



**Beyond Lectures:**  
**Insights from Business Discipline-**  
*(Reflections, Transformations, and the Human*  
*Side of Teaching)*

Chief Editor  
Dr. Azila Jaini



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## THE EVOLUTION OF SERVICE MARKETING

*Nur Adilah Saud, Mazlina Ismail, Muruga Chinniah*

### **Introduction**

Service marketing has become an essential area of study and practice as global economies increasingly shift from manufacturing-based systems to service-dominated markets. Industries such as banking, healthcare, education, tourism, telecommunications, and information technology rely heavily on services to create value for customers. Unlike physical goods, services possess unique characteristics such as intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability. These characteristics make marketing services more complex and dynamic compared to marketing tangible products (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985). Over time, scholars and practitioners have developed various concepts, models, and strategies to address the unique challenges associated with marketing services. The evolution of service marketing reflects the changes in economic structures, technological advancements, and customer expectations. This article explores the development of service marketing from its early stages to the modern digital era.

### **Early Development of Marketing and the Neglect of Services**

In the early stages of marketing theory, particularly before the 1970s, the discipline of marketing was largely centered on the promotion and distribution of physical goods. Marketing scholars focused primarily on manufacturing industries such as automobiles, consumer packaged goods, and industrial products. During this period, services were often overlooked or treated as supplementary elements that accompanied tangible products. For example, businesses such as banks, airlines, hotels, and insurance companies existed and provided services to customers, but there was little academic attention devoted to understanding how services should be marketed. Marketing strategies were designed primarily for products, emphasizing factors such as product features, packaging, pricing, distribution channels, and advertising. Service organizations adopted similar strategies even though their offerings differed significantly from physical goods. One of the main reasons services were neglected was the assumption that marketing principles for goods could easily be applied to services. However, practitioners began to realize that services presented unique challenges that traditional product marketing theories could not fully address. For instance, services could not be stored in inventory, their quality often varied depending on who delivered them, and customers frequently participated in the production process. These differences gradually prompted researchers to investigate service marketing as a distinct field of study (Shostack, 1977).

### **Emergence of Service Marketing as a Discipline**

The 1970s and 1980s marked the emergence of service marketing as a separate area within the broader marketing discipline. During this period, scholars began to recognize that services had distinctive characteristics that required specialized marketing approaches. These characteristics include intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity (or variability), and perishability (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Intangibility refers to the fact that services cannot be seen, touched, or physically possessed before purchase. Customers often rely on cues such as reputation, brand image, or physical evidence to evaluate service quality. Inseparability means that services are typically produced and consumed simultaneously, which often requires direct interaction between service providers and customers. Heterogeneity refers to the variability in service performance, since the quality-of-service delivery may differ depending on the employees involved or the circumstances under which the service is provided. Perishability indicates that services cannot be stored for future use, unused service capacity, such as an empty airline seat or hotel room, represents lost revenue. These characteristics highlighted the need for different marketing strategies when dealing with services. As a result, the concept of the extended marketing mix was introduced. While

traditional marketing focused on four elements which are product, price, place, and promotion. Service marketing expanded the framework to include three additional elements: people, process, and physical evidence (Booms & Bitner, 1981). People represent the employees and customers who participate in the service delivery process. Because services often involve direct interaction between staff and customers, employee behavior plays a critical role in shaping customer perceptions. Process refers to the procedures and systems used to deliver services, ensuring efficiency and consistency. Physical evidence includes the tangible elements that support service delivery, such as facilities, equipment, and visual cues that help customers evaluate intangible services.

### **The Rise of Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction**

In the 1980s and 1990s, service marketing research expanded significantly, with a strong emphasis on understanding service quality and customer satisfaction. Organizations began to recognize that delivering high-quality service was a key factor in achieving competitive advantage. Unlike product-based industries, where differentiation often relies on physical features, service organizations compete primarily through customer experience and relationship building.

One of the most influential models developed during this period was the SERVQUAL model, which was designed to measure service quality by comparing customer expectations with their perceptions of actual service performance. The model identified five key dimensions of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Reliability refers to the ability of a service provider to deliver the promised service dependably and accurately. Responsiveness involves the willingness of employees to help customers and provide prompt service. Assurance relates to the knowledge, competence, and courtesy of employees, which inspire trust and confidence among customers. Empathy reflects the degree of caring and individualized attention provided to customers. Tangibles include the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel associated with the service.

The focus on service quality led organizations to invest more in employee training, service standards, and customer feedback systems. Businesses also began to implement strategies aimed at improving customer satisfaction and loyalty. The concept of relationship marketing gained prominence during this time, emphasizing the importance of building long-term relationships with customers rather than focusing solely on individual transactions. Relationship marketing encourages organizations to maintain continuous engagement with customers through personalized communication, loyalty programs, and improved service experiences. This approach recognizes that retaining existing customers is often more cost-effective than acquiring new ones.

### **The Impact of Technology and Globalization**

The late 1990s and early 2000s brought significant technological advancements that further transformed service marketing. The rapid development of the internet, mobile technology, and information systems enabled organizations to deliver services through digital platforms. As a result, electronic services (e-services) became increasingly common across many industries. For example, banks introduced online banking services that allowed customers to check account balances, transfer funds, and pay bills through the internet. Airlines implemented online booking systems, enabling customers to purchase tickets and manage travel arrangements without visiting physical offices and retailers adopted e-commerce platforms that offered online customer support and personalized recommendations.

Technology also facilitated the development of customer relationship management (CRM) systems. These systems allow organizations to collect, store, and analyze customer data in order to better understand consumer behavior and preferences. By using CRM tools,

companies can tailor their services, improve customer communication, and enhance overall service quality.

Globalization also played a significant role in shaping service marketing during this period. As businesses expanded into international markets, service providers needed to adapt their strategies to different cultural, economic, and regulatory environments. Multinational service organizations such as hospitality chains, airlines, and financial institutions developed standardized service procedures while also customizing their offerings to meet local customer needs.

### **The Experience Economy and Customer-Centric Marketing**

In the 21st century, service marketing has evolved further with the emergence of the experience economy. Customers are no longer satisfied with basic service delivery; they expect memorable and engaging experiences that create emotional value (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016). As a result, organizations have shifted their focus from simply providing services to designing comprehensive customer experiences. Customer experience management has become a critical aspect of modern service marketing. Companies aim to manage every interaction between customers and the organization across multiple touchpoints, including physical locations, websites, mobile applications, and social media platforms. This approach ensures that customers receive consistent and satisfying experiences throughout their journey with the brand.

Social media has also transformed the way service organizations interact with customers. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter allow businesses to communicate directly with consumers, respond to inquiries, and address complaints in real time. Customers now have greater power to influence brand reputation by sharing their experiences online. Furthermore, digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and chatbots have enhanced service delivery by providing faster and more efficient customer support. For example, chatbots can answer frequently asked questions, assist with online transactions, and provide personalized recommendations based on customer data.

Another important development in modern service marketing is the concept of value co-creation. Instead of viewing customers as passive recipients of services, organizations increasingly involve them as active participants in the service process. Customers contribute ideas, feedback, and content that help improve service offerings. This collaborative approach strengthens customer relationships and encourages brand loyalty.

### **Challenges and Future Directions**

Despite the significant progress in service marketing, organizations continue to face various challenges in delivering high-quality services. One of the primary challenges is maintaining consistent service quality across different employees, locations, and channels. Since services involve human interaction, variations in performance are difficult to eliminate completely.

Another challenge is managing customer expectations in an increasingly competitive and technology-driven environment. Customers now expect fast, personalized, and convenient services. Organizations must continuously innovate and adapt to meet these expectations. Data privacy and security also represent growing concerns as companies rely more heavily on digital platforms and customer data. Businesses must ensure that customer information is protected while still using data to enhance service experiences.

Besides that, the future of service marketing will likely be shaped by further technological innovations such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and the Internet of Things. These technologies have the potential to transform service delivery by creating more immersive and personalized customer experiences. Additionally, sustainability and ethical business practices

are becoming increasingly important to consumers, prompting service organizations to adopt socially responsible strategies.

### Conclusion

The evolution of service marketing reflects the changing nature of modern economies and the increasing importance of services in creating customer value. Initially overlooked in marketing theory, services gradually gained recognition as a unique and complex area that required specialized strategies. The identification of service characteristics, the development of the extended marketing mix, and the emphasis on service quality and relationship marketing significantly advanced the field.

Technological advancements and globalization further transformed service marketing by enabling digital service delivery and data-driven customer management. In the contemporary business environment, service marketing focuses heavily on customer experience, personalization, and value co-creation.

As customer expectations continue to evolve and new technologies emerge, service organizations must remain adaptable and innovative in their marketing strategies. By understanding the historical development of service marketing and applying its key principles, businesses can effectively deliver value, build strong customer relationships, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage in the service-dominated economy.

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