

Getting Quality Out on the Street—

A Case of Show and Tell

by Judi Brownell
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Hotel employees hear all about quality standards from the general manager and supervisors. But it's not until managers demonstrate those principles that employees really learn all that quality service means.

The vision is clear: You want to distinguish your property on the basis of service excellence. The goal is set: You want every employee to provide high-quality service to your guests, every time. Now your real challenge begins—ensuring that service standards are communicated, understood, and maintained throughout your organization. Some properties seem to operate smoothly, while others struggle with misunderstandings, inconsistencies, and missed opportunities. The study described in this article suggests that

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one of the key factors supporting service excellence is effective, appropriate communication.

The research reported here was undertaken to learn more about the specific ways in which employees come to understand what quality service means within an organization. The findings reinforce what you may have suspected all along. You can write memos, hold meetings, and provide training programs, but to a large degree employees' perceptions of quality service are shaped over time through their daily, informal interactions with managers and other organization members.

Communication in Organizations

Organizations develop elaborate charts to represent their formal structure, but those charts, with their tangle of boxes and lines (both solid and dotted), rarely reflect the critical path of information flowing through the workplace. Members of an organization spin elaborate and often delicate webs of communication. The strands that connect various individuals and departments, linking one organizational level to the next and bridging boundaries of culture and experience, are often difficult to identify.

Organizational-culture studies have demonstrated that employees acquire information about "the way things are done" in a variety of ways—direct and indirect, formal and informal, and intentional and unintentional.¹ Understanding the variety of information sources and channels available to employees and

recognizing the ways in which members come to their understanding of service-quality concepts are critical if you are to influence organizational practices.²

Although the process of developing clear service standards has been given considerable attention, much less emphasis has been placed on an equally critical and parallel concern. That is, how do you ensure that employees understand these principles and put them into practice? How are ambiguous concepts like service quality best communicated within an organization's networks? Unless effective strategies are developed, the danger is that employees' actual service behavior may bear little resemblance to the original vision.³

The first step in designing an effective communication strategy is to understand how information currently originates and flows to employees. By identifying the formal and informal networks through which employees learn about key organizational concepts and by recognizing the sources of information on which they depend, you will be better able to tap into these systems in your efforts to ensure that all employees receive essential information.

Sources and Channels

A study addressing the issues involved in communicating service-quality concepts was conducted at a

250-room luxury hotel in the northeastern United States. Specifically, researchers and senior managers were interested in determining how employees come to their understanding of what service quality means. The research team believed that if a model could be developed of employees' communication practices, managers would have the necessary information upon which to design strategies for effectively communicating key organizational concepts. In addition, results of the study would indicate whether present communication practices were having the desired effect—and, specifically, whether employees were relying upon the sources and channels that managers were using to communicate about service quality. The next sections describe the study that was conducted and illustrate the usefulness of this information in developing communication strategies to support the organization's goal of ensuring excellence in service quality.

Building a Questionnaire

The first step in creating a questionnaire was an extensive literature review on such topics as organizational communication, quality service, and organizational culture and change. The researchers then constructed a pilot survey comprising the following questions:

- (1) Who talks with employees about service quality?
- (2) How do employees learn about service quality?
- (3) When do employees learn about service quality?
- (4) How do employees define service quality?

The pilot questionnaire was tested in 30-minute interviews with approximately two dozen employees to determine whether (a) all property-specific sources and channels had been included on the survey, and (b) the terminology of the sur-

¹ R.M. Donnelly, "The Interrelationship of Planning with Corporate Culture in the Creation of Shared Values," *Managerial Planning*, Vol. 32, No. 6 (1984), pp. 8–12; B.L. Porter and W.S. Parker, Jr., "Culture Change," *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer 1992), pp. 45–67; and B. Schneider, "The Climate for Service: An Application of the Climate Construct," in *Organizational Climate and Culture*, ed. B. Schneider (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), pp. 383–412.

² J. Brownell, "The Symbolic/Culture Approach: Managing Transition in the Service Industry," *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1990), pp. 191–205; and H. Greenbaum, E. Holden, and L. Spataro, "Organizational Structure and Communication Process: A Study of Change," *Group and Organization Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1983), pp. 61–82.

³ M.N. Barrington and M.D. Olsen, "Concept of Service in the Hospitality Industry," *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1987), pp. 28–33; and C.G. Partlow, "How Ritz-Carlton Applies 'TQM,'" *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (August 1993), pp. 16–24.

Exhibit 1
Respondents' length of employment

	At hotel	In position
Six months	15.6	18.5
Up to 1 year	9.9	11.9
1 to 5 years	40.9	48.1
6 to 10 years	34.0	21.5

Exhibit 2
Who talks about service quality

	Mean	SD
General manager	5.38	1.63
Direct supervisor	5.19	1.53
Other property supervisors	4.57	1.52
Fellow employees	4.56	1.60
Guests	4.48	1.95
Family and friends	3.95	1.95

Means are from a 7-point Likert-type scale, based on 143 responses.

Exhibit 3
Learning about service quality

	Mean	SD
Watching other employees	5.14	1.40
Watching supervisors	5.06	1.58
Prearranged conversations	4.85	1.59
Being coached	4.82	1.73
Meetings	4.60	1.68
Guest-comment cards	4.57	1.82
Guests at property	4.53	2.03
Casual conversations	4.35	1.52
Memos and written messages	4.21	1.69
Manuals and documents	4.15	1.70
Formal training programs	3.81	1.95

Means are from a 7-point Likert-type scale, based on 143 responses.

vey would be understood readily by all employees. The survey instrument was then revised in light of these conversations, coded, and distributed through the human-resources department to 513 employees. A follow-up request after three weeks resulted in a total of 143 usable surveys.

Respondents were asked to indicate, on seven-point Likert scales, the extent to which they received information from each of a number of sources and channels. Those ratings were analyzed using descriptive statistics, in which means, standard deviations, and frequencies of response were calculated for the entire sample and for each of three sets of comparison groups: supervisors compared with employees, men compared with women, and native English speakers compared with those for whom English was a second language. *T*-tests determined whether the comparison groups showed significant differences with regard to the communication sources and channels through which the members of these comparison groups learned about service quality.

The questionnaire included an open-ended item to solicit respondents' definitions of service quality. In this case, a content analysis was conducted to determine recurring themes in employees' definitions of service quality. The survey concluded with demographic information so that correlations might be made between responses and such variables as length of employment, satisfaction with service quality, department, and cultural background.

Demographics

The respondents' gender breakdown was 55 percent male and 45 percent female. While 15.6 percent had worked at the property six months or less, 34 percent had been employed for six years or more (see Exhibit 1). Thirty-six percent of the

sample were supervisors. The highest percentage of respondents came from the following six departments: housekeeping, front desk, bell staff, stewarding, food and beverage, and accounting. All but 16 percent were native English speakers.

From the Top

Employees rated the extent to which six individuals or groups talked with them about service quality on a scale that ranged from never (1) to a great deal (7). The respondents rated the general manager highest (mean of 5.38), followed by their direct supervisor (mean of 5.19). Thirty percent of the sample gave the GM the highest possible rating (7), indicating that he talked with them about service "a great deal," while 55 percent of the respondents gave the GM a rating of either six or seven. Forty percent of respondents rated their direct supervisor as either six or seven. Ratings for other property supervisors, fellow employees, and guests clustered substantially below GMs and supervisors, with means near the midpoint of the scale. Family and friends were barely a source of service-quality information for these respondents (see Exhibit 2).

Learning in Action

While general managers can talk about service excellence, many hotel employees learn the most about the actual execution of quality service by watching co-workers and supervisors. The survey's second question asked organizational members to rate, again on seven-point Likert scales ranging from "learned nothing" (1) to "learned a great deal" (7), the degree to which they learned about service quality in each of 12 contexts (refer to Exhibit 3). "Watching other employees" had the highest mean (5.14). Over 40 percent of the total sample assigned ratings of 6 or 7 to this method, indicating that they learned "a great

deal" about service quality from watching their co-workers. Close behind in respondent ratings was watching supervisors (mean of 5.06).

Prearranged conversations (4.85) and coaching (4.82) received the next highest mean ratings, followed by meetings, guest-comment cards, and guests themselves. Formal training programs were ranked last (mean of 3.81), while written communications—memos, manuals, and other documents—ranked near the bottom of the scale as well. Under 25 percent of respondents assigned ratings of 6 or 7 to those sources of service-quality information.

A Lengthy Process

The answer most respondents gave regarding when they learned about service quality provides additional evidence for the damage that high turnover does to management's efforts to maintain service quality. Sixty-three percent of all respondents said they learned about service quality "over a long period of time" (ratings of 6 or 7), as shown in Exhibit 4. Their ratings of other items confirmed that although workers believed they understood a few things about service quality before they began working at the property, and acquired additional information about quality issues during the interview process, their understanding is, by and large, developed gradually during the first six months or more.

Comparing Status, Gender, and Language

Although it is useful to examine responses from the entire sample, organization members may identify with subgroups that have different styles or preferences that affect their information source and channels. Tests for significance were conducted on the means of three different comparison groups: supervisors and employees, men and women,

and native and non-native English speakers. At the $p > .05$ level, t scores with an absolute value of 2.0 or greater are considered significant.

When the samples of managers and employees were compared, significant differences occurred on several dimensions. With regard to sources of information on service quality, differences were greatest in the frequency with which supervisors and employees talked with their family and friends and guests. Supervisors communicated more frequently with both groups. Statistically significant differences also occurred with regard to use of communication channels. Supervisors received more information through formal training programs ($t = 2.50$) and by being a guest at the property ($t = 2.27$) than did the employees. On the other hand, when asked when they learned about quality, both groups gave relatively similar, high ratings to "on and off over a long period of time," "during the first six months," and "during the first few weeks."

While men and women gave only slightly different ratings to the question of information sources, the difference between the sexes regarding how they actually learned about quality were striking. Women appear to gain more information about service quality than do men by watching other employees and watching supervisors. When supervisors and employees were placed in subgroups according to gender, differences became even more readily apparent—especially in the employee sample. Levels of significance between male and female employees regarding the degree to which they gain information on service quality by watching others (colleagues and supervisors) were both at $p > .001$.

In addition, female employees appear to depend much more heavily on all forms of written communication for information

Exhibit 4 Time period to learn about service quality

	Mean	SD
Long period of time	5.56	1.56
First six months	5.54	1.60
First few weeks	5.30	1.58
Before starting job	4.48	1.82
During interview	4.35	1.73

Means are from a 7-point Likert-type scale, based on 143 responses.

than do their male counterparts. Statistically significant differences occurred between these two groups with regard to the extent that they relied on manuals and documents ($t = 2.00$) and memos ($t = 2.45$). Women indicated that the length of time it took them to learn about service quality was shorter on average than the time period reported by men.

Women also gave significantly higher ratings to the amount of information gained during the interview process ($t = 2.24$) and during the first six months ($t = 2.16$).

Finally, some of the greatest differences were found in the comparison of native and non-native English speakers. In examining responses to the first question, it appears that non-native English speakers talk less to their family and friends and to potential guests than do other employees (mean difference scores of -1.19 and -1.10, respectively).

The most significant differences, however, were in the degree to which the two samples relied on written messages ($t = -2.62$), meetings ($t = -2.62$), prearranged conversations ($t = -2.68$), and coaching ($t = -2.56$) for information on service quality. In each case, non-native English speakers were far more dependent on these formal channels than were members of their comparison group.

Exhibit 5
Definitions of service quality

	Frequency	Percentage of total
Meeting our high (excellent) service standards	32	18.82%
Anticipating guests' needs	25	14.71%
Being helpful, pampering, meeting guests' needs	23	13.53%
Responding in a friendly and courteous manner	20	11.76%
Projecting a positive attitude	14	8.24%
Surpassing guests' expectations	12	7.06%
Never saying "no"	9	5.29%
Timely and efficient service	7	4.12%
Taking pride in the job	6	3.53%
Consistent standards	6	3.53%
Putting the guest first	6	3.53%
Hard work	5	2.94%
Behaving in a professional manner	5	2.94%
Totals	170	100%

Content analysis of responses to an open-ended question yielded a total of 170 items.

Non-native English speakers and women were the only subgroups that indicated receiving more information about service quality from their direct supervisor than from the general manager.

Defining Service Quality

Although it is widely recognized that the guest ultimately defines acceptable levels of service quality, it is important to assess employees' perceptions of that critical success factor. Two trained coders and one of the researchers applied content analysis to the respondents' qualitative responses to the question that asked them to define quality service. (Interrater reliability was tested at 94 percent.) The 143 surveys yielded 170 response units that fell into 23 distinct categories. Of those, 13 categories were mentioned by five or more respondents, and six categories were used by ten or more respondents (Exhibit 5).

The highest number of responses fell into the categories "meeting our high (or, excellent) service standards," "anticipating guests' needs," "being helpful, pampering, meeting

guests' needs," and "responding in a friendly and courteous manner."

Walking the Talk

Previous research suggests that effective organizational leaders "walk the talk"; they are on the floor, communicating with employees and modeling effective practices.⁴ One recent study concluded that employee commitment is most influenced by the degree to which employees perceive top management as both inspiring a shared vision and modeling that vi-

sion.⁵ Clearly, the picture of the general manager painted by respondents in this study conforms to this image. Supervisors, too, appear to be effective in their efforts to communicate service standards regularly to their employees through both actions and words.⁶

We also know that the "real" beliefs of an organization are expressed

less in corporate mission statements than in the daily rituals and routines of organizational members.⁷ Employees come to understand what "quality service" means as they are socialized through various interactions with their peers.

As Eisenberg and Goodall explained, the experience of entering an organization is one of "surprise and sense-making."⁸ As key concepts in the culture are named—as in the case of service quality—they become better understood because employees experience first-hand these previously undefined activities. In this study we find that respondents primarily learned about service quality not by participating in formal training programs but by watching other employees and supervisors "over a long period of time."

Culture of Quality

This study also reveals a largely oral culture of quality service, where coaching, prearranged conversations, and meetings play a more significant role in employees' understanding of service concepts than do handbooks, memos, or other written documents. The findings also suggest that there may be value in examining various groups within the organization for their unique patterns of acquiring information. While all employees in this hotel paid close attention to the daily behavior of their colleagues, women and non-native English speakers

⁴ J.A. Hess, "Assimilating Newcomers into an Organization: A Cultural Perspective," *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, May 1993, pp. 189-210; M.R. Louis, "Surprise and Sense-Making: What Newcomers Experience in Entering Unfamiliar Organizational Settings," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1970), pp. 225-251; G.F. Ross, "Service Quality and Management: The Perceptions of Hospitality Employees," *Journal of Tourism Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1993), pp. 12-23; and K.L. Scelhoff, "Nine Steps to Better Communication: Supervisors Find That Informal Communication with Staff Builds Trust, Commitment," *Hotels*, Vol. 27, No. 11 (1993), p. 24.

⁵ B.P. Niehoff, C.A. Enz, and R.A. Grover, "The Impact of Top-Management Actions on Employee Attitudes and Perceptions," *Group and Organizational Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1993), pp. 337-352.

⁶ Ross, pp. 12-23; D.A. Waldman, "A Theoretical Consideration of Leadership and Total Quality Management," *Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1993), pp. 65-79; and B.J. White, "Developing Leaders for the High-Performance Workplace," *Human-Resource Management*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Spring 1994), pp. 161-168.

⁷ N. Johns, "Quality Management in the Hospitality Industry: Recent Developments," *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1993), pp. 10-15; S.A. Sackman, "Culture and Subcultures: An Analysis of Organizational Knowledge," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 37 (1992), pp. 140-161; and D.P. Schmidt, "Integrating Ethics into Organizational Networks," *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1992), pp. 34-43.

⁸ E.M. Eisenberg and H.L. Goodall, Jr., *Organizational Communication: Balancing Creativity and Constraint* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 144.

apparently depended more heavily on written messages than did other groups, such as English-speaking males. Non-native speakers, it appears, relied on formal information channels and may require special attention during periods of organizational change.

None of this is to say that printed materials are not of value, for the themes contained in printed material ideally will eventually permeate the organization. Quality-service themes cited in formal print documents at this property clustered around five central themes. Comparing these themes to respondents' definitions reveals additional information regarding the effectiveness of organizational communication practices. In this case, formal company documents emphasize the statements shown in Exhibit 6 that employees also used in their definitions of quality service. Four of those five themes topped the list of items mentioned most frequently by employees (Exhibit 5). The fifth item, behaving in a professional manner, was near the bottom of the list.

Seventy-three percent of all responses correspond in at least one feature to official property documents. This general agreement between the employees' statements and the organization's definitions of service quality suggest, in this case, that communication strategies have largely been effective in creating shared meanings.

In assessing your own organizational communication strategies, you might raise the following questions.

- (1) Are employees' definitions of service quality consistent with the organization's intended vision?
- (2) What potentially effective sources and channels are underused?
- (3) How do the organization's communication practices

Exhibit 6
Company service-quality statements compared with those of employees

Respondents' Statements	Organization Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting high, excellent service standards (18.8%) • Anticipating guests' needs (14.7%) • Being helpful, pampering, meeting guests' needs (13.5%) • Responding in a friendly and courteous manner (11.8%) • Behaving in a professional manner (2.9%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide excellent, superior service • Anticipate guests' needs • Attend to every guest need (no matter how small) • Provide warm, courteous, sincere service • Provide professional service

- compare with the employees' preferences for sources and channels?
- (4) Is the current system working? What should be done to strengthen, supplement, or improve current communication practices?
 - (5) Are there employee groups that may require special efforts to match their communication needs and preferences?
 - (6) What reward systems are in place that will encourage employees to continue effective communication practices?

Changing Channels

Results of this study are useful in a number of ways. First, the findings reveal employees' perceptions of their communication sources and channels and enable researchers to construct a picture of the activity of formal and informal networks in the organization's communication system. The food and beverage manager, for instance, may believe she's communicating regularly with her employees about service quality, but do they report getting timely and sufficient information from her? The reservations manager may be sending out numerous memos on service issues, but is anyone reading them?

Organization leaders can compare and assess the effectiveness of their communication practices with

information from a survey such as the one used here. Communication practices might be brought more into line with employee preferences, or steps might be taken to increase the use of neglected channels.

A series of studies like the one presented here may reveal characteristics of communication practices in successful hospitality organizations. Managers who believe that their communication sources have not been tapped or that their channels are not functioning can compare their systems against the model.

The model can also assist organizational leaders in developing communication strategies that are likely to reach the greatest number of employees with clear and consistent messages about service values and priorities.

Only through ongoing assessment and the deliberate design of effective communication strategies can hospitality leaders ensure the smooth and successful implementation of quality-service principles. Only when employees understand service expectations are they prepared to improve the level of service quality they provide. From the general manager to the housekeeper, from the chef to the concierge, walking the talk gets the word about service quality out on the street. **CQ**