

USE OF THE CIT METHOD FOR QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF CATERING SERVICES

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Abstract: When using various types of services, the customer may experience positive or negative situations, incidents. These incidents may affect the customer's satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Therefore, these incidents can be a source of very valuable information for the enterprise about the quality of the services it offers. The problem, however, is their analysis, because such incidents can affect different aspects of the service, but also, as mentioned earlier, can have a positive or negative impact on customer satisfaction. The Critical Incident Technique (CIT), often mentioned in the literature, can be used for such an analysis. With this method, it is possible to isolate situations that are typical of the negative and positive feelings of the customers, as well as to determine the frequency of their occurrence. The purpose of the papers was to analyze the quality of services offered by the chosen catering enterprise with use of CIT. The research took form of a direct interview with customers after delivery of the chosen service. Data obtained on this basis was analyzed: all incidents were first divided into groups and categories as well as positive and negative incidents, and then statistics for individual categories were presented. This research allowed to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the research service, but at the same time to indicate the areas of potential improvement.

Keywords: service quality, CIT, customer, direct interview

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality is one of the most important issues in the contemporary world. In case of services, the customer is the best source of information on the quality, as he takes part in the preparation of these services (Kardas, 2018; Kowalik and Klimecka-Tatar, 2018; Mazur, 2018). During the process of the services provision, different, often unpredictable incidents that may affect the customer's satisfaction or dissatisfaction, may appear. Due to their very large diversity, their analysis is often very difficult. In such cases, it will be helpful to use the Critical Incident Technique (Stauss, 1993; Serrat, 2010).

CIT can be defined as a set of procedures for collecting direct information about human behavior that facilitates problem solving and the development of broad psychological principles (Yonas et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2009). CIT can be treated as one of the instruments of improvement. It indicates the strengths and weaknesses of the services offered by the enterprise, and thus indicates the areas of potential improvement. It has been used in a variety of service contexts in recent years to explore service research issues and has been instrumental in advancing understanding of these issues (Gremler D.D. 2004; Marcella et al., 2013).

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is one of the most popular and most frequently described methods for service quality assessment. However, it is not used very often because of the time it takes to conduct and to analyze the results.

The author of CIT is commonly considered J. Flanagan, who developed this technique for research for the Aviation Psychology Program of US Air Force during World War II (Krok, 2011; Flanagan, 1954; Butterfield et al., 2005). He conducted research in three types of the service enterprises: in hotels, restaurants and airlines. The study was attended by seventy-five interviewers who had the task of gathering from the respondents data on ten critical incidents that occurred during the service provision process: 5 with positive and 5 negative, which were particularly memorable.

CIT introduces an important term - a critical incident. The incident itself, also called an event in literature, can be defined as observable human action that is sufficient enough to be able to give some conclusions (Bitner et al., 1990; Douglas et al., 2009). A critical incident is an interaction between a customer and a service enterprise employee which is particularly satisfactory or unsatisfactory. The level of satisfaction is the difference between the perceived features of the service and the expectations of the recipient. If the features of a given service do not meet expectations, the service buyer is dissatisfied, while if the service features exceed expectations, the buyer is willing to renew the purchase of the service (Pilarz and Kot, 2019).

High satisfaction fosters the formation of strong, emotional relationships, and then the emergence of customer loyalty (Otto, 2004; Ingaldi, 2018). For an incident to be considered critical, it must meet four conditions: the occurrence of interaction between a given customer and employee; from the point of view of the recipient, the incident should be strongly positive message (very satisfied) or negative (unsatisfactory); being a separate case; detailed presentation of the fact so that the person who conducts the interview could describe and understand it.

The basis of CIT is the collection of incidents by direct interview with people and analyzing them in order to arrange them in the appropriate scheme, which allows to detect problems and their causes. Respondents are asked about specific incidents that have happened in the past and have cause particularly satisfaction or dissatisfaction. They are asked to focus on one incident or more. Incidents are collected as long as they allow for a real and potential effect and conclusions (Bitner et al., 1990).

CIT steps are following (Czubala, 2006; Ingaldi, 2018; Wolnowska et al., 2009):

1. Direct interview with people using the services. The respondent talks about his feelings, and the role of the interviewer is to help, in accordance with the assumptions of the previously prepared questionnaire.
2. Categorization. Once the information has been collected, an incident identification system is created to serve the categorization of incidents based on similarities. Sorting of incidents into groups and categories according to their similarities are made by independent experts, then the results of the works are compared.
3. Final categorization. On the basis of a two-stage analysis carried out in the previous stage, the independent expert assigns described incidents to particular groups and categories.
4. Creating statistics. The research consists in presenting the proportion between positive and negative events in each group, as well as between them.

Critical incidents described by the respondents are classified into categories that correspond to specific areas of the given service enterprise's activity (Stoma and Doroszewicz, 2009; Jubenville and Cairns 2016). This classification then allows to recognize which areas of the service provider's operation need to be improved. The best-known division into categories was made by the precursors of the CIT method: Bitner, Booms and Tetreault. An example of the division made by Fraś (2014) was presented Table 1.

Table 1
Groups and categories taken into account in CIT

Group	Category
Reaction of the staff to any mistakes of the enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – reaction to unavailability of the service, – reaction to service delay, – reaction to other defects related to basic services.
Reaction of the staff to the needs and requests of the customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – reaction to "special" customer needs, – reaction to customer preferences, – reaction to a mistake, which is granted to the customer, – reaction to the nuisance of other customers.
Spontaneous staff operation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – attention to the customer, – sincere, "unusual" behavior of the staff, – staff behavior in the context of cultural norms, – overall assessment, – behavior in adverse circumstances.

Source: (Fraś, 2014).

The use of CIT for assessing the quality of services allows for (Łańcucki, 2003; Chen and Barrows, 2015):

- learning accurate and consistent interpretations and assessments of incidents without their excessive distortion, which may occur when using other types of questionnaires,
- identifying the type of knowledge that the service personnel may need,
- developing programs for monitoring customer satisfaction,
- designing procedures and policies of enterprises operating in the services sector,
- proper training of personnel who have direct contact with the customers.

The results obtained from the conducted research are mainly used for the design of services that would be the most adequate to the customers' expectations so for

improvement of the provided services. CIT is one of the best and most appropriate tools to identify the sources of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the offered services and the process of their provision (Czajkowska and Ulewicz, 2006; Radkowski 2005).

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted in a small catering enterprise in Silesia. The research took the form of a direct interview with people who used the chosen service. The first questions concerned whether the customers actually used the services of the chosen enterprise and whether he remembered any positive or negative incident related to it so non-customers answers could be eliminated.

Data obtained from direct interviews was analyzed: Incidents were first divided into groups and categories as well as positive and negative incidents, and then statistics for individual categories were presented. The results were shown in tabular form. The percentage of positive incidents is interpreted as a synthetic result measuring the experienced quality. During the division into groups, the groups that usually are used in the Servqual method were chosen (Mahmoud and Khalifa, 2015; Gilmore, 2003; Ulewicz 2014).

Next, a matrix of two variables was built (Figure 1), where the X-axis is the number of positive incidents assigned to each category, while the Y-axis is the number of negative incidents. The positive incidents here are called the potential of magic moments, while the negative incidents the potential of poverty moments. The matrix has been transformed in relation to the original one and based on the Cartesian system. This facilitates both the matrix creation and reading the results.

Both variables were evaluated on a two-stage scale: small and big. Each group of incidents was evaluated in the above-mentioned scale based on the number of incidents. Scale limits can be determined independently based on the analyzed data (Urban, 2018). The lateral limits were determined by checking the minimum and maximum number of positive and negative incidents, while the division limit as half of this interval. The limits have been calculated separately for both axis.

Potential of poverty moments	big	Creating dissatisfaction	Critical
	small	Neutral	Creating satisfaction
		small	big
		Potential of magic moments	

Fig. 1. Matrix of classification of critical incidents (own study on the basis of Ravenscroft and Rogers, 1997)

4. RESULTS

The classification of all 489 critical incidents, selected from the respondents' answers included in the questionnaires of the interviews was made. These incidents were divided into five thematic groups and 17 categories. Table 2 presents a list of positive and negative incidents that have been described by customers.

Table 2
Results of CIT analysis for the research enterprise

Groups and categories	Type of incidents				All incidents	
	Positive		Negative		Sum	
	number	%	number	%	number	%
G1. Service material infrastructure						
1. Building	4	0.82	7	1.43	11	2.25
2. Equipment	13	2.66	11	2.25	24	4.91
3. Parking	7	1.43	9	1.84	16	3.27
4. Summer garden	6	1.23	7	1.43	13	2.66
5. Toilets	13	2.66	21	4.29	34	6.95
6. Dishes	19	3.89	17	3.48	36	7.36
<i>Sum for G1</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>12.68</i>	<i>72</i>	<i>14.72</i>	<i>134</i>	<i>27.40</i>
G2. Service offer						
7. Updated offer	11	2.25	15	3.07	26	5.32
8. Opening hours	17	3.48	9	1.84	26	5.32
9. Individual events	21	4.29	11	2.25	32	6.54
<i>Sum for G2</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>10.02</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>7.16</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>17.18</i>
G3. Staff responsiveness						
10. Staff knowledge about offer	11	2.25	17	3.48	28	5.73
11. Polite staff	19	3.89	6	1.23	25	5.11
12. Fast reacting staff	27	5.52	17	3.48	44	9.00
<i>Sum for G3</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>11.66</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>8.18</i>	<i>97</i>	<i>19.84</i>
G4. Staff honesty						
13. Service vs. order	25	5.11	13	2.66	38	7.77
14. Bill vs. order	16	3.27	19	3.89	35	7.16
<i>Sum for G4</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>8.38</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>6.54</i>	<i>73</i>	<i>14.93</i>
G5. Staff empathy						
15. Staff attention to customers	7	1.43	19	3.89	26	5.32
16. Understanding specific need of customers	24	4.91	13	2.66	37	7.57
17. Communication with staff	17	3.48	21	4.29	38	7.77
<i>Sum for G5</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>9.82</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>10.8</i>	<i>101</i>	<i>20.65</i>
Total sum	257	52.56	232	47.4	489	100.00

Source: own study.

Analyzing the data contained in Table 2, it can be seen that the distribution of positive and negative critical incident is very similar. Such a situation should be worrying, because in just over 50% of incidents described by the customers high satisfaction was noticed.

Considering the percentage shares of particular groups of critical incidents, it can be concluded that in the case of positive events, these shares were more closely related. The most frequent sources of customer satisfaction were incidents related to service material infrastructure (12.68% described positive incidents), followed by staff responsiveness (11.66%). If it comes to the service material infrastructure, the incidents assigned to this group were also those that brought the most dissatisfaction (14.72% of negative events). In the case of the group staff honesty, the lowest number of both positive (8.38%) and negative (6.54%) incidents was recorded.

Analyzing particular categories in case of positive incidents, it can be noticed that the most incidents described by customers concerned fast reacting staff (5.52%); service vs. order (5.11%); understanding specific need of customers (4.91%). These are

important elements in the case of catering enterprises and restaurants, because customers do not like to wait, they want to be quickly served, and their service and what they get must be same like in their order. The category understanding specific need of customers is not surprising. Currently, many customers are on specific diets, e.g. gluten-free, sugar-free, lactose-free and expect such offer. A small share of positive incidents related to building was also noted (0.82%).

When analyzing negative incidents, it was noticed that many of them were concerned toilets (4.29%), communication with staff (4.29%). In places where meals are eaten, customers spend a lot of time, they must have access to a clean toilet. However, it should be emphasized that their bad condition or dirt is not only fault only of the enterprise itself, but very often of customers who leave a lot of disorder after the use of toilet. Whereas, in the case of communication with staff, the enterprise should react quite fast. In addition, the least negative events concerned polite staff (1.23%), but they should also worry, because the staff has direct contact with customers and directly affects their satisfaction or lack of it.

Based on the data included in Table 2, the minimum and maximum numbers of positive and negative incidents were determined and the center of the interval was calculated. In case of positive incidents, the limits were <4; 27>, and the center of the range was 15.5, while in case of negative incidents <6; 21>, and 13.5. Ready matrix was presented in Figure 2.

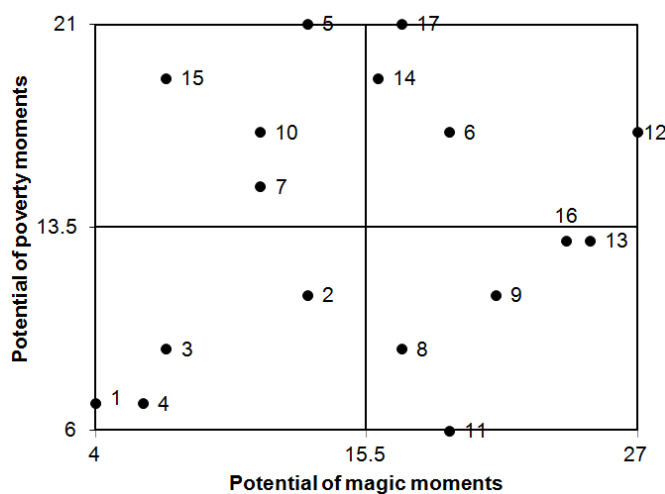


Fig. 2. Matrix of classification of critical incidents for the research enterprise (own study)

From Figure 2 it can be concluded that among the categories requiring improvement, the following are the most urgent: toilets, updated offer, staff knowledge about offer and staff attention to customers. These are incidents that specifically create dissatisfaction of customers. In their case, there were little positive and many negative incidents. The second group of categories requiring improvement, but further include: dishes, fast reacting staff, bill vs. order, communication with staff. These are categories for which a lot of both negative but positive incidents have been recorded. Subsequently, the management of the research enterprise, according to the authors, should carry out a thorough analysis of the indicated areas on the basis of presented results, in order to propose improvement actions. Such actions should affect the reduction of negative critical incidents, and subsequently, should increase the level of customer satisfaction of the research catering enterprise.

5. CONCLUSION

In the paper, the quality analyze of the services offered by the chosen catering enterprise with use of CIT was conducted. The survey was conducted in the form of a direct interview with people who used the services of the research enterprise. The classification of all 489 critical incidents, selected from the respondents' answers was made. These incidents were divided into positive and negative ones, followed by division into 5 thematic groups and 17 categories. The analysis allowed to indicate that only in case of slightly over 50% of incidents described by the customers it was possible to notice high satisfaction, which is not a good situation for the research enterprise. It can be concluded that improvement is needed.

The analysis of the obtained results allowed to indicate which categories of incidents should be more thoroughly analyzed by the managers in terms of improvement. They were mainly: toilets, updated offer, staff knowledge about offer and staff attention to customers. Improvement in these areas should reduce the occurrence of negative critical incidents and thus affect the satisfaction of customers.

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