Measuring service quality gap in Bajaj Allianz life insurance Company

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Abstract

Present study focuses to determine the expected and perceived service quality level along with gaps on the basis of Service Quality model by Sureshchandar *et al*. (2001) in one of the leading private sector company in India, Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company (BALI). Though collectively, private sector has significantly captured the market share in initially, but now a days, most of the private sector companies are struggling for a regular growth in business and market share, and the selected company is one them. Also, the customer often complaints of poor services in life insurance services, which obviously means there is something wrong in customer strategies of these companies. The same is proved in the findings about BALI, that there exists a significant negative gap in service quality expected and perceived by the customers of the selected company. Present paper is a result of an empirical study on 180 BALI customers residing in Haryana, Chandigarh and Delhi regions of northern India, selected randomly.

Keywords: service quality, expected service quality, perceived service quality, customer satisfaction

Introduction

Indian life insurance sector has been passing thorough a sea change. Because of the new liberal policies, the competition is getting tougher and tougher with entry of more and more private life insurers in the industry. Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDA), the apex governing institution of insurance sector, has helped the industry evolve at a fast pace and emerge as one of the fastest growing industries in the country. People's perception of insurance has also changed from an instrument of saving to a risk-hedging tool. This change has been facilitated by the emergence of a range of new insurance products suiting diverse needs of consumers.

Competition between the LIC and the private sector insurers continues to intensify. While innovative products have been underpinning private insurers' premium growth, the threat of losing market share has also led to more aggressive pushes by LIC to stay competitive such as to develop new distribution channels like banc assurance. As a result, though LIC lost significant market share to private companies in the post-liberalization period, it still retains a commanding position in the life insurance segment. While, most of the product innovations came from the private players initially, later LIC joined the race soon in order to protect its turf. While LIC still dominates in segments like endowments and money back policies, private insurers have already wrested a significant share of the annuity and pension products market. Such intense competition has resulted in faster premium growth as well as deeper penetration for the entire market.

At the same time, the profile of Indian customer is also evolving. Customers are more actively managing their financial assets, and are increasingly looking to integrated financial solutions that can offer stability of returns along with more comprehensive protection. Insurance has emerged as an attractive and stable investment alternative that offers total protection for life, health as well as wealth. These factors have contributed to changes in demand for insurance products. While traditional life insurance products like individual insurance, whole life insurance and term life insurance continue to remain popular to this day, new products such as single premium, investment-linked, retirement products, variable life and annuity products are on a growth trajectory.

By the discussion it is evident that though collectively, private sector has significantly captured the market share in initially, but now a days, most of the private sector companies are struggling for a regular growth in business and market share, and the BALI is one them. Also the customer often complaints of poor services in life insurance services, which obviously means there is something wrong in customer strategies of these companies. Also it is well accepted that there is a relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, customer loyalty and sustainable profitability. So in the light of above construct, this study is purposed to determine the level of service quality delivered as a whole and on selected service quality dimensions in BALI.

Review of Literature
Service Quality: A Conceptual Framework

Although service quality is an extensively researched concept but still its discussion is not straightforward. To understand the concept of service quality better, discussion of its components, i.e. service and quality is required.

Services are processes of activities aiming to provide solutions to customers' problems, with most other characteristics of services being consequences of their process nature (Gronroos, 2000; 2001) [9, 10].

The majority of services are first sold and then simultaneously produced and consumed, very often requiring the physical presence of customers (Berry, 1999) [1]. The "inseparability"

of production and consumption, prevents services from being subject to a predetermined quality control process or marketed in traditional ways (Gronroos, 2000) [9].

Being very often produced during service employee-customer encounters (Drew-Rosen *et al*., 2003) [4], services are "heterogeneous" as the performance of humans, whether employee of customer, is not same all different service encounters. Services are heterogeneous even when delivered through automated channels due to varying customer behavior in interacting with automated and information technology using electronic machines of this new era tech world.

Although certain tangible elements may be included, the essence of services is "intangibility" (Zeithaml *et al*., 1990) [20] that leads customers to perceive services in subjective and often highly abstract ways (Gronroos, 2000) [9]. Services are perceived as performances, and these performances are "what" the service provides and "how" it is delivered, depending on front-line employees' interactions with customers, the organization and its facilities. A number of "peripheral" services facilitate the offering of the core service (Gronroos, 2000) [9].

Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2001) [6] define a service bundle as a package of goods and services consisting of supporting facilities, facilitating goods, and explicit services.

The American Society for Quality (www.asq.org/), in line with Feigenbaum (1983) [5], define quality as "a subjective term for which each person has his or her own definition" while the international standard ISO 8402 (1994) defines quality as "the totality of characteristics of an entity (product, service, process, activity, system, organization, person) that bear on its ability to satisfy stated and/or implied needs".

Intangibility implies that the criteria for a flawless service are not only less specific than the criteria for a defect-free tangible good (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991) [3] but also exceptionally complex and not very difficult to realize. Marketers view service quality as the level needed to make the service acceptable in the market place and try to ascertain certain standard of service quality prior to delivery of service to customers.

On the other hand, customers make "during" and "after use" evaluations (Marwa, 2005) [15] comparing the service delivered to them with their previous experiences (Gronroos, 1982, 1984; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982; Lewis and Booms, 1983) [7, 11, 13]. The result of this comparison is perceived service quality (Gronroos, 1982; 1984; Takeuchi and Quelch, 1983; Parasuraman *et al*., 1985; 1988) [7, 11, 14, 17]. Hence, services must conform to the wishes of customers rather than to any predetermined set of specifications (Berry *et al*., 1988) [2]. As Lewis (1993) [12] put it, "there is no other fact or reality about service quality but what customers perceive about a service".

Service Quality Assessment
Accepting the definition of perceived service quality as the result of comparing actual service delivery with prior experience (Gronroos, 1982; 1984; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982; Lewis and Booms, 1983; Parasuraman *et al*., 1985) [7, 11, 13, 14, 17], researchers have generally followed two main theoretical perspectives. The Nordic (European) (Gronroos, 1982, 1984) [7, 11] perspective views service quality as having

two dimensions: "technical" and "functional" quality, reflecting the service outcome and the service process respectively. Customers' perceptions of these two dimensions are filtered through the service firm's image.

The American model defines service quality as the discrepancy between expected and perceived service through five core components:

Reliability	–	performing the promised service dependably and accurately;
Responsiveness	–	helping customers and providing prompt service;
Assurance	–	inspiring trust and confidence;
Empathy	–	providing caring, individualized attention to customers; and
Tangibles	–	the tangible elements of service (Parasuraman *et al*., 1988) [2].

Although the American model dominates the literature there is no unanimity between researchers on which of the two, or some other, better reflects perceived service quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Another service quality model which was used by Sureshchandar *et al*. (2001) [18] have stated that the customer's perceived quality depends upon five factors:
1. Core service.
2. Human elements of service delivery.
3. Non-human element of service delivery.
4. Tangibles of services.
5. Social responsibility.

The core service refers to the essence of a service. In a service sector the service features offered are as important as how they are delivered. Human element of service delivery refers to all aspects (reliability, responsiveness, assurance empathy, moments of truth, critical incident and recovery) that will fall under the domain of the human element in the service delivery. The non-human element in the service delivery is in contrast to the human element. Service delivery processes should be perfectly standardized, streamlined, and simplified so that customers can receive the service without any hassles. The tangible of the service facility refers to the equipment, machinery, employee appearance, etc., or the man-made physical environment, popularly known as the "servicescapes". The social responsibility is the obligation of organization management to make decision and take actions that will enhance the welfare and interests of society as well as the organization. When an organization shows enough evidence on its Social responsibility it is natural to attract more customers.

Acknowledging the importance of the model used by Sureshchander *et al*. (2001) [18], present study has also followed the same model and dimensions with certain customized sub dimensions. These sub dimensions were selected after a thorough study and critical evaluation of service factors regarding life insurance sector in India.

Objectives of the Study
1. To assess the overall service quality expected and service quality perceived in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

2. To assess the gap of service quality expected and perceived in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.
3. To assess the service quality gaps of selected service quality dimensions in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.
4. To give practicable suggestions so that the service quality in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company may be improved.

Hypotheses

H_{01}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

H_{02}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on core product dimension in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

H_{03}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on human element dimension in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

H_{04}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on systemization of service dimension n in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

H_{04}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on tangibles of service dimension in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

H_{05}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on social responsibility dimension in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

Research Methodology

Though there is no dearth of literature in the field of service quality but still there is very less literature available regarding use of service quality in life insurance industry, so the present study is both exploratory and descriptive in nature and is empirical one. Apart from using all kind of literature available, a survey of customer was conducted during period of 2010-2011.The population of the survey consist of all the customers of Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company residing in State of Haryana, Capital of India- Delhi, and U.T of Haryana and Punjab- Chandigarh.

A sample of 180 respondents was selected randomly, choosing 60 each from selected geographical limits and their responses are measured on a customized schedule based on Service Quality Model by Sureshchander *et al*. (2001) [18] in Seven Point Likert Scale. This model measures service quality on five dimensions; Core service, Human elements of service delivery, Non-human element of service delivery, Tangibles of services and Social responsibility of service quality which were incorporated in self structured schedule with certain tested life insurance services specific sub dimensions. Further data have been organized, tabulated, analyzed and interpreted with the help of selected model and appropriate statistical techniques. The analytical techniques used among others include Mean, Standard Deviation, t-test, and ANOVA.

Data Analysis and Interpretation
Service Quality Expected
To measure expected service quality level of the customer of BALI, all respondents of the selected sample were simply asked to show the extent to which they think life insurance

companies should possess selected service quality dimensions. And further, it is clearly stated to the respondents that the researcher is keenly interested in knowing the ranking of their expectation about services of BALI on the same selected dimensions of service quality on seven- point likert scale given in survey schedule.

The expected service quality responses of selected respondents are explained by mean, standard deviation values tabulated in Table 1.0. The average expected service quality score for the 180 respondents is assessed 6.7612 which is certainly very high and falls in strongly agree region of scale which also means customers of the selected company expect very service quality.

Table 1: Service Quality in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company

Summary Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Expected Service Quality	6.7612	.11634
Perceived Service Quality	4.4488	.42313
Gap in Service Quality	-2.312	.4369

Source: Customer Survey

Service Quality Perceived
To measure perceived service quality by the customer of BALI, all respondents were simply asked to show the extent to which they feel or experience about their life insurance company. And further, it is clearly stated to the respondents that the researcher is keenly interested in knowing the ranking of their perception about their life insurance company on the same selected dimensions of service quality on seven- point likert scale on given in survey schedule. It is important to mention here that the dimensions are same as used in measuring customer service quality expectation.

The perceived service quality scores of selected respondents tabulated above in Table 1.0. The average expected service quality score for the 180 respondents is assessed 4.4488 which is comparatively quite low to service quality expected and falls in region middle of neutral and somewhat agree of response which means, customers are least agree with the service quality level they are perceiving. It can also be said that customer service quality delivery level of BALI which is very low and they are nowhere close to expected service quality level.

Service Quality Gap
To measure customer service quality gap, responses of selected customer respondents on expected service quality are subtracted from responses on perceived service quality. Average gap scores of the respondents are given above in Table 1.0.

Here, the customer service quality gap score is assessed -2.312, which is considered very high and as this gap is in negative zone which means there is an acute shortfall from life insurance service providers in delivering expected service quality.

Dimensionwise Service Quality
Core Product in Service Delivery
The expected service quality score of the respondents exhibited in Table 2.0 is 6.8857 which is very close to the strongly agree region which means that expectations of

customers are very high about core product sub dimensions of service quality. Also core product expected service quality score is highest of all the selected five dimensions. This also hints that core product of life insurance service providers is topmost priority of the customers. The perceived service quality score of the respondents shown in Table 2.0 is 4.8643 which is very close to somewhat agree level. This means customer are somewhat agree that they are perceiving expected service quality on core product dimension. If compared with scores of other dimensions, core product dimension score is highest and this means customers of BALI are getting comparatively better service quality level on their topmost priority.

The service quality gap score of the respondents tabulated in Table 2.0 is -2.021 which is quite high and indicate deficiencies in core product offerings of the company. But comparatively this score is lowest in all dimensions which mean company is comparatively doing better on core product in service front.

Human Element in Service Delivery
The expected service quality score of the respondents revealed in Table 2.0 is 6.7689 which is very close to the strongly agree region which means that expectations of customers are very high about selected subdimensions or say variables of service quality. Also the human element expected service quality score is second highest of all the selected five dimensions. This also hints that core product of life insurance service providers is second topmost priority of the customers. The perceived service quality score of the respondents shown in Table 2.0 is 4.6167 which is in middle of neutral and somewhat agree response level. This means customer are least agree or somewhat disagree of the perceived level of service quality on this dimension. If compared with scores of other dimensions, human element dimension scores comes at third place after tangibles of service which come second place in scores of perceived service quality and this means customers of BALI are getting poor services on human fronts on their second topmost priority.

The service quality gap score of the respondents tabulated in Table 2.0 is -2.152, which is quite high and comes as third lowest score among all the dimensions, which indicate that company requires a substantial improvement in service quality on human element front.

Table 2: Dimension wise Service Quality in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company

Summary Measures	Core Product	Human Element	Systemization	Tangibles	Social Responsibility
Expected Service Quality	6.8857	6.7689	6.6629	6.7320	6.7567
Perceived Service Quality	4.8643	4.6167	4.0486	4.6180	4.0967
Service Quality Gap	-2.021	-2.152	-2.614	-2.114	-2.660

Source: Customer Survey

Systemization of Service Delivery
The expected service quality score of the respondents portrayed in Table 2.0 is 6.6629 which is close to the strongly agree region which means that expectations of customers are very high about selected sub dimensions of service quality. Though the expected service quality score is lowest in the selected five dimensions but difference is very small and at same agree region. The perceived service quality score of the respondents shown in Table 2.0 is 4.0486 which is close to neutral response level. This means customer are neither agree or nor disagree of the perceived level of service quality on this dimension and they are not certainly agree that BALI is providing service quality on this dimension.

The service quality gap score of the respondents revealed in Table 2.0 is -2.614, which is quite high, which is a matter of great concern for the company. So company require to substantial improvement of systemization of service front.

Tangibles of Services
The expected service quality score of the respondents exhibited in Table 2.0 is 6.7567 which is close to strongly agree region. This means customers of BALI have accepted that selected dimension is very important in providing service quality and they have high expectation from life insurance providers. The perceived service quality score of the respondents tabulated in Table 2.0 is 4.6180 which is close to somewhat agree response level. This means customer are somewhat agree of the perceived level of service quality on tangibles of services dimension or say they are bit agree that

BALI is providing service quality on this dimension.
The service quality gap score of the respondents shown in Table 2.0 is -2.114, though it is very high but it is second lowest gap after core product dimension which mean company is doing comparatively better on this front.

Social Responsibility
The expected service quality score of the respondent portrayed in Table 2.0 is 6.7567 which is very close to strongly agree region. This means customers of BALI have accepted that selected dimension is very important in providing service quality and they have high expectation from life insurance providers. The perceived service quality score of the respondents tabulated in Table 2.0 is 4.0967 which is at neutral response level. This means customer are least agree of the perceived level of service quality on this dimension or say they are somewhat disagree that BALI is performing in a socially responsible way.

The service quality gap score of the respondents tabulated in Table 2.0 is -2.660, which is quite high and comes as highest score, hence the company need to improve service quality on this front a lot.

Service Quality Weights
To measure the customers comparative importance of selected service quality dimensions, they were simply asked to allocate 100 points among selected dimension of service quality according to their priority of significance to them. Average score are tabulated in Table 2.1 which clearly shows that Core

Product in Service with score of 27.2000 is the topmost priority of BALI customers, second topmost priority is Human Element in Service with score of 23.4000, Systemization of Service is middlemost priority with score of 18.9000,

Tangibles of Service is second lowest dimension with score of 17.4000 and lowest in list come Social Responsibility with a weighting of 13.1000 of life insurance provider.

Table 3: Dimension wise Service Quality Weights in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company

Summary Variables	Core Product	Human Element	Systemization	Tangibles	Social Responsibility
Mean (Weights*)	27.2000	23.4000	18.9000	17.4000	13.1000
Std. Deviation	3.12371	3.39935	2.52062	3.29370	3.07975

Source: Customer Survey
* Weights are assigned by the respondents out of 100

Hypothesis Testing

To test the drawn hypothesis Paired t Test was applied on averages of collected responses of BALI customers and output of the analysis is exhibited in Table 3.0. The output gives t value, degree of freedom, significance level and 95% confidence interval for the mean.

H_{01}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company (BALI).
Results of Paired t Test
t value of 52.923 for 179 degree of freedom (df) is significant at 0.000 level. Therefore, null hypothesis is

rejected. Thus there is significant difference in service quality expected and perceived by the customers of BALI.

H_{02}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on core product dimension in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company (BALI).
t value of 44.594 for 179 degree of freedom (df) is significant at 0.000 level. Therefore, null hypothesis is rejected. Thus there is significant difference in service quality expected and perceived by the customers of BALI on core product dimension of service quality.

Table 4: Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	CPE – CPP	2.0214	.45329	.04533	1.9315	2.1114	44.594	179	.000
Pair 2	HEE - HEP	2.1522	.86177	.08618	1.9812	2.3232	24.974	179	.000
Pair 3	SSE – SSP	2.6143	.56544	.05654	2.5021	2.7265	46.234	179	.000
Pair 4	TSE – TSP	2.1140	.84960	.08496	1.9454	2.2826	24.882	179	.000
Pair 5	SRE – SRP	2.6600	.55501	.05550	2.5499	2.7701	47.927	179	.000
Pair 6	E – P	2.3124	.43693	.04369	2.2257	2.3991	52.923	179	.000

Source: Customer Survey

Here,   E = Overall Expected Service Quality   P= Overall Perceived Service Quality
CPE= Core Product Expected Service Quality   CPP= Core Product Perceived Service Quality
HEE= Human Element Expected Service Quality   HEP= Human Element Perceived Service Quality
SSE= Systemisation of Service Expected Service Quality   SSP= Systemization of Service Perceived Service Quality
TSE= Tangibles of Service Expected Service Quality   TSP= Tangibles of Service Perceived Service Quality
SRE= Social Responsibility Expected Service Quality   SRP= Social Responsibility Perceived Service Quality

H_{03}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on human element dimension in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company (BALI).
t value of 24.974 for 179 degree of freedom (df) is at 0.000 level. Therefore, null hypothesis is rejected. Thus there is significant difference in service quality expected and perceived by the customers of BALI on core human element dimension of service quality.

H_{04}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on systemization of service dimension n in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company (BALI).
t value of 46.234 for 179 degree of freedom (df) is at 0.000 level. Therefore, null hypothesis is rejected. Thus there is significant difference in service quality expected and perceived by the customers of BALI on systemization of service dimension of service quality.

H_{04}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on tangibility of service dimension in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company (BALI).
t value of 24.882 for 179 degree of freedom (df) is at 0.000 level. Therefore, null hypothesis is rejected. Thus there is significant difference in service quality expected and perceived by the customers of BALI on tangibility of service dimension of service quality.

H_{05}. There is no significant difference in service quality expected and perceived on social responsibility dimension in Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company (BALI).
t value of 47.927 for 179 degree of freedom (df) is at 0.000 level. Therefore, null hypothesis is rejected. Thus there is significant difference in service quality expected and perceived by the customers of BALI on social responsibility dimension of service quality.

Conclusion

In Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company, there is found high negative service quality gap, which certainly not a good sign for the company's ambitions. Customers of the company do not perceive the expected service quality levels. Company's service quality delivery gap is comparatively high on human element, social responsibility and systemization of service fronts which is a matter of concern for the company. Only respite for the company is customer perception on core product and tangibles of service front where customer service quality gap is comparatively better. So lesson here is that there is lot to do for the customers by the company and to improve customer service more efforts must be put to improve service quality on all selected dimensions. Another lesson which all life insurance service providers can take is; customers of life insurance services has very high service quality expectations and to meet these expectations, certainly required more improved customer service quality strategies.

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