SERVQUAL POTENTIAL FOR QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN HOTEL SERVICES

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Abstract

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The aim of the paper is to present possibilities and specifications of using the Servqual method in service quality management in hotel industry. The Servqual method works on the definition of five dimensions of a service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. It is based on so called Gap analysis that crucially comes out of the discrepancy between a customer's expectation and perception. Demonstrating the practical application of Servqual in hotel business is also a part of the paper, as well as verifying possibilities of customer satisfaction quantification with the help of the Gap model, evaluating general applicability and presenting suggestions for possible adaptations and further utilization in the branch of tourism. Input data necessary for the gap analysis have been gained by force of a primary field-research with the help of a quantitative research via questionnaire. The results of Servqual score for individual dimensions of service quality have also been used to calculate a total weighted score that for the examined hotel reached the value of –0.07. This shows that the discrepancy between expectations and perceptions of the hotel guests is minimal. However, the calculation of this score would be of a higher importance if we wanted to compare more accommodation facilities mutually or possibly to follow the development of this index in time.

quality management, servqual, gap analysis, hotel industry, customer satisfaction

The problems of quality management and customer satisfaction did not use to be one of the primary objectives in each company for a long time, and even nowadays it is not like this in majority in the Czech Republic. The concept of quality management and customer satisfaction was created in the 1980s when companies all over the world began to accept the system of Total Quality Management (TQM) due to which they intended to reach high customer satisfaction with objective to face increasing globalization as well swelling competitive environment. Industrial production organizations were the first business subjects to deal with the importance of quality. Applying quality management in these branches is sure easier from the point of view of reaching standardization as well as rectifying a defective product or a fault committed in the process of production itself. Especially in connection with the fact that competitive environment grows stronger and stronger quality management acquires more importance even

in the service sector where specific features of services have to be taken into account – especially their tangibility, evanescence and variability. So the quality of a service is rather difficult to measure – nevertheless, it can easily be evaluated according to the level of customer satisfaction. It is customer satisfaction that is considered to be a key factor in differentiation on highly competitive markets and it is becoming a key element of firm strategy more and more often.

The aim of the paper is to present possibilities and specifications of using the Servqual method in service quality management in hotel industry. Demonstrating the practical application of Servqual in hotel business is also a part of the paper, as well as verifying possibilities of customer satisfaction quantification with the help of the Gap model, evaluating general applicability and presenting suggestions for possible adaptations and further utilization in the branch of tourism.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) states demarcating quality for accommodation sector as "satisfaction within the frame of accepted price of all customer's legitimate requirements and expectations that include basic qualitative factors, such as security, hygiene, achievability of accommodation and boarding services, harmony with human and natural environment." (Beránek, 2000).

Customer satisfaction and service quality are mutually mingling concepts and their consistent analysis is a crucial tool of competitiveness. Evaluating satisfaction systematically and continually helps reveal latent problems that can even lead to the bankruptcy of a company in their worst consequences (Horovitz, 1994).

To evaluate customer satisfaction we can use tools that give a service provider rather a basic picture of satisfaction (e.g. systems of complaints, mystery shopping, satisfaction surveys, simple questionnaire surveys)[1] as well as more sophisticated methods (Gap[2], Kano[3], PFI[4], ECSI[5]) that are based on models the aim of which is to operate service quality and customer satisfaction in such a way that they become better measurable and traceable.

In the world the Servqual technique is considered to be rather significant. It is based on the model of contradictions – so called Gap model – that was theoretically elaborated by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1990). The Gap model belongs to methods based on formulating attributes of „a perfect service". These authors present five dimensions of service quality that were quantified on the basis of extensive researches and that have an impact on a customer's perception of a quality service. These attributes are mentioned according to their importance and their validity is theoretically presumed in all types of services:

- Reliability – the achievability and ability to provide the service exactly and reliably;
- Responsiveness – the willingness and sensitivity when approaching a customer, providing a prompt service;
- Assurance – the staff qualification, their knowledge, politeness and ability to arouse a feeling of trust in a customer;
- Empathy – empathizing with individual requirements, the care and attention paid to a customer, sensitive approach;
- Tangibles – the materialization of a service and the influence of the environment.

The Servqual method understands quality as a reflection of a customer's satisfaction. It is based on the presumption that a customer's satisfaction is a reflection of the difference between his or her expectations and perceiving the level of a required service. The dimensions of a quality service that are mentioned above are evaluated as basic characteristics of the quality of a service from a customer's point of view (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Berry, 1990). The Gap analysis reveals imperfections in service quality and at the same time it determines tools for overcoming them. By force of the Gap model we can analyse business causes leading to the differences between a customer's expectations on one hand and perceived performance on the other hand (Mateides, Ďaďo, 2002). So the model is used for quantifying satisfaction as well as evaluating service quality.

The Gap model is divided into two mutually interactive levels (Fig. 1) – these are the level of a service provider and the level of a customer (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1990). The base of the model (see picture 1) is a presumption that the basic contradiction (gap 5) between the perceived and expected quality is a function of partial contradictions that cause a customer's dissatisfaction. To eliminate this most important gap (gap 5) a company needs to close all the other gaps on the service provider's side, i.e. from gap 1 up to gap 4 (Zeithaml, Bitner, 2000). The first contradiction (gap 1) appears between customers' expectations and the management's ideas of these expectations. The second contradiction (gap 2) appears among the management's opinions on what customers expect from the service and the standards defined for providing the service. The third contradiction (gap 3) can arise as a difference between defined standards and the real provision of the service. The fourth contradiction (gap 4) emerges in case that the company does not provide the level of the service that it promises. So, the contradictions on the side of a provider document main causes leading to a possible customer's dissatisfaction.

The Servqual technique works with 22 most often used features (assertions) for evaluating service quality. A standardized questionnaire is used for measurements where the assertions are represented by five dimensions of a quality service. Two statements are formulated for each question – the statement "it should be like this" probing customer satisfaction and the statement "it is like this" revealing the perception of the provided service (Mateides, Ďaďo, 2002). Individual assertions are evaluated by a customer with the help of seven-point Likert evaluating scale where 1 means a strong disagreement and 7 means a strong agreement. Then the difference between perceptions and
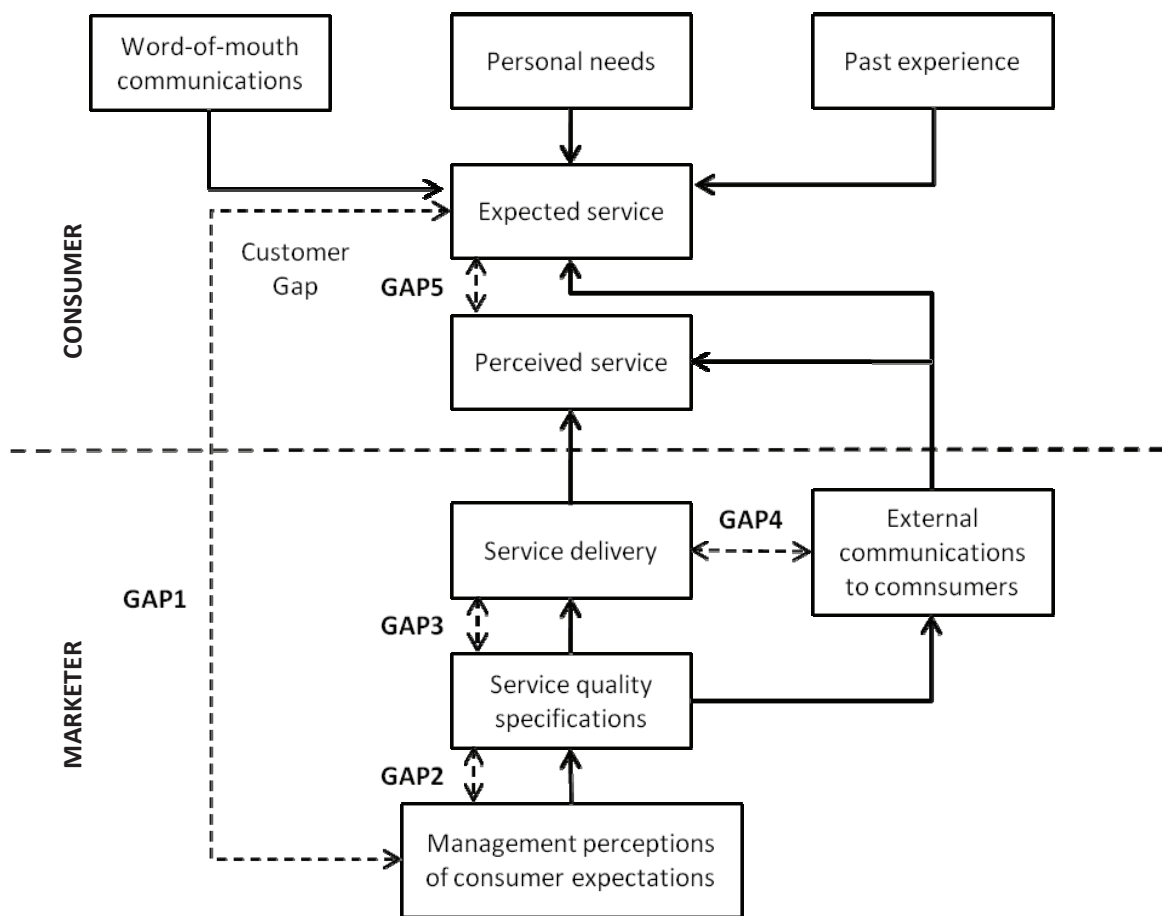
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1 Kotler, 2001; Kotler, Keller, 2007; Mateides, Ďaďo, 2002
2 Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Berry, 1990; Zeithaml, Bitner, 2000
3 Kano, 2001; Mateides, Ďaďo, 2002; Nenadál, 2004
4 Hill, Brierley, MacDougall, 2003
5 Fornell, 1992; Mateides, Ďaďo, 2002; Ryglová, Vajčnerová, 2005; Ryglová, 2007, 2011

1: *The Gap model (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Berry, 1990)*

expectations for individual assertions as well as dimensions can be calculated, and similarly we can also calculate total weighted or possibly unweighted score (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Berry, 1990).

The score can be calculated separately for individual pairs of assertions (expectations vs. perceptions), for individual dimensions of a quality service as well as for the combined Servqual score in total for all dimensions. The advantage of this method is that a company can use the obtained results not only for evaluating overall quality of their services but also for identifying key dimensions and concrete aspects within these dimension which the company should focus on with respect to increasing their customers' satisfaction as well as the quality of their service.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A practical demonstration of using the Servqual technique in managing the quality of a selected hotel is presented in this part of the paper[6]. It is followed by a discussion concerning its possible utilization in tourism practice with the aspect of hotel industry.

Nowadays the researched hotel does not apply any other certification of quality management except for the quality standards arising from its inclusion into the hotel chain. The hotel tries to obtain information concerning customer satisfaction by force of the book of requests and complaints, available internet reviews and their own simple non-anonymous questionnaire surveys done irregularly. However, the recoverability of these questionnaires that are placed in hotel rooms is minimal.

Input data necessary for the Gap analysis were obtained by force of a primary survey (so called field research) with the help of a quantitative survey in the form of questioning. The basic concept of the questionnaire for hotel guests was based on standardized Servqual questionnaires. The suggested survey questions are based on the five dimension of a quality service („tangibles", „reliability", „responsiveness", „assurance", „empathy"). Within the frame of the questionnaire

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6   On the basis of researched hotel requirements its name is kept anonymous. It is a four-star hotel belonging to an important hotel chain operating in the Czech Republic. The hotel disposes of more than 350 rooms of various categories.

we also try to find out a relative importance of individual attributes of a quality service for a customer – it is done by force of a division scale[7]. The obtained scales are then used in calculating weighted Servqual score. The structure of the questionnaire was slightly modified for the needs of the survey in hotel industry – especially some questions in the basic Servqual questionnaire were reformulated and some questions were even totally omitted due to their little relevance for the hotel branch.

As it was mentioned above, the Servqual technique is based on the Gap analysis. Within the practical application we mainly focused on the most important contradiction between a customer's expectation and perception, i.e. gap 5. Measuring the fifth customer contradiction showed that on one hand the hotel guests have rather high expectations towards the excellent hotel services provider, on the other hand their perception of the service level provided by the hotel itself is also evaluated quite high – as much complying with their expectations. From the comparison of average expectations and perceptions for the whole group of responders we can see (see Fig. 2) that all attributes of a quality service are considered to be very significant by the guests – nevertheless in case of none of these attributes the guests think that the hotel totally met or even exceeded their expectations. Despite of this fact the difference between perception and expectation – so called gap 5 score – is not much significant (Fig. 3). The biggest gap is seen by the responders in case of the attributes of reliability, responsiveness and the influence of the environment.

When analysing final Servqual scores for individual pairs of assertions in more detail we can state that the least contradiction is seen in hotel employees' behaviour – guests positively evaluate their politeness, their ability to understand specific needs and also their behaviour that evokes a hotel guest's trust. Promotion and information materials of the hotel are also evaluated positively, as one of the elements concerning the tangible character of the service. On the other hand, the largest contradiction is seen in the hotel areas that are considered to be not representative and pleasantly facilitated enough considering their expectations towards the hotel facility of a high quality. What is evaluated negatively is the ability to meet deadlines, to provide correct information and the readiness to help a guest. So the hotel ought to concentrate more especially on these areas with the aim to come up to their guests expectations fully and so to increase their satisfaction.

Then, from the results of the Servqual score for individual dimensions, the total weighted Servqual score was calculated – for the hotel it reached –0.07. We can see that the contradiction between guests' expectation and perception is minimal. Nevertheless, the calculation of this score would be of a much higher importance in case we wanted to compare more accommodation facilities mutually, for instance individual hotels within one hotel chain, or to follow the development of this index in time.

The analysis of the first contradiction (gap1) was then added to the gap 5 analysis among the hotel guests; it describes the gap in the management's perception. This means that it presents the contradiction between customers' expectation and
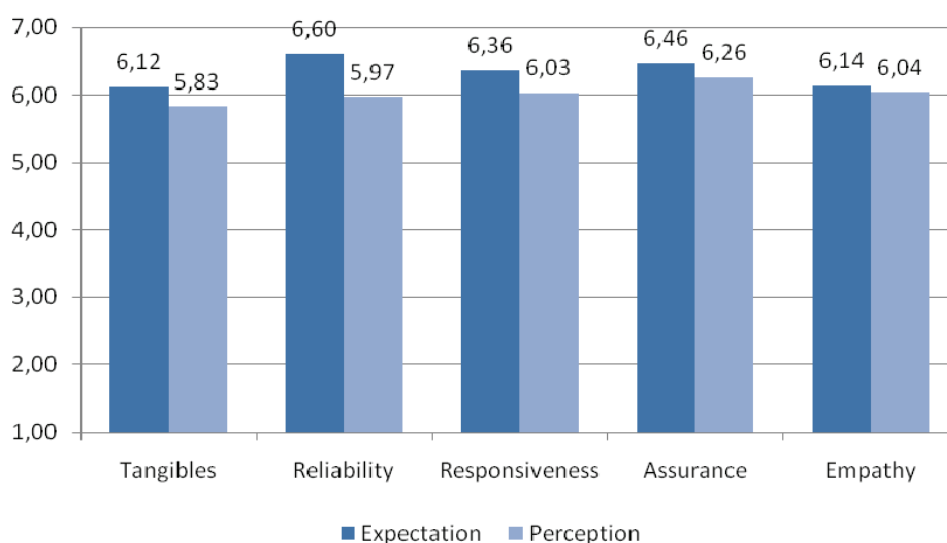
2: *The comparison of average expectation and perception for individual attributes of a quality service (Bratánková, 2011)*

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7   A responder divides a total sum of 100 points aminy individua attributes.
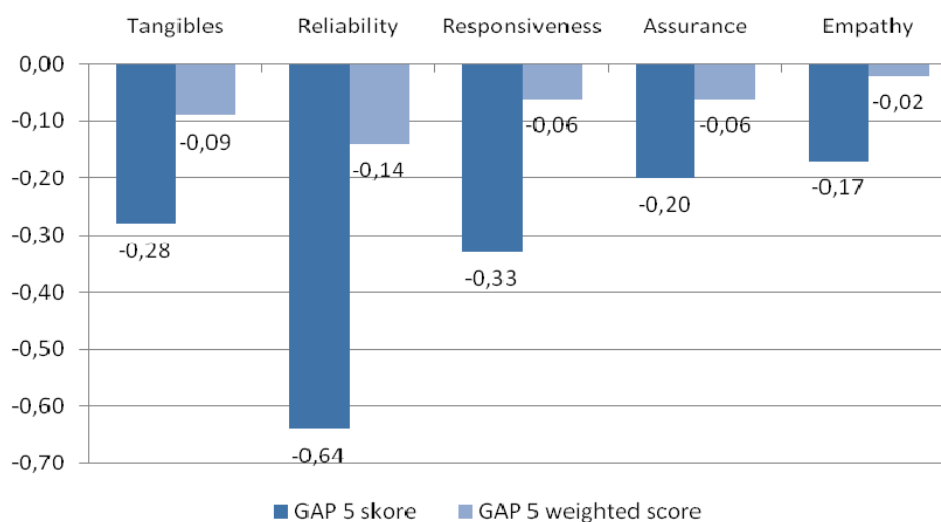
3: *Servqual Gap 5 score for individual attributes of service quality (Bratánková, 2011)*

the management's understanding or possibly not being aware of these expectations. It is considered to be the most important contradiction on the service provider's side, just for the reason that it crosses the imaginary border between a provider and a customer.

The results of the gap 1 analysis showed that within the frame of all dimensions except for the attribute of reliability the hotel guests' expectations exceed the hotel management's perception of these expectations. So, we can estimate that the hotel might not understand its guests' expectations and requirements correctly. Just as in case of the hotel guests, also in case of the hotel management the relative importance was found concerning individual attributes of a quality service. It revealed that the hotel management believes that the hotel guests consider the attribute of reliability and responsible approach to be the most important. Then follow assurance and empathy, and the influence of the environment comes only the last. The most remarkable difference (gap 1 score = –0.98) was found in case of the attribute concerning the influence of the environment that is seen to be the most important by the guests – on the other hand, the hotel management believes it is the least important criterion. This result shows a possible problem that might be reflected in lower customer satisfaction.

Measuring the gap 1 contradiction with regard to the relative importance showed a negative score for the attributes concerning the influence of the environment, assurance and empathy, which indicates incorrect perception of the hotel guests' expectations from the side of the hotel management. On the other hand, a positive score shows that the guests have lower expectations than it is presumed by the management of the hotel. *In* these areas the hotel can overtake its guests' expectations and so bring them a higher level of satisfaction. The total weighted gap 1 score for the whole group of

attributes of a quality service reached the value of –0.15, which indicates rather a low contradiction and so on the whole it should not present serious problems in perceiving the hotel guests' expectation by the hotel management.

The crucial problem that emerged during the practical application of the Servqual method was a low recoverability of the questionnaires from the hotel guests. A low recoverability is a general problem of many surveys, especially when the questionnaire exceeds the general standard length of twenty questions – nevertheless, finding a set of responders that is big enough has a fundamental impact on the representativeness of the survey. Finally, the total size of the explored set was 80 responders, which influenced the representativeness of the survey and the possibilities of its generalization. However, even on the basis of the obtained results the possibilities of using Servqual can be discussed, as well as the following quantification of customer satisfaction by force of the Gap model in hotel industry.

As it was mentioned in the initiating part of this paper, the Gap model of service quality consists of five contradictions. Only the two most important ones were analysed in this paper. It is inevitable to be aware of the fact that the total application of the gap model would include a complex analysis of all five contradictions. Measuring the second, the third and the fourth gap would also be possible to realize with the help of the Servqual technique by force of a questionnaire survey, where selected employees would indicate their contradiction perceptions directly in given areas. According to the specific explored contradiction the target responders should be either management representatives (gap 2) or front line employees (gap 3 and 4). The structure of the questionnaire would be similar as for measuring customer contradiction, the evaluation would again be made by the seven-point Likert scale. The total evaluation would again be obtained by averaging

the evaluations from all responders where a higher evaluation would indicate a smaller gap.

The following alternatives of using the Servqual technique and the Gap model in managing quality not only in hotel industry but also in other companies providing services can bring a dynamic view provided that the hotel will perform the measurements periodically. In this way it is possible to realize the analysis of perception and expectation in time, to follow a progress or a change in satisfaction and so on. It is evident that the individual alternatives would require a suitable modification of the Servqual questionnaire.

The Gap model of service qualities can be used for *comparing various accommodation facilities*. This can concern comparing hotel facilities owned by one proprietor, comparing facilities integrated in the same hotel chain or comparing accommodation facilities of the same hotel certification level. So the model can become an interesting complementary tool for management's decision-making.

By force of the Gap model it is also possible to *analyse a competitive accommodation facility* and to gain important information on its strengths and weaknesses. The analyses can be conducted by a mere incorporation of other assertions concerning a competitive business into the part of perception, i.e. the second part of the questionnaire.

The assertions of expectation remain the same for the analysed company as well as its competitor. Comparing own Servqual score to the score of the competitor can serve as benchmarking when identifying the strengths of the company and it can also initiate eliminating the weaknesses.

Hotels usually direct their services at various segments of the market. By force of the Gap model it is possible to conduct *the analysis of target segments*, i.e. to survey the satisfaction of these various target segments, to compare their expectations end perceptions. For a hotel it might be interesting to compare the results on the basis of geographical segmentation (domestic vs. foreign guests) or to compare the segment of corporation clients and other individual recreation guests. The company can also gain important information on the difference in expectation and perception with the help of a demographic segmentation on the basis of sex, age, income and so on.

Another possible utilization of the model is possible for *the quantification of internal clients' satisfaction, i.e. the employees of a company*. Being aware of their satisfaction should be of the same importance for a company as being aware of external clients' satisfaction. It is generally true that if a company wants to provide quality services and reach high customer satisfaction, at first it has to satisfy its employees and build a full relationship with them – then this will be reflected in a higher loyalty towards the company, towards its values and so even towards customers themselves.

If the Servqual technique was used for a broader research it would be possible to obtain results with a higher declaring value that could become an important basis for the strategic decisions of a company. The obtained partial as well as total Servqual scores can simplify decision-making not only from the position of a manager or a businessperson but they can also make a customer's process of decision-making easier when it concerns selecting a company or purchasing a service or a product. However, the objective of this paper was not to analyse the obtained Servqual score in detail and then to evaluate the impacts, but to show the possibilities of a practical application and utilization of this tool in a real business environment.

In connection with the practical application of Servqual (which is also a weakness of the ECSI methodology)[8] we have to count with the fact which emerges from the complexity of the methodology, especially in the area of collecting enough primary input model data due to the questionnaire which is too long and complicated. This complexity of the Servqual score calculation methodology, and similarly the ECSI index, could be solved by the approach of Hill, Brierley and MacDougall (2003), i.e. using a simplified gap analysis and calculating a simplified index of customer satisfaction based only on evaluating the maximum of twenty most important characteristics of satisfaction – from the position of a customer. This methodology enables quite a fast and not very complicated analysis of customer satisfaction; it answers the question: "How successful are we in satisfying 15–20 most important customer requirements?". Although these requirements change and develop in time or various market segments have various requirements, we still receive an answer to the ability to satisfy 15–20 most important customer requirements. Unfortunately, we do not get answers for example to the questions of loyalty (which is also a weakness of Servqual) or complaints (unlike ECSI that mentions both of these areas) that are closely connected with satisfaction.

SUMMARY

The paper presents the possibilities and specifications of using the Servqual method in managing the quality of services in hotel industry. The Servqual method comes out of the definition of five dimensions of quality service: the influence of the environment – tangibles, reliability, responsive

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8   Ryglová, 2009

approach – responsiveness, assurance and empathy, and it is based on so called Gap analysis that principally comes out of the contradiction between a client's expectation and perception. Demonstrating a practical application of the Servqual in hotel industry is also a part of the paper, as well as verifying the possibility of quantifying customer satisfaction by force of the gap model, evaluating a general applicability and presenting suggestions for possible adaptations and also further utilization in the branch of tourism. Input data necessary for the Gap analysis were received by force of a primary survey (so called field-research) with the help of a quantitative research in the form of questioning. From the results of the Servqual score for individual dimensions of service quality the total weighted score was calculated – for the explored hotel it reached the value of –0.07, which shows that the contradiction between guests' expectation and perception is minimal. Nevertheless, the calculation of this score would be of a higher importance in case we wanted to compare more accommodation facilities mutually or to follow the development of this index in time.

The advantage of the Servqual technique is that it can be used crosswise various branches of the service sector. Nevertheless, for the needs of the research in hotel industry it was slightly adapted just to this branch – some questions in the basic Servqual questionnaire were reformulated and some of them were even omitted due to their little relevance for the hotel branch. The advantage of the gap model of service quality is undoubtedly its broad applicability, i.e. it can be used not only for the research of customer satisfaction but also for the analysis of competition or for the analysis of target segments' satisfaction. In its full application it also enables to define concrete causes and problematic areas leading to customer dissatisfaction by force of the contradictions on the side of a service provider. Provided that it is applied periodically it can bring a dynamic view of issues concerning service quality as well as customer satisfaction.

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