

**Can SERVQUAL Be Used to Gain A Competitive Edge By Measuring Service Quality  
Perception And Customer Satisfaction In The Irish Construction Retail Market?**

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
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## **Abstract**

This study was undertaken to explore the potential role of SERVQUAL as an instrument to assist organisations in the construction retail sector in Ireland to measure service quality and in turn gain a competitive advantage. The study aims to use both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data in the form of semi structured interviews and a questionnaire respectively.

In the semi structured interview, the researcher used the dimensions of SERVQUAL as thematic headings to explore the views of construction retail managers by asking indirectly related questions and probing question where necessary to elicit more information:

- Tangibility
- Reliability
- Responsiveness
- Assurance
- Empathy

The questionnaires respondents answers were analysed and tabulated to give a view of the authors own organisations customers' expectations and perceptions of service. This led to the conclusion that while there were not insignificant gaps there was also clear action to be taken to close the identifiable gaps.

The findings are discussed in conjunction with the relevant literature outlining the limitations and benefits of SERVQUAL. There are practical recommendations for the construction retail sector outlining the importance of service quality as offering a competitive advantage. The limitations of the small-scale study are also listed.

# **Research Students Declaration Form**

## **Submission of Thesis and Dissertation**

### **National College of Ireland**

#### **Research Students Declaration Form**

*(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)*

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**Degree for which thesis is submitted: Master's in business administration**

**Title of Thesis: Can SERVQUAL be used to gain a competitive edge by measuring service quality perception and customer satisfaction in the Irish Construction retail market?**

**Date: 18/8/2021**

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

The construction sector in Ireland has experienced a variety of fortunes in the past twenty years with the hyperactivity of the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent crash of 2008 and the protracted period of stagnation resulting in a slow but steady recovery to the current time. The recent advent of Brexit and the COVID 19 pandemic have increased the cost pressure on main contractors in the market as clients and developers take advantage of uncertainty and seek more competitive tenders. This in turn has created a downward pressure on suppliers' margins and so competition has increased to the detriment of profitability. There has been little published in relation to the use of service quality models in the construction retail sector in Ireland. The question is whether or not the SERVQUAL model can provide an effective measure of the perceived quality of service performance by customers and in turn can this be used to gain a competitive advantage?

Murali et al (2016) states that customer satisfaction was fundamental in business leading to improved customer retention and customer loyalty resulting in improved profit. The trend and increase in the focus on services as opposed to products alone is making companies consider their customer service to be of strategic importance. Shokouhyar et al (2020) describes customer satisfaction as a multidimensional and extensive notion with many different variables that must be continuously evaluated and improved and Duljevic et al (2012) refers to client satisfaction as a crucial process in the creation of professional company client relationships.

Retail companies are shifting the focus of their offering to their markets from a purely product-based sale to one where the perceived level of service offers a real competitive edge. In the highly competitive market of construction retail, is there an opportunity to identify gaps and subsequent actions in the area of customer satisfaction?

According to the Linesight Report (2020) turnover in the construction sector in Ireland stood at approximately €18 billion for 2020. This represented 5.4% of total projected GDP and is well below the EU average of 9%, reported by the European Commission. Employment in the sector is more in line with the EU average with 6.5% in Ireland compared to 6.8% in the EU. The industry has seen a spate of challenges in recent times but, it is important to note that despite the tumultuous period with the impact of COVID 19 and Brexit there is a positivity that the ground made in the recovery from the crash of 2008 will be held and built upon as

the underlying need for residential, commercial, and infrastructural development still remains. However, despite this optimism it should be noted that the fall in construction output has potentially created a more competitive tendering environment, putting downward pressure on contractor margins. This in turn means that there will be pressure on suppliers and retailers to be competitive in their pricing.

## **Chapter 2 Literature review**

### **Introduction**

Saunders *et al* (2016) state that the literature review section of a research paper is essential. It is the opportunity for the author to show their level of knowledge in their area of research. Bryman and Bell (2008) describe the literature review and that part of the research where all available and relevant research to the area of interest has to be reviewed to locate sources that have a direct bearing on the research problem. The literature review enables a framework to be created, establishing the importance of the research and a method whereby different results and findings can be cross referenced within the body of knowledge. According to Creswell (2014) the literature review is an essential part of a dissertation as it provides the foundation on which the data will justify the research questions and design.

The author will discuss the concept of services marketing describing its evolution and how this relates to the Irish construction retail sector. There will be an examination of the concept of quality and in turn how that is connected to customer satisfaction leading to the measurement of discrepancies between the expectations of customers and the perception of service received using the SERVQUAL model. Finally, there will be an examination of the importance of service quality in the Irish construction retail sector in gaining a sustainable competitive advantage.

### **Services Marketing**

Gerstner (2002) argued that services were moving to the front edge of industry and Baron *et al* (2013) stated that the global economic activity has been increased by the expansion in the provision and development of the services sector. Parasuraman *et al* (1991) describes how all organisations compete at some level on the basis of service and it is difficult to think of an industry where service is viewed as unimportant. According to the European commission (2021) the services' sector accounts for over 65 per cent of all European employment and over 70 per cent of European gross domestic product. Galetzka *et al* (2006) stated that services are the largest wealth creation component of western economies and in the United States according to De Keyser *et al* (2014) services account for 80% of the economy and are an essential part of everyday life.

Taking these statistics into account when considering the recovery of the Irish economy and in particular the construction sector since the crash of 2008 it is worth reflecting on the size of both the retail sector and construction sector in Ireland.

Looking forward, the CSO (2021) estimates Consumer Spending in Ireland to stand at 24949.00 EUR Million for 2021. In the long-term, the Ireland Consumer Spending is projected to trend around 27165.00 EUR Million in 2022 and 27709.00 EUR Million in 2023.

The CSO (2021) also estimates that GDP From Construction in Ireland is expected to be 1769.00 EUR Millions for 2021 in spite of the COVID 19 pandemic. In the long-term, the Ireland GDP from Construction is projected to trend around 2387.00 EUR Million in 2022 and 2435.00 EUR Million in 2023.

Baron *et al* (2013) described at length how the creation of the service culture among organisations has changed the nature of the customer relationship, moving from customer relationship management (CRM) to a focus on the customer engagement experience and justifying this with sales growth through service-related competitive advantage.

The original '4Ps' of the marketing mix (McCarthy, 1964) have been expanded to the '7Ps' to meet the new demands of service marketing and include the physical environment, the process, and the people. Skålén (2009) argues that managerial practices need to be created to promote the customer focus of a business and Dibb *et al* (2006) says that it is important to understand the complexity of the service product in order to control its variability.

### **The concept of services**

Kotter *et al* (2014) defines service as 'any act or performance that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. Its production may or may not be tied to a physical product'.

According to Cronin *et al* (1992) services can be distinguished from goods in terms of inseparability from the provider, heterogeneity, perishability, intangibility, and the concept of temporary ownership. Parasuraman *et al* (1988) identified five underlying dimensions on which service quality is evaluated as being the following: tangibles (if they exist), reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The perception of quality of service relates to the gap between client expectations and perceptions of performance on the part of the service provider.

From the review of the available literature there seem to be many definitions of the concept of service with disagreements over what should be included as a service. By the very nature of services, they are difficult to define, but Lovelock *et al* (2011) argues that services are economic activities offered by one organisation to another. They are usually time-based performances which in turn deliver required results, articles, or assets for which the deliverer has a responsibility. This definition implies that the customer will expect 'value' in return for monies paid.

In defining service, it is often useful to describe its characteristics to distinguish it from goods in that it has intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability.

### **Intangibility**

Palmer (2011) asserts that a service product cannot be judged in the same manner as tangible goods with any of the physical senses since they are performance or actions and cannot be touched, tasted, or felt. Zeithaml *et al* (2009) describes another difference to tangible goods in that mass production is difficult as the service is produced and consumed at the same time.

Booms and Bitner (1981) argue that there are ways in which the service provider can make the service more tangible. This can be achieved through physical evidence and presentation where the service provider gives cues to the customer by careful use of marketing tools. Kotler (2014) lists these evidential tools to include but not limited to the following:

- Employees – correct attitude and positive mentality.
- Premises – interior and exterior giving the required impression.
- Communications material/methods with the customer – professional and efficient.
- Symbols and artifacts – signalling quality in the offering.
- Equipment – latest relevant technology.

Grönroos (2007) states that it is important for the business to understand what the customer is looking for and how they evaluate the offering in order for a business to develop a service and marketing model for the business.

## **Heterogeneity**

Zeithaml *et al* (2009) explains that because services are delivered by humans, no two will be exactly alike and similarly characteristics of customers will differ greatly also, each having different demands or perceive the service in a different way. Therefore, because services are heterogenous across people, locations, and customers, it is difficult to deliver consistent service quality. Quality itself depends on many variables, none the least of which is the customers' ability to articulate what is required and the service providers willingness to deliver.

Zeithaml *et al* (1985) reiterates that the customisation that is typical of a service provision makes it difficult to mass produce adding a further challenge to the provider in relation the difficulty of maintaining standards of quality.

## **Inseparability**

Wirtz *et al* (1995) explain how physical goods sellers are often seen as distinct from their products whereas service providers are often seen as the goods themselves. Grönroos (2007) explains further stating that production and consumption of services cannot be separated and in fact the customer vary often participates in the delivery of the service. Gilmore (2003) states that because services are often delivered in real time, the customers have a higher perception of risk in relation the quality received. Normann (1984) states that the inseparability concept is at the heart of the 'moment of truth' where the service provider and customer interact resulting in an opportunity to impress or disappoint.

## **Perishability**

Zeithaml *et al* (2009) describes the perishability of services as a critical part of services marketing as it explains that services cannot by their nature be kept in storage, resold, or returned. This in turn creates a problem for marketers as to how to plan for demand and utilisation. Parasuraman *et al* (1988) describes this as an '*existential issue*' for most service providers insofar as they must decide how to level out demand by employing tactics like price discrimination e.g., early bird menus and increase prices during peak demand times.

## **The concept of quality**

Kasper *et al* (2006) argues that the provision of quality in services is a relatively recent phenomenon and according to Goetsch *et al* (2002), when quality is defined in relation to a

service, it much more difficult than a definition for tangible products. Criteria for a definition include fitness for use, meeting or exceeding customer's requirements and meeting or exceeding customer expectations. Moreover, meeting, or exceeding customer's requirement is much more difficult due to the fact that only the customer determines if the quality of service is acceptable.

According to Kasper et al (1999) service quality was historically seen as a production concern with a product measured for conformity to a technical specification, but it is acknowledged that this approach is only suitable for mass production and measurement. Hardie *et al* (1993) claim that problems in defining quality are due to the elusive nature of the concept of quality in service and the different perspective and orientations in the changing contexts of the person defining it.

Ghylin *et al* (2008 p.75) describes quality as being considered an attribute of an entity (as in property and character), a peculiar and essential character of a product or a person (as in nature and capacity), a degree of excellence (as in grade) and as a social status (as in rank and aristocracy). However, in order to control and improve its dimensions it must first be defined and measured.

Battini *et al* (2012) states that the concept of quality can be approached from two perspectives, the first being the production point of view where the definition is the proportion of goods that are manufactured in accordance with the specification and the second being the customer satisfaction point of view where the end users perception is measured. The limitation with this method is that it is very subjective and subject to freedom of variation.

Gummesson (1991) expressed dissatisfaction with the nature of the subjective approach arguing that more objective aspects were needed but Wicks *et al* (2009) recommended a balance of both in unison in order for an organisation to compete in a world class environment. She reasons that the user-based definition is important to the customers, but the process-based definition is more important to the business and even though there is no catch all definition for quality, the organisation should aim for a balance between the two.

For the purposes of this research the starting point will be in line with the argument put forward by Berry and Parasuraman (1985), that service quality measures are rated by both the outcome of the service and the process by which it was delivered.

## **Customer Satisfaction and Service Quality**

### **Definition of Customer Satisfaction**

Murali et al (2016) determined that the role of the customer in any business cannot be underestimated and that the primary function of any business is to satisfy its existing customers and attract new ones. Dis-confirmed expectations (active or passive) dictate the degree of customer satisfaction with a particular service.

Posselt and Gerstner (2005) proposes that improved customer satisfaction would lead to improved customer retention and loyalty resulting in improved profitability. Stenberg (1997) states that the implementation of a customer satisfaction philosophy in any business involved four activities, namely, the identification of customers, the identification of their needs and expectations and finally the measurement of their perceptions. Duljevic et al (2012) states that providing superior quality and keeping customers satisfied are becoming ways that companies are able to differentiate themselves from the competition. Oliver (1980) described customer satisfaction as a post choice evaluative judgement in relation to a specific purchase decision. Kotler (2000) described customer satisfaction as a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from the persons comparison of an expected product performance with the perception of what was actually received. Yi (1990) stated that it was the collective outcome of perception, evaluation, and psychological reactions to the consumption experience with the product or service. Hunt (1991) simplified it further by arguing that it is a function of the consumers belief that they have been treated fairly.

The UK Institute of Customer Service (2021) state that satisfaction measures allow a company to create metrics necessary for the formulation of business strategy and corporate governance. Quality satisfaction is seen as an important component in customer retention and loyalty as it creates an emotional bond as opposed to a rational preference.

According to Sureshchandar et al., (2002, p. 363), customer satisfaction should be seen as a multi-dimensional construct just as service quality meaning it can occur at multi levels in an organisation and that it should be operationalized along the same factors on which service quality is operationalized.

For this research customers have been chosen as they are in a position to evaluate how service quality is presented or managed and are able to recognise the important quality elements of

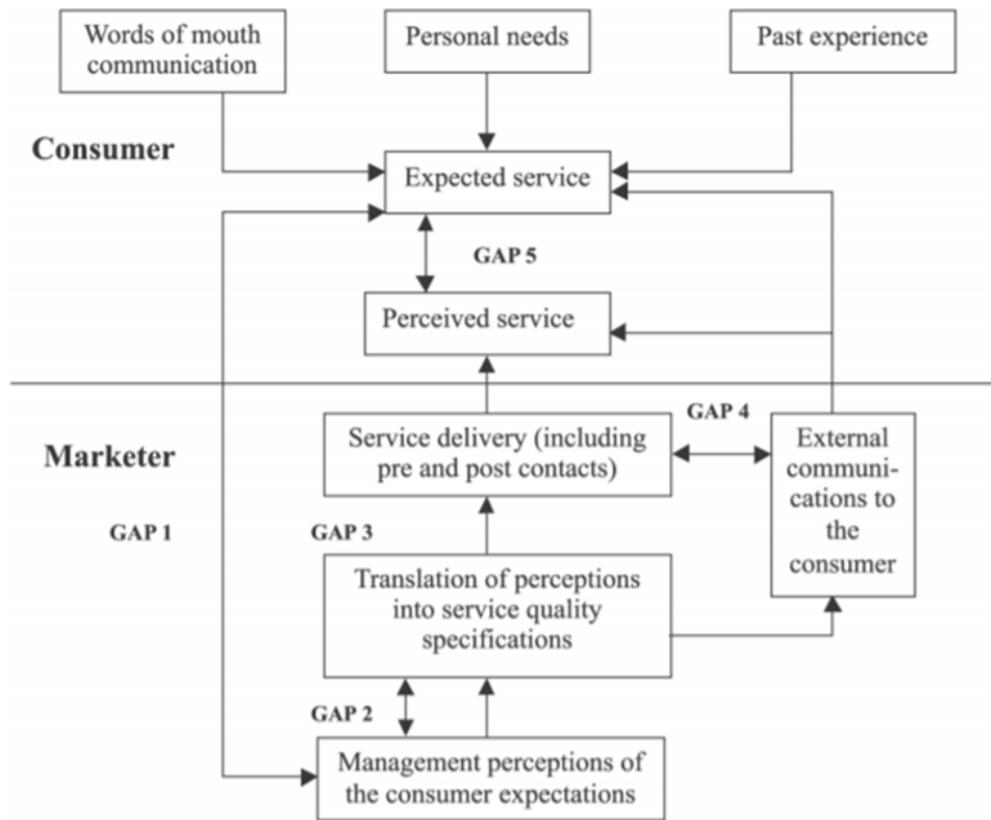
Layher Ireland. For this reason, they will be able to indicate general levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction providing the opportunity for Layher Ireland to make the necessary changes.

### **Measurement of service quality**

Hoffman *et al* (2001) argued that the quality service process can be measured in term of gaps between expectations and perceptions of management as they advertise services to their customers and then the reality of the customers experiences as communicated back to management. Zeithaml et al (2009) states that closing these gaps is critical to delivering a quality service. Parasuraman et al. (1985) breaks them down into four main types of gaps.

1. The Listening Gap – Occurs when the organisation underestimates the need to fully understand the customers' expectations.
2. The Standards Gap – Occurs where sales, profit or market share take precedence over service delivery e.g., timeliness, personnel behaviour, and lack of attention to customer requirements
3. The Service performance gap – Occurs where services are highly interactive, labour intensive and usually performed in multiple locations and the employees are either unwilling or unable to perform to the required standard. The solution is usually to improve the training and recruitment process.
4. The Communications Gap – Parasuraman (1990) states that it is critical to coordinate external communications with service delivery i.e., inflated promises leading to unrealistic customer expectations.

These gaps in turn lead to Gap 5 which is the difference between the expected and perceived service as experienced by the customer as shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: the GAP Model, Source: Parasuraman et al. (1985)**

The literature suggests the 4 gaps listed are essential to the creation of Gap 5 and indeed the closure of this gap. Therefore, the focus of this research will be on gap 5 as this gap emphasises the customers expectation and perceptions rather than the internal organisation represented by the other gaps.

## SERVQUAL Model

There have been a great many studies conducted using the SERVQUAL model in various cultural, geographical, and business settings e.g., a hospital (Babakus and Mangold, 1989), an acute care hospital (Carman, 1990), fast food retailer (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), banking sector (Sharma and Mehta, 2004) and discount and departmental stores (Finn and Lamb, 1991). However, it is important to note that these studies do not necessarily support the model as shown in Figure 1. which was proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985). The gap model and subsequent SERVQUAL instrument were designed to identify and measure the gap between a customer's expectation and the perception of what was experienced. By comparing the customers expected service with the customers perceived service, the supplier can determine whether the level of service was appropriate or not. The generalist design and scale of its dimensions has been criticised by Lapierre *et al* (1996) and it is suggested that they should be customised to the specific service sector in which they are applied.

Five dimensions of service were identified as shown Table 1. and in turn an instrument consisting of 22 statements were created to elicit from the customer responses on a rated scale.

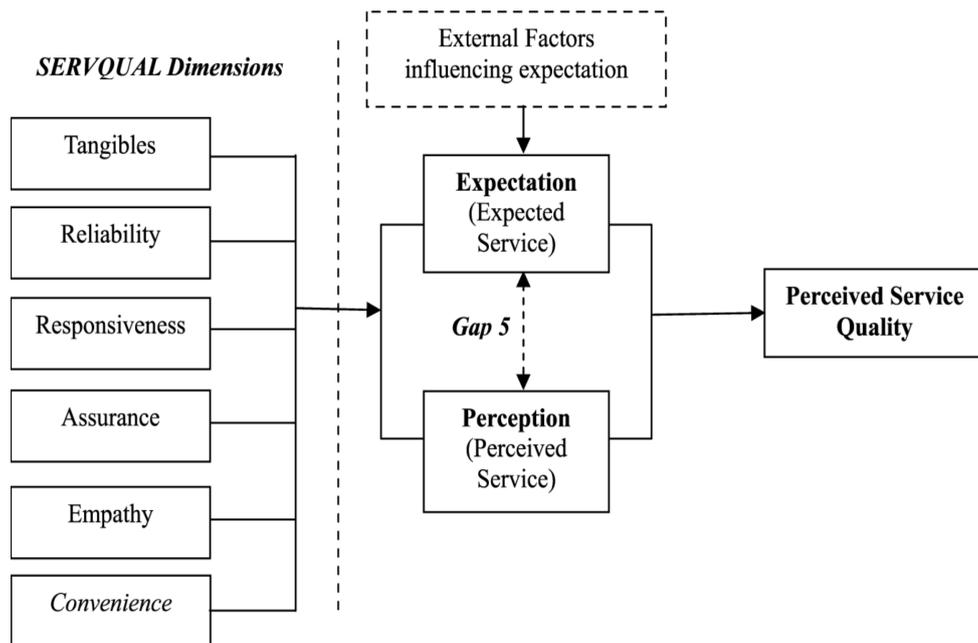
**Table 1: Five Broad Dimensions of Service Quality**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Tangibles	Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and written materials
Reliability	Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately
Responsiveness	Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service
Assurance	Employees' knowledge and courtesy and their ability to inspire trust and confidence
Empathy	Caring, easy access, good /communication, customer understanding and individualized attention given to cutomers

Source: Adapted from Zeithaml et al. (1990)

According to Evans and Dean (2003) the customer is the best judge of quality and Grönroos (1990) refers to the 'moment of truth' (Normann, 1984) encounter between customer and the service provider as determining whether a customer leaves satisfied, dissatisfied or whether the customer decides to return or not.

The SERVQUAL model was first published in 1988 but there have been many improvements in the meantime with Kumar *et al* (2009) producing the diagram shown in Figure 3., which shows the 5 dimensions of service quality and their influence on Gap 5 as well as external factors shown in Figure 2. i.e., WOM, past experience and personal needs.



**Figure 2. Measuring service quality using SERVQUAL (Kumar, et al 2009)**

### **Criticisms of SERVQUAL**

In spite of its popularity through the decades there have been many re-examinations criticisms of the SERVQUAL model by different authors (Buttle, 1994; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Gilmore, 2003; McCollin, 2011). The major criticism involves the use of the 44-point questionnaire as an instrument of measurement.

Buttle breaks the criticisms into two different groups i.e., the theoretical and the operational:

#### *Theoretical criticisms*

- Paradigmatic objections: SERVQUAL is based on a disconfirmation paradigm rather than an attitudinal paradigm
- Gaps model: there is very little evidence that customers consciously assess service quality in terms of Perception and Expectation gaps.
- Process orientation: SERVQUAL focuses on the process of service delivery, not the outcomes of the service encounter.
- Dimensionality: SERVQUAL's five dimensions are not universal to the contexts in which they are applied

### *Operational criticisms*

- Expectations: consumers use standards other than expectations to evaluate service quality; and SERVQUAL fails to measure absolute service quality expectations.
- Item composition: four or five items cannot capture the variability within each service quality dimension.
- Moments of truth (MOT): customers' assessments of service quality may vary from MOT to MOT.
- Polarity: the reversed polarity of items in the scale causes respondent error.
- Scale points: the seven-point Likert scale is flawed as it takes too long and frustrates respondents.
- Two administrations: two administrations of the instrument (expectations and perceptions) cause boredom and confusion.
- Variance extracted: the over SERVQUAL score accounts for a disappointing proportion of item variances.

Despite these criticisms SERVQUAL is still regularly utilised as an instrument to assess service quality as it is adapted to different contexts. SERVQUAL can be used by organisations with different scopes to ascertain the level of service they provide (Zeithaml, V., Parasuraman, A. and Berry, L. 1990).

With this in mind the researcher will adapt the instrument to reflect the required insights into Layher Ireland from the respondents with the 44-item questionnaire and questions relating to demographics. (Appendix 2)

### **Customer expectations of Service**

Parasuraman (1991) breaks customer expectations levels into two different levels:

1. "What it should be" i.e., the desired level that the customer hopes it will be.
2. The adequate level which refers to the minimum acceptable level.

The variation in what the customer is willing to accept is called the 'zone of tolerance' and differs widely from the minimum acceptable causing frustration and dissatisfaction or where the performance exceeds expectations causing pleasure and surprised satisfaction. Zeithaml et

al. (1990) states that customers' expectations are simple in that they expect the provider to do what they said they were going to.

Grönroos (2007) points out that customer expectations are also guided by factors outside the control of the organisation e.g., WOM, personal needs and could lead to unrealistic expectations. However, marketing and advertising is under the control of the organisation and should be controlled by correct marketing strategy to manage the customers' expectations in a realistic fashion.

For this reason, the author will define expectations as customers previous experience being associated with the pre consumptive process and subsequently having a direct impact on the post consumptive evaluation as this research aims to identify the current service gaps that appear between the two processes.

### **Customer perceptions of Service**

Kasper *et al* (2006) noted that following the consumption process, it is apparent that the customers perceptions are related to their previous interaction with the service (or indeed other similar services) and either their own, or others' opinions. Etgar *et al* (2009) state that consumers perceptions are processes that are selected and interpreted into their own reality and Zeithaml (2009) state that after purchase and after experience evaluation can be used to predict future consumer behaviour particularly for services.

### **Customer perceptions of Value**

Hoffman (2006) states that the customer perception of value refers to the perceived benefits of the service received in terms of the cost paid, not only in monetary value but also time, energy, and mental costs. From this, the customer will determine whether they received the benefits they desired and hence a level of customer satisfaction will result.

As part of this research, customers of Layher Ireland will be surveyed to measure expectations against the perceived service and whether the resulting gap falls within the aforementioned zone of tolerance. This will contribute to the efforts to enhance the quality and contribute to a competitive advantage.

## **Service Quality and Competitive Advantage**

Service quality is regarded as one of the few means for service differentiation and competitive advantage which attracts new customers and contributes to the market share (Rust *et al.*, 1995; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). Service excellence increases repeat purchases by customers, buying more, buying other services, becoming less price sensitive, and to tell others about their positive experiences (Anderson and Fornell, 1994; Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Rust *et al.*, 1995; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996; Bolton *et al.*, 2000).

Ladhari (2009) found that service quality is generally recognised as a critical success factor in a firm's endeavours to differentiate itself from its competitors and that service managers can use SERVQUAL to assess their own service quality and compare it with that of their competitors. In today's world of intense competition, the key to sustainable competitive advantage lies in delivering high quality service that will in turn result in satisfied customers (Shemwell *et al.*, 1998; Mohammad & Alhamadani, 2011))

Sureshchandar *et al* (2001) states that the true gains of a quality revolution come only from delighting the customer. This, to a great extent, depends on his or her perceptions of overall service quality. According to Asubonteng *et al* (1996) service-based companies are compelled to provide excellent services to their customers in order to have a sustainable competitive advantage, but they must also understand what service quality is.

The author chose to focus the research service quality because it plays an important role in service-based organisations and the Irish construction retail sector is no exception. Service quality is antecedent to other constructs like customer satisfaction, profitability, customer loyalty and repeat sales. These concepts create a competitive advantage companies have a proper understanding of service quality and how it is measured.

## **Conclusion**

The literature has attempted to discuss the main areas relating to the importance of analysing the gap between customers' expectations of the levels of service and quality they want to receive and the perception of what they received. There is a general consensus that creating a service-oriented organisation encourages customer retention and results in an increase in profitability.

While the Gap model and SERVQUAL instrument formed an essential foundation in the movement to refocus from a quality of product to a quality of service there are identifiable failures as a result of its generalist design and the literature recognises that it should be tailored to suit the individual circumstances of the supplier.

The research highlights a gap in the existing literature in so far as it relates directly to the Irish construction retail market however there is sufficient research in comparable markets to allow a synthesis of that research to the Irish construction retail situation.

## Chapter 3 Research Aims and Question

Excellent service quality is a necessity for business success (Hasty, 1997) and Parasuraman *et al* (1985) sought to provide a multi-dimensional construct for service quality by categorising five dimensions of service namely:

1. Tangibility
2. Reliability
3. Responsiveness
4. Assurance
5. Empathy

The hypothesis is that customers assess service quality by comparing expectations of service provided with the perceptions of the service received. Following this Parasuraman *et al* (1988) created a twenty-two-item questionnaire to capture the customers expectations and perceptions and allow them to be scored. This in turn will allow service providers to measure the gaps in service and whether they are negative or positive.

The difficulties in providing differentiation in the construction retail sector in Ireland by marketing mix elements like product, price and promotions alone mean that differentiating through superior customer service can be viewed as a realistic course of action.

Hence the authors question:

Can SERVQUAL be used to gain a competitive edge by measuring service quality perception and customer satisfaction in the Irish Construction retail market?

The first objective of the research is to use a qualitative approach to understand the managements perception of the customers' expectations in the construction retail market in Ireland. This will be achieved by using a semi structured interview with five senior manager in the construction retail market and elicit from them using the themes of the five dimensions what if any relevance they have to competitive advantage.

The second objective is to use a quantitative approach to measure Layher Ireland's customers' expectations and perceptions of service using the 44-statement instrument as prescribed by Parasuraman *et al* (1988).

Following this the data gathered will be analysed to establish if SERVQUAL is a suitable model to be used to gain competitive advantage in the Irish construction retail market.

# Chapter 4: Research Methodology

## Introduction

According to Merriam & Tisdell (2015) methodology is the description of the research process undertaken which includes philosophical and theoretical assumptions upon which the research is based, while also including the implications of those assumptions on the research method adopted. Saunders *et al* (2009) reason that a systematic approach is required in order to ensure that the data is gathered and analysed correctly and efficiently. Saunders *et al* (2016) describes the stages of choosing the correct research methodology using the ‘research onion tool’ (Figure 3). The outer layers of the research onion examine the philosophy behind the research by examining the paths taken to reach the decision to conduct the research. Collins and Hussey (2009) state that each layer of the onion represents a layer of research that needs to be peeled away until the core of the onion is reached representing the collection of data in the research.

The six layers of the onion are as follows:

1. Research Philosophy
2. Research Approach
3. Research Strategy
4. Research Choices
5. Time Horizons
6. Techniques and procedures

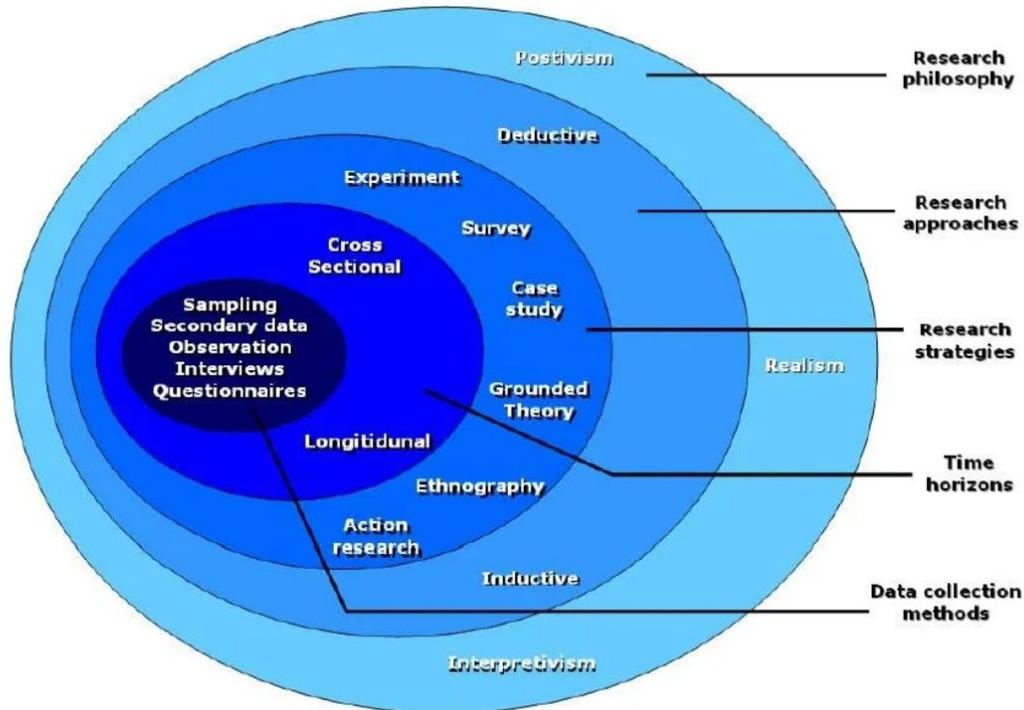


Figure 3. The Onion Research Method. Source adapted from: Saunders, Mark & Lewis, Philip & Thornhill, Adrian & Bristow, Alex. (2019). "Research Methods for Business Students" Chapter 4: Understanding research philosophy and approaches to theory development.

This research was undertaken to gather data and identify similarities or discrepancies from respondents and interviewees with the supporting literature. This section of the dissertation will describe the process the author took through the layers.

### Research Philosophy

Saunders *et al* (2016) state that the most appropriate philosophy for business research is interpretivism as organisations by their nature are complex organisations operating within specific contexts. Thanh and Thanh (2015) argue that an interpretivist philosophy allows the researcher to see things by understanding the perception of the interviewee as belief and knowledge are subjective and moulded by their environment and the people around them.

Saunders *et al* (2009) describes how it is necessary to see people differently as social actors instead of mere objects. The term 'social actors' is taken from the theatrical setting when actors take an interpret a role in their own specific way in the same way that people adjust to different daily challenges and react according to their own social values. Weber (2004) states that interpretivists comprehend that knowledge is gained from experience, social culture, values

etc. and the aim of this research is to understand these factors and how they influence the respondents and participants decision making process.

The aim of this research is to establish if SERVQUAL can be used to gain a competitive advantage in the Irish construction retail market. Central to this will be understanding the perspectives of the interviewees and respondents to the qualitative and quantitative research which will allow the author to empathise and provide meaning, making the interpretivist philosophy the most appropriate approach.

## **Research Approach and methodology**

An inductive approach is one where, based on the data collected, theories are formed using observations and interpretations of the findings as opposed to starting out with a hypothesis which has to be proved or disproved (Azungah, 2021). The author will gather and analyse data to identify patterns or themes using an inductive approach as it is the most suitable for this dissertation.

In the process of this research, it is proposed to provide both qualitative and quantitative material. Choy (2014) states that both qualitative and quantitative can be appropriate have compared their relative strengths and weaknesses but concluded that when used together they can be complimentary and may provide better results. The qualitative will take the form of interviews with senior managers in the construction retail sector. The aim of this part of the research is to identify patterns from the interviews conducted and generate a tangible meaning from the data collected that would assist in answering the research question.

According to Bryman and Bell (2007) the nature of an inductive approach lends itself to towards a qualitative research method while quantitative emphasises measurements and mathematical analysis of data through the use of questionnaires or surveys or by using statistical data. Robson (2002) states that the qualitative approach gives you an opportunity to scrutinise the real world in a meaningful way.

As discussed, the qualitative approach was carried out using semi structured interviews which although non-standard, have been described as qualitative research according to Saunders et al. (2016) who also state the interview questions should be based on themes which were discussed in the literature review section of this paper. This type of non-standard interview permits the interviewee scope on how they answer the questions (Robson, 2002)

According to Queirós (2017) quantitative research focuses on objectivity and is especially appropriate when there is the possibility of collecting quantifiable measures of variables and inferences from samples of a population. Questionnaires have many benefits but two of the most important include the high representativeness of the entire population and the low cost of the method when compared to other alternatives. On the other side, the reliability of survey data is very dependent on the survey structure and the accuracy of answers provided by the respondents.

### **Sampling and Interview Design**

In preparation for the interviews, questions were rehearsed and refined by conducting trial interviews. A mobile phone was used as a recording device, and this was tested to ensure it was fully functional prior to recording the interviews. If, however the interviewee was uncomfortable with this arrangement handwritten notes were to be taken but this was not necessary as all interviewees agreed to be recorded. Interviewees will be made to understand that all information gathered relating to the interview will remain confidential and anonymous if they so choose. Using the Otter transcription app on my phone, the recording will be written up and the recording deleted.

According to Bryman and Bell (2007) a potential weakness in this type of research is bias, as using one person in an organisation might not be representative of the organisation as a whole. However, Robson (2002) stated that this could be overcome by ensuring that the individual interviewed was of sufficient seniority and experience in the field of research.

### **Method of Data Collection**

As discussed, the author chose to use a combination of quantitative research through questionnaire and qualitative research through the use of semi-structured interviews as a method of collecting primary data. Choy (2014) states that both qualitative and quantitative can be appropriate have compared their relative strengths and weaknesses but concluded that when used together they can be complimentary and may provide better results. The qualitative will take the form of interviews with senior managers in the construction retail sector. The aim of this part of the research is to identify patterns from the interviews conducted and generate a tangible meaning from the data collected that would assist in answering the research question.

The quantitative took the form of a survey using a set of 22 service attributes associated with customer service and satisfaction generated by a review of the relevant literature and then categorised using Parasuraman's SERVQUAL measures. This survey was sent to employees of existing companies who are clients of the author's company. The survey consisted of statements of which ratings were requested employing the Likert style rating scale where participants marked one of the existing statements. Each statement had five levels to allow the participant to express their opinion. It was the authors intention to use 7 levels but on reflection it was decided that it made the survey seem unnecessarily long which in turn might impact on the respondent return rate. Babakus and Mangold (1992) opted to use five-point Likert scales on the grounds that it would reduce the "frustration level" of patient respondents, increase response rate and response quality. There were two more sections to measure the demographics of age and gender. A statistical package such as SPSS was used to tabulate and analyse the results of the survey.

### **Sample Selection**

The research for the qualitative semi structured interviews involved 5 participants from businesses that are actively engaged in the construction retail sector in Ireland. Although this is a relatively small sample size, Boddy (2016) states that sample size is not necessarily the most important factor when carrying out qualitative research and Ritchie and Lewis (2003) argue that it is more important to match the sample chosen to the research objective to ensure relevant information is collected.

The participants of the structured interview were chosen from an initial list of 10 from the authors business network which was reduced to 5 interviewees after time and availability constraints were considered. The participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- Must work for a construction retail company in Ireland
- Owner or manager with strategic responsibility for decision making
- Owner or manager with responsibility for quality in their organisation

Sandelowski (1996) reasons that by the very nature of qualitative research, sample sizes tend to be smaller as this facilitates more in-depth analysis that is essential for this mode of enquiry. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that the most important aspect of sampling for interviews in qualitative research is in selecting participants who will most likely add value to the topic by contributing positively to the research.

Because of the current COVID 19 pandemic, interviews could not be conducted face to face and were carried out by telephone.

The sample of respondents for the quantitative were chosen from the contacts list of customers of Layher Ireland. This list was created to try and overcome a disadvantage of questionnaires identified by Cameron *et al* (2009) whereby applications are limited by the population profile, education and understanding of the questions. Identification of the right people with the ability to provide the right information is critical in eliciting relevant data.

The participants of the questionnaire were required to meet the following criteria:

- Must work for a customer company of Layher Ireland
- Must interact with Layher Ireland in a capacity to experience the service levels offered

Kumar (2014) lists the advantages of questionnaires as being less expensive and a more convenient and accurate source of data when administered to a collective study population. Cameron *et al* (2009) agrees stating that questionnaires are cheap and less time consuming than interviews and focus groups.

### **Limitations of the data collection methods**

Kumar (2014) cites low response rates to questionnaires as one of the most damaging limitations as it depends on a number of factors such as interest in the topic, the number of questions and how they are worded. The fact that the questionnaire was administered via the internet and through traditional postal methods should improve the response rate.

Semi structured interviews conducted to gather research data are time consuming and early planning and execution is important. Disadvantages with telephone interviewing include shorter durations than face to face interviews with 25 minutes being the typical practical duration. Bryman *et al* (2011) pointed out the difficulties faced by the interviewer in not being able to observe the facial expressions or body language as part of the response to questions.

### **Analysis of the Data**

The data was analysed using thematic analysis as according to Braun and Clarke (2006), it offers the researcher flexibility as it is not linked to a specific theoretical framework. Braun and Clarke (2006) presented six steps to analyse gathered data, and these were followed by the author as outlined below.

1. Familiarisation with the data was achieved through accurate and timely transcription of notes from interviews
2. Responses that were expected or unexpected were coded to highlight salient points from each of the transcripts. Subsequently themes were formed that could be linked to evidence from the literature. This linked back to the interpretive philosophy due to its exploratory nature.
3. Themes and sub-themes were identified.
4. Themes were cross referenced with the literature researched to ensure that they could be supported.
5. Further refinement of themes to ensure relevance to the dissertation and research objectives.
6. An inductive approach was used to ensure relevant and pertinent extracts from the transcripts were included.

### **Time Horizons**

The research was cross sectional in design, capturing phenomenon or phenomena at a particular point in time rather than a longitudinal study which according to Saunders *et al* (2009) uses various time stamps and analyses changes that may have taken place between stages. Because of the time constraints, the author chose cross sectional design as the most appropriate.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The author has read the NCI Ethical Guidelines and Procedures for Research involving Human Participants and completed the NCI Ethics Application form. A consent form was emailed to each of the participants prior to the interviews to obtain informed consent (Appendix 1).

## Chapter 5. Analysis of Findings

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to reveal the findings of the primary sources of research i.e., the SERVQUAL questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews as discussed in the research methodology chapter 3. The quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed through Microsoft Excel 365 with a written explanation for each question.

The questionnaire of the research used was the SERVQUAL model and included the framework of five dimensions as proposed by Parasuraman *et al* (1988):

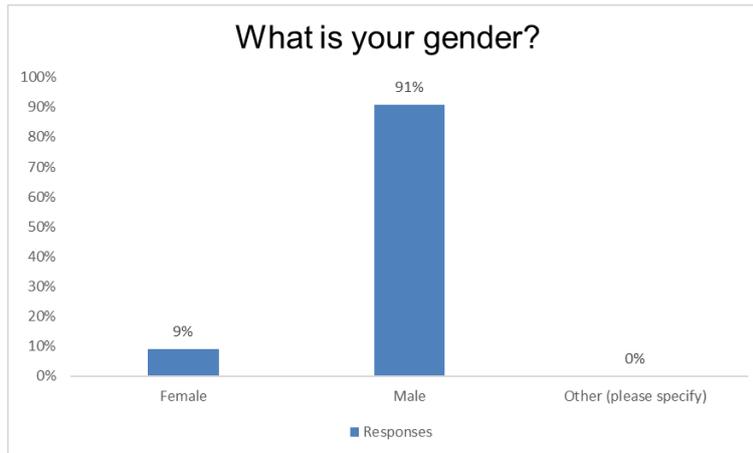
1. Tangibility
2. Reliability
3. Responsiveness
4. Assurance
5. Empathy

The questionnaire consists of two sections, each containing 22 questions covering the 5 dimensions. The first section seeks to understand the customers' expectations of service before interacting with Layher Ireland and the second section focuses on the perception of the customers after having received the service.

A five-point Likert scale was used: 1 was for "strongly disagree", 2 was for "disagree", 3 was for "neither agree nor disagree", 4 was for "agree" and 5 was for "strongly agree". Using this scale, a quantifiable value was applied to each objective dimension which measured both positive or negative responses to each statement in the questionnaire. There were also questions relating to the demographics of the respondents including age, gender, and position with their respective organisation.

## Demographic Analysis

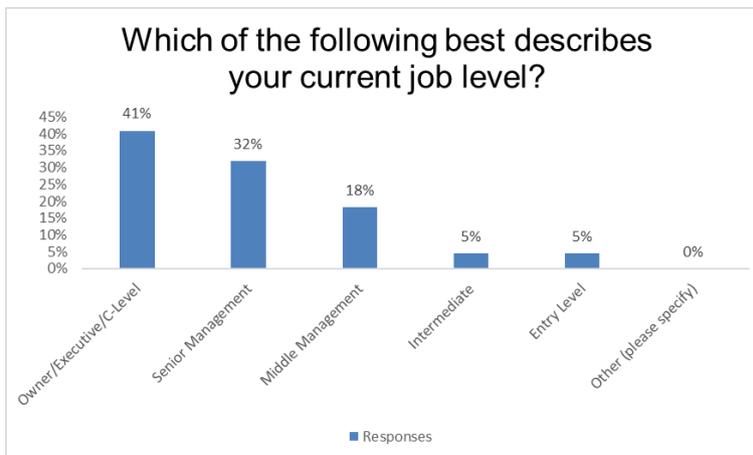
### Gender



Graph 1: Gender

The results of the questionnaire shown in Graph 1. show that the vast majority of the respondents were male at 91% while females on accounted for 8%

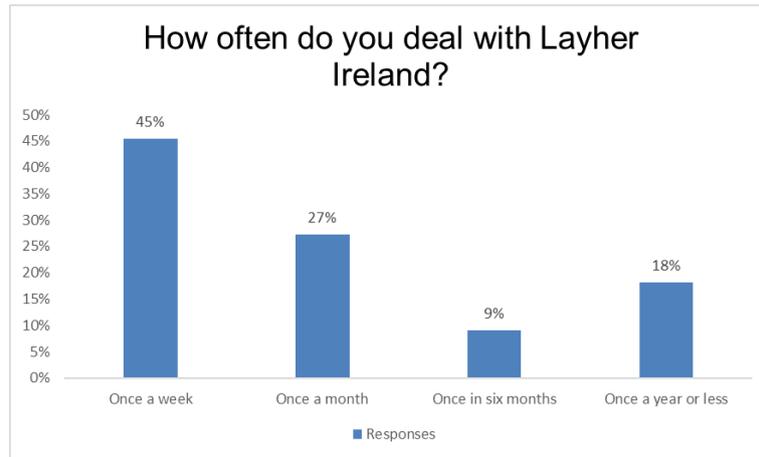
### Current Job Level



Graph 2: Current job level

The majority of the respondents were at either owner/chief executive or senior management level accounting for 73% of responses. Only 10% of respondents were at junior or intermediate level with the remaining 18% at middle management level.

### Frequency of Interaction



Graph 3: Frequency of Interaction

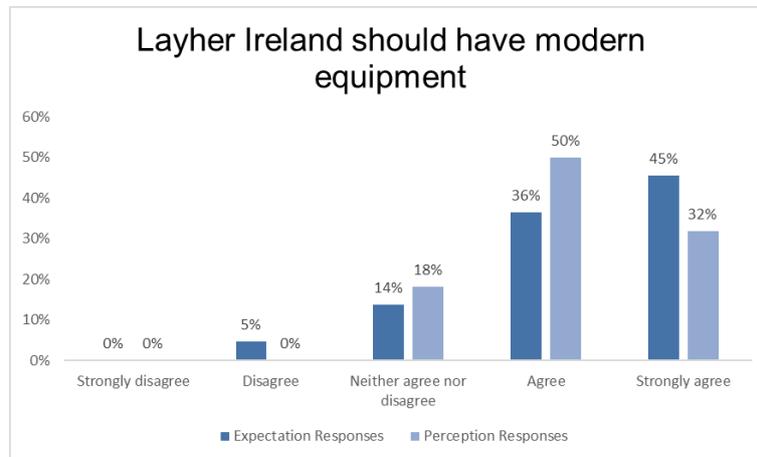
45% of respondents described the frequency of interaction as once a week, 27% as once a month, 9% as once every 6 months and 18% at once a year or less.

### Expectations Versus Perceptions as measured using the SERVQUAL instrument

For simplicity the researcher has decided to amalgamate the two separate sections and display them in graphics for comparison. The objective is to identify gaps between values allocated for comparable dimension related statements i.e., if the value assessed for the gap score is negative then the expectations of the customers were not met.

## The Tangible dimension

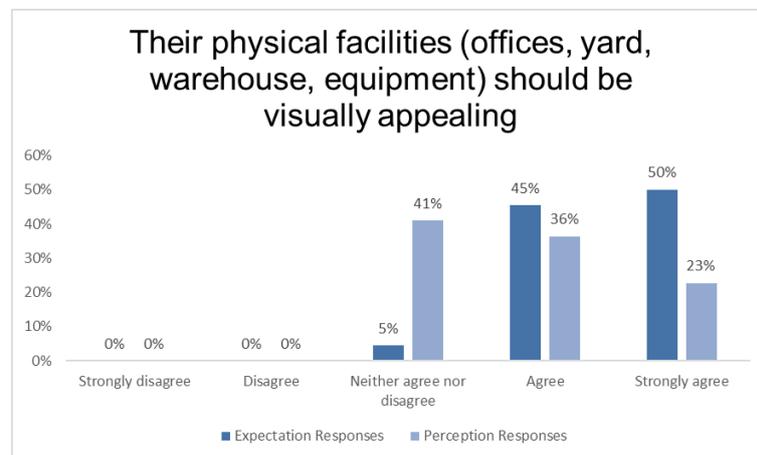
### Q.1 Modern equipment



Graph 4: Layher Ireland should have modern equipment

As shown in graph 4., 45% of respondents expectations 'strongly agree' that there should be modern equipment at Layher Ireland with 36% 'agree', 14% 'neither agree or disagree' and 5% disagree. In comparison of the perceptions to these results 32% 'strongly agree', 50% 'agree' and 18% 'neither agree or disagree' with 0% who disagree.

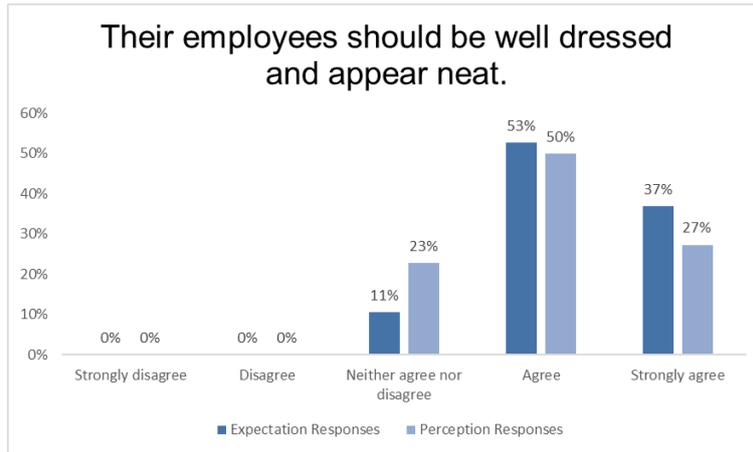
### Q. 2 Appealing physical facilities



Graph 5: Physical facilities should be appealing

Graph 5 shows that the majority of respondents expectations 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with 50% and 45% respectively. Only 5% 'neither agree or disagree' holding a neutral answer to the facilities. On the perceptions side this changed considerably with only 23% 'strongly agree' and 36% in 'agree' however the neutral answer increased to 41%.

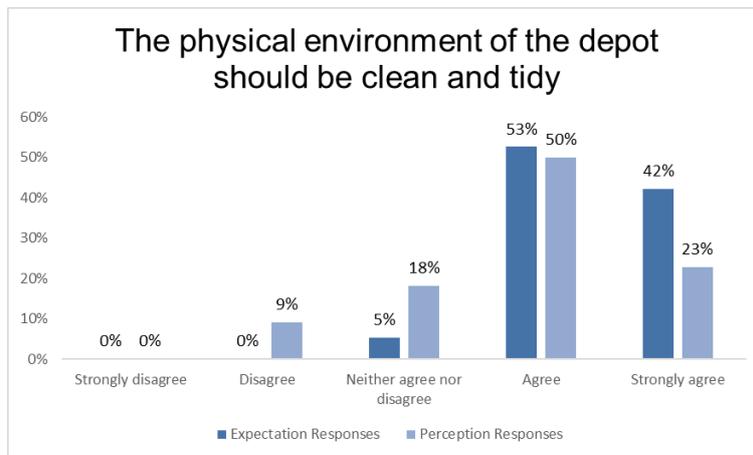
### Q. 3 Employees appearance in Layher Ireland



Graph 6: Employees appearance in Layher Ireland.

The majority of respondents 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with 53% and 37% respectively with 11% answering neutrally with 'neither agree or disagree'. Slightly less percentages in 'agree' and 'strongly agree' in the perception answers at 50% and 27% respectively and a large increase in the neutral answer 'neither agree or disagree' at 23%.

#### Q. 4 Clean and tidy physical environment

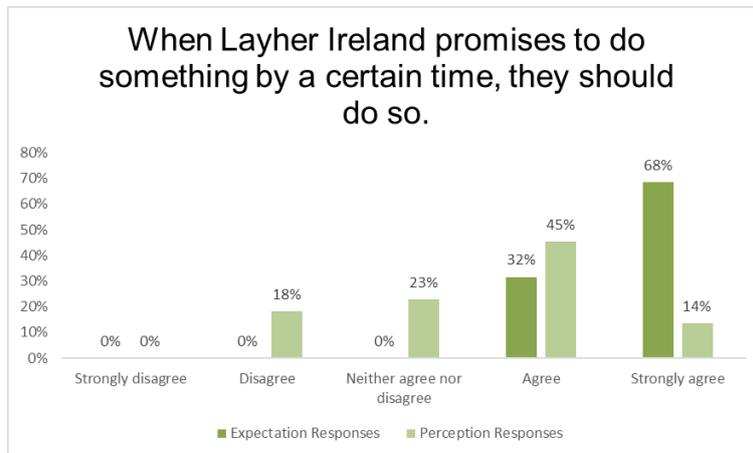


Graph 7: Clean environment at Layher Ireland

The majority of respondents 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with 53% and 42% respectively with 5% answering neutrally with 'neither agree or disagree' regarding the expectations of the statement. The customers perceptions were 23% 'strongly agree', 50% 'agree' with 18% neutral and 9% 'disagree'.

## Reliability Dimension

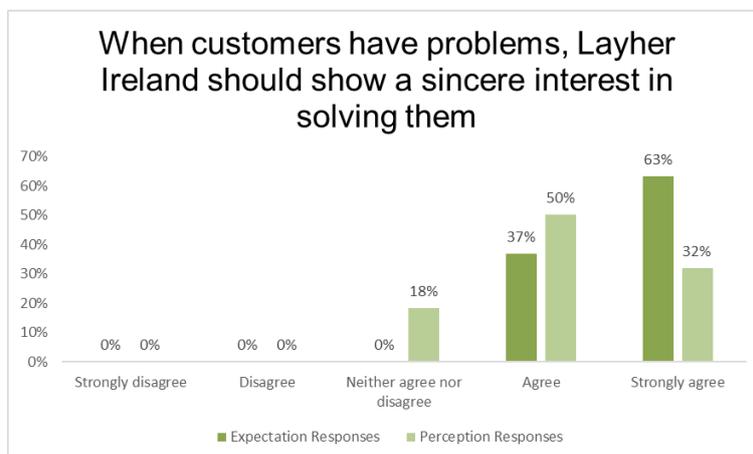
### Q. 5 Willingness to fulfil promises at Layher Ireland



Graph 8: Willingness to fulfil promises at Layher Ireland.

All of the respondents 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with 32% and 68% respectively when it comes to the expectation of promise fulfilment. With regard to the perception of customers to the statement after interaction with Layher Ireland 14% 'strongly agree', 45% 'agree', 23% 'neither agree or disagree' and 18% 'disagree'.

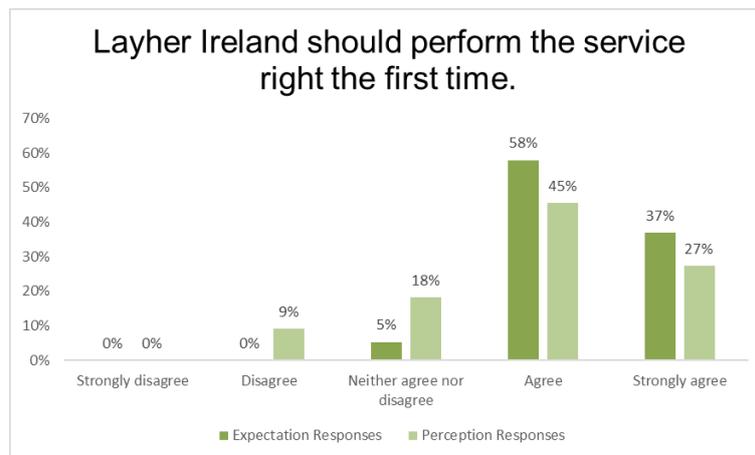
### Q. 6 Willingness to solve customers' problems at Layher Ireland



Graph 9: Willingness to solve problems at Layher Ireland

All of the respondents 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with 37% and 63% respectively when it comes to the expectation of problem solving at Layher Ireland. With regards to the perception, 32% 'strongly agree', 50% 'agree' and 18% are neutral with 'neither agree or disagree'.

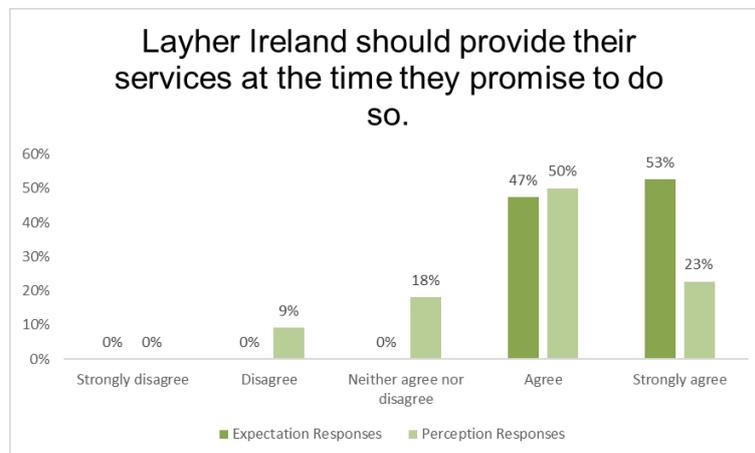
Q. 7 Dependability to solve the problem right the first time.



Graph 10: Dependability to perform the service right first time

The majority of respondents ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with 58% and 37% respectively with 5% answering neutrally with ‘neither agree or disagree’ regarding the expectations of the statement. The customers perceptions were 27% ‘strongly agree’, 45% ‘agree’ with 18% neutral and 9% ‘disagree’.

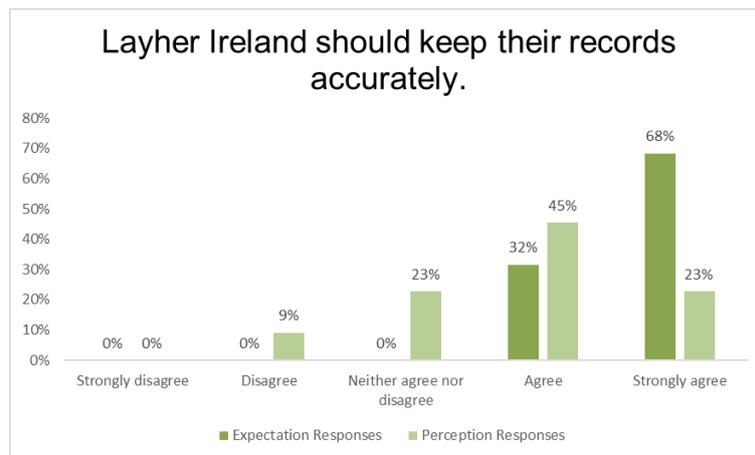
Q. 8 Willingness to provide prompt service at Layher Ireland



Graph 11: Layher Ireland should provide a prompt service

All of the respondents ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with 47% and 53% respectively when it comes to the expectation of prompt service at Layher Ireland. With regards to the perception, 23% ‘strongly agree’, 50% ‘agree’, 18% are neutral with ‘neither agree or disagree’ and 9% disagree.

### Q. 9 Records should be kept accurately at Layher Ireland

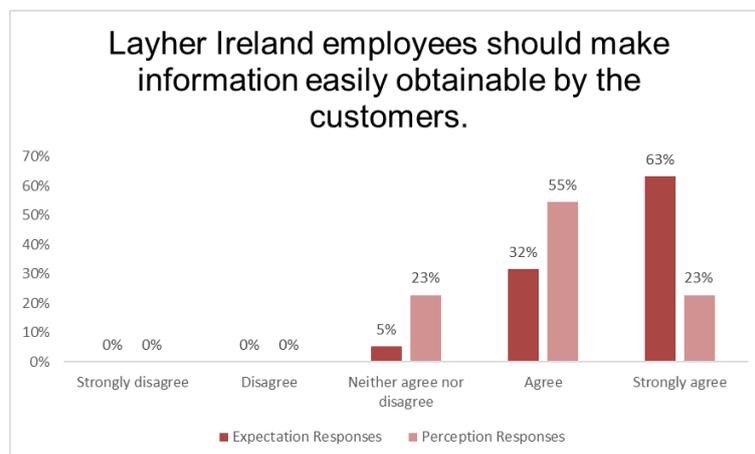


Graph 12: Layher Ireland should keep accurate records

All of the respondents ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with 32% and 68% respectively when it comes to the expectation of accurate records at Layher Ireland. With regards to the perception, 23% ‘strongly agree’, 45% ‘agree’, 23% are neutral with ‘neither agree or disagree’ and 9% disagree.

### Responsiveness Dimension

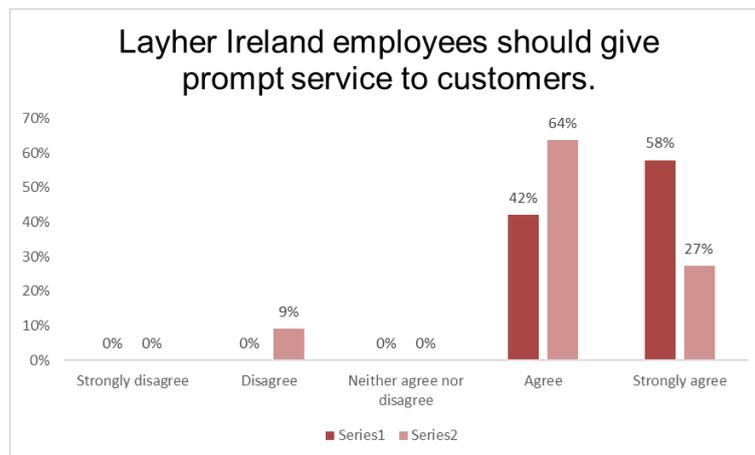
#### Q. 10 Willingness of employees at Layher Ireland to provide Information to customers



Graph 13: Layher Ireland employees should make information easily obtainable.

The majority of respondents ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with 32% and 63% respectively with 5% answering neutrally with ‘neither agree or disagree’. There are different percentages in ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ in the perception answers at 55% and 23% respectively and a large increase in the neutral answer ‘neither agree or disagree’ at 23%.

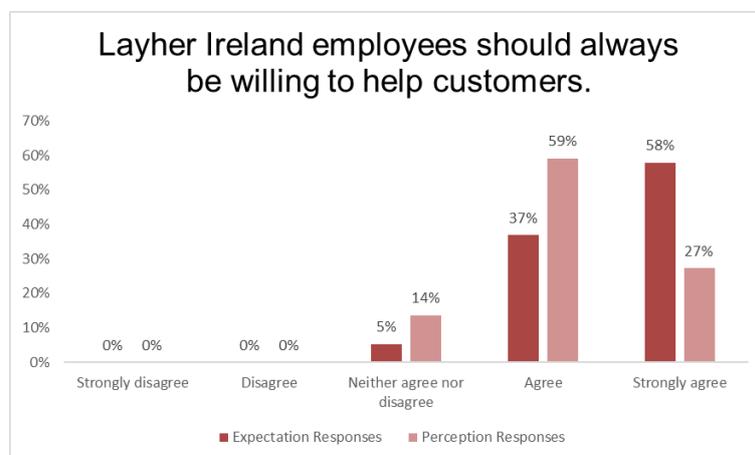
Q 11. Willingness of employees at Layher Ireland to provide prompt service



Graph 14: Layher Ireland employees should provide prompt service.

All of the respondents ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with 42% and 58% respectively when it comes to the expectation of prompt service at Layher Ireland. With regards to the perception, 27% ‘strongly agree’, 64% ‘agree’, 23% and 9% ‘disagree’.

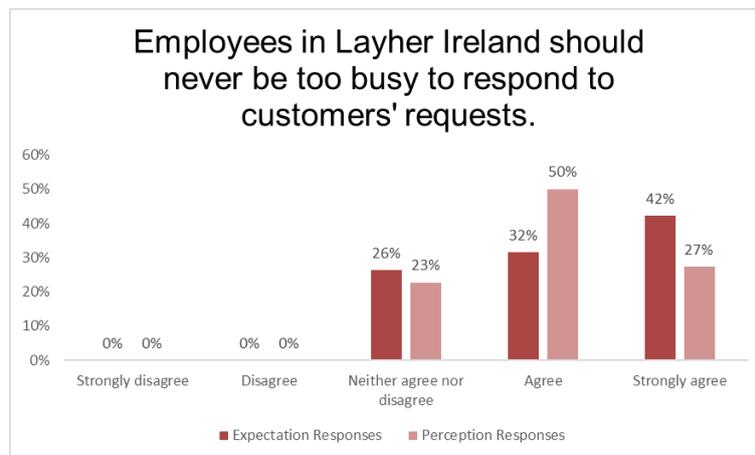
Q. 12 Willingness of employees at Layher Ireland to provide help



Graph 15: Layher Ireland employees should always be willing to help

In relation to respondents expectations, 58% ‘strongly agree’, 37% ‘agree’ and 5% ‘neither agree or disagree’. The perceptions are slightly different with 27% ‘strongly agree’, 59% ‘agree’ and 14% ‘neither agree or disagree’.

Q. 13 Availability of employees at Layher Ireland to assist customers



Graph 16: Availability of Layher Ireland customers to help customers

Graph 16 shows that in relation to expectations, 42% of respondents ‘strongly agree’, 32% ‘agree’ and 26% ‘neither agree or disagree’ with the statement. The responses for perception of service received were 27% ‘strongly agree’, 50% ‘agree’ and 23% are neutral with ‘neither agree or disagree’.

**Assurance Dimension**

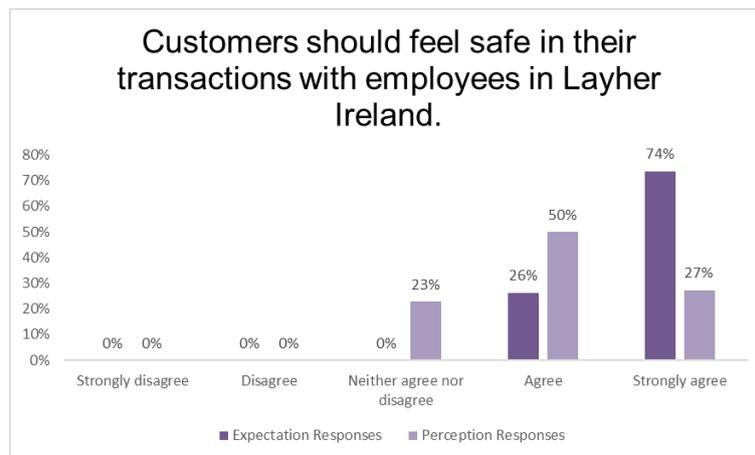
Q. 14 Employees in Layher Ireland instil confidence in customers



Graph 17: Behaviour of Layher employees should instil confidence in customers

In relation to customers’ expectations, 53% of respondents ‘strongly agree’, 42% ‘agree’ and 5% are neutral with ‘neither agree or disagree’. The perception differs in that 27% ‘strongly agree’, 55% agree, 9% ‘neither agree or disagree’ and 9% ‘disagree’.

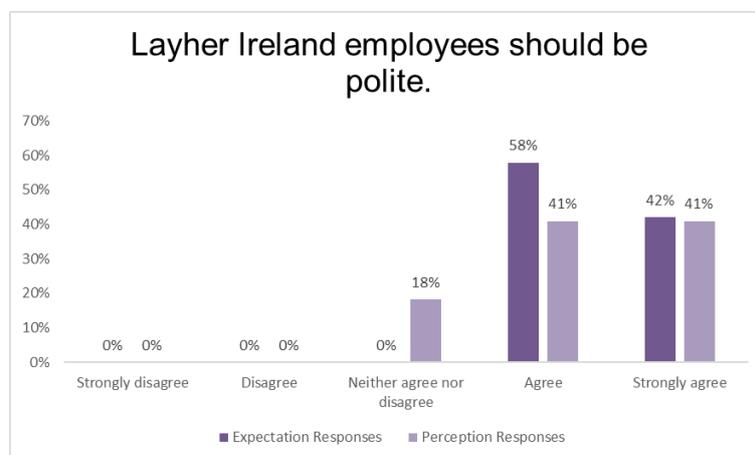
Q. 15 Safe transactions at Layher Ireland



Graph 18: Customers should feel safe in their transactions with employees at Layher Ireland

All of the respondents ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with 26% and 74% respectively when it comes to the expectation of safe transactions with employees at Layher Ireland. With regards to the perception, 27% ‘strongly agree’, 50% ‘agree’ and 23% ‘neither agree or disagree’.

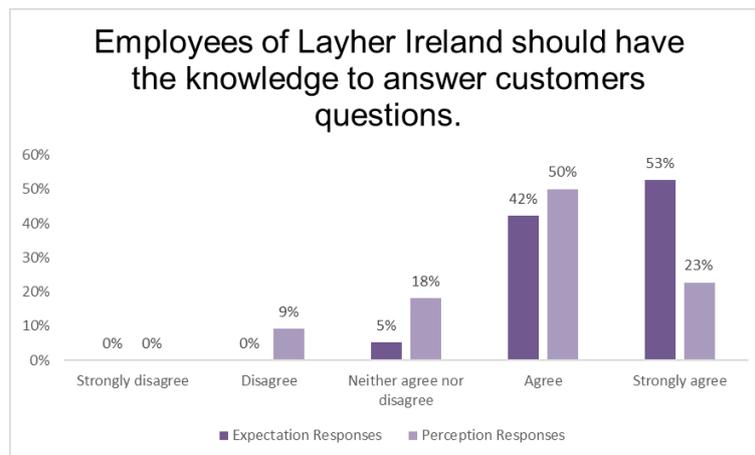
Q. 16 Politeness of employees at Layher Ireland



Graph 19: Layher Ireland employees should be polite

All of the respondents ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with 58% and 42% respectively when it comes to the expectation of politeness of employees at Layher Ireland. With regards to the perception, 41% ‘strongly agree’, 41% ‘agree’ and 18% ‘neither agree or disagree’.

Q. 17 Knowledge and experience of the employees of Layher Ireland

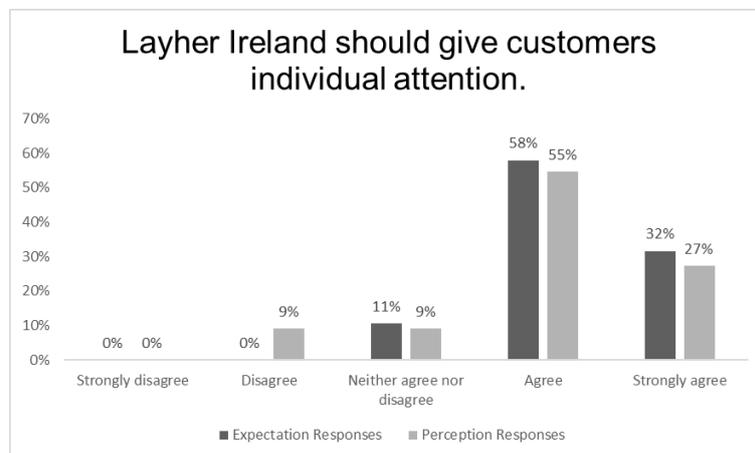


Graph 20: Knowledge and experience of the employees of Layher Ireland

In Graph 20 it can be seen that for the expectations 53% of respondents ‘strongly agree’, 42% ‘agree’ and 5% are neutral. Moving to the perceptions, 23% ‘strongly agree’, 50% ‘agree’, 18% are neutral and 9% disagree.

**Empathy Dimension**

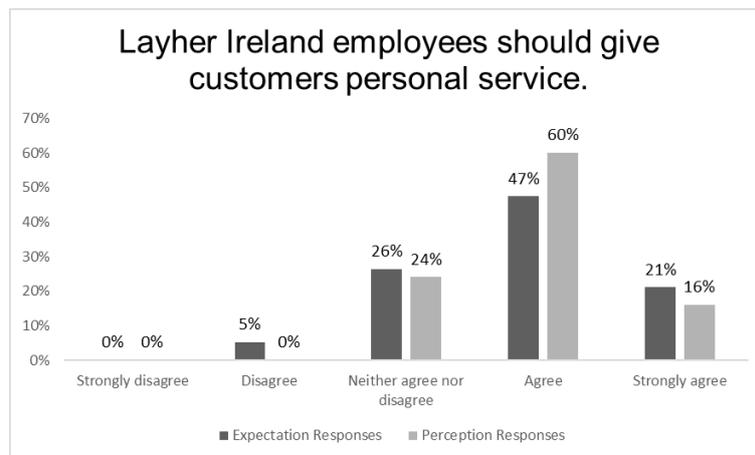
Q. 18 Willingness to meet customers’ needs by Layher Ireland employees



Graph 21: Layer Ireland should give customers individual attention

In the expectation questions 32% of respondents ‘strongly agreed’ with this statement while 58% ‘agreed’ and 11% were neutral. On the perception side 27% ‘strongly agreed’, 55% ‘agreed’, 9% were neutral and 9% ‘disagreed’.

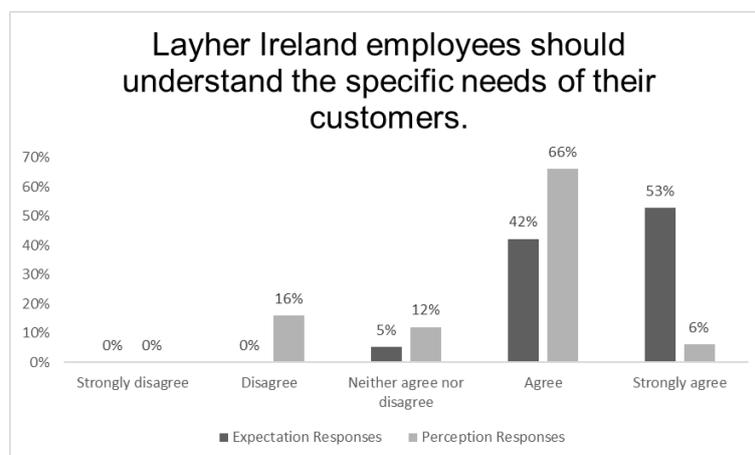
Q. 19 Individualised attention provided by the employees of Layher Ireland



Graph 22: Layher Ireland employees should give customer personal service

Graph 22 shows that the expectations in relation to the statement are 21% ‘strongly agree’, 47% ‘agree’, 26% ‘neither agree or disagree’ and 5% ‘disagree’. The perceptions were 16% ‘strongly disagree’, 60% ‘agree’, 24% are neutral and 0% ‘disagree’.

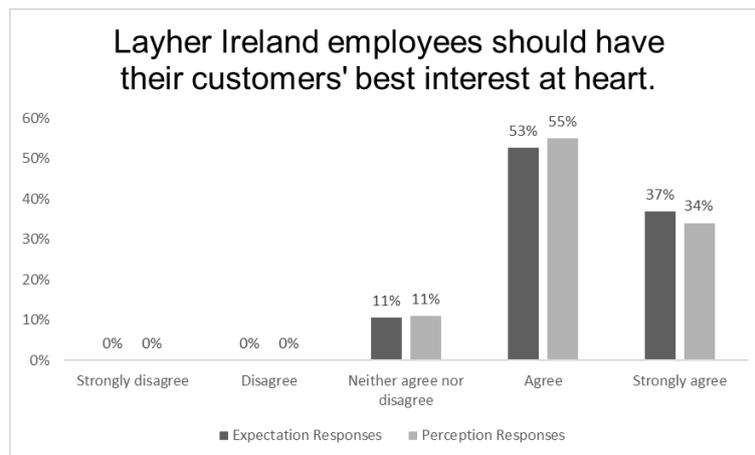
Q. 20 Layher Ireland employees knowledge of customer needs



Graph 23: Layher Ireland employees should understand the specific needs of customers

For the expectation results, 53% of respondents ‘strongly agreed’, 42% ‘agreed’ and 5% were neutral. The perception of the statement was that 6% ‘strongly agreed’, 66% ‘agreed’, 12% were neutral but 16% disagreed.

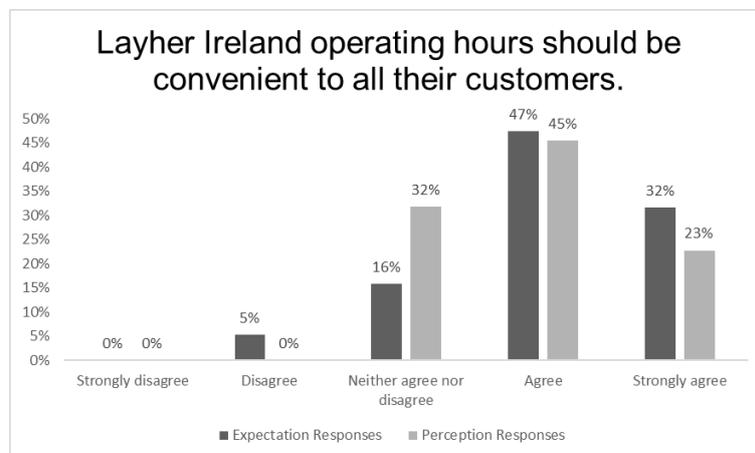
Q. 21 Layer Ireland employees have their customers best interests at heart



Graph 24: Best interests in the customers’ needs

According to the figures in graph 24, in relation to expectations, 37% of respondents ‘strongly agree’, 53% ‘agree’ and 11% are neutral. The perceptions response is 34% ‘strongly agree’, 55% ‘agree’ and again 11% are neutral.

Q. 22 Layer Ireland operating hours are adequate



Graph 25: Layher Ireland operating hours should be convenient to customers

In relation to the expectations, 32% of respondents ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement, while 47% ‘agreed’, 16% were neutral and 5% ‘disagreed. With regard to the perceptions, ‘23% strongly agreed’, 45% ‘agreed’, 32% were neutral and none disagreed.

## Descriptive Statistics for each of the dimensions

### Tangible Dimension

Tangible Dimension	Scale	Expectations	Totals	Mean	Sentiment
<b>Satisfaction</b>		Responces			
Strongly disagree	5	0	0.00	0.00	
Disagree	4	1	4.00	0.18	
Neither agree nor disagree	3	9	27.00	1.23	
Agree	2	40	80.00	3.64	
Strongly agree	1	38	38.00	1.73	
<b>Total</b>		88	149.00	<b>6.77</b>	1.69
<b>Satisfaction</b>		<b>Perception</b>			
Strongly disagree	5	0	0.00	0.00	
Disagree	4	2	8.00	0.36	
Neither agree nor disagree	3	22	66.00	3.00	
Agree	2	41	82.00	3.73	
Strongly agree	1	23	23.00	1.05	
<b>Total</b>		88	179.00	<b>8.14</b>	2.03

Table 5.1 Comparison between expectation and perception in the Tangible dimension

Table 5.1 lists the numerical values that were gathered at each point on the Likert scale and used to generate statistical values by frequency of total responses and adding the mean values of scores, then comparing the numerical difference between the customers' expectations and perceptions. Table 5.1 shows values of 6.77 for expectations and 8.14 for perception. Sentiment is 1.69 to 2.03 indicating 'strongly agree' to 'agree'.

### Reliability Dimension

Reliability Dimension	Scale	Expectations	Totals	Mean	Sentiment
<b>Satisfaction</b>		Responces			
Strongly disagree	5	0	0.00	0.00	
Disagree	4	0	0.00	0.00	
Neither agree nor disagree	3	2	6.00	0.27	
Agree	2	46	92.00	4.18	
Strongly agree	1	62	62.00	2.82	
<b>Total</b>		110	160.00	<b>7.27</b>	1.45
<b>Satisfaction</b>		<b>Perception</b>			
Strongly disagree	5	0	0.00	0.00	
Disagree	4	10	40.00	1.82	
Neither agree nor disagree	3	22	66.00	3.00	
Agree	2	52	104.00	4.73	
Strongly agree	1	26	26.00	1.18	
<b>Total</b>		110	236.00	<b>10.73</b>	2.15

Table 5.2 Comparison between expectation and perception in the Reliability dimension

Table 5.2 shows the results from the reliability dimension with a mean value of 7.27 for expectations and 10.73 for perception. Sentiment is measured from 1.45 to 2.15.

### Responsiveness Dimension

Responsiveness Dimension	Expectations				
Satisfaction	Scale	Responses	Totals	Mean	Sentiment
Strongly disagree	5	0	0.00	0.00	
Disagree	4	0	0.00	0.00	
Neither agree nor disagree	3	9	27.00	1.23	
Agree	2	32	64.00	2.91	
Strongly agree	1	47	47.00	2.14	
<b>Total</b>		88	138.00	<b>6.27</b>	1.57
Satisfaction	Perception				
Strongly disagree	5	0	0.00	0.00	
Disagree	4	2	8.00	0.36	
Neither agree nor disagree	3	13	39.00	1.77	
Agree	2	50	100.00	4.55	
Strongly agree	1	23	23.00	1.05	
<b>Total</b>		88	170.00	<b>7.73</b>	1.93

Table 5.3 Comparison between expectation and perception in the Responsiveness dimension

Table 5.3 records the results from the responsiveness dimension with a mean value of 6.27 for expectations and 7.73 for perception. Sentiment is measured from 1.57 to 1.93.

### Assurance Dimension

Assurance Dimension	Expectations				
Satisfaction	Scale	Responses	Totals	Mean	Sentiment
Strongly disagree	5	0	0	0.00	
Disagree	4	0	0	0.00	
Neither agree nor disagree	3	4	12	0.55	
Agree	2	37	74	3.36	
Strongly agree	1	47	47	2.14	
<b>Total</b>		88	133	<b>6.05</b>	1.51
Satisfaction	Perception				
Strongly disagree	5	0	0	0.00	
Disagree	4	4	16	0.73	
Neither agree nor disagree	3	15	45	2.05	
Agree	2	43	86	3.91	
Strongly agree	1	26	26	1.18	
<b>Total</b>		88	173	<b>7.86</b>	1.97

Table 5.4 Comparison between expectation and perception in the Assurance dimension

Table 5.4 records the results from the Assurance dimension with a mean value of 6.05 for expectations and 7.86 for perception. Sentiment is measured from 1.51 to 1.97.

## Empathy Dimension

Empathy Dimension		Expectations				
Satisfaction	Scale	Responces	Totals	Mean	Sentiment	
Strongly disagree	5	0	0	0.00		
Disagree	4	6	24	1.09		
Neither agree nor disagree	3	19	57	2.59		
Agree	2	51	102	4.64		
Strongly agree	1	34	34	1.55		
<b>Total</b>		110	217	<b>9.86</b>		1.97
Satisfaction		Perception				
Strongly disagree	5	0	0	0.00		
Disagree	4	8	30.08	1.37		
Neither agree nor disagree	3	14	43.02	1.96		
Agree	2	64	127.64	5.80		
Strongly agree	1	24	24.32	1.11		
<b>Total</b>		110	225.06	<b>10.23</b>		2.05

Table 5.5 Comparison between expectation and perception in the Empathy dimension

Table 5.5 records the results from the empathy dimension with a mean value of 9.86 for expectations and 10.23 for perception. Sentiment is measured from 1.97 to 2.05.

## Gap Value

Dimension	Expectation Mean	Perception Mean	Gap (Per-Exp)
Tangibility	6.77	8.14	1.37
Reliability	7.27	10.73	3.46
Responsiveness	6.27	7.73	1.46
Assurance	6.05	7.86	1.81
Empathy	9.86	10.23	0.37

Table 5.6 Tabulation of Gap values

Table 5.6 represents the numerical difference between the expectation and perception means of the customers responses. The interpretation of these results will be discussed further in chapter six, Discussion of findings.

## **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Of the five participants interviewed, two held the MD position and three were senior management within their organisations. All organisations are significant participants in the Irish construction retail sector and the length of time spent in the companies ranged from two to twenty-one years.

The interviews were conducted via

The nature of the questions was designed to elicit information from the participants and discuss the findings under the headings of the SERVQUAL dimensions i.e.,

1. Tangibility
2. Reliability
3. Responsiveness
4. Assurance
5. Empathy

### **Relevance of tangibility in the construction retail sector**

Each of the participants felt that it was necessary to have modern equipment in both the rental and particularly sale sections of their businesses. IC1 manages a large branch for one of the indigenous builder's merchants chains in the country and he was keen to impress the importance of image in his business. This ranged from the tidiness of the retail premises to the dispatch yard.

IC3 agreed, but as a manager in an older premises with a well-established customer base, his stated preference was for the personal appearance of the employees. This reason given for this was that a large part of their sales process was consultative, and he felt that it was particularly important to give the customers the impression that the staff was professional, "almost conservative". When pressed further on the necessity for modern equipment and premises, he replied that the sentiment was that it was more of a "nice to have, rather than a have to have".

IC2 is the managing director of an independent retailer only in operation for two years having previously worked for one of the large multinational retailers for many years previously, the author felt that he was a good choice for interview. He drew the distinction between the online image and the real situation at his premises in that he has concentrated on creating a

professional appearance through the company website while his premises are basic as the company is at a start-up phase.

IC5 agreed somewhat with this sentiment as MD of an independent, trading for over twenty years, he stated that the refinement of the premises and equipment came with time and success allowing him the ability to make the necessary investment to modernise. This was a process that he feels was unavoidable as the capital in the early days was invested in broadening his range of products and indeed the premises was something “akin to a frontier trading post”. However, he did state that perhaps this was like “a leap of faith” and when he did modernise and professional the staff, the additional business generated made him question why he did not act sooner.

IC4 was very emphatic, that as a GM for one of the large multinational construction retailers, it was vital to be seen to have premises and staff that are well managed. The company put a big emphasis on image and reinforces this with strict dress codes for staff, rigid specifications for suppliers, and even ensuring that each of their store is laid out in identical fashion to allow customers to find what they want “by looking in familiar places”.

### **Relevance of reliability in the construction retail sector**

IC1 explained that the service offering of his organisation was built on a number of “pillars” one of which related to reliability, but he referred to it “sincere interest in the customers’ requirements”. As the relationship with the customer develop, a trust is built up where the customer will come to his business first to solve their problems and “price is secondary because how do you put a value on performance?”

IC2 also stated that the customers interests must be a priority and it was important to listen and act correctly as unfortunately “sometimes you are only viewed as being as good as your last job”. As a relatively young business, IC2 felt that it was equally important for him to ensure from the outset that the customers’ expectations needed to be managed to avoid unnecessary disappointment by “overpromising and underdelivering”.

IC4 stated that his organisation focused more on the advertisement of products and maintaining the brand by repeating the message that they “carried everything under one roof”. Their staff were trained in customer relations and encouraged to offer the customer solutions, but that these “solutions were a little one size fits all” and that it was perhaps the “Achilles heel” of

construction retail superstores that the unspoken truth is that perhaps they were relying on volume rather than quality for profitability.

IC5 was very much in the same mind as IC2 in that even though he headed a more mature and well-established business, he was mindful of the reputation his business had grown as a reliable partner to his customers in the building sector. He even pointed out that they encouraged employees to form relationships with individual customers in the fashion of key account managers. In this way, the customers feel that they have an “inside man or woman” working towards their best interests.

IC3 was very like the opinion of IC1 where the quality of the customer care was a cornerstone of the business as they offer very specialist products commanding very high prices. He pointed out that they were not the only “player in the market” and indeed some of their competitors were cheaper but customer service was emphasised as a selling point when negotiating sales.

### **Relevance of responsiveness in the construction retail sector**

IC4 again pointed to the difficulty in meeting the needs of the large volume of customers in a timely manner and that they try to “help the customer to help themselves” by providing freely available information such as instruction manuals, “how to guides”, advice leaflets and encouraging customers to avail of their online chat service which offers help and guidance.

IC1 depicted a similar situation but stated that his organisation spent time training staff and encouraged them to manage themselves in their interactions with customers ensuring that the customers’ needs were identified and dealt with in an efficient manner.

IC2 said that as an experienced retailer operating in a relatively new organisation, prompt and accurate service was important in allowing him to establish a customer base that return for repeat business. He is trying to instil in his relatively small workforce a “sense of urgency” when dealing with customers but that this should not mean that insufficient time is spent on a customer, rather the customer should be listened to and more importantly, understood.

IC3 made the same points as IC2 in that the speed and willingness to help made his organisation the “go to” solution provider. The standard of training is very high as the products are quite technical and therefore it’s important that the employees are not only willing to help, but able to help because they have the “requisite knowledge”.

IC5 operates in a rural environment where, similar to IC3 the customers go to his company because he has established himself as the “place people go not only for building related products but for advice”

### **Relevance of assurance in the construction retail sector**

IC1 referred to “believability” when the author questioned how customer service was evaluated. In his opinion, the fact that they took the time to train their staff in customer relationship management meant that they were reinforcing the subliminal message that they “cared about the customers” and were meeting their needs.

IC2 saw little difference between assurance and confidence when it came to the customers attitude to doing business with his company. He had to ensure that proper systems were in place to allow not only the customer to have confidence but also that he and his team could monitor transactions and react if there were problems e.g., late payments, delayed deliveries, stock shortages etc. Again, the theme seemed to be about managing expectations and being honest with the customer.

IC3 commented on how his organisation has invested heavily in their technical department as they found it was the most obvious way to instil “confidence in the customer” in relation to the company’s ability to “solve problems”. He explained that the company had over a long period developed a mantra of “being the industry expert” again harking back to the theme being the first choice in customers minds when they required assistance irrespective of the cost.

IC4 spoke about how the size of his organisation combined with the methodical and consistent advertising campaign provided the reassurance that customers sought. He felt vindicated by the success that the chain had experienced over the past two decades when the author probed about the possibility that being a large chain meant that customers might feel that there was a lack of personal service. He felt that there was a “comfort” for customers dealing with a large reputable brand and this allowed them to compete in the face of smaller stores who he accepted might have “more time to spend on customers”. He also accepted that there was little scope for staff to become personally acquainted with customers but that this was not a problem as the model they offered was speed of transaction as opposed to “long discussions at the checkout”

IC5 described how the business had evolved over the years and with that the “professionalism” of his own organisation. In the beginning he described how the business was in “survival mode”, that is making decisions on a tactical rather than a strategic level. As their experience

grew over time, they were better able to predict the upcoming needs of the market and make better long-term decisions. This had the effect of creating new markets in seasonal products particularly for the small domestic user who only bought at a particular time of the year e.g., summertime home projects, as opposed to the year-round professional builders.

### **Relevance of empathy in the construction retail sector**

All of the interviewees agreed that opening hours should suit the customers but equally all said that it wasn't possible to remain open all hours and remain profitable. IC5 stated that since they were based in a small market town in rural Ireland, they had traditionally closed at lunchtime for one hour but that this had changed to meet the demands of the market where people wanted to purchase in their lunch hour as this was the only time in the day when they were not engaged in their own occupation.

IC4 similarly described how the opening hours have in the last decade expanded to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. They recognised the societal change in work and purchase habits and met the demand. He also felt that his organisation had to some extent created this demand by listening to the parent company and recognising the pattern in overseas markets where the emphasis on convenience had created demand by showing the customer an alternative to the traditional five and half day a week model.

IC2 was somewhat different in that he has limited staff resources but would if requested by a customer open early or late or, perhaps at the weekend. But this was problematic as “exceptions quickly become the rule” and if the customers felt that it was acceptable to call at any time, it would end in disappointment as he does not have the resources to meet this type of demand.

IC3 agreed with IC2's sentiment in that it is important to “be there” for the customer but emphasised that it was also important for the customer to understand the limitations of the service offered. Having said that he was keen to point out that they offered an excellent service and felt that their trading hours were correct.

IC1 was more robust on the subject of opening hours in that his organisation has trading hours to match the other companies operating in the building sector. Like IC2, he felt that if the trading hours were expanded, it would not result in an appreciable increase in business. However, he would pay more in overheads such as staff and utilities.

## **Conclusion**

The interviews and questionnaire raised many points which will be discussed further in the following chapter. There is a commonality with all of the interviewees in relation to the dimensions of SERVQUAL albeit with some small differences.

## Chapter 6 Discussion of Findings

### Introduction

The aim of this research was to answer the question as to whether or not in the construction retail sector, the SERVQUAL model can provide an effective measure of the perceived quality of service performance by customers and in turn can this be used to gain a competitive advantage? The data was captured in two ways to answer the two part of the research question, namely, a SERVQUAL questionnaire and a series of semi structured interviews with managers in the construction retail sector.

### Gap Analysis

The service quality gap in Layher Ireland was computed using the SERVQUAL questionnaire as previously described. A positive score indicates that the service provider has underestimated customers' expectations while a negative gap would indicate that the service provider has overestimated the customers' expectations.

Table 5.6 shows that reliability has the highest value of positive score and therefore it is necessary for Layher Ireland to look at the components of this dimension as it relates to the ability to perform service dependably and accurately. This includes examining it's resource base including the skill mix of the labour force, budgets for stock and systems for customer interactions e.g., CRM, inventory management, accounts etc. The high score also indicates the value that the customer base place in this dimension and Landrum *et al* (2009) state the importance of this dimension, arguing especially when dealing with customers that are under stress, they may demand speed and reliability, finding this dimension in their research as the most important.

Assurance comes next indicating that the customers value this service-related dimension as they expect employees to be knowledgeable about the products and service, show them the proper respect and be honest in their transactions. Birgül *et al* (2014) highlighted the importance of this dimension stating that employees should be able to reassure their customers that they are qualified to provide the service, possessing the required knowledge to carry out their responsibilities. The positive from this finding is that there is no reason why this dimension cannot be achieved with adequate training.

Responsiveness is next and according to Minkyun *et al* (2014) it is a dimension which is vital for the organisational strategy as it can overcome dynamic and competitive business environments by ensuring agility and market flexibility. It is interesting to note that the sentiment averages are both placed between ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ indicating that while there is room for improvement, the expectation and perception scores are perhaps not that far apart in reality.

In fourth place was tangibility and this is perhaps because the customers do not expect much when it comes to the physical appearance of the facilities belonging to Layher Ireland and instead attach more importance to the delivery of service. Sanchez-Hernandez *et al* (2009) highlight the importance of the tangible dimension as it relates to the functional interaction in between customers’ and employees. Table 5.1 would seem to indicate a certain correlation in that a relatively large number of respondents choose the neutral category in both the expectation and perceptions with 9 and 22 respectively again lending credence to the argument that the customers do not place a strong emphasis on the appearance of Layher Irelands premises.

Finally, there is the empathy dimension which had a score of 0.37 and sentiment scores that are almost identical for expectation and perception at 1.97 and 2.05 respectively. Parasuraman *et al* (1985) states that where the score difference is near zero then it can be taken as negligible and equating to zero. This being the case it means that Layher Ireland according to Mekoth *et al* (2011) who stated that the empathy dimension directly effects attitudinal loyalty and purchase intentions because there is more emotion in the quality outcome process.

### **Gap analysis summary**

It can be seen from the data gathered that the general customer expectations of service and the perceptions of service received are broadly aligned. Reliability, responsiveness, and assurance are the areas of least alignment and from the authors personal experience of the construction sector over the past twenty-five years this would seem to match the impression that customers from this sector place a higher emphasis on the delivery of service than the physical appearance or emotional satisfaction. Alternatively, Layher Ireland could be said to have correctly understood the customers expectation levels in these two areas but in the area of tangibles, the shift in expectation from ‘strongly agree’ to the neutral ‘neither agree or disagree’ is noteworthy as it indicates an area that can be improved.

## **Critique of SERVQUAL research**

Prior to 1988 there was no measurement technique in a generic form that could be applied to all service industries to identify customers' expectations and perceptions of the service received. Parasuraman *et al* (1988) devised SERVQUAL as a multiple item scale to measure consumer perceptions and quantify the 'gaps' as per the previously designed 'gap model of service and quality (Parasuraman *et al*: 1985). Sureshchandar *et al* (2001) argued that SERVQUAL showed good evidence that it was a good predictor of service quality in its entirety but, Smith (1995) noted that not many replication studies followed the methodology of Parasuraman *et al*.

One of the major criticisms of SERVQUAL is its dimensionality with many studies failing to identify Parasuraman *et al* original dimensions and Brady *et al* (2002) confirmed this by stating that many researchers failed to find the scales five factors.

The conceptualisation of the expectation value poses another problem with Lam and Woo (1997) pointing to a loss of stability in the results with only a one-week gap between re-examinations. However, Parasuraman *et al* (1993) states that the most important part of SERVQUAL is the comparison between expectation and perception as a measurement of perception alone would result in a poorer diagnostic analysis.

According to Smith (1995) the use of a Likert scale is problematic as it does not contain a 'don't know' response and does not allow for people who are not familiar with SERVQUAL to give an accurate answer. Andrews (1984) states that the inclusion of a 'DK' category allows for better data collection.

The completion of the 'expectation' terms before the 'perception' terms has been criticised by Brown *et al* (1993) who suggested that 79% of their respondents were influenced by prior answers and this is confirmed by Tourangeau and Rasinski (1988) who reported that prior items can influence respondent interpretations of later questions.

## **Recommendation for further research**

Due to the time constraint faced by the author in the process of gathering the data and particularly relating to the sample size of only 22 respondents, this limitation could have an impact on the accuracy of the result. A larger survey sample size would provide a better range

for analysis and investigation but the fact that a qualitative study was undertaken at the same time will hopefully lead to a better understanding of customer behaviour.

### **Semi-structured interview analysis**

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis has a limitation in that it provides the researcher with so much flexibility it can lead to vast quantities of data being produced that are not necessarily critical to the research topic. With this in mind the research guided the respondents responses not by asking direct questions about the SERVQUAL dimensions but rather dimension related questions. The reason for this was twofold, firstly Taylor *et al* (2015) found that data can be descriptive in nature, but it can be rectified by improving the quality of the research questions. Secondly, according to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), a thematic analysis on research data goes beyond simply summarising the data collected. Patterns and connections within the data that relate to the research question should be identified and subsequently it is not recommended to use the questions asked as theme headings.

### **Tangibility**

The interviewees all felt that it was important to have modern equipment but there was a difference of opinion on whether the premises or the staff appearance was more important. The businesses that are emphasising the quality of their technical services felt that the physical appearance of the premises was not seen as important as the physical appearance of the staff members. This is reflected in the results of the SERVQUAL questionnaire where tangibility was rated in fourth place overall. However, it should be noted that two of the respondents felt that tangibility was very important, and one spoke about how it was reflected in their online store and that it was seen as adding to the creation of trust with their customers.

### **Reliability**

All interviewees felt that this was a cornerstone in their customer relations, and this is reflected in the questionnaire results where it accounts for the biggest gap between expectation and perception of Layher Irelands customers. Customers, particularly in a sector like construction where projects run on critical paths need to know that they can rely on their service provider, where the needs are urgent, and solutions must be right first time. The interviewees also mentioned that customers were willing to pay a premium for a service that they knew would deliver. The findings indicate that reliability is one of the key drivers of customer satisfaction

or dissatisfaction and more importantly personalised services could build strong relationships with customers gaining trust and loyalty.

### **Responsiveness**

There were different answers from the interviewees, with the ones with large customer bases expressing difficulty in offering the personal service of the smaller organisations. They tried to compensate by making information freely available and helping customers to learn for themselves. It would seem that in all cases it is important for the customers expectations to be managed carefully through, WOM, advertising, marketing, and general communication to bring their perceptions of service received in line with providers views or expectations.

### **Assurance**

The findings indicate that Assurance is seen as having the utmost concern to customers of the interviewees. Based on the literature review, the categories are competence, courtesy, security, and credibility. Each of the interviewees related to the author how they took steps to ensure that staff were trained in customer relations, but while the larger organisations had prescribed training for staff, some of the smaller ones seemed to act on an evolving basis only learning through the benefit of experience. Referring back to the questionnaire, Assurance was the second largest gap after Reliability and the findings indicate that it is important for customers to believe that their service provider has credibility when it comes to issues like payments, product knowledge and security of service.

### **Empathy**

Opening hours are an important consideration but were not the same for each of the interviewees as while some could justify opening every day, others pointed out that they wouldn't have the level of business to justify the cost. Again, it was pointed out by some of the interviewees that the customers' expectations needed to be managed to avoid disappointment and dissatisfaction.

### **Structured interview Summary**

The interviews elicited information from service providers in what can be seen as a highly competitive market. It would seem to be a challenge for the service providers to close the gap between customer expectation and perception as it is difficult to offer all of the service

dimensions and attributes at once and therefore it is important to get the balance right. After reliability, assurance and responsiveness are the next most important factors and have significant impact on trust with responsiveness being the most critical in determining customer satisfaction. While personalisation and customisation can be effective, Empathy can be viewed as being the least important dimension. Dehghan (2006) states that because in B2B and industrial type businesses, live contacts are important, it means that there is less emphasis on the importance of the Empathy dimension.

Garland *et al* (1999) found in a study into the construction retail market in New Zealand that Reliability followed by Responsiveness and then Assurance were the most important dimensions followed by tangibility and empathy which were considered less important.

It would seem that the interviewees understand the implications for managers in the construction retail market in relation to the importance of tracking their customers expenditure habits through regular communication. Fluctuations in expenditure can be investigated as those customers are more likely to have lower perceptions and early intervention can prevent minor problems from turning into major problems affecting customer retention.

## **Chapter 7. Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to investigate and decide if SERVQUAL can be used to gain a competitive edge by measuring service quality perception and customer satisfaction in the Irish Construction retail market?

From the literature review it can be seen that SERVQUAL is a widely accepted instrument in the measurement of service quality and even its major critics acknowledged its popularity (Brown *et al.* 1993). Cronin and Taylor (1992) found that replication was problematic as they failed to identify the same dimensions as Parasuraman *et al* (1985) and the conceptual and paradigmatic basis is less than ideal as it focuses on processes rather than service quality outcomes and overall, as noted by Smith (1995) few of its claims remain undisputed.

Part of the appeal of SERVQUAL is that it is cheap to use and despite much academic investigation, an alternative that far exceeds its performance and results has yet to be found.

### **Additional findings**

Part of the aim of this study was to empirically investigate the gap between the service level expectations and the perception of service received by the customers of Layher Ireland. In this regard the gaps are small but not insignificant and in line with other research into service in the construction sector, the Reliability dimension is seen to be the largest and this in turn is where Layher Ireland should focus its attempts to increase its resource base including training of the labour force, increased stock levels and computerised systems.

The second part of the study was a series of semi structured interviews with construction retail managers where the importance of customers perception and expectations was verbalised by all. Service quality was stated by all interviewees to have a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage and while SERVQUAL per se was unknown to them, the questions asked elicited responses which indicated an intuitive understanding of the different dimensions.

The answer to the question of SERVQUAL being useful in the pursuit of competitive advantage is both yes and no. As part of the suite of instruments for evaluating service quality it can certainly be seen to assist organisations empirically measure customers' expectations and perceptions of quality. However, the focus of SERVQUAL on process rather than outcomes does mean that it fails to capture other potentially less controllable components like reputation or emotion.

On balance SERVQUAL can be used effectively to capture a range of sentiments and empirical evidence relating to the service quality experienced by customers. It can inform management on the gaps that exist between their understanding of the customers wants and the perceptions held after interacting with the organisation. The literature has shown that service quality is a key component in competitive advantage particularly in a highly competitive market like the Irish construction retail sector where price is not always a strong enough differentiator between competition.

### **Limitations of the study**

The first limitation is time, as the author was working full time in an extremely busy period during the resurgence of the construction sector following the preceding shutdowns incurred by the COVID 19 pandemic.

The second limitation related to the first, because of the limited time available for in-depth consideration and analysis of questionnaire and semi structured interviews.

Cameron (2009) described a lack of education in respondents/interviewees as potential limitations, however since the author invited both the respondents and the interviewees as they were known to be knowledgeable and suitably placed to give valued insight this is not viewed as a limitation.

Kumar (2009) described low numbers in questionnaires as a limitation and while 22 respondents might seem low, it represented approximately 50% of the Layher Ireland customer base. However, another limitation could be seen in the questionnaire as a lack of opportunity to clarify issues: when respondents may not fully understand questions asked resulting in different interpretations and affecting the quality of the information provided.

### **Contribution to the research on the construction retail sector in Ireland.**

The author believes that this research has made a positive contribution to the study of the construction retail sector. There is a lack of research specifically relating to construction retail which the author suggests is attributable to the nature of the business as an annex to the construction sector rather than being seen as key to its future success.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Interview Consent Form

### Research Question

**Can SERVQUAL be used to gain a competitive edge by measuring service quality perception and customer satisfaction in the Irish Construction retail market?**

- **A qualitative approach to understand the managements perception of the customers' expectations in the construction retail market in Ireland.**
- **A quantitative approach to measure Layher Ireland's customers' expectations and perceptions of service using the 22-statement instrument.**
- **To establish if SERVQUAL is a suitable model to be used to gain competitive advantage in the Irish construction retail market.**

Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves a online interview lasting 45-60 minutes discussing cybersecurity within your organisation.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being voice-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about. I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a *dissertation* that will be publicly available on NCI dissertation database
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on encrypted USB drive accessible only to the researcher *until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.*
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained until September 2022
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Pat McGahan – Master of Business Administration  
 National College of Ireland  
 Phone: 0871521454  
 Email: [X19107081@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:X19107081@student.ncirl.ie)

*Signature of research participant*

*Date*

-----

-----

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

-----

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## Appendix 2 SERVQUAL Instrument Questionnaire

I am an MBA student in studying at the National College of Ireland. I am carrying out a study on the suitability of the SERVQUAL model to assist in gaining a competitive advantage in construction retail. I would appreciate your assistance in filling the questionnaire. Thank you.

The questionnaire is in two parts, expectations, and experience.

**Expectations:** This section deals with your opinions about Layher Ireland

Please, show the extent to which you think Layher Ireland should possess the following features. I am interested in knowing your expectations from an ideal supplier.

Please rank each statement as follows.

Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please put a cross (X) on your choice of answer.

1. Layher Ireland should have modern equipment.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

2. Their physical facilities (Offices, yard, warehouse, equipment) should be visually appealing.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

3. Their employees should be well dressed and appear neat.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

4. The physical environment of the depot should be clean and tidy.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

5. When Layher Ireland promises to do something by a certain time, they should do so.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

6. When customers have problems, Layher Ireland should show a sincere interest in solving them.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

7. Layher Ireland should perform the service right the first time.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

8. Layher Ireland should provide their services at the time they promise to do so.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

9. Layher Ireland should keep their records accurately.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

10. Layher Ireland employees should make information easily obtainable by the customers.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

11. Layher Ireland employees should give prompt service to customers.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

12. Layher Ireland employees are always willing to help customers.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

13. Employees in a Layher Ireland should never be too busy to respond to customers' requests.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

14. The behaviour of employees at Layher Ireland should instil confidence in customers.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

15 Customers should be able to feel safe in their transactions with employees in Layher Ireland.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

16 Layher Ireland employees should be polite.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

17 Employees of Layher Ireland should have the knowledge to answer customers questions.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

18 Layher Ireland should give customers individual attention.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

19 Layher Ireland operating hours should be convenient to all their customers.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

20 Layher Ireland employees should give customers personal service.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

21 Layher Ireland employees should have their customers' best interest at heart.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

22 Layher Ireland employees should understand the specific needs of their customers.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

**Perceptions:** The following statements deal with the perceptions of service experienced at Layher Ireland. Please, show the extent to which these statements reflect your perception of service at Layher Ireland

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Please cross (X) on your choice of answer

Statement scores

1. Layher Ireland have modern equipment.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

2. Their physical facilities (Offices, yard, warehouse, equipment) are visually appealing.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

3. Their employees are well dressed and appear neat.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

4. The physical environment of the depot is clean and tidy.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

5. When Layher Ireland promises to do something by a certain time, they do so.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

6. When you had problems, Layher Ireland showed a sincere interest in solving them.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

7. Layher Ireland performed the service right the first time.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

8. They provided their services at the time they promise to do so.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

9. They kept their records accurately.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

10. Employees made information easily obtainable.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

11. Employees gave prompt service.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

12. Employees were always willing to help.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

13. Employees at Layher Ireland were never too busy to respond to requests.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

14. The behaviour of employees at Layher Ireland instilled confidence.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

15 As a customer, you felt safe in your transactions with employees in Layher Ireland.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

16 Employees were polite.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

17 Employees of Layher Ireland had the knowledge to answer customers questions.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

18 Layher Ireland gave individual attention.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

19 Operating hours were convenient.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

20 Employees gave customers personal service.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

21 They had their customers' best interest at heart.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

22 The employees understood the specific needs of their customers.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

**Demographic questions**

23) Gender:    Male                                  Female

24) Level of Education: Undergraduate                                  Masters                                  Others

25) How many times do you visit Layher Ireland?

Once a week                      Once a month                      Once in six months                      Once a year  
Others

Dear Colleagues,

I hope you are all safe and well.

In preparation for the completion of an MBA at NCI, I am conducting a survey for my dissertation. I need participants who have interacted with Layher System Scaffolding in Ireland to answer a few short questions on expectations and perceptions of service quality.

The survey should take no longer than 3 minutes to complete.

Survey Responses will be anonymous and will be used for this research only.

I would greatly appreciate it if eligible persons would participate.

**Please find the link attached:**

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Z6RLH7P>

Kind regards,

Pat

## **Appendix 3 Semi Structured Interview questions.**

### **Research Question**

Can SERVQUAL be used to gain a competitive edge by measuring service quality perception and customer satisfaction in the Irish Construction retail market?

- A qualitative approach to understand the managements perception of the customers' expectations in the construction retail market in Ireland.
- A quantitative approach to measure Layher Ireland's customers' expectations and perceptions of service using the 44-statement instrument.
- To establish if SERVQUAL is a suitable model to be used to gain competitive advantage in the Irish construction retail market.

Questions to the participants :

1. How long have you worked in this company?
2. What are your responsibilities in your work?
3. Do you see service quality as a tool to gain competitive advantage in the market?
4. How do you evaluate the service quality in your organisation?
5. Are modern facilities and equipment important to your customers? Probe: Explain why/why not?
6. How would you describe customer satisfaction in your organisation? Probe: ?In what kind of channels can customers provide feedback?
7. Based on the customers' feedback, how do you implement change to meet their requirements and suggestions?
8. During work, what difficulties are faced by employees providing services to the customers?
9. Do you have strategies for improving service quality in your organisation?
10. Do you have any strategies to attract more new customers and continuously win the customers' loyalty?
11. How do you train your employees?