...there is no such thing as service industries. There are only industries where service components are greater or less than those of other industries...

We all recognise that optometric practices provide a service (mainly eye exams) accompanied by the supply of goods (mainly spectacles or contact lenses). Despite the increasing options of buying optical goods from elsewhere and online, the overwhelming majority of people still choose to attend for an eye exam before purchasing optical goods usually from the same provider.

Mintel’s most recent report\(^2\) makes it clear that eyewear users are indeed aware of the importance of the eye exam and its role in eye health. Yet the marketing of optometric practices is dominated, both externally and internally, by the marketing of optical goods rather than services. Perhaps now, with increasing competition, a squeeze on profits, a reduction of growth predicted in the industry\(^2\) and an increasingly ageing population, it is time to consider the marketing of optometric services as the real differentiator.

This series of articles will review the characteristics of services; they will discuss how they impact on the provision of optometric services and on marketing of optometric services.

**Unique tendencies of service**

Although there are exceptions, services have a number of very distinct tendencies (or characteristics) that differentiate them from goods and these have an impact on how they are marketed. The key tendencies that generally define services (Figure 1) are:

- **Intangibility**
- **Heterogeneity/variability**
- **Inseparability/simultaneity**
- **Perishability**

A service such as an eye exam is difficult to assess in a physical sense. One cannot touch it, and therefore unlike optical goods, one cannot examine it before purchase. Whereas before purchasing spectacles, patients and customers can try them on, can feel the weight, consider the size, colour and finish, look at any markings, logos etc, and take a view about their quality. This is not possible with the eye exam.

The ideal way to judge the eye exam is to experience it. This intangible and abstract nature of the eye exam has a number of consequences for optometric practices, patients and customers. It means that patients and customers have difficulty in evaluating competing providers of the service, and perceive the purchase of these services as highly risky. Because it is intangible, buyers will look for tangible clues including things like the cleanliness of the practice, the appearance of the staff, the state of equipment which may be visible etc, to help them decide if they are going to attend your practice or not. As a result they place a great deal of emphasis on personal information sources (word-of-mouth) and will often use price as a basis for gauging quality.

In such circumstances the reputation of a single individual may decide the outcome. Consequently practices have to stress tangible clues to help prospective patients and customers. These can be in the form of a brochure about the eye exam process, or by making it easier for the
public to view the examination process (e.g. a view of the consulting room equipment and/or pre-screening equipment and/or a slide show/animation/streaming video of what happens in an eye exam). In this way a degree of tangibility is provided to what is, essentially, an intangible product.

In addition to this, the reliance of prospective patients and customers on personal information sources means that smarter practices adopt some method of encouraging positive word-of-mouth comments and recommendations. This can range from a simple thank you letter to existing patients, who recommend new patients to the practice, to a more comprehensive mechanism and ‘instruments’ that provides some reward as an incentive for recommendations. The idea is to turn patients into ambassadors of the practice.

Having measures in place

Although pricing requires consideration of the cost base, the customer/patient, and the competition, remember that prospective patients and customers often view price as a signal of quality. Thus practices need to be sure that they are not charging fees at a level that may raise negative questions in the minds of prospective patients and customers about the quality of the eye exam. The old adage you get what you pay for is still very alive in the public mind.

The intangible nature of the eye exam makes it essential to have a measure in place of how well the practice is doing with its services delivery. That is to say, to create a measure of patient and customer ‘satisfaction index’.

In many practices this may mean introducing a patient questionnaire (although there are other methods) to gauge patient satisfaction or to explore their experiences of attending the practice. The questions that need to be asked will have to be a few carefully formulated ones to elicit a view on the key interactions of the patient journey before they attend, during their visit and after they have attended. These will then need to be analysed and the information gleaned acted upon.

Because a single individual can make or break the success or otherwise of the practice, the behaviour and reputation of every single member of staff alike, needs to be positive in the practice, before, after and during the patient’s visit and in the local community (e.g. friendly, compassionate, supportive of the local community, highly qualified, etc).

It should be increasingly apparent that, in general, when marketing services (an intangible like an eye exam) the idea is to add tangibles (e.g. a report or a detailed prescription). On the other hand, when marketing goods (tangibles like frames and lenses) then it is best to add intangibles (e.g. after sales services, brand, etc).

The next article in this series will deal with the service characteristic of ‘heterogeneity’, or ‘variability, and its impact in an optometric context.

References