



**SWP 33/92 THE CHANGING FACE OF SERVICE
QUALITY MANAGEMENT**

**DAVID BALLANTYNE, MARTIN CHRISTOPHER,
ADRIAN PAYNE & MOIRA CLARK**
Marketing Group
Cranfield School of Management
Cranfield Institute of Technology
Cranfield
Bedford MK43 0AL
United Kingdom

(Tel: 0234-751122)

(Fax: 0234-751806)

The Changing Face of Service Quality Management

By

David Ballantyne.
Linfox Fellow in Logistics
Syme School of Marketing
Monash University
Melbourne Australia
Telephone (03) 573 2492

Martin Christopher
Professor of Marketing & Logistics
Cranfield School of Management
Bedfordshire UK
Telephone (0234) 751122
and

Adrian Payne
Professor of Services Marketing
Cranfield School of Management
Bedfordshire UK
Telephone (0234) 751122

with
Moir Clark
Teaching Fellow in Services Marketing
Cranfield School of Management
Bedfordshire UK
Telephone (0234) 751122

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1 - Introduction

In recent years we have seen a radical shift in management thinking. Interest in service quality improvement, which had some early and superficial expression as *customer care*, is now being refuelled by problem solving techniques (with origins in Total Quality Management) and broad based staff involvement with those techniques (with origins in Participative Management). These practices are not new but they are now often fused together in one cascading company-wide event. Furthermore, the marketing environment is changing radically. Every industry is now potentially a "service" industry. Every company has the opportunity to design and market its own unique set of quality solutions to meet customer problems. This also requires service quality support of various kinds, including information and advice giving on an on-going "relationship marketing" basis.

The aim of this paper is to examine changes in the approach to service quality management. It commences with a discussion of the idea of the "quality gap" derived from services marketing concepts of quality. The concept of customer value chains, and their linkages with customer expectations are then examined and the role of internal customers and suppliers outlined. The variability of the service process requires fundamentally new approaches to service process management which involve ongoing diagnostic problem solving for sustainable quality improvement. The paper proceeds by examining specific diagnostic feedback activities that will change the face of service quality. The paper concludes by examining some practical approaches to monitoring service quality in the context of a retail service firm and outlines the challenges facing both marketing and quality management in the future.

This article will in essence bring to the fore and examine often ignored services marketing linkages with quality management.

2 - Services Marketing Concepts of Quality

One of the most remarkable features of Total Quality Management is the way in which it has drawn practising managers from many parts of an organisation to work together across traditional functional boundaries to improve quality and productivity. This points up a rather simple yet dramatic link that has not yet been widely brought to attention. It is this: *quality has become an integrating concept between production-orientation and marketing-orientation* (Gummesson 1988). This is especially the case in service quality management, where production, delivery and consumption can occur simultaneously.

The concept of quality referred to here is simply the match between what customers expect and what they experience. This is perceived quality. Any mismatch between these two is a "quality gap". As perceived quality is always a judgement by the customer, whatever the customer thinks is reality, is reality. In effect, quality is whatever the customer says it is. The service quality management goal is to narrow the "quality gap". This not only facilitates getting customers, but *keeping* them. As quality goes up, non-value wastes and time related costs come down (Leonard and Sasser 1982). Furthermore, when staff participate in the quality improvement process the beneficiaries are the staff, shareholders and customers because stake-holder expectations are not in tension with each other.

The quality gap between customer's service expectations and service experience is seductive territory for marketing research but few researchers with the notable exception of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, have attempted to categorically define the generic determinants of service quality and the kinds of quality gaps that lead to quality shortfalls. (Parasuraman et al, 1985, 1988).

The difficulty is that customers are continually experiencing and evaluating service performances in particular settings. They are continually "adjusting" their perceptions of customer service. Once something is "fixed" or "improved" other important service issues will naturally emerge. And when one among many critical service issues is resolved the priority levels naturally change places.

One starting point is that service quality is perceived in a personal way by every single customer. (Gronroos 1984).

The experience of service (following Gronroos) in turn is influenced by

- what the customer gets as a result of the interaction between buyer and seller which he calls 'technical' quality
- how the buyer and seller interact in each and every service encounter which he calls 'functional' quality.

In effect 'technical' quality is about outcomes of service encounters and 'functional' quality is about the interactive process of achieving those outcomes. The dichotomy between 'technical' and 'functional' qualities is useful in exploring and coming to terms with the 'intangibility' of service quality. In particular it gives emphasis to the key role of front line staff in the service marketing process and shows how emphasis on the service relationship might in itself become a competitive strategy.

However the 'functional' and 'technical' qualities are clearly interdependent. And at this point, some difficulties arise. The technical dimension is not just a prerequisite for total service quality. In the eyes of the customer, technical quality is often experienced as though it were functional quality. For example, staff may be blamed for 'service' problems if the internal data processing 'back up' is not supportive. Quality must be built into the technical system or variation will be experienced as poor or inconsistent functional service at the front counter.

Without an internal process for management review of the technical 'back up' elements, there will be variance in quality, built into the system, due more to common (random) causes than special (assignable) causes - as Total Quality Management people put it.

3 - Quality and Process Management

In Total Quality Management (TQM) we find structures for planning, and introducing the kinds of integrating and coordinating changes that need to be made to meet quality goals but these are often only tenuously linked to *customer expectations* and strategies for building a loyal customer base. Clarifying customer expectations from a market based point of view is helped by the concept of *customer value chain*.

The customer value chain is a series (or linkage) of things a customer does with a product or service that produce value for that customer. A firm's offering is the input into the customer value chain (Porter 1985). The activity patterns of a customer are represented by the links in the chain. These control or modify the way in which a firm's output is actually used. For example, a banking account may be input into a customer value chain as a bill paying device, an investment for a "rainy day" or a day to day savings account, according to how the customer goes about managing money and the priorities which are given value. The appropriate marketing aim is to identify what a customer is *trying to do* with the firm's offering before jumping to any conclusions about what is valued and *why*.

The value a firm creates for a customer is a function of the alignment it can achieve between the *firm's* value chain and the *customer's* value chain. Marketing management must share some of the responsibility for this. The continuing task is about adjusting the way a firm manages its service intangibles. How can we come to grips with this?

Consider first a sole trader or self-employed professional. The activities he or she performs on behalf of a customer are sequenced and integrated along the value chain without the need for any command structure or functional differentiation within the "organisation". The whole design, production, delivery, and personal service is integrated within one head. However, if the business grows in staff numbers, new coordinating work activities arise which require functional specialisation and some kind of hierarchical command and control. This is fine, however the vertical controls are usually

strengthened to the detriment of the integration of working relationships *between* people and *across* departments. Coordination and collaboration usually receive scant attention until quality falters.

Organisational quality problems are found *between* divisions rather more than *within* divisions. To the extent that one department's output is mismatched with another department's input needs, there is a quality gap. Failure to manage work flow and processes, laterally across the firm's value chain, has a way of multiplying costs and quality failures all along one value chain to the next, through to the end customer. The cost of quality is swollen by the sum total of all these mismatched activities, which invoke delays and higher level "fire fighting" decisions. One key task of service quality management is to identify and examine the most critical cross-functional organisational linkages and remove any blockages, thereby reducing the cost of achieving quality (See Figure 1).

In other words, internal customers and internal suppliers each supply the other, invisibly connected, but nonetheless connected in terms of the input-output links in the value chain. Diagnosing these cross functional links *within* the organisation from their starting point with the external customer and back "upstream" to the external supplier represents process improvement opportunities for marketing logistics and/or Total Quality Management. The improvement goal is the same whether the Marketing manager or the Quality manager is in charge here.

The Variability of a Process is Built In

Quality is at the mercy of variability built into work processes. This has to be managed. It certainly will not correct itself. Every work process generates outputs which in some way fall short of perfection and uniformity. All processes contain sources of variability and these differences may be large, or small beyond measurement. This is because in service quality management the customer is also part of the process and indeed, a *common cause* of variability. Even so, waste in all kinds of business activity can be brought under control by minimising process variability. Eliminating "waste" means eliminating cost that does not add value. This sounds like a traditional accountant's approach and it is, except for one absolutely critical difference - you must define the service process and focus on *process variation*, and reduce that. Organisations seeking to eliminate waste by cutting costs per se will almost certainly cut value, without ever knowing how or why.

Process variation is generated and passed along the whole chain of customers and suppliers to the end customer. Indeed, one eminent Japanese statistician, Genichi Taguchi, says that there is an incremental economic "loss" for each deviation from customer "target requirements", which has a flow-on effect to society as a whole (Taguchi 1990).

Coming to grips with service intangibles challenges the traditional approaches to quality assurance developed in manufacturing industries. At first glance we may tend to attribute the quality of 'front line' service to the strengths or weaknesses of service staff. This is a natural enough perception but it is nonetheless a partial observation. What constitutes "performance" is the *sum* of the performance processes for which staff are the agents. Certainly "front line" service staff must perform well and need training in customer service skills. This is an important marketing function. However, efforts to improve "front line" service performance by improving staff "customer service" training add cost, not value, unless the design of work activities, the environment in which service is delivered, and the work processes involved are also targeted for quality improvement, part of a continuous, diagnostic review.

The challenge for managers is to allocate time and resources for diagnostic problem solving and opportunity seeking where the effort counts most. How might this task be approached?

4 - The New Face of Service Quality Management

All service elements need to be seen as part of a total system where all the organisational elements are inter-related. Any action or development with one is likely to influence action or development in another. This *systemic structure* is what we see as the new face of service quality management. It allows us to consider localised 'problems' as symptoms of problems for which root causes and solutions may be found elsewhere in the total system.

The diagnostic model presented in Figure 2., reflecting how some organisations are approaching service quality improvement today. Each step, discussed below, potentially contains a range of solutions to any given service quality problem. Again, each of these steps need to be seen as part of a total system where all parts are inter-related.

(i) Environmental Setting

The environments in which the customer 'faces' the service provider are critical to the perceived quality of service. The 'situational' variables are often overlooked. The physical aspect is obviously a major component of environmental design but there are emotional and psychological features as well.

In other words, the environment affects behaviour by influencing the meaning a customer draws from a particular setting (Fox and Bender 1986). This includes issues of orientation, learning where we are, where we are going, how things work and what behaviour is expected from us as a customer or as a service provider (Wener 1985).

Every visit by a customer to a shop or service centre, every telephone call, and every order exists in a specific context defined by people, time and place. Each and every service encounter may therefore be said to prescribe and to be prescribed in a 'service interaction zone' (Ballantyne 1987). Many service firms think that the smallest logical zone of service activity is the shop, office or branch. Yet people visiting a bank and putting in money for example, see the bank in a different context and have a different set of service expectations to those waiting to see the manager.

In any service centre there will be a multiple of service interaction zones, or service 'windows' through which service is seen differently. In other words, defining the key service zones will provide a focused framework for any market research analysis of customer's service quality expectations and experiences.

Some service companies have not paid much attention to the good fit of place and service function. As a result by default, the customer experiences disorientation effects. The ideal environment setting will prepare the customer by giving visual, procedural and psychological clues, which both support and define service quality expectations.

(ii) Processes

Internal processes, in the sense of service support, procedures and policies directly influence the quality of service experienced at the front counter and information desks, ie: they help to destroy or support the face to face service experience.

Quality improvement therefore is about changing the way a firm sequences its external (interactive) processes and manages its internal processes. As W Edwards Deming has stated over and over, workers are never to blame for flaws in the design of a process. Ineffective process design is management's responsibility. Poor process design prevents workers from giving their best.

The development of 'user friendly' DP systems in the last decade is a case in point. This development was not so much the outcome of a new focus on customers' needs as it was on technological breakthrough. Given that there has been further technological breakthrough in terms of enquiry languages and relational data bases, the next step is to 'customer friendly' systems, ie: narrowing the gap between customer effective systems and operationally efficient systems. If a customer service officer's terminal demands extensive staff training the system is not effective even if it is operationally efficient.

What at first seems impossible to change is often found to be possible when the assumptions being made about the nature and purpose of the underlying process are made visible. An increase in both routinisation and in customer service is not an impossible goal (Todd 1985).

(iii) People

With services there is a change in the sequence of events that occurs in product marketing - the 'sale' of a service must be made before production and consumption take place.

The service product is largely intangible, a continuous process, not a thing. If we think of service as an 'on going sale', front line staff are a big part of the service (process) and the product (outcome) as the customer sees it. The well known service concept of the 'moment of truth' was popularised at SAS Airlines to show staff how this service cycle is a series of critical encounters with the customer.

Staff tend to find that service quality itself is a motivator when the goal is seen to be about improvements that customers value, an opportunity to test one's personal limits and in so doing, contribute to the customer relationship and the organisation's success. This three way outlook provides the opportunity for a shift in management style from traditional/autocratic towards participative/collaborative.

Some organisations are tempted to give strong emphasis to 'training' in their plan for improving service quality. Training is vital but *education* is better. Sometimes the first has to be prevented from interfering with the second! An 'internal marketing' approach is helpful because it gives 'training' a strategic customer focus (see for example George 1977 and Gronroos 1985). Some key elements are

- staff selection processes and induction
- training design and the measurement of competency
- staff 'climate' monitors
- internal (staff) communications support for company-wide quality improvement

While there is room for various patterns of internal marketing, our definition is that it is *any* form of marketing within an organisation which focusses staff attention on the internal activities that need to be changed in order that marketing plans might be implemented.

(iv) Job Design

A service company earns its reputation for good service by consistently delivering what customers expect of it.

Over time, jobs can develop haphazardly with little focus on customer concerns. In the more extreme cases jobs can become arbitrary groupings of activities that machines cannot do, with role conflict or ambiguity the likely outcome. Badly designed jobs tend to conceal the environment and process defects inevitably involved.

There is a natural tendency to think that the design of a job is a 'given' dictated by the technology and that poor performance on the job must be the fault of the worker (see for example Campion and Thayer 1987).

One might turn to the classical Tavistock socio-technical job design approaches which focus on motivational outcomes (Hackman and Oldham 1980) then analyse and modify the structural design (see for example Shostack 1987). This means changing the actual structure of the jobs people perform, not just changing the processes of which people are part.

5 - Practical Approaches to Monitoring Service Quality

The promise of TQM is an improvement in both quality and productivity, previously felt to be contradictory aims. Certainly, many attempts are being made in the service industries to implement TQM procedures, with varying degrees of success.

The challenge for TQM is that the production and delivery of services occurs invariably at the same time. This gives rise to the 'moment of truth' referred to earlier, when the parties in the service relationship come together. Under such time critical interactive conditions, job design and environmental setting become highly relevant to service performance. However, behind the 'face' of the service encounter lies departmental (technical support) territories. Setting internal measures and monitors makes sense provided they are clearly connected to the 'consumption' of service, that is, are customer orientated.

Service quality measurement must stay 'close to the customer'. A six-point measurement and monitoring approach is recommended. Whilst the approach taken in practise will depend on the specific service context being examined to set some context for this discussion, an organisation with a branch and regional structure such as a bank is considered in Figure 3 and the ensuing discussion.

A beginning might be made at any point but the sequence tends to move logically from customer service research and a staff attitude survey (or climate monitor) to setting up a range of 'risk point' feedback systems. Last of all comes the progressive introduction (and review) of internal TQM statistical performance standards.

These market monitors are as follows:

(i) Customer Service Quality 'Benchmark'

Firstly, a two step qualitative/quantitative research study, which benchmarks the strength of particular customer satisfactions and dissatisfactions in specified service contexts for the supplier company and its main competitors.

What 'qualitative' customer service research can tell you is the service quality issues that require attention. What 'quantitative' research gives you is the customer priority order for action. Further quantitative testing as to which service issues are critical from the point of view of staff (as well as customers) would allow a more powerful diagnosis of overall results (see later in this section).

Paradoxically, no one person or department can uniquely implement the findings from these studies. The customer service "solution" is always a mix of changes that cross departmental boundaries. What is required is a diagnostic review of the critical service issues using inter-departmental teams for review of the major (chronic) quality problems, thus achieving significant interdepartmental commitment to improvement (breakthrough).

The diagnostic process can involve a review of both service centre and 'head office' related issues. Critical action in "head office" policy and/or systems areas is usually overlooked unless a formal review process is established.

(ii) Staff Climate Monitor

This survey is an empirical measure of branch/district/head office staff opinion about quality of customer service, and also the quality of work life. These two elements impact on the quality of service experienced by the customer (see for example Greenway and Southgate 1985).

(iii) Silent Shopper

The 'silent shopper' is a survey measurement system based on the real shopping experience of customers. The measurement is done by skilled market researchers who are also genuine customers. This ensures that the shopping experience is as genuine as possible. The purpose of this measure is not evaluative but purely diagnostic. Staff would be encouraged to challenge the information received. That is, how might the work processes be improved?

(iv) Quality Maintenance Index

This maintenance audit incorporates basic 'housekeeping criteria' (see specimen items for a retail bank, Figure 4) and can be administered by service centre staff or by district level audit, or both. It is intended as part of an overall service centre performance assessment.

(v) Risk Point Analysis

There are a range of 'soft' research options appropriate and all of them are intended to locate negative customer experiences including those leading to loss of customers (See Figure 3). The fact that the data is not representative of the customer base as a whole is not the point. Any negative customer experience is a variance within the system, and provides valid data for diagnosis and quality improvement.

(vi) Statistical Performance Standards

Only the customer can "set" service standards. Therefore, how these *external* standards are signalled and interpreted by the company is the central issue.

It is characteristic of an authoritarian approach to quality improvement to move quickly to *internal* standard setting (or statistical process controls) as a prerequisite for improving service. There are better ways. The first step is to identify which work processes are connected with the "vital few" customer service characteristics that are of critical concern to the customer.

What is needed is a clear picture of the key processes, usually achieved by flow charting (Ballantyne 1990). What is usually revealed at this point is that the critical processes have no clear ownership patterns. Who does *own* the process? This is next to be resolved. This might involve negotiation with key departments, perhaps using a Departmental Purpose Analysis technique (Oakland 1989). Linking the "vital few" critical service issues to key processes is a matter of judgement and wisdom.

One design technique sometimes used is Quality Function Deployment (Burn 1990, et al). Through a process of linking and matching, a target value might be generated after careful consideration as presenting the ideal state of a particular process characteristic. This is the *standard* at which to aim, but it is by no means the standard by which performance of the process in its current state can be measured in the short term. Of course, intermediate goals can be set as "standards" and these relate to particular periods of time and operating conditions (see for example, Kacker 1988). The internal quality goal is really the progressive elimination of variation against a target value.

In service industries, setting internal standards for "front-line" service quality and managing those to standards absolutely can work only where there is very little process back-up needed for front-line service staff. It is more common to find that the *total process* is the service experienced by the customer, so it is the process capability that must be monitored.

6 - Conclusions

The new face of service quality management reveals a customer focussed concern with service environments, work practices and job design issues, all part of the total service process but largely ignored in the traditional approach to marketing.

It is often stated that what gets measured gets done. This is a useful structural approach but it is the *quality* of the measurement systems and the diagnostic review process on which attention should be focussed.

What is wanted is not feedback about performance but *feed forward* which effectively channels commitment and teamwork into the problem-solving and opportunity-seeking area for quality improvement on a continuing basis.

The marketing of services is about managing the 'ongoing sale', or relationship building. That the service product is intangible, and not a thing, means that service variability often goes unmanaged. It

is a challenge for marketing management and quality management alike. Marketing needs quality management to reduce service process variability, just as surely as quality management needs marketing information inputs to make sense of customer needs and review its process capability. If the links between these parts of the corporate whole are broken, then neither can succeed.

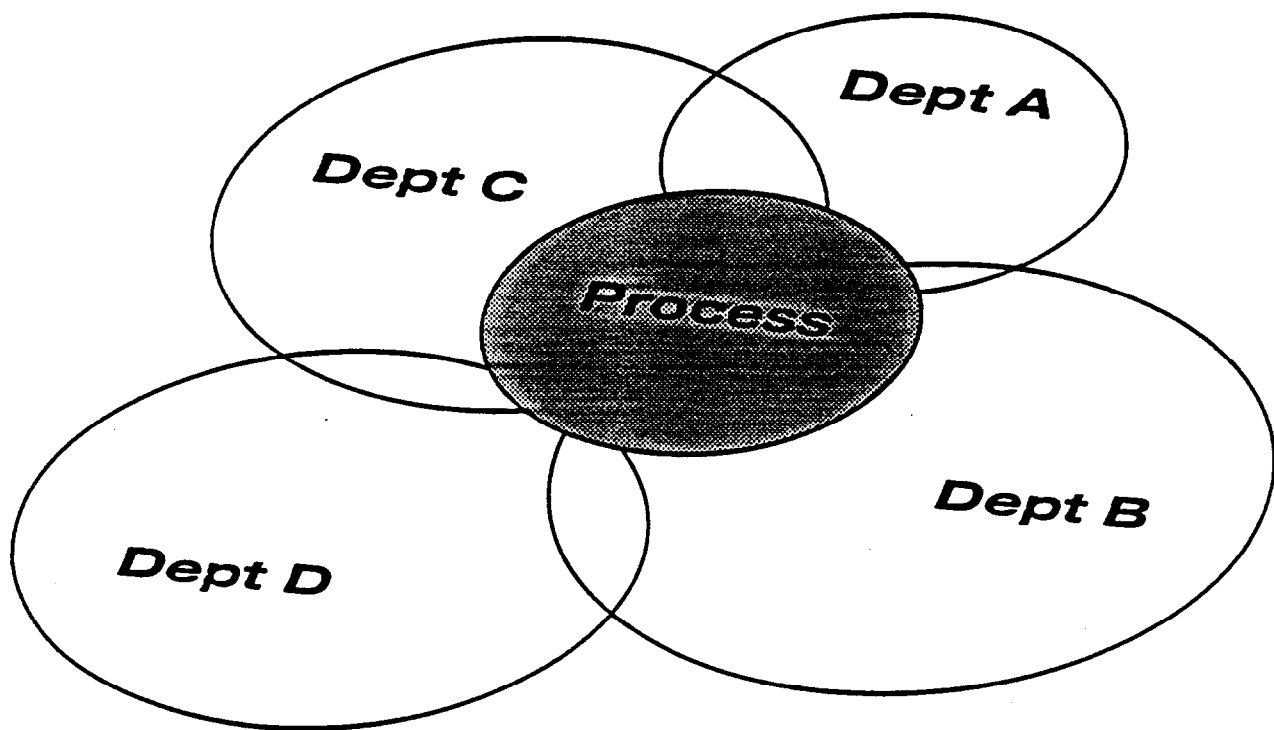
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Figure 1
Process Management



Who owns the process?
Who recognizes the opportunity for quality improvement?

Figure 2
The Diagnostic Steps in Service Quality Management

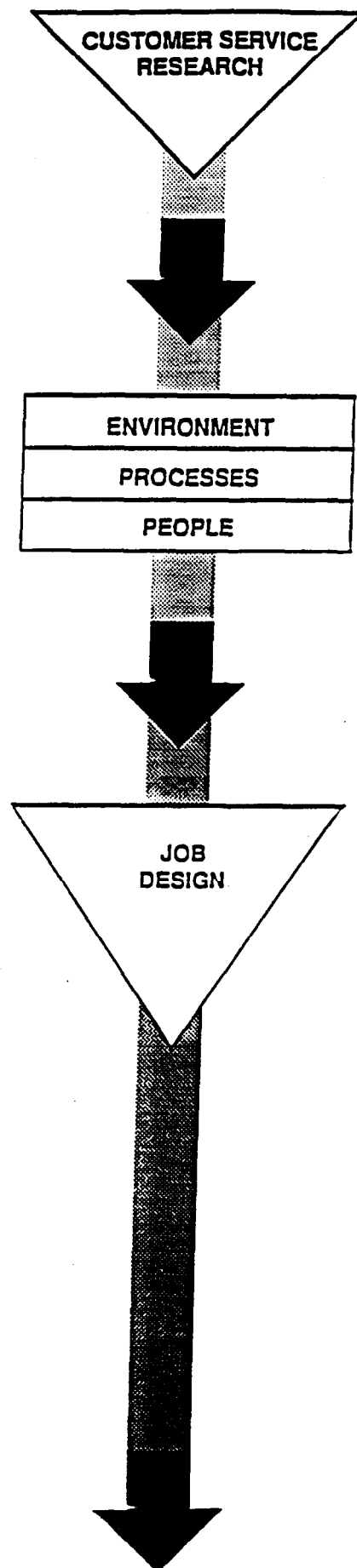


Figure 3
Monitoring and Measuring Service Quality

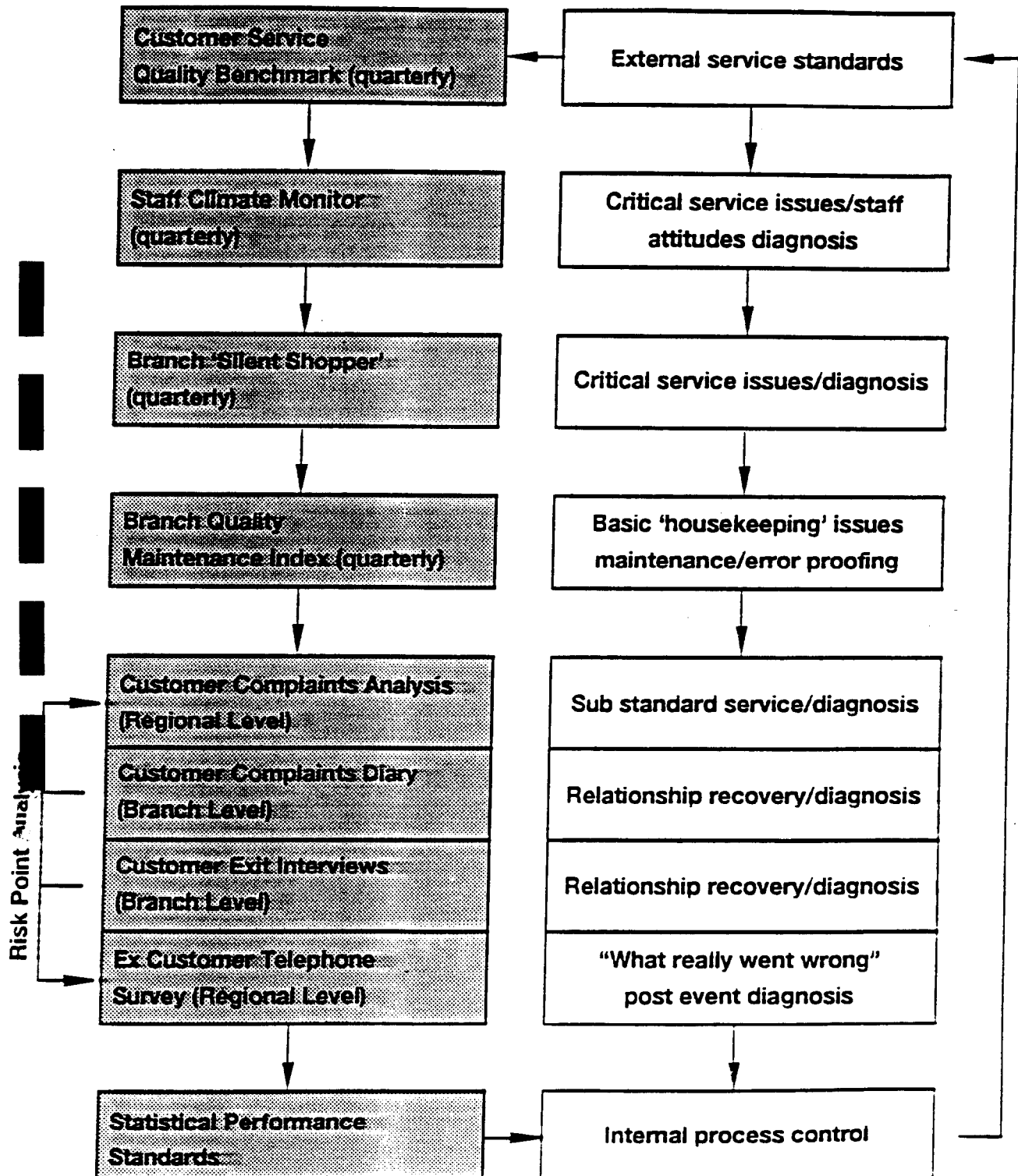


Figure 4

Branch Maintenance (Housekeeping) Criteria

In your assessment, are the following service issues up to satisfactory customer standard?

Please tick appropriate box in response to Question.

If not applicable leave blank

Yes	No, but action is being taken	No
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OUTSIDE THE BRANCH

• Pathways and/or gardens, branch front neat and tidy	☐	☐	☐
• Windows and Door glass clear and clean	☐	☐	☐
• Door handles and closers working and easy to open	☐	☐	☐
• Door step easy to use and accessible	☐	☐	☐
• Exterior lighting working and adequate	☐	☐	☐
• Car parking available to customers (not occupied by staff)	☐	☐	☐
• Visibility of signs (various views)	☐	☐	☐

AUTOMATIC TELLING MACHINE CASH DISPENSER, NIGHT SAFE

• Lighting adequate	☐	☐	☐
• Cleanliness of fascia and screens (and lobby)	☐	☐	☐
• No damaged parts (keyboards, security panel)	☐	☐	☐
• Points of reference decal and advertising up to date	☐	☐	☐
• Litter bin tidy	☐	☐	☐
• Deposit envelopes available	☐	☐	☐
• Keypad volume audible	☐	☐	☐

“In House” ATM/ lobby

• Air conditioning working	☐	☐	☐
• Automatic doors working	☐	☐	☐
• Customer entry/exit easy and sign posted	☐	☐	☐

Progressive Totals

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Cranfield School of Management

Cranfield Institute of Technology

Cranfield Bedford MK43 0AL England

Telephone National Bedford (0234) 751122

International +44 234 751122

Telex 826559 CITMAN G

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