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CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTION OF SERVICE DELIVERY AT A PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT PROMOTION AGENCY

This study evaluates customers' perceptions of service delivery at Trade and Investment KwaZulu-Natal (TIKZN), a provincial investment promotion agency in South Africa. Using a quantitative approach, the data were collected via structured questionnaires from a sample of 400 businesses in Durban Central, selected through probability cluster sampling. The SERVQUAL instrument measured customer expectations and perceptions across five service quality dimensions. The data analysis, conducted using SPSS, revealed a consistent negative gap between expectations and perceptions, indicating widespread dissatisfaction with TIKZN's service delivery. The largest gaps were observed in responsiveness and reliability, suggesting that clients found the agency insufficiently prompt and dependable. Despite high expectations for modern facilities and professional staff, actual service experiences fell short. The study recommends implementing rigorous customer satisfaction measures, regularly monitored by independent auditors, and investing in targeted employee training to improve service quality and responsiveness, thereby enhancing stakeholder satisfaction and institutional performance.

Keywords: customer perceptions; service delivery; service quality assessment; service quality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Trade and Investment KwaZulu-Natal (TIKZN) is a South African commerce promotion organisation established to position the KwaZulu-Natal province as a prime destination for investment and trade. It facilitates access to international markets for local

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companies, following a governmental shift that transferred investment promotion responsibilities from national to provincial levels (TIKZN, 2019). This strategic change mandates TIKZN to focus on driving investment and trade initiatives. To promote its offerings, TIKZN utilises a mix of social, electronic, print, and audio-visual media, complemented by roadshows and informational booklets. These tools form part of its service marketing communications strategy, aimed at raising awareness, showcasing services, and sharing success stories with municipalities and districts. TIKZN's clientele includes both local and international businesses, investors, exporters, workshop attendees, and clients seeking one-stop-shop advisory services through various engagement channels.

Service quality is critical to customer retention, regardless of outreach effectiveness or cost-efficiency (Bushe, 2019). Poor service delivery can adversely affect customer satisfaction and, by extension, broader socio-economic conditions. Moreover, customers may lack clarity on the nature and delivery of TIKZN's services (Singh, 2019), highlighting the need to evaluate their service experiences and expectations. Despite the critical role of provincial investment promotion agencies like TIKZN in driving regional economic development, there is limited research evaluating their service delivery from the customer's perspective. Poor service quality can hinder customer satisfaction and retention, ultimately affecting the agency's effectiveness. Customers may also lack clarity on the nature and delivery of services offered. This study addresses the problem by examining the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of service quality at TIKZN, aiming to identify shortcomings and propose improvements that enhance service delivery and contribute to public sector performance and accountability.

This study, therefore, aims to assess customer satisfaction with TIKZN, identify gaps between expectations and perceptions, and explore ways to improve service delivery. Although service quality has been studied in various government entities, limited research exists on customer perceptions within provincial investment promotion agencies like TIKZN. These agencies are vital to regional economic development, yet their performance remains underexplored from the perspective of business clients and investors. This study addresses that gap by applying the SERVQUAL model to evaluate service quality dimensions, offering structured insights into areas needing improvement. In the South African context, where public sector accountability is increasingly scrutinised, the findings will inform strategies to enhance customer satisfaction and operational efficiency. The study also contributes to academic discourse by extending service assessment tools to provincial agencies, promoting customer-centric evaluation and enabling comparative research across similar institutions.

The study is guided by three key research questions: What are customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality at TIKZN? What gaps exist between these expectations and perceptions? How can these gaps be addressed to enhance service delivery? By answering these questions, the research aims to identify service delivery shortcomings and propose actionable improvements, ultimately contributing to better institutional performance and public sector service quality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the SERVQUAL model, which is a well-established tool for measuring service quality in various sectors, including public institutions. Developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, the SERVQUAL model

identifies five key dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Yarimoglu, 2014). These dimensions provide the basis for assessing the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of service delivery at Trade and Investment KwaZulu-Natal (TIKZN). This model is particularly relevant in the public sector, where service quality is often scrutinised due to its direct impact on citizen satisfaction and the credibility of institutions (Leach, 2018). In the South African public service sector, the Batho Pele principles emphasise the significance of service quality. These principles promote transparency, consultation, courtesy, and value for money in public service delivery (DPSA, 2014). They closely align with the SERVQUAL dimensions and offer a framework for evaluating how effectively public institutions meet the needs of their clients. By combining SERVQUAL with Batho Pele, this study adopts a dual perspective, both empirical and normative, to assess the quality-of-service delivery at TIKZN.

The study also incorporates principles from Total Quality Management (TQM) theory, which emphasises the importance of continuous improvement, a focus on customer needs, and employee involvement in enhancing service quality (Venkataya et al., 2019). TQM posits that service excellence is not just a one-time achievement but an ongoing process that requires institutional commitment and strategic alignment. Understanding this perspective is vital for TIKZN as it seeks to evolve its service delivery mechanisms to meet changing customer expectations. Additionally, the framework includes insights from public value theory, which differentiates between private and collective value in service delivery (Musaba et al., 2014). For TIKZN, service quality must not only satisfy individual business clients but also contribute to broader economic development goals. This dual responsibility highlights the importance of evaluating service delivery from both micro (customer-level) and macro (institutional and societal) perspectives. By synthesising these theoretical concepts, SERVQUAL, Batho Pele, TQM, and public value theory, the study establishes a comprehensive framework for analysing service quality at TIKZN. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of customer satisfaction, institutional performance, and the strategic implications of service delivery within a provincial investment promotion agency.

2.2. Service Quality

In the service sector, service quality is the propensity to concentrate on the needs of the client and their confidence in and expectations of the product in question. Additionally, service quality refers to a service provider's capacity to satisfy clients to improve the company's performance effectively (Ali et al., 2021; Ramya, Kowsalya & Dharanipriya, 2019). Service quality is frequently cited as a significant factor in creating frameworks for community audits and questionnaires. When consumers or customers compare their expectations and the services provided, service quality is a benchmark for customer satisfaction for excellent organisational performance (Leach, 2018; Singh et al., 2020). Service quality is based on comparisons between perceptions, expectations, and real performance or services received (Yarimoglu, 2014). Helao (2015) asserts that any organisation seeking success should consider investing in developing policies devoted to managing output quality while integrating perceptions with institutional goals for growth and development. Service quality is an organisational dedication to the ongoing enhancement of customer satisfaction. Therefore, total quality management enables institutions to strengthen their commitment to service quality management and development (Venkataya, Pudaruth, Juwaheer, Dirpal, Sumodhee, 2019).

Considering the above definitions, Batho Pele principles are observed in South Africa to ensure effective and efficient service delivery. The Batho Pele principles guide the planning and implementation of community or customer surveys and audits and promote enhanced customer service delivery (Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA, 2014). The DPSA (2014) further notes that the principles provide mechanisms for assessing service quality by laying out the steps and guidelines for better service delivery, which include public consultations, the establishment of service standards, enabling and increasing access, providing information, courtesy, redressing, as well as ensuring value for money. In other words, the principles not only guide how key customer services are delivered but also serve as a basis for guiding how critical services are rendered. El-Nabolsi and Kidane (2015) maintain that over the years, scholars have concurred on the definition of service quality, agreeing that service quality is simply the difference between the expectations and perceptions of customers.

2.3. Service Quality Assessment

Service quality assessment is crucial in promoting continuous service quality improvement and management. According to Malefane (2019), engaging communities and applying their views and perceptions is crucial, particularly on service performance, as such assessments may lead to better service quality standards. Including perceptions in service quality assessments is crucial, especially when exploring public services (Sleep, Bharadwaj & Lam, 2015). The quality of services is what determines customer satisfaction with the services. Leach (2018) identifies six perspectives on quality, and among these is, firstly, the transcendent view, which is tantamount to excellence and entails high achievement with uncompromising standards. The second one is the product-based approach, which views quality as a palpable variant without taking cognisance of other variances, including the customer's or user's personal choices and preferences. Thirdly, the user-centred approach compares service quality with high customer satisfaction, and this depends on demand. The fourth is the manufacturing-based approach, which focuses on engineering and manufacturing practices. The fifth is affordable excellence, which views quality in terms of value and price. The sixth, a service-based approach, speaks to the precise nature of services requiring unique approaches to measuring quality.

Service quality assessment is an essential multidisciplinary study area for academics as well as industry professionals because it provides critical data that can be used to improve business performance and market positioning. Even though service quality has been shown to improve customer satisfaction, most companies do not devote enough resources to measuring the benefits of quality standard systems. It is, therefore, essential to assess the quality of services rendered to understand customer satisfaction and establish plans for organisational enhancement. (Mathong et al., 2020; Mendocilla, Miravittles Matamoros, Matute, 2021; Tian et al., 2020). Service quality assessment is also linked to service excellence, differentiation, and competitive characteristics and is crucial for customer loyalty and retention. Technical and functional approaches can be used to evaluate service quality. Quality in technical evaluation can be rated according to professional scientific standards, whereas in the functional approach, the service can be evaluated from the customers' perspective. The most evaluated part of service quality is functional quality, which has the greatest impact on quality improvement (Aboubakr, Bayoumy, 2022; Goula et al., 2021).

2.4. Service Delivery

Worldwide, “service delivery” is a common phrase that signifies the movement of basic communal requirements and services (Reddy, 2016). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) defines service delivery as “any contact with the public administration during which consumers, residents, enterprises, customers or citizens provide or seek data, handle their affairs or fulfil their duties”. Service delivery should be provided in an affordable, reliable, predictable and effective manner. Considering the above, Reddy (2016) maintains that service delivery is determined to promote public value and achieve public good, which is determined by customer perceptions of the anticipated quality of service, which forms the theoretical basis of this study. Smith (2020) observed that having a deeper understanding of the value systems that shape the public when discussing public services is imperative. On the same note, Musaba et al. (2014) postulate that the difference between public and private value is that private value focuses on the individual, whereas public value focuses on the collective or the generality of the populace.

Customer participation is critical in in-service delivery, including customers or clients who provide positive suggestions and feedback or reactions to the service provider's services and products (Mustak, Jaakkola, Halinen, 2013). The authors further maintain that the customers or clients share their appreciation or concerns and thoughts on new services or products. Customers' active participation ensures the incorporation of their perceptions and critical inputs to the public value systems processes (Habib, 2015). The author further notes that when customers or citizens are not engaged and their expectations are not met, the staging of protests is the result. In other words, the negative value would have been created by the poor or lack of engagement processes in which perceptions were neglected. Customer service expectations represent their perceptions of anticipated services and should form a vital part of the public service delivery process (Yi, Ul Haq, Ahmed, 2022).

2.5. The Customer Service Perception

The whole cycle of customer perception begins when a customer sees or acquires information about a specific service, and then the customer begins to form an opinion about the service. As a result, the business's performance is determined by how well the services fulfil client expectations (Tulcanaza-Prieto, Aguilar-Rodriguez, Lee, 2022). There are also many perspectives on service quality, with customer expectations and subjective evaluation being the most essential components of service quality perceptions. As a result, customers are impacted not just by service pricing but also by their impressions, which are formed through comparison and subjectivity. (Choi et al., 2020; Zhong, Moon, 2020).

Obtaining customer perceptions entails public involvement in the decision-making processes of public and private companies (Hanyane, Naidoo, 2015). Matiza and Oni (2014) concur and further note that the involvement of the general populace through customer service evaluation is vital to ensure the collection of the right feedback information that enables institutions to work hard in improving service delivery. This, in turn, will transform the livelihoods of others who are less privileged. There are several ways of incorporating customer perceptions of service delivery. Customer satisfaction surveys are a very good example, and these are in the form of community audits or communication (Catlin, Luchs, Phipps, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was descriptive and quantitative in nature. According to Bhasin (2020), quantitative research is a systematic way of gathering data using sampling techniques, questionnaires, online polls, and online surveys. A descriptive research design was adopted to assess how customers felt about the way TIKZN delivered its services and to give a reliable and accurate picture of the variables influencing customer satisfaction levels. The TIKZN's business database, which is thought to contain over 250,000 units, served as the study's target population. Using the probability sampling method, a sample size of 400 respondents from different businesses affiliated with TIKZN was selected. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2019), a sample size of 368 to 370 respondents should be sufficient to validate the study findings. Therefore, a sample size of 400 respondents from different businesses affiliated with TIKZN was chosen using the probability sampling method. To choose the participants, a cluster sampling method was employed. According to Thomas (2020), cluster sampling is a common technique for probability sampling employed to examine large populations, particularly those widely dispersed geographically. The reality that the cluster sampling technique is more time and cost-efficient was a factor in the choice of method.

For data collection, this investigation employed a questionnaire with closed-ended (structured) questions. Google Docs was used to create the SERVQUAL questionnaire, which was then made available online and via email to respondents in the TIKZN database. The severity of the social isolation necessary during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic also made this approach essential. The questionnaire, particularly the digital version, was inexpensive to use and enabled quick responses from the participants. The latest version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used to analyse the data in this study.

4. RESULTS

Table 1 depicts the business sectors under study. The sectors range from Agriculture, Business Services, Health Services, and Manufacturing.

Table 1. Business sectors

		Frequency	Percent
Sector	Manufacturing	109	28.0
	Health Services	79	20.3
	Agriculture	16	4.1
	Business Services	153	39.3
	Other	32	8.2
	Total	389	100.0

Source: Researcher's Self-Computation from Field Survey, 2024.

The mean scores of the expectations and perceptions, and the mean gap scores are shown in Table 2. The average expectation score was high, ranging from 3.97 on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 agrees for item 8 (The physical facility at an excellent government agency should be visually appealing and in an excellent government agency material associated with the service such as pamphlets and brochures should be visually appealing) to 4.52 for item 15 (The behaviour of employees in an excellent

government agency will instil confidence in customers). The expectations had a total mean score of 4.22. This value is closest to “strongly agree”, which suggests that the respondents have a positive agreement with their service delivery expectations.

Table 2. Respondents' Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality

	Expectation		Perception		P-E Mean Gap score
	Mean	Std	Mean	Std	
An excellent government agency will have up-to-date and modern technology to assist with my needs.	4.06	0.719	2.86	1.233	-1.2
The physical facility at an excellent government agency should be visually appealing.	3.97	0.653	3.27	1.142	-0.7
In an excellent government agency, materials associated with the service, such as pamphlets and brochures, should be visually appealing.	3.97	0.649	3.50	1.088	-0.47
When an excellent government agency promises to do something by a particular time, it certainly will.	4.23	0.589	2.80	1.059	-1.43
When a customer has a problem, an excellent government agency will show sincere interest in solving it.	4.10	0.633	3.02	1.039	-1.08
An excellent government agency will perform the service correctly the first time.	4.11	0.541	3.06	1.069	-1.05
The employees from an excellent government agency will advise customers exactly what services will be performed.	4.16	0.762	3.42	0.975	-0.74
The employees from an excellent government agency will give prompt services to customers.	4.23	0.601	2.94	0.998	-1.29
The behaviour of employees in an excellent government agency will instil confidence in customers.	4.52	0.640	3.26	1.035	-1.26
Customers of excellent government agencies will feel safe in their transactions.	4.36	0.613	3.09	1.057	-1.27
The employees of an excellent government agency will have the knowledge to answer customers' questions.	4.52	0.632	3.43	0.973	-1.09
The employees of an excellent government agency will understand the specific needs of their customers.	4.37	0.799	3.59	1.098	-0.78
Average score	4.22	0.653	3.19	1.064	-1.03

Source: Researcher's Self-Computation from Field Survey, 2024.

Table 3. Association between Expectation, Perception and Respondents' socio-demographic variables

Socio-demographic		Expectations	Perceptions
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Gender	Male	4.17 (0.506)	2.93 (0.941)
	Female	4.32 (0.485)	3.71 (0.527)
	Sig.	0.005	0.000
Age group	Below 24	4.61 (0.314)	3.66 (0.489)
	25-34	4.07 (0.498)	2.79 (0.856)
	35-44	4.16 (0.467)	2.99 (0.967)
	45-54	4.07 (0.713)	3.50 (1.139)
	55 and above	4.36 (0.316)	3.57 (0.434)
	Sig.	0.000	0.000
Racial group	Black	4.22 (0.491)	3.20 (0.880)
	Indian	4.01 (0.504)	3.23 (0.952)
	White	4.23 (0.448)	3.16 (0.717)
	Coloured	4.62 (0.303)	3.08 (0.976)
	Sig.	0.000	0.784
Level of education	Less than Certificate (Grade 12 Matric)	3.92 (0.786)	3.03 (1.621)
	National Certificate	4.42 (0.443)	2.78 (1.385)
	National Diploma	4.21 (0.402)	2.69 (0.796)
	Degree	4.23 (0.476)	3.69 (0.603)
	Postgraduate	4.04 (1.234)	3.18 (1.145)
	Sig.	0.191	0.000
Area	Southern Basin	4.32 (0.566)	2.82 (0.903)
	Northern basin	4.11 (0.589)	3.47 (0.730)
	Central Durban	4.34 (0.367)	3.66 (0.797)
	Inner West basin	4.03 (0.316)	2.71 (0.990)
	Outer West basin	4.17 (0.393)	3.53 (0.863)
	Eastern basin	4.15 (0.228)	3.65 (0.228)
	Sig.	0.001	0.000
Business sector	Manufacturing	4.13 (0.451)	2.79 (0.896)
	Health Services	4.07 (0.435)	3.48 (0.631)
	Agriculture	4.16 (0.386)	3.63 (0.970)
	Business Services	4.37 (0.483)	3.24 (0.955)
	Other	4.18 (0.755)	3.38 (0.766)
	Sig	0.000	0.000

Source: Researcher's Self-Computation from Field Survey, 2024.

In terms of the respondents' gender, the results of the ANOVA in Table 3 reveal that there is a statistically significant difference measured for the respondents' expectations ($P=0.005$) and perceptions ($p<0.001$) with regard to their age group, home language, and qualifications ($P>0.05$). It was found that the expectations ($M=4.32$) and perceptions ($M=3.71$) for females were higher than those measured for males. This suggests that female respondents have very good expectations and perceptions of service quality when compared to their male counterparts.

In terms of the age group of the respondents, the ANOVA value measured suggests that there were significant differences in both expectations ($p < 0.001$) and perceptions ($p < 0.001$). It was found that the expectations ($M = 4.61$) and perceptions ($M = 3.66$) of service quality were the highest among respondents below 24 years of age. This suggests that respondents below 24 years of age have very good expectations and perceptions of service quality.

Table 4. Correlation between expectation and perception of service quality

		Expectation	Perception
Expectation	Pearson Correlation	1	.130*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.011
	N	387	387
Perception	Pearson Correlation	.130*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	
	N	387	389

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Researcher's Self-Computation from Field Survey, 2024.

Pearson correlation was used to analyse the association existing between the respondents' expectations and perceptions of service quality. The results indicate that the respondents' positive expectations of service quality correlate weakly with their perceptions of service quality ($r = 0.130$; $P = 0.011$).

Table 5. KMO and Bartlett's Test for Expectation and Perception of Service Quality

Section	Service quality	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity		
			Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.
1	Expectation	0.830	7080.276	66	0.000
2	Perception	0.803	9120.802	66	0.000

Source: Researcher's Self-Computation from Field Survey, 2024.

The data in Table 5 indicates that the Kaiser-Meyer value for both expectations and perception of service quality exceeded the recommended values, while Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant, thus supporting the suitability of the correlation matrix.

4.1. Summary of Results

The findings revealed a consistent negative gap between customer expectations and perceptions across all five dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Customers had high expectations, particularly in areas such as modern facilities, visually appealing materials, prompt service, and employee competence. However, their actual experiences were lacking, indicating dissatisfaction with service delivery. The expectation that received the highest positive rating was that "the behaviour of employees in an excellent government agency will instil confidence in customers". Conversely, the most favourable perception was that "employees understand

the specific needs of their customers". These results highlight the need for TIKZN to enhance service responsiveness, reliability, and customer engagement to better meet stakeholder expectations.

This pattern of gaps between expectations and perceptions is consistent with findings from other studies in South Africa's service sectors. For example, a study on fashion retail stores in Durban (Tlapana et al., 2024) also utilised the SERVQUAL model. It found that while customers had high expectations for physical aspects, such as modern equipment and well-groomed staff, the perception scores were slightly lower. However, these scores were not as significantly negative as those observed in the TIKZN case. Interestingly, the fashion retail study reported positive gap scores in some areas, such as modern-looking equipment and visually appealing facilities. This suggests that retail stores were generally more successful in meeting customer expectations compared to TIKZN. The retail sector's emphasis on customer experience and competitive positioning may account for this difference. Similarly, a study conducted on supermarket chain stores in KwaZulu-Natal (Noel, Govender, 2024) found that customers had positive perceptions of service quality, particularly regarding personal interaction, physical aspects, and store policies. Utilising structural equation modelling (SEM), the study identified strong positive relationships between personal interaction and customer satisfaction, as well as between satisfaction and customer loyalty. However, the study revealed that reliability did not significantly impact customer satisfaction, which aligns with the findings from TIKZN, where reliability was noted as one of the weaker dimensions. This indicates that, across different sectors, customers prioritise interpersonal engagement and tangible service aspects over procedural reliability, which may be seen as a basic expectation rather than a distinguishing factor.

In contrast, the study on uShaka Marine World theme park (Kalanga, 2022) underscored the significance of the physical environment and staff interactions in shaping customer satisfaction. Visitors had high expectations for service quality and generally expressed satisfaction with attractions such as "Dangerous Creatures" and "Sea World". However, the study identified shortcomings in areas like food offerings and the diversity of attractions. It emphasised that both emotional and experiential factors play a crucial role in service quality, indicating that customer satisfaction in leisure and tourism settings is influenced by both tangible and intangible elements. This finding aligns with TIKZN's research, which revealed that customers expect visually appealing materials and genuine employee engagement. This suggests that emotional connections and presentation are essential across various sectors.

The TIKZN study is notable for its focus on a government agency, where service delivery is often hindered by bureaucratic processes and limited resources. In contrast to the retail and tourism sectors, which are driven by profit and prioritise customer satisfaction, public agencies may find it challenging to respond quickly to customer feedback and implement improvements in their services. This context may account for the larger gaps between expectations and perceptions observed in the TIKZN study. Nevertheless, the findings from all three comparative studies emphasise the importance of aligning service delivery with customer expectations, investing in staff training, and improving both the physical and interpersonal aspects of service environments. In conclusion, the TIKZN study provides valuable insights into the quality of public sector services, identifying areas for improvement and aligning with broader trends seen in the retail and tourism sectors. The consistent focus on tangibles, responsiveness, and personal interaction across various studies indicates that these factors are universally important to customers. To bridge the gap between customer expectations and perceptions, TIKZN and

similar agencies must prioritise customer-centric strategies, invest in employee development, and continuously monitor service performance using validated tools like SERVQUAL. By doing so, they can enhance customer satisfaction, build trust, and improve their effectiveness in delivering public services.

4.2. Limitations of the study

This study has limitations due to its focus on a single provincial agency, TIKZN, which may affect the applicability of the findings to other regions or government entities. The specific context and operational dynamics of TIKZN may not represent broader service delivery trends. Additionally, the use of self-reported data collected through structured questionnaires introduces the risk of response bias as the participants might provide socially desirable answers or misinterpret the questions. Furthermore, relying solely on quantitative methods limits the depth of understanding regarding customer experiences, which could be enhanced through qualitative approaches such as interviews or focus groups.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights a significant gap between customer expectations and perceptions of service quality at Trade and Investment KwaZulu-Natal (TIKZN). To address these discrepancies and enhance service delivery, several strategic recommendations are proposed. First, it is suggested that TIKZN improve the overall quality of its services. This can be achieved by implementing rigorous customer satisfaction measures that are continuously monitored. To ensure objectivity and transparency, these measures should be assessed by an independent external service, such as a market research company. Regular audits will help identify gaps between actual performance and customer expectations, allowing the organisation to take corrective action promptly.

The quality-of-service delivery starts with education. TIKZN should invest in comprehensive training programs for employees at all levels. These programs should focus on enhancing technical skills, promoting behavioural changes, and nurturing a customer-centric attitude. A specialised customer service course should be introduced, particularly for frontline staff who interact directly with clients. This will ensure that employees are well-equipped to provide services that meet or exceed customer expectations. In addition to technical training, TIKZN should establish a robust internal support system that encourages teamwork and recognises employee achievements. Team-building initiatives and recognition programs with incentives can significantly enhance morale and performance. Senior management should publicly acknowledge outstanding service delivery, and a dedicated section in the organisation's newsletter or brochure should be used to celebrate employee excellence. This approach will cultivate a culture of appreciation and foster long-term commitment to customer service.

To enhance employee capabilities and improve client service at TIKZN, clear guidelines should be established focusing on continuous learning, goal setting, and performance management. These guidelines will foster an environment that promotes professional growth and accountability. Additionally, improved engagement and communication between management and staff will enhance reliability and responsiveness. It is important to explore internal communication platforms to facilitate the sharing of ideas and to identify challenges in service delivery. A key recommendation is to establish a dedicated "Client Care Unit" within the One-Stop-Shop department. This unit will be

responsible for managing customer complaints and ensuring they are directed to the appropriate departments or unit heads. The Client Care Unit must maintain a structured reporting system, submitting weekly or monthly reports that detail common issues, their frequency, resolution timelines, and mitigation strategies. This proactive approach will enable TIKZN to address recurring problems effectively and improve customer satisfaction.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the urgent need for TIKZN to address the gap between customer expectations and actual service delivery. The consistent negative gap across all five SERVQUAL dimensions, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, indicates that clients are not receiving the level of service they anticipate. Addressing this issue is critical for improving customer satisfaction and enhancing institutional credibility.

By implementing the recommended strategies, TIKZN can improve operational efficiency, foster a culture of excellence, and strengthen relationships with its clients. These strategies include rigorous customer satisfaction monitoring, employee training, improved internal communication, and the establishment of a dedicated client care unit to manage complaints and feedback. Additionally, conducting external audits and performance evaluations will ensure accountability and transparency in service delivery.

The integration of these initiatives will position TIKZN as a responsive and customer-focused investment promotion agency. Ultimately, such improvements will enhance public sector performance, boost investor confidence, and promote sustainable economic development in KwaZulu-Natal. This study provides a foundation for future service quality enhancements and underscores the importance of aligning institutional practices with stakeholder expectations.

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