the department is the Postal Service Board. The board consists of a chairman and three members. The three members hold the portfolios of Operations and Marketing, Infrastructure and Financial Services, and Personnel. The Joint Secretary and Financial Advisor to the Board is also a permanent invitee to the Board.

India has been divided into 22 postal circles. Each circle is headed by a Chief Postmaster General. Each Circle is further divided into Regions comprising field units, called Divisions, headed by a Postmaster General. Other functional units like Circle Stamp Depots, Postal Stores Depots and Mail Motor Service may exist in the Circles and Regions. Besides the 22 circles, there is a special Circle called the Base Circle to cater to

the postal services of the Armed Forces of India. The Base Circle is headed by an Additional Director General, Army Postal Service holding the rank of a Major General.

The modern postal service in India is more than 150 years old. In October 1854, all the post offices of Indian sub-continent came under centralized control. In the same year Railway Mail Service was established and India had a network of 701 post offices across the continent. After Independence, the Indian government broadened the vision of the postal system to reach the entire population of the country. Today Indian postal system has a reach that ranges from arid deserts of Rajasthan and Kutch to the icy heights of Laddakh. India has the highest post office in the world in Sikkim at a height of 15,500 feet (postal code – 172114). India possesses the largest postal network in the world with 155,000 post offices spread all over the country as on March 31, 2008, of which 89 per cent are in the rural sector.

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OBJECTIVES

- To examine the customer perceptions of services provided by post offices of two districts in Tamilnadu.
- To assess the effectiveness of existing measures of service quality in predicting customer satisfaction and intention to repatronize the services.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As it is an empirical study to highlight the perceptions of customers of post offices regarding its service quality, it largely depends upon the primary data. The survey was undertaken through an Interview schedule with those who have availed services of post offices from the respondents of both Virudhunagar district and Madurai district. A total of 150 respondents participated from Virudhunagar district and 150 respondents from Madurai district in the survey yielding 300 usable total responses.

The study focuses its attention on service quality perceptions of customers of post offices. The researcher has identified five dimensions of service quality as SERVPERF (service performance) measures. They are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Comfort, operations and safety, conditions of facilities and ease of using the services are the four dimensions taken for analyzing the service quality as service sector based measures.

The perceived service quality of the respondents is measured with the help of 7 point Likert scale. Cronbach’s co-efficient Alpha tool is used to measure the reliability of the dimensions. The alpha values of all the dimensions are either close to or greater than 0.7.(Refer:Table1)

Table 1

Cronbach’s co-efficient Alpha for SERVPERF dimensions		
Dimensions	Cronbach’s co-efficient Alpha	
	Virudhunagar district	Madurai district
Tangibility	0.68	0.73
Reliability	0.85	0.68
Responsiveness	0.71	0.73
Assurance	0.65	0.81
Empathy	0.73	0.74
Cronbach’s co-efficient Alpha for service sector based dimensions		
Dimensions	Cronbach’s co-efficient Alpha	
	Virudhunagar district	Madurai district
Comfort	0.82	0.80
Operations and safety	0.68	0.67
Conditions of facilities	0.73	0.78
Ease of using the services	0.84	0.81

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The respondents of both Virudhunagar district and Madurai district were asked to evaluate the quality of the services provided by the post offices. The results are summarized in Table:2.

Table:2

SERVPERF Measures- Results of t-test				
Variables	Mean		t-value	p-value
	VNR	MDU		
Tangibles				
The postal service has up-to-date equipments	4.45	4.25	1.22	0.23
The physical facilities are visually appealing	4.50	4.17	2.03	0.04
Employees are well dressed and neat	5.50	5.03	2.6	0.01
Reliability				
The postal services keep promises	4.32	4.20	0.69	0.49
The postal service is reassuring	4.05	4.23	-1.01	0.31
The postal service is dependable	4.90	4.51	2.43	0.02
The records are accurately maintained	4.85	4.35	3.12	0.01
Responsiveness				
Prompt service is provided	4.43	4.20	1.16	0.25
Employees are always willing to help customers	4.36	3.81	2.92	0.01
Employees respond to customers requests promptly	4.27	3.76	2.63	0.01
Assurance				
Employees are trustworthy	4.84	4.38	3.08	0.01
There is safety in each postal transaction	4.89	4.25	3.87	0.001
Customers get adequate support	5.13	4.56	3.31	0.001
Empathy				
Customers get individual attention	4.49	3.91	3.16	0.01
Customers' needs are satisfied	4.22	3.40	5.46	0.001
The operating hours are convenient	4.39	3.19	6.60	0.001
Service sector based measures- Results of t-test				
Comfort				
Adequate seating facility in post office	4.69	4.18	5.06	0.001
Comfort of the seats and tables for writing purposes	4.88	4.01	4.45	0.001
Degree of crowding in queues	4.28	4.30	6.07	0.001
Operations and safety				
Safety from crime while handling with cash	3.88	4.88	-5.14	0.001
Swiftness in delivery of parcels, money orders etc	4.72	3.77	5.75	0.001
Response to complaints	3.30	3.98	-1.04	0.30
Conditions of facilities				
Cleanliness of post office	4.28	3.28	-0.42	0.68
Condition of franking machine, computers etc	3.69	4.02	-1.74	0.08
Ease of using the service				
Awareness about the services available	3.75	4.24	-2.42	0.02
Availability of information at the post office	3.30	3.98	-1.04	0.30
Ease of getting information from post master, post men and postal agents	3.19	3.14	6.07	0.001

It is inferred from the above table that on many of the SERVPERF measures, the average ratings of the respondents of Virudhunagar district were significantly higher than those of the respondents of Madurai district. The respondents of Madurai district are at the high level of satisfaction regarding the operations and safety and ease of using the services of post offices, from the dimension of service sector based measures.

CONCLUSION

The status of any organization depends upon its personality, perceptions of the customers and the quality of the services offered. As regards the service quality perceptions on post offices, the positive attitude is greater than the negative attitude. The results of the study indicate that the respondents of Virudhunagar district are generally more satisfied with their postal service than the respondents of Madurai district on most of the SERVPERF dimensions. However, the service sector based measures produce many interesting contrasts between the two groups of customers. Specifically respondents of Madurai district are satisfied with the safety from crime while handling with cash, response to complaints, awareness about the services available and availability of information at the post office. Though the functions of post offices are procedural and its services are based on government norms, the perceptions of the customers differ. So the post offices should make an effort to recognize the perceptions of their service to customize services for the needs of customers of different strata.

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