

How to Build Service Quality into Your Operation

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You've probably heard about or used some kind of quality assurance program in your operation, including total quality management, Six Sigma, lean, quality circle, or Kaizen. These techniques or approaches have been developed to help operators define, create, and execute organizational processes to build and maintain service quality. Regardless of the approach you use, service quality initiatives and processes are widely recognized as critical tools for ensuring guest satisfaction and developing a competitive advantage. Needless to say, creating and delivering a consistent, quality product and service is a key to long-term business success.

Hospitality service-quality initiatives require excellent service processes and consistently effective employees. As a manager, operator, or supervisor, most of your time will be spent working to understand, develop, and modify the behavior of your guests, employees, and owners. A total quality approach to management can help you gain better control over those important people. In this chapter, I present and discuss the foundations of service quality— in particular, what you can do to bring it into your organization.

We start with a general discussion of service quality, look at complaint management, and conclude with a discussion of how to introduce, measure, and monitor your operation's service quality initiatives. Most of my examples are drawn from food-service operations, but the principles are the same in hotels or any other service-based company.

Service Quality Assurance

Quality assurance (QA) begins with the definition of what quality means to you and your guests. This definition is specific to your operation—and different from all others.

Quality is typically defined as the conformance to standards to produce and execute a product or service. So quality is achieved based on a set of predetermined standards and desired outcomes, for which you outline standards stating the required levels of performance needed to achieve the desired level of quality. The desired quality varies by operation, of course, but even diverse operations can have similar standards that are realized in different ways.

Smith and Wollensky Steakhouse, Outback Steakhouse, and McDonald's all serve high-quality beef products, but each of these multiunit operators has an explicit definition of what quality means to their operations. As a result, their guests set expectations for the quality level of products and services they receive, based on those explicit definitions. So McDonald's customers expect (and receive) 100 percent beef with no fillers, along with QSCV (quality, service, cleanliness, and value); Smith and Wollensky's guests expect prime beef dry-aged in-house, and Outback will meet a standard of "no rules, just right."

The main premise behind building service quality is to set up reasonable and achievable levels of standards, along with a process to eliminate errors from the service- and product-delivery system.¹ QA processes should be designed to identify areas that need improvement² and to maintain current desirable levels of quality. When standards are not met, an error of some sort has occurred in the service or product delivery, meaning that quality was not achieved in that particular instance. As a manager or member of a QA team, your job will be to find and correct the cause of that error.

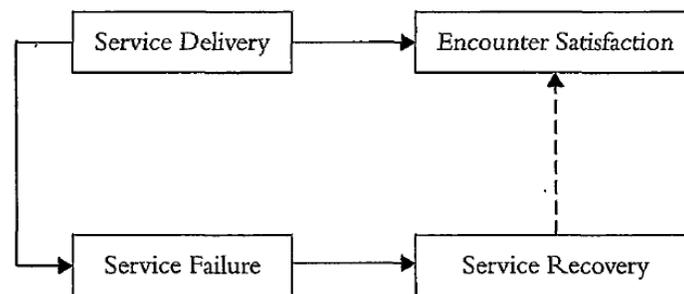
The principles of service quality and QA apply to any business, be it a hospitality business or a manufacturing business. The only difference is in how the guest uses a product as compared to a service. In both cases, a customer develops a set of expectations and judges the quality of the product or service against those expectations. For a product, its use generally occurs far from the site of its manufacture or sale. Because services are consumed within your operation, your employees and the guest are involved in the service. This is why you need to have quality control and service quality processes in place to continually assess the consistency of your guests' experiences and determine the source of problems when they occur.

One of the early QA planners was W. Edwards Deming, who suggested that you need to take the following four interrelated steps to implement a QA initiative: plan, do, check, and act.³ In the "plan" stage, you would determine your needs, create standards, and set up the model you will put in place to achieve your goals. In the "do" stage, you will test how the standards worked, and then "check" to ensure that the process you designed is carried out correctly and whether the test yielded the desired results. If your "check" stage yielded the desired results, then you can "act" by instituting the processes into standard operating procedures. This is, however, a continuing process in which you revise the model according to the real-world results. The key behind QA processes is that you need to be able to identify product and service failures (errors) and then develop the fixes for them in such a way that the failures are permanently removed from the system.

Transaction-Focused versus Relationship-Focused Process Design

Let's look at two frameworks that demonstrate the importance of having QA processes in place, particularly in service-based settings.⁴ The first framework, the transaction-focused approach,⁵ presented in Figure 12.1, depicts the process of how a service failure would be detected and remedied. In this model, you have a planned service delivery and you either execute the service delivery properly (which will lead to guest satisfaction) or your planned service delivery results in a service failure (which probably will dissatisfy your guest). To overcome guest dissatisfaction following the service failure, you most likely would offer a remedy to address the failure, with the belief that once the error is remedied, the guest or end user of the product or service will be satisfied.

Figure 12.1
Transaction-Focused Service Recovery

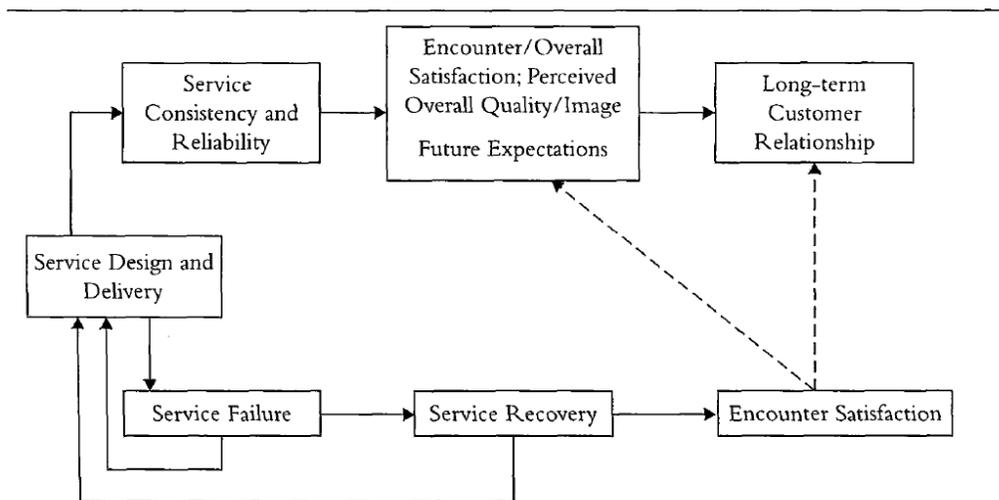


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A classic restaurant service error occurs when a guest orders a steak medium rare and it is overcooked. The guest will probably complain, which would be a common way to uncover this error. (Although no one likes guest complaints, if the guest says nothing and chokes down the overcooked steak, the restaurant will never know why that guest left, never to return.) Once the complaint is lodged, the service provider will need to offer a service recovery, usually by bringing the guest a properly cooked steak, but sometimes with an alternative dish to replace the incorrectly prepared steak or some other form of compensation to redress the problem. The key point here is that in the transaction-focused model, the service failure was corrected, but no other actions are taken to determine what led to the service failure or to prevent a similar problem from reoccurring. The result is a strictly short-term, episodic approach.

Relationship Model: Now let's look at what would happen when an overcooked steak is served (or some other service error occurs) in the relationship-focused model (presented in Figure 12.2).⁶ As you see, this model addresses both the short-term issue of service recovery and long-term elements of service process management. In the model, the upper portion begins with service design and delivery, which leads to service consistency and reliability, which will then influence overall guest satisfaction and future expectations, and help build long-term relationships with your guests. The idea here is that delivering a consistent product or service will allow guests to accurately set their expectations and form a relationship with your firm. The second part of the model shows the two parts of the process when a service failure occurs. The first part addresses the immediate need to correct the service failure (like the transactional model), and the second part collects information regarding the service recovery, and feeds that information back into service design and delivery to make improvements to the process (unlike the transactional model). So, when the steak arrives overcooked, the service provider should attempt to correct the problem by determining what remedy will redress the problem to ensure that the guest is satisfied with the corrective action taken. Then, you would need to understand what led to the service failure and what impact the chosen remedy had on the guest and her experience in the restaurant. Figuring out exactly what happened is crucial for solving the problem and preventing it from recurring.

Figure 12.2
Relationship-Focused Service Recovery



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If you're familiar with restaurant operations, you can see many points at which the error could have occurred. The server may have accidentally entered medium well in the point-of-sale (POS) system; the steak could have sat under a heat lamp too long; the cook might have overestimated the cooking time because the cut of meat was thinner than usual; the broiler could have malfunctioned; the cook might simply have overcooked the steak, due to lack of skill or attention; the steak may have been served to the wrong guest; or the guest's idea of medium rare could have been different from the chef's view. To address this service error, the QA team needs to check the process at each point, understand what happened, and use this information to craft a long-term solution. We all know that improperly prepared food and other service failures are inevitable. What separates the strong from the weak is how we learn from our mistakes to prevent them from reoccurring. A QA approach to management is one way to achieve that end.

The Case of the Overcooked Steak

I didn't choose the example of incorrectly cooked steak at random. This was a real problem that occurred in our restaurant, Taverna Banfi, which is operated by the Cornell School of Hotel Administration and open to the public. We noticed that we were getting a large number of steaks returned over a period of about a month. But the complaints were not consistent. Some steaks were being returned as overcooked, others undercooked. A standard Taverna Banfi operating procedure requires managers to record any guest complaints in a management log. We want to make sure that we have the information regarding the complaint, how it was handled, and the outcome. Our management team reviews this log daily. After seeing the problems with the steaks, we examined the issues presented earlier as we reviewed every step of the process. Through our examination, we found no problems with the equipment, ticket times, servers' POS entries, product consistency, or how the guests interpreted steak doneness. However, we did find two interesting things through our examination: (1) The steaks were being returned during the peak times of the evening meal period, and (2) this occurred when one particular grill cook was working. As it turns out, this grill cook had recently been promoted to his position. "We concluded that he needed additional training to be able to handle the grill station during crush time.

I have to emphasize that the purpose of our analysis was not to assign blame or to punish worker errors. Our goal was to improve the process, and we could conclude that we needed to take another look at our training procedures. We were able to quickly resolve the problem because we focused on identifying a solution rather than assigning blame.

Another Case of "Wrong" Steaks: Let's look at how Outback Steakhouse dealt with a similar problem and removed an unexpected error from their service delivery system. Because Outback Steakhouse introduced steaks to a much wider audience, they created and produced high-quality steaks that appealed to an audience that was relatively new to steaks. Even though they designed their restaurants, service processes, and staff training to produce these high-quality steaks in a casual environment, they found that their guests had varying perceptions of how steak temperatures worked. As a result, a fair number of guests were unhappy with how their steaks were cooked. To remedy this service failure, Outback assessed the situation and learned that their guests' definitions of steak doneness were different from theirs (as well as being inconsistent). After recognizing the problem, Outback did two things: (1) They printed menu descriptions of what steaks cooked at various temperatures would look like, and (2) they had each server tell the guest what they should expect (inside and out) from a steak ordered to a particular temperature or level of doneness. For example, if you ordered your steak rare, the server would explain that the steak would be served seared on the outside but red and cool in the center. If you ordered your steak well done, the server would explain that the steak would be cooked clear through. By taking these actions, Outback reduced their error rate. Notice also that Outback did not fall into the "expertise trap" of thinking that they were right and the guests were wrong. Instead, they treated guest dissatisfaction as a service failure and sought to resolve it.

With these two examples of what appears to be the same service failure, you see how the application of QA programs and a focus on service excellence will lead you to a competitive advantage. While the specific service failures at Cornell's Taverna Banfi and Outback Steakhouse were based on the same apparent service failure, the reason behind each restaurant's service failure was completely different. Both organizations were able to resolve their problems by taking a service quality approach to management.

Despite the time and expense of implementing and maintaining service quality initiatives, I believe that you'll find that the benefits from QA programs will almost always outweigh their costs. You can check on the value of your QA system by having a sound measurement system in place to collect information on your performance. One mechanism to gauge performance is guest feedback, in the form of both complaints and compliments. Compliments are more fun than complaints, but from a QA perspective, you need both so that you can record elements of your performance from multiple sources. Because complaints are one of the real challenges of hotel and restaurant operation, let's look at complaint management and how to improve performance based on complaints received.

Complaint Management

Before we discuss complaint management, let's set the parameters for how to conceptualize and process service failures and complaints. We have all heard the expression "the customer is always right." The problem with that statement as a way of managing complaints is that you, as an operator, are assigning blame in the process of complaint resolution and management. We have already seen that assigning blame is counterproductive when you are trying to improve your operation. As noted above, when a service failure occurs, you should spend every ounce of energy trying to understand what happened, fixing the problem, and preventing it from reoccurring. Instead, each service failure becomes your responsibility to correct, devoid of blame. Correcting the problem may require you to change your expectations, your guests to change their expectations, or a correction of behavior in how service processes are executed in your operation.

We can define a complaint as a social confrontation that has been initiated to adjust perceptions and outcomes, either in the short term or more preferably in the long term.⁷ When a service failure occurs that goes unnoticed by the operator, guests are faced with the choice of communicating a complaint to influence the service delivery process or terminating the service exchange without having their service expectations met in a satisfactory manner.⁸ With service-based complaints, the dissatisfying elements of the service experience lead to a number of possible initiating acts on the part of the consumer that begin and frame the social confrontation or the complaint.⁹ When operators are trained to identify guests' initiating acts, they can often resolve problems for guests more quickly and more efficiently.

Let's look at five categories of initiating acts, noting that complaint initiation likely occurs through a sequence of negotiated interdependent actions, rather than strictly one initiating act.¹⁰ You've probably noticed these in some of your guests.

1. **Hinting:** In this case, the guest is making a subtle comment or gesture to get the service provider to notice that something is missing from the service experience. It could be as simple as placing the water glass at the edge of the table, or making a scribbling gesture to get the check. At this point, the guest is making the service provider aware of their needs and is awaiting a response or action to take place.
2. **Seeking confirmation:** In this instance, the guest uses a more direct social confrontation to confirm a request that was already initiated. Building on the preceding "hinting" examples, a guest may ask the service provider, "Didn't I ask for

the check already?" or "Didn't I ask for a refill of my water?" Frustration is building for the guest, and the remedy should be delivered to further avoid additional conflict.

3. **Blaming or accusing:** At this point, if the guest still perceives a problem, the guest will move to a more confrontational approach. Using the same examples above, the guest might say "I asked you for the check 10 minutes ago. I need to leave," or "I asked you to refill my water 10 minutes ago." In this case, the guest is displeased and the resolution needs to be swift to restore a sense of balance and satisfaction for the guest in the service experience.
4. **Emotional display:** This is more intense than blaming or accusing, and I doubt that an empty water glass would cause an emotional display. However, guests might become emotional if the server fails to close out a check, especially if the guest really wants or needs to leave. Emotional displays may include tears or crying, visible anger, or coldness and sarcasm. At this point, the service failure has clearly gotten the guest upset and a stronger intervention would be required to correct the problem.
5. **Emotional statement:** The most intense reaction is a communication filled with anger or disappointment. Unfortunately, we have all seen this type of behavior at airports, when frustrated passengers pound on the podium, or you may have had a guest threaten to report you to the Better Business Bureau. Guests in this stage require more care and handling and can also damage the service experience for other guests who witness the outburst.

Even small service errors, such as water refills, cause guest dissatisfaction and may lead to a loss of patronage ("They couldn't even remember to fill my water glass"). To mitigate problems and ensure that guests' complaints are handled appropriately and before they escalate, guest service personnel should be trained to identify escalating failures and features that lead to social confrontations. I also want to point out the effect of a sincere and quick service recovery. I've conducted other research that shows that most guests respond well when you move quickly to take an appropriate recovery action.¹¹ This is the key in the short term to help you build long-term solutions!

Heading Off Failure

Standard operating procedures should include training for guest contact employees to help to recognize potential problems and conflicts before the situation gets to the point of the initiating acts. You cannot hold an employee accountable for an outcome if the employee was not properly prepared

to do the job, if the employee is not supported by an effective system, or if the employee is improperly supervised.

When a failure occurs, service personnel should be trained to identify potential problems or concerns, and they should know when they are not properly executing service processes. Going back to the new grill cook at Taverna Banfi, he originally did not know how to perform properly during peak business times, but with additional training and support, as well as attention to detail and service processes, the problem was resolved quickly and appropriately to prevent future problems.

You should encourage your guests to complain when they are not happy. Complaints are direct performance feedback that in most cases will be fully actionable. Your guests should be trained to give you feedback, and you should reward them for doing so by showing them how their comments helped you (or will help you) get better. Take all complaints seriously unless you have information that causes you to act otherwise. Few of the complaints you receive will be disingenuous, and do not forget that a complaint is a social confrontation initiated by one of your guests to correct a problem or error that took place in service delivery!

With the presence of social media and blogs, you'll have to work all the harder to be observant and prevent errors from occurring. You will also have to encourage your guests to tell you their problems, instead of simply posting their complaint. Even so, a guest can have a negative experience in your restaurant, go through the initiating acts described earlier, and still share their experience with others. So prevention is your best strategy. Let's look at how to measure your systems using guest feedback to track and improve service quality.

Guest Measurement Systems

There are four main methods to gather feedback from guests:

1. Direct or indirect communication with management and staff
2. Customer relations call centers
3. Guest satisfaction surveys or other forms of comment cards (including Web, e-mail)
4. Mystery shopping programs

Each of these methods is equally valuable and offers operators direct performance feedback from their guests. In fact, a savvy operator should use as many of these approaches as possible.

Direct or Indirect Communication with Management and Staff

Through the normal course of business, guests, employees, and managers will interact and exchange a lot of information. Guests may pass on their assessment of their service experience in part or in whole (good or bad), or staff or management may prompt them to share their thoughts. It is important to look at both what is said and what is not said. Any comments received from guests should be reported and recorded, if applicable, and acted upon when needed. Be specific in your communication. If you ask generic questions ("How is everything?"), you'll probably get standard responses ("Fine, okay") even if that's not what the guest is really thinking. So make sure your interactions are based on clear, direct goals, and, in addition to appropriate pleasantries, target communication to gather useful information and enhance the guest experience.

Let's go back to the overcooked steak. An observant manager or server looking at the steak should have been able to see that it was not cooked properly. So, instead of a generic question, a server (or a manager) doing a table check should say something like: "Pardon me, but I noticed your steak is not cooked medium rare as you ordered it." That will offer the guest a chance to have the problem corrected without having to engage in a social confrontation (i.e., a complaint). If your staff and management are performing their duties, they are responsible for being in tune with what the guest is experiencing (or not experiencing) and making adjustments as needed. Whether it is a restaurant meal, an airline flight, a hotel stay, or any other hospitality-based experience, management and staff should know what is correct based on the espoused standards of the operation, and they should be able to manage guest experiences to deliver on those standards. The power of observation and the ability to use guest feedback and reactions in service experiences is one easy way to maintain and improve service quality.

Customer Relations Call Centers

Large organizations usually have a call center set up to receive guest feedback and provide guests with needed information. When readily available, call centers can take complaints or compliments, offer directions, take reservations, answer questions, or give information about promotions or organizational features. Call centers allow you to centralize some functions, while providing your guests with an easily accessible platform to communicate with the operation.

Like any communication that transpires among staff, management, and guests, you need to log and review the information to see if any trends are emerging. While a single comment or question is important, being able to track the trends that emerge from guest communication is equally important.

Data collected through call centers can add rich layers of information that allow you to improve processes and build service quality.

Guest Satisfaction Surveys

Guest satisfaction surveys (GSSs) allow you to collect specific information from guests, along with open-ended responses when applicable. This type of feedback is useful because it taps into your guests' perceptions of the experience they had in your operation, and it also provides sociodemographic data to help with future decision making. If you do run a GSS system, plan to ask no more than about 30 questions, to avoid respondent fatigue and low response rates. This constraint means that you need to be focused in what questions you ask and how you ask them. While these data can give you an episode-by-episode description of what transpired in your operation, the GSS system's chief purpose is to provide large amounts of data to help extract trends. You also need to keep in mind that because a GSS asks for feedback from your guests, it may require you to make a direct, personal response to a guest's comment. As with all guest interactions, it is important to ensure that all GSS data are closely tracked and monitored for such responses.

Although you can track trends with guest satisfaction surveys, you can also use GSSs to gather data on specific problem areas or processes, using Deming's "plan, do, check, act" framework.¹² For example, a large casual dining chain restaurant used a GSS to measure service quality (measured as servers' attentiveness, knowledge, friendliness, and timeliness), food quality (measured as correct temperature, taste, and value), cleanliness, repeat patronage intentions, and overall satisfaction. The chain's managers noticed that the scores from their carryout guests were significantly and consistently lower than the scores for their dine-in guests. This bit of information prompted the company to institute a separate GSS for their carryout guests. Rather than create a lengthy survey, the organization used a "Six Sigma" approach to measure carryout performance. Six Sigma is an approach to QA that helps operators identify and eliminate errors (defects) in production and service, by effectively reducing the variance in delivery from product to product or, better yet, from guest experience to guest experience. Six Sigma is heavily data driven and focuses on solving problems by creating and building solutions into the culture of the organization, where the goal would be to have zero defects or a standard deviation of zero.¹³

Through the process analysis that was used to develop the survey, the company looked at what makes a carryout experience positive for their guests. The following five questions emerged to capture the essence of a carryout experience for their guests:

1. Were there any items missing from your order?
2. Was the food prepared as ordered?
3. Did the carryout packaging keep the food at the right temperature?
4. Was your food ready when you expected?
5. Compared to other similarly priced restaurants in the same vicinity that offer carryout, would you say your overall experience with the brand was much worse (1), worse (2), about the same (3), better (4), or much better (5).

This new GSS survey accomplished the following three things. First, it checked on whether each restaurant was properly executing carryout processes. Second, it got every manager thinking about their guests' carryout experience and what makes or breaks the experience for them. Finally, it allowed the chain to gauge how its guests felt about their carryout experience compared to their direct competition. The results of the survey over the first quarter helped identify units that were performing well and units that needed improvement.

Mystery Shopping Programs

A mystery shopping program puts a trained observer into the position of a guest who then assesses your operation. As with a GSS program, you need to have clear objectives and be able to identify important elements of the service process that you would like evaluated. Unlike a GSS program, you can ask mystery shoppers to provide a detailed assessment of their experience. You will receive fewer observations tied to a specific service experience, but you can ask for greater detail about each service experience.

Here are four main considerations for setting up a mystery shopper program.

1. **Program timing:** As an operator, you need to determine how many shops per unit will be useful. For some operators, one mystery shopper visit per week is sufficient, while other operations may require more, and others less. The schedule and frequency of the shoppers' visits should be closely tied to operational objectives and outcomes, for example, during slow periods, if that is appropriate, or busy periods, or both. You would also have to determine whether the time of day or day of the week makes a difference. Whatever you determine, you need to closely monitor the shopping schedule to ensure that each mystery shop adds value for all concerned.
2. **Mystery shopper training:** With mystery shoppers you can gather detailed data, but you need to make sure that the people who are mystery shoppers know what they

are looking for, and you also need to have a sound organizational structure in place to manage the process. That means that you are selecting the right shoppers and that you have a sound system to record and report shoppers' experiences in a timely manner.

3. **Program design:** As part of making sure that the mystery shoppers give you useful data, you determine what will be measured and why. Your program also should be collected consistently and periodically, to give you an analysis over time. The script that is used for data collection from the shoppers, should be inclusive and yield data that can be used for continuous improvement.
4. **Program implementation:** You also have to be clear on how the system works, what it measures, and how you want to use the data. Line-level employees, supervisors, property-level managers, and regional and corporate managers all need to be on the same page to ensure the process is well executed and the data are properly used.

A solid mystery shopping program should yield data that your organization can use directly to assess performance and that offer clear avenues for performance enhancement. Additionally, it should also provide a mechanism to reward employees and managers for their accomplishments. Finally, a well-implemented shopper program provides oversight to managers in a controlled manner and can act as a proxy for a good supervisor, since the output provides management with tools for coaching and developing staff members to achieve QA goals.

Each type of feedback discussed here is an essential part of any QA process. Having multiple mechanisms to collect data will allow you to build continuous improvement into your operation. To get the most benefit from all these efforts, make sure to pass the information to appropriate people at the regional, unit, and line levels. Discussions of specific findings and outcomes can lead to process and output improvements. As a final point, any guest or operational feedback you receive needs to be connected to relevant unit-level and company data (including POS, performance management system [PMS], customer relationship management [CRM], supply chain, and human resources [HR]) to ensure that feedback is used to improve performance.

Toward Consistently Excellent Service

Understanding how your operation works from the ground up is the best way to ensure that you can consistently deliver quality service to your guests. Your guests will recognize it, be loyal to you for it, and will help you create and maintain a great service-based organization.

Let's review the considerations you should keep in mind for a sound QA program. QA takes time and money to use properly. It won't be useful if you fail to use the data consistently and make sure that the indicated changes are made permanently. Train your staff on how the process works, and make sure they are committed to the process. You need to demonstrate how the process improvements will be good for everyone, and monitor and track performance. You can do this by connecting outcomes of programs to performance for managers and use performance metrics for staff members involved for raises and promotions.

You also need to be consistent and timely with results of the evaluations, process improvements, and outcomes. If too much time elapses between program design, execution, and evaluation, much valuable momentum will be lost.

Finally, after you implement any changes resulting from a QA program, be sure to evaluate the costs and benefits every few months (at a minimum) to ensure that errors remain low and that product and service quality, sales and revenue, and other important metrics remain at the required levels.

¹ S. S. J. Hall, "The Emergence of Ethics in Quality," in *Ethics in Hospitality Management*, ed. S. S. J. Hall (East Lansing, MI: Educational Institute of the American Hotel and Motel Association, 1992), 9-22.

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⁴ Lockwood, 1994.

⁵ S. W. Brown, D. L. Cowles, and T. L. Tuten, "Service Recovery: its value and limitations as a retail strategy," *International Journal of Service Industry Management* (1996): 32-46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ G. Makoul and M. E. Roloff, "The Role of Efficacy and Outcome Expectations in the Decision to Withhold Relational Complaints," *Communication Research* 25 (1998): 5-29; S. E. Newell and R. K. Stutman, "The Social Confrontation Episode," *Communication Monographs* 55 (1988): 266—285; and S. E. Newell and R. K. Stutman, "Negotiating Confrontation: The Problematic Nature of Initiation and Response," *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 23 (1989/139-162).

⁸ A. M. Susskind, "Efficacy and Outcome Expectations Related to Customer Complaints about Service Experiences," *Communication Research* 27(3) (2000): 353-378.

⁹ Newell and Stutman, 1988; Newell and Stutman, 1989/1990.

¹⁰ Ibid.; Susskind, 2000.

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¹² Deming, 1982.

¹³ M. L. George, *Lean Six Sigma for Service* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 2003).