

Service Quality, Competitive Advantage and Business Performance in Service Providing SMEs in Sri Lanka

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Abstract- Service sector in Sri Lanka plays a major role in the economy by contributing more than 55% of the Gross Domestic Production. Especially in under developed countries, they are encouraging and promoting small business to cater as source of income generation, employment creation and maximum utilization of resources. The growth and the survival of these small business depend on one of the important factor; the quality of the service offered. It helps these businesses to retain and attract customers by fulfilling their expectations. This study focus on studying the service quality of service providing SMEs and how it will help to gain the competitive advantage and leads to business performance. This paper contains the theoretical background derived from the existing literature in order to construct the research framework for the study.

Index Terms- Quality, service quality, business performance, competitive advantage, SERVQUAL

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the service sector is reflected in its increasing contribution to many national economies. Recent years have witnessed much interest in the sector by both practitioners and academics (Fisk et al., 1994). Service Quality is an emerging competitive dimension in today's business world and identified as one of the strategies of success (Abdulla, 2006). Service organizations, without regards for size, are increasingly seeking the unique ways of differentiating their offering and service quality is one such option in this regard. Many organizations, today, have responded to the strategic and financial impact of quality, treating it as a strategic weapon (Paradise-Tornow, 1991). By providing quality service, organizations are trying to face the challenge of gaining competitive advantage (Warraich et.al, 2013). The focus of service quality measurement has principally been based on asking customers their expectations and/or their perceptions of the service they receive from different organizations (Fisk et al., 1994), as cited by Pitt (1997). The benefits of providing a better service to customers include increased profitability, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, customer retention and positive word of mouth (Giese and Cote, 2000). However, it is argued that the small firms, however, tend to be regarded as implicitly in close contact with their customers and therefore issues surrounding customer care and service quality in the context of the small firm are overlooked. They pointed out the significance of improving service quality which will guide the developing enterprise in achieving success in an increasingly competitive marketplace (Pauline and Pauric, 1999). Sri Lanka is an under developed country and there is an increase in SMEs start-ups. However, the survival of those start-up is still in question. Therefore, it is important to ensure the quality of the service provided by those SMEs and should take necessary remedies to improve the quality of low quality services.

Further it is argued that it is very difficult to define and measure the service quality due to its unique characteristics such as; intangibility, inseparability, perishability and lack of ownership (Zeithaml et.al, 1990).

Accordingly this paper intends;

- To examine the relationship between service quality and the competitive advantage of service proving SMEs
- To examine the relationship between service quality and the business performance of the service proving SMEs
- To investigate the relationship between competitive advantage and the business performance

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality and Service Quality

In the service literature service quality is interpreted as perceived quality which means a customer's level of judgment about a service (Barbara, 2010). According to Bitner & Hubbert (1994), the quality is the overall impression of the relative inferiority/superiority of the organization and its services. "Quality is the totality of features and characteristics in a product or service that bear upon its ability to satisfy needs" (Haider, 2001). The concept of quality gains is important only in the event that the product or services meet the needs and expectations of the guest. Indeed, this is the reason that all the strategies are based on quality standards stemming from exceptional knowledge about the guest. Service quality can be defined as 'the customer's assessment of the overall excellence or superiority of the service' (Zeithaml et.al, 1988). Thus, the quality is 'the ability of a product or services to continually fulfil, or even surpass the customer's expectations' (Stevenson, 1993). Schroeder (2000) also believes that quality means 'to fulfil or surpass customers' requests now and in the future.

Wicks & Roethlein (2009) outlined quality into five categories: (1) Transcendent definitions. These definitions are subjective and personal. They are eternal but go beyond measurement and logical description. They are related to concepts such as beauty and love. (2) Product-based definitions. Quality is seen as a measurable variable. The bases for measurement are objective attributes of the product. (3) User-based definitions. Quality is a means for customer satisfaction. This makes these definitions individual and partly subjective. (4) Manufacturing-based definitions. Quality is seen as conformance to requirements and specifications. (5) Value-based definitions. These definitions define quality in relation to costs. Quality is seen as providing good value in relation to cost.

The SERVQUAL framework developed by Parasuraman *et al.* in 1988 is a method of evaluating service quality for service industries and came about from research which suggests that customer satisfaction is based on multiple factors rather than one factor. The five dimensions identified to measure service quality are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Harr, 2008). In SERVQUAL model the above dimensions are defined as follows (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988)

- Reliability (delivering the promised outputs at the stated level).

- Responsiveness (providing prompt service and help to customers; the reaction speed plays a vital role here).
- Assurance (ability of a service firm to inspire trust and confidence in the firm through knowledge, politeness and trustworthiness of the employees).
- Empathy (willingness and capability to give personalized attention to a customer).
- Tangibles (appearance of a service firm's facilities, employees, equipment and communication materials).

In an attempt to develop a model for service quality, it was found that the variety of factors namely resource constraints, market conditions, management indifferences may result in discrepancy between management perceptions of customer expectations and the actual specifications established for service (Perasuraman *et al.*, 1985). Joonas (2013) developed a model to understand the service quality. In the model perceived quality is affected by personalization, communication, experience, perceived expectation from employee, company's image and customization. Gronroos (1983) has his own functional/technical model of service quality. He used a two-dimension model of service quality:

- (1) Technical quality; and
- (2) Functional quality

As far as services are concerned, if technical quality is at least satisfactory, then functional quality is the important factor of consumer perceptions. Meanwhile, where technical quality is very similar among firms, functional quality is an important means of differentiation.

SERVPERF model is another model proposed by Cronin and Taylor in 1992 to measure the service quality. SERVQUAL directly measures expectations as well as perceptions while in the SERVPERF model, service quality is evaluated by perceptions of the service delivered only (Barbara, 2010).

Competitive Advantage

When understanding the concept of competitive advantage, Michel porter has laid a clear foundation as the evolution of the competitive advantage is a function of the way the firm organizes and manages the activities. Organizations create value through these activities. He explained that the competitive advantage can be gained by offering more value to the customers than competitors (Passemard and Kleiner, 2000). Competitive advantages are formed by such activities, features, and qualities of a hotel organization that are better than their competition. Competitive advantage creation is possible to define only compared to rivals/competitors meaning that the hotel company needs to create more value than its competitors. Two criteria exist for creating and maintaining competitive advantage (Bahtijarević-Šiber, 1999, p. 129):

1. Activities unique for the company helps the company produce goods or offer services valued by the consumers.
2. Competitors cannot easily copy them.

Service quality is considered an important tool for a firm's struggle to differentiate itself from its competitors. The relevance of service quality to companies is emphasized here especially the fact that it offers a competitive advantage to companies that strive to improve it and hence bring customer satisfaction. (Ladhari, 2008).

Warraich *et.al* (2013) conducted a study using 320 companies in telecom sector in Pakistan, found that service quality to be considered as a source of competitive advantage. Further, it was found that the tangibility and the reliability are the most important dimensions in determining the competitive advantage. According to Ines and Jasmina (2010), quality of services is one of the most important factors for achieving a competitive advantage. This was found in an empirical study undertaken in small hotels in Croatia. It is identified that the hotels should keep high standards to protect the quality of services. Pauline and Pauric (1999) found that personal touch, specialist offering, employee loyalty, quicker decision making, speeder delivery and local image, greater innovativeness and greater flexibility are important in constituting competitive advantage in small engineering firms in UK, which lead to establish a long term customer relationship as well. According to Passemard and Kleiner (2000) the creation of a competitive advantage is a tough task, but preserving it is much harder. The preservation of a competitive advantage depends on three conditions. One depend on the sources of advantage. The second factor is the number of sources of competitive advantage. The third factor is related to the continuous effort of modernizing and perfecting. Then the preservation of the competitive advantage requires the firm to adopt an anti-natural behavior consisting of keeping changing their strategies.

It is the evolution of the technologies, of the demand, of the governmental politics, or of the country's infra- structure that launches the processes of globalization by creating among the enterprises some major inequalities in the competitive positions. The automobile industry became globalized when the Japanese constructors had got a substantial competitive advantage in quality and productivity, when the demand had become more uniform and the cost of transportation became lower (Passemard and Kleiner 2000).

Thus, delivering services with superior quality will make it harder for the customers' to leave for service for a rival, in other words, it will weaken their bargaining power (Peppard 2000). From a service organization's perspective, the service level and how the organizations employees deliver the service can be a solid source of differentiation and competitive advantage (Wirtz *et al.* 2008). On the basis of prior literature, Koufteros *et al.* (1997) describe a research framework for competitive capabilities and de- fine the following five dimensions: competitive pricing, premium pricing, value-to-customer quality, dependable delivery, and production innovation. Based on the above, the dimensions of the competitive advantage constructs

used in this study are price/cost, quality, delivery dependability, product innovation, and time to market (Suhong Li *et.al.*, 2004). With these theoretical and empirical evidenced the following hypothesis can be proposed.

H1: Higher the service quality greater the competitive advantage in service providing SMEs.

Business Performance

Previous studies have used different variables to measure the performance of SMEs with regard to financial and overall performance. Financial performance of SMEs was evaluated in different industries. Then the generic performance measures confuse the comparison of performance among those industries. Furthermore, it is highlighted that the application of inappropriate financial performance measures hampers the assessment of firm performance. Apart from objective measures of performance, manager's perceptions of firm performance were used as a subjective measure for overall firm performance compared to competitors by Robinson *et al* (1986). The objective measures included sales growth (percent change in sales), net profit after tax (percentage changed in return on sales) and employment growth (sales per employee). Industry-specific data would help to describe the financial performance accurately and those included growth in revenue, net income growth, present value growth and CEO cash compensation growth over 5 years (Bracker *et al.*, 1988). The following Table 1 indicates the measures used by Bracker *et al* in 1988. Another set of financial measures were employed to measure the performance consisted of employment growth, return on sales, sales growth and after tax profits (Glen and Weerawardena, 1996).

Table I: Measures of Financial Performance

Variable	Indicator
Growth in revenue	Average sales growth over 5 years
Net income growth	Average net income before taxes for 5 years
Present value growth of firm	Average book value of the firm, patents and goodwill for 5 years
CEO cash compensation growth	Average growth in CEO cash compensation for 5 years

Source: Bracker *et al* (1988)

Dahlgaard and Ciavolino, (2000) perceived that performance is an objective measure of company and used statements to reflect performance regarding market share and Return of [sic] Investment followed by the Table 2.

Table II: Indicators of Performance

Latent variable	Manifest variables
Performance	The market share has increased during the last three years.
	The revenue has increased during the last three years
	The percentage of profit has increased
	The percentage of Return of Investment has increased during the last three years
	The total trend of the company's performance has improved

Source: Dahlgaard and Ciavolino (2000)

French *et al* (2004) also limited to financial performance measures in their study of 145 small professional service firms which consist of historical sales growth, historical growth in net profit after tax, forecast sales growth and forecast growth in net profit after tax. There is difficulty in obtaining reliable and correct financial data especially from SMEs due to the reluctance of disclosing them by owner/managers of those businesses (Wijewardena *et al.*, 2004). In this study also financial performance was evaluated based on changes in sales, which is ordinal scale (decreased significantly, decreased slightly, remained constant, increased slightly and increased slightly) and sales growth during 1997-1999 (ratio scale). Efendioglu and Karabulut (2010) were insisted on financial performance which was assessed using Average sales growth/year, average profit/year and average export growth/year. However, in this study annual sales, annual profit, number of employees, market share and investment to the business are considered as measures of business performance. Likert scale statements are used to evaluate the trend in these measures during three year period from 2012 to 2014.

Service Quality and Business Performance

Many of past researchers have discovered that service quality has been proven to have significant relationship with organizational performance (Maryam *et.al* 2014). Maryam *et.al* (2014) were interested in finding out the relationship between service quality and business performance using a sample of 45 telecommunication firms in Iran. The study found that there is a positive relationship between service quality and business performance. In search of service quality and organizational performance it was used eight constructs, internal customer satisfaction, management commitment, customer productivity, system, policy and procedure, human resource management, infrastructure and environmental factor as the indicators of overall service quality and supported the fact that there is a close association between the service quality and the organization performance. Recent study conducted by Cho and Pucik (2005), have confirmed that top managers increasingly relate quality to firm performance and hence it has been viewed as one of the important key variables in achieving long-term competitive advantage. An empirical study undertaken by the Pitt (1997) supported the hypothesis that the level of service quality of firms is related positively to a better performance over the past five years in 131 service firms in UK. Thus, the following hypothesis has been derived:

H2. Service quality is positively related to business performance.

Business Performance and Competitive advantage

Some studies have defined the organizational performance in the perspective of “financial and “non-financial” and “sales-based and organizational-based”. Studies have found that there is a significant relationship between competitive advantage and the sales-based performance of organizations, when sales-based performance was measured by the level of sales revenue, profitability, return on investments, productivity, product added value, market share and product growth. Further, previous empirical studies have illustrated a significant relationship between competitive advantage and the organizational-based performance of organizations, when organizational-based performance was measured by the emphasis on efficient organizational internal processes, customer satisfaction, employee development and job satisfaction (Neely, 2005). Suhong Li *et.al* (2004) conducted a study using 196 firms in US found that competitive advantage can have a direct, positive impact on organizational performance. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that,

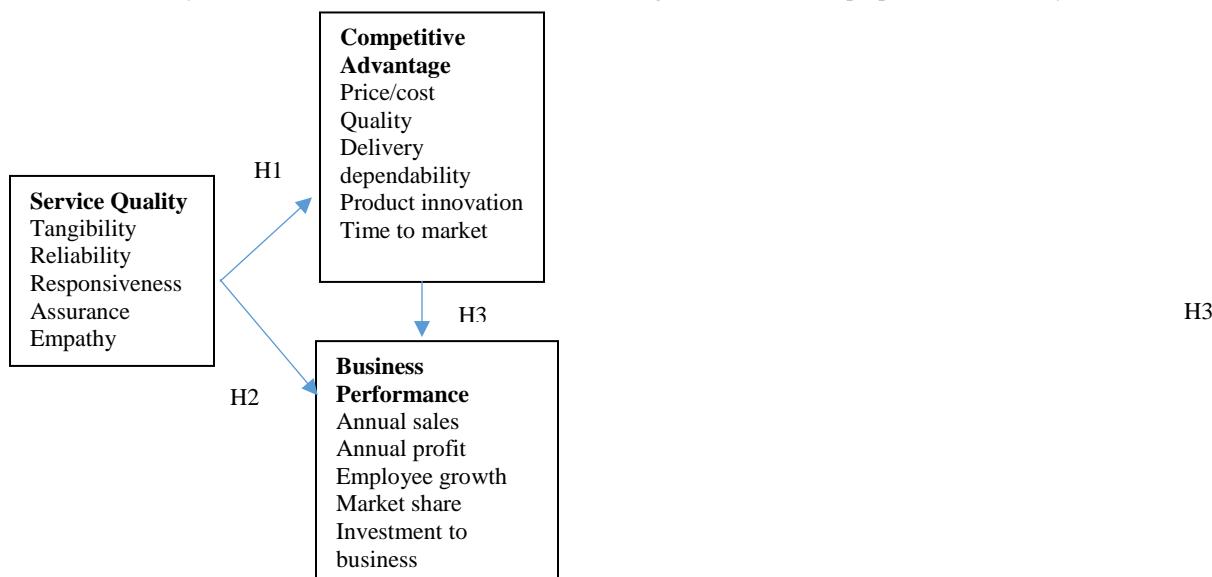
H3: Higher the competitive advantage better the business performance of service providing SMEs.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

Research framework

Based on the literature survey the

following theoretical can be proposed for this study.



The overall methodology for this study is deductive in nature and follows survey method. According to the nature of research questions, the study consists of both descriptive and inferential parts.

Measurement of Variables

According to the above research framework, service quality, competitive advantage and the business performance are the main constructs. In order to measure each of these variables five-point likert scale statements ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree were used based on the prevailing literature. Indicators to measure service quality were adopted from the model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) as cited by Barbara (2010), Daniel and Berinyuy (2010), Pauline and Pauric (1999).

Table III: Indicators of Service Quality

Variable	Indicators
Reliability	The firm performs its services without errors. Firm services are performed within the promised time. Firm employees show sincere concern in solving my problems The firm correctly performs a service from the very first time. The firm performs a service exactly as promised.
Responsiveness	Employees quickly respond to my requests. Employees are always willing to help. Employees are quick in eliminating potential errors. In the firm I do not spend much time waiting in line.
Assurance	Firm employees tell me exactly when a service will be performed. Employees are trustworthy. Employees are kind and polite. Employees are knowledgeable enough to reliably respond to my questions.
Empathy	Employees know to advise me what would be the most proper service for my specific needs. The firm considers my wishes and needs. Employees show understanding of my specific needs.

Tangibles	Offices are visually appealing The firm has modern-looking technical equipment. Employees are suitably dressed and neat, considering the work they perform.
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Source: Barbara (2010)

Indicators to measure competitive advantage were adopted from Suhong Li *et.al* (2004).

Table IV: Indicators of Competitive Advantage

Variable	Indicators
Price/cost	We offer competitive prices. We are able to offer prices as low or lower than our competitors.
Quality	We are able to compete based on quality. We offer products that are highly reliable. We offer products that are very durable. We offer high quality products to our customer.
Delivery dependability	We deliver the kind of products needed. We deliver customer order on time. We provide dependable delivery
Product innovation	We provide customized products. We alter our product offerings to meet client needs We respond well to customer demand for "new" features.
Time to market	We deliver product to market quickly We are first in the market in introducing new products. We have time-to-market lower than industry average We have fast product development.

Source: Suhong Li *et.al* (2004)

Business performance was measures using trend of annual sales, annual profits, employee growth, market share and the investment to the business over the last three years from 2012-2014. Therefore the owner/managers were asked to indicate the trend of each of these indicators during last three years as "Highly increased", "Increased", "Moderate", "Decreased" and "Highly decreased" using 5-point scale. Following table shows the no. of establishments and the persons engaged in service providing SMEs in Colombo, Gampaha and Kaluthara districts. In order to test the hypotheses in this study Colombo district was selected due to higher no. of establishments. Therefore, the operational population for the study consists of service providing SMEs in Colombo district in Sri Lanka where the no. of employees serving from 5 to 150.

Table V: Service Providing SMEs in Western Province (District wise)

District	Small (5 - 29)		Medium (30 - 150)		Total establish ments
	No. of establish ments	Persons Engaged (No.)	No. of establish ments	Persons Engage d (No.)	
Colombo	332	5,987	412	65,413	744
Gampaha	245	3,337	298	32,202	543
Kalutara	188	2,597	127	19,328	315

Source: Department of Census and Statistics (2014)

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire mailed to owner/managers of all the SMEs in Colombo district. There were 125 completed and usable questionnaires representing 16.8% response rate. Further, the data will be analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Factor analysis was conducted for the Service quality and Competitive Advantage using principal component method (factor extraction with Varimax rotation). The results showed that Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sample adequacy is greater than 0.5 and the significance values of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity equal to 0.000. Cronbach's alpha was used to measures the internal consistency among indicators and the Cronbach's alpha values for the Service quality and Competitive Advantage and the business performance were greater than 0.7.

According to the general profile of service providing SMEs, 93% of SMEs survived in the period of 5 to 25 years. 90% of SMEs are focusing on local customers. Further 52% of SMEs are carried out as family businesses.

Table 6: Service quality and competitive advantage in service providing SMEs.

		Competitive Advantage	Price/cost	Quality	Delivery dependability	Product innovation	Time to market
Service Quality	Pearson Correlation	.785	.783**	.495**	.798**	.789**	.611**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	125	125	125	125	125	125

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Survey data (2015)

According to the table no.6, Pearson correlation values between Service quality and competitive advantage are .000 (less than 0.005) and the correlation is significant at 0.01 level of significance proving that there is a strong and positive correlation between Service quality and competitive advantage. Accordingly, supports the hypothesis H1: Higher the service quality greater the competitive advantage in service providing SMEs.

Table 7: Service quality and Business performance.

		Business Performance	Annual sales during last three years	Annual profits during last three years	Employee growth during last three years	Market share growth during last three years	Investment to the business
Service Quality	Pearson Correlation	.685	.743**	.545**	.672**	.686**	.704**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	125	125	125	125	125	125

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Survey data (2015)

According to the above table, Pearson correlation values between Service Quality and overall business performance and the each indicator of Business Performance shows .000 (less than 0.005) supporting the hypothesis H2: Service quality is positively related to business performance.

Table 8: Competitive advantage and the business performance of service providing SMEs.

		Business Performance	Annual sales during last three years	Annual profits during last three years	Employee growth during last three years	Market share growth during last three years	Investment to the business
Competitive Advantage	Pearson Correlation	.802	.688**	.745**	.625**	.762**	.744**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	125	125	125	125	125	125

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Survey data (2016)

According to the above table, Pearson correlation values between Competitive advantage and the overall business performance and the each indicator of Business Performance shows .000 (less than 0.005). It is significant at 0.01 level of significance supporting the hypothesis H3: Higher the competitive advantage better the business performance of service providing SMEs.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper intends to review the existing literature about the service quality, competitive advantage and the business performance. Further, it focus on how the businesses are offering service quality to gain competitive advantage and to ensure business performance. In order to address the above relationship the hypotheses are derived based on the empirical evidences of the service quality literature. The study has selected the service providing SMEs in Colombo district in order to test the above hypotheses. The results of the data analysis showed that all the hypotheses are supported at 0.01

level of significance. The results provides meaningful insight for the owner/managers of service providing SMEs in Colombo district, Sri Lanka highlighting the importance of adhering to service quality. As long as they improve the level of service quality they can achieve greater competitive advantage and higher business performance in the long run, which in terns ensure the survival of the SMEs too.

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