Customer Perceptions of E-commerce Quality: A Critical Review of Extant Knowledge

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Abstract

Websites of e-retailers are like a digital and dynamic representation of Bricks & Mortar store of retailers. So, if a customer goes to a store and finds that its ambience is not pleasing, products are not correctly priced, friendly environment is not there, then he would leave the store and will not return. Similarly in online context, if customers perceive a company's website as poorly designed, providing inaccurate information, user interface is not friendly and has privacy issues, then customers will switch to other e-tailers. Hence, not only products and services but the dimensions that judge the perceive service quality has become very important for success in e-commerce. Thus, this paper is an attempt to discuss in detail the various dimensions of a website quality that an online vendor must keep in mind in order to attract and retain customers.

Keywords: information content, web design, privacy, security, fulfillment, reliability, responsiveness

Article

In today's competitive world, providing only products and services is not enough, for surviving in this hyper competitive environment business firms have to provide 'quality' product and services. Specially with the invent of internet and widely increasing e-commerce business, it has become a necessity for online vendors to gain knowledge about what is website quality and how to provide customers the quality products along with ease of purchasing, security and other added features which could aid in reducing the gap between the customers expected quality and customers perceived quality. Providing service through internet has become a popular business of e-commerce and thus e-service quality has been a domain area of research for various practitioners and academicians. Various dimensions of website quality have been studied by numerous authors in the past. Although there is no consensus on the number and types of dimensions of website quality, still after comprehensive review few global dimensions have been concluded in following sections.

Important Dimensions of Website Quality

After reviewing literature a total of six dimensions has been concluded. These are Information content, Ease of usability, Internet privacy and security, Web design, Fulfillment/ Reliability and Responsiveness. All these dimensions have been explained in brief in the following sections.

Information Availability and Content

One of the main objective for any marketer is to provide their customers with information on which they can base their decisions. A perceived benefit in outline shopping is that customers need not to go offline stores to obtain information about the product/service. They can procure enormous amount of information directly from a site. Thus, the availability and depth of information are frequently mentioned as an important reason for shopping online (Swaminathan and Rao 1999, Wolfinbarger and Gilly 2001, Li, Kuo and Russell 1999). Prior researches shows that one of the key benefits, as perceived by the customers, of shopping online is the reduced search costs for products and their related information. Quality of information should be consists of material, precise, prompt, personalized, comprehensive information presentation. Quality information provided by the websites can lead to satisfaction and increases the chances of revisit and repurchase. When users can control the sequence, content, system and duration of product related information, their ability to comprehend, integrate, and thereby use information is improved (Airely 2000). The empirical results of past researches have shown that customers who give value to information quality prefer shopping physical products online. Level of control that customers has over the information system of a website also plays an important role in helping the customers to better match their preferences, and have better knowledge about the area they are examining and make them feel more confident in their decisions.

Ease Of Usability and Perceived Usefulness

The initial research in this area is done by Davis (1989). Perceived usefulness (PU) in his words is defined as "the degree to which an individual believes that his or her job performance is enhanced by using a particular system". Whereas Ease of usability (EOU) is defined as "the extent of simplicity and ease perceived by an individual after using a particular system ". The basic idea of usability is making the user interface of the websites more friendly. The main focus is to make users feel at ease and eliminate all the congestion so that users can conveniently browse or purchase products online. Some of the common facets of usability are – coherence, clarity, accessibility, integrity, dependability, informality and most important simplicity. Work done by Davis 1989 and several replication studies have discovered that both ease of use and perceived usefulness have a different impact on different aspects like behavior, attitude etc. All these studies have confirmed the relationship that perceived usefulness rather than ease of use is the stronger predictor of future usage. But both these attributes are considered as an important factor in determining the prospects of adoption of new technology. Furthermore, the customer evaluation of websites will probably be impacted by how facile the sites are to use and how valuable they are in assisting customers to perform their tasks.

Internet Privacy and Security

Privacy and security of users personal information are considered to be major issues arising from the rapid growth of e-commerce. Internet privacy involves protecting user information, maintaining secrecy and providing informed consent. On the other hand, security includes protection of users from the risk of intrusion or fraud, information theft or misuse. Privacy is a major ethical issue in the acquisition and management of user information. Results of past researches show that a majority of internet users have various concerns related to information privacy and issues regarding procurement and dispersal of user's data. In addition to information privacy, security (information embezzlement in particular) also has been regarded as a key concern of e-commerce. The issues related to both privacy and security are interrelated, because when e-commerce companies engage in protection of consumer privacy, they also assume their responsibilities of ensuring the secure storage and dissemination of consumer information contained in their databases.

Web Design

Web design involves page layout, photography, animation, art, color and illustration. Web design have undergone a rapid development from being a basic primeval medium to an advanced hi-tech multi-media design. Web design has become an artistic phenomenon having its own mode of expression. Previous researches have discovered that graphic style of a site has an impact on customer perceptions of online shopping (Hoffman and Novak 1996, Airely 2000). The underlying focus behind graphic style is to aid the customers in making purchase decision confidently by providing them adequate amount of product information. For this e-tailers have to determine what type of illustration and visual communication technique are most relevant for their customers and accordingly incorporate those techniques to augment e-shopping experiences. Graphic style as a dimension is more critical to online apparel retailers due to the nature of apparels (Kim, Lennon 2006). The information search cost of the customers is affected by the way in which graphic style of a site presents the product related information. Depending on how the websites are designed some information search tasks takes longer time while other shorter (Hoque & Lohse 1999). According to Kotler (1974), colors, design, graphics enhance purchase probability by producing certain psychological effects on the customers. The way graphics are used to display a particular product can also leads to impulse purchases (Ko and Rhee 1994).

Fulfilment / Reliability

Reliability, in online context, means unambiguous, truthful and precise product information/representation, timely and accurate delivery and efficient management of other fulfilment impediments. Reliability/Fulfilment involves accurate delivery of assured services with high level accountability. Mostly, the complaints received from online users are related to unreliable services. According to Yang, Peterson & Cai (2003), one of the most prominent reasons under the reliability dimension, that results in customer complaints is inaccurate order fulfilment. Lack of proper sync between clicks and bricks business processes probably results in poor fulfilment. Anonymity and miscommunication between consumers and e-retailers is one of the reasons for service failure. Relaibility can also be viewed in terms of technical reliability i.e. effortless and proper functionality of websites which increases customer confidence, trust and loyalty. Reliability has been considered as a dominant factor in traditional service quality. Prior researches has considered it as an important dimension in e-SQ also

(Wolfinbarger & Gilly,2002). Reliability/Fulfilment strongly influence customer satisfaction, loyalty or intentions to revisit and repurchase at a site (Wolfinbarger& Gilly,2002).

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is the willingness and ability of online retailers to help customers by providing appropriate information and relevant solution to a particular problem. This dimension describes how readily and promptly an online store respond to customers requests, inquiries, grievances and problems. Responsiveness is also measured by the promptness with which the e-tailersrespond to e-mails, effectively handles problems and returns through the site and provide online guarantees (zeithmal, parasuraman, malhotra 2002, 2005). Customer satisfaction and trust is enhanced by understanding customer requirements and providing appropriate service based on feedback obtained (Gummerus, 2004). So, responsiveness also measures flexibility and ability of online stores to customize the services according to their customer needs. Responsiveness can be seen as the period of time the customers have to wait before they get assistance, reasonable answers to their inquiries or attention to their problems. Responsiveness as a dimension of e-service quality of websites, influence customer satisfaction and service quality perception.

Discussion and Conclusion

Not mere fulfillment of order but the outcome of the service also significantly influence customer perceptions of e-Service Quality. . Reliability is also very important and a significant predictor of web service quality. Hence, in order to retain customers and increase their satisfaction and loyalty, online stores should also focus on Reliability as a dimension of quality e-service delivered. While Trust and Reliability are considered significant factors, Responsiveness, Website Design seems to have only minor effects on overall service quality. In this competitive global e-commerce environment, high quality e-services is the key to success for any e-tailer. So, focusing on service quality should be the priority in internet commerce. For maintaining and increasing customer retention, the first priority of e-tailers should be on high service 'reliability' and timely 'responsiveness'. Further, security and Trust should be the foremost concerns of e-commerce companies for attracting potential customers and increasing retention and loyalty.

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