Chapter 6

Service Quality of Business Correspondents-Perception of Clients

6.1 Introduction – The Need of Providing Quality Services by Business Correspondents to Clients

BCs provides banking services to a large section of the population that are normally located in rural areas and since they are the best available option to avail formal financial services locally, the majority of the customers in the rural areas pursue their banking transactions with them. Those customers depend on the BCs to undertake their banking transactions as they are the local faces and are perceived to be more accessible as compared to the bank branch officials. The hesitation to undertake banking transactions is overcome to a large extent by the customers due to the reputation built by the BCs in the villages and since customers undertake transactions ranging from short term to long term, there lies a major onus on the BCs to provide quality banking services. Service being an invisible thing, has an important role in the banking industry, providing quality services increases customer satisfaction that helps the business add new customers and retain its existing customers. The effort built to promote inclusive finance through agent banking can reap the desired results if quantifiable or measurable metrics are established to identify the banking service quality provided by the BCs, else the customers may exclude themselves intentionally rather than facing inconvenience and financial losses due to low cooperation from the BCs. This can result in a substantial downfall in business for the BCs as it will be difficult for them to retain the existing customers and further add new customers from the nearby locations.

Further, with the advent of information technology and mobile penetration, new avenues have opened up for the customers wherein they can pursue their banking transactions with much more convenience and lower cost. Thus, there lies a major thrust on BCs to provide quality banking services at an affordable cost that will not only provide an edge against a competitor but will also help them to expand their market share as the

business revenue is based on the number of transactions conducted by the customers. This will gradually increase their commission, making it more sustainable in the long term. Investigation into the quality of services as expected by the clients of BCs and as perceived by them after getting the services can be very effective in having a view of the demand of banking service through agents.

Negative perceptions about the quality of services provided by BCs can reduce their numbers of customers as rural societies are often quite cohesive and reliability on word of mouth of fellow villagers does have an impact on the financial behavior of other villagers. Positive perception about BCs services generates trust and confidence among the rural folks and is one of the crucial factors for achieving financial inclusion through doorstep banking. With the gradual increase of new players emerging in the agency banking domain, quality services are going to be a centre of attraction as the customers will have the option to choose better service providers among the existing ones. Earlier, the entire focus was about covering the unbanked villages which were used to be allocated to the bank based on sub-service area wherein majority of bank tended to provide the banking services to the customers through the agents ignoring the service quality. But the advancement of information and communication technology along with mobile penetration has increased the competition among the service providers. Now there is a necessity on the part of BCs to provide better services to the customers so that they can retain them and sustainably continue their operations. Gradually, the onus is shifting from compulsion to convenience, where the quality of services will decide the fate of the existing participants, which was still dominantly enjoyed by the banks and BCs.

Several researchers have delved into the need of providing quality services for agency banking operations. The following subsection deals with a bird's eye view of their findings.

6.1.1. A Bird's Eye View of Some Researchers on Service Quality in Banking

Ananda & Devesh (2018) tried to explore the main factors responsible for influencing the service quality of banks that leads to customer satisfaction. The primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire using the SERVQUAL model from the customers having a retail bank account in Oman. The respondent was asked to indicate their opinion regarding the degree of satisfaction using seven-point Likert scale. The study found that three dimensions of service quality i.e. Reliability, Responsiveness and Assurance were the most influencing factors that lead towards customer satisfaction.

Mongi & Mokaya (2018) conducted an exploratory study to understand the influence of agency banking on customer satisfaction. Data were collected using a questionnaire and interview method. Further, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to substantiate the findings. The study revealed that agency banking services positively influence customer satisfaction. The quality of agency banking having a 0.877 positive correlation; convenience 0.668; agency banking service location 0.803; and service reliability had a positive correlation of 0.586 on the customer satisfaction. It was further recommended that the banks should undertake a customer awareness program, business security, build trust, add more services and train the agent frequently.

Suri (2017) opined that the success of the financial services system depends on rapid deployment and growth of the agent network numbers while its sustainability depends to a large extent on the level of trust, efficiency, liquidity and profitability of the agents.

Tan, Chew & Hamid (2016) analyzed the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction in the banking industry of Malaysia. Nearly 200 data were collected from the bank customers and was investigated using the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL

model. The study revealed that the reliability dimension had the largest gap between the expectation and perception of the banking services while responsiveness had the lowest dimension. The customers had higher expectations from the banks in terms of reliable services but the perceived services were below their expectations. Further, the study found that there exists a strong relationship between the five dimensions of SERVQUAL on customer satisfaction and suggested that SERVQUAL is the most suitable instrument in measuring the service quality of banks.

Masila, Chipkulei & Shibairo (2015) investigated the influence of agency banking on customer satisfaction in Kenya. The questionnaire was administered to 250 agent banking customers residing in different regions of Kenya. The study found that most of the respondents trust the agent bank and they felt that bank agents were competent in their services providing quality and reliable services and are more responsible towards their complaints. Further, they concluded that responsiveness, professionalism, service quality, reliability, delivery of services, confidence level and quality management were the different attributes of agency banking that lead towards increased customer satisfaction.

Salma & Shahneaz (2013) conducted a comparative analysis of the satisfaction level of customers towards services offered by the Public and Private sector banks using 500 samples of the customers. The study found that customer satisfaction varies according to the nature of services like in the case of Public sector banks, higher customer satisfaction was observed in the case of convenient bank branch location, quick resolution of customers' problems and nominal bank charges. Similarly, Private bank customers were more satisfied with the convenient location, modern technology infrastructure and relationship-building approach towards the customers.

Rao & Lakew (2011) studied banking service quality perception levels of customers of public and private sector banks in Visakhapatnam using the SERVQUAL

model taking into account the five dimensions of service quality. Nearly 300 respondents were surveyed using the structured questionnaire. Reliability and Assurance dimension score has the highest value while Tangibles got the lowest rating from the customers. The result indicated that public sector bank needs to focus more in responsiveness dimension while the study suggested that drinking water facility, solving customers' problem, instilling confidence in customers, willing to help the customers and resolving customer grievances were some of the dimension items which needs more attention. Further, they also concluded that the perceptions of customers change once corrective measures are taken by the service providers.

Santhiyavalli (2011) studied about the service quality of the State Bank of India in the Coimbatore region. She applied the SERVQUAL technique using GAP Analysis to find the shortfalls in the various dimension of banking service quality from a sample of 250 respondents captured on seven points Likert scale. The study found that customers were satisfied with the security aspect with gap scores being less for Assurance while there was the highest gap score in the Empathy dimension suggesting that customers were highly dissatisfied due to the lack of individual care and attention. Further, the researcher also found that Reliability, Responsiveness, Empathy and Tangibility were the major factor responsible for the satisfaction of the customers.

Ezirim (2005) identified the key factor affecting the choice of retail bank customers in Nigeria. The survey was conducted on 1000 bank customers using structured questionnaires and a personal interview was also conducted with the bank officials. The study found that security of environment; size and financial strength of the retail banks; service delivery speed; liquidity and deposit safety; accuracy and efficiency in managing customer accounts; convenience; proximity and ease of access and cordial staff positively influence the performance of the banks.

Drawing from the above studies, the need was felt to investigate the quality of services provided by BCs through a model which would be taking into account a multi-dimensional approach. The SERVQUAL model was chosen for this research as the scale was already tested for reliability and validity and had also been used by many other previous researchers.

6.2 The SERVQUAL Model

Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985) developed a "Gap Analysis Model" identifying the ten general dimension of service quality using the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988, 1991a, 1991b) which as a subsequent of further research resulted into the reduction of dimension into five factors. The customers were provided two questionnaires wherein they were required to state their opinion on an identical Likert scale for each of the 22 service attributes, one indicating their expectation of the services delivered and the other reflecting their perception of the services delivered by a service provider in a specific service sector. Thereafter, the service quality was calculated using the differences between the two scores of each dimension. Thus, the model measures the gap between the expectation and perception of the customers. The five dimensions of service quality are as follows:

(i)   Reliability – It measures the ability to perform the services dependably and accurately.

(ii)   Tangibles – It measures the physical facilities, staff, building, equipment and appearances, etc.

(iii)   Responsiveness – It measures the willingness to help and respond to the need of the customers.

(iv)   Empathy – It measures the attention, care and individual services given to the customers.

(v)   Assurance – It measures the staff's ability to inspire, build confidence, trust and have courtesy towards bank staff.

The five dimension SERVQUAL model is widely used to measure the perceived service quality in the banking sector (Wang, Jeng & Wan, 2013). Though there is some lack of consensus among researchers regarding its applicability yet it is one of the most extensively and successfully used service quality instruments in the twenty-first century (Tsoukatos & Rand, 2006). Similarly, Angur et al. (1999) also suggested that the SERVQUAL model being multidimensional provides more information on the banking sector regarding their service quality as compared to other service quality measurement scales like SERVPREF. Further, Coulthard (2004) proved that the various advances in service quality measurement items validated the SERVQUAL model and recommended SERVQUAL as an important instrument for improving service quality and customer satisfaction in the private sector as well as public services.

6.3 The Hypotheses

Alike all other services that customers avail, there are expectations by the clients to get satisfaction and quality banking services from business correspondents. However, depending on various circumstances the perception of services received by the clients may differ from what they had expected. If the perceptions of the quality of services received are better than what they had expected, it speaks well about the services offered by the BCs. On the contrary, if the reverse is observable the quality of services offered by the BCs has missed the mark and therefore calls for improvement.

Based on this premise, the following hypothesis have been constructed:

H_o: There is no difference between the quality of services as expected by the clients of Business Correspondents and as perceived by them i.e. $\mu_p = \mu_e$

H_1: There is a difference between the quality of service expected and as perceived by the Business Correspondent clients. i.e. $\mu_p \neq \mu_e$

6.4 Methodology

Two persons, one male and one female person from each area covered by each BCs sampled for the study were randomly chosen. This means 636 persons were chosen. These persons were not the customers of the BCs in 2018 (July). A questionnaire comprising 22 items based on the SERVQUAL model was administered to these 636 persons to assess their expectations of services from BCs.These 22 items covered Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy dimensions. For each of the item a Seven point Likert Scale was used based on the following anchors of Expectation i.e. (7) 'Definitely', (6) 'Very Probably', (5) 'Probably', (4) 'No Opinion', (3) 'Possibly', (2) 'Probably Not', (1) 'Definitely Not', Similarly, the anchors of Perception were (7) 'Always', (6) 'Very Frequently', (5) 'Occasionally', (4) 'No Opinion', (3) 'Rarely', (2) 'Very Rarely', (1) 'Never'. The questionnaire was prepared after a thorough discussion with several branch managers of banks and corporate business correspondents and a pilot study was conducted on 60 BCs customers. During the administration of the questionnaires, many of these persons had to be explained what BCs were and also they were counseled to become the customers of BCs. The questionnaires were administered from July 2018 to November 2018. These persons were again contacted in November 2019. Out of these 636 persons, 467 persons (203 females and 264 males) had become customers of BCs. All these customers were administered the questionnaires for assessing their perception. 389 proper responses covering all the 22 indicators were received and taken for the analysis.

6.5 Findings

The results of SERVQUAL are reported in Tables 6.1 to 6.5. To analyze the difference between the perception and expectation of the BC customers regarding the five

dimensions i.e. Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy, paired

t-test is executed.

Table 6.1 SERVQUAL Analysis of the BC Customers – Tangibility

EXPECTATION (E)		PERCEPTION (P)		Paired Difference			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Statements	Mean (E)	Statements	Mean (P)	Mean (P-E)	S.D	S.E Mean			
1. It is expected that Information regarding BC, link branch, contact number and product and service charge will be available at CSP	6.62	1. Information regarding BC, link branch, contact number and product and service charges are displayed at my CSP	5.38	-1.244	-1.37	-1.121	-19.8	388	.00*
2. It is expected that transaction will be done through smart devices	6.88	2. My BC use Computer, Laptop or Smart devices to conduct banking transactions	6.82	-0.059	-0.11	-0.008	-2.28	388	0.023
3. It is expected that BC will provide drinking water, sitting facility and space for standing in queue	6.48	3. My BC provides drinking water, sitting facility and space for standing in queue	5.48	-1	-1.11	-0.888	-17.5	388	.00*
4. BC will smartly manage the CSP and open it in time.	6.51	4. My BC smartly manage the CSP and open it in time.	4.87	-1.643	-1.76	-1.528	-28.2	388	.00*
Mean P-E Gap for Tangibility				**-0.987**					

Table 6.2 SERVQUAL Analysis of the BC Customers – Reliability

EXPECTATION (E)		PERCEPTION (P)		Paired Difference			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Statements	Mean (E)	Statements	Mean (P)	Mean (P-E)	S.D	S.E Mean			
5. It is expected that BC will explain the terms and condition before enrolling as a customer	6.44	5. All terms and conditions as told to me before enrolment as a customer are met by my BC	4.61	-1.83	-1.94	-1.723	-33.6	388	.00*
6. BC will demonstrates genuine interest in solving customers problem	6.65	6. My BC demonstrates genuine interest in solving the problems of the customers	4.71	-1.941	-2.04	-1.84	-37.7	388	.00*
7. The account is expected to be link with a bank which is extremely safe	6.65	7. My BC is linked to a bank where my money is safe	6.37	-0.278	-0.39	-0.161	-4.69	388	.00*
8. The transaction record will be accurately maintained by BC	6.54	8. My BC maintains a correct record of my transactions.	6.51	-0.031	-0.13	0.072	-0.59	388	0.557

				Paired Difference					
9. It is expected that BC will not charge any extra amount to conduct transactions	6.62	9. My BC does not charge an extra amount to conduct any transactions	4.81	-1.805	-1.91	-1.695	-32.5	388	.00*
Mean P-E Gap for Reliability				**-1.177**					

Table 6.3 SERVQUAL Analysis of the BC Customers – Responsiveness

EXPECTATION (E)		PERCEPTION (P)		Paired Difference			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Statements	Mean (E)	Statements	Mean (P)	Mean (P-E)	S.D	S.E Mean			
10. It is expected that BC will perform transactions without any delay	6.58	10. My BC perform transactions without any delay	5.18	-1.396	-1.52	-1.27	-21.8	388	.00*
11. BC will promptly respond to the enquiries of the customers	6.53	11. My BC responds to the enquiries of the customers promptly	5.27	-1.257	-1.38	-1.133	-19.9	388	.00*
12. BC will update the passbook without delaying it from their end	6.51	12. There is no problem and delay in getting my passbook updated by my BC	5.27	-1.242	-1.37	-1.113	-19	388	.00*
13. It is expected that BC will handle the technical snags efficiently	6.4	13. Problems in transactions due to technical snags can be handled by my BC	6	-0.398	-0.51	-0.289	-7.13	388	.00*
Mean P-E Gap for Responsiveness				**-1.073**					

Table 6.4 SERVQUAL Analysis of the BC Customers - Assurance

EXPECTATION (E)		PERCEPTION (P)		Paired Difference			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Statements	Mean (E)	Statements	Mean (P)	Mean (P-E)	S.D	S.E Mean			
14. It is expected that transaction with BC will be safe and secure	6.82	14. It is safe for me to transact with my BC	6.35	-0.465	-0.55	-0.385	-11.4	388	.00*
15. BC will instill confidence in pursuing banking transaction	6.42	15. My BC instill confidence in pursuing banking transaction	5.99	-0.432	-0.53	-0.33	-8.37	388	.00*
16. BC is expected to be courteous and polite during the transaction	6.48	16.My BC is courteous and polite during the transaction	6.34	-0.139	-0.22	-0.057	-3.32	388	.00*
17.It is expected that BC will explain the features of available banking product and services before providing it to customers	6.51	17. My BC explains the features of available banking product and services before providing it to the customers	3.92	-2.584	-2.69	-2.473	-46	388	.00*
Mean P-E Gap for Assurance				**-0.91**					

Table 6.5 SERVQUAL Analysis of the BC Customers - Empathy

EXPECTATION (E)		PERCEPTION (P)		Paired Difference			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Statements	Mean (E)	Statements	Mean (P)	Mean (P-E)	S.D	S.E Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
18.BC will give special attention to the customers especially the aged customers	6.52	18.My BC gives special care to the customers especially the aged customers	6.48	-0.041	-0.11	0.024	-1.24	388	0.215
19.It is expected that BC will provide banking services beyond normal working hours in case of necessity	6.55	19.My BC works beyond normal working hours in case of necessity to the customers	5.73	-0.82	-0.94	-0.702	-13.7	388	.00*
20.BC is expected to resolve the low balance account and balance deduction related query	6.39	20.My BC smoothly resolves the low balance account and balance deduction related query	5.25	-1.136	-1.28	-0.995	-15.8	388	.00*
21.BC is expected to redress the customer grievances politely	6.54	21.My BC redresses customers grievances with politeness	5.46	-1.087	-1.2	-0.971	-18.4	388	.00*
22.It is expected that BC will courteously deal with failed transaction	6.38	22. My BC is courteous when dealing with failed transactions of the customers	5.22	-1.152	-1.28	-1.026	-18.1	388	.00*
Mean P-E Gap for Empathy				**-0.85**					
Total Average P-E Gap				*-0.99*					

*Significance at 1%

From the above table 6.1 to 6.5, one can find that all the attributes have some statements which have failed to meet the expectation of the business correspondent customers. There is 19 statement that has a significant gap between the expectation and perception of the BCs customers resulting into a rejection of Null hypothesis at 1 percent level of significance. Further, the highest gap is observed in the 'Assurance' dimension statement in Table 6.4 where "My BC explains the features of available banking product and services before providing it to the customers" has a mean gap of 2.584 which implies that the BCs open the different scheme without explaining its features to the customers. This aligns with the findings observed during the field survey where a majority of the

customers expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the activation of the said schemes by the BC Agents without taking their consent. Similarly, the lowest gap is observed in the 'Reliability' statement in Table 6.2 where "My BC maintains a correct record of my transactions." has a mean gap of 0.031 implying satisfaction by the customers regarding the proper maintenance of accounts with transparency. This implies that the transactions are properly recorded in the account and any withdrawal, deposit or transfer is appropriately posted in the respective account and the transaction balance is stated by the BC Agents regularly to the customers along with the issuance of the transaction slip. It is also found that the 'Reliability' dimension has the highest average gap of 1.177 between expected and perceived services by the BCs customers where three of its statement i.e. "All terms and conditions as told to me before enrolment as a customer are met by my BC" has a gap score of 1.83; "My BC demonstrates genuine interest in solving the problems of the customers" has a gap of 1.941 and "My BC does not charge an extra amount to conduct any transaction" has 1.805 gap score. This signifies that BC Agents are not explaining the details regarding the different products or services offered to the customers before providing them. This was also observed in the case of APY scheme activation where several BC Agents have activated the scheme without taking the consent of the customers as these were the targets given to them by the bank branch manager and the Corporate BC official which had to be achieved within a due period. Thus, this has resulted in major grievances for many of the BCs customers. Similarly, there are some of the BCs operating in the rural and urban areas who are alleged to be charging a certain amount from the customers to withdraw, deposit or transfer the money, though the frequency of such BCs is low, but this form of charges is levied rampantly in far-flung rural areas where the bank branches are located at the distant places. A similar observation was made by Ujjawal et al. (2012) during the study of the financial viability of the

customer service provider and the client satisfaction wherein he found that there was overcharging by CSPs in many of the urban location collecting service fee from the client for each transaction pursued. Similarly, the 'Responsiveness' dimension in Table 6.3 has the second-highest average gap of 1.073 where three statements have a gap of more than 1.3 each, clearly signalling a significant gap in this dimension. "My BC performs transaction without any delay has a gap of 1.396", Similarly, My BC responds to the enquiries of the customers promptly" has a gap score of 1.257 and "There is no problem and delay in getting any passbook updated by my BC has a gap score of 1.242". This signifies that the transaction is not processed smoothly and there is a delay in the service of the BCs while providing the services. Further, the enquiries raised by the customers is also not redressed by the BCs as there is no mechanism where the banks and Corporate BC can look into the number of enquiry raised by the customers and redressed by the BC within a particular period, this results in a delay in the redressal of customers queries. The passbook which has to be updated by the BCs requires much more time due to various factors like collecting it from the customers and then going to the bank for printing. Many bank officials assign specific days and times for printing the passbook beyond which they do not perform the services. Similarly, many BC Agents go to the bank on a particular day for printing purposes due to the traveling cost. All these factors lead to the increase of the gap between the perception and expectation of BCs in the responsiveness dimension. Finally, the total average P-E gap in Table 6.5 is -0.99 which states that there is a significant gap regarding the expectation and perception of the BCs customers. In the next step, a weighted SERVQUAL score has been computed by multiplying the SERVQUAL scores with the weight which represents the importance of the dimension assigned by the customers while filling the perceived questionnaires. The customers were asked to provide the weight to all the five dimensions totalling 100 as per the importance

perceived by them. Accordingly, the average of the total weight assigned to the five dimensions by the customers is calculated and stated below:

Table 6.6: Weighted SERVQUAL Scores of BCs Customers

SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSION	SERVQUAL SCORES	WEIGHT	WEIGHTED SERVQUAL SCORE
Tangibility	-0.987	0.22	-0.2171
Reliability	-1.177	0.18	-0.2118
Responsiveness	-1.073	0.31	-0.3326
Assurance	-0.905	0.13	-0.1176
Empathy	-0.847	0.16	-0.1355
Overall		**1**	**-0.2536**

The overall average weighted SERVQUAL score is -0.2536 with 'Responsiveness' being the most important attribute with a weight of 0.31 which states that the clients perceive the transaction should be smoothly conducted by the BCs and they should respond to the queries raised during the transaction and there should not be an abrupt delay in updating the passbook. Further, 'Assurance' is the least significant attribute among the five dimensions of SERVQUAL with a weight of 0.13. Similarly, 'Tangibility' is assigned a weight of 0.22 followed by 'Reliability' with a weight of 0.18 and 'Empathy' being 0.16.

6.6 Conclusion

To sum up the findings, it can be said that this study has brought out the gap between the expected and perceived services by the BCs customer and paved the way for a clear message that opening banking services in terms of outreach is not only the sine-qua-non for financial inclusion, but the quality of services also play a major role in

motivating rural people in getting financially included through BCs. Gaps between expectation and perception of BC customers do not always suggest that the BC agents are not serving them properly . Expectations can soar high in the rural areas as many persons are first generation bank customers and do not understand the problems which BC agents can face. Comparison of services offered from brick and mortar branches, which obviously have better infrastructure, equipment and personnel with agent outlets often result in expectation of comparable services. This type of comparison cannot be considered to be rational as the agents can manage to put up only basic facilities for infrastructure and equipment as they have to finance these from their own pockets. The gaps can however, of course be treated as indicators of having a target for providing better services. These gaps can be brought to the notice of the BC agents so as to increase their awareness as to where they are lacking in providing services and how can they improve them. These can be indicators to the corporate BCs as well as to identify the lacunae in services and provide training to the agents to rectify these lacunae. Since, BC Agents are the local faces conducting the banking transactions and for bringing the unbanked into the formal financial domain, it is extremely necessary that better services be provided to the customers so that positive word of mouth is spread among the rural folks that will boost the demand side aspect of financial inclusion services leading towards increase in number of banking transactions at the BC outlets. Better quality of services by the BC Agents can lead to more satisfaction of the rural customers. Satisfied customers can spread the message by word of mouth about the quality of agent banking services at their doorsteps. This can result in more people from the rural and semi-urban areas to get motivated and induced to get financially included by opening a bank account with the BCs. This phenomenon will naturally enhance the demand for agency banking. Once these new customers get the taste of being financially included at their doorsteps and have

the ease of transactions in deposit, withdrawal, loan and direct benefit collection, they will be induced to carry on more transactions and also draw in their friends and relatives into the system. Therefore, logically improvement in quality of services can directly bolster the demand for these services.

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