

SERVING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY CUSTOMERS: EVIDENCE FROM MULTI-CULTURAL MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationships among service quality, trust, communication effectiveness, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in public service delivery. This paper hopes to understand the service quality in service delivery of a government department (i.e., District Office). The survey research addresses key relationships among service quality dimensions, trust, communication effectiveness customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in the public services. Structured questionnaire was designed and used to collect data from the customers. A total of 200 respondents, reflecting normal distribution based on the population and demographic factors were randomly selected. Respondents were queried on their knowledge and preference level of the service delivered by the District Office. The findings indicate that responsiveness, reliability and empathy are among the important dimensions of the service quality that will influence the customer satisfaction and loyalty. Empathy is significantly and positively related with customer satisfaction, communication effectiveness, trust and customer loyalty.

Keywords: Service quality, Communication effectiveness, Trust, District Office, Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Malaysia gained her independence from the British in 1957, the public sector service quality has been an integral part of the government's development and advancement agenda. The concern for quality has been recognized both in the context of changing expectation of customers (Kueh and Voon, 2007) as well as facing the challenges brought about by globalization. While acknowledging the importance of delivering quality service, it becomes

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even more challenging to define it precisely and to satisfy customers from diverse backgrounds, particularly in multicultural nations such Malaysia. Values such as efficiency and effectiveness, equity, equality, ethics, democracy and accountability may influence the nature of quality (i.e., expectations and perceptions).

In the public sector, one of the key concerns is delivering quality services especially the customer-contact counter staff. As front-liners, the quality of services provided by the public service staff will have a tremendous influence on the public's perceptions of the quality of the public service. Quality service delivery is considered as one of the most important research topics in the context of human resource development due to its close associations with customer satisfaction and loyalty (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Qin and Prybutok, 2008; Voon, 2006). Among the commonly cited reasons attributed to poor service are staff's lack of knowledge and skills, inadequate service operation system, and inflated customers' expectation (e.g. Parasuraman et al., 1988). Government departments generally have a large number of customers. Hence, it is difficult for them to provide services that please everyone. The situation becomes even more complex due to insufficient resources or when there are other operational obstacles present. With this in mind, the government has been trying to improve the delivery of services from time to time in accordance with customers' expectation.

The local community customers have increasing expectations of the public service in terms of administration, management and development of the district. For instance, the people have higher level of expectations from the District Office staff in terms of their ability to resolve administrative matters as well as to be knowledgeable with the local customs and culture. Knowledge of these matters is of paramount importance at all levels of a District Office in order to meet the desires and expectations of the local customers. Among the key roles of the District Office are: 1) to supervise, provide and implement efficient and effective customer administrative services, and 2) to plan, monitor, implement and achieve a sustainable and balanced socio-economic development standard in the Division. The services rendered include: Managing, monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the implementation of rural projects and the Malaysian Plans; Issuing relevant licenses and permits; Being a manager, secretariat and coordinator to various programs as well as socio-economy and community activities (including cultural and religious celebrations); Providing services related to probation, adoption, criminal and civil courts, letter of oath, marriage tribunal and others; Managing, implementing and enforcing local traditions and cultures (native court); Chairing the various committees which among others involve the aspects of administration, development, tourism, safety (public and roads), and customer welfare; Providing government rest house at District and Sub-District level; and Providing official transport services.

The information derived from its local customers will enable the District Office to strategically adjust its quality of services to fit the local customers' needs. The present study is essentially significant in assisting the District Office in improving the services delivered to the public at large. The District Office must be able to instill trust and confidence in the people who come to visit the office. Its staff must be able to project themselves as credible and trustworthy whenever they offer their services, advices and recommendations.

The importance of counter service in District Offices is well acclaimed. According to Lovelock and Gummesson (2004), the impression one gets from a counter service is of crucial importance as it reflects the efficiency and effectiveness of an organization. This can be perceived through the attitude of the front-line officers, the response time and the services delivered. This study defined the attributes of quality services from the customers' perspective. Once the needs are more clearly known and understood, the District office will be in a better position to react. The administration of District Offices has been a constant subject of administrative reforms in Malaysia. The district office, being the front-line agency in policy and programme implementation as well as the intermediary between the Government and the people at the grass-roots level, contributes to the perception that people have of the public service and the Government. Seminars and meetings are frequently held by relevant authorities to seek ways to improve the capacity of district administration, service quality improvement and customer relationship enhancement. In order to provide some relevant information, the present study specifically examined the relationships among service quality, communication effectiveness, trust, customer satisfaction and loyalty in the public service delivery context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Service Quality*

The customer-perceived service quality is an important component of customer service management because it is an antecedent to customer satisfaction. Research suggests that customers do not perceive quality as a one-dimensional concept (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Grönroos, 1988; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982; Parasuraman et al. 1988; Voon, 2011). In fact, Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) have found that customers considered five dimensions in their assessments of service quality (i.e., reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles). Reliability is the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately while responsiveness is the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service. Assurance or employee behaviours (Qin and Prybutok, 2008) refers to employees' knowledge and courtesy, and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. Empathy is the caring, individualized attention given to customers and tangibles are appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and written materials.

Service quality is important for all types of organizations (i.e., public or private, service or manufacturing). Scholars and researchers such as Grönroos (1988), Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982), and Parasuraman et al. (1985), have helped to uncover the factors that determine service quality and to provide a number of actionable tools that managers and marketers can use to gauge their firm's performance. Agus, Baker and Kandampully (2007) explored the relationships among service quality, service performance, and customer satisfaction within the context of the public service. According to them essentially, service quality represents a customer's assessment of the overall level of service offered by an organisation (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and this assessment is often based on perceptions formulated during service encounters (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Johnston, 1995). The majority of the service dimensions depicted in the conceptual model relate to the human-interaction elements of service delivery.

Thus, service quality is depicted as a product of service dimensions comprising of employee-related behaviours and organisational practices which will influence service performance and customer satisfaction.

2.2. Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

Many research findings have suggested that there is a link between service satisfaction, expectations and customer loyalty (e.g. Chen et al., 2011; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Kueh and Voon, 2007, Zeithaml et al., 1996). Oliver (1997) defines expectations as the anticipation of future consequences based on prior experience, current circumstances and other information.

Customer satisfaction is behavioural in nature and it concerns the customers' evaluation of services based on their perceptions and expectations (Oliver, 1997). Besides, customer satisfaction has traditionally been viewed as a cognitive construct – where consumers cognitively compare perceived performance with an evaluative standard (expectations) (Oliver, 1997). Customer satisfaction is viewed as an objective outcome of the magnitude and direction of the differences existing between expectations and the perceived level of performance experienced. Generally, satisfied customers tend to maintain their consumption pattern and will consume similar products or services. Thus, customer satisfaction has positive effect on behavioural intentions and/or loyalty (Boulding et al., 1993). Service loyalty is also said to be associated with customers' personal relationships with service personnel (Voon, 2011). Hence, high levels of customer trust towards the firm's employees would be expected to translate into positive attitudes towards the firm.

2.3. Communication Effectiveness and Trust

Communication effectiveness refers to the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information (Sin et al., 2005) between the service provider and the targeted customer(s) in an empathetic manner. Its purpose is to educate and keep customers informed about something or services in a language that they can understand. Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggested that an easy flow of communication is an important characteristic of a strong relationship. Sharma and Patterson (1999) also stressed that effective communications must include both the formal and informal contact between the professional and the client. This will help in terms of building the service-provider-customer relationship. Hatfeld (1993) argued that public sector planning services will depend on the effectiveness of listening and feedback between the service provider and customer. Effective communications can be useful for developing a sense of closeness and ease in the relationship as well as be instrumental in building emotional and social bonds. As such, communication effectiveness will be essential to build trust. In fact, researchers (e.g. Sharma and Patterson, 1999) suggested that it was a powerful determinant of relationship commitment.

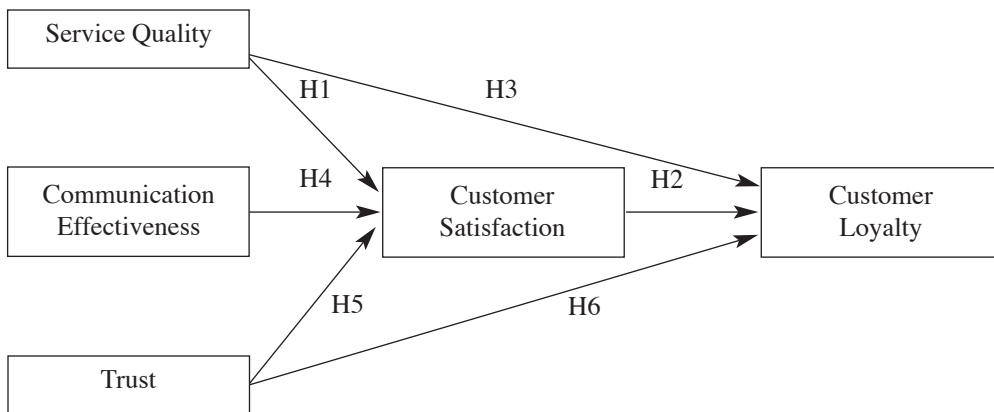
With the presence of effective communication and trust in the service delivery system, the customers who receive the services will tend to be satisfied (e.g. Chen et al., 2012). Instructions, messages and information will be accurately communicated and customers will know what and how to do. The employees who can communicate well with their customers will be most probably be trusted and will be able to create more satisfied customers. Service researchers

(e.g. Boulding et al., 1993; Qin and Prybutok, 2008; Taylor and Baker, 1994; Voon, 2011) indicated that the very satisfied customers will tend to be more loyal.

2.4. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

This survey research examined the relationships among service quality, communication effectiveness, trust, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty within the context of public service (i.e., District Office). Although previous researches into similar issues within the context of the Malaysian public services do exist (e.g. Agus et al., 2007), relatively few studies pertain directly to the District Office. Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework for the study and the hypothesized relationships are indicated.

Figure 1: The theoretical framework and hypotheses



The service quality literature indicated that perceptions of high service quality and high service satisfaction resulted in a very high level of purchase intentions (Boulding et al., 1993; Chen et al., 2011). If the services are perceived to be good and of high quality, the customers would naturally be satisfied. Therefore, the hypothesis is:

H₁: There is a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Service researchers found the positive relationship between customer-perceived service quality and loyalty (e.g. Boulding et al., 1993; Chen et al., 2011; Parasuraman et al., 1988, Sureshchandar et al., 2001; Taylor and Baker, 1994; Voon, 2011). With consistent findings across different industries that service quality and satisfaction are different constructs, and that service quality leads to customer satisfaction, the research interest moved to studying the link between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H₂: There is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

H₃: There is a positive relationship between service quality and customer loyalty.

Communication effectiveness is an important element in determining the technical and/or functional quality (e.g. Grönroos, 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Strong communication skills are needed to ensure that clients understand. Based on the nature, frequency and effectiveness of communication, they affect the customers' perceptions of service quality and satisfaction. As such, it is hypothesized that:

H₄: There is a positive relationship between communication effectiveness and customer satisfaction.

Trust is the cornerstone for all relationships and it will take time and require sincerity from all parties involved. Relationship marketing researchers (e.g. Sin et al., 2005, Chen et al., 2012) tend to agree that satisfaction can be considered to be an important criterion that has to be fulfilled for building trust between partners and in turn the improved trust will stimulate the intention to continue the relationship. This is logical as satisfaction can be described as a customer's cognitive and affective evaluation of a product or service which is being delivered to him/her by a specific provider (Oliver, 1997). Therefore, the hypothesis is:

H₅: There is a positive relationship between trust and customer satisfaction.

The customers who have trust in the service employees and their organization will most probably be loyal (e.g., positive word-of-mouth, intention to revisit). In fact, trust is a central variable for good relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sin et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2012). Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H₆: There is a positive relationship between trust and customer loyalty.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This descriptive study was carried out in multi-cultural Malaysia. The data collection was done at a District Office in Sarawak where there were customers with multi-cultural backgrounds (e.g. multi-ethnic groups such as Ibans, Malays, Chinese, Melanaus, etc.). The data on service quality was obtained via the administration of structured questionnaires comprising of measurement variables adapted from literature. Items in the questionnaire were measured using seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was pilot tested and improvements were made accordingly prior to its actual utilization in the fieldwork. The refined questionnaire was used to solicit demographic information, the customer-perceived service quality, communication effectiveness, trust, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

The distribution of the structured questionnaires was done randomly at the District Office counter and its waiting area. The designated population of this study is defined as all visitors of the District Office, within a stipulated time frame (three weeks). This study employed the judgmental sampling technique which is a form of convenience sampling in which the population elements are selected based on the judgment of the researcher.

The sample for this study comprised of 200 respondents. With reference to the related research found in literature, this sample size is reasonable (e.g. 203 in the study of Qin and Prybutok, 2008; 201 in Sharma and Patterson; 277 in Sin et al., 2005). In fact Krejcie and Morgan (1970) suggested for a sample size of only 384 if the target population size is a million. The representativeness is very important. There was a satisfactory representation of the customer segments where Ibans were the major group of customers. The majority of the respondents were from the Iban ethnic group (49 percent), followed by the Malays (18 percent), Chinese (14 percent), Melanaus (13.5 percent) and other races (less than 5 percent). The racial composition of the sample population was reflective of the actual racial composition of the district's population. With regards to gender, 64 percent of the respondents were male whereas 36 percent were female. A majority of the respondents that visited the District Office were either farmers or were unemployed. The main purpose for their visit to the District Office was for Document Certification purposes (39.5 percent). This was followed by Gun and Ammunition matters (26.5 percent), Probate matters (15.5 percent), Statutory Declaration (9.5 percent) and Business Registration matters (9 percent). In relation to the respondents' preferences of the choice of companion on their visits to the District Office, data analysis showed that most of the respondents preferred to visit the District Office on their own (43.5 percent) followed by having the company of friends (33.0 percent) and the remaining respondents indicated their preference of having members of their family (23.5 percent) tagging along.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The goodness of measures was analyzed. The reliability of measures was determined via the internal consistency method (Churchill, 1979; Sureshchandar et al., 2001; Sekaran, 2000). This method shows the inter-correlations among the items constituting the scale. The internal consistency was estimated using the Cronbach Alpha (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) and the reliability of the internal consistency was performed on all 38 items before the analysis was made (Table 1). Most of the results were higher than 0.70 (ranging from 0.74 to 0.91), indicative of the measures possessing internal consistency and acceptable reliability in their original form. Thus, it is reliable to conclude that the level of service quality in service delivery of the District Office to be moderate.

The evidence of service quality's convergent validity was examined through simple correlation analysis among its five components. The results of the correlation analysis (Table 2) indicate that all correlations are significant (at 0.01 level) among the five components of service quality. The correlation coefficient values, ranging from 0.433 to 0.762 indicate weak to moderate levels of correlations. The correlation coefficients indicate that the five components converge to a common construct. Criterion validity reflects whether a scale performs as expected in relation to other variables selected as meaningful criteria (criterion variables). Communication effectiveness, trust, customer loyalty and customer satisfaction also have significant correlations with the service quality dimensions, namely: tangibles, employee behaviors (Qin and Prybutok, 2008), reliability, responsiveness and empathy.

Table 1: Reliability analysis on service quality dimensions and variables

Dimensions	Items	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha	Item-Total-Correlations
Tangibles	Sufficient facilities.	5	0.87	0.747
	Modern and up-to-date equipment.			0.759
	Convenient waiting room..			0.690
	Visually appealing.			0.756
	Information services are available.			0.587
Employee Behaviors	Well dressed.	5	0.87	0.616
	Trustworthy.			0.652
	Knowledgeable			0.740
	Friendly and courteous			0.756
	Neat and decent appearance.			0.743
Reliability	Providing a service as promised.	4	0.77	0.607
	Caring service.			0.674
	Performed the service right the first time			0.594
	Insisted of error-free record by reconfirming			0.437
Responsiveness	How the service will be performed.	4	0.81	0.486
	Willing to help for the service request.			0.731
	Prompt and timely service.			0.691
	Never being too busy to respond to request			0.610
Empathy	Personal attention	4	0.80	0.592
	Convenient operating hours.			0.564
	Understand the needs.			0.670
	Listen to comment			0.645
Communication Effectiveness	Understand culture.	4	0.74	0.569
	Language that can be understand			0.555
	Can speak the dialect.			0.504
	Terms/words that can be understand.	0.573		
Trust	The Office's support.	4	0.86	0.691
	Concerned about welfare			0.681
	Providing quality service and can be trusted.			0.724
	Ready and willing to assist and support.			0.734
Customer Loyalty	Recommend other to come.	3	0.91	0.835
	Like to be the customer.			0.795
	Said positive things to other people.			0.820
Customer Satisfaction	Overall, the quality of service is excellent.	5	0.91	0.780
	Overall, satisfied with the service			0.818
	Have very good experience with the service			0.716
	Service can meet the expectation.			0.773
	Not disappointed with the service			0.758

Table 2: Correlations among service quality dimensions and variables

The variables	TGB	EB	RBY	RPS	EPY	CE	TRS	CL
Tangibles (TGB)	1.00							
Employee Behaviors (EB)	0.510**	1.00						
Reliability (RBY)	0.532**	0.742**	1.00					
Responsiveness (RPS)	0.433**	0.676**	0.762**	1.00				
Empathy (EPY)	0.525**	0.597**	0.619**	0.713**	1.00			
Comm. Effectiveness (CE)	0.426**	0.514**	0.542**	0.580**	0.577**	1.00		
Trust (TRS)	0.309**	0.550**	0.541**	0.657**	0.599**	0.570**	1.00	
Customer Loyalty (CL)	0.420**	0.557**	0.557**	0.550**	0.572**	0.524**	0.485**	1.00
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	0.497**	0.601**	0.662**	0.669**	0.630**	0.601**	0.623**	0.743**

Notes: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$ (all t-tests are two-tailed)

Table 3 presents the regression results of the service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. The adjusted R^2 of 0.54 indicates that 54 percent of variance in customer satisfaction can be predicted by the service quality dimensions of the District Office. The positive coefficient for the dimensions responsiveness (0.288), reliability (0.284) and empathy (0.233) were found to be statistically significant, suggesting that the increase of these dimensions will lead to significant increase in the level of customer satisfaction. However, the tangibles and employee behaviour dimensions are relatively less impactful on customer satisfaction. Overall, service quality influences customer satisfaction (see Table 6). Therefore, H_1 is supported (i.e., there is a significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction).

Table 3: Relationships among service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction

Independent variables	Coefficient	Standard error	t	Significance
Constant	5.033*	1.507	3.340	0.001
Tangibles	0.095*	0.047	2.030	0.044
Employee Behaviour	0.091	0.075	1.225	0.222
Reliability	0.284*	0.114	2.491	0.014
Responsiveness	0.288*	0.102	2.814	0.005
Empathy	0.233*	0.084	2.756	0.006
$R^2 : 0.55$, Adjusted $R^2 : 0.54$, $F = 47.508$				

Notes: * Significant at 0.05 level

Table 4 shows the regression results for customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The adjusted R^2 of 0.55 indicates that 55 percent of the variance in customer loyalty was due to the change in customer satisfaction. The positive significant coefficient suggests that the higher customer satisfaction on the services, the higher the customer loyalty. Therefore, H_2 is

supported (i.e., There is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty). This suggests that managers and staff in the public service sector should realize that creating many satisfied customers and improving customer satisfaction are important (e.g. Pérez et al., 2012). Strictly speaking merely satisfied might not be good enough; they must have many extremely satisfied customers. The very satisfied customers will be spreading good words about the District Office. Besides benefiting from the positive comments made by extremely satisfied customer to others about the District Office, it also reflects the favourable image of the District Office.

Table 4: Regression results of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty

Independent variables	Coefficient	Standard error	t	Sig.
Constant	8.497	1.234	6.885	0.000
Customer Satisfaction	0.482*	0.031	15.609	0.000
$R^2 : 0.55$				
Adjusted R^2 0.55, F = 243.634				

Notes: * Significant at 0.01 level

Table 5 shows the regression results for service quality and customer loyalty. The adjusted R2 of 0.40 indicates that 40 percent of service quality is associated with customer loyalty. The positive significant coefficient suggests that the higher the service quality, the higher the customer loyalty to the District Office. Hence H3 is supported, there is a positive relationship between service quality and customer loyalty. However, its impact on loyalty was not as great as its counterpart, customer satisfaction (0.55).

Table 5: Regression results of service quality and customer loyalty

Independent variables	Coefficient	Standard error	t	Significant
Constant	4.178	1.089	3.836	0.000
Service Quality	0.105*	0.009	11.551	0.000
$R^2 : 0.40$				
Adjusted R^2 0.40, F=133.434				

Notes: * Significant at 0.01 level

Regression analysis on communication effectiveness and customer satisfaction also found positive results. The R^2 was 0.36 (36 percent variance explained). The positive coefficient suggests that higher communication effectiveness leads to stronger relationship commitment and higher customer satisfaction toward the staff (i.e., H_4 is supported). On the other hand, regression analysis on trust and customer satisfaction found R^2 of 0.39 (39 percent of customer satisfaction is associated with trust). Hence, H_5 is supported. Besides, H_6 is also supported as the regression results on trust and loyalty found R^2 of 0.24.

Additional investigations were performed to examine the relationships of service quality dimensions, overall service quality and other variables in the study. The results in Table 6 show that empathy is relatively more important in influencing the communication effectiveness as the beta value that is higher (0.252) and followed by responsiveness (0.222). On the other hand, responsiveness (0.393) is the most important in influencing trust followed by empathy (0.262) and employee behaviour (0.177). As for customers loyalty, empathy is the most important (0.269), followed by employee behaviour (0.199) and reliability (0.143). These results and findings suggest that empathy, responsiveness and empathy are among the areas of concern for service management so as to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty. These dimensions influence the communication effectiveness and trust which also had great influences on customer satisfaction.

Table 6: The relationships among service quality dimensions and other variables

Dependent Variables	Service Quality Dimensions and Other Independent Variables	Standardised Coefficient Beta	t	Sig	R ²	Adjusted R ²
Communication	Tangibles	0.099	1.436	0.153	0.42	0.40
Effectiveness	Employee Behaviour	0.091	1.047	0.296		
	Reliability	0.096	0.974	0.331		
	Responsiveness	0.222*	2.260	0.025		
	Empathy	0.252*	3.006	0.003		
Trust	Tangibles	-0.086	-1.321	0.188	0.48	0.47
	Employee Behaviour	0.177*	2.169	0.031		
	Reliability	-0.006	-0.069	0.945		
	Responsiveness	0.393*	4.244	0.000		
	Empathy	0.262*	3.314	0.001		
Customer Loyalty	Tangibles	0.064	0.924	0.356	0.42	0.40
	Employee Behaviour	0.199*	2.296	0.023		
	Reliability	0.143	1.445	0.150		
	Responsiveness	0.088	0.898	0.370		
	Empathy	0.269*	3.213	0.002		
Customer Satisfaction	Service Quality	0.483*	7.522	0.000	0.60	0.59
	Communication	0.167*	2.723	0.007		
	Effectiveness	0.228*	3.746	0.000		
	Trust					

Notes: * Significant at 0.05 level.

Nevertheless, if the District Office can deliver quality service coupled with effective communication and able to instill trust, the customer will be even more satisfied. The results of multiple regressions indicated that these three variables, together, have significant impact on customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.60$). Service quality is the most important followed by trust.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

All the hypotheses developed in the theoretical framework of this study were supported. The responsiveness, reliability and empathy dimensions of the public service quality in the District Office context were found to be relatively more important in influencing the customer satisfaction whereas empathy and employee behaviours tend to be more important in influencing their loyalty.

Interestingly, the survey data from the participating respondents suggested that the physical appearance of the District Office physical facilities as relatively less important in the service delivery. This serves as an important hint for offices that have over-emphasized the physical appearance but overlooked the human factor in serving the customers. As such, offices that are only capitalizing on and practicing the 5S concept (Seiri, Seiton, Seiso, Seiketsu and Shitsuke) to satisfy customers, heavily equipped with modern and/or up-to-date facilities should review its cost-effectiveness and relevance from time-to-time.

The findings revealed that the customers expect the service employees to be more caring, able to provide individualized attention plus offer more reliable services, willing to deliver prompt service, are more knowledgeable as well as being able to inspire more trust and confidence in their customers (e.g. Chen, et al., 2012). The empathy dimension is identified as the dimension that has significant and positive influence on all the variables (customer satisfaction, communication effectiveness, trust and customer loyalty). In line with the findings of previous research, there is no doubt that employee courtesy generates more favourable perceptions of service quality and satisfaction among customers (Guiry, 1992; Johnston, 1995; Voon 2011). Apart from the expertise of an employee which forms an important component of the overall service quality, employees who are attentive, courteous, cooperative, and keen to listen are more likely to enhance customers' perceptions of service than those who are rude, inattentive, and unapproachable (Guiry, 1992).

The findings of this study have important implications on the management of service quality of the District Office as perceived by its customers. This study demonstrates the usefulness of the customers' feedback as a good measure of service quality in the District Office. Once the attributes of quality services from the customer's perspective are clearly known and understood, the service providers will be in a better position to anticipate customers' requirement instead of just reacting to customers' dissatisfactions. The attributes of empathy responsiveness, reliability and empathy have been indicated by respondents to be the important dimensions of service quality. Inevitably, there is still room for improvement for the soft skills among the public service employees, especially the frontliners or customer-contact employees. They need to be appropriately empowered in order to serve effectively and deliver quality service (Kuan and Voon, 2007). Hence, there is always a need for the District Office to strive to improve and build on the human capital. Training staff on a continuous basis would be a likely solution in improving these dimensions as well as their communication effectiveness. Training will upgrade staff professionalism and consciousness of the task at hand. When they are well trained, these employees can increase the satisfaction of customer. Issues of courtesy, knowledge and confidence should be part of the training agenda. In its quest to increase the level of satisfaction,

the District Office should also allocate resources in the most effective and efficient manner to ensure that services rendered meet customers' expectation.

Service enhancement through service-driven philosophy will provide the public sector with an opportunity to gain confidence from the tax-paying public. Chen et al. (2004) also proposed a customer-oriented service enhancement (COSE) system that can be effectively used by the public sectors to improve the quality of service. This is an initiative that can definitely be emulated by the local District Offices in Malaysia, especially the appropriate human factor engineering for service excellence which will be necessary.

The sample population of this study has been limited to only one particular district and further improvement on representativeness can still be done. Therefore, it is recommended that for future research, a study be conducted on a longitudinal basis so as to allow data gathered at two or more points in time to answer the research questions for more accurate generalizations. It is also recommended that the study be extended to other District Offices with different population and cultural distribution. These could then be analyzed by the relative importance of the five dimensions in influencing service quality. Another point to consider for future research is the inclusion of the employee respondents into its sampling frame. They were not part of the sample of the present study. The feedback from multiple sources, both external and internal customers, on the delivery of public services would definitely afford a more holistic view. The use of structural equation modeling (SEM) to investigate the causal relationships among the variables will be recommendable.

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