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Some reflections on my career, publishing, and contributing significantly to a field

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ABSTRACT: In this article the author provides an overview and a retrospective analysis of his over three-decade-long academic career and the evolution of his research during the course of that career. Within the broad overview and analysis of his career, he singles out and elaborates on his fifteen-year collaborative research on service quality (with colleagues Valarie Zeithaml and Len Berry), in order to illustrate the nature of a programmatic research stream on an important topic and the significant impact that such a research stream can have on a discipline's knowledge base and practice. The author also derives a number of personal lessons from his reflections about his career and research, and discusses the implications of those lessons for researchers. He concludes the article with some general observations and recommendations about making significant contributions to a field.

KEYWORDS: Programmatic research, publishing strategy, service quality.

ALGUNAS REFLEXIONES SOBRE MI TRAYECTORIA: CÓMO PUBLICAR Y CONTRIBUIR DE MODO SIGNIFICATIVO EN UN CAMPO DEL CONOCIMIENTO

RESUMEN: En el presente artículo, el autor ofrece una perspectiva general de sus más de tres décadas de trayectoria académica y hace un análisis retrospectivo de su evolución como investigador. Siguiendo esa perspectiva y bajo un análisis amplio, el autor reseña sus 15 años de investigación colaborativa sobre la calidad del servicio (con sus colegas Valarie Zeithaml y Len Berry), con el fin de ilustrar la naturaleza de una corriente de investigación programática sobre un tema importante y el impacto significativo que esa forma de investigar puede tener en la base y en la práctica del conocimiento de una disciplina. El autor también menciona un número de experiencias personales que surgen de la reflexión sobre su carrera como investigador, y discute las repercusiones que estas experiencias podrían tener para otros investigadores. El artículo concluye con algunas observaciones y recomendaciones generales sobre cómo se puede contribuir significativamente a un campo del conocimiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: investigación programática, estrategia de publicación, calidad del servicio.

QUELQUES REFLEXIONS SUR MON PARCOURS: COMMENT PUBLIER ET CONTRIBUER SIGNIFICATIVEMENT DANS UN DOMAINE DE CONNAISSANCE

RÉSUMÉ: Dans cet article, l'auteur offre une perspective générale de son parcours académique de plus de trois décades et réalise une analyse rétrospective de son évolution en tant que chercheur. Dans cette perspective et par une profonde analyse, il décrit 15 ans de recherche en collaboration (avec ses collègues Valarie Zeithaml et Len Berry) sur la qualité de service, afin d'illustrer l'essence d'un courant d'investigation programmatique sur un thème important et l'impact significatif de ce genre de recherche sur le fondement et l'exercice de la connaissance d'un discipline. L'auteur mentionne également plusieurs expériences personnelles surgissant de la réflexion sur sa carrière de chercheur et les répercussions que ces expériences pourraient avoir pour d'autres chercheurs. En conclusion, il effectue quelques observations et recommandations générales concernant la manière de contribuer de façon significative dans un domaine de connaissance

MOTS-CLEFS : investigation programmatique, stratégie de publication, qualité du service.

ALGUMAS REFLEXÕES SOBRE MINHA TRAJETÓRIA: COMO PUBLICAR E CONTRIBUIR DE MODO SIGNIFICATIVO EM UM CAMPO DO CONHECIMENTO

RESUMO: No presente artigo, o autor oferece uma perspectiva geral de suas mais de três décadas de trajetória acadêmica e faz uma análise retrospectiva de sua evolução como pesquisador. Seguindo essa perspectiva e sob uma análise ampla, o autor faz uma resenha de seus 15 anos de pesquisa colaborativa sobre a qualidade do serviço (com seus colegas Valarie Zeithaml e Len Berry), com o objetivo de ilustrar a natureza de uma corrente de pesquisa programática sobre um tema importante e o impacto significativo que essa forma de pesquisar pode ter na base e na prática do conhecimento de uma disciplina. O autor também menciona experiências pessoais que surgem da reflexão sobre sua carreira como pesquisador, e discute as repercussões que estas experiências poderiam ter para outros pesquisadores. O artigo é concluído com algumas observações e recomendações gerais sobre como se pode contribuir significativamente a um campo do conhecimento.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: pesquisa programática, estratégia de publicação, qualidade do serviço.

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Introduction

The three primary categories of articles solicited and published by *INNOVAR* are *Research Articles*, *Reflection Articles,* and *Review Articles* (as per this journal's "Guidelines for Contributing Authors"). The present piece would fall under the reflection-article category. However, its scope and intent are broader than those implied in *INNOVAR*'s guidelines for this type of article –namely, that reflection articles "present the results of research from an author's original source-based, analytical, interpretative, or critical perspective on a specific topic." Although my research stream over the last quarter century has focused on the topic of customer service, and while this article will allude to some key insights from that research stream, it is likely to be somewhat different from typical reflection articles appearing in this journal. The article's primary objectives are to (a) provide a critical analysis of my thirty-six year academic career; (b) discuss the personal lessons my career has taught me; and (c) draw on those lessons to offer suggestions to graduate students, researchers and other professionals for making significant contributions to their respective fields.

As a backdrop to what is to follow, I begin with a brief overview of my education and employment history. I obtained a Bachelor of Technology degree (in mechanical engineering) in 1970 from the Indian Institute of Technology-Madras and a Master of Business Administration degree (with a marketing concentration) in 1972 from the Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad. Among the various business fields to which I was introduced during the first year of my MBA program, I was most fascinated by marketing. I was drawn to marketing especially because of its "fuzziness" (vis-à-vis other fields such as accounting and finance) and the consequent potential I saw for applying my engineering training to tackle that fuzziness. My fascination with marketing also sparked a strong desire in me to become an academic –in particular, a teacher and a researcher who would try to make a small contribution towards bringing some structure to what I felt was an inherently fuzzy–but fascinating–field.

Because none of the universities in India offered a doctoral program in marketing at that time, and based on my belief that a doctorate was essential for pursuing a career in teaching and research, I went to the United States in 1972 to begin my doctoral studies at Indiana University (Bloomington, Indiana), with a major concentration in marketing and minor concentrations in operations research and statistics. My doctoral thesis, completed in 1975, focused on issues related to sales force management and industrial marketing. Consistent with my dual interest in marketing and quantitative methods, for my doctoral thesis I developed and validated an operations-research model for optimally allocating a given number of salespeople across a company's sales territories. A paper based on my thesis was my first major publication in a leading marketing journal (Parasuraman and Day, 1977). My first full-time job as an academic was at the University of Northern Iowa (Cedar Falls, Iowa), where I spent four years (1975-1979) before moving to Texas A&M University (College Station, Texas). After spending fifteen years (1979-1994) at Texas A&M University I moved to the University of Miami (Coral Gables, Florida), where I am at present in my eighteenth year.

The remainder of this article is organized into three sections. In the next section I trace the evolution of my research interests and publications, critically examine that evolution, and derive some personal lessons from the examination. In the section after that I describe my research collaboration with Valarie Zeithaml and Len Berry on service quality, outline key outcomes stemming from that collaboration, and discuss their impact on theory and practice. I conclude the paper with some general thoughts on making significant contributions to a field.

Evolution of my research interests and publications

Table 1 pictorially depicts the evolution of my areas of research emphasis from the time I was a doctoral student to the present time. Table 1's rows correspond to consecutive three-year intervals of my career; its columns represent the general areas of my research emphasis over the years. Starting with my doctoral-student days, marketing research methodology (especially quantitative techniques) has been one of my distinct areas of interest, although since 2005 my focus on that domain has changed from primary to secondary. My first substantive research domain was sales management and industrial marketing – the area of my doctoral thesis. I continued to have a strong interest and conducted extensive research in this area until around 1986, after which I gradually decreased my emphasis on it over a six-year period as my interest in other topics–services marketing in particular–grew rapidly. My second substantive area of research as Table 1 shows was the "marketing concept" –a philosophy urging firms to first develop an accurate understanding of market needs and

TABLE 1. Primary and secondary areas of research emphasis.

	Research Methodology	*Sales Mgmt. & Ind. Mktg.*	*Marketing Concept*	*Marketing Strategy*	*Services Marketing*	*Technology's Role in Svc. Delivery*
1972-74	Doc Student	Doc Student				
1975-77						
1978-80						
1981-83						
1984-86						
1987-89						
1990-92						
1993-95						
1996-98						
1999-01						
2002-04						
2005-07						
2008-11						

KEY:	Primary Emphasis		Secondary Emphasis

then coordinate and focus all internal activities to satisfy those needs. The marketing concept generated considerable debate among scholars during the late 1970s, which is what triggered my research interest in the topic. I maintained at least a secondary research interest in the marketing concept for about twelve years. Soon after I moved from the University of Northern Iowa to Texas A&M University in 1979; collaborations with my new colleagues broadened my research interests to encompass two additional areas –marketing strategy and services marketing, with my strong emphasis on the latter continuing to the present time. As the last column in Table 1 shows, for over the past fifteen years my research in the service domain has also been focusing on the role of technology-based systems in serving customers.

Service-related issues have by and large been the sole substantive focus of my research since around the mid-1980s.

However, up until 1986 my research was considerably less focused. In particular, from 1981-1986 my research was spread over four distinct substantive areas (see Table 1). In addition to lacking a clear research focus, this six-year period was the most stressful period of my entire career –more on this later after I provide an overview of my publication history, which is summarized in Table 2.

Articles that I have authored or coauthored have appeared in major marketing journals (*Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Marketing Science*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* and *Journal of Retailing*) as well as a variety of other marketing and business journals (e.g., *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Service Research*, *Decision Sciences Journal*, *Sloan Management Review*, *Business Horizons*). In terms of articles published, the most productive six-year period in my career was 1981-1986 (see Table 2), accounting for almost a third of the total number of articles I have published to date. During this period I also wrote a sole-authored marketing research textbook that was over 800 pages long (Parasuraman, 1986). Yet, despite being a period marked by high scholarly productivity, this six-year span was also a very stressful–and not a personally fulfilling–phase of my professional career. In fact, I consider this period to be a "dark phase" in my career for several reasons.

First, as already noted, my research lacked focus and was spread over four distinct substantive areas simultaneously. Second, I was getting involved in too many "opportunistic" research projects that came my way, being attracted to them primarily by the prospect of adding to my list of publications. I managed to publish at least one article from every such opportunistic research project in which I participated. However, based on hindsight, I wish I had resisted the publication lure of such projects and instead focused most or all my research efforts on the increasingly important substantive domain of services marketing. While I eventually was able to establish a programmatic stream of research on service quality in that domain (more on this in the next section), I lost valuable research time and momentum in this regard during 1981-86. Third, and as a consequence of the preceding shortcomings, several of my articles published during this period are ones of which I am not particularly proud because, in retrospect, they do not fit any of the cohesive research streams through which I have tried to contribute to the literature; instead they "stick out like sore thumbs" in my CV. The journal articles labeled as "Y" in Table 2 belong to this category of articles (as Table 2 shows, of the ten "Y" articles in my CV, eight were published during 1981-86). Fourth, while I am glad I wrote my sole-authored marketing research textbook (it was well-received by the marketplace and was a commercial success as well), thinking back I question whether it was wise to take on such a major textbook-writing task so early in my career when I had not yet established myself as a research scholar in any substantive domain. Moreover, I significantly underestimated the time commitment needed for writing an accessible and comprehensive textbook on marketing research. Consequently, focusing on writing the textbook–while simultaneously concentrating on the multiple research projects on varied topics in which I was involved, in addition to attempting to pay sufficient attention to my young family (a wife and three children below

TABLE 2. Chronology and composition of journal articles published.

	Major Marketing Journals*	Other Marketing and Business Journals "X"	Other Marketing and Business Journals "Y"	Total
1975-77	1	1	0	2
1978-80	1	3	1	5
1981-83	1	15	5	21
1984-86	5	9	3	17
1987-89	4	8	1	13
1990-92	3	8	0	11
1993-95	6	1	0	7
1996-98	3	3	0	6
1999-01	2	2	0	4
2002-04	2	12	0	14
2005-07	2	6	0	8
2008-11	1	11	0	12
Total	31	79	10	120

*****_Journal of Marketing_, _Journal of Marketing Research_, _Marketing Science_, _Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science,_ and _Journal of Retailing_

"X" –Journal articles I am glad I wrote

"Y" –Journal articles about which I have second thoughts in retrospect the age of six at that time)–took a heavy emotional and physical toll on me. I was at an emotional breaking point towards the end of this period.

Fortunately, I decided to take a semester-long leave of absence (without pay) from Texas A&M University during the latter half of 1986 to sort things out. If not for that leave, I am not sure if I could have pulled myself out of this dark phase. The semester-long sabbatical gave me the time I sorely needed to reflect on my professional choices and career up to that point and their consequences. Based on that reflection, I resolved to try to (1) focus my research on a single domain (or several related–even if distinct–topics within that domain); (2) gradually decrease, and eventually eliminate, research emphasis on my initial substantive areas of research (in particular, sales management/industrial marketing that was the domain of my doctoral work) so that I could concentrate on issues related to customer service, an area in which I was getting increasingly involved; and (3) to wean myself from the habit of getting involved in every research opportunity that came my way, without first critically examining whether and how it fit my primary research stream. As evidenced by the post-1986 phases of my career summarized in Table 1 and 2, I believe I have been reasonably successful in staying true to the aforementioned resolutions.

The manner in which beginning scholars handle the formative initial years of their career can critically affect the nature and extent of their eventual impact on their respective fields in later stages of their careers. As implied by the preceding discussion, in retrospect I believe I could, and probably should, have handled differently certain aspects of my early career stages and my professional choices in those stages. I learned some personal lessons based on my experiences as an academic during the first dozen years of my career. Though the lessons are necessarily subjective and open to debate, I summarize them below as a way of offering some food for thought to professional colleagues, particularly those who are on the verge of launching their academic careers:

1. *Rather than focusing on maximizing the number of articles published, focus on establishing a programmatic stream of research in an important area, even if such a focus leads to fewer published articles*. Developing a reputation as a scholar with a sustained research record–and hence expertise–in a specific domain is much more conducive in the long run for making significant contributions to a field than is the sheer number of articles one publishes on a variety of topics.
2. *Resist the temptation to get involved in research projects that do not overlap in any meaningful way with one's primary research domain*. Though getting involved in such opportunistic projects may result in published articles, developing those articles will take precious time away from building a reputation as an expert in one's primary area of interest. Moreover, articles from purely opportunistic research projects may eventually detract from and dilute one's overall record of contributions from programmatic research in one's primary area.
3. *Do not be afraid to choose "risky" research topics/approaches, or to change the substantive area of one's research emphasis, as long as compelling professional logic and personal conviction support those choices and changes*. In my case, switching from my original stream of research focusing on sales management/industrial marketing (the area of my doctoral dissertation and one in which I was continuing to publish in the early years of my career) to service quality–a topic that was relatively new to me and to the marketing literature at that time–was a potentially risky move. However, I was convinced that the risk was well worth taking based on the strong practitioner interest in service quality in the 1980s, coupled with the paucity of conceptual frameworks and empirical approaches in the literature for understanding, assessing and improving service quality.
4. *While there is no substitute for working hard, especially early in one's career, it is also important to maintain a healthy work-life balance*. In my case, I was so engrossed in fulfilling commitments related to the many research and writing projects in which I was involved, especially during 1981-86, that I did not spend sufficient time with my young family. Based on hindsight, the resulting frustration and guilt that I felt was counter-productive because my mental stress actually slowed down my professional progress. I would have been better off if I had reallocated some of my research and writing time to my family.

My research stream on service quality

My interest in services germinated in 1980, soon after I moved to Texas A&M University where I had the good fortune to meet and start collaborating with Valarie Zeithaml and Len Berry, two colleagues to whom I owe a sincere debt of gratitude for introducing me to the exciting new area of service quality in which there was considerable practitioner interest but not much by way practical guidelines in the extant literature. A significant impetus for our collective interest in studying service quality came from the Marketing Science Institute (www.msi.org), a nonprofit organization sponsored by over 70 large companies and having as its principal mission the generation of new knowledge through rigorous academic research on topics of keen interest to practitioners. The MSI-sponsored research collaboration among the three of us–hereafter referred to as the "PZB" service quality journey–endured over the entire time I was at Texas A&M University and involved five major phases. Though we have continued to collaborate on other service-related research and writing projects, the focus of this section is limited to the PZB service quality journey from 1981-94, as an illustration of the nature and impact of a programmatic stream of research on an important topic. Table 3 provides an overview of the makeup and outcomes of the sequential research phases constituting this journey.

The five research phases took about three years each to complete and alternated between qualitative and quantitative approaches, with each phase building on and extending the insights from the previous phase. After obtaining MSI funding for our initial proposal in 1982, we followed the typical MSI protocol of completing the funded research, presenting the findings to MSI member companies that sponsored the research, and writing an MSI research report. Additionally, the research process we followed had another distinct feature that paved the way for what eventually turned out to be a programmatic, multi-phase research journey (rather than just a single project): When we presented our findings to MSI and its member companies, we also submitted a well-developed proposal requesting additional funding to conduct research to gain a deeper understanding of the findings and address new issues stemming from those findings. The additional step of simultaneously submitting a proposal for follow-up research when presenting insights from just-completed research, which we followed in each of the first four phases, worked well for us because several MSI member companies were eager to support and participate in the proposed research for the next phase (see the third column in Table 3).

Phase 1 (1982-84)

Given that service quality was a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry, the first phase of the PZB journey focused on several basic questions: What is superior customer service? How do customers define service quality? What criteria do customers employ in evaluating service quality? What organizational deficiencies may stand in the way of delivering high-quality service to customers? We deemed qualitative research–consisting of customer focus group interviews in a variety of sectors and in-depth interviews with senior executives in leading companies in each of those sectors–to be the most appropriate ap-

TABLE 3. Anatomy of an effective research stream –"PZB" service quality journey (1981-1994).

Research Phases	Nature of the Research	MSI Companies Sponsoring the Research	Key Research Outcomes	MSI Research Reports Published
Pilot (1981-82)	Review and synthesis of insights from extant literature	–	Proposal developed and submitted to MSI	–
Phase 1 (1982-84)	Qualitative	Chase Manhattan Bank, Dean Witter Reynolds, Sears, Bank of America	Conceptual model of service quality ("Gaps Model")	Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1984), "A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research," MSI Report No. 84-106.
Phase 2 (1984-86)	Quantitative	AT&T, Chase Manhattan Bank, Sears, VISA	SERVQUAL (instrument for assessing service quality)	Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1986), "SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item Scale for Measuring Customer Perceptions of Service Quality," MSI Report No. 86-108.
Phase 3 (1986-89)	Qualitative and quantitative	Bank of America, Bank of Boston, GTE, MetLife, Travelers	Extended gaps model and its empirical assessment	Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1987), "Communication and Control Processes in the Delivery of Service Quality," MSI Report No. 87-100. Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1990), "An Empirical Examination of Relationships in an Extended Model of Service Quality," MSI Report No. 90-122.
Phase 4 (1989-91)	Qualitative	Allstate, Cigna, General Motors, Kodak, Marriott, MetLife, Prudential, Ryder	Conceptual model of the nature and determinants of customers' service expectations	Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1991) "The Nature and Determinants of Customer Expectations of Service," MSI Report No. 91-113.
Phase 5 (1991-94)	Quantitative	Allstate, IBM, MetLife, Sears	Refined SERVQUAL instrument	Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1994), "Moving Forward in Service Quality Research: Measuring Different Levels of Customer Expectations, Comparing Alternative Scales, and Examining the Performance-Behavioral Intentions Link," MSI Report No. 94-114.

proach for addressing these questions. A number of consistent themes that cut across the different sectors emerged from our qualitative research. Based on those themes we defined service quality as the extent and direction of the discrepancy between what service customers expect from excellent companies in a sector and what they perceive they receive from a given company whose service quality is being assessed. This definition was also consistent with insights in the nascent services marketing literature that was starting to grow rapidly at that time (Gronroos, 1982; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982; Lewis and Booms, 1983; Sasser et al., 1978). The common themes from the in-depth executive interviews suggested four broad organizational deficiencies or gaps that could, in turn, contribute to the gap experienced by customers between expected and perceived service:

1. *Market Information Gap*: The discrepancy between what customers expect from a service organization and senior managers' understanding of customers' expectations.
2. *Service Standards Gap*: The discrepancy between managers' knowledge of customers' service expectations and organizational specifications or guidelines for service delivery.
3. *Service Performance Gap*: The discrepancy between organizational standards for service delivery and the actual service delivery.
4. *Internal Communication Gap*: The discrepancy between the actual service delivery and what customers are led to believe the service will be like.

Integrating the customer and organizational perspectives on service quality, we developed the "Gaps Model," a framework for understanding and analyzing potential deficiencies within the organization (Gaps 1-4) so as to narrow the external service quality gap (Gap 5) experienced by customers. Our first MSI research report published in 1984 (see last column of Table 3) describes in detail the development, structure and implications of the gaps model. This research report served as the basis for several subsequent journal articles, including one in the *Journal of Marketing* that introduced the Gaps Model to the mainstream literature (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Phase 2 (1984-86)

The second phase of the PZB research journey focused on the customer side of the Gaps Model–namely Gap 5–and involved developing a scale for measuring this gap. The starting point for this phase was a set of insights from the previous phase pertaining to service-related attributes that customers employ in evaluating service quality. In addition to generating a definition of service quality from the customer's perspective (i.e., Gap 5), the focus groups in Phase 1 suggested ten broad dimensions that customers use as criteria in judging service quality. Based on these ten dimensions and specific service attributes under each, we developed an initial survey instrument for operationalizing Gap 5. Through a series of empirical studies conducted in multiple sectors, we sequentially pruned and refined the initial instrument. After several iterations this process yielded SERVQUAL, a 22-item scale for quantifying the service expectation-perception gap along five generic dimensions:

Reliability: Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

Responsiveness: Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.

Assurance: Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.

Empathy: Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.

Tangibles: Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials.

Our second MSI research report published in 1986 details the multiple stages involved in developing and testing the SERVQUAL scale. This report, as in the case of our first MSI report, resulted in several journal articles, chief among which was a *Journal of Retailing* article that introduced SERVQUAL to the literature at large (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Phase 3 (1986-89)

The overall objective of this phase was to develop a deeper understanding of *why* the four broad internal deficiencies (Gaps 1-4) occur in service organizations and *how* those deficiencies are related to the external service quality deficiencies perceived by customers. Of the five phases in the PZB research journey, this turned out to be the most ambitious and complex phase, involving a major qualitative component (to address the *why* question) as well as an extensive empirical study (to address the *how* question). The qualitative component involved (a) reviewing and synthesizing insights from the literature in the organizational behavior, human resources and operations areas and (b) conducting an extensive field study of one of the participating firms –this study comprised focus groups with employees at various levels and in different departments, individual interviews with a variety of managers (including senior executives), examination of the firm's promotional campaigns, and discussions with appropriate personnel in the firm's advertising agency. Integrating insights from the literature review and the field study, we generated a list of potential causes for each of the four organizational deficiencies, and developed an "Extended Gaps Model," which is discussed in the first of the two MSI research reports from this phase (see Table 3). The empirical portion of Phase 3 involved (a) developing measures of the four broad organizational gaps as well as the potential causes of each of those gaps; (b) using the measures to gather data on the four organizational gaps and their potential causes from a sample of companies; (c) using the SERVQUAL scale to collect data on the external gap (Gap 5) from customers of the sample companies; and (d) conducting statistical analyses to ascertain the nature and extent of the effects of the various potential causes on their corresponding organizational gaps and, in turn, the effect of the latter on the external gap as measured by SERVQUAL. Other details about this empirical study and its findings are in the second MSI research report produced in this phase. Despite its being an extensive and complex study, the empirical component of Phase 3 was somewhat disappointing in that it did not reveal much by way of meaningful insights. In retrospect, the effectiveness of the preceding phases and the strong positive company reactions to findings from those phases perhaps made us unduly ambitious in proposing a comprehensive empirical test of the full extended model of service quality, without carefully thinking through the practical constraints of calibrating and testing that model. Difficulties encountered during the study–such as in measuring the various constructs at different levels of aggregation (e.g., individual employee level vs. group or department level), collecting and matching data from distinct samples of respondents representing different constituencies (e.g., customers, frontline employees, supervisors, senior managers), and doing all of this across multiple companies–necessitated compromises in implementing the study that might have contributed to the lack of significant findings.

The empirical study in Phase 3 did make an important nonempirical contribution in that it produced multiple-item scales for measuring each organizational gap and its corresponding potential causes. These scales (which are included in the second MSI research report from this phase) can be helpful to companies and researchers interested in empirically examining the determinants and consequences of each of the four organizational gaps. Thus, Phase 3 was productive overall, with the two research reports leading to multiple journal articles as in the case of the previous phases. In addition, drawing upon the collective outcomes and insights from this and the previous two phases, we wrote a business book aimed primarily at practitioners and got it published in 1990 (Zeithaml et al., 1990).

Phase 4 (1989-91)

Because service expectations are the benchmarks against which customers assess a company's service performance, we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and determinants of expectations and their role in service quality measurement. Phase 4 of the PZB research journey focused on generating that understanding. An additional impetus for this phase came from questions that were beginning to surface in the literature about SERVQUAL after its publication in the *Journal of Retailing* in 1988. Consistent with our definition of service quality, the SERVQUAL approach for measuring the construct consists of computing gap scores by subtracting customers' expectations ratings from their perceptions ratings on the 22 items that make up the scale. The need for and value of measuring customers' expectations and the appropriateness of computing gap scores were the core issues in the debate about SERVQUAL (see Parasuraman et al., 1994a and 1994b for further details concerning this debate).

The research we employed to better understand customers' service expectations was qualitative and involved an extensive focus-group study covering multiple sectors. Combining insights from previous conceptualizations of expectations with findings from this study, we developed an integrative model of customers' service expectations. This model, in addition to portraying a variety of potential determinants of expectations, reflects another important insight from our research about the *nature* of expectations –namely, that expectations exist at two different levels that customers use as comparison standards in assessing service quality:

Desired Service: The level of service representing a blend of what customers believe "can be" and "should be" provided (i.e., a "realistic ideal" level).

Adequate Service: The minimum level of service customers are willing to accept.

Separating these two levels is a *zone of tolerance* that represents the range of service performance a customer would consider satisfactory.

The integrative model of service expectations and its implications are discussed in the MSI research report emerging from this phase (see Table 3). This report, in turn, has spawned several additional journal articles.

Phase 5 (1991-1994)

The insight that customers' service expectations exist along a range (i.e., zone of tolerance) bounded by two distinct levels of expectations called for corresponding modifications to SERVQUAL. The purpose of Phase 5, a quantitative-research phase, was to refine the original SERVQUAL scale to capture customers' desired and adequate service levels, as well as their perceptions of a focal company's service. Our research in this phase consisted of multiple empirical studies to test different scale formats for operationalizing the zone of tolerance and assessing customers' service perceptions relative to the zone (details about the empirical studies, the refinements to SERVQUAL, and the refined scale's psychometric properties and diagnostic value are in the MSI research report and subsequent journal articles based on the report).

Impact of the PZB journey

The concepts and publications emerging from the PZB journey have had widespread impact on practice as well as research scholarship related to service quality. As an indication of impact on practice, in addition to the companies listed in Table 3 that sponsored our research and benefited from the insights it generated, we have conducted seminars based on our work at many other companies, several of which have also engaged us as consultants. Our corporate presentations and consulting assignments have covered over three dozen countries around the world.

One measure of the PZB journey's impact on research scholarship is the number of published journal articles and the number of citations garnered by those articles. Each MSI research report from the PZB journey led to at least one major article in a leading marketing journal and additional articles in other journals targeted at a variety of audiences (a total of eighteen articles resulted from the six research reports shown in the last column of Table 3). As of this writing, the Google-Scholar citation count for each of the major marketing articles exceeds 1000, with the Gaps Model and SERVQUAL articles (Parasuraman et al., 1985 and 1988, respectively) each having over 8500 citations. The current citation count for the *Delivering Quality Service* book (Zeithaml et al., 1990), published about two-thirds of the way into the PZB journey, exceeds 2600.

The extensive scholarly debate surrounding SERVQUAL and the additional studies and journal articles by many researchers around the world is another indication of the PZB journey's impact. The journey has also influenced research well beyond the marketing discipline. For instance, the refined SERVQUAL instrument from Phase 5 has been the basis for the development of LibQUAL (www.libqual.org), a rigorous methodology that is being used by a worldwide consortium of several hundred research libraries (under the auspices of the Association of Research Libraries) to track the quality of their services on an annual basis.

Finally, the PZB journey has also had an impact on pedagogy –the Gaps Model and SERVQUAL have been featured in several textbooks in chapters covering topics related to customer service and service quality assessment and improvement. One of the leading services marketing textbooks (Zeithaml et al., 2009) uses the Gaps Model as its underlying framework.

Lessons from the PZB journey

Reflecting on the overall PZB journey and its impact suggests some general lessons and guidelines that may be helpful to research scholars, especially those early in their careers, in maximizing the impact of their work. The key lessons/guidelines from the journey are:

1. *Focus on research topics that have evolutionary potential –i.e., topics that are broad and robust enough to lead to a program of research consisting of a sequence of studies, with each study building on and extending the preceding one*. In our case, although we did not–and could not–plan or predict at the outset the duration of and number of phases in our research journey, we did know that service quality was an important and "wide open" topic with multiple facets calling for research attention.
2. *Work on research projects that will have practical relevance (at least eventually)*. I believe that a primary reason for the widespread impact of the PZB journey was its focus on a topic that was of keen interest to practitioners and high on the list of MSI's research priorities. The potential contribution of research that has both methodological rigor and practical relevance will be significantly greater than that of research that is deficient on the latter.
3. *Take a multi-context research approach if at all possible*. An important contributor to the success of the PZB journey was the fact that multiple sectors and companies were involved in each of its five phases. Key conclusions from each phase were anchored in common patterns of findings from diverse contexts, thereby strengthening the robustness of those conclusions and

proactively deflecting potential concerns about their generalizability.

4. *While broad research topics are likely to have greater evolutionary potential than are narrow topics (as implied by the first guideline above), it is important "not to bite off more than one can chew" in any single study*. As discussed previously, the quantitative study in Phase 3 of the PZB journey turned out to be too ambitious, difficult to implement, and not as effective as a less elaborate study with a narrower scope might have been.

5. *Be prepared to face, and respond constructively to, criticisms of one's work*. Our SERVQUAL work drew considerable attention from other researchers and became the subject of some heated debate in the literature. We were initially surprised and puzzled by the questions being raised about SERVQUAL in the academic literature, especially given the strong positive reactions we received from managers in a variety of companies and sectors. We were caught somewhat off-guard by the criticisms. It took us a while to get over our initial shock and frustration before being able to think calmly about the issues being raised and how to address them. We responded to the issues in rejoinder articles –by, for example, reiterating the robustness of our SERVQUAL findings across diverse sectors, re-establishing the scale's psychometric properties and demonstrating the practical, diagnostic value of the data generated by it. In addition, stimulated by the scholarly debate about SERVQUAL, we made further refinements and improvements to the scale (as noted in Phases 4 and 5 of the PZB journey).

6. *Disseminate research findings through a variety of publication outlets and professional forums to reach diverse audiences and broaden the research's impact*. As already mentioned, we published the findings and implications from the five phases in a variety of scholarly and practitioner-oriented journals; and, we wrote a business book based on the collective insights from Phases 1-3. Additionally, we contributed chapters based on our work to scholarly books and handbooks, incorporated our findings into the courses we taught, and presented our work in numerous conferences, research colloquia and executive seminars around the world. Such widespread dissemination of our work through multiple channels was crucial for the extensive exposure it received and its broad impact on both research and practice in the service quality field.

General thoughts on contributing significantly to a field

The two preceding sections provided overviews of and personal reflections about my career and the PZB service quality journey. Each section ended with a set of suggestions for researchers based on my reflections. In this section I conclude with some general observations and recommendations pertaining to making an impact on a discipline[1].

Academicians have to fulfill several important professional roles, broadly categorized as research, teaching and service roles. Though all three roles are critical, the content and quality of one's research and writing contributions are paramount in determining one's *discipline-wide* reputation and impact. Those who excel in teaching and service do get recognized and develop reputations for making important contributions. However, recognitions and reputations stemming solely from teaching and service contributions are typically confined to the "local"–i.e., department, school or university–level, and rarely achieve discipline-wide status. Moreover, a record of scholarly publications is a conventional criterion for being eligible to teach doctoral seminars, supervise doctoral students and perform important professional gatekeeping functions (e.g., serving on editorial review boards of journals, promotion-and-tenure review committees, etc.). Therefore, in addition to being significant in its own right, the research role is intertwined with–and is a prerequisite for–some of the most influential teaching and service roles of academicians.

A range of publication channels are available for contributing to a discipline through research and writing, including: Broad-based scholarly journals, specialized scholarly journals that have a narrower scope, scholarly books or book chapters, "applied" journals aimed at practitioners, textbooks, and business books. These channels vary with respect to the *nature*, *endurance,* and *primary targets* of the written contributions.

The "nature" of a written contribution refers to whether the contribution focuses primarily on knowledge creation (i.e., introducing to a discipline new insights, concepts, frameworks, etc. based on original research) or knowledge dissemination (i.e., synthesizing, reformulating and propagating knowledge that already exists within a discipline). On a continuum anchored by "Primarily knowledge creation" at one end and "Primarily knowledge dissemination" at the other end, the abovementioned channels will occupy different positions, with broad scholarly journals

[1] Material in this section relies heavily on– with portions of it excerpted from–Parasuraman (2003).

near the knowledge-creation end and business books near the knowledge-dissemination end, and the others falling in-between (in approximately the same order in which they are listed above).

The "endurance" of a written contribution refers to the degree to which it continues to stimulate scholarly discourse and additional research –i.e., the extent to which the work continues to contribute to the discipline's knowledge-creation activities. On an endurance continuum anchored by "Relatively high" at one end and "Relatively low" at the other end, broad scholarly journals will be near the high end and business books near the low end, with the others falling in-between. Thus a written contribution's nature (in terms of degree of focus on knowledge creation vs. dissemination) and endurance (in terms of longevity of impact) are likely to be highly correlated.

The primary targets or audiences for research and written contributions include research scholars, Ph.D. students, "thoughtful" practitioners (who appreciate and seek out scholarly research that offers new knowledge), managers in general (who are interested more in how-to guidelines with immediate practical applications than in new knowledge per se), and non-Ph.D. students. While each of these groups is a potential target for work appearing in any of abovementioned publication outlets, not all of them are likely to be *primary* targets for every publication outlet. For instance, the primary targets for scholarly journals and scholarly books will typically be limited to research scholars, Ph.D. students and thoughtful practitioners. Similarly, non-Ph.D. students are likely to be the primary or sole target for traditional textbooks; and, managers (both the "thoughtful" and "general" types) are likely to be the primary target for business books.

There are thus different primary "publication pathways" for influencing different constituencies or target audiences within a discipline. For instance, the most effective means of influencing a broad cross-section of managers through one's written contributions is to write business books. On the other hand, having a significant impact on a discipline's current and future scholarly thought leaders and gatekeepers would require channeling one's research and writing efforts towards scholarly journals and scholarly books or book chapters (see Parasuraman [2003] for a complete typology of primary and secondary publication pathways linking the various publication channels to potential target audiences).

Academicians, especially those who are about to start–or in early stages of–their careers, will benefit from having a well-thought-out publication strategy. It is neither possible nor appropriate to recommend a one-size-fits-all strategy for everyone –the best strategy will differ across individuals depending on their doctoral training, areas of interest, skill sets, and professional interests and inclinations. However, based on the preceding points and discussion, I offer four general observations that may be helpful in developing or reformulating one's publication strategy so as to increase one's impact on a field:

1. *Multiple publication pathways are available for contributing to a discipline and all of them deserve attention*. Within my own discipline (marketing), colleagues who have had a significant impact vary in terms of the types of channels and targets through which they have made their mark. Some have concentrated virtually all of their research and writing on just one type channel (e.g., flagship scholarly journals or textbooks); others have focused on a subset of channels and their corresponding primary targets; and yet others have made notable contributions through all channels, thereby directly influenced a variety of audiences. Thus, it is possible to contribute significantly to a field by focusing on one, a few, or all publication channels.

2. *Although all publication channels are potentially helpful in influencing a discipline, beginning scholars should consider focusing most or all of their research and writing efforts on "scholarly" channels (i.e., those that are towards the upper ends of the continua representing the nature and endurance facets of written contributions)*. Having just completed their doctoral degrees (or similar advanced degrees), scholars in early career stages are likely to have three critical resources that can increase their chances of getting published in leading scholarly journals: (a) current and extensive knowledge of the literatures pertaining to their dissertation domains, (b) a fresh and original piece of research (i.e., their dissertation), and (c) a minimum of service commitments that invariably escalate during later career stages. Because all three resources tend to deteriorate over time, a different or diffused publication focus early in one's career (e.g., getting involved in book writing projects) may result in wasting valuable opportunities to publish in leading scholarly journals.

3. *It is advisable to consider multiple and varied journals within the realm of scholarly publishing*. Though publishing in a discipline's flagship scholarly journals is ideal, acceptance rates at leading journals are extremely low, typically hovering around ten percent. The low acceptance rates are not necessarily because the rejected articles are all of poor quality: "For most top journals, there isn't a dramatic drop in quality between the top 10 percent of manuscripts received and the next best

10 percent, and most of the manuscripts submitted to the leading journals are reasonably well-done." (Summers 2001, p. 405) Moreover, there are excellent suggestions in the literature for shaping one's research and manuscripts to increase the probability of acceptance at leading journals (e.g., Stewart 2002; Summers 2001; Varadarajan 1996). Nevertheless, the reality is that the number of submissions to flagship journals continues to climb rapidly, without a commensurate increase in space in those journals to accommodate all high-quality manuscripts submitted to them. Thus, although scholars in early stages of their careers should continue to submit their best work to leading journals in their disciplines, they may benefit from expanding the number and types of journals they consider for their research, while simultaneously also increasing the number and variety of their manuscripts for submission to those journals. Getting an acceptance letter from a good journal (even if it is not a flagship journal) early in one's career can boost confidence and reduce stress stemming from the pressure to publish.

4. *Maximizing one's career-long impact on a field through research and writing requires that one's contributions influence not only the field's knowledge base, but its practice and pedagogy as well*. In other words, it is important to try to channel one's writings through all potential publication channels so as to influence all relevant target audiences. However, it is not necessary–and may not be feasible or desirable–to do all of this at once. For instance, as noted earlier, scholars in early career stages should probably avoid getting involved in textbook-writing projects. Moreover, because the resources (especially time) available for research and writing are finite, even scholars in later stages of their careers may find it difficult to write *simultaneously* for different types of publication outlets aimed at different audiences. Therefore, scholars may want to pursue a "longitudinal" publication strategy, wherein they vary the emphasis they place over time on different types of writing projects and publication channels –for instance, they could focus primarily on scholarly journals initially, then gradually add other publication channels (practitioner-oriented journals, book chapters, textbooks, and business books, roughly in that order) to their publication portfolios; if necessary, they could decrease their emphasis on, or drop altogether, previously selected publication channels in order to focus sufficient attention on newly added ones. As noted in the first observation above, some scholars may be capable of making–and have made–significant contributions to a field by focusing on just one type of publication channel (e.g., by concentrating on writing best-selling textbooks or popular business books). Therefore, a longitudinal publication strategy may not always be necessary or appropriate. However, in the absence of such a strategy it may difficult to have a *far reaching* impact on one's field.

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