

ASSESSMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY OF WHOLESALE CONSTRUCTION AND FINISHING MATERIALS SALES COMPANIES: CASE OF LITHUANIA

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Abstract. Customer service is one of the main factors influencing the success of a company's operations, as it directly determines customer satisfaction, loyalty and the company's image. High-quality service encourages customers to return and strengthens long-term cooperation. This article analyses customer service principles and their significance, and service quality assessment methods that identify problem areas and ensure high service standards. The main criteria for assessing service quality are discussed, such as employee professionalism, speed of service, clear and polite communication, understanding customer needs and problem-solving effectiveness. The importance of feedback in improving service quality is emphasised, and customer satisfaction measurement methods are discussed, including surveys, feedback analysis and service quality methodologies. The article also underlines that continuous assessment of service quality and customer service improvement is essential to achieving long-term business growth, customer loyalty and competitive advantage. Therefore, this article aims to determine how customers assess the quality of service of wholesale construction and finishing materials sales companies, i.e., their expectations and the actual situation. A systematic analysis of scientific literature and the SERVQUAL method is used to achieve this goal. The results obtained show that companies in this sector, due to the specifics of their activities, pay little attention to meeting customer expectations. However, they still have to assess and consider customer expectations to achieve a high-quality service standard. This is the only way to adapt to market changes and ensure long-term success more effectively.

Keywords: customer service, service quality, customer satisfaction, SERVQUAL, customer expectations.

JEL Classification: M0, M20.

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1. Introduction

Customer service is one of the main factors influencing the success of a company's operations, as it directly determines customer satisfaction, loyalty and the company's image. High-quality service encourages customers to return and strengthens long-term cooperation, an essential condition for competitive advantage in a dynamic business environment. Lithuania's wholesale construction and finishing materials sales sector is an integral part of the country's economy, as these companies supply the construction sector with the necessary materials and finishing products. The specifics of this sector are characterised by high competitiveness and the need to ensure high-quality services to maintain long-term cooperation with business customers and partners. In this context, the quality of customer service takes on particular importance because not only does the prompt execution of orders depend on it, but also the ability to meet changing customer expecta-

tions. The wholesale construction and finishing materials sector faces special challenges, as customer needs and expectations are dynamic and often depend on project scope, complexity and deadlines. Therefore, service quality is decisive in ensuring customer satisfaction and loyalty. In addition, competition among suppliers is increasing in the market, so companies strive to stand out by offering a wide range of products or competitive prices and providing an exceptional customer service experience that forms long-term business relationships.

The importance of customer service quality in this activity is also highlighted by the fact that in the wholesale segment, customers are often professional buyers – construction companies, interior designers, contractors and other professionals. These customers expect fast and reliable service to ensure the smooth progress of projects and an efficient supply of materials. They value product quality and smooth communication, employee competence, problem-solving effectiveness, and quick

response to unforeseen situations. Thus, the quality of customer service directly affects the company's reputation and long-term business relationships. In recent years, the importance of customer service quality for business success has been increasingly emphasised in the scientific literature (Gao et al., 2021; Bayad et al., 2021; Sheth et al., 2023; Chaithanapat et al., 2022; Chen, 2024) and in business practice. Customer satisfaction and loyalty are key factors that help companies maintain a competitive advantage. Service quality becomes especially important when customers in the wholesale sector value not only the product range or price but also fast and efficient service, professional communication, and the ability to solve problems quickly. This constant pursuit of customer satisfaction requires companies to invest in improving employee competencies and continuously optimising service processes.

As scientists (Grobelsna, 2021; Pishini et al., 2025; Alsalfiti & Notteboom, 2025; Song et al., 2025) provide, service quality assessment and improvement are a complex process that includes monitoring not only the level of service but also feedback analysis and identification of customer needs. For this purpose, service quality assessment methods, such as SERVQUAL (A Multiple-Item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality Method), are often used, which allow for a structured analysis of quality according to specific criteria: professionalism of employees, speed of service, clarity of communication, understanding of customer needs and efficiency of problem-solving. A continuous quality assessment system ensures the ability to identify and eliminate shortcomings promptly.

Thus, this article analyses customer service principles and their significance for business success and discusses service quality assessment methods and practical aspects of their application. It also examines how wholesale construction and finishing materials sales companies in Lithuania assess service quality and the main challenges and opportunities in this area. The purpose of the selected study is to determine how customers evaluate the quality of service in companies in this sector, i.e., their expectations and the actual situation. The research methodology uses a systematic analysis of scientific literature and the SERVQUAL method, highlighting the main gaps in service quality and providing recommendations for their elimination.

This article is structured as follows. The first part presents the theoretical foundations of customer service, its main principles, and the importance of the customer service policy. This part was based on the works of internationally recognised scientists. The second part presents the research methodology and the SERVQUAL method used during the study. The third part presents the research results that were obtained. The last part presents the conclusion and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background

This section will present how other researchers treat customer service, what concepts they present, and will also

analyse scientific literature and works related to the main aspects of customer service, their influence on customer loyalty, satisfaction, company reputation, and success. The importance of customer service policy and its influence on competitiveness will also be analysed.

2.1. Theoretical review of customer service

In today's scientific literature (Metz et al., 2020; Lee & Lee, 2020; Gao et al., 2021; Bayad et al., 2021; Sheth et al., 2023; Sarkar & Dey, 2023), customer service is presented as an integral part of the business. Over the past few decades, the attitude towards the customer and its influence on the company's activities have constantly changed. Customer service in the service sector continues to play an increasingly important role. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the alternatives offered and the level of services provided. As Tomczyk (2018) states, customers offer various types of value to the company: they pay for goods or services, recommend them, and share experiences and impressions. The essence of customer service lies in ensuring a positive experience that encourages customers to return and recommend the company to others. This can be achieved in various ways: through professional communication between employees, a personalised approach to each customer, effective problem-solving, and modern technologies such as automated responses or artificial intelligence.

Table 1 shows how customer service concepts have changed over time.

As seen from Table 1, customer service can be described as an integral part of business, where quality customer service means a timely response to inquiries or problem-solving, mutual communication, and the ability to understand customer needs and build long-term relationships. Kumar et al. (2018), Maqsood et al. (2019), Petrescu and Krishen (2025), Chaithanapat et al. (2022), and Chen (2024) argue that to understand their customers better, companies must pay great attention to customer service. Choosing the most appropriate measures and taking appropriate actions because the level of service is a measure of the company's operational efficiency in terms of product usefulness in time and place, an expression that ensures not only the retention of existing customers but also the possibility of attracting potential customers. Individualised attention becomes essential, which in the field of customer service is understood as the recognition of customer needs, expectations and appropriate satisfaction (Meidutė-Kavaliauskienė, 2024). Nalluri et al. (2025) also emphasise the importance of loyal customers, who claim that customers with positive emotions and good experiences return and recommend the company to others. Typically, it costs companies up to seven times more to attract a new customer than to retain an existing one. It is emphasised that existing loyal customers often become ambassadors for the company – they share positive experiences with friends and relatives. Regular customers reduce sales fluctuations and ensure more stable income.

When analysing the importance of customer service,

Table 1. Descriptions of customer service concepts (source: created by authors)

Parasuraman et al., 1988	Service quality can be defined as the difference between customer expectations and actual service performance.
Zeithaml, 1988	Service quality is defined as the customer's overall service evaluation.
Følstad et al., 2018	"... at the same time, customer service is resource-intensive, as it typically requires highly personalised interactions with customers, involving skilled customer service personnel."
Asbjørn and Skjuve, 2019	"Customer service is the consumption of information and assistance services from their providers. Customer service can be designed to enhance customer engagement with the service provider and increase company revenue, or to provide customers with the assistance they need."
Metz et al., 2020	"... customer service is an important factor in retaining customers and profits, as well as acquiring new customers. Customer service issues can negatively affect the company's image, sales, and customer retention."
Lee and Lee, 2020	Companies must provide a diverse range of services, depending on the type of assistance the customer needs, the product knowledge required, and even the psychological characteristics of the customer.
Bayad et al., 2021	"... any business worldwide depends on the customer; the product's value and profit always increase and decrease according to the customers' needs. Therefore, treating them as "kings of the market" is necessary.
Khrais and Alghamdi, 2021	The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the behaviour of consumers and their habits, and such a change has also forced businesses to change.
Singh et al., 2023	Customer service is the perception that the customer's expectations will be met due to the goods or services received. It measures the level of satisfaction or happiness that the customer experiences.
Gonu et al., 2023	"... the quality of a service is determined by its compliance with the customer's requirements and expectations, and the more it meets the requirements, the greater the satisfaction."

it is essential to note that the experience of purchasing a product or service is significant. Alhamdany et al. (2025) emphasise that quality customer service is directly related to higher customer satisfaction and that companies that provide high-quality service have a higher probability of customer engagement and long-term cooperation. This is also supported by De Albuquerque et al. (2025) and Roy Dutta (2025), who found that customers are willing to pay more for a better service experience. It is stated that 86% of customers are willing to pay more for a higher standard of service because customers who receive excellent service feel valued and are more likely to return. Yu and Rojniruttikul (2025) state that good service increases customer trust in the company and reduces their desire to look for alternatives. Ellitan et al. (2023) agree with this, where the study's results showed that the product and the service have a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction and purchase intentions. Makatora et al. (2025) claim that 73% of customers base their decision on where to buy a product or service on the quality of service, not on the price. The authors highlight customer service as the main factor determining a company's success in a competitive market. It is also emphasised that service quality is defined as the degree to which the user's experience meets their needs and expectations. Understanding customer needs is an essential part of customer service and business strategy. This understanding helps companies create products, services, and experiences that meet or exceed customer expectations. Most businesses agree that the quality of customer service is one of the most essential strategies and areas of activity for a company because a company's success depends on its orientation to customer needs, which are changing rapidly. For a company to respond quickly to changing customer needs, it must have a lot of information about each customer: their interests, requests, behaviour, etc.

It is observed that high satisfaction levels encourage positive recommendations and reviews, which can attract new customers. Positive service contributes to the formation of a company's image and can become a key competitive advantage (Grobelna, 2021; Pishini et al., 2025). Good customer service encourages positive reviews, which can significantly impact potential customers. Nalluri et al. (2025) emphasise that customer service directly impacts a company's reputation, reducing sales even if the products are of high quality. Rezki et al. (2025) and Promsiri et al. (2024) emphasise that personalised customer service is one of the most effective strategies for increasing customer satisfaction, including individualised recommendations, customised communication and customer history analysis. This way, customers feel valued when companies adapt services to their needs, promoting greater customer engagement and loyalty. Al-Waheed et al. (2025) argue that companies that offer high customer service quality can more easily differentiate themselves from their competitors and that most customers base their decision on where to buy a product or service on service quality rather than price. Roy Dutta (2025) argues that better customer service can be the main reason customers choose one company over another, even in a competitive market with similar product prices. High-quality service allows companies to connect emotionally with customers, encouraging long-term cooperation. Bongers et al. (2025) and Kalra (2023) argue that businesses that invest in customer service achieve higher customer loyalty, leading to long-term revenue growth. High-quality customer service can become a key competitive advantage, and negative experiences can spread quickly and damage a company's reputation. Pishini et al. (2025) agree with this, where a study found that about 91% of dissatisfied customers never return to the same service provider, and about a quarter of them share their negative experience with more than 15

people. Negative customer experiences can spread quickly through social networks and feedback platforms. To prevent this from happening, Nian and Takzare (2024) argue that one of the most critical factors in customer satisfaction is fast and effective problem resolution. Companies that respond quickly to customer inquiries and solve problems effectively have more loyal customers because slow customer service causes frustration and can force customers to switch to competitors. At the same time, adequate solutions increase trust in the company and reduce the number of complaints.

In conclusion, customer service remains an essential part of business, directly affecting customer satisfaction, loyalty and company success. Research shows (Grobelna, 2021; Pishini et al., 2025; Bongers et al., 2025; Kalra, 2023; Nian and Takzare, 2024; De Albuquerque et al., 2025; Roy Dutta, 2025) that high-quality service not only increases customer engagement and long-term cooperation but also encourages positive recommendations, contributes to the company's reputation and can become a key competitive advantage. Personalised service and quick problem resolution help ensure customer trust, reduce their desire to look for alternatives and promote stable revenue in the long run.

2.2. Analysis of theoretical aspects of customer service policy

Recently, customer service policy and high customer satisfaction have become key to service management. Krishnan and Rathakrishnan (2025) emphasise that customer service policy is a set of internal rules and methods of a company to ensure smooth, professional and customer-oriented service. Kumar et al. (2025) emphasise that a service policy focused on customer experience can improve a company's reputation and increase consumer trust in a brand. Firdaus et al. (2025) found that a consistently implemented customer service strategy allows companies to retain existing customers and attract new users. Alsalfiti and Notteboom (2025) found that companies that apply a dynamic customer service policy can more effectively meet customer needs and strengthen their position in the market. Meidutė-Kavaliauskienė (2024) states that customer service policy defines the company's standards, rules and principles that are followed when providing services or selling goods. An effective customer service policy helps ensure high-quality services, promotes long-term customer relationships and strengthens the company's reputation in the market. Companies with a well-defined customer service policy generate 20% more revenue on average than competitors who do not have strict standards (Ashraf et al., 2025). Alsalfiti and Notteboom (2025) emphasise that customer service policy should be focused on understanding and satisfying customer needs. This means the company must listen to customer expectations, analyse their behaviour and adjust its activities accordingly. Various tools, such as customer surveys, feedback analysis and market research, are used. Companies that pay sufficient

attention to customer feedback can often remain competitive because they adapt to market changes promptly and improve the quality of their services. According to Alhamdany et al. (2025), customer feedback is one of the leading business strategies that help enhance the quality of service and strengthen customer loyalty. According to the authors, companies that regularly analyse customer feedback have a 30% higher level of customer satisfaction than those that ignore customer feedback. Khan (2025) highlights that a standardised service process reduces the number of customer complaints and increases overall service efficiency. Clear and specific service standards are necessary to ensure consistent customer service levels. Sierra et al. (2017) argue that these standards can include response times, employee ethics in customer interactions, problem-solving processes, and other essential aspects of service. For example, many companies determine that customer inquiries via email must be answered within 24 hours and by phone, immediately or within a few minutes. It is also essential to define how employees should respond to customer complaints and how to resolve problems that arise effectively.

Song et al. (2025) argue that customer service policies should balance technology and human functions, as the human factor remains essential in-service delivery, as customers value personalised attention, empathy, and the ability to understand their individual needs. Therefore, best customer service practices often combine technology with professional, personalised communication. It is important to emphasise that technological advances provide opportunities to improve customer service. Therefore, companies should include various automation tools in their customer service activities to help them serve customers quickly and efficiently. These can consist of artificial intelligence-based chatbots, customer management systems that effectively manage customer data, and self-service platforms where customers can find the necessary information without direct employee intervention.

Another critical point is continuous improvement in customer service, a consistent and continuous process designed to effectively organise and manage service processes and ensure that service quality meets or exceeds customer expectations (Meidutė-Kavaliauskienė, 2024). Customer service policy must promote the development of employee competence. Customer service is often directly related to the abilities of company employees. Therefore, it is important to invest in their training, seminars and practical situations that help improve customer communication skills. Well-trained employees professionally serve customers and contribute to creating a positive company image.

In summary, a well-formed and implemented customer service policy is one of the most important components of a company's competitiveness. It includes understanding customer needs, setting clear service standards, developing employee competence, using technology and applying feedback systems. Companies that actively care about customer service strengthen their positions in the market and build long-term, valuable relationships with their customers.

While the literature widely supports the importance of high-quality and personalised customer service in increasing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and competitive advantage (e.g., Kumar et al., 2018; Alhamdany et al., 2025; Bongers et al., 2025), most studies focus on general outcomes across industries without examining how customer service strategies are implemented in specific sectors. Furthermore, while many sources highlight the benefits of customer service, there is a lack of empirical or comparative research assessing which components of service policies (e.g., response times, feedback loops, employee training, use of artificial intelligence) have the most significant impact on customer behaviour and loyalty. The interaction between human and technological aspects in service delivery is recognised but has not yet been adequately explored or quantified. Therefore, this article will analyse Wholesale Construction and Finishing Materials Sales Companies and how customers evaluate their changing customer service policies using the SERVQUAL method.

3. Research methodology

The SERVQUAL method was chosen for the analysis of service quality. It was developed in 1988 by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry and has become one of the most popular service quality assessment methodologies based on the difference between expectations and perceived quality. It assesses the extent to which the service provided meets customer expectations. It is a standardised 22-question questionnaire with attributes such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The questionnaire is presented in Table 2.

This methodology is designed to help service companies identify service weaknesses to implement customer service improvement strategies (Jonkisz et al., 2022). Ideally, it also acts as an early warning system, as the methodology can monitor service quality over time, providing long-term trends and performance guidelines and identifying changes in specific service areas (Sharifi et al., 2021).

Thus, this methodology was used to analyse the quality of services provided in wholesale construction and finishing materials sales companies and customer satisfaction with the services offered. The SERVQUAL method, compared to other customer satisfaction assessment methods, such as CSAT (Customer Satisfaction Score), stands out for its depth and methodological consistency. First of all, SERVQUAL allows you to assess service quality both *ex ante* (before the service is provided) and *ex post* (after the service is provided), making it possible to identify momentary shortcomings and systematic discrepancies between customer expectations and actual experiences.

Unlike CSAT, which focuses mainly on momentary customer satisfaction with a specific contact with the service, SERVQUAL uses a standardised questionnaire based on five essential dimensions of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and material aspects. Such a structure allows you to collect detailed, analytical data that becomes a significant basis for making strategic

Table 2. SERVQUAL questionnaire (source: created by authors based on Parasuraman et al., 1991)

Attribute	Number	Field of questions
Tangibility	1	Latest equipment
	2	The physical premises are visually attractive.
	3	Staff are well-groomed
	4	The appearance of the physical premises shall be consistent with the type of service or its activities.
Reliability	5	The company meets the promised deadline for the reply
	6	The company is empathetic and communicates with the customer when the customer has problems.
	7	They are reliable
	8	They provide their services as promised, on time.
	9	They keep targeted records.
Responsiveness	10	Staff will always tell customers exactly when the service will be carried out.
	11	It is reasonable to expect staff to provide prompt service.
	12	Employees must always be willing to help customers.
	13	It is normal for staff to respond quickly to customer queries.
Assurance	14	Staff must be reliable
	15	Customers need to feel safe when working with staff.
	16	Staff should be polite.
	17	Employees should receive adequate support from the company to do their jobs well.
Empathy	18	It is to be expected that the company will give individual attention to each of its customers.
	19	It can be expected that staff will give individual attention to each customer.
	20	Staff should be expected to have a full understanding of customer needs.
	21	It is realistic to expect staff to understand customer needs fully.
	22	The company must be open during hours that are convenient for all customers.

decisions about service improvement. In addition, the SERVQUAL method promotes a deep understanding of service quality gaps, one not only to assess the service itself, but also to assess the service itself and contextual factors – the physical environment, employee behaviour, and post-transactional service. Such an approach is especially important for organisations that seek not only to respond to customer opinions, but also to long-term quality improvement and strategic planning. In view of this, it can be argued that the SERVQUAL method is more appropriate when a holistic and consistent approach to assessing service quality is sought, especially in the long term.

Sample. A sample is an integral part of the study, in which representative data is selected from the entire research group. For the survey results to reflect the whole, assessing how many respondents' opinions are necessary to collect is essential. The selection of residents is carried out using the purposive (purposive) sampling method – the survey included long-term corporate clients whose opinions are based on repeated experience with the services provided by the organization. The study was conducted in wholesale construction and finishing materials sales companies, surveying customers and their opinions on service quality. The sample was calculated based on. Paniotto (1986) proposed a sample calculation Equation (1):

$$n = \frac{1}{\left(\Delta^2 + \frac{1}{N}\right)} = 296, EQ, \quad (1)$$

where n – the number of respondents required to be surveyed; Δ – error; N – the size of the study population.

According to the selected error, it was determined that 296 respondents should participate in the study. After assessing the risks that the questionnaires would not be filled out correctly, a more significant number of respondents, i.e. 400, were included in the study. Therefore, based on the SERVQUAL, both expected and actual service will be assessed. It is essential to mention that service quality is measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The expected level of service quality (from 1 – “Strongly disagree” to 7 – “Strongly agree”), and the experienced level of service quality (from 1 – “Very bad” to 7 – “Excellent”). The study's results are analysed according to the average of the expected (L) and experienced (P) service quality levels. The average of the expected service quality level is calculated according to the following Equation (2):

$$L = \left(\frac{1A + 2A + 3A + 4A + 5A + 6A + 7A}{n} \right), \quad (2)$$

where: L = expected level of service quality; A = number of respondents who chose the rating; n = sample size.

The experienced level of service quality (P) is calculated using the same formula as the expected (L) level of service quality. The size of the gap (K) between the experienced and expected levels of service quality is calculated using the following Equation (3):

$$K = P - L, \quad (3)$$

if: $K < 0$ (consumer expectations are not met); $K = 0$ (consumer expectations are met); $K > 0$ (consumer expectations are exceeded).

The results of the study will be presented in the next section.

4. The results of the research

During the study, five main service quality dimensions were assessed according to the SERVQUAL: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. To clarify the differences between customer expectations and experience, an assessment of both of these quality aspects was carried out.

Tangibility. When analysing demand data according to the tangibility attribute, the results of which are presented in Figure 1, a small gap is noticeable when comparing the difference obtained between the expected and experienced quality levels, as well as a slight difference is also evident when comparing the expected and experienced service quality levels (Figure 1). Respondents when assessing the first statement “if necessary, the company can provide samples of the supplied products”, gave 6.1 points, while the experienced service quality level according to this attribute was 5.6. The gap between the expected and experienced service quality level is –0.5 points. This shows that $K < 0$; therefore, it can be stated that customers' expected service quality level is lower than the provided service. The following statement is: “Delivered products are always neat and without damage.” The expectations of corporate customers are 6.2 points, and the actual experienced level of service quality is 5.7 points. The resulting gap is –0.4, respectively $K < 0$, which indicates

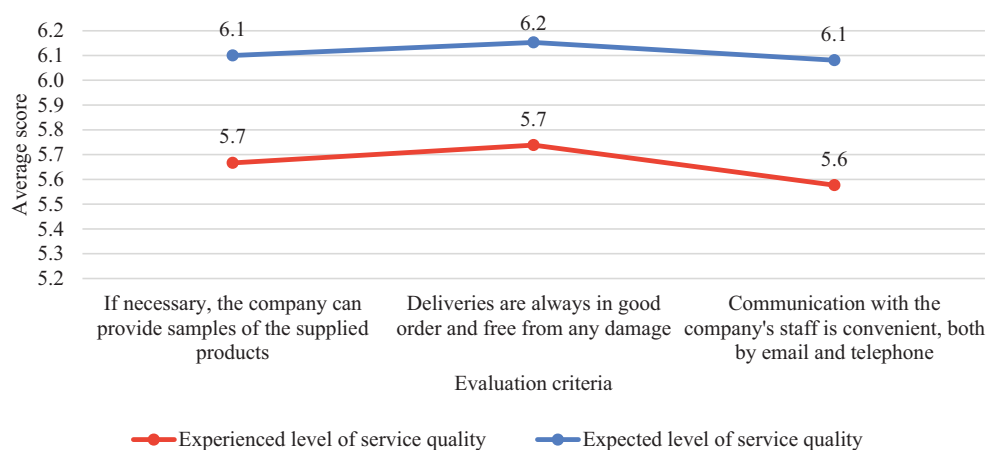


Figure 1. Comparison of expected and experienced service quality levels and gap sizes for the “Tangibility” evaluation criterion (source: compiled by the author)

that corporate customers have higher expectations. The statement "contacting company employees is convenient both by e-mail and phone" shows that the expected level of service quality is 6.1 points, and the experienced level is 5.7 points. The corresponding gap between the expected and experienced level of service quality for this statement is -0.5 points, which means that customers are not always comfortable using the communication tools offered by companies, and the introduction of alternative tools (technologies) in customer service should be assessed. It is necessary to emphasise that contact with employees and customers is very important for a company because it ensures a competitive advantage and demonstrates attention to the customer. If the customer does not receive a response, he always has a choice – to contact another company.

After analysing the first evaluation criterion, "Tangibility", all statements have negative gaps, which shows that respondents' expectations are higher for all tangibility attributes.

Reliability. In the analysis of the reliability attribute, slight differences are observed between the expected and experienced service quality levels (Figure 2).

When assessing whether the statement "the company's employees provide services on time", respondents gave 6.14 points to the expected level of service quality and 5.64 points to the experienced level. The gap in this case is -0.50 points. This allows us to conclude that customer expectations are much higher. The following attribute is whether "the employees provide the necessary information when problems arise", and respondents gave 6.1 points to the expected level of quality and 5.7 points to the experienced level. This leads to the conclusion that company employees do not always provide the necessary information when problems arise. When assessing the third attribute, whether "the company is a reliable service provider", respondents' expectations reached 6.1 points, and experience reached 5.7 points. In this case, the gap is also equal to 0.5 points. The fourth statement, "the

company's employees provide correct and accurate information related to your service," was evaluated: expected – 6.13 points, and experienced – 5.55 points, from which it follows that the gap size is equal to 0.58 points, which means that customer expectations significantly exceed the assessed service quality. The assessment of the fifth attribute includes "the company's employees prepare layouts and drawings accurately and without errors". The result showed that the expected service level was evaluated at 6.08, and the experienced level was 5.63; the gap size of these assessments is -0.45 points. Since the gap is negative, it is concluded that customer expectations are not satisfied. After analysing the last attribute, "the company's employees perform calculations correctly and without errors", it is noted that the expected service quality level was evaluated at 5.97 points, and the experienced level was 5.56. The gap size is -0.41 , which also indicates higher customer expectations.

After analysing the reliability attributes, it is essential to note that the smallest gap size between the expected and experienced service quality level was related to "the company's employees perform calculations correctly and without errors". It can be concluded that respondents often receive what is expected. Meanwhile, the analysis shows that the attribute with the most significant gap is "the company's employees provide correct and accurate information related to your service" in this case, the gap size was -0.58 points, which means that employees often provide inaccurate or inappropriate information related to the customer's service. When assessing the specifics of the companies under study, the customer often sends inaccurate quantities of materials, areas, etc., and the employees, having only such information, send preliminary calculations, drawings and estimates.

Responsiveness. A small gap was observed when assessing the quality of the service according to the third attribute. Respondents, when assessing the statement that "services are provided quickly and punctually", assigned 5.99 points to expectations and 5.53 points to the

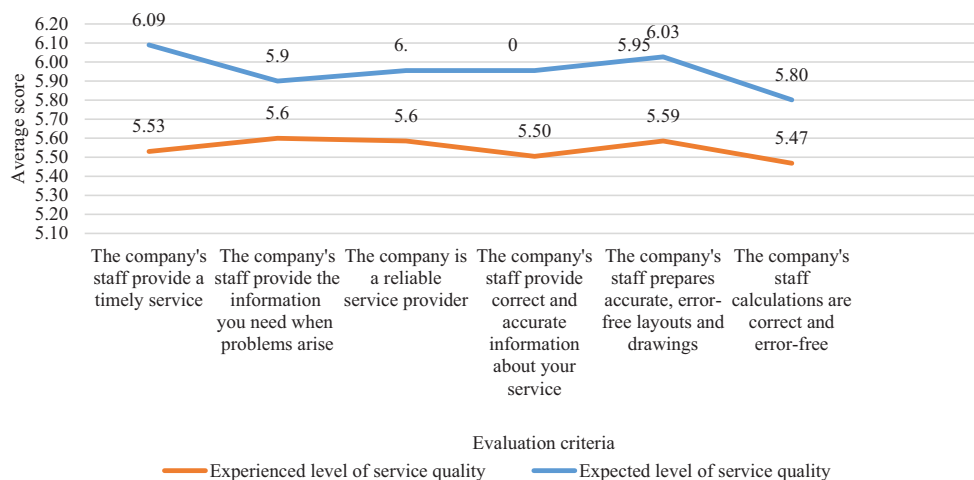


Figure 2. Comparison of expected and experienced service quality levels and gap sizes for the evaluation criterion "Reliability" (source: compiled by the authors)

experienced quality level; the resulting gap is -0.46 points (Figure 3). The results reflect the opinion that the service provision time would be shorter and deadlines would be met. The following attribute – “employees always respond to requests and wishes” shows that customer requests and wishes are not always responded to on time. After analyzing the third statement about “when a problem arises, employees start solving it as quickly as possible”, it can be concluded that employees are usually in no hurry to solve problems or it takes them longer than the customer expects. After assessing the last statement, “employees carefully resolve issues that arise”, expectations were evaluated at 6.09 points and experience at 5.69 points. The gap size is -0.40 points, meaning emerging problems are not resolved promptly.

In summary, negative gap sizes are visible in the response attributes. The most significant gap is observed in the statement “services are provided quickly and punctually”; the gap sizes of other statements are similar. When paying attention to the results obtained, it would be worth paying attention to the fact that customers always expect a quick response to inquiries and a shorter time for forming

proposals, submitting drawings and correcting comments or inaccuracies.

Assurance. When analysing the distribution of scores for this attribute, a slight difference is observed between the expected and current service quality. When assessing “the company’s quality services”, consumer expectations amounted to 6.06 points, and the current one – 5.75 points. The gap size of this statement is -0.31 points, which means that customers are not always provided with the quality of services they expect (Figure 4). For the following statement, “employees always respond to emails and phone calls,” respondents rated the expected quality at 5.96 points, and the experienced quality at 5.74, and the gap between these scores is -0.22 points, which shows that there is a minimal gap between the level of service quality received and expected.

In the statement “the company’s employees ensure the confidentiality of information about customers”, the expected quality reaches 6.08 points, and the experienced quality reaches 5.81 points; the gap size is -0.27 , which shows that employees probably also ensure customer trust. The following statement, “The employees are

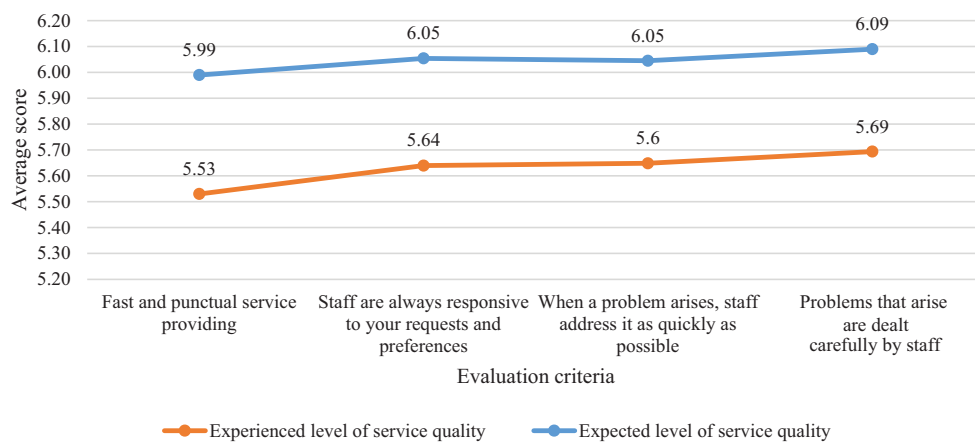


Figure 3. Comparison of expected and experienced service quality levels and gap sizes for the evaluation criterion “Responsiveness” (source: compiled by the authors)

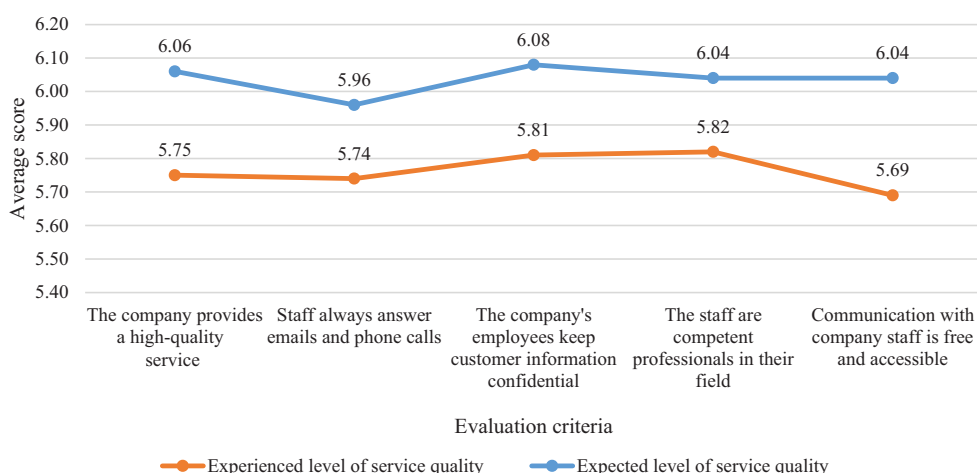


Figure 4. Comparison of expected and experienced service quality levels and gap sizes for the “Assurance” evaluation criterion (source: compiled by the authors)

competent employees in their field," shows the following results: the expected level of service quality is 6.04 points, and the experienced level is 5.82 points. The gap size shows that customers have higher expectations and expect more competence in one or another issue from the employees serving them. The last statement, "communication with the company's employees is free and accessible", shows that the expected quality level is 6.04, and the experienced level is 5.69 points. The gap size is -0.35 points ($K < 0$), and this means that respondents are not always satisfied with the communication, availability and accessibility of employees.

Summarising the results obtained, the gap sizes of the statements of the assurance attribute are the smallest. Therefore, when assessing this attribute, the service quality is very close to customers' expectations.

Empathy. When analysing the results of the statements of the last attribute, a slight gap between expectations and experience is noticeable (Figure 5). The assessment of the first statement, "the company has a pleasant and friendly staff", showed the size of the gap -0.36 points. This means that the respondents' expectations regarding this statement are higher and they would like the more pleasant and friendly staff. The following statement about "the company provides individual attention to customers" shows the respondents' expectations regarding this evaluative attribute are higher. It can be concluded that customers expect a more personalised approach to them.

The statement "company employees understand specific needs" was evaluated: expectations $- 6.05$ points, and

experience $- 5.7$. This shows the client expects an individualised approach from the employee and certain service specifics. When evaluating the statement "employees work at a convenient and appropriate time for you", the score assigned to expectations is 6.05, and the experience is assessed as 5.62 points. The gap size is -0.43 points ($K < 0$), which means that customers' expectations are higher, and they expect more individual approaches and adaptations to the customer's needs. When evaluating empathy, it can be stated that the respondents' expectations remain similar in all criteria; their gap sizes indicate that customers lack an individual approach and do not feel adequately served.

Summarising the results of the survey obtained in wholesale construction and finishing materials sales companies, we can conclude that there is a discrepancy between customer expectations and actual service quality and that customers in this sector would still like a personalised approach to customer service, pleasant communication, faster response to requests and quicker resolution of problems. Figure 6 below shows the averages of expected and experienced service quality assessments.

The study showed minor deviations between the expected and experienced service quality assessments. The average expected service quality level fluctuations range from 6.01 to 6.09 points, a minimal fluctuation. The average volatility in the experienced quality level ranges from 5.61 to 5.74 points. The highest expectations of respondents were given to the tangibility attribute, with 6.1 points, and the professional quality was given to reliability,

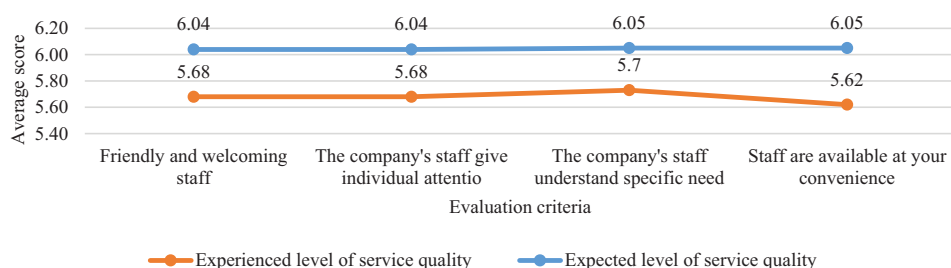


Figure 5. Comparison of expected and experienced service quality levels and gap sizes for the evaluation criterion "Empathy" (source: compiled by the authors)

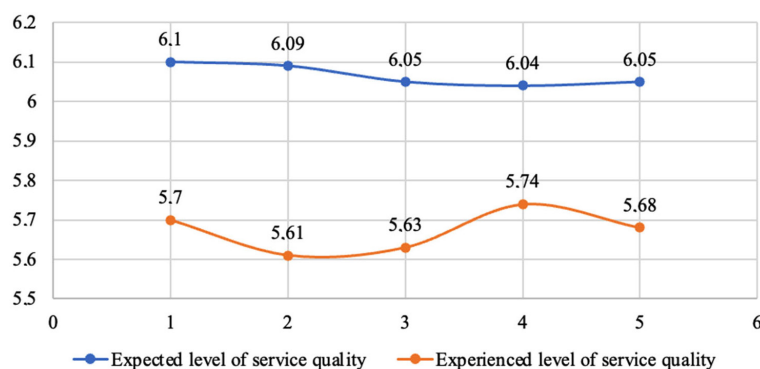


Figure 6. Comparison of expected and experienced quality averages for the evaluated attributes (source: compiled by the authors)

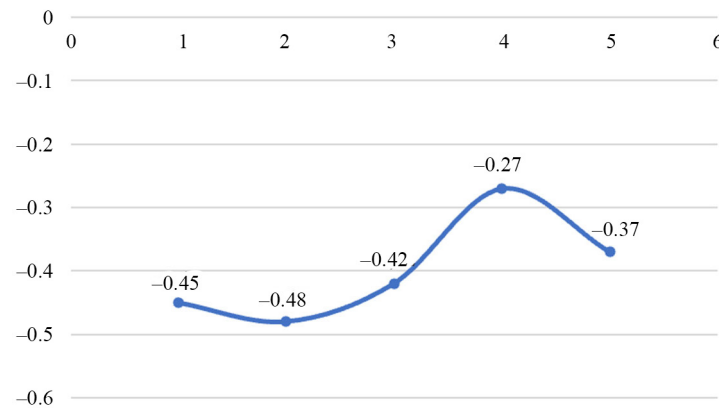


Figure 7. Comparison of the average gap sizes of the assessed features (source: compiled by the authors)

with 5.7 points. In the case of experience, reliability received the lowest score (5.61), which suggests that employees of companies in this sector should pay more attention to meeting customer expectations related to the reliability dimension.

As can be seen from Figure 7, there is not a very drastic difference between the expected and experienced service quality levels. The largest gap size is -0.48 points for the reliability attribute. Reliability includes statements such as the provision of services on time, provision of the necessary information about the product or service; the company is a reliable service provider, information related to the service is provided accurately and correctly; layouts and drawings are drawn up without errors, calculations are accurate and performed without mistakes. Meanwhile, the assurance gap between the expected and experienced service quality levels is the smallest at -0.27 points. The assurance attribute includes statements such as quality service is provided, letters and phone calls are always answered, confidentiality is ensured, employee competence is ensured, and communication with employees is free and accessible. Also, the empathy attribute has a correspondingly small gap size of -0.37 points. The empathy attribute includes statements such as pleasant and friendly staff, individual attention, understanding specific needs, and working at a convenient and appropriate time. These attributes (empathy and assurance), in this case, are the attributes that best meet the needs of the respondents. Regarding the remaining attributes – tangibility, reliability, and responsiveness, the company should review its activities to identify such gap agreements that are interfering.

Thus, based on the collected data, it was found that none of the assessed quality aspects exceeded customer expectations – the experienced quality level was always lower than expected. There is a tendency for a gap between the standards expected by customers and the quality of the services. However, the differences between the expected and experienced quality levels in various aspects are not very large. This suggests that customers experience a level of quality that only slightly lags behind their expectations, but there is room for improvement.

5. Conclusions

The quality of customer service in wholesale construction and finishing materials sales companies is a key factor determining the success, competitiveness and long-term cooperation with business partners of companies in this sector. The study showed that the quality of customer service in this sector is often underestimated, although customers' expectations for professionalism and promptness of service are high. This situation determines the need to constantly improve service processes and consider changing market requirements and customer needs.

The study results revealed that customers particularly value these aspects of service quality, that in the area of professionalism and competence of employees, customers expect a high level of qualification, the ability to solve problems and provide comprehensive information about products and their availability. The professionalism of employees directly affects customer trust in the company and determines the formation of long-term business relationships. Speed and promptness of service require efficient and fast order fulfilment, which is necessary to meet customer expectations, mainly when construction projects depend on the timely receipt of materials. Delays or inaccuracies in orders can cause financial losses for the customer and the company, so efficiency becomes the most crucial quality criterion. Communication clarity and courtesy include ensuring accurate and timely information and respectful communication helps build trust and loyalty. Customers appreciate it when they are communicated openly and smoothly, and detailed information about products, prices, and delivery terms is provided. The area of understanding customer needs revealed during the study that customers value the ability of company employees to listen to customer requests and respond flexibly to changes, which increases satisfaction with service. Companies that understand the specifics of their customers' businesses and can adapt their solutions to individual needs gain a strategic advantage. Practical problem-solving is directly related to a quick reaction to problems, where a fast and straightforward way to solve them forms a positive

customer experience. Problem situations must be resolved quickly and efficiently; otherwise, there may be a risk of losing customer trust.

Thus, the assessment of service quality using the SERVQUAL helped to determine that although companies are trying to ensure high-quality customer service, challenges often arise due to the lack of employee training, heterogeneity of service standards and insufficient feedback management. Service quality gaps can lead to customer dissatisfaction and migration to competitors, so companies must constantly improve service processes, implement innovative solutions, and assess service quality indicators. It is important to emphasise that high-quality customer service is a source of competitive advantage and a strategic factor determining long-term business relationships. Therefore, companies must actively invest in employee training, service standardisation and feedback analysis. Ensuring service quality also contributes to forming a positive image of the company, which in the long run helps maintain a loyal customer base and attract new business partners.

Based on the study's results, future research directions could focus on areas where customer service quality deficiencies have been observed and possible solutions that could increase customer satisfaction and long-term cooperation. One crucial direction would be a detailed assessment of customer expectations and service quality according to different customer segments, such as small businesses, large contractors or retailers. This would allow for a better understanding of which service aspects are most important for each group and how to adapt services to their needs. Another relevant direction is the analysis of the impact of employee training on service quality. Since the study revealed a lack of employee competence and uneven standards, it would be appropriate to study how systematic employee training improves service quality and customer satisfaction.

It is also worth investigating the role of technology in increasing customer service efficiency. Future studies could analyse how various digital solutions, such as order tracking systems, automated communication or customer management platforms, affect service speed, accuracy and customer trust. Another direction is to analyse the effectiveness of customer feedback management systems. Since it has been observed that customer feedback is often ignored, it would be helpful to investigate how structured feedback collection and analysis can contribute to improving services and building closer relationships with customers.

In addition, a comparative study could be conducted between wholesale, supply and retail companies to determine whether service quality problems are specific to wholesalers or whether they are a broader supply chain challenge. Another important direction is to analyse the business consequences of poor service quantitatively. Such studies would help assess the financial implications of service deficiencies (e.g., delays, inaccuracies, poor

communication) and justify the need to improve customer service. Finally, the relationship between customer service quality and long-term business relationships should be explored. Such studies could reveal which specific aspects of service (e.g., promptness, professionalism, problem solving) contribute most to customer loyalty, repeat purchases and long-term cooperation.

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