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A CASE STUDY TO EXAMINE THE IMPACT OF SERVICE QUALITY ON ALBORZ PROVINCE GAS STATION CUSTOMERS' LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

In a business environment that is constantly more complex and competitive, customer satisfaction has become the main goal of companies. This not only helps employees get to work, but is also seen as a source of profitability for the company. So many benefits to the company's customer satisfaction and higher levels of customer satisfaction leads to loyalty. To analyze the impact of service quality on customer loyalty is based on the model Seyed Javadein *et al.*, (2010) which is derived from the servqual model of *Parasuraman*. The population of this research was customers of Fuel Station Alborz Province in the period 07/09/2013 to 07/10/2013. As the population was large and unlimited, we used sampling method for facilitating the available-information collection and according to the availability of members of society is used. The results showed that the tangible and physical facilities, staff courtesy, reliability, responsiveness and empathy are the direct positive impact on customer loyalty. And therefore service quality has a direct and positive impact on customer loyalty, so that the results of research Seyed Javadein *et al.*, (2010) as well as "a model of assessing the impact of service quality on customer loyalty and sports services" also showed that tangible and physical facilities, staff courtesy, reliability, responsiveness and empathy employees have a direct and positive impact on customer loyalty.

Keywords: Customer Loyalty, Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

In a business environment constantly getting more complex and competitive, earning customer satisfaction has become the main objective in many companies. This not only helps employees get to work more and better, but also is a source of profitability for the company; it has so many benefits for the company and higher levels of customer satisfaction leads to their loyalty. Maintaining good customers in the long run is more beneficial than continuing to attract new customers to replace customers who have cut ties with the company. Customers who have high satisfaction transfer their positive experiences to others and become thus a good advertiser that reduces the costs of attracting new customers. This is particularly important for public service providers because their reputation and credit the expressing advantages and positive aspects of is an important source of public confidence.

High customer satisfaction is an insurance against companies' possible errors which are unavoidable as a result of changes associated with the production of their services. Clientele are more excusing in the face of such situations because of previous good experiences and easily overlook companies' small errors (Aali, 2012).

Marketing is at a stage in its evolution where marketers do not only focus on finding new customers. The purpose of marketing today is management of demand through customer growth and developing loyalty to organizations and companies. Today customers' satisfaction is not enough and organizations must not stop at this point. They have to make sure their satisfied customers are also loyal to them. The purpose of this paradigm is to establish long-term relationships and interaction with special interest groups especially customers. This relationship will help retain more customers and lose fewer ones. The result will be good demand in the long term and increased interests, market share and profitability.

Today is no more the age of satisfaction but the era of loyalty. Customer loyalty will have employee loyalty, management loyalty, loyalty to the community and ideals and beliefs etc. (Soleimani, 2008). Therefore, today one of the most important factors of the environment is an organization's customers. Experts in management consider customer satisfaction to be one of most important tasks and priorities of

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every company management and the senior managers' commitment to customer satisfaction as a precondition for success (Aali, 2011).

So that one of the most important developments in the field of quality improvement in the last decade of the twentieth century was measuring customer satisfaction as one of the main requirements of ISO 9000 or quality management systems and business excellence awards in all institutions and business enterprises.

The increasing number of vehicles and a large number of old vehicles, increasing the waiting time in traffic and fuel stations, increasing the number of trips within and outside the city, the lack of public transportation and urban facilities and lack of proper regulation of the use of new technologies, has caused the upward trend in gasoline consumption, followed by attendance at gas stations as a key challenge in the country, so given the heavy investment of the construction of gas stations, especially in large cities due to high price of land, a new construction way of gas stations with the aim of increasing the efficiency of gas stations, is considered to be a necessary economic measure to take (Abedi et al., 2010). Organizations and companies (including gas stations) create value through a variety of services they provide and if the client feels mistreated at the time of delivery it reduces the value of the service in the long term. Even the reverse seems to be true as well, i.e. if an employee fills mistreated by the client, if the manager doesn't support the employee or if they don't receive good salary, the value of the service declines and this reaches the customer because it is a fact that lowest level employees are in touch with customers and this is one of the main problems of gas stations managers because most of these people are young and inexperienced and sometimes less educated than their clients and must learn social and technical skills and know how to deal with customers. In fact, any organization which is looking for longterm relationships cannot mistreat customers and employees and abusing the rights of customer and employees or mistreating them will reduce the level of customer satisfaction. Managers must compare their services with those of other stations to find identical services and make good use of competitors' successful ideas to be able to compete and surpass them. In fact, most problems in gas stations happen around inappropriate behavior between employees and clients. Of course customers are very different and the older they are, their loyalty becomes more likely, because this type of service is a high contact one which means clients must go in person to receive them and have a more active participation in the delivery of services.

Considering the important role of service quality in increasing customer loyalty and also the important role of gas stations, researchers aimed to study of factors affecting customers' loyalty at gas stations.

The Importance and Necessity of Research

Why do we study services? Because today's economy arises from small and large institutions. Services are responsible for creating most specialized and non-specialized new jobs around the world. The section of services in various industries has many variations that include activities of many governmental and non-profit organizations. Services make up more than half of the economy of developing countries and more than 70 percent of the economy in developed countries (Tajzadeh, 2012).

One of the most important developments in the field of performance improvement the in the last decade of the twentieth century was measuring customer satisfaction as one of the most important elements and a main requirement for management systems in business enterprises. A plethora attention they pay today to promote performance management tools and the customer-oriented attitude researchers, experts and business managers have indicates that customer satisfaction is one of the most important factors in determining business success and profitability. Therefore, creation and implementation of customer satisfaction measuring and monitoring systems is one of the most important indices to improve the performance of the basic needs of today's organizations (Zivyar *et al.*, 2012).

On the other hand, due to intense competition and dynamic development of economy, ideals and goals of organizations have had significant changes over the last few years. While previously the focus on attracting new customers was the major policy of all organizations, today strategic and business policies focus on maintain and improving loyalty and increase customer confidence to the organization. The causes of these changes increased public awareness and information about the consequences of customer

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satisfaction and loyalty. In other words, customer satisfaction has been identified as the cornerstone of management theories in modern marketing (Zivyar et al., 2012).

Service providers can't separate efficiency improvement from quality improvement. If these two issues get completely separate, executive managers may implement plans to increase efficiency that will reduce quality service and marketing managers may implement plans to increase service quality that will lead to the complexity of operations, increasing costs and harming the interests. Successful companies orient efforts to improve quality based on their information on the expectations of customers about the whereabouts of quality and analyzing quality deficiencies that can lead to dissatisfaction. When things are not done properly, they look for fundamental reasons and try to avoid their frequent occurrence. Their efforts focus on new methods T that will increase both efficiency and quality.

Companies who are successful in providing high quality services listen to their clients and staff especially those employees who are in direct contact with customers. These companies make information systems that use different research skills to assess customer satisfaction of service quality but measuring the efficiency can be difficult due to the imperceptible nature of service performance. Unfortunately, many traditional criteria underestimate services, quality changes and its value for customers (Tajzadeh, 2012).

There is no doubt that in the age of mass production and endless competition, organizations can achieve success that highly increase the satisfaction of their customers until complete loyalty level and the main problem in achieving this satisfaction, is the quality of goods or services customers expect which will only be solved through good management of issues inside the organization (Zivyar *et al.*, 2012).

Customers in the process of buying pass through three stages: buying (awareness of the need, searching for information, evaluating different ways) service treatments (service request, service delivery) and after the purchase (performance evaluation, later imaginations). To create an objective picture of a service from customer's perspective there's a flow chart named as services process step-by-step analysis. This flow chat can be used for the analysis of extant problems and opportunities in service delivery.

All marketers must pay attention to who their customers are bit this attention requires additional dimensions for certain types of services. When customers have much contact with other services agencies or with each other the combination of customers helps define organization traits, because customers become part of the product.

Difference among any set of customers may lead to an incomplete picture, especially when customers of all sectors use service at the same time. Maltreating customers may deteriorate others' experience and also destroy profitability. So, market should choose favorable market sectors and guidelines should be prepared for the treatment of services customers (Tajzadeh, 2012).

Marketers must pay the most attention to customers who give the most value to the company because they shop more frequently and pay the most money to on additional services. Programs for rewarding permanent consumers (like car washes, repair shops and other ancillary services in gas stations) not only recognize and reward high-value customers, but also enable marketers to investigate their conducts in the following categories: where and when do they use services, what level and type of products do they purchase and how much do they spend. The biggest successful is making organizations that create loyalty in their enthusiastic customers and ant allow them get attracted by other companies (Tajzadeh, 2012). Collecting customer feedback through complaints and suggestions is one of the ways to increase customer satisfaction and a great opportunity to understand their feelings and thoughts. All complaining customers wish to continue their relationship with the service company they have complained against, unless a very serious problem has happened. But they also point out that everything is OK and expect the company to make everything alright.

Research Method

To analyze the impact of service quality on customer loyalty, based on Seyed Javadein *et al.*, (2010) itself derived from the model Servqual Parasaraman six hypotheses were designed to check these assumptions with a questionnaire of 6 general (demographic), 46 specialized and 1 open question (the questionnaire contains 53 questions in total). Special section questions are five choice ones based on Likert range scale and the questionnaires were distributed between 384 gas stations customers in Alborz province. Finally,

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given the independent of errors and normality of variables, we used a single variable regression to test the hypotheses.

Questions of the Research

What is the impact of service quality on customer loyalty?

Hypotheses

In this study, with respect to the target population the following hypotheses assumed:

- 1) Tangibles and physical facilities have an impact on services customer loyalty in Alborz province gas stations
- 2) Curtsey has an impact on services customer loyalty in Alborz province gas stations.
- 3) Reliability has an impact on services customer loyalty in Alborz province gas stations.
- 4) Willingness to respond has an impact on services customer loyalty in Alborz province gas stations.
- 5) Empathy of the staff has an impact on services customer loyalty in Alborz province gas stations.
- 6) Customer loyalty has an impact on services customer loyalty in Alborz province gas stations.

Population

The statistic population is a group of people and objects n which properties or characteristics of the study are extant and common and are associated with the subject of the study (Saei Orosi, 2010).

The study population of this research includes all customers of Alborz province gas station from 6 Sep 2013 to 7 Oct 2013.

Sample

Sample is a member of the population that has its dominant characteristics and is in fact a representative the community or the test set and the results of its study must be able to be generalized to the entire community (Saei Orosi, 2010).

Since the population is big and cannot be counted, sampling was used to facilitate collection of data in the form of available sampling based on the availability of community members. (According to the data of the year 2012 and estimations done by gas station holders and experts some 950,000 people have used Alborz Province gas stations in this period and using the same number for the following year using Cochran formula we will have as follows:

$$\frac{950000 * (1.96)^2 * 0.5 * 0.5}{950000 * 0.0025 + (1.96)^2 * 0.5 * 0.5} \approx 384$$

Where

N =the entire population (384 = N)

t2=962/1 = t student when significance level is equal to 0/05

d2=2(05/0) = 0025/0 approximation in estimating the parameters studied

=p 5/0 the probability of the characteristic

q0/5= the improbability of the characteristic

(When there is no variance in the population the highest sample size percentage will be obtained while taking the value of p, q as 5.0)

n = the sample size (Saei, 2010, p. 43)

The sample size based on Cochran formula is as follows in the table :2-3

Table 1: Sample Members and the Population of Each Community

Group	Size of Population	Sample Size
Alborz Province Gas Stations Customers	N = 950000	N = 384

Based on Cochran formula results the sample size was set as 384 to realize a 100 percent return rate of questionnaires, and a little more than necessary (420) questionnaires were distributed. Finally, all the returning of 384 questionnaires to assess the research hypotheses.

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Description of Questions of the Questionnaire along the Research Variables

In this section and along the research variables the responses results are presented as such. *Tangibles*

Questions 1 to 14 of the questionnaire is devoted to tangibles and the mean and the SD of the sample respondents' ideas on this variable are shown in the following table.

Table 2: Statistical Specifications of Tangible Variable Items

Row	Question	The Mean	SD
1	Up to-date available equipment	4/08	0/98
2	Attractive design and construction of gas station	3/97	1/01
3	Physically decent staff	3/89	1/00
4	Ventilation equipped system	3/71	1/10
5	The availability of rest rooms	3/61	1/22
6	Access to the supermarket	3/30	1/23
7	Access to car repair	3/04	1/28
8	Access to carwash service	3/56	1/37
9	Clean physical environment and office decoration	3/89	1/01
10	Ability to pay electronically	3/88	1/16
11	Proper lighting	4/26	0/86
12	Suitable places for other facilities available to everyone	3/54	1/13
13	Being a leader in providing services greater than expected	3/51	1/11
14	Sufficient human resources to provide good service to the customer	3/85	0/98

As can be seen in Table 2 question 11 in the questionnaire (proper lighting) with an average of 4.26 and an SD of 0.86 had the highest average and question 7 (access to car repair) had an average of 3/04 and an SD of 1.28 had the lowest average which indicates that the members of the study population had the highest agreement with question 11.

Courtesy

Questions 15 to 18 of the questionnaire are about the variable of politeness, the mean and the SD of the sample respondents' ideas on this variable is shown in the following table.

Table 3: Variable Statistical Specifications Items of Politeness

Row	Question	Mean	SD	
15	Precise personnel delivering careful and sincere services	1 3/91	1/00	
16	Courtesy of the staff	3/96	0/97	
17	Courtesy of the management	4/03	1/01	
18	Employees inducing intimacy to customers	3/82	1/03	

As can be seen in Table 3 question 17 in the questionnaire (Courtesy of the management) with an average of 4.03 and an SD of 1.01 had the highest average and question 18 (Employees inducing intimacy to customers) had an average of 823/ and an SD of 1.03 had the lowest average which indicates that the members of the study population had the highest agreement with question 17. *Reliability*

Questions 19 to 25 of the questionnaire are about the variable of reliability, the mean and the SD of the sample respondents' ideas on this variable is shown in the following table.

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Table 4: Variable Statistical Specifications Items of Reliability

Row	Question	Mean	SD	
19	Employees' ability to respond to customers' requests	3/90	mean	
20	Services free from defects and faults	3/74	0/94	
21	Scientific and practical ability of the staff	3/69	0/98	
22	Delivering promised services	3/77	1/02	
23	Delivering services properly and on time	3/85	1/00	
24	Providing complete and accurate information to customers	3/81	0/99	
25	Workers building trust with their correct behavior	3/80	1/07	

As can be seen in Table 4 the question 19 of the questionnaire (Employees' ability to respond to customers' requests) with an average of 3.90 and an SD of 0.94 had the highest average and question 21 (Scientific and practical ability of the staff) had an average of 3.69 and an SD of 1.02 had the lowest average which indicates that the members of the study population had the highest agreement with question 19.

Responsiveness

Questions 26 to 34 of the questionnaire are about the variable of reliability, the mean and the SD of the sample respondents' ideas on this variable is shown in the following table.

Table 5: Variable Statistical Specifications Items of Responsiveness

Row	Question	Mean	SD
26	Determined replacement in case of absenteeism or vacation	3/61	1/13
27	Planning and performing service delivery fit processes	3/68	1/08
28	Determined hours of workers' presence	3/80	1/01
29	Responsiveness of employees in case there is a problem	3/81	1/09
30	Responsiveness of management in case the employees do not respond	3/66	1/21
31	Worker's responsiveness against customers' demands	3/83	1/11
32	Available phone number for offering suggestions and criticisms	3/52	1/27
33	Responsiveness of management in case there is a need	3/69	1/14
34	Available workers with appropriate efficiency for answering customers' needs.	3/67	1/11

As can be seen in Table 5 the question 31 of the questionnaire (Worker's responsiveness against customers' demands) with an average of 3.83 and an SD of 1.11 had the highest average and question 32 (Available phone number for offering suggestions and criticisms) had an average of 3.52 and an SD of 1.27 had the lowest average which indicates that the members of the study population had the highest agreement with question 31.

Empathy

Questions 35 to 38 of the questionnaire are about the variable of reliability, the mean and the SD of the sample respondents' ideas on this variable is shown in the following table.

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Table 6: Variable Statistical Specifications Items of Empathy

Row	Question	Mean	SD	
35	Staff paying special attention to each customer	3/70	1/14	
36	Flexibility of staff in certain circumstances	3/69	1/11	
37	Staff enthusiasm in dealing with customers	3/65	1/18	
38	Customers' access to superiors if necessary	3/64	1/22	

Regression Hypotheses

For each regression assumptions are required that undermine the credibility of regression and the regression will only be credible if they hold. One of these assumptions is normality of errors and the other the independency of variables. The study the independency of errors from Durbin-Watson test and review the normality of variables Kolmogorov-Smirnov test has been used.

Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

To study the normality of the study variables Kolmogorov-Smirnov test has been used. The results of Kolmogorov Smirnov have been presented below:

Table 7: K. S Tests Results

Variables	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistics	Significance Level
Tangibles	1/052	0/229
Politeness	0/832	0/425
Confidence	1/037	0/258
Accountability	0/791	0/633
Empathy	0/926	0/376
customer Satisfaction	1/239	0/155
Tangibles	1/054	0/256

Table 7 contains Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic and significance level of the test. Since significance test level for all the variables of the research was more than the acceptable error rate (α =0.05) so we can say that all research variables are normal.

Errors Independence Test

Another regression assumptions is the independence of errors from one another (errors are the difference between values actual and those predicted by the regression), if errors are not independent of each other, regression can't be used. In order to evaluate the independence of errors the Durbin-Watson test was used. In this test,

H0 is the lack of correlation between errors

H1 is the correlation between errors

So that if Durbin-Watson statistic is to be in the range of 5.1 to 5.2, then H0 will be accepted, and otherwise will be rejected. Durbin-Watson test for each of the assumptions has been presented as the following:

Table 8: Durbin Watson

Row	Hypothesis	Durbin-Watson Statistic	Test Result
1	Tangibles - Customer Satisfaction	1/851	No Errors Correlation
2	Courtesy and Respect	1/739	No Errors Correlation
3	Reliability	1/763	No Errors Correlation
4	Responsiveness	1/894	No Errors Correlation
5	Empathy	1/830	No Errors Correlation
6	Customer Satisfaction	1/698	No Errors Correlation

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As can be seen in Table 8 the Durbin-Watson statistic for each assumption is in the range of 5.1 to 5.2, so we can say there is no correlation between the errors.

Given that both regression hypotheses exist, variables normality and errors independence, single variable regression can be used to study hypotheses of the research.

Assessment of the Main Hypothesis (Assumption Sixth)

The sixth assumption holds that customer satisfaction has an impact on customer loyalty. This thesis examines the impact of the independent variable (customer satisfaction) on the dependent variable (customer loyalty). According to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results and those of Durbin-Watson that represent variables normality and errors independence respectively, single variable regression is used to test the third hypothesis of the research with results showing in the table below:

Table 9 - Summary Model

	42 J 1120 4401			
Model	Correlation	The Coefficient	of The Coefficient	of
	Coefficient	Determination	Determination	
			Adjusted	
	0/757	0/574	0/573	

Table 10: Variance Analysis

Model	Sum Squares	of Degrees Freedom	of Average Squares	of Statistics F	Significance Level
	1	rreedom	1		
Regression	213/550	1	213/550	514/256	0.000
Residuals	158/629	382	0/415		
Total	372/180	383			

Table 11: Regression Model

Model	Estimated Parameters	Statistics t	Significance Level
Intercept beta 0	0/508	3/326	0.000
Satisfaction beta 1	0/903	22/677	0.000

As can be seen in table that the correlation coefficient and R^2 or the coefficients of determination are 0.757 and 0.574 respectively. This means that the independent variable (customer satisfaction) alone justifies some 7090/ of all the dependent variable (customer loyalty) changes and the rest is on other variables.

In regression table we examine assumptions H0: β 1, β 0 =0 as against the assumption $0 \neq$ H1: β 1, β 0. Assumptions $0 =_1 \beta_0 \beta H_0$: are rejected since their significance level value is 0.000 and less than the acceptable error rate (α =0/05) which means customer satisfaction has an impact on customer loyalty. According to the estimated value of beta1 which is equal to 0.0903 and a positive value, we can say that customer satisfaction has a direct and positive impact on customer loyalty.

Conclusion

This study investigates the impact of service quality on customer loyalty in Alborz Province gas stations based on the model provided by Sayed Javadein *et al.*, (2010) derived from the model Servqual Parasaramun, as designed in 6 hypotheses. To investigate these hypotheses, a questionnaire including 6 general questions (demographic information), 46 specialized questions and 1 open question was used. All specialized questions were five-choice questions based on Likert range scale and the questionnaires were distributed among 384 Alborz Province gas stations customers. At the end with regard to the independence of errors and normality of variables, using a single variable regression we tested the hypotheses of the research and results showed that tangibles and physical facilities, politeness of staff, reliability, responsiveness and empathy had positive impact on customer loyalty just as services quality had a direct and positive effect on customer loyalty. Thus, in a research titled "a model of assessing the effect of service quality on sport services customers loyalty "Sayed Javadin *et al.*, (2010) also showed

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that tangibles and physical facilities, staff courtesy, reliability, responsiveness and empathy had a direct and positive impact on customer loyalty and customer loyalty had a direct and positive impact on customer loyalty.

The main hypothesis or the sixth hypothesis of the research studies the effect of all independent variables (service quality) on the dependent variable (customer loyalty) that, given the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Durbin Watson, represents the normality of variables and independence of errors. So, a single variable regression was used to test the sixth hypothesis of the research.

According to the determination coefficient value which is equal to 0.574 the independent variable (service quality) alone justifies about 0.574 of dependent variable (customer loyalty) changes and the rest is on other variables. In the regression table we examine assumptions H0: β 1, β 0 =0 as against the assumption 0 \neq H1: β 1, β 0. Assumptions 0 =1 β 0 β H0: are rejected since their significance level value is 0.000 and 0.001 and less than the acceptable error rate (α =0/05) which means customer satisfaction has an impact on customer loyalty.

According to the estimated value of beta1 which is equal to 0.823 and a positive value, we can say that customer satisfaction has a direct and positive impact on customer loyalty.

Practical Suggestions

- 1. With regard to the results of the first hypothesis, representing positive impact of tangible and physical facilities on customer loyalty of gas stations customers, managers should take measures such as providing access to restrooms, supermarkets and restaurants, light and heavy vehicle repair shops, rest areas and stops to be able to provide further customer satisfaction.
- 2. With regard to the results of the second hypothesis, representing positive impact of staff politeness on customer loyalty of gas stations customers, managers should take measures such as teaching the staff to respect customers and in service training for a better treatment to be able to provide further customer satisfaction.
- 3. With regard to the results of the third hypothesis, representing positive impact of reliability on customer loyalty of gas stations customers, managers should take measures such as providing complete and exact information o customers, enabling staff to respond well to customers' requests, increasing staff practical and scientific information through pedicel trainings ad providing on time exact services to be able to provide further customer satisfaction.
- 4. With regard to the results of the fourth hypothesis, representing positive impact of responsiveness on customer loyalty of gas stations customers, managers should take measures such as providing substitutes in case the staff is away, necessitating staff responsiveness in case there is a problem, phone numbers for suggestions and complaints and management responsiveness in case the staff doesn't respond and when there is a new problem access to restrooms, supermarkets and restaurants, light and heavy vehicle repair shops, rest areas and stops to be able to provide further customer satisfaction.
- 5. With regard to the results of the fifth hypothesis, representing positive impact of empathy on customer loyalty of gas stations customers, managers should take measures such as providing appropriate attention a cases when customers have a problem, causing staff flexibility in emergencies and understanding customers' special needs to be able to provide further customer satisfaction through more sympathy.
- 6. With regard to the results of the fourth hypothesis, representing positive impact of service quality on customer loyalty of gas stations customers, managers should increase their quality service to be able to provide further customer loyalty.
- 7. According to the survey results it is suggested for managers to pay attention to beautification and lighting as additional efforts to increase customer satisfaction.
- 8. Managers should place and update their systems such as CCTV, intelligent systems, communication cable and their safety level so that customers are served safely and leave with satisfaction.
- 10. If stations can also accommodate services like police +10, cars administration and electronic services they can further their customer satisfaction.
- 11. Petroleum products are offered by the government and the private sector has no role in it. So, if the government outsources production and supply of petroleum products to the private sector there will be

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competition and prices will be competitive as in European countries, and therefore the private sector will make great efforts to increase the level of satisfaction.

Unfortunately, some customers escape from the station right after they receive gas and since no preparation has been organized the staff asks for money right after gas delivery. This makes some customers unhappy. For solving this problem we suggest preparations like installing car information collection software.

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