

# An evaluation of the customer service in supermarkets in Pretoria East, Tshwane Metropolis, South Africa

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## Opsomming

Verbruikerstevredenheid word vandag op meer as bloot net die gehalte van produkte gebaseer – veral die diens wat in die kleinhandelomgewing gelewer word, word baie belangrik geag. Omdat die produkte op die winkelrakke dikwels oorwegend dieselfde is, is dienslewering uiteindelik die enigste manier waarop een handelaar homself van 'n ander kan onderskei. Ongelukkig kon min navorsing gevind word wat aandui hoe die harte en beursies van verbruikers in belang van handelaarslojaliteit gewen kan word. Bestaande navorsing spreek meestal enkele, baie spesifieke elemente van klantediens aan, veral in terme van hoe dit aankoopgedrag en voortgesette ondersteuning van handelaars sal beïnvloed.

In hierdie navorsing is veronderstel dat kleinhandelaars verbruikers se lojaliteit kon wen indien die dienskwaliteit in belang van groter verbruikerstevredenheid verbeter kon word. Deur hierdie navorsing is gepoog om vas te stel hoe verbruikers die klantediens in Suid-Afrikaanse supermarkte beoordeel sodat voorstelle gemaak kon word ten opsigte van die verbetering van spesifieke elemente van klantediens. Die elemente van dienskwaliteit wat afsonderlik of gesamentlik tot verbruikers se voorkeur vir sekere supermarkte (in terme van gereelde en herhaalde aankope) bydra, is dus ondersoek.

Teorie en besprekings is binne die sisteembenadering aangebied omdat dit die geleentheid gebied het om die samehang, onderlinge belang en afhanklikheid van die onderskeie elemente van klantediens sinvol te bespreek. Die kognitiewe perspektief is betrek ter wille van 'n bespreking van verbruikers se interpretasie van winkeldiens.

'n Gerieflikheidssteekproef is deur middel van die sneeubaltechniek in Pretoria-Oos, in die geografiese metropool van Tshwane gewerf. Die area is gekies omdat daar verskeie supermarkte binne 'n klein radius geleë is wat dit vir verbruikers moontlik maak om verskillende supermarkte te ondersteun. Deelnemers moes in die area woonagtig wees en/of daar inkopies gedoen het en moes ouer as 25 jaar wees. Geen vereiste is ten opsigte van ras of geslag gestel nie. 'n Kwantitatiewe data-opname tegniek is gebruik (vraelysopname), hoewel 'n kwalitatiewe tegniek (fokusgroepgesprekke) vooraf gebruik is om die inhoud en bewoording van die vraelys te valideer – veral om alledaagse terminologie en byko-

mende konstrukke te identifiseer wat moontlik nie uit die teorie duidelik geblyk het nie.

Resultate het getoon dat verbruikers gereeld by verskillende supermarkte in die area koop en dat hulle die diens van sommige supermarkte betekenisvol beter ag as dié van ander. Die elemente van klantediens wat groter kritiek uitgelok het, het meestal met *personeel* verwante eienskappe en met *prosesse* verband gehou. Hoewel *prys* belangrik was in terme van gereelde aankope, was verbruikers meer krities ten opsigte van hoe hulle deur personeel hanteer word en ekstra moeite wat handelaars doen om die aankoopgeleentheid sonder voorval te laat verloop. Twee supermarktgroepe is betekenisvol swakker as die ander vier wat in die studie ingesluit is, beoordeel. 'n Interessante bevinding was dat die supermark wat die swakste beoordeel is, gedurende die voorafgaande boekjaar die meeste aan advertensie spandeer het. Die aanbeveling is dat hierdie geld beter aangewend kan word in belang van klantediens, veral in terme van die opleiding van personeel.

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## INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION FOR THE RESEARCH

Problems with customer service (CS) are not unique to the South African context. The American Customer Satisfaction Index (University of Michigan in Gowan *et al*, 2001:278) indicates that customers' satisfaction with the service in the retail environment in the USA declined by 12 percent between 1996 and 2001. Howardell (2003) explains that customers want it all and they want it now and warns that if a particular retailer fails to provide what customers want, it will not be difficult for these customers to find another that can. As a consequence, the majority of customers shop hop to overcome unsatisfactorily customer service (Woodruff, 1997; Webster, 1994).

Research on this topic to date has mainly focused on products and production processes rather than on services *per se*, and most of what has been published refers to first-world experiences (Calif, 2001; Dawson, 2000; Erdem *et al*, 1999). The relevance of excellent CS to the survival of a company in a competitive marketplace has been discussed repeatedly (e.g. see Du Vázquez *et al* 2003; Malan, 2003; Nielsen, 2002; Seybold, 2001; Woodruff, 1997) and there seems to be no doubt that CS is vital to service quality (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004; Cronin *et al*, 2000; Spreng & Mackoy, 1996). In fact, CS is supposed to add memorable and satisfactory value to a purchasing experience and to boost customer satisfaction as well as adding to an overall perception of service quality with a prospect of customer loyalty. The literature however does admit that earlier attempts to identify what keeps retailer shoppers loyal to a store have not been very successful. In conjunction with imprecise definitions of CS, confusion about the meaning and relatedness of constructs pertaining to commendable CS still cause widespread confusion (Winstead, 1997).

In order to deliver service quality in a specific context (e.g. supermarkets), CS *per se* has to be clarified both in terms of its individual elements/attributes and also their collective contribution towards customer satisfaction and, ultimately, store loyalty. An inspection of existing publications indicates that very specific individual attributes of CS (e.g. price; product variety and quality; store personnel; place and physical environment; promotions) have almost been over-researched over the years in terms of their role in promoting store loyalty and influencing buyers' behaviour. Little evidence, however, is available to help us understand and describe the collective contribution of the elements of CS towards service quality. Also, apart from some research in Asian countries (Kim *et al*, 2002), most research into consumer behaviour relies on theoretical frameworks developed in sophisticated Western societies, with little known about how consumers in different countries and cultural backgrounds evaluate and anticipate CS (Du Plessis *et al*, 1995:169).

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

Certain supermarket conglomerates have become household names in South Africa; we all patronise Pick 'n Pay, Spar, Checkers, Shoprite, OK the supermarket departments in Woolworths or Woolworths Foods when we do our grocery shopping. Gone are the days when we enjoyed the personal assistance of the friendly grocer on the corner of the street. These retailers have since made way for retail giants whose shops occupy hundreds of square metres and draw thousands of customers, pushing gigantic trolleys through long alleys in seemingly never-ending shopping malls. These supermarkets are furthermore often located within close proximity of one another, although they stock more or less the same goods, which suggests that a difference in their CS differentiates them in terms of service quality and ultimately also customers' store loyalty (Bell, 2003). The term CS, however, refers to an assortment of attributes that collectively constitute CS as a collective phenomenon. Any single positive attribute of CS, e.g. competitive prices or product assortment, might therefore not necessarily ensure consumer satisfaction or store loyalty. The intangibility of CS makes it particularly difficult for both retailers and customers to objectively evaluate (Levy & Weitz, 2001:176, 586, 587). CS assessed in terms of service quality can therefore vary considerably from one store to the next and from one customer to another.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objective with this research project was to evaluate the CS in South African supermarkets in the eastern suburbs of Tshwane. This area probably represents the ultimate of what the respective supermarkets offer in terms of supermarket shopping in South Africa at present, considering the demographic profile and socio-economic characteristics of the area. To identify the shortcomings that could be amended to improve consumers' satisfaction with CS, this study aims to provide, based on consumers' experiences of well-known supermarkets, firstly a narrative of consumers' satisfaction with CS as a whole, and secondly a description of their satisfaction with various attributes of specific elements of CS.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### Supermarkets

A supermarket is defined as any large, departmentalised retail store that primarily sells food products and groceries (Marshall & Nielson, 2001). In the South African context, OK, Spar, Pick 'n Pay, Checkers and Shoprite fall into this category. A department store refers to a large retail unit with an extensive assortment (variety and range) of goods and services that are organised into separate departments that may include a foods and grocery section (Thang & Tan, 2003), e.g. Woolworths. The focus group discussions conducted as part of this study indicate that consum-

ers do not necessarily make this distinction. All the retailers listed above, as well as their hyper stores and smaller foods outlets were therefore included in this study's definition of "supermarket".

### Customer service

Customer service (CS) refers to the combination of activities offered by retailers. If taken seriously, CS is presented with the intention of enhancing service quality, so that customers perceive the shopping experience as more pleasant and even rewarding (Howardell, 2003; Levy & Weitz, 2001: 586, 587; Woodruff, 1997; Zikmund & d'Admico, 2001:331). For the purpose of this study, CS is interpreted in terms of the four elements of the marketing mix namely, product, place, price, promotion, and three additional elements (added to the marketing mix by Booms & Bitner, 1981), namely people, processes and physical evidence, to include the widest possible spread of possible influencing variables. CS is further considered as a means-to-end process where all the interactions/"moments of truth" are interrelated in terms of a total experience. It is assumed that good CS revolves around getting all the elements of the process right to prevent failure because of an apparent weakest link (Rhee & Bell, 2002; Woodruff, 1997).

**Customer service in terms of customer satisfaction** From a business point of view, customer satisfaction implies always doing the right things right (Levy & Weitz, 2001:586; Woodruff, 1997). Customer satisfaction is essential for the survival of retailers because it enhances repeat purchase behaviour and contributes to positive word-of-mouth communication and the breeding of so-called customer advocates (Malan, 2003). Process definitions of satisfaction are based on the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm that proposes that confirmation and positive disconfirmation generally result in satisfaction, as opposed to negative disconfirmation that leads to dissatisfaction. Evaluation is generally done within a framework of expectations to conclude a desires congruency (with what was expected), and either positive or negative disconfirmation (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996); this can result after single, or brief encounters. Satisfaction can also refer to a state of fulfilment that involves reinforcement and arousal over time; this requires repetitive exposure and experience (Yi, 1990 in Iacobucci *et al*, 1995). Consumer satisfaction influences a consumer's motives and attitudes during subsequent consumer decisions, e.g. to patronise a specific supermarket or not (Du Plessis *et al*, 1990 in Erasmus & Donoghue, 1998).

**Customer service in terms of store loyalty** Store loyalty occurs when a customer intentionally chooses one store over others, irrespective of the offerings at the other stores (Levy & Weitz, 2001:152). Consumer satisfaction however does not necessarily result in store loyalty; consumers who are highly satisfied with a store's CS may for example still not be loyal. Well-managed customer retention programs that are communication- and tactics-driven and which strive to improve CS are generally used to encourage custom-

ers' loyalty in a competitive market place (Malan, 2003).

### Customer service as a collective phenomenon

CS *per se* refers to an assortment of attributes that collectively represent the service. The systems theory provides a useful vehicle for incorporating the various elements of CS, i.e. discussing an experience as a whole (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328). The systems theory enables a study of the various elements of CS but acknowledges the sequence, relationship and interdependency of the fundamental elements of CS. The elements of CS comprise all the external factors that incite the consumer's mind (Thang & Tan, 2003). The interpretation of the individual elements of CS is considered a cognitive activity; it involves interpretation within established schemata in memory that are based on existing knowledge structures (Spears & Gregoire, 2003:2). Consumers can therefore be postulated to convert stimuli (elements of CS) into meaningful information and then apply this consciously or subconsciously when they comprehend the environment before making a judgement (Thang & Tan, 2003). Upon entering a supermarket, consumers therefore rely on internal resources to comprehend the situation and to guide their decision-making processes (Belch & Belch, 1998:104). The systems theory further postulates that when one element (e.g. price) changes, a consumer's interpretation of the other elements of CS (e.g. product availability) as positive/negative will also change. This occurs on a subliminal level (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000:172-179). Wholeness is another important characteristic of a systems approach; the output of the system (e.g. superior CS) may not necessarily be derived from elements of CS considered in isolation (e.g. assuming that competitive price would be a precondition for superior CS). Of greater importance is the collective contribution (priority and hierarchy) of the composite elements of CS in terms of service quality and store loyalty (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:325, 328). Although consumers do judge and comment on elements independently, their collective contribution eventually determines the interpretation of service quality/outcome.

Within the systems theory, equifinality refers to the phenomenon where a certain level of CS (output) may be achieved via different routes, e.g. a combination of lower prices and higher product availability at the cost of store design and layout, as opposed to higher prices and elaborate product ranges or convenient store design. The compensatory rule of consumer decision-making applies (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000:452); a consumer evaluates CS and allocates relative weights to elements of CS in terms of their perceived importance in a specific context to establish a final CS score for each store visited. The store with the highest score will thus probably represent the preferred one. Two stores might thus earn the same total score although scores for individual service elements might differ considerably; both will then provide "good CS", but via different routes. On the other hand, a store with a high score, which might appear

acceptable, may still fail to attract customers due to an unacceptable minimum condition. This explains the contribution of each element of CS in terms of eventual acceptable CS. Customers will patronize a retailer when the perceived CS meets or exceeds their expectations (Levy & Weitz, 2001:152, 587). The post-purchase reaction to purchase behaviour that is typical of a dynamic system affects subsequent purchases by creating an internal frame of reference that determines future evaluation. If the consumer is satisfied with the consequences of a purchase experience, the probability of repeat purchase behaviour increases. Feedback is therefore of utmost importance in searching for ways to improve customer service (Spears & Gregoire, 2003:2,3).

#### **Individual elements/attributes of customer service**

Consumers generally look for tangible evidence (contextual cues) of what they are about to experience in a given service encounter, which is intangible (Bitner, 1994). The elements of CS that may contribute to service quality are now briefly discussed in terms of the traditional variables of the marketing mix (as discussed by McCarthy in 1960), and including the expanded version discussed by Booms and Bitner (1981), that acknowledges certain additional contextual cues (Woodruff, 1997:142).

**Product** This refers to the merchandise assortment as need-satisfying utilities (Zikmund & d'Admico, 2001:654), e.g. a supermarket's product offerings in terms of range, quality and availability, and also includes packaging, because this eventually also contributes to the image of the store through its effect on shelf life, product image, communication of product information and affordability.

**Place/physical surrounding** The store itself has thus become a fertile opportunity for market differentiation to the extent that store image (e.g. a safe, beautiful, hygienic environment) may be an important antecedent of store satisfaction and store loyalty (Levy & Weitz, 2001:176, 555; Zikmund & d'Admico, 2001:11-12). It has been reported that customers nowadays desire hedonic experiences (multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of consumption) that extend beyond the purpose of acquiring merchandise (Arnold, 2003; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Thang & Tan, 2003). Criteria for *success* may even be aesthetic in nature (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Malan, 2003). Retailers therefore have to determine how much their target market will be willing to pay for atmosphere and physical resources such as convenient parking facilities (Zikmund & d'Admico, 2001:11-12).

**Price** The amount of money that is exchanged for the satisfaction of a need is generally considered acceptable if the value of the product purchased is perceived to be equal to, or exceeding the amount paid. Irrational evaluation of price occurs when price is used as an indication of quality. Pricing strategies are often used to sway buyer decisions because most consumers are ill equipped to guard against them (Assael, 1993:650; Zikmund & d'Admico, 2001:654). Depending on the importance of price in a consumers' inter-

pretation of CS, price can thus be a very important determinant of a consumer's patronage of a specific store.

**Promotion** All forms of marketing communication, in written, oral, auditory and/or visual format, used to draw attention to a store's offerings influence customers' decision to patronize the store or not (Zikmund & d'Admico, 2001:655). Vast amounts of money are spent annually to promote businesses; four of the prominent six supermarkets in South Africa were listed in the top ten advertisers in 2004/5.

**Salespeople and personnel** With respect to selling orientation/customer orientation, salespeople and other personnel significantly influence customers' satisfaction with stores, products and manufacturers. Efforts towards product development and promotion are apparently often negated by the poor performance of salespeople (Goff *et al*, 1997; Sharma & Levy, 1995). A good customer- salesperson relationship contributes to a pleasant shopping experience (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999) and reduces risk perception, especially during the final stages of the decision-making process (Solomon, 1986). A customer-oriented approach that signifies empathy, expertise and competence enhances customer satisfaction and store loyalty (Clopton *et al*, 2001).

**Processes** All the procedures, mechanisms and flows of activity e.g. handling complaints, ensuring dependability, and providing credit facilities, exchange policies and guarantees make up the process of attracting and retaining customers. Customers expect retailers to be supportive and so any service/mechanism that suggests empathy and understanding will enhance consumer satisfaction (Dabholkar *et al*, 1994; Du Vázquez *et al*, 2003).

**Retail policies** All stores have specific strategies to attract and retain customers (Du Vázquez *et al*, 2003). These policies become very complex in their application in a supermarket that serves customers with different lifestyles from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, as opposed to a shop that serves a smaller, more homogeneous market. Unfortunately the needs of a generalized European or American consumer are often accepted as the norm in studies of supply products in retail, even in third-world countries (Du Plessis *et al*, 1995:169).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research style**

The study was conducted using a quantitative methodological paradigm but includes quantitative as well as qualitative data collection techniques to enhance validity and reliability (Babbie & Mouton, 1998:291, 292). The study was cross-sectional in nature. Data was collected in August 2004, with the assistance of four trained field workers who distributed and collected questionnaires in specific areas.

## Sample and sampling

Participants were recruited in the eastern suburbs of Pretoria. This area, which has a relatively high socio-economic status in the Tshwane metropole, was chosen based on reports that consumers with higher discretionary incomes are more aware of their consumer rights and thus generally have a greater intolerance of poor CS (Arnold, 2003; Samson & Little, 1993:390) and can afford to travel to different supermarkets to find a pleasurable shopping experience (Nielsen, 2002). Two assumptions were made in terms of the selection of the geographical area: firstly, that retailers present their best CS offering in more affluent communities and secondly, that the problems found in such an area probably also exist and may even be more intense in poorer areas, so the chosen sample area represents the best- rather than the worst-case scenario. Because of time and financial constraints and because of the recommendation of other researchers, snowball sampling (chain referral) was used to recruit participants (Areni, 2003; Leong *et al*, 1997). Participants were recruited in a structured manner to include a good distribution of participants from the various suburbs in the target area (Neuman, 1997:204). Any willing individuals older than 25 years, irrespective of gender, who managed or co-managed their own household were included. They were expected to have had at least six personal buying experiences at two or more of the well-known supermarkets during the preceding three months (Thang & Tan, 2003).

## Data collection

**Phase 1: Focus group discussions** Two focus group discussions were held as an initial data collection phase to verify the theoretical content and wording of the questionnaire, to ensure inclusion of familiar concepts and everyday language, and avoidance of theory that primarily reflects first-world experiences (McQuarrie & McIntyre, 1988). Participants were limited to ten per discussion group to allow enough time for each participant to express his/her views in the limited time. Simultaneous participation of friends, spouses and family was not allowed (Babbie & Mouton, 1998:292; Cook, 1982). Participants were invited, knowing that the study was concerned with CS in supermarkets. No reference was made to any particular stores or specific characteristics of CS. Discussions evolved from general to specific; open-ended questions were used to encourage discussions of specific personal experiences (Garrison *et al*, 1999). Discussions were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants, to enable accurate transcriptions (Babbie & Mouton, 1998:292). The following represent examples of the prompts used during the discussions:

- ◆ Do you prefer certain supermarkets and avoid others when doing your grocery shopping? Explain.
- ◆ What do you expect of a supermarket before you will give it your continual support?
- ◆ Do the supermarkets in your area provide the same service?

**Phase 2: Structured questionnaire** The structured questionnaire distributed as the main data-collection

instrument predominantly contained closed questions, which were finalized in terms of wording and content after interpretation of the focus group discussions. The questionnaire consisted of six sections: (A) Demographics and general buyer behavior (e.g. How frequently have you shopped at each of the following supermarkets in the past three months? Who does the grocery shopping for your household?; How frequently do they do it?); (B) Judgment of the importance of the attributes of CS (using a five-point scale to score 34 statements e.g. How important do you regard the following in your judgement of the service of a supermarket?); (C) *Listing of intolerable attributes of CS* (involved an open-ended question that enabled cross validation (Zikmund & D'Amico, 2001:146; Leong *et al*, 1997); (D) An evaluation of well known supermarkets (using a five-point scale to score statements e.g. Indicate your view of the customer service of the supermarket/s where you generally do your shopping); (E) A rating of satisfaction with specific attributes of CS (using a five-point scale to score 33 attributes e.g. How satisfied are you in general with the following aspects of customer service of the supermarket/s where you generally do your shopping?); and (F) Willingness to recommend supermarkets (referring to all the supermarkets in the area with questions such as Would you recommend the following supermarkets to your best friend for regular purchases?).

Four trained field workers (Masters-degree students) assisted with the distribution and collection of questionnaires in the selected area on a drop-and-collect-later basis. Questionnaires were collected at an appointed time within 48 hours of drop-off, and were returned in sealed envelopes. Of the 500 questionnaires that were distributed in 48 suburbs over a 14 day period during August 2004, 386 were successfully retrieved by the deadline.

## QUALITY OF DATA

Various precautions were taken during the research process to limit error and to enhance the validity and reliability of data.

### Validity

**Theoretical validity** To enhance the theoretical validity of this study, all the key concepts pertaining to CS, store loyalty and consumer satisfaction were identified through a thorough literature review before the compilation of the questionnaire. This was further supported by focus group discussions during which special attention was given to the language used by participants to refer to specific theoretical concepts so that nothing was overlooked, incorrectly labelled, or left vague or complex.

**Construct validity** More than one method was used to identify relevant constructs and appropriate terminology, so that construct validity was enhanced. A simple Likert-type scale was used as the main means of measurement in the questionnaire, based on its success in similar studies in the past and the

ease it brings to the interpretation of lengthy questionnaires such as this one (Danaher, 1997).

**Inferential validity** The assistance of a professional statistician ensured that data was correctly analysed, and that statistical procedures were chosen in accordance with the objectives of the study.

#### Sampling error

To reduce error in terms of the relatively large sample population, sampling was done according to pre-determined criteria. The sample was compared to the population profile of the Tshwane metropole. Only eager and willing participants were included so that it could be assumed that their responses are truthful.

#### Reliability

The key criterion for validity in data collection is reliability (Mouton, 1996:156, 157), which was addressed by using a combination of data-collection methods (Plug *et al*, 1997:43, 108) reduce possible errors during the focus groups discussions (Katzner, 1982:64), time and location of discussions were arranged to suit participants; the discussions were held in a neutral environment to enhance open communication; and a maximum of ten willing individuals was included to allow each participant enough time to voice his/her individual feelings, perceptions and experiences.

Possible sources of error during the implementation of the questionnaires were addressed through clear statement of the purpose of the survey; an indication of the researcher's affiliation; and a promise of confidentiality. The length of the questionnaire was limited and it was pre-tested before implementation. Only trained assistants conducted the surveys and only willing individuals were included.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

This study aims to examine the CS of South African supermarkets in general and never intended to discriminate against or to favour any of the supermar-

kets. Because of the sensitive nature of this research, the identities of the supermarkets and department stores that were investigated, namely Checkers, Checkers Hyper, Pick 'n Pay, Pick 'n Pay Hyper, Spar, Super Spar, OK, Woolworths and Woolworths Foods were thus protected by the use of codes A, B, C, D and E (these do not coincide with the order of the listed stores) in the research report. Aa, Bb, Cc etc, refer to the hyper stores and/or the food versions of the relevant supermarkets.

#### Focus group discussions

Immediately after each session the recordings made during a focus group discussion were transcribed and cross-checked by the researchers. Content analysis, open coding and axial coding were done to confirm and identify constructs and concepts that were already contained in the questionnaire or new ones that had to be taken into consideration. Attention was also given to common language used in the discussions, and the questionnaire adapted accordingly (Babbie & Mouton, 1998:292).

#### Questionnaire

Descriptive and inferential statistics suited to the specific objectives of the study were implemented. Linear regression was carried out and Pearson correlation coefficients calculated to determine whether the three identified elements of CS would be useful to predict satisfaction with CS and willingness to recommend supermarkets to others.

## RESULTS

#### Profile of participants

Of the 386 useful questionnaires that were collected, 99 were completed by male and 287 by female participants.

#### Buying habits

**Patronage of specific supermarkets** Table 1 indi-

**TABLE 1: PARTICIPANTS' PATRONAGE OF DIFFERENT SUPERMARKETS (N=386)**

Frequency of shopping	Supermarket A	Supermarket B	Supermarket C	Supermarket D	Other supermarkets*
At least once a week	109	136	158	76	21
Max 2-3 times a month	91	122	84	72	15
Max once a week	33	49	45	21	4
Once	63	48	41	75	17
Never	45	12	17	85	55
Total	341	367	345	339	112

\* "Other" includes supermarket E as well as convenience stores at garages

cates that supermarket B seems to be the most frequently visited in general and that B and C are most frequently visited on a weekly basis. Supermarket D is apparently patronized less frequently in general, and is never patronised by 85 (22%) of the participants. During focus group discussions some participants mentioned that although they would have preferred to do the majority of their grocery shopping at A, they could not afford to do so and generally only go there for fill-in shopping.

**Family members' involvement in supermarket shopping** The percentages in Table 2 were calculated in terms of the larger sample. The largest percentage (mostly women) apparently does grocery shopping on a *monthly* basis; 14,6% of husbands/partners of participants shop *weekly*, and children's involvement in terms of grocery shopping for the household is not really worth mentioning. During focus group discussions participants indicated that they generally stop at conveniently located supermarkets on their way home from work for fill-in shopping but that they intentionally go to their preferred supermarkets on a weekly basis to do major shopping. Children were not specifically mentioned during these discussions.

**Importance of individual elements of CS with regard to service quality**

**As indicated in focus group discussion** The focus group discussions generally confirmed the theoretical content of the questionnaire. Certain additional constructs that appeared to be more typical of the South African situation however were mentioned and accommodated in the questionnaire, e.g. safety aspects such as area or personal safety in the stores; poor service from salespeople; and inefficient personnel.

**As indicated in the questionnaires** In Section B of the questionnaire, participants had to rate 34 attributes of CS in terms of importance of contribution to service levels in supermarkets (Table 3). More than 90% of the participants (more than 347 out of 386) rated 19 out of the 34 listed attributes as either important or very important. Only two attributes, namely regular promotions and demonstrations in store and access to internet shopping were rated as less important or unimportant by more than 30% (116 and more) of participants.

In terms of the attributes considered very important, those mentioned by more than 80% (309 and more

out of 386) of the participants were: *place-related* (a clean store); and *product-related* (strict control over the freshness of products). The same indication was given in focus group discussions where the cleanliness of stores was discussed with enthusiasm. Cleanliness/perceived hygiene was indicated as a reason why consumers prefer to patronise supermarket A, the only store that was apparently perceived as a clean store.

Attributes mentioned as very important by 70-79% (n=270-308) of participants were: *place-related* (store layout); *product-related* (products of excellent quality) and *process-related* (minimum waiting time at cashiers).

Attributes mentioned as very important by 60-69% (n=231-269) of participants were: *place-related* (clear signage in store; safety/security); *personnel-related* (enthusiastic staff; knowledgeable staff); and *process-related* (clean trolleys; availability of credit card facilities).

Attributes mentioned as very important by 50-59% (n=193-230) of participants were: *place-related* (easy access to the parking area; well located parking bays; location of the store in a safe area; practical shelf layout; convenient location of the store); *product-related* (large product variety; availability of new products); *personnel/process-related* (efficient staff assistance; approachable managers); and *process-related* (provision of good quality plastic bags for shoppers).

The aspects considered least important were in-store demonstrations and access to internet shopping. The latter, although a new tendency in supermarket shopping world-wide, is currently apparently *not* a local priority yet.

**Satisfaction with specific attributes of CS of supermarkets patronized by respondents**

Participants indicated their satisfaction with specific attributes of CS (specific denominators of the elements of CS drawn from the literature as well as the focus group interviews) of the supermarkets they patronize in section E of the questionnaire. This was used to transliterate all the attributes of CS that were rated highly or poorly, in terms of elements of CS. Table 4 indicates participants' satisfaction with the various attributes of CS with reference to the "supermarket/s that they patronize on a regular basis".

In terms of participants' satisfaction with specific attributes of CS (a summation of satisfied and highly satis-

**TABLE 2: FAMILY MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT IN SUPERMARKET SHOPPING (N=386)**

	Participant (self)		Husband/ wife/ partner		Children		Other	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Monthly n=122	89	23,0	28	7,3	8	2,0	7	1,8
Weekly n=245	18	4,6	52	14,6	4	1,0	14	3,6
Daily n=84	59	15,2	21	5,4	3	0,7	1	0,2
Occasionally n=106	21	5,4	49	12,6	34	0,9	2	0,5

**TABLE 3: IMPORTANCE OF VARIOUS ATTRIBUTES OF CS IN SUPERMARKETS IN GENERAL (N=386)**

Attributes of CS	Unimportant	Less important	Uncertain	Important	Very important*	Missing
Clean store	0	1	4	51	326	4
Strict control of freshness of products	0	4	4	47	325	6
Products of excellent quality	0	2	3	79	301	1
Short queues at the cashiers/ minimum waiting time	1	5	9	75	296	0
Store layout	0	2	7	105	270	2
Clean trolleys	0	9	6	125	245	1
Friendly, enthusiastic staff assistance	2	4	15	123	242	0
Clear/visible signage to indicate product location	1	7	19	116	241	2
Security in the store	1	14	29	102	235	5
Availability of credit/debit card facilities/in-store ATM	7	21	21	103	230	4
Well trained / knowledgeable staff	1	14	19	121	230	1
Efficient staff assistance	2	10	18	127	229	0
Easy access to parking area from road	1	10	20	123	227	5
Well located parking bays	1	6	11	138	224	6
Practical, logical shelf layout	0	9	15	138	223	1
Store located in a safe place	0	4	12	145	222	3
Large product variety	1	4	17	141	221	2
Managers that are approachable	5	26	23	117	213	2
Store conveniently located	0	9	16	152	206	3
Availability of new products	2	15	20	142	205	2
Strong plastic carry bags	16	28	29	109	200	4
Comfortable in-store temperature	2	7	17	177	183	0
Pleasant store atmosphere	0	13	19	179	173	2
Uniformly dressed staff	4	34	39	146	163	0
Efficient packers at the cashiers	4	37	28	164	150	3
Managers that show interest in client	3	50	53	126	149	5
Aesthetically appealing in-store environment	3	34	40	175	131	3
Lowest prices, cheapest products	5	52	62	132	129	6
Provision of free plastic carry bags	33	75	60	87	127	4
Bargains in store on a regular basis	6	47	64	148	117	4
Regular advertising of store specials	16	64	56	137	110	3
Modern appearance of store	15	64	54	150	99	4
Regular promotions/demonstrations	29	115	68	101	73	0
Access to internet shopping	80	99	76	61	63	7

\* Attributes are arranged in descending order according to the *very important* figures

fied figures), more than 75% of the participants were satisfied or highly satisfied with *place-related* attributes (in-store temperature: 85%; in-store layout: 85%; location of parking bays: 85%; cleanliness of store: 85%; store appearance: 85%; convenience of store location: 97%) and *product-related* attributes (quality of products: 85%).

Between 20% (n=77) and 30% (n=116) indicated that they were dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied with *per-*

*sonnel/process-related* attributes (waiting time in queues: 27%; knowledge of staff: 21%; assistance of staff: 20%).

Between 10% (n=39) and 15% (n=58) indicated their discontent with *personnel/process-related* attributes (friendliness of staff: 12%; assistance of managers: 13%; in/efficiency of packers: 12%; interest of the managers in the customers: 16%); *place-related* attributes (security in the store: 11%) and *process-*

**TABLE 4: SATISFACTION WITH ATTRIBUTES OF CS (N=386)**

Attribute of CS	Highly satisfied*	Satisfied	Un certain	Somewhat dissatisfied	Highly dissatisfied	Missing
Convenient location	126	229	20	5	1	5
In-store credit & debit card facilities, ATM	125	189	40	21	6	5
Quality of products	122	219	28	13	0	4
Strong plastic carry bags	107	185	60	21	7	6
Condition of the trolleys	97	146	40	9	2	92
Cleanliness in stores	96	230	30	22	4	4
Product variety	93	220	41	23	4	5
Location of parking bays	90	231	33	26	3	3
Signage of product location in the store	87	191	68	33	4	3
Quality control of products	83	219	58	21	1	4
Store layout	83	244	37	16	2	4
Friendliness of staff	81	182	71	38	10	4
In-store temperature	80	248	38	14	1	5
Regular advertising of specials in the media	80	185	86	26	4	5
Availability of new, interesting products	78	197	79	26	2	4
Shelf layout	75	223	53	27	2	6
Appearance of staff	68	225	65	19	5	4
In-store security	68	169	98	41	5	5
Quality of plastic carry bags	65	195	77	37	5	7
Safety of the environment	64	250	51	14	3	4
Store atmosphere	64	222	74	18	0	8
Assistance of managers in the stores	63	140	127	41	12	3
Modern stores	63	241	65	12	1	4
Assistance and interest of managers	61	152	108	49	11	5
Availability of bargains	58	186	99	33	4	6
Efficiency of staff assistance to solve problems	56	150	97	65	12	6
Appearance of stores inside	54	271	47	9	1	4
Knowledge of staff	54	166	81	69	12	4
Efficiency of packers at the cashiers	51	195	82	40	14	4
In-store promotions/demonstrations	51	177	117	36	1	4
Queues/waiting time at cashiers	47	177	57	84	17	4
Access to internet shopping	40	95	183	36	21	11
Prices	39	217	70	41	12	7

\* Attributes are arranged in descending order according to the *highly satisfied* figures

**TABLE 5: INTOLERABLE ATTRIBUTES OF CUSTOMER SERVICE IN SUPERMARKETS (N=386)**

Service attribute	n	%
Rude/untrained staff	271	70,2
Unavailability of products	199	51,6
Dirty trolleys	197	51,0
Long queues at pay points	142	36,8
Poor quality of products	130	33,7
Expensiveness/high prices	123	31,9
Distance to store	104	27,2

*related* aspects (quality of plastic bags: 10%; access to internet shopping: 15%).

Customers mostly appeared to be dissatisfied with *process-related* aspects of CS where *personnel* were involved; a noteworthy percentage indicated that assistance and efficiency of both general frontline staff and management are not satisfactory. Participants generally appeared to be satisfied with *product-related* and *place-related* attributes, probably because most supermarkets stock the same goods, so that differentiation between the shops is based on other attributes.

#### Intolerable attributes of customer service

Section C contained an open-ended question where participants could mention any attribute, which they considered unacceptable to such a degree that it would cause them to leave a supermarket without buying anything. Table 5 reflects only those attributes of CS that were considered intolerable by more than 25% of the participants.

More than 50% of participants (n=193) indicated that the following three attributes are intolerable in terms of customer service: *personnel/process-related* (rude or untrained staff); *product-related* (unavailability of products); and *other* reasons: (dirty trolleys). Attributes identified as intolerable by a noteworthy percentage of the sample (25% to 50%) were: *personnel/process-related* (long queues at pay points); *product-related* (poor quality products); *price-related* (*expensive products*); and *place-related* (distance to the store/ location).

In retrospect, personnel- and process-related attributes are identified as the main contributors towards intolerable customer service, followed by product-related issues, specifically quality-related attributes of products. Price (expensiveness) was mentioned by less than a third of the participants. These findings are consistent with the attributes and elements of CS scored as very important in supermarkets, which suggests that the participants' responses are valid and reliable, and indicates that the attributes mentioned should be considered relevant and worth taking notice of.

#### Evaluation of the various supermarkets

In Section D of the questionnaire, participants had to evaluate the CS of the various supermarkets in the geographical area where they generally do their shopping. The more positive a customer's interpretation of the CS at a specific supermarket, the greater the probability can be assumed to be that the customer will frequently visit that supermarket (Table 6).

In terms of excellent customer service, supermarkets A and Aa were rated better than the other supermarkets. The supermarkets rated lowest, as least satisfied, were D, Dd and E; some participants even scored E as unacceptable. Noteworthy also is the number of participants who were uncertain of the CS in stores D, Dd and E; this probably indicates non-patronage of these supermarkets (based on the formulation of the question). Satisfaction with supermarkets however does not necessarily ensure store patronage on a regular basis. During focus group interviews, participants indicated that they would have preferred to shop at A and Aa on a regular basis, but that regular patronage was simply unaffordable. This was confirmed in the responses to Section C of the questionnaire where participants indicated that high prices cause them to leave a store without making a purchase (Table 5).

#### Recommendation of specific supermarkets as an indication of store loyalty

Based on participants' willingness to recommend supermarkets to others, supermarkets A, Aa, B, Bb, C and Cc performed better than D and E (Table 7). A and Aa received the most "yes" votes while D and E received the most "no" votes. D, Dd and E received many "uncertain" votes, which might reflect limited experience of these stores.

Aa was rated significantly better ( $p \leq 0,05$ ) than all of the other supermarkets, while A was rated significantly ( $p \leq 0,05$ ) better than B, C, Cc, D, Dd and E. Both A and Aa were rated significantly better ( $p \leq 0,05$ ) than Bb. It must however be stressed that participants also cited A and Aa as too expensive to patronise on a regular basis. When rating CS, participants were apparently not too concerned about higher prices but then admitted that they could not patronise these more expensive stores on a regular basis. No significant difference could be found between supermarkets Bb (a Hyper store), C and Cc. B, C and Cc

**TABLE 6: PARTICIPANTS' EVALUATION OF THE VARIOUS SUPERMARKETS IN THE AREA WHERE THEY GENERALLY DO THEIR SHOPPING (N=386)**

Supermarket	Excellent	Good	Uncertain	Poor	Unacceptable
A (n=307)	151	113	33	9	1
Aa (n=311)	181	96	24	8	2
B (n=337)	93	205	30	9	0
Bb (n=308)	86	150	54	16	2
C (n=334)	84	180	51	17	2
Cc (n=294)	97	146	40	9	2
D (n=301)	29	96	102	52	22
Dd (n=274)	30	90	94	46	14
E (n=224)	6	25	110	54	29

**TABLE 7: WILLINGNESS TO RECOMMEND SUPERMARKETS**

Supermarket	Yes	No	Uncertain	Mean	Std dev
A (n=343)	301	14	28	4,3159	0,80511
Aa (n=341)	305	15	21	4,4340	0,7959
B (n=341)	280	15	36	3,9805	0,8501
Bb (n=316)	260	25	31	4,1243	0,6950
C (n=314)	254	15	45	3,9790	0,8143
Cc (n=314)	254	15	45	4,1122	0,7995
D (n=294)	78	134	82	3,2774	1,0322
Dd (n=309)	146	93	70	3,1927	1,0658
E (n=277)	27	146	104	2,6652	0,0324

were rated significantly better ( $p \leq 0,05$ ) than D, Dd and E. We can thus conclude that A and Aa are considered the best supermarkets although they are also considered too expensive to patronise regularly. Also, supermarket groups D and E have a lot to improve on in terms of their CS.

#### CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPLAINED WITHIN THE SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Belch and Belch (1998:104) explain that external stimuli provoke consumer needs but that a consumer's interpretation of these stimuli (elements and attributes of CS) provokes the decision to buy or to refrain from buying. The cognitive perspective assumes that consumers long for consistency in their evaluation of CS on the basis of their individual perceptions. Consumers are influenced by elements and attributes of CS, but interpret/transform these cues in terms of a mental framework; cues are prioritised and evaluated in terms of the output that will best serve their needs. The lexicographic decision rule perhaps best describes consumers' evaluation of the elements of CS in terms of repeat purchase behaviour. Although participants are clearly not very satisfied with the CS of certain supermarkets, they still shop there because of the acceptability of certain other attributes such as affordability and location.

The systems theory postulates that changing one element (e.g. store location) can affect the interpretation of other elements of CS (e.g. price). This is supported in the findings; participants confess to patronizing two of the supermarkets of which certain elements of CS are rated as *poor* and even unacceptable, because they are affordable and conveniently located. When discussed individually, certain elements are thus stressed and strongly debated although they are not necessarily crucial in terms of the final decision to patronise a supermarket or not. CS that encourages repeat purchase behaviour and store loyalty may therefore not necessarily derive from the individual elements of CS that represent excellent CS and service quality, which explains why some of the supermarkets that are severely criticized yet remain in business.

Retailers are advised not to relax when favourable output, good sales and store patronage are achieved. Considering a retailer's objective, namely to attract

and attain a competitive advantage and ensure consumers' loyalty, shops should concentrate on feedback (the post-purchase reaction to purchase behaviour), because post-purchase evaluation affects consequent purchases and contributes to the internal frame of reference that determines future evaluation of supermarkets as well as interpersonal communication about CS. If consumers are satisfied with the consequences of a purchase experience, the possibility of repeat purchase behaviour and store loyalty increases. During the focus group discussions, participants mentioned that when they are satisfied they not only patronise a store on a regular basis, but also recommend it to others. Subsequently the contrary also applies; dissatisfaction will probably result in negative word-of-mouth communication and non-purchase behaviour. Participants even said that they explicitly discourage friends and family to visit stores where they experience poor CS. Examples of their responses include the following:

- ♦ *"I will never recommend anyone to go to E; the store is a mess."*
- ♦ *"I cannot imagine why one would go to E for your shopping if B is just around the corner; I would never recommend one to buy there."*
- ♦ *"I have been to C more than once and I always come out disappointed; I will certainly not recommend anyone to shop there."*

An article in a national Sunday newspaper ("Die grootste adverteerders in 2004":2005) listed the ten South African companies that spent most on advertising in the country in the 2004 financial year. This list included four of the five supermarket groups included in this study. Interestingly, the group that was rated best in terms of individual CS attributes was not included in the list. Thorough scrutiny of the content of the advertisements shows that these supermarkets emphasise PRICE, though this specific element of CS is not identified as a very important determinant of CS as expected by customers. We can thus suggest that budgets allocated to promotion of price be reallocated to programmes that will enhance the knowledge and competence of personnel, since these were strongly criticized throughout the study.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Because the study was done in an affluent suburb in

an urban area where all of the popular supermarkets are located in close proximity, it was assumed that these stores would more or less represent the best of what these retailers can provide. The findings do thus not necessarily reflect the situation everywhere in the country.

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