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## Customer Service Quality as a Strategic Dimension of Marketing Management in Poland's Travel Industry

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the quality of services provided by travel agencies in Poland. Particular attention is given to identifying gaps between customer expectations and perceptions, which are crucial for enhancing competitiveness in the dynamic tourism sector.

**Approach/Methodology/Design:** The research was conducted in 2024 using the SERVQUAL method, a well-established tool for measuring service quality across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The study applied a modified version of the SERVQUAL model to better capture the specific context of travel agencies and the evolving needs of customers in a digitalized service environment.

**Findings:** The results reveal that the overall condition of service quality remains conditional, as perceived performance (P) scores were consistently lower than customer expectations (O). This indicates that the services offered do not fully meet client demands. Among the dimensions assessed, Reliability received the lowest rating after weighting, highlighting serious concerns regarding the consistency and dependability of service delivery. These findings point to critical areas where managerial intervention and strategic improvements are necessary.

**Practical Implications:** The results underscore the importance for travel agencies to focus on strengthening their reliability, as this is the dimension most strongly influencing customer satisfaction and trust. Addressing weaknesses in this area could significantly enhance customer loyalty and competitive advantage. Furthermore, the SERVQUAL-based evaluation provides actionable insights for entrepreneurs, enabling them to design targeted strategies to close service quality gaps.

**Originality/Value:** This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the practical applicability of a modified SERVQUAL approach in the tourism and travel sector, specifically within the context of Polish travel agencies. The findings emphasize its value as a diagnostic tool for optimizing marketing management processes, particularly in an era of rapid digital transformation and shifting customer expectations. The study advocates for the broader application of SERVQUAL in service quality assessment to foster sustainable growth and improved customer experiences in the tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Service quality, SERVQUAL model, travel agencies, customer expectations and perceptions, tourism management.

**JEL classification:** M31, L83, M10, Z32, C38.

**Paper Type:** Case study.

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## **1. Introduction**

Quality is one of the basic factors determining the purchases made by customers (Dębski, Krawczyk, and Dworak 2019; Paliś and Przenzak, 2022). Therefore, providing consumers with services at the highest level is a prerequisite for the survival of a company in an increasingly competitive market (Baum and Kokkranikal, 2008).

Providing services of the highest possible quality is also beneficial for the company from an economic point of view. According to research, "the cost of acquiring a new customer in a tourism company is five times higher than the cost of increasing the quality of services in order to retain the current customer" (Szostak, 2007).

A review of domestic and foreign literature shows that few studies concern the evaluation of customer service in travel agencies (Dziadkowiec, 2000; Wojciechowska-Solis, 2012; 2013; Pachrová and Dolezalová, 2016; Flint and Zaręba, 2020; Wen Rou Xiang, Yong-ki Lee, and Wen Long Wang (2024). This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the practical applicability of a modified SERVQUAL approach in the tourism and travel sector, specifically within the context of Polish travel agencies.

The findings emphasize its value as a diagnostic tool for optimizing marketing management processes, particularly in an era of rapid digital transformation and shifting customer expectations. The study advocates for the broader application of SERVQUAL in service quality assessment to foster sustainable growth and improved customer experiences in the tourism industry by filling the gaps in this area.

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## **2. The Scope and Methods of Research**

The study was carried out in several stages. In the first stage, a review of the literature on the subject was carried out in Poland and abroad (in the Web of Science, Scopus databases).

The basic concepts are explained. In the next stage of the research, the selection of the city was made, which was of a non-random, purposeful, and typical nature of typical units. It was assumed that the research would be carried out in a large city in Poland. Large cities are those that, according to the Central Statistical Office, have at least 100 thousand inhabitants.

In the next stage of the research, 47 entities were searched for in google.com according to the keyword "travel agencies Bydgoszcz". Due to the small size of the general population, it was assumed that the research would be comprehensive. Ultimately, some entities were rejected due to the fact that some offices were liquidated, changed the nature of their activities, carried out only domestic trips or were closed. Therefore, the presented results apply only to 31 travel agency outlets.

The research focused on selected aspects that allow the assessment of the quality of customer service in terms of the information provided by the travel agency employee based on the Servqual method. The study took into account five dimensions used in this method, i.e. relevance, reliability, responsiveness, self-confidence, empathy. A total of 25 selected elements were evaluated, five for each area. The analysis of the obtained results was based on the methods of descriptive statistics.

The research was carried out at the headquarters of travel agencies in 2024. The assessment was carried out using the method of participant observation and direct interviews with the employees of the office by interviewers who had previously declared their interest in going abroad to the south of Europe (countries located in the Iberian, Italian and Balkan Peninsulas).

Interviewers were therefore potential clients of the travel agency. The purpose of the trip was to be a holiday with sightseeing for a period of up to 1 week at any time for 2 participants. The total budget was up to 8000 PLN. Thanks to such assumptions, comprehensive information was obtained, because the interviewers (clients) spent enough time during their stays at travel agencies, while the employees of the agencies were not aware of the research, so they behaved as always.

The weakness, however, is the subjective nature of the research. However, some of the problems pointed out in previous publications (), such as the non-response error or the superficial nature of the research results, have been avoided.

During the study, a measuring instrument was also prepared – an interview scenario and an evaluation questionnaire, verified in pilot studies.

### **3. Selected Methods of Assessing the Quality of Customer Service in Travel Agencies**

Stationary travel agencies should pay more and more attention to the quality of customer service in the era of digitalization. They can carry out research using various methods. The traditional approach includes, first of all, consumer surveys based on original or ready-made questionnaires, surveys or interviews (Dziadkowiak, 2006).

Travel agencies can also use the published results of research carried out by tourism organizations or industry magazines based on surveys of travel agency clients.

An example of such research is the research carried out as part of the “Consumer Quality Leader Project”, which assumes the main goal of selecting Quality Leaders of services and products available on the Polish market. It is a cyclical survey commissioned by the editors of the *Strefa Gospodarki* magazine. In the 2025 edition, the sample size for the tests was over 15000 customers.

The method of sample selection was the quota and purposeful method, taking into account such criteria as age, gender, place of residence. In the category of travel agencies in 2025, Itaka won. The results of these studies are published in various media. The winners receive diplomas, which they flaunt in promotional materials

Another method used to assess the quality of customer service for travel agencies is Servqual Method. The Servqual method was developed in the 1980s by a team of American researchers: A. Parasuramana, V. Zeithaml and L. Berry’ego. It can be used to objectively test the quality of all types of services (Stoma, 2015).

The formula for calculating the Servqual index is as follows:

$$S = P - O$$

*Where: S – the result of the Servqual method,*

*P – customer perception of the service,*

*O – customer expectations from the service, whereby:*

*P = O – desired condition: customers are fully satisfied with the service,*

*P > O – perfect condition: customer perception of the service significantly goes beyond their expectations,*

*P < O – conditional state: customer expectations for the service have not been fully met.*

The authors of the Servqual method have identified five areas of quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988; Trawnicka, 1997; Stasiak-Betlejewska and Borkowski, 2010):

- Materiality - the external appearance of the facility, equipment and staff appearance,
- Reliability - the ability to perform services reliably and accurately,
- Responsiveness - desire to assist customers and ensure prompt service,
- Certainty - having the required skills and knowledge necessary to perform the service,
- Empathy - paying attention, feeling the client's needs

It should be noted that this is a time-consuming method, as it requires the client to fill out a long questionnaire twice. Numerous researchers also point to the difficulties in conducting a survey with the same tourist before and after using the service, and the subjective nature of the customer opinions expressed (Cronin and

Taylor, 1994; Brzezińska-Wójcik and Widz 2017, Hsu, Tsuen-Ho, Sen-Tien Her, and Jia-Jeng Hou, 2021).

An example of research carried out using this method is the research carried out by Marinković, Senić, Kocić, and Šapić, (2013). Results revealed that four SERVQUAL dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, empathy and tangibility) had a significant influence on customer satisfaction. This method is used in various modifications or as an inspiration for creating new concepts (Chien-Che Huang, Yu-Wei Chang, Ping Yu Hsu, and Grandys Frieska Prassida, 2020; Talukder, Swarna, and Kumar, 2025).

Sometimes a simplified version of Servqual is used, which consists of researching customer opinions about the service, only after using it. We are then dealing with the Serfperf method (Cronin and Taylor, 1994).

Mystery Shopping is another method of testing the quality of services. In this method, the client's place is taken by a qualified interviewer who uses the services just like a regular client. After using the service, he fills out a questionnaire, evaluating individual aspects of the service.

In this way, weaknesses in consumer surveys are eliminated. Firstly, the employee does not know that he is being tested, so he does not try to perform better than usual, and secondly, the variability resulting from the subjectivity of the client is limited (Dziadkowiec).

This method is used by specialized research agencies on behalf of enterprises or industry organizations. In 2023, for example, research was carried out using this method for the Polish Tourism Organization. The aim of the study was to assess the quality of services provided in direct contact (direct audit) and remote contact (telephone, e-mail, Messenger).

A total of 474 audits were carried out. In terms of the overall quality of service, the surveyed facilities were rated quite high, achieving a total of 74% positive indications (Quality Survey..., 2023).

This method is also used in foreign scientific research to assess the quality of services provided in travel agencies. In Czech studies, e.g. Websites, business premises and sales staff were evaluated (Pachrová and Dolezalová, 2016).

Modern technological tools such as chatbots, online opinion analysis, online review platforms are also increasingly used to evaluate the services provided.

It should be noted that the above-mentioned methods are used not only for stationary points, but also for online travel retail distribution agencies (OTRDAs) (Wen Rou XIANG, Yong-Ki LEE, and Wen Long Wang, 2024) and international comparisons

on the impact of e-commerce on travel services (Chien-Che Huang, Yu-Wei Chang, Ping Yu Hsu, and Grandys Frieska Prassida 2020).

#### 4. Results

Own research was carried out in travel agencies. The interview with the employee was conducted at the headquarters of the office. Thanks to this form of communication, the information service on departure provided in travel agencies was assessed. Table 1 presents the five dimensions of quality, along with the adopted statements in the questionnaire.

**Table 1.** *Dimensions of service quality*

| Dimension      | Questions / Statements |                                                                                        |
|----------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Materiality    | 1.                     | Travel agency exterior                                                                 |
|                | 2.                     | Travel agency interior                                                                 |
|                | 3.                     | Travel agency equipment                                                                |
|                | 4.                     | Staff appearance                                                                       |
|                | 5.                     | Outdoor advertising                                                                    |
| Reliability    | 6.                     | Accuracy of information                                                                |
|                | 7.                     | Reliability and honesty of information                                                 |
|                | 8.                     | Timeliness of information                                                              |
|                | 9.                     | Accuracy of information                                                                |
| Responsiveness | 10.                    | Keeping promises                                                                       |
|                | 11.                    | Waiting time in line                                                                   |
|                | 12.                    | Speed of response to questions                                                         |
|                | 13.                    | Efficient customer service                                                             |
|                | 14.                    | Flawless record keeping                                                                |
| Certainty      | 15.                    | Willingness to help customers                                                          |
|                | 1.                     | Competence of personnel                                                                |
|                | 2.                     | Courtesy and friendliness of the staff                                                 |
|                | 3.                     | A trustworthy manner of conversation                                                   |
|                | 4.                     | A conversation that gives you a sense of security                                      |
| Empathy        | 5.                     | Ability to present the offer                                                           |
|                | 1.                     | Individual approach to the client                                                      |
|                | 2.                     | Full attention to the customer                                                         |
|                | 3.                     | Identification of customer preferences, needs and expectations                         |
|                | 4.                     | Tailoring the tour proposal to the client's needs                                      |
|                | 5.                     | Possibility of contacting an office employee tailored to the client's individual needs |

**Source:** *Own research.*

The obtained research results are summarized in the Sevqual sheet. It can be observed that most of the assessed elements obtained a negative assessment (Table 2).

**Table 2.** *Servqual sheet*

| No  | The quality dimension | Questions / Statements                                         | Customer expectations | Customer observations | Arithmetic difference |
|-----|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1.  | Materiality           | Travel agency exterior                                         | 3,77                  | 3,48                  | -0,29                 |
| 2.  |                       | Travel agency interior                                         | 4,16                  | 3,84                  | -0,32                 |
| 3.  |                       | Travel agency equipment                                        | 4,16                  | 4,06                  | -0,1                  |
| 4.  |                       | Staff appearance                                               | 4,16                  | 4,00                  | -0,16                 |
| 5.  |                       | Outdoor advertising                                            | 3,61                  | 3,13                  | -0,48                 |
| 6.  | Reliability           | Accuracy of information                                        | 4,58                  | 4,19                  | -0,39                 |
| 7.  |                       | Reliability and honesty of information                         | 4,42                  | 4,29                  | -0,13                 |
| 8.  |                       | Timeliness of information                                      | 4,68                  | 4,35                  | -0,33                 |
| 9.  |                       | Reliability of information                                     | 4,29                  | 4,00                  | -0,29                 |
| 10. |                       | Keeping promises                                               | 4,19                  | 4,10                  | -0,09                 |
| 11. | Responsive ness       | Waiting time in line                                           | 4,19                  | 4,45                  | 0,26                  |
| 12. |                       | Speed of response to questions                                 | 4,19                  | 4,35                  | 0,16                  |
| 13. |                       | Efficient customer service                                     | 4,58                  | 4,42                  | -0,16                 |
| 14. |                       | Flawless record keeping                                        | 4,29                  | 4,39                  | 0,1                   |
| 15. |                       | Willingness to help customers                                  | 4,55                  | 4,13                  | -0,42                 |
| 16. | Certainty             | Competence of personnel                                        | 4,26                  | 4,19                  | -0,07                 |
| 17. |                       | Courtesy and friendliness of the staff                         | 4,55                  | 4,55                  | 0                     |
| 18. |                       | A trustworthy manner of conversation                           | 4,45                  | 4,19                  | -0,26                 |
| 19. |                       | A conversation that gives you a sense of security              | 4,23                  | 4,10                  | -0,13                 |
| 20. |                       | Ability to present the offer                                   | 4,39                  | 3,90                  | -0,49                 |
| 21. | Empathy               | Individual approach to the client                              | 4,23                  | 4,06                  | -0,17                 |
| 22. |                       | Full attention to the customer                                 | 4,68                  | 4,45                  | -0,23                 |
| 23. |                       | Identification of customer preferences, needs and expectations | 4,26                  | 4,23                  | -0,03                 |
| 24. |                       | Tailoring the tour proposal tot he client's needs              | 4,26                  | 4,10                  | -0,16                 |
| 25. |                       | Possibility of                                                 | 4,16                  | 3,94                  | -0,22                 |

contacting an office  
employee  
tailored to the client's  
individual needs

*Source: Own research.*

In the next stage of the research, the qualitative features were ordered from the worst to the best (Table 3). The weakest element was "Ability to present the offer", where the assessment was negative. The best rated elements were "Flawless record keeping" i "Speed of response to questions". In both cases, the customer perception of the service significantly goes beyond their expectations,

In the case of the "Courtesy and friendliness of the staff" element, the expectations towards this element and the perception of it after using the service are equal. In this respect, we are dealing with a desired condition. Customers are fully satisfied with these factors.

**Table 3.** *Quality features of the examined service*

| The quality dimension | Questions / Statements                                                                 | Arithmetic difference |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Certainty             | Ability to present the offer                                                           | -0,49                 |
| Materiality           | Outdoor advertising                                                                    | -0,48                 |
| Responsiveness        | Willingness to help customers                                                          | -0,42                 |
| Reliability           | Accuracy of information                                                                | -0,39                 |
| Reliability           | Timeliness of information                                                              | -0,33                 |
| Materiality           | Travel agency interior                                                                 | -0,32                 |
| Materiality           | Travel agency exterior                                                                 | -0,29                 |
| Reliability           | Relevance of information                                                               | -0,29                 |
| Certainty             | A trustworthy manner of conversation                                                   | -0,26                 |
| Empathy               | Full attention to the customer                                                         | -0,23                 |
| Empathy               | Possibility of contacting an office employee tailored to the client's individual needs | -0,22                 |
| Empathy               | Individual approach to the client                                                      | -0,17                 |
| Responsiveness        | Efficient customer service                                                             | -0,16                 |
| Materiality           | Staff appearance                                                                       | -0,16                 |
| Empathy               | Tailoring the tour proposal tot he client's needs                                      | -0,16                 |
| Reliability           | Reliability and honesty of information                                                 | -0,13                 |
| Certainty             | A conversation that gives you a sense of security                                      | -0,13                 |
| Materiality           | Travel agency equipment                                                                | -0,1                  |
| Reliability           | Keeping promises                                                                       | -0,09                 |
| Certainty             | Competence of personnel                                                                | -0,07                 |
| Empathy               | Identification of customer preferences, needs and expectations                         | -0,03                 |
| Certainty             | Courtesy and friendliness of the staff                                                 | 0                     |
| Responsiveness        | Speed of response to questions                                                         | 0,16                  |
| Responsiveness        | Flawless record keeping                                                                | 0,1                   |

*Source: Own research.*

In the next stage of the research, the importance of individual quality dimensions was determined (Table 4). The most important dimension was "empathy" followed by "reliability", "certainty" "responsiveness" and "materiality".

**Table 4.** *Importance of quality dimensions*

| The quality dimension | Importance |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Materiality           | 14,48      |
| Reliability           | 21,90      |
| Responsiveness        | 20,02      |
| Certainty             | 21,58      |
| Empathy               | 22,35      |

**Source:** Own research.

Then, the weighted arithmetic difference was calculated for individual quality features (Table 5). The obtained results indicate that " Ability to present the offer" was the worst-rated element. Giving importance to individual dimensions has not changed the fact that it is still the weakest quality trait.

**Table 5.** *Weighted arithmetic difference for individual quality characteristics*

| No | Quality Criterion | Questions / Statements                            | Arithmetic difference | Weight | Weighted arithmetic difference |
|----|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|--------------------------------|
| 1  | Materiality       | Travel agency exterior                            | -0,29                 | 14,48  | -4,20                          |
| 2  |                   | Travel agency interior                            | -0,32                 |        | -4,63                          |
| 3  |                   | Travel agency equipment                           | -0,1                  |        | -1,45                          |
| 4  |                   | Staff appearance                                  | -0,16                 |        | -2,32                          |
| 5  |                   | Outdoor advertising                               | -0,48                 |        | -6,95                          |
| 6  | Reliability       | Accuracy of information                           | -0,39                 | 21,90  | -8,54                          |
| 7  |                   | Reliability and honesty of information            | -0,13                 |        | -2,85                          |
| 8  |                   | Timeliness of information                         | -0,33                 |        | -7,23                          |
| 9  |                   | Relevance of information                          | -0,29                 |        | -6,35                          |
| 10 |                   | Keeping promises                                  | -0,09                 |        | -1,97                          |
| 11 | Responsiveness    | Waiting time in line                              | 0,26                  | 20,02  | 5,21                           |
| 12 |                   | Speed of response to questions                    | 0,16                  |        | 3,20                           |
| 13 |                   | Efficient customer service                        | -0,16                 |        | -3,20                          |
| 14 |                   | Flawless record keeping                           | 0,1                   |        | 2,00                           |
| 15 |                   | Willingness to help customers                     | -0,42                 |        | -8,41                          |
| 16 | Certainty         | Competence of personnel                           | -0,07                 | 21,58  | -1,51                          |
| 17 |                   | Courtesy and friendliness of the staff            | 0                     |        | 0,00                           |
| 18 |                   | A trustworthy manner of conversation              | -0,26                 |        | -5,61                          |
| 19 |                   | A conversation that gives you a sense of security | -0,13                 |        | -2,81                          |

|    |         |                                                                                        |       |       |        |
|----|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|
| 20 |         | Ability to present the offer                                                           | -0,49 |       | -10,57 |
| 21 |         | Individual approach to the client                                                      | -0,17 | 22,35 | -3,80  |
| 22 | Empathy | Full attention to the customer                                                         | -0,23 |       | -5,14  |
| 23 |         | Identification of customer preferences, needs and expectations                         | -0,03 |       | -0,67  |
| 24 |         | Tailoring the tour proposal to the client's needs                                      | -0,16 |       | -3,58  |
| 25 |         | Possibility of contacting an office employee tailored to the client's individual needs | -0,22 |       | -4,92  |

**Source:** Own research.

Then, the unweighted (SQnw) and weighted (SQww) Servqual index was calculated for each quality feature as assessed by the customer (Table 6).

The obtained general results indicate that only the conditional state has been achieved ( $P < O$ ). Customer expectations for the service have not been fully met. The worst assessed area was "materiality", and after taking into account the weight of dimensions - "reliability". These are areas that need to be improved first.

**Table 6.** Servqual indicator unweighted (SQnw) and weighted (SQww) for individual quality dimensions as assessed by customers

| The quality dimension | SQnw                                            | SQww                                          |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Materiality           | -0,27                                           | -3,91                                         |
| Reliability           | -0,25                                           | -5,39                                         |
| Responsiveness        | -0,01                                           | -0,24                                         |
| Certainty             | -0,19                                           | -4,10                                         |
| Empathy               | -0,16                                           | -3,62                                         |
| Indicator             | Arithmetic overall average measure: SQn = -0,18 | Weighted overall average measure: SQw = -3,45 |

**Source:** Own research.

## 6. Conclusions

The obtained assessment of the quality of services means that the expectations of service users in the surveyed entities have not been met. The defined difference between the expected and perceived quality indicates that the customer's satisfaction has not been achieved. The worst ranked assessed dimension, was "Reliability " (after taking into account the weight of dimensions). This is an area that need to be improved first.

In conclusion, it can be said that (modified) Servqual method is of great importance in optimizing the marketing management process activities in the surveyed travel

agencies, especially in the era of digitalization and should be widely used.

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