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Published

2006

Conference Title

ANZMAC 2006 Conference Proceedings

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Expectations of Service Responses from Federal Politicians

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Abstract

The service expectation literature is well developed with clearly identified customer expectation determinants. The public sector service expectation literature is, however, under-represented in the literature and there are large gaps in our knowledge. Public sector marketing represents a dichotomy, with public service and electoral office roles being clearly delineated. This dichotomy of roles introduces variations in service expectations that are not empirically explored. This paper reviews the literature and presents electoral office service expectation propositions as a foundation for future research.

Introduction

The drive towards business practices by governmental agencies has led to a structural and procedural change over the last decade. Parallel with this change has been a modification to the politician's perspective of the 'voter', as elected representatives become more 'market oriented' in response to increasingly demanding constituents. The interaction between politicians and their constituents is changing, with politicians remaining connected to their voters throughout their term in office. The politicians' response includes an increasing emphasis on the electoral offices interaction with constituents.

Whilst the elected officials and their representatives in electoral offices are moving towards a market orientation, little is known about the expectations of the people that elected the parliamentary representatives. Do constituents expect their elected representatives to respond to their individual problems? Do they have expectations of the service provided through the electoral office? How do constituents assess the level of service provided by electoral offices? These are significant questions for politicians that desire to move to a market orientation rather than 'tinker' with internal procedures and surface responses. The purpose of this theoretical paper is to explore the service expectation literature in relation to elected political representatives and to develop propositions for exploratory research.

Public Sector Reform

The crux of the ongoing public sector reform has been to remold the public sector to be market oriented by imitating the private sector. There are two approaches to emulate the market orientation of the private sector; improving service quality and, managing service expectations. Australian public sector service quality improvements have (reportedly) been made, but there is little evidence of managing service expectations.

The issue of service expectations has arisen with Australian public sector reform geared toward more business-like and market oriented public sector services (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000). This mirrors the reforms in the UK (Hood, 1995) and US (Osborne and Garbler, 1992). The reforms are based on a fundamental shift from rejecting to embracing private sector business theories and practices (Hood, 1995). The market orientation of the public sector has resulted in citizens being viewed and treated as 'consumers' (Butler and Collins, 1995).

Public sector service is considered a “subfield of services marketing” (Brown, Fisk and Bitner, 1994, p. 21). While the public sector may have adopted the prevailing private sector service language, the implementation and evaluation of service quality have not been adequately considered due to problematic issues associated with applying profit oriented theories to public sector organisations (Buckley, 2003). A challenge in public sector organisations is the additional complexity of irreconcilable goals, unidentified outputs, and a lack of understanding of the intention and impact of private sector management practices.

To achieve market orientation, it is argued that the quality of public sector services “...must be brought into line with market expectations, by means of improvements where necessary or by the better management of expectations” (Butler and Collins, 1995, p. 90). Many improvements have been made to the Australian public sector, particularly over the last ten years (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000). To date, these improvements have focused on internal procedures, with limited focus on the market and constituents – the ‘market orientation’.

Managing expectations, especially the determinants of public sector service expectations, is not evident in the literature. Whilst research on service quality in the private sector has increased markedly over the last twenty years, it has only been investigated at a conceptual level within the public sector, and it requires much deeper examination (Buckley, 2003).

Political services present a dichotomy of roles, both of which have been influenced by public sector reforms. The public service sector advises the political legislative process and implements the policies of the political party in power. Electoral offices are the constituent marketing arm of the elected politician and their parties and, as such, are not involved in the legislative process. Australian electoral offices do not exhibit the level of marketing sophistication of their North American counterparts and are now becoming more aware of the need to remain visible and in contact with constituents throughout their political tenure. For constituents, the electoral office represents a ‘checks and balances’ resource for service failure resulting in unsatisfactory outcomes in public service interactions. As such, the constituent approaches the electoral office when they are dissatisfied and/or angry over public service responses and this influences their electoral office service expectations.

Political Marketing and Constituency Service

The purpose of political marketing is to gain attention, votes, and support for policy (Kotler, Adam, Brown, and Armstrong, 2003). The politician-electorate relationship is essentially a marketing one that should include a constituent focus (O’Cass, 1996) employing service quality theory to understand the determinants of constituents’ service expectations.

Constituency service is a “classic politician role” (Kotler and Kotler, 1999, p.11). Recently, Australian constituent service has moved from an election-centric limited focus to also incorporating ongoing services through electoral offices. There is a developing appreciation that ongoing service delivery to constituents and the electorate needs to be regarded more broadly as a crucial part of a MP’s marketing regime (Butler and Collins, 2001). However, further research is required to understand service quality from a constituent’s perspective (Butler and Collins, 2001). The effect of respondents’ political ‘leaning’ and perception of politicians also plays a role in evaluating the electorate service and this requires exploration.

Constituency work is crucial to Australian political representation, yet it has tended to be neglected in the literature (Studlar and McAllister, 1996). In a study of 68 Federal MPs, it was established that constituency work includes constituency service, local party work, and parliamentary travel. Constituency service makes up two thirds of all constituency work, and over half of constituency service relating to service by electorate offices. This generally involves attending to constituents' problems and MPs allocate funding for this purpose.

Heitshusen, Young, and Wood (2005) examined the focus Federal Government MPs place on constituency service by interviewing 44 MPs, concluding that 43% of MPs have a high focus, 30% have a medium focus, and 27% have a low focus on constituent service. Interestingly, MPs from marginal electorates have a higher constituency focus.

The extant literature does not address the issue of the determinants of constituents' service expectations of the Federal Government at the electorate office level. Given the key role of electoral offices in managing constituent expectations and 'between election' relationships, this gap in understanding constituent expectations is surprising and should be addressed.

Customers' Service Expectations

There has been significant development of services marketing theory in line with the increasing contribution of services to economies (Bateson, 1999). Customer expectations are discussed to varying degrees by numerous authors in the service quality and customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction literature (Anderson, 1973; Bahia, Paulin, and Perrien, 2000; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, and Zeithaml, 1993; Brady and Cronin, 2001; Brown, Fisk, and Bitner, 1994; Buttle, 1995; Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins, 1987; Cronin and Taylor, 1992, 1994; Finn and Kayande, 1998; Gronroos, 1993; Oliver, 1980, 1997; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985, 1988, Patterson and Johnson, 1993; Schembri and Sandberg, 2002; Teas, 1993, 1994; Tsiros, Mittal and Ross, 2004; Westbrook and Reilly, 1983; Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins, 1983; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, 1993).

'Service quality' is a broad outlook towards an organisation and 'customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction' relates to individual transactions which eventually translate to service quality (Patterson and Johnson, 1993). Expectations are relevant in assessing both service quality and customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Patterson and Johnson (1993) propose that the dominant models for both can be integrated, and suggest a model based on expectations that shows how customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction contributes to service quality.

The Determinants of Service Expectations

Initial discussion on the determinants of service expectations emanates from product marketing in the customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction literature (Oliver, 1980, 1997). This principally relates to the disconfirmation paradigm where performance is matched with expectations to establish customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction. The role of expectations in the disconfirmation paradigm provides an impetus to understand the determinants of expectations (Oliver, 1997). Oliver (1980) (citing Helson's 1948 and 1959 research) identifies four broad categories of determinants of expectations - past experience, word of mouth, marketing, and personal characteristics.

The Nordic school proposes a perceived service quality model and suggests that service expectations are influenced by marketer's communication, image, word-of-mouth, consumer needs and consumer education (Gronroos, 1993).

The American school developed the 'gap' model (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985) which considers service quality as the gap between expectations and perceptions and this led to further consideration of the underlying determinants of service expectations. They found ten dimensions of service quality that may influence service expectations.

The issue of expectation standards has been explored by numerous researchers (Boulding *et al.*, 1993; Cadotte, *et al.*, 1987; Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml, 1991; Santos and Boote, 2003; Spreng, MacKenzie and Oslavsky, 1996; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Woodruff *et al.*, 1983; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993). Santos and Boote (2003) summarise the extant literature and described nine different expectation standards, however, this is unwieldy to operationalise and apply to business activities. Zeithaml *et al.*, (1993) conclude that the dimensions of service quality are not determinants of service expectations, but rather criteria to evaluate service quality. This subtle difference becomes important when politicians are learning to 'manage' constituent expectations.

Parasuraman *et al.* (1991) proposed a 'desired service' expectation and 'adequate service' expectation, separated by a 'Zone of Tolerance'. Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) identifies eleven categories of determinants of service expectations: six broad determinants of desired service expectations and five broad determinants of adequate service expectations. Desired service expectations are more 'stable', with adequate service expectations being more 'temporary' in nature and thus subject to variability. These studies are based on the US private sector and the theory has not been explored in a public sector context, for example, a Federal Government electorate office.

Research Propositions:

From a political marketing perspective there is recognition of the importance of an ongoing relationship with constituents. This recognition has been reflected in the procedural and attitudinal changes in electoral offices that interact with and respond to constituent requests. To date, there has been little research into the constituent perspective and constituent expectations of politicians' responses. We know that the desired service expectations are more stable (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993) but we do not know if these apply to constituent expectations of service from electoral offices. Rather than commence research assuming no common determinants, the researchers have elected to ground this research in existing empirical results and identify commonalities and variations in service expectations. Thus:

Proposition 1: The determinants of service expectations identified in the extant literature are similar to the constituents' service expectations of a Federal Government electorate office.

Proposition 2: The determinants of service expectations of a Federal Government electorate office are consistent with the existing 'desired' and 'adequate' classifications.

An assumed variation influencing expectations is the added complexity of constituent political awareness and the political party representing the electorate. These may influence

the constituent's service expectations, particularly when the representative is not from 'your' party. Thus:

Proposition 3: Political considerations influence the determinants of service expectations of a Federal Government electorate office.

Constituents 'normally' approach the electoral office after a failure in public service response, seeking an alternate source of solving the issue. The different context of the electoral office service delivery will influence constituent expectations of the service they will receive from the electoral office, resulting in additional variables that influence service expectations. Thus:

Proposition 4: The public sector 'market' includes unique determinants of service expectations not in current private sector models.

Word of mouth is the principal determinant of service expectations followed by past experience, and then personal needs and external communication which are of equal significance (Webster, 1991). Thus:

Proposition 5: Some determinants of service expectations of a Federal Government electorate office are more significant than others.

Proposition 6: The significance of determinants of service expectations of a Federal Government electorate office are different to the private sector.

These propositions require exploration in the context of constituents obtaining service from Federal representative electorate offices. They are crucial if the federal electoral office wish to complete 'private sector reforms' and model the business practices of industry. Marketing is predicated on an understanding the customer and providing services independent of understanding constituent expectations is fraught with difficulty.

Discussion and Conclusions

Services are increasingly the major component of global and the Australian economy. This has stimulated research and theoretical development on service quality and the nature and determinants of service expectations over the last 25 years. In the same period the Australian public sector services have been reformed to be market oriented. However, this reformation is primarily reflected in the 'provider' perspective, with limited understanding of and consideration for the consumer.

A review of marketing and public sector management literature reveals empirical research results that identify the important determinants of service expectations. These determinants, which have significant managerial implications, are yet to be tested in the public sector, specifically, at the Federal Government electorate office level. As electorate office services are an essential part of political marketing and an increasingly important part of maintaining contact with the constituency, understanding the service expectations of the constituents is fundamental to reforming the services provided.

The purpose of this theoretical paper is to explore the determinants of service expectations in a public sector context, and identify propositions that require exploration to continue reforming the public sector towards 'market orientation'.

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