

## Chapter 5

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Conclusions for the study are based on the results and presented in terms of the objectives that were formulated for the research. Recommendations are made on how the customer service in appliance sales departments could be augmented to enhance informed, responsible buying decisions. The context refers to prominent RSA department stores as an example of an emerging economy that have to attend to the needs of consumers across a broad socio economic spectrum.*

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The research aimed to determine customers' judgement of the Customer service (CS) and Service quality (SQ) in the appliance sales departments of prominent retail stores in the RSA in order to identify shortcomings and discrepancies that could be addressed to ultimately augment the service offering to be conducive for informed, responsible buying decisions. The findings are discussed in accordance with the objectives for the study, within a systems theory approach. The findings relate to a specific context, i.e. appliance sales departments of prominent retail stores in the RSA. The study was executed in Tshwane, which is more affluent than most of the nine provinces in the country. One may however assume that other branches of the same stores/channels in the other provinces would have attracted customers that are very similar in terms of profile because these are the established major outlets for customers in middle-income groups. These stores further more proclaim that whatever they offer in one store would also be available in their other branches. The researcher therefore has no reason to expect that the results would have been significantly different had it been done elsewhere in the country. The findings of the study could be useful to enhance the service offering in all the stores across the country, as an example of the situation in an emerging economy.

## 5.2 A DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS IN TERMS OF THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

### 5.2.1 Consumers' judgement of Customer Service in appliance sales departments in retail stores

#### 5.2.1.1 The elements of CS

Consumers' satisfaction with the customer service (CS) of the retail stores was firstly judged in terms of six elements of the service offering that coincided with what is generally referred to a store's marketing mix. The six elements of CS, namely *Product, Price, Place, Personnel, Processes, Promotions* were represented by five items each. The 30 item scale signified tangible aspects of the service offering that consumers could identify with easily. These items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis to objectively explore the elements/dimensions of CS in the context of this study, which was a specialized retail context (appliance sales that presented a specific product category of durable, high risk products) in an emerging economy.

Factor analysis revealed a reduction of the initial six elements of CS to three. The content of each of the three newly identified elements was scrutinized to construe a coherent meaning for each of the three elements and they were consequently labelled (1): *Personnel*; (2): *Processes and Value for money*; and (3) *Product presentation*. The respective Cronbach alphas of 0.87, 0.84 and 0.86 indicated acceptable levels of reliability. In itself, the reduction of six distinct elements (inferred from literature) to three elements suggests that the customer service offering in the context of this research is perceived in a less intricate manner.

The systems theory postulates that a system is judged holistically but also in terms of the individual elements of the system (in this instance CS) and that all the elements of the system are not necessarily of equal importance. This is demonstrated through a reduction and reorganization of the original six elements of CS that were identified in literature (*Product, Price, Place, Personnel, Processes, Promotions*) to only three

elements in the context of this research, i.e. a specific appliance category in department stores in an emerging economy.

One of the original elements of CS that did not manifest clearly in the revised scale, is *Promotions*: descriptors of this construct are in fact included as denominators of two different elements in the new scale, i.e. *Value for money* and *Product presentation*. Similarly *Price* did not manifest as an individual element, it is now offered along with descriptors that signify *Value for money*, which indicates a sense of vulnerability or price sensitivity. The fact that *Place* could also not be distinguished as a clearly defined element of CS may be ascribed to the similarity of the various department stores as explained in the selection of the participating stores.

The first element that was distinguished through exploratory factor analysis, i.e. *Personnel*, coincides with one of the elements contained in the initial scale. Consumers unequivocally confirmed *Personnel* as a distinguished element of CS and associated certain tasks with the demeanour of a store's sales force. This suggests that customers' judgement of the behaviour/ contribution of the personnel and/ or salespeople during the sales encounter would probably affect their judgement of CS notably.

An acknowledgment of *Personnel* as a prominent element of CS confirms Malhotra's (1994:1-5) view that customers in developing countries focus particularly on the human component of a service and that they have high regard for direct personal contact with sales people during the service encounter. This accentuates the need for proper, focused consumer facilitation by well-trained, trustworthy salespeople. Salespeople should therefore not only be regarded as employees that are obliged to boost sales for the retailer (economic perspective). Ideally personnel should be employed and trained to assist and to guide consumers towards informed responsible buying decisions especially with regard to a complex commodity such as major household appliances that are purchased to satisfy functional requirements as well as other less obtrusive needs (Naylor & Frank, 2000:312). In terms of the training of

personnel, cooperation between retail and industry as well as professionals in the field of Consumer Science is envisaged.

The second element of CS, i.e. *Processes and Value for money* represented a combination of three of the original elements of CS, namely (1) Processes, (2) Price and (3) Product. The integration of *Processes* (the element that refers to aspects that suggest concern and effort during the sales encounter as well as concern regarding after sales service) with *Value for money* (that suggests "getting your money's worth" in terms of quality) suggests that consumers associate the products in the store (appliances) with the store's willingness/ability to support the transaction. This could be ascribed to the fact that retailers often publicly boost specific brands and proclaim in the media that they offer extended guarantees. Consumers may therefore find it difficult to discriminate between product characteristics, price related factors and processes that are meant to reduce risk perception. Contrary to the expectation that the element *Price* would have been retained as a prominent element of CS in the context of this research (i.e. an emerging economy and a scenario that relates to a durable, complex high-risk product category), attributes that relate to price were merged with value (that suggests quality) and processes (that signifies protection/support from the store).

Similarly, the element *Product* was not distinguished as an individual element of CS in the context of this research. While brand name is generally used as an indication of product quality as well as status (Erdem *et al.*, 1999:137) the significance of product and all the relevant attributes could not be confirmed as a distinguished element of CS. Instead, the original element *Product* was integrated with other descriptors to signify the connotation with a package presentation where price and product and superfluous support are offered simultaneously.

The third element represents a combination of attributes of two elements of the original scale, i.e. aspects relating to the physical environment as well as certain aspects associated with processes. This element of CS contained attributes that are associated with a safe environment, easy access to parking, a spacious, clean

department with a convenient lay-out where good quality merchandise is displayed. Attributes that relate to clear, visible pricing, comparable prices (between stores) and prices that coincide with advertised prices were also included. This supports a previous study that reported that price *per se*, is not necessarily regarded a priority in a service environment in an emerging economy where a diverse consumer group is served (Marx & Erasmus, 2006:66).

#### **5.2.1.2 Consumers' satisfaction with CS**

Consumers' satisfaction with the various elements of CS was expressed on a five-point Likert-type scale. Means of 4.01 for Personnel (SD 0.71), 4.03 for Processes and Value for money (SD 0.61) and 3.79 for Product presentation (SD 0.75) signify that customers' satisfaction was above average to good for all three elements of CS. The findings suggest that retailers' service offering mostly coincide and even exceed customers' expectations for each of the elements of CS.

In a study that was executed in the same geographic area in terms of the service offering in supermarkets, personnel-related attributes were identified as main contributors towards intolerable CS. In that particular context rude, unfriendly behaviour and incompetence were mentioned as major frustrations during service encounters in supermarkets (Marx & Erasmus, 2006:65). Similar problems could be particularly problematic in an appliance sales environment where personnel have to be approachable and well informed to assist consumers with highly sophisticated technology, i.e. complex buying decisions and where sales personnel are expected to be knowledgeable and well informed. While trust is a universally accepted basis for any human interaction (Jacobs *et al.*, 2001:50), poorly trained personnel may cause hesitancy during interaction with customers in the store and destroy any opportunity to create the trust that is required during consumer facilitation. Fortunately it seems as if consumers were more than satisfied with the personnel's performance and attitude in the store. It must however be noted that satisfaction could be based on limited expectations (Gummesson, 1988:18) and that satisfaction with this particular element of CS does not necessarily guarantee service excellence.

Other measures therefore had to be used to determine whether consumers' positive judgement was valid.

A mean satisfaction score of 4.03 for *Processes and Value for money* reflect a positive judgement, i.e. that consumers' expectations regarding the customer support of the store, were mostly met.

Consumers' mean satisfaction with the element *Product presentation* was lower than the means for the other elements (3.79) but it was still above average. Compared to the other elements of CS, retail stores could probably make more effort to improve on matters that they have control over. This particular element included attributes such as product display, easy access to products in the store. Although one may assume that the physical environment in retail chain stores would be more basic than elaborate, in this research the original elements *Physical environment* and *Processes* were integrated into this new element that was labelled *Product presentation* and that puts more emphasis on the display and presentation of appliances so that the environment is more conducive for the evaluation of alternatives.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate a possible relationship between each of the three newly identified elements of CS and specific *demographic variables*, i.e. the *gender of respondents*; *years of experience with appliances* as well as *how easy they perceived the buying decision* to be (Findings are presented in Table 4.2).

No significant relationship between *gender* (Female: n=201; Male: n=93) and respondents' judgement of any of the three dimensions of CS (Table 4.2) was confirmed. Although literature indicates that men tend to be more sceptical about technology, it could not be confirmed in this research.

*Years of experience with appliances in their own households* however seem to have a significant inverse relationship with consumers' judgement of CS: consumers with more than 25 years experience were significantly less satisfied with *Personnel* (Element 1)

than the other groups ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). The same applies for *Processes and Value for money* (Element 2) ( $p \leq 0.02$ ). In terms of *Product presentation* (Element 3), respondents with 9 to 15 years experience as well as those with more than 25 years experience were significantly less satisfied ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). The findings therefore indicate that consumers who have more extensive experience are less satisfied with all the elements of CS. This is also evident when judging means for the various age categories on face value only: although differences in the means are not necessarily statistically significant for all the intervals, there is a noticeable decline in customers' satisfaction with CS as experience increases. When consumers are more experienced, their expectations change due to an experienced based cognitive framework on which they can rely during store visits. Personal experience contributes to a more elaborated expectations framework and inevitably consumers would become more aware of shortcomings and probably also less tolerant. In an emerging economy such as South Africa where prominent retail stores are patronized by a broad spectrum of consumers, it is recommended that the CS is designed to meet the needs of less experienced consumers even if they not necessarily know what they are missing out on if the service is lacking. Evidence that more experienced consumers are less satisfied, indicates that the overall satisfaction figures (that were positive) should not be used as the only indicators of whether stores are performing optimally. It is recommended that a follow-up study be done to investigate the needs of more experienced consumers so that their recommendations could be used to augment the service offering to the benefit of all.

Likewise, respondents that indicated that it was *easy to conclude the buying decision* were significantly less satisfied with *Product presentation* (Element 3). This indicates that consumers, who are confident, are more sceptical and/or expect more in terms of how appliances are displayed and presented in the store. Denominators included in this element of CS involved the display and availability of manuals for inspection by consumers in the store; comments on the location of appliances in the store; an evaluation of in store promotions and demonstrations that would make it easier to judge the performance and functional properties of appliances; judgement of the availability of new and interesting products as well as models in different price ranges. The overall mean satisfaction of consumers with respect to this element was lower

than the means for the other two elements of CS. Acknowledging a significant lower mean for those who were confident decision-makers, signify room for improvement. This is particularly noteworthy because any improvement in this regard would inevitably also benefit other consumers who not necessarily realise what they are missing out on.

Within the systems perspective, it is postulated that consumers would judge a store's service offering on the factor level, i.e. in terms of the individual elements of CS (in this research a positive judgement was concluded for all three elements of CS) as well as a judgement of CS on the integrated level where shortcomings of one element of CS can possibly be negated by positive judgements of the others or *visa versa*. In this research, all three satisfaction judgements on the factor level were positive and within the same judgement range, i.e. above average. Respondents were therefore also asked to react to a single item question by means of a Smiley scale in terms of whether they were dissatisfied, neutral or satisfied with the CS of the store. This question was used to affirm the findings of the previous scale. Although 38.8% of the respondents (n=115) indicated that they were satisfied with the CS, almost half of the respondents (49%; n=144) were neutral, i.e. neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. This indicates hesitance to express an exact view and probably confirms extant research findings that consumers in a developing country have lower quality expectations and therefore demonstrate a wider range of tolerance for ineffective services (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:3). Of importance in this research, is that consumers were not overly satisfied with CS when asked to respond to their experience in general through a single item index, but when they had the opportunity to respond to specific discriminators of CS, their satisfaction was above average. Considering that consumers in a developing country have been reported to have lower quality expectations (probably due to limited experience) and that they therefore demonstrate a wider tolerance for ineffective services (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:3), one could infer that any negative judgement from consumers' point of view should be taken more seriously in terms of an indication of how CS could be augmented in favour of informed, responsible buying decisions. The single item index indicated that the majority of consumers were



not satisfied, which means that retailers need to take action to improve their service offering.

## **5.2.2 Consumers' perception of the Service Quality in appliance sales departments in retail stores**

### **5.2.2.1 An identification of the dimensions of SQ**

An investigation of consumers' judgement of customer service involved a judgement of retail stores' service offering in terms of tangible elements of CS and related attributes. The content of the scale was based on literature and constructs were such that consumers could identify with them and comprehend them easily. However, when the service offering of retail stores is investigated, it is generally done in terms of the service outcome, i.e. consumers' perception of Service Quality (SQ). In order to do so, a SERVQUAL scale that predominantly focuses on intangible denominators that serve as an indication of how the service offering is perceived by customers, was included in the survey. This measurement was also included in this research to ascertain whether consumers' judgement of SQ would coincide with a judgement of tangible evidence of CS. The notion was that a judgement of SQ might produce more favourable responses because (as suggested by Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:6), consumers in emerging economies apparently tend to judge services differently and seem to be more tolerant and forgiving of poor service delivery. The five dimensional SERVQUAL scale of Dabholkar and co workers (1996:7) was chosen for the purpose.

Exploratory factor analysis revealed that the respondents in this study judged the SQ in terms of only two broad dimensions that represented a re organization of attributes of the original SERVQUAL scale (Table 4.3). The content of the two dimensions were analyzed and labelled *Supportiveness* and *Impressiveness* to reflect the content/denominators of the respective scales. This outcome conforms with previous researchers (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982) that favour two dimensions for SERVQUAL scales and suggest that one dimension describes the human interaction component of service delivery (in this research the element *Supportiveness* equals this view) while

the second dimension involves extrinsic quality (in this research: *Impressiveness* confirms this view), which includes some tangible aspects and the physical quality of the service offering. This research applied exploratory factor analysis to objectively evaluate consumers' perception of SQ in a specific retail setting in an emerging economy. It is suggested that customers evaluate SQ in retail both at the attribute and the integrated level. The reduction of the elements of SQ from five dimensions to two, indicates a less intricate, more integrated judgement in the context of this research.

This research concludes that in the context of this research, i.e. an emerging economy where the prominent retail store targets consumers across a broad socio economic spectrum, consumers perceive the service quality in appliance sales departments on a more integrated level, thus in terms of two dimensions in stead of five as suggested in the original SERVQUAL scale, namely human oriented variables that can be referred to as the *Supportiveness* dimension as well as extrinsic qualities that reflect the *Impressiveness* attributes.

Consumers' discrimination of the *Supportiveness* dimension indicated their sensitivity for the human-orientated aspects of service quality, which correlates with previous findings that the human aspects of a retail transaction are a priority to customers in developing countries (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:3-5). Attributes that pertained to this dimension of the service offering, were: sensitivity of salespeople and their commitment to keep their promises; confidence that transactions are executed correctly the first time; assurance that merchandise will be available; trust in the dealings with the store, prompt attention from salespeople; assurance of personal attention, courteousness of personnel and competence of salespeople to handle complaints. Consumers' perception of this particular dimension of SQ primarily depends on the personnel: the number of personnel that are available to attend to the customers in the store promptly so that they do not feel neglected; their personal commitment to the clients (which may be contradicting in terms of their obligation toward their employers at times), their competence to handle queries and problems as well as their people skills in order to differentiate between different types of

consumers and to act accordingly. These qualities inevitably exert pressure on management to employ personnel who have the potential to conform and to provide training or opportunity for training to ensure that they are competent and confident in their demeanour. Unfortunately previous research indicate that sales personnel in retail in South Africa are not always highly regarded in terms of basic salaries and employment status, and this may be discouraging in terms of the attraction of devoted, loyal employees.

The second dimension that was distinguished through factor analysis, i.e. *Impressiveness* evolved around characteristics of the physical environment and convenience of the shopping experience. Attributes that were grouped as part of this dimension of SQ included: an impression that the store is modern, visually pleasing, up to standard, spacious, safe and secure, convenient (also in terms of operating hours and opportunity to use different payment methods. Convenience also entailed assurance of error free transactions, assistance by knowledgeable, willing salespeople, provision of sufficient and correct information about services, and easy return and exchanging of goods.

This research concludes that SQ, in the context of this research, implies a dimension that assures support and that suggests a contribution of sales personnel to achieve it. SQ however also implies aspects of the service offering that will impress the customers, which could be related to the image of the store and/ or attributes that will exceed their expectations. Stores will therefore have to refrain from stagnation.

#### **5.2.2.2 Consumers' perception of the SQ in retail stores**

Respondents' perception of the various items in the SQ scale was judged on a five point Likert-type scale and produced means of 3.88 and 4.08 (Cronbach alphas: 0.93 and 0.86) respectively for the two dimensions of SQ. This reflects an above average positive judgement of the SQ in appliance sales departments for both dimensions, which suggests that the service offering mostly coincide with consumers' expectations. A positive judgement was expected due to evidence that customers in

emerging economies tend to have higher tolerance levels and lower quality expectations with regard to service delivery. Previous researchers also suggest that in emerging economies, consumers tend to focus on core benefits of the service rather than added benefits (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:7). The collapse of the five dimensional scale to two dimensions supports the latter. However, means of 3.88 and 4.08 do not suggest that consumers regard the service offering as outstanding. Especially regarding the *Impressiveness* dimension, there is room for improvement.

In the context of this research the service quality judgements were above average to positive. Means however suggest that there is room for improvement considering that the findings were probably based on limited expectations frameworks and that consumers were more tolerant of shortcomings as is suggested in previous research. Findings therefore indicate that it would be unwise for retail to be enthusiastic about these positive judgements and that it would be risky to base future strategies on a single evaluation of SERVQUAL as it might not produce the correct impression of the level of excellence of the service and what could be done to augment the service offering to an exceptional level.

### **5.2.3 An assessment of consumers' product knowledge**

#### **5.2.3.1 *Product knowledge as an indication of consumers' ability to conclude informed, responsible buying decisions***

Consumers' product knowledge is a major concern in terms of their ability to make informed, responsible buying decisions. Limited product knowledge can also cloud customers' expectations regarding CS and SQ and consequently result in positive CS judgements that are not necessarily substantiated in terms of service excellence. It is alarming that customers seem to be satisfied with CS and SQ despite lack of evidence that the in store encounter enhanced their ability to make informed buying decisions. John (1999:11) explains that consumers in an emerging economy do not have sufficient structural and transactional knowledge to ensure satisfying and responsible buying decisions. These consumers generally do not have shopping

scripts to rely on, and they do not have shopping skills and an understanding of the consequences of the transaction that could result in an understanding of marketplace transactions.

This research proclaims that in these contexts the CS in department stores has to be augmented to significantly to provide the much needed assistance for the consumers. The responsibility can however not simply be reverted to the salespeople in terms of their effort and customer approach. Findings of research by Makgopa, Kachale and Erasmus in Tshwane, RSA in 2004 (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:95) indicated that consumers do not rely on salespeople for information, but prefer to trust brand names, guarantees and a retailer's reputation.

The notion that consumers' judgement of customer service and service quality in this research would produce favourable judgements because consumers in emerging economies have been reported to be more tolerant of poor service delivery, instigated the inclusion of a knowledge test in this survey. The researcher assumed that consumers should, after their buying encounter, at least be acquainted with the basic functional and performance attributes of the appliances that they purchased in the respective stores on the specific day because consumers completed the questionnaires immediately after closure of a sales deal. Theoretically, they therefore had every opportunity in the retail store to investigate product alternatives and to consult information sources, whether personal or non-personal in terms of information they thought they required to conclude informed buying decisions. It was assumed that the findings of the knowledge tests would be a sign of whether consumers were properly informed during the service encounter. It was hoped that satisfied consumers (in terms of the customer service judgement) and consumers with a positive perception of the service quality of the store (SERVQUAL judgement) would perform well in the knowledge tests because they were supposed to be confident about their purchases by the time they were leaving the store. Low scores in the knowledge tests would indicate an inability to conclude informed buying decisions and probably then also indicate shortcomings in the service offering that limited opportunity for consumers to become better acquainted with the products they

purchased in the store that day. In a previous study that involved a script elicitation procedure for the acquisition of major household appliances (Erasmus *et al.*, 2002:3), the researcher concluded that buying decisions are predominantly determined in the store: consumers apparently set off to purchase their appliances, but depend on the in store environment for the cues in terms of what to purchase. These cues include personal as well as non-personal information sources. Low knowledge scores and positive customer service and service quality judgements would *inter alia* indicate a discrepancy in terms of consumers ability to objectively judge the service offering and may be a sign of shortcomings in consumers' expectations framework regarding optimal service offering of the stores, or indicate a higher tolerance for poor customer service, as was suggested by Malhotra (1996).

Detailed results of the knowledge tests as presented in Table 4.9 reveal that consumers' product knowledge and their comprehension of the functional and performance characteristics of the appliances were poor, notwithstanding the risk involved in the purchases in terms of the expected service life of appliances (functional and performance risk) and the money involved in the transactions (financial risk). These figures are not in congruence with consumers' satisfaction judgement of the Customer Service of the store. Neither do the low product knowledge scores affirm consumers' above average judgement of the Service Quality of the appliance sales departments of the store. One could deduce that consumers' limited product knowledge signifies limited expectations, i.e. limited cognitive ability to assume what they are missing out on and could then have affected their confidence to criticize the stores' service offerings negatively. These judgements would therefore never disclose shortcomings in the service offering and would not raise complaints that would raise concern with retailer to augment the service offering.

*The research therefore concludes that consumers, in the context of this study, even after the service encounter, could not convince that their satisfaction with customer service and their positive judgements of the service quality of the stores were based*

*on appropriate expectancy frameworks in terms of how they were supposed to benefit from an in store experience.*

Consumers' product knowledge scores were too low for them to have concluded informed, responsible buying decisions and from a Consumer Science perspective, one would expect stores to provide services that provide for even inexperienced consumers, to make informed, responsible buying decisions with regard to a complex product category such as major household appliances that are supposed to be functional for a decade or more because, amongst others, appliances are too expensive to replace at regular intervals.

#### **5.2.3.2 Consumers' product knowledge related to gender; years of experience with appliances as well as ease of making the buying decisions**

This investigation aimed to identify influences that could positively affect consumers' product knowledge so that those could be capitalized on during efforts to augment the service offering in retail stores. It was anticipated that consumers with more extensive product related experience would perform better in the product knowledge tests and that experience would be more conducive for informed responsible buying decisions.

No significant difference between the product knowledge of male and female respondents could be confirmed. Males' mean scores were higher for tests relating to dishwashers, washing machines and tumble dryers while female's scores were higher in terms of tests for the fridge/freezers and the microwave ovens (the two appliances that were owned by a larger percentage of the households). Differences were however not significant. The knowledge scores reflect the score for the individuals who actually filled out the questionnaire. In some instances both spouses were present in the store and they could have consulted before completing a question. Results therefore indicate the best guess for the individual or the couple at the point in time.

*The research concludes that, in the context of this study, no significant relationship between gender and the consumers' product knowledge could be confirmed for any of the major household appliances that were included in the product knowledge test.*

Consumers with more than 25 years product related experience achieved higher scores for all the appliances except for dishwashers. Although experienced consumers' mean scores were generally higher, the scores are nevertheless too low to confirm the possibility of informed buying decisions in terms of the functional and performance characteristics of appliances.

*This research concludes that even experienced consumers could not convince (through the findings of the product knowledge tests) that they were more competent to conclude informed, responsible buying decisions.*

Low product knowledge scores for experienced consumers could possibly be attributed to rapid and continual changes in household technology. If a household replaces an appliance after ten or more years, the consumer would probably be overwhelmed when confronted with new product alternatives that are offered in the store. Although the product knowledge test aimed to cover only basic functional and performance attributes of appliances, this outcome is probably one of the most important indicators of shortcomings in the service offering in retail stores. Even if experienced consumers are hypothetically probably more hesitant to demand the assistance of personnel in the store during the product evaluation process, other elements of customer service such as in store displays, promotional materials, printed matter should evoke curiosity so that consumers are more willing to seek information about product characteristics they are less familiar with. The availability of non-personal information may also overcome the concern raised in previous research, i.e. sales personnel's proposals are not necessarily trusted because they, in many cases, sell for personal gain to meet sales targets so that they could earn higher commissions and sales incentives.



The presumption was made that consumers who found it difficult to conclude a buying decision, would probably not obtain high scores in the product knowledge tests. Almost half of the respondents (n=141; 47.6%) declared that the buying task was easy to perform. Although the mean scores for respondents who thought that the task was easy to perform, were the highest for four of the five appliances, namely dishwashers (2.54/10.00), fridge/freezers (4.07/10.00), microwave ovens (5.04/10.00) and tumble dryers (2.91/10.00) compared to respondents who were indifferent or who thought that the decisions were difficult to conclude, their scores were too low to confirm their ability to have made informed, responsible buying decisions. Consumer facilitation is more complicated in conditions where consumers are confident and of the opinion that they can manage on their own. These findings indicate that all consumers should be considered vulnerable even if they appear to be confident. Under such circumstances non-personal information sources could be invaluable to stimulate awareness and curiosity so that consumers become inspired to investigate the options in the store and eventually consult sales personnel if they wish to do so rather than to feel pressurised. One can assume that consumers who are confident and who think that it is easy to buy a new appliance would not necessarily consult personnel when they enter the store and that alternative elements of the service offering should be augmented to attract their interest.

In the findings of this research, the particular elements of customer service that could be augmented to serve the needs of consumers who do not realize that they need support, are the elements (1) Processes and Value for money (which relate to trust in the store and clear indicators of price and quality as well as the ability to compare products with ease) as well as (2) Product presentation (which relates to the availability of a range of products in an environment which is conducive for product evaluation). With respect to the dimensions of Service Quality, attributes that would enhance the Impressiveness dimension (rather than Supportiveness dimension) should be attended to, to address the needs of confident consumers. During consumers' judgement of the Service Quality of the retail stores, the SERVQUAL judgements of respondents who thought that the buying decision was easy to conclude were significantly lower for the Impressiveness dimension of Service Quality.

Findings revealed that consumers who experienced difficulty to make buying decisions and who scored poorly in the product knowledge tests nevertheless indicated that they were satisfied with the CS. This suggests that consumers in the context of this research probably do not have high expectations of the CS and/or are hesitant to indicate that they are not satisfied with the service, i.e. more tolerant to their own detriment. The element of CS that was scored the lowest was *Product presentation*. This clearly indicates a specific dimension of the service that should be attended to in terms of visible, tangible evidence, i.e. display of appliances; availability of manuals to use during investigations; availability of new and interesting products in different price ranges. The outcome of the product knowledge test confirms the need for change in CS in retail despite customers' positive judgements of CS and consequently, also SQ.

#### **5.2.4 An in store assessment of the service offering in retail stores by store management**

The visual presence of aspects that relate to the various elements of CS in the appliance sales departments in the selected retail stores was assessed with the intention to identify shortcomings that could be augmented to the benefit of consumers' potential to conclude informed buying decisions. One store of each of the channels was selected randomly. A score sheet that contained denominators of the respective elements of customer service was designed and a representative of the store assessed the various denominators in each of the selected stores in the presence of the researcher. The checklist was based on a conceptualization of CS in terms of the six original elements of CS and was used to assess the presentation of CS (i.e. *products, price, physical environment, personnel, processes, promotions*) in the five selected stores. Although the elements of CS were reorganized in terms of three elements in phase 1 of this research, the original conceptualization of CS in terms of six elements was applied during this phase because it was performed as the introductory phase to confirm the non-threatening approach of the survey with store managers. This was of utmost importance to gain approval for the time consuming data

collection processes during the consequent data collection phases amongst customers and personnel later on.

Findings show that stores not necessarily attend to the individual elements of CS in the same manner. Certain elements of CS seem to be neglected/overseen in certain stores. It was never intended to compare the service offering of the different channels, findings however indicated that only one of the five stores obtained an *Excellent* rating for its integrated presentation of all the elements of CS. The service offering of two stores was interpreted as *Good* and two stores only managed to obtain *Average* ratings. The *Promotions* aspect of the service offering was identified as the most neglected element of CS. In terms of the overall score for the stores, this negative rating was mostly outbalanced by the positive assessment of two of the elements, *Price* and *Physical environment*. The one element of CS that is apparently attended to more meticulously by retail stores than the other elements of CS is *Physical environment*. This is commendable and could contribute to a pleasurable in store experience. However, retailers have to augment this element of CS despite the positive judgement because consumers who were more experienced and those who thought that the buying process was easy to conclude, were less satisfied with this element of CS. Considering the powerful stimulus of the physical environment on consumer behaviour, stores should focus on this aspect to guide the buying decision of the consumer (Bruner, 1990:94). Within the systems theory, it becomes clear that positive judgements could negate negative judgements to the extent that the integrated judgement for a store could turn out to be positive despite serious shortcomings. This assessment confirms that a positive presentation of *Price* that not necessarily primarily contributes to informed buying decisions, may attract customers to a store and set the mind of management at ease while the store's service offering in fact has serious shortcomings that should be attended to. The lower scores that were obtained for the elements *Products* and *Processes* by three of the five stores indicate areas of concern. These two elements in particular are important in terms of exposure to goods in the store and assistance to consumers during and after the in store encounter. In terms of efforts to augment CS, these negative assessments should be noted. Other researchers agree that when consumers buy high risk products like

expensive household appliances (Burton, 1993:383), stores should be more concerned about satisfying the needs of their customers and to limit their risk perception (Sweeney *et al.*, 1999:77), than to exhibit an impressive product array.

One of the stores only managed to get a positive rating for the element *Price* and obtained *Average* to *Poor* ratings for the remaining five elements of CS. This confirms an emphasis of price, probably in an attempt to push sales though it is done to the detriment of other elements of CS. This reflects a situation that is not conducive for optimal service delivery and where informed buying decisions would probably not be enhanced. Overall, *Price* was attended to more meticulously than the other elements of CS. Although this strategy could benefit consumers financially, it is most probably formulated to favour sales (Chandon *et al.*, 2000:65) i.e. decisions within an economic perspective. In the end, all the other stores obtained *Good* to *Excellent* ratings for the same element (*Price*). This store's emphasis on price does therefore not necessarily provide them with a competitive advantage in the market. According to the behavioural perspective model, consumers' personal evaluations of the product and their resulting behaviour will be influenced by functional benefits as well as the informational benefits of the product (Creusen & Schoormans, 1998:551; Soriano & Foxall, 2002:139). If image building properties and the symbolic role of the product is enhanced, inexperienced consumers may therefore be tempted to buy the product and will not necessarily be put off by a higher price. On the other hand, cheaper prices are often used to enhance the sales of certain products or patronage of certain stores. The consumer should however be supported in making an informed responsible decision when buying a durable household product that is not determined by a high or a low price.

Only one of the stores obtained a total score that signified an *Excellent* CS offering across all six elements of CS. Two of the stores could not confirm an *Excellent* score for themselves on any one of the elements of CS. One may therefore conclude that the service offering of the majority of retail stores have room for improvement. Because this assessment was made by representatives of the stores themselves, these shortcomings can be regarded unbiased. Consumers' positive judgement of CS in

the appliance departments of retail stores was therefore not supported by retail's own judgement of their service offering.

Bendall-Lyon and Powers (2004:114) accentuate the significance of satisfaction in terms of the outcome of the service delivery process. The way in which the service is presented will influence consumers' perception of the efficiency and purposefulness of the store in with regard to their product needs. This may influence a consumer's choice of store in future (Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2004:114). *This research however concludes that, despite consumers' apparent satisfaction with the CS in the appliance sales departments of retail stores and their positive perception of the SQ in this research, the majority of retail stores that participated in this research acknowledged shortcomings in their service offering.* Two elements of CS that are generally offered on a more impressive level, namely Price and Physical environment while two elements of CS that are more crucial in terms of informed buying decisions, namely *Products* and *Processes* were assessed less favourably in the majority of the stores.

### **5.2.5 Augmented customer service from the perspective of experienced sales people**

Sales personnel's recommendations with regard to augmented CS, i.e. to create a sales environment that would enhance informed, responsible buying decisions were obtained through participation of 18 salespeople in a written projective technique that implied spontaneous reflection and deliberation through a written narrative. Systematic open coding of the text was done to identify concepts that related to the original six elements of CS (products, price, physical environment, personnel, processes and promotion).

Salespeople referred to their own contribution in terms of augmented CS more frequently than any other element of CS. Apart from attending to the role of salespeople in terms of consumer facilitation, they however also spontaneously elaborated on aspects that deter their contribution at present, namely role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of motivation, lack of training and poor relationships with

management. Emphasis on the human element of CS concurs with recommendations for consumers with less experience (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:3-5) but differs from what has been reported from consumers' perspective (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:97; Marx & Erasmus, 2006:65), i.e. lack of trust in personnel. Harvey McKay once said: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (Marino, 2001:14). Trust must be created, and if the salesperson appears to be an expert, the face-to-face communication with the customer will be more persuasive, as the salesperson will be regarded as a credible source of information (Gothan & Erasmus, 2003:100). It is therefore important that the manager of the store pays attention not only to the store architecture, its layout, the merchandise and its display, but also to the engineering of effective salesperson-customer interactions to improve satisfaction and repeat purchase (Menon & Dube, 2000:285). Positive relationships between sales personnel and consumers however have to be salvaged by sales personnel through their actions and interaction in the stores (Beatty *et al.*, 1996:225). Attitude of personnel was mentioned as the most prominent factor required to enhance CS in the departments. Considering the frequency mentioned, it meant that several of the respondents mentioned this personal trait more than once to accentuate the significance of their proposal. Employees that feel good about themselves, will provide better quality service and facilitate customers better (Chitwood, 2000:5; Fish *et al.*, 2002:2; Graham, 2002:3; Musser, 1995:3).

The availability of salespeople to attend to customers' needs, competence through better training and knowledgeability were used as additional descriptors. Reference to clear job descriptions by a few probably indicates that sales personnel are expected to do a variety of tasks that may be counterproductive, confusing, frustrating and may interfere with what salespeople perceive to be their main responsibilities and that these should be clarified. A value-based management system is recommended where the wisdom, creativity and knowledge of every employee is acknowledged in terms of its potential contribution towards the company (Chopp & Paglia, 2002:1; Dubinsky, 1999:5). Sales personnel eventually implement CS, but management must be committed to its employees and to its

customers and make allowances to optimise CS (Beatty *et al.*, 1996:225; Graham, 2002:3).

Reference to the element *Processes* also suggest that participants mentioned it more than once. Participants in particular mentioned characteristics that are associated with peace of mind and attempts to minimize frustration through error free transactions and after sales support. This coincides with consumers' apparent regard for the human aspect of CS as postulated by Malhotra *et al.* (1994:3-5) and which was confirmed in this research through one of the two newly identified elements of CS (i.e. Supportiveness).

*Products* were referred to in terms of three concepts. Product availability was however mentioned more frequently than product quality. This may indicate a supply-demand concern that not necessarily addresses augmented CS. This discloses an area of concern because, from a consumer facilitation point of view, one would have expected sales personnel to be more concerned about the quality for the sake of augmented CS.

Not all participants included *Price* in their proposals for augmented CS. Those who did mention price indicated that prices should be displayed visibly and correctly, which suggests efforts to reduce frustration and to inform customers properly rather than a focus on affordability. The survey amongst store managers revealed that price was scored fairly positively and that the scores for this element of CS were comparable for all of the participating stores. When making their suggestions for augmented CS, the salespeople may thus have been under the impression that prices are competitive any way, which explains why no mention was made of affordability in the projective technique.

Less than fifty percent of the participants mentioned *Physical environment* as a contributor in terms of their proposals for augmented CS. This may indicate that personnel are blasé in this regard and have not necessarily thought that the environment in a department store could be improved to be more conducive for

informed, responsible buying decisions. On the other hand, no further explication of how the physical environment could be improved/ changed may be attributed to the fact that the physical surrounding in the stores were generally regarded fairly satisfactory in terms of what is offered in department stores. The assessment of the elements of CS by managers of the stores through the in store survey revealed that this specific element of CS is apparently attended to more attentively than any of the other elements of CS (see Table 4.13). Participants therefore probably did not consider physical facilities as is, non-conducive for optimal service delivery.

The element *Promotions* was referred to least often as a contributing factor towards augmented CS. Similarly, this element of CS seemed to be the most neglected element of CS (see Table 4.13). The potential contribution of promotions towards informed buying decisions may thus not be understood or highly regarded.

#### **5.2.6 Industry's responses to the service offering in appliance sales departments in retail stores**

Any proposal for augmented customer service in appliance sales departments in retail stores have to acknowledge the potential contribution of industry. Contact with industry followed a qualitative approach and involved personal interviews and/or telephonic interviews with individuals in managerial positions, specifically individuals who are responsible for marketing issues and liaison with retail. Participants reacted to pre-determined questions and their comments were summarized. In none of the discussions the names or the responses of the other contributors were disclosed or referred to.

Four major role players in terms of the distributors of brands that are prominently offered in department stores were interviewed successfully. Every one of the individuals, who were eventually reached for comment / participation, was willing to share thoughts and was very helpful. All agreed that the potential contribution of industry in terms of augmented customer service with an intention to enhance



informed, responsible buying decisions is limited to certain elements of customer service.

With respect to personnel, all agreed that in terms of the employment of competent personnel and their conditions of employment, industry couldn't be held responsible. Industry does however contribute in terms of the training of personnel. This is done on a regional basis in terms of their own brands and training is offered regularly in terms of new products to ensure that sales personnel are kept informed. This training is however not compulsory and is done in personnel's own time. Training therefore implies that salespeople are not at work and do not own income during the training. Industry highly regards the contribution of well-trained personnel and invests time and effort in their training as is recommended in extant research (Decker, 2002:2-3; Fish, Wittman & Arnett, 2002:1-2; Marino, 2001:4). Personnel are however offered incentives on sales, that may differ from one supplier to the next and this may create conditions where products are boosted for personal gain (i.e. for the sake of the incentives) rather than to address the needs of customers who request their assistance. Consumers' hesitation to trust salespeople is therefore founded. All participants confirmed this problem but no solution was offered as nobody seemed willing to do away with this practice. In previous research, it was reported that sales based incentives create tension in the workplace because colleagues compete for clients rather than to cooperate and assist one another.

Industry's efforts to train salespeople to provide assistance in the store are also meant to enhance/ promote the image of their brands. Participants admitted that sales personnel may be inclined to ensure that the products that would earn them greater imbursement on sales would be cared for better in terms of the availability of promotional materials, brochures. One of the spokespersons indicated that they therefore tried to provide basic, need to know information to clients through posters, stickers and written material to ensure that clients who prefer to investigate products on their own, are informed. More than one participant mentioned that the availability of written material such as brochures in the stores is problematic because it is

sometimes not displayed, or visitors to the store who are not necessarily seriously interested in buying appliances take the brochures.

Participants also agreed that the physical environment, in terms of the visual appearance, displays, general conditions in the store that creates opportunity to compare appliances, is the responsibility of the store. Although effort is made to ensure that appliances (brands) are displayed properly, industry has little control over the eventual conditions in the store.

Industry contributes in terms of price through agreement to participate in special promotions: this is done to increase sales and is not done to enhance informed buying decisions.

With regard to after sales service, i.e. processes that are in place to support consumers during use, industry has a major responsibility to provide the service, spare part etc. This is reflected in basic and extended guarantees. Contact with industry in this regard is however made through the retailers. The relationship between retailers and industry is therefore of utmost importance and all participants indicated that they value these relationships and attempt to retain good relationships to uphold the reputation of their brands. Due to fierce competition, the researcher got the impression that this element of CS is well in place for the reputable brands.

### **5.2.7 Proposals for augmented Customer Service**

Literature suggests that customers are not always satisfied with CS due to gaps between their service related expectations and experience of the service offering (Gummesson, 1988:18; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988:44). To ensure customer satisfaction, the reality should therefore coincide with, or exceed their expectations. This could occur through impressive surroundings, excellent pricing strategies or an emphasis of any of the individual elements of CS. This may be easier to achieve when customers

are ignorant, ill informed, inexperienced and when they have no alternatives to base their judgements on (limited cognitive frameworks).

Ideally the relationship between the store and the customer must be customised within the context of the service offering to understand the needs of the customer (e.g. inexperienced consumers in a context where complex, expensive merchandise is offered (Beatty *et al.*, 1996:225). When a store impresses its customers, the service offering not necessarily enhances informed, responsible buying decisions. A positive judgement of the customer service of a store or a positive rating of the service quality merely indicates congruence between customers' expectations and the service offering. In this research, the findings indicated that customers are satisfied and that their impression of the service quality of the retail stores is favourable. This research project revealed that consumers' product knowledge is very limited even after their store visits and the time spent browsing in the stores. Opportunities in the store and the in store environment in appliance sales departments in the RSA as is, are therefore not used optimally. These findings did however not reveal explicit problems in the retail environment that would evoke concern. This could unfortunately create the impression that the stores are on the right track in terms of their service offering. However, more experienced consumers seemed significantly less impressed with the impressiveness dimension of the service quality and that reflects upon conditions of the physical environment.

Augmented Customer Service in an emerging economy where the needs of inexperienced consumers have to be taken into consideration would have to preempt potential problems that consumers may encounter. This could be facilitated through competent, well trained personnel as was suggested by sales people in the projective technique as well as representatives from industry during the interviews. Stores that take advantage of positive customer service and service quality judgments without effortful attempts to expand consumers' frame of reference, i.e. to inform them and to encourage them to be more inquisitive before they finalise their buying decisions, may in fact disregard an important obligation towards their customers.

This research concludes with a suggestion that augmented customer service is not necessarily achieved at the input level, i.e. though an upgrading of the respective elements of CS, but that the focus should shift to the transformation of inputs, i.e. to the way in which consumers judge and interpret the elements of the service offering. It is therefore suggested that efforts to enhance informed responsible buying decisions, should acknowledge the importance of consumers' cognitive ability to interpret information and efforts to make product evaluations easier, more understandable, and less complicated. This inevitably involves the contribution of the way in which the physical environment in the store is designed/ equipped and should focus on the contribution of personnel. Any changes in terms of these elements of CS should be directed in terms of ways in which a store's customers could be educated to take control (product related transactional knowledge).

Salespeople need to be empowered to respond to needs and problems of customers with speed and courtesy, limiting their frustrations (Graham, 2002:3, 4). A value-based management system should be followed, where the wisdom, creativity and knowledge of every worker is acknowledged and every employee in the store is perceived to add value to the store's core activities (Chopp & Paglia, 2002:1; Dubinsky, 1999:5). Competition between salespeople may be counterproductive while rewards for a job well done will serve as motivation (Marino, 2001:2). Long working hours are problematic, especially in big cities, but the salaries do not always mirror the demands on family life and personal stress. This may lead to very little job satisfaction that can result in resignations (Churchill, Ford & Walker, 1990:334). Management need to be more involved with their personnel (salespeople) because they are important links between the store and the customers. There is nothing new about the importance of the training of sales people, except that it is being largely neglected by the stores: the responsibility need to be shared by industry and retail so that the idea of training is not associated with a possibility to earn incentives, but rather to improve the service offering. Superior customer service does not result from slogans or fixed guidelines. Only training, dedication and commitment by the sales people, backed by an involved management, will (Graham, 2002:2).



The in-store environment should be attended to allow for comparative shopping and to create a pleasant atmosphere where customers are willing to “linger longer”. Through efforts to enhance the physical surroundings, stores would also elevate their image and this could contribute to a more pleasant shopping experience as well as more favourable working conditions for employees.



## Chapter 6

# EVALUATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The research was executed in Tshwane, RSA, which is one of the most affluent provinces of the nine in the country. The stores that were involved were probably better equipped than stores elsewhere in the country. It is therefore possible that customers' satisfaction with customer service as well as the service quality judgments as reported in this study would differ somewhat elsewhere in the country. Based on the findings of this research, one can however not assume that the judgments would have been more negative elsewhere because this study confirmed Malhotra's findings that consumers in emerging economies tend to be tolerable of poor service. This research therefore gives an indication of CS and SQ judgments in the context of this research and expresses the view that certain shortcomings that have been identified need to be addressed in stores all over the country in an attempt to enhance informed, responsible buying decisions in appliance sales departments in major retail stores.

In this research, the CS and SQ judgments *per se* did not reveal the shortcomings in the stores' service offering. In fact, findings might suggest that stores have little to be concerned about. The actual shortcomings in the service offering in retail stores were only confirmed after an interpretation of consumers' poor performance in the product knowledge tests. One could therefore infer that the findings would be relevant to all the stores irrespective of where they are in the country.

The sample discriminated between female and male participants. Gender did not signify a significant relationship with either the CS or the SQ judgments. During the completion of the questionnaires, spouses could however have influenced the responses of their participating partners. Although findings reveal no significant difference in the judgments of male and female participants, the findings could have differed if spouses were separated and not allowed to discuss the questions. This could however have jeopardized consumers' willingness to participate. The issue of gender could be investigated in a future study, possibly through introduction of panel discussions. However, a different outcome would not necessarily have changed the conclusions that were drawn in terms of augmented CS.

## **6.2 VALUE OF THE RESEARCH**

This research contributes to existing theory through evidence of CS and SQ judgments in an emerging economy. In the course of the data analysis, the CS scale as well as the SERVQUAL scale was revised in terms of less intricate scales.

Exploratory factor analysis revealed that, in the context of this research, CS was judged in terms of three elements that exposed the apparent significance of personnel in the store; processes and value for money (rather than explicit emphasis on price and product as separate elements) and the physical environment, specifically through product presentation. These elements of CS were confirmed in the SERVQUAL judgement where the five dimensions of SQ collapsed into two dimensions that distinguished the human touch of the service (therefore personnel related factors) as well as extrinsic factors (that signifies the physical surroundings). Although these judgments were above average to good, the reorganisation of the elements of CS and the dimensions of SQ provide evidence of how retail should approach the service offering to address the level of understanding/interest of its customers. During the in store survey, it became clear that stores regarded price

highly while price per se never featured as a separate entity. In stead, it is suggested that value for money need to be attended to.

The exceptional contribution of this research is in terms of the combination of Customer Service and SERVQUAL judgments with the product knowledge tests to confirm consumers' inability to make informed buying decisions irrespective of their positive judgments of the stores' service offering. The product knowledge tests revealed that, in the context of this research the positive CS and SERVQUAL judgments confirmed that consumers in emerging economies, i.e. including less experienced consumers are more tolerant of poor service delivery. Without such evidence, stores might be under the impression that they are doing well. Consequently little would be done do improve their apparent successful strategies.

### **6.3 VALIDITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY**

The sample size (N=296) is commendable considering the particular trying conditions under which the participants had to be recruited, i.e. in the store immediately after closure of a sales deal. Customers' willingness to cooperate was probably due to the support of the management of the stores during data collection sessions. The researcher is satisfied that the respondents eventually represented the actual target group of selected department stores. In this study the research process was carefully executed to limit errors and to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. The researcher kept track of every data collection session and follow-up sessions were held with assistants to ensure that procedures were intact. All sales personnel that participated were employed for more than a year in the particular stores and they participated willingly and enthusiastically, probably because the task allowed them to share their views on a very important issue.

A combination of data collection techniques was used to ensure that eventual conclusions were valid. The inclusion of the product knowledge test confirmed the areas that could be improved on to augment CS to a level that enhances informed



consumer decisions (i.e. assistance of well trained personnel and an improvement of the physical surroundings so that consumers are encouraged to be more curious and investigative). In the eventual phase, i.e. the discussions with representatives of industry, the concerns of the sales personnel were confirmed.

Techniques for increasing the credibility of the study during data collection included prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation across sources and methods. This was done through visitation to several similar retail contexts as well as the use of multiple methods to gather data. Sufficient time was spent in each specific context to witness a replication of activities and to develop an understanding of the phenomenon. By using willing participants who have just purchased appliances from the store, to complete the questionnaires, the trustworthiness of the research was also enhanced. Various appropriate qualitative as well as quantitative data collection techniques were implemented for the purpose of triangulation and to increase trustworthiness of data (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 76, 92; Eldabi *et al*, 2002:66).

The entire research process was planned in advance to enable conditional inter-subjectivity, as recommended by Stenbacka, (2001:552) for good quality qualitative approach although the researcher kept an open mind in terms of changes to selected procedures if the situation merited any. To enhance the credibility and objectivity of interpretation formation, on-site interaction with the co-workers occurred; negative case analysis and debriefing was done after every store visit with the study leader. The truth/reality of the research procedures, the data and the findings were confirmed as being the focus of the inquiry and not of the biases of the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:278).

A professional statistician assisted the researcher to capture and analyse the data according to the objectives of this study. The transferability of the research to other contexts, like other developing countries, is a concern. To reach an understanding of the fairly predictable behaviour of the inexperienced consumer, transferability was established by going to multiple venues to study the phenomenon.

Four questions, compiled by Lincoln and Guba, concerning trustworthiness were listed by Wallendorf and Belk (1989:70) that are important for all research. It must however be noted that the answers to these questions will differ in post-positivist research that employs participant observation and ethnographic methods.

On the first question of whether to have confidence in the findings of the research, internal validity is proposed. Internal validity is established by close interaction with the real phenomenon (Gummesson, 2002:328; Hughes, 2006:118). But as it assumes a mirroring of research with a single external reality, it should be substituted by credibility. The representations of the constructions of reality that were studied must be adequate and believable (Payne & Williams, 2005:297; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989:71). In this study 296 consumers were asked to fill in the questionnaire; all available salespeople (18), working in the specific department of the selected stores, were included in the projective techniques and four representatives from the industry were interviewed.

The second question of the degree to which findings can be applied in other contexts, is answered by the transferability of the research. Generalization, if any, is restricted to the context of appliance sales in department stores of large retail outlets in a third world context. The pretence of replication is however not offered, because any control over the research setting would destroy the interaction of variables and affect the underlying philosophy of the research method (Eldabi *et al*, 2002:66; De Ruyter & Schol, 1998:12). Reliability of the research assumes the possibility of an exact repetition, which does not fit the scenario where the human is researched as a dynamic and subjectively shaped phenomenon.

#### **6.4 CONTRIBUTION TO THE THEORY**

This research revealed that the constructs *customer service* and *service quality* need to be defined within context. In the context of this research, i.e. an emerging economy, both constructs were redefined in terms of new dimensions. The findings

can make a valuable contribution in terms of an understanding of the challenges in retail where the consequences of globalization and the needs of emerging consumer groups are incongruent. The findings of this research suggests that consumers in emerging economies, where the needs of diverse consumer groups have to be addressed simultaneously, should not be based on experience in sophisticated first world countries. In stead, services should be customized.

In terms of the methodology, this research confirmed the value of multiple measurements in research in terms of the validity of the findings. This research integrated a customer service (CS) scale, a SERVQUAL scale as well as a product knowledge test to confirm the notion that consumers in emerging economies judge services differently.

## **6.5 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this research reveal that retail stores have a major responsibility towards their customers that differ from the demeanor of the economic perspective. Instead of an emphasis on sales and profitability, retailers will have to accept some responsibility for the well being of their customers. While retailers have a constant battle to survive in a highly competitive market place, consumers in emerging economies are bombarded with sophisticated products from all corners of the world. Merchandise such as major household appliances represents complex technology and consumers not necessarily have the ability or the opportunity to obtain relevant product knowledge before they enter the store. Retail provides the ideal environment to provide the assistance that is needed to make informed buying decisions and stores should take advantage of the fact that customers' judgement of the service offering in retail stores is predominantly positive.

The researcher recommends that efforts in retail to educate customers that visit the stores should be monitored and assessed to identify successful strategies. Consumers'



limited product knowledge could be investigated to determine the consequences in terms of use and maintenance of appliances.

