

## **DO WE NEED A NEW PARADIGM IN SERVICES MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT?**

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Not long ago, Ray Fisk, Steve Grove, and Joby John invited ten service researchers (including me) who had been involved with the field since its early days, to respond to a series of questions about their work, including their views on future directions for the field (Fisk, Grove, and John, "Services Marketing Self Portraits." Chicago: AMA, 2000).

Several of us argued for a shift in direction. Ben Schneider went further, stating that he sensed a kind of malaise in services marketing and that despite "a happy 20 year run" based on the paradigm that services are different from goods, the field needed new energy and new directions. "We need a new paradigm," he declared. "I wish I knew what it should be, but I know we need one." Len Berry, one of the foremost researchers in service quality, commented that so much research energy and journal space was devoted to service quality measurement during the 1990s that the field of services marketing "seemed to lose its bearings." His hope for the future was that researchers "would place more emphasis on important societal issues related to the service economy and the genuine problems managers face."

I agree. We need new energy, new research priorities, new insights for practicing managers, and new ways of teaching our students. Some of the old axioms, such as declaring the four unique characteristics of services to be intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability, are simply not valid across the full array of services today and we mislead students if we teach otherwise. Customer satisfaction, however important, is a broad marketing issue that is not service-specific.

At the recent "Frontiers in Services" conference in Maastricht, it became very clear that lots of people are hungry for new ideas and new thinking on services. When I spoke on the topic of "Do We Need to Rethink the Field of Service Management?" it proved to be an afternoon of surprises. Although my session was scheduled at the end of the day in one of seven concurrent tracks, the room was overflowing. More surprising still, over 30 participants remained for a half-hour after the official end of the session to continue the discussion. And perhaps most surprising of all, no one actively disagreed with me about the need for a change in thinking! The excitement was palpable.

Later, in the concluding plenary session, Evert Gummesson emphasized the importance of challenging what he considers to be a series of myths about services management—ideas and beliefs that have gained credibility over the years not because they are necessarily right, but largely because they gained credibility from being repeated and re-cited innumerable times. He said the trouble with comparing services to goods is that the latter have never been properly defined.

As I see it, the problem with conceptualizing services is that they vary so widely. Services involving customers in person are very different from those that involve goods

or physical property (such as cleaning or repairs), where the customer need not be present at all. The only true intangibility is found among information-based services that can be delivered entirely through electronic means. But there is one overarching characteristic that we haven't explored: the distinction between marketing activities that involve a transfer of ownership and those that do not.

What are the implications of looking at services from a "non-ownership" perspective? Clearly, they offer a means for customers to obtain benefits--including temporary possession utility in some cases--through rental of physical objects and spaces, hiring a service provider's time and expertise, and paying fees to access to systems, networks, and physical facilities.

One potential application that I find particularly intriguing is to research possibilities for improving living standards in emerging economies, where sharing rather than owning may be the key to affordability of a whole array of desired benefits.

The SERVSIG research conference in Reims next June 12-14 will include a number of sessions devoted to rethinking the field of service management and exploring possible new paradigms. I hope very much that as many people as possible will not only participate in this exciting conference but will also submit abstracts and join in the debate.