



Service portraits in service research: a critical review

Service portraits
in service
research

Bo Edvardsson, Anders Gustafsson and Inger Roos
Service Research Center, University of Karlstad, Karlstad, Sweden

107

Abstract

Purpose – Focusing on one main research question: how is the phenomenon “service” portrayed within service research?, the aim is to describe and analyze how the concept of service is defined, how service characteristics express the concept, the relevance of the existing “service portraits”, and to suggest a new way of portraying service.

Design/methodology/approach – A literature search was carried out in order to find definitions of the service concept and expressions about the service characteristics. Databases were searched and 34 articles were used for further analysis. The same procedure was carried out for service characteristics. The articles that were chosen by the databases were reviewed thoroughly and those most relevant to the search topic were chosen. Sixteen leading scholars who had been shaping the service research field were also asked two basic questions.

Findings – The analysis of the concept of service and service characteristics shows that the definitions are too narrow and the characteristics are outdated as generic service characteristics. It is suggested that service is used as a perspective. When service is portrayed as a perspective, the approach is clear: it depends on who is portraying the service and on the purpose. If service characteristics are outdated, when will they stop being used in teaching? It is no longer necessary to defend services as being different from goods. Service is a research area in its own right.

Research limitations/implications – The number of articles and books used in the analysis can be criticized for not including enough relevant literature. The keywords used when searching in databases should also have included other words to capture the concept of service and service characteristics.

Practical implications – The practical implications are not so clear since this article is a contribution to the ongoing discussion about future directions of service research. However, it is suggested that service is a perspective on value creation and that value creation is best understood from the lens of the customer based on value in use.

Originality/value – This paper contributes with a literature review, a discussion on what service portraits are, and describes service as a perspective on value creation through the lens of the customer.

Keywords Services, Customers

Paper type General review

Introduction

This article discusses service portraits in service research. We use the metaphor “service portraits” to explain the empirical phenomenon of “service” by considering both service characteristics and service definitions. By using the metaphor of portraits, we also emphasize that describing and understanding service always relates to a perspective. In this article we will emphasize the customer’s perspective as opposed to the service provider’s point of view. Our aim is to portray service as such, and value creation through service as a consequence of the customer lens.

Scholars have defined the service concept in different ways. This article describes and analyzes the range of service definitions, how the definitions have been operationalized in generic service characteristics, and how they contribute to the future



International Journal of Service
Industry Management
Vol. 16 No. 1, 2005
pp. 107-121

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
0956-4233

DOI 10.1108/09564230510587177

of service research. Most scholars consider services to be activities, deeds or processes, and interactions (Solomon *et al.*, 1985; Lovelock, 1991; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Vargo and Lusch, 2004b). According to Hill (1977), services can be defined as changes in the condition of a person or something in the possession of the customer. Edvardsson (1997) views a service as part of the wider concept of the product. A product may consist of goods, services, computer software or, more commonly, in combination. The customer is most often involved as a co-producer in the production process, while a service is created in and during a process. Lovelock (1991) defines a service as “a process or performance rather than a thing”. Most definitions focus on the customer and on the fact that services are provided as solutions to customer problems (Grönroos, 2000). It is not certain that these definitions capture the essence of services or that they form a fruitful basis for managing services and creating value through their provision.

Scholars shape the service-research field by means of the goods-and-services dichotomy and by portraying services as being different from physical products. The IHIP (inseparability, heterogeneity, intangibility, and perishability) characteristics have often been used not only to build the research field, but also to defend service research when it has been criticized. The main premise is that services are similar to goods and that the suggested service characteristics are not unique to services (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004b). This criticism may be based on a former producer and product-centred paradigm, and one may question whether or not these scholars understand the emerging service and customer-centred view within management and marketing. It may also be debated whether service characteristics are unique to services or if there is anything new and different in service research.

Criticism also comes from established and pioneering service research scholars such as Christian Grönroos, Chris Lovelock, and Evert Gummesson (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004). During the 2002 Service Frontiers conference in Maastricht and the 2003 AMA ServSig conference in Reims, some of the leading scholars expressed disappointment with the development of the service research discipline. They questioned whether or not existing service concepts are applicable to internet services and other self-service technologies (Brown, 2000; Bowen *et al.*, 2000). A discussion has thus begun considering and questioning the foundations of service research. This article contributes to that discussion by focusing on the key concepts used among service scholars.

We focused on one main research question: how is the phenomenon “service” portrayed within service research? The aim is to describe and analyze how *the concept of service* is defined, *how service characteristics* express the concept, the relevance of the existing service portraits, and to suggest a new way of portraying service.

Today, the service concept is operationalized mainly through service characteristics, as seen in service textbooks (cf. Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2001; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). The purpose of this article is to contribute to the discussion about the foundations and future direction of service research. We have compared different definitions of services based on a literature review and a survey of leading service scholars. We have critically examined and discussed whether or not the IHIP is applicable when it comes to describing and understanding the essence of service.

The article begins with the methods and sources we have selected for the literature search and the service experts we chose for our survey. We discuss the service concept and the service characteristics. We then embed the results from our literature search and the input from leading service scholars. We discuss our results and finally we suggest some areas for future research.

Method

The literature search

We carried out a literature search in order to find definitions of the service concept and expressions about service characteristics. We searched the Emerald, ScienceDirect, Business Source Elite, and ISI Web of Science databases, having entered the following keywords:

- service definition;
- service concept;
- service notion; and
- definition of services.

“Definition of services” generated the greatest number of hits, which prompted us use that term for further searches. The results were 228 hits, of which 30 were duplicates. A large number of articles did not give a definition of services and these were omitted from our set of articles. When analysing the results from the search, we focused on methods of portraying and constructing services, the service perspective, and value-creation in relation to services and service production. We chose 34 articles for further analysis. Our findings are summarized in the Discussion section of this article.

We carried out the same procedure for service characteristics. The following terms were included in the initial searches:

- service characteristics;
- service features;
- service description;
- character of services;
- service differences;
- nature of services;
- service dimensions; and
- features of services.

If the number of articles was reasonable, then the articles were first briefly reviewed to ensure that they corresponded to the required information (e.g. does it describe the characteristics of services in general, or does it describe the specific offerings?). Even though some of the phrases seemed promising at first, the authors had different ideas than we envisaged. In the case of the ISI database, for example, many articles were not related to business management, but were related to psychology and social welfare. The term “characteristics of services” was chosen to refine the search. The articles that were chosen by the databases as a result of the search for this combination were reviewed thoroughly, and those most relevant to the search topic were chosen. Finally, we chose 57 of 335 articles.

Table I shows the results of our procedure in choosing articles to comprise definitions of service. Table I shows the number of articles that form the base for our understanding of how service characteristics are handled in the service literature. The number of articles chosen may seem small compared to the total number of articles reviewed. The reason is that the hits are based on the use of the search words in the text of the articles, and many articles only discussed the topics briefly. We chose articles where service and characteristics were discussed or empirical studies were carried out.

The expert survey

We asked 16 leading scholars who had been shaping the service research field two basic questions (see Appendix). We used the following three criteria when selecting these experts:

- (1) they have published numerous articles and are widely cited in service journals within the last 25 years;
- (2) they represent different areas within service research marketing, human resources, and operations management; and
- (3) we included the editors of the two major journals, *Journal of Service Research* and *International Journal of Service Industry Management*.

A survey was sent to the experts via email.

The service concept

The concept of service has been defined in different ways. Grönroos (2001) and many other scholars stress the process nature of services. He defines the service concept “as an activity or series of activities of a more or less intangible nature that normally, but not necessarily, take place in the interaction between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems”. The three core dimensions in this definition are:

- (1) activities;
- (2) interactions (which we could say are what separate services from physical products); and
- (3) solutions to customer problems.

	Keyword: Definition of services		Keyword: Characteristics of services	
	Number of hits	Chosen	Number of hits	Chosen
ScienceDirect	149	9	60	11
Emerald	15	11	137	14
Business Source Elite	57	12	109	30
ISI Web	7	2	29	2
Total	228	34	335	57

Table I.
The database search

The third dimension may also be applicable to physical products. Scholars offering other definitions emphasize that services are deeds, processes, and performances, and not (physical) objects with embedded qualities in the product features (see, for example, Lovelock, 1991; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003).

According to Gummesson (1995), consumers do not buy goods or services, but rather purchase offerings that render services, which create value. He uses value instead of solutions to customer problems, which is favoured by Grönroos (2001). Gummesson (1995) emphasizes what the service does for the customer and what the customer buys, which may be interpreted as a customer perspective on services and the service concept. Gustafsson and Johnson (2003) suggest that the service organization should “create a seamless system of linked activities that solves customer problems or provides unique experiences” (p. 29). This view stresses the customer’s perspective as it includes a system of linked activities which support the customer in solving problems.

A different approach to defining the concept is suggested by Vargo and Lusch (2004a, b). They define services as “the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” (p. 2). They argue that this definition is more inclusive and that it captures the fundamental function of all business enterprises.

The experts’ views of the service definitions

A survey (see the Appendix) was sent to 16 experts and we received 11 answers. Table II shows the different views of the concept of service among the 16 “service experts”. Some of them did not define services, but most did, and they stressed the benefit or value to the customer.

The process nature of services

We found the following three key words often mentioned:

- (1) performance (six times);
- (2) processes (five times); and
- (3) deeds (three times).

Some scholars also referred to activities and experiences, as well as solutions and value. These are consistent with the previously mentioned core dimensions.

Expert 4 raises an interesting issue when he mentions “service” rather than “services”, which he defines as “satisfying customer needs and wants”. This is similar to expert 10, who stresses that service “is a performance meant to provide benefit”, and expert 8 who says that the “essence of service is the experience created for the customer”. These definitions are more outcome-related, i.e. they focus on the value that services create. It could be argued that there is a fundamental difference between offering “service” compared to “services”. The former involves the whole organization’s performance in providing the customer with a good experience, while the latter implies that services are something that can be offered to the customer.

Service expert	Answer given
Expert 1	“Service” means many different things in many different contexts. From a customer perspective, “service” is the combination of the customer’s experience and their perception of the outcome
Expert 2	I do not think finding a definition of one or two lines is meaningful. This is my way: “Goods are things, services are activities. Goods perform services and services perform services”
Expert 3	In my opinion any definition of what a service is will be problematic. “A service is a process consisting of a series of more or less tangible activities that normally, but not necessarily always, takes place in interactions between the customer and service employers and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided to customers as solutions.” In a commercial context, my definition could perhaps be: “Service is to support someone else’s processes so that value for that person (or organization) is created in those processes”. This is a definition of service as a perspective, which I think it should be seen as, whereas the first definition is a definition of service as an activity. In the literature services are always defined as an activity
Expert 4	We should be discussing service rather than services. The term, “services”, is too limiting, because it implies the service sector. Service is now all-encompassing, in that physical goods are only part of it. My definition of service would be “satisfying customer needs and wants”
Expert 5	I like the early definition by Rathmell (1966) – “A service is a deed, a performance, an effort”. I’ve never enjoyed debates over the best wording of definitions
Expert 6	Services are economic activities offered by one party to another, most commonly employing time-defined performances to bring about desired results in recipients themselves or in objects or other assets for which purchasers have responsibility. Service customers expect to obtain value from access to labour, professional skills, facilities, networks, systems, and equipment, but do not normally take ownership of any of the physical elements involved
Expert 7	Deeds, processes and performances. This has been attributed to many authors, so I’m not sure where it comes from. It is simple and includes all services
Expert 8	The essence of service is the experience created for customers when in contact with a provider firm, team, and/or individual. The experience has two major components: the core quality (food, clothing) and the delivery quality
Expert 9	I would define services as “processes, performances and actions that reflect – and result from – the transformation of a company’s resources (other than physical products) into value-adding benefits for the company’s external and internal customers”. The origin of this definition is Vargo and Lusch (2004), who define services as “the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” (p. 2)
Expert 10	A service, in essence, is a performance meant to provide benefit. It can be performed for a customer or by a customer. Unlike goods, services are used but not owned by the customer
Expert 11	“Services are deeds, processes and performances” (see Zeithaml and Bitner, <i>Services Marketing Textbook</i> , 2003). I like this definition because it is broad and embraces non-profit and manufacturing organizations

Table II.
Service experts’
definitions of the service
concept

Note: The question asked was: “What definition do you think best captures what you consider to be the essence of services? Please explain why this definition is better than the other definitions. What is the origin of this definition? Please write your definition and give the source you refer to”

The service definitions – a critical examination

The definitions focus on the offering to the customers, i.e. services as opposed to service. The former is related to dividing offerings into products and services while the latter reflects the perspective of service, according to the criticism of the experts.

The service definitions are all at an abstract level and may be operationalized and interpreted in a number of different ways. Services on an empirical level include many different offerings, organizations, and customers. The theoretical definitions therefore need to be at a high level of abstraction to cope with the diverse phenomenon of “service”.

These definitions have different meanings depending on whether we view them as an objective way of portraying services or as a way of constructing them in terms of value-creation. The first approach stresses services as activities that are the object of exchange, while in the second case service is used as a perspective on value creation. Our interpretation is that the definitions are attempts to construct a way of describing services with a clear focus on what the service does for the customer. There is a wide range of views, however, on the role of the customers and there is a tendency to stress value-in-use. One solution we suggest is to focus on defining value-creation through service rather than services as market offerings, and to emphasize value-in-use as defined and experienced by customers. This may form a base for viewing the service concept as a perspective on customer relationships.

The terms or concepts used in defining services are also open to different interpretations. It is not clear what we mean by activities, deeds, processes, performance, interactions, experiences, and solutions to customer problems. The concept of “service” is fuzzy, and perhaps this is normal within an emerging discourse. As service research enters maturity, however, we may need more precise definitions or a clearer point of departure: one possibility is to define services through the lens of the customer with a focus on value-in-use (Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b).

Service characteristics

During the period 1963-1983, Zeithaml *et al.* (1985) conducted a literature review, and found 46 publications by 33 authors focusing on the characteristics of services. They found that the most frequently cited characteristics were intangibility, inseparability (of production and consumption), heterogeneity (or non-standardization), and perishability (or exclusion from the inventory). An overview by Edgett and Parkinson (1993) encompassing 106 publications from 1963-1990 pointed to a similar conclusion. The four characteristics were first put forward in an operations textbook written by Sasser *et al.* (1978). Many other characteristics have been suggested, but have not been widely accepted. One example is the absence of ownership in service purchases mentioned by Judd (1964), Rathmell (1966, 1974), and in the overview by Lovelock and Gummesson (2004). We notice that the characteristics are neither based on empirical research in an inductive way, nor developed from previous research and theories in a deductive way. They seem to be based on observations, anecdotes, and practical experience (Shostack’s widely cited article “Breaking free from product marketing” is mainly based on her practical experiences of Citibank, where she was vice-president; see Shostack, 1977).

Intangibility denotes that services are activities and not physical objects, as is the case with goods. Often services cannot be seen, felt, tasted, or touched before they are

purchased. Bateson (1979) claims that intangibility is the critical characteristic of services from which all other differences emerge. He uses the term “double intangible” (p. 139) and makes a distinction between “physical intangibility” (that which cannot be touched) and “mental intangibility” (that which cannot be mentally grasped). Bateson’s conceptualization is supported by the results from an empirical study conducted by Bielen and Sempels (2003). The distinction between physical and mental intangibility is not presented in most textbooks on service marketing (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004), and is seldom used in scholarly research. This is somewhat surprising since “tangibles” (e.g. equipment, buildings and physical facilities, and communications material) have been identified in service-quality research as a key quality dimension (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990).

Bitner (1992) developed the concept of “servicescape”, which is a framework for describing the role of the physical aspects of the environment in which services are produced and experienced by customers. Bitner (1992) also emphasizes the key role of the physical environment, such as packaging, as a differentiator and a facilitator in shaping customer behaviour.

Some services may be characterized in terms of standardization through IT (e.g. internet-based and telecom services), or through machine-intensive service operations such as ATMs. Other examples of standardized and homogenized services include information through commercial databases, airline transportation, and medical procedures (Vargo and Lusch, 2004b). These should not be portrayed as heterogeneous, as are interactive and labour-intensive services. Lovelock and Gummesson (2004) thus conclude that “[I]t is inappropriate to continue to generalize about *heterogeneity* (or variability) as being a distinct characteristic that sets all services apart from all goods” (p. 21). Customization may require non-standardization; therefore, heterogeneity may contribute to customer value while standardization may have a negative influence on value creation.

Lovelock and Gummesson (2004) called *inseparability* an oversimplification and argued that many services are partly or largely produced independent of the customer (p. 145). Inseparability can be seen mainly as a problem for the service organization rather than an opportunity. As well, there is a large group of services that does not involve the customer directly (car repair, information and financial services, dry cleaning, goods transportation, and defence services provided by the government), meaning that production and consumption need not be simultaneous. The authors conclude that simultaneity of production and consumption is a distinctive characteristic of inseparable services with important managerial implications: however, there are too many separable services to justify any generalization.

Services are stored in systems, buildings, machines, knowledge, and people. The ATM is a store of standardized cash withdrawals. The hotel is a “store of rooms” (Gummesson, 2000, pp. 123-4). Memories may be stored in the customer’s long-term memory for years, and they may direct perceived quality and future behaviour. The service is produced, delivered, and consumed, but the favourable (or unfavourable) customer experience is stored. We might conclude that *perishability* is related not only to services but also to managerial problems relevant to manufacturing companies and goods. The problem is how service companies can deal with issues related to perishability, not the issues from the perspective of the customer.

The process nature of services and service characteristics

Table III reveals different degrees of negative views, or reservations, when it comes to the ability of IHIP to capture the essence of services. About half of the experts considered the IHIP useful to some extent or in some situations, while others suggested that it should be discarded. Six experts said that the IHIP characteristics capture some of the essence of services and still serve as a useful description, but that they are not as universal as originally posited. They are less “powerful” than before, and they focus only on delivery aspects. Some stressed that the characteristics were still useful but that we need to understand the conditions to use them and the purpose.

The results of the survey show that some experts (five of 11) claim that the IHIP characteristics do not portray the essence of a service in a meaningful, generic way and therefore should not be used. In both theory and in practice, marketers have recognized that the fundamental, qualitative differences between goods and services, in addition to requiring special management paradigms, may elicit distinctive behaviour from customers. Services are not directly perceptible, are frequently experimental, and are typically unpredictable in their outcomes for the buyer. This implies that they influence the purchasing behaviour of customers. Although there are varying degrees of perceived risk with all consumer purchases, evidence suggests that by their fundamental nature, services may be perceived as particularly risky (Guseman, 1981; Murray and Schlacter, 1990). Furthermore, because of their transitory and varied nature, product evaluation may occur primarily after purchase and consumption, heightening pre-purchase uncertainty (Murray, 1991).

The conclusion of our study, therefore, is that we should not generalize the characteristics to all services, but use them for some services when they are relevant and in situations where they are useful and fruitful. We need to understand the conditions under which they apply. We might conclude that the characteristics have most often been discussed through the lens of the service provider, instead of the lens of the customer (Vargo and Lusch, 2004b). The issues raised as a result of the IHIP characteristics are all related to service delivery and how to manage services from the company or provider perspective. They are not related to co-producing and consuming services from the customer’s perspective. Finally, our review of the literature and our survey among service experts did not identify one study or research project in which the IHIP characteristics were studied either empirically or theoretically. We could conclude that the IHIP characteristics should not be used in the future as generic service characteristics if we want to understand economic exchange and value creation through services.

We believe that it is a significant finding that so many of the service experts do not regard the IHIP as a helpful tool in describing services, and that the outcome of our research and search in different databases was rarely congruent with the views of experts. Considering service as a perspective on customer relationships may form a fruitful approach for future research.

The service characteristics – a critical examination

The results of the survey among service experts show that most of the respondents question the validity and relevance of the IHIP characteristics. They do not portray the essence of value creation through service in a meaningful way, and therefore they should be avoided. They do not capture the process and interactive nature of services.

Service expert	Expert's view
Expert 1	No I think these are unhelpful. They focus on outmoded and narrow-minded views of service
Expert 2	No, absolutely not. They are not generic service characteristics and they are not typical only of services. Probably, someone some time during the early days of research into services, or rather services marketing, happened to suggest these four so-called characteristics, and since then everyone who writes a textbook about services or a scientific paper or article on services seems to feel an obligation to say that it is like that
Expert 3	The four generic service characteristics capture much of the essence of services, but are too limiting to adequately capture it all
Expert 4	No, IHIP has always been a flawed framework with far too many exceptions, and the advent of the internet has made it even more so. It's time to stop defining services with reference to goods. The essence of a service is that it doesn't involve ownership. When goods are rented or physical facilities are accessed, they become elements in a service
Expert 5	Yes, I do. They don't capture all the consequences of these characteristics, but they do capture the basic characteristics
Expert 6	No! These characteristics just capture aspects of many services, but not all. I'm not sure it is possible to capture the essence of services. Such a quest is a little like trying to "bottle lightning". I, frankly, enjoy the ambiguity that surrounds any discussion of what services are or what their characteristics might be
Expert 7	The answer is NO
Expert 8	What is missing from these service attributes is that they focus almost exclusively on the delivery aspects of service and not the core attributes. So, for any one service experience the core may be fine but the delivery not, meaning that the tangible facet of service is fine but the intangible facet is not fine. In essence, the defining characteristics you list are defining characteristics of service delivery
Expert 9	I feel that the general characteristics of intangibility – and perhaps heterogeneity – are still relevant in describing services. The inseparability and perishability characteristics perhaps need to be rethought and perhaps downplayed as being distinguishing characteristics, because through technology-based and other innovations a number of services can be produced and consumed independently (e.g. entertainment services), which also implies that such services can be "inventoried" (i.e. they are not necessarily "perishable"). Overall, I think the four generic characteristics are not as "powerful" as they once were during the time when arguments were being advanced for the need for a separate focus on services marketing
Expert 10	These generic characteristics are helpful in understanding the nature of services if they are properly qualified. They are not as universal as originally posited and, because they are not, some scholars want to toss them out. We don't need to discard them, but we do need to understand the conditions under which they do and do not apply
Expert 11	The generic service characteristics are useful, but too static a classification by themselves. Services can typically be dynamic, can be localized and personalized, yet can also be global. Services increasingly are the focus of the world economy

Table III.
The service experts' views on the most common service characteristics

Note: The question asked was: "Do you feel that the generic service characteristics (intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability) capture the essence of services? If not, what is missing?"

These characteristics, however, may be useful in some special situations. The service concept may be replaced by the service perspective on value creation, focusing on value-in-use for the customer.

In terms of *intangibility*, scholars claim that it is difficult to develop output measures for services and to display or communicate them. This is referred to as the prime source of performance ambiguity, and relates to the customer not owning anything tangible when the service has been produced. There is often, however, something tangible from the customer's perspective, such as new knowledge, a memorable experience, or something tangible related to possessions (e.g. the car has been repaired and the result is that I can drive it again, or it has a nice new colour). The advice of an accountant may be very tangible and last for years (not perishable from the customer's perspective). It may result in reduced tax, but it could also be the opposite (I expected reduced tax but this did not happen and I may have to pay a fine). The value of the intangible service may actually be tangible for a long time.

There are two ways of looking at *heterogeneity*:

- (1) service providers and service processes tend to be heterogeneous; and
- (2) the production within a given company tends to be heterogeneous due to employee-induced variation and variation among customers in terms of needs and expectations.

Consistency may vary over time as a result of "service role ambiguity". The customer participates as a co-producer, which means that the standardization and direction of processes and results are difficult, if not impossible, and heterogeneity and non-standardization may be fruitful and necessary for customization. This characteristic focuses on the provider perspective rather than on the customer and value-in-use perspective.

The *perishability* nature of services often causes capacity problems and introduces uncertainty because of both task characteristics and task interdependencies. The focus is on the activity from the producer's perspective; it does not last and cannot be stored (e.g. a seat on an aircraft or a place at a school). Perishability from the customer perspective, however, may be different, and it is not mentioned or discussed. The characteristics of intangibility and perishability seem to be a result of the former paradigm where services were defined in relation to goods or physical products and how they should be produced and marketed. Instead of using intangibility we could use "tangibilizers", and focus on how to manage the evidence and create favourable, memorable customer experiences.

The *inseparability* of production and consumption introduces uncertainty, and it may have the same roots as heterogeneity in the customer perspective. The difficulty in separating production from consumption in services poses challenges, for example, in terms of quality assurance and quality control. Services cannot be provided in advance and checked before delivery. Inseparability also seems to be a characteristic based on the former, product-focused and production-oriented paradigm. Perhaps we should focus on co-production, co-creation, and the fact that the dynamic nature of services as activities, deeds, performances, and experiences requires simultaneous production and consumption. These are processes overlapping in time and space (not necessarily place), involving customers, employees, and other parties/actors in a co-production and co-consumption constellation.

We also recommend the perspective approach for service characteristics. By combining the definitions and characteristics into the perspective approach, we believe the focus should be the lens of the customer.

Discussion

Despite difficulties in defining precisely what a service is, marketing literature does reflect some agreement, in terms of both conceptual description and empirical substantiation, as to what characterizes services (e.g. Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985). The service concept has, however, traditionally focused on the nature of service performance, activities, processes, and interactions for a specific group of market offerings labelled “services”. We may conclude that there are two approaches within service research: service as a category of market offerings and service as a perspective on value creation. Some scholars claim that goods render services and services render services (see, for example, Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004). Physical products may be seen as platforms for services or components in service offerings. The new focus in service research today is not on differences between goods and services, but on differences in how we want to portray value creation with customers (and other stakeholders) where the customer’s perspective is emphasized.

We have in this article focused on one main research question: how is the phenomenon “service” portrayed within service research? The aim has been to describe and analyze how the concept of service is defined, how service characteristics express the concept, and the relevance of the existing service portraits, and to suggest a new way of portraying service.

Our conclusion is that services are as different from each other and from products as products are from each other. There is a fundamental difference between services and service, which echoes into the thoughts for future research. Looking at service as a perspective on value creation through the lens of the customer may add to future understanding of the service approach.

Our analysis of the concept of service and service characteristics shows that the definitions are too narrow and the characteristics are outdated as generic service characteristics. We suggest that service is used as a perspective. When service is portrayed as a perspective, the approach is clear – it depends on who is portraying the service and on the purpose. The customer can portray the service, or the company, or both the customer and the company in a dyad. We also stated in our study that service characteristics are outdated: therefore, when are we going to stop using them when teaching? We no longer need to defend services as being different to goods. Service is a research area in its own right. The studied service definitions confirm our statement. When, for example, service is seen in the customer’s perspective regarding a particular service, customers describe the characteristics that are important for them and naturally leave out the ones that are not adding value. The customers express what creates value for them. To summarize, we suggest a new way of portraying service:

- service is a perspective on value creation rather than a category of market offerings;
- the focus is on value through the lens of the customer; and
- co-creation of value with customers is key and the interactive, processual, experiential, and relational nature form the basis for characterizing service.

Accordingly, services as portraits do not represent general customer expressions. Instead, the very nature of service includes the company-specific feature portrait, as well as the customer-specific service portrait for the particular purpose. The purpose may be value-in-use or it may also be a long relationship view. Regardless of the purpose for the particular service or the view, it is included when service is seen as a perspective. Additionally, the definitions of service are changing constantly because of many factors, for example changing competitive situations that affect customer value-in-use. In summary, on a general level the service definition is a perspective. On lower abstraction levels a general service definition does not exist. It has to be determined at a specific time, in a specific company, for a specific service, from a specific perspective.

References

- Bateson, J.E.G. (1979), "Why we need service marketing", in Ferrell, O.C., Brown, S.W. and Lamb, C.W. Jr (Eds), *Conceptual and Theoretical Developments in Marketing*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, pp. 131-46.
- Bielen, F. and Sempels, C. (2003), "Proposition d'une Nouvelle Echelle de Mesure du Degré d'Intangibilité d'une Offre de Services", *Document de Travail*, No. 2003-08, LABORES-IESEG, Université Catholique de Lille, Lille.
- Bitner, M.J. (1992), "Servicescapes: the impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 56, April, pp. 57-71.
- Bowen, D.E., (2000) in Fisk, R.P., Grove, S.J. and John, J. (Eds), *Services Marketing Self-Portraits: Introspections, Reflections, and Glimpses from the Experts*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, pp. 37-51.
- Brown, S.W. (2000), in Fisk, R.P., Grove, S.J. and John, J. (Eds), *Services Marketing Self-Portraits: Introspections, Reflections, and Glimpses from the Experts*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, pp. 53-69.
- Edgett, S. and Parkinson, S. (1993), "Marketing for service industries – a review", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 19-39.
- Edvardsson, B. (1997), "Quality in new service development – key concepts and a frame of reference", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 52 No. 1/2.
- Fitzsimmons, J.A. and Fitzsimmons, M.J. (2000), *Service Management: Operations, Strategy and Information Technology*, 3rd ed., McGraw-Hill/Irwin, New York, NY.
- Grönroos, C. (2000) in Fisk, R.P., Grove, S.J. and John, J. (Eds), *Services Marketing Self-Portraits: Introspections, Reflections, and Glimpses from the Experts*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, pp. 71-108.
- Grönroos, C. (2001), *Service Management and Marketing: A Customer Relationship Management Approach*, 2nd ed., Wiley, New York, NY.
- Gummesson, E. (1995), "Relationship marketing: its role in the service economy", in Glynn, W.J. and Barns, J.G. (Eds), *Understanding Services Management*, Wiley, New York, NY, pp. 224-68.
- Gummesson, E. (2000), in Fisk, R.P., Grove, S.J. and John, J. (Eds), *Services Marketing Self-Portraits: Introspections, Reflections, and Glimpses from the Experts*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, pp. 133-52.
- Guseman, D.E. (1981), "Risk perceptions and risk reduction in consumer services", in Donnelly, J.H. and George, W.R. (Eds), *Marketing of Services*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, pp. 200-4.

- Gustafsson, A. and Johnson, M. (2003), *Competing in the Service Economy*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Hill, T.P. (1977), "On goods and services", *Review of Income and Wealth*, pp. 315-18.
- Judd, R.C. (1964), "The case for redefining services", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 28, January.
- Lovelock, C. (1991), *Services Marketing*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Lovelock, C. and Gummesson, E. (2004), "Whither services marketing? In search of a new paradigm and fresh perspectives", *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 20-41.
- Murray, K.B. (1991), "A test of services marketing theory: consumer information acquisition activities", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 55 No. 1.
- Murray, K.B. and Schlacter, J.L. (1990), "The impact on services versus goods on consumers' assessment of risk and variability", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 51-65.
- Rathmell, J.M. (1966), "What is meant by services?", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 30, October, pp. 32-6.
- Rathmell, J.M. (1974), *Marketing in the Service Sector*, Winthrop, Cambridge, MA.
- Sasser, W.E. Jr, Olson, R.P. and Wyckoff, D.D. (1978), *Management of Service Operations*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA.
- Shostack, G.L. (1977), "Breaking free from product marketing", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 44, April, pp. 73-80.
- Solomon, M.R., Surprenant, C.F., Czepiel, J.A. and Gutman, E.G. (1985), "A role theory perspective on dyadic interactions: the service encounter", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49 No. 1, pp. 99-111.
- Vargo, S.L. and Lusch, R.F. (2004a), "Evolving to a new dominant logic of marketing", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 68, January, pp. 1-17.
- Vargo, S.L. and Lusch, R.F. (2004b), "The four service marketing myths – remnants of a goods-based, manufacturing model", *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 6 No. 4, pp. 324-35.
- Zeithaml, V. and Bitner, M.J. (1996), *Services Marketing*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Zeithaml, V. and Bitner, M.J. (2003), *Services Marketing: Integrating Customer Focus across the Firm*, 3rd ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Zeithaml, V., Parasuraman, A. and Berry, L. (1985), "Problems and strategies in services marketing", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49, Spring, pp. 33-46.
- Zeithaml, V., Parasuraman, A. and Berry, L. (1990), *Delivering Service Quality: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations*, Free Press, New York, NY.

Appendix. The questionnaire

Dear Service Scholar,

Together with Inger Roos and Anders Gustafsson at the Service Research Center (CTF), I am writing an article focusing on how services have been portrayed within service research. One area we cover is how the service concept has been and is defined by leading scholars who have been shaping the field. You are among the 16 internationally recognized experts we have identified:

- Len Berry;
- Christian Grönroos;
- Christopher Lovelock;
- Valarie A Zeithaml;

- Mary Jo Bitner;
- Evert Gummesson;
- A. Parasuraman;
- David Bowen;
- James Heskett;
- Benjamin Schneider;
- Stephen W Brown;
- Bob Johnston;
- Berndt Stauss;
- Ray Fisk
- Jos Lemmink; and
- Roland Rust.

If you have suggestions for scholars to be added to the above list, please let us know.

We ask you to answer two questions:

- (1) What definition do you think best captures what you consider to be the essence of services? Please explain why this definition is better than other definitions. What is the origin of this definition? Please write your definition with reference to the source you refer to.
- (2) Do you feel that the IHIP generic service characteristics (intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability) capture the essence of services? If not, what is missing?

We would very much appreciate your replay no later than May 5th.

You answer by e-mail to: Bo.Edvardsson@kau.se

Thanks for your cooperation,

Bo Edvardsson