

**CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS A QUALITY COUNTER  
SERVICE: A CASE STUDY IN PUBLIC SECTOR**

YAP LEE LING

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Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	iii
Table of Contents	iv-vi
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
Abstract	ix
<i>Abstrak</i>	x
1. CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	
1.0 Introduction	1-5
1.1 Background of the Study	5-10
1.2 Organization Background	10-11
1.3 Problem Statement	11-15
1.4 Research Objectives	15-17
1.4.1 General Objective	15
1.4.2 Specific Objectives	15-17
1.5 Theoretical Framework	17
1.6 Hypotheses	18-19
1.7 Significance of the Study	19-21
1.8 Definition Conceptual and Operational	21-29
1.8.1 Customer	21
1.8.2 Perception	22
1.8.3 Counter Service	23
1.8.4 Service Quality	23
1.8.5 Tangibles	24
1.8.6 Reliability	24
1.8.7 Responsiveness	25
1.8.8 Competence	26
1.8.9 Courtesy	26
1.8.10 Credibility	27
1.8.11 Security	27
1.8.12 Access	28
1.8.13 Communication	28
1.8.14 Understanding the Customer	29
1.9 Limitation of the Study	29-30
1.10 Conclusion	30
2. CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.0 Introduction	31
2.1 Service Quality	31-33
2.2 Quality Counter Service and Service Quality	33-34
2.3 Service Quality in the Public Sector	35-37
2.4 Customer Perception	38-40
2.5 Tangibles	40-42
2.6 Reliability	42-43

2.7	Responsiveness	43-44
2.8	Competence	45-46
2.9	Courtesy	46-47
2.10	Credibility	47-48
2.11	Security	48-50
2.12	Access	50-52
2.13	Communication	52-53
2.14	Understanding the Customer	53-54
2.15	Conclusion	54
<b>3.</b>	<b>CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY</b>	
3.0	Introduction	55
3.1	Research Design	55-56
3.2	Population and Sample	56-58
3.3	Instrumentation	59-60
3.4	Pilot Study	60-61
3.5	Data Collection Process	61-62
3.6	Data Analysis	62-63
3.7	Conclusion	63
<b>4.</b>	<b>CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS</b>	
4.0	Introduction	64
4.1	Respondents Demographic Characteristics	65-66
4.2	Frequency Analysis of Respondents' Perceptions towards the Employees' Level of Courtesy	67
4.3	Hypotheses Testing on Correlation between Service Quality Dimension and Perception of Counter Service	68
4.3.1	Hypotheses Null One (Ho1)	69-70
4.3.2	Hypotheses Null Two (Ho2)	70-71
4.3.3	Hypotheses Null Three (Ho3)	71-73
4.3.4	Hypotheses Null Four (Ho4)	73-74
4.3.5	Hypotheses Null Five (Ho5)	74-75
4.3.6	Hypotheses Null Six (Ho6)	75-76
4.3.7	Hypotheses Null Seven (Ho7)	76-77
4.3.8	Hypotheses Null Eight (Ho8)	77-78
4.3.9	Hypotheses Null Nine (Ho9)	78-79
4.3.10	Hypotheses Null Ten (Ho10)	80-81
4.4	Hypotheses Testing on Dominant Factor	82-83
4.5	Summary Result of Research Hypotheses	84
4.6	Conclusion	85
<b>5.</b>	<b>CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
5.0	Introduction	86
5.1	Summary	86-88
5.2	Conclusion	88-89
5.3	Recommendations	89-90

5.3.1	Recommendations for Organization	89
5.3.2	Recommendations for Future Researcher	90
6.	BIBLIOGRAPHY	91-97
7.	APPENDIXES	98

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Malaysia: Contribution of Services to Employment, 1980-2002	4
Table 2 Dimensions of Service Quality	39
Table 3 Result of Cronbach Alpha Test	61
Table 4 Four-point Likert Scale	62
Table 5 Distribution of Respondents by Gender	65
Table 6 Distribution of Respondents by Age	65
Table 7 Distribution of Respondents by Level of Education	66
Table 8 Distribution of Respondents Perception towards the Employees' Level of Courtesy	67
Table 9 Result Summary of Pearson's Correlation	68
Table 10 Result Summary of Regression Linear	82
Table 11 Result Summary of Research Hypotheses	84

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Concept of Counter Service	6
Figure 2 Theoretical Framework	17
Figure 3 The Citizen and Government Services	36

## ABSTRACT

### CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS A QUALITY COUNTER SERVICE: A CASE STUDY IN PUBLIC SECTOR

Yap Lee Ling

This study aimed to investigate customers' perceptions towards a quality counter service. Specifically this study is to determine the relationship between customers' perceptions and the ten service quality dimensions which are the tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, competence, courtesy, credibility, security, access, communication and understanding the customers. Besides that, the dominant factor for this study was also identified. A quantitative survey research is chosen for this study. Questionnaires were used to obtain feedback from 120 respondents who were selected by using simple random sampling. The questionnaires that have been distributed used a four-point Likert scale to determine customers' perceptions and the relationship towards the ten service quality dimension. In this study, the independent variables are the ten service quality dimension and the dependent variable is customers' perception towards counter service. These research hypotheses are tested by using inferential statistic which are the Pearson Correlation Coefficient and Multiple Linear Regression. The result from the Pearson Correlation Coefficient indicated tangibles ( $r=0.394^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), reliability ( $r=0.387^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), responsiveness ( $r=0.463^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), competence ( $r=0.464^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), courtesy ( $r=0.553^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), credibility ( $r=0.509^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), security ( $r=0.471^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), access ( $r=0.634^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), communication ( $r=0.513^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and understanding the customer ( $r=0.577^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) had significant relationship with customers' perceptions. Meanwhile, the result from the Multiple Linear Regression showed that access dimension is the dominant factor that contributes 40.2% variance to the perception of counter service followed by understanding the customer dimension which contributes 33.3% variance to the perception of counter service. This means that both access and understanding the customers dimension are important factor that will influence the customer perception. In conclusion, this study is important to assist the organization in determining which factor does the customer stress on as well as suggesting recommendation to improve the organization quality service delivery process in the counter.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **PERSEPSI PELANGGAN TERHADAP KUALITI PERKHIDMATAN KAUNTER: SATU KAJIAN KES DI SEKTOR PERKHIDMATAN AWAM**

*Yap Lee Ling*

*Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti persepsi pelanggan terhadap kualiti perkhidmatan kaunter. Secara spesifiknya, kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti perkaitan di antara persepsi pelanggan dengan sepuluh dimensi kualiti perkhidmatan iaitu aset ketara, kebolehpercayaan, responsif, kecekapan, kesopanan, kredibiliti, keselamatan, akses, komunikasi dan memahami pelanggan. Selain itu, kajian ini juga mengkaji faktor dominan. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah metodologi kuantitatif survei. Borang soal selidik digunakan untuk mendapatkan maklum balas daripada 120 responden yang dipilih secara rawak. Borang soal selidik yang telah diedarkan menggunakan skala empat Likert bagi mengukur perkaitan persepsi pelanggan dengan sepuluh dimensi kualiti perkhidmatan. Dalam kajian ini, pemboleh ubah tidak bersandar terdiri daripada sepuluh dimensi kualiti perkhidmatan manakala pemboleh ubah bersandar terdiri daripada persepsi pelanggan terhadap perkhidmatan kaunter. Hipotesis kajian ini diuji dengan menggunakan kaedah statistik Pekali Korelasi Pearson dan Regresi Linear Berganda. Dapatan kajian daripada Pekali Korelasi Pearson telah menunjukkan bahawa aset ketara ( $r=0.394^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), kebolehpercayaan ( $r=0.387^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), responsif ( $r=0.463^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), kecekapan ( $r=0.464^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), kesopanan ( $r=0.553^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), kredibiliti ( $r=0.509^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), keselamatan ( $r=0.471^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), akses ( $r=0.634^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), komunikasi ( $r=0.513^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) dan memahami pelanggan ( $r=0.577^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) mempunyai perkaitan dengan persepsi pelanggan terhadap perkhidmatan kaunter. Manakala, hasil kajian daripada Regresi Linear Berganda menunjukkan akses merupakan faktor yang paling dominan dan menyumbang sebanyak 40.2% kepada persepsi pelanggan terhadap perkhidmatan kaunter dan diikuti dengan faktor memahami pelanggan yang menyumbang sebanyak 33.3%. Ini menunjukkan kedua-dua akses dan memahami pelanggan merupakan faktor penting yang dapat mempengaruhi persepsi pelanggan. Kesimpulannya, kajian ini adalah penting dalam membantu organisasi mengenal pasti faktor yang patut diberi perhatian dan sehubungan itu memberikan cadangan untuk meningkatkan kualiti perkhidmatan di kaunter.*

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0 Introduction**

In today's competitive market, rapid development and changed can be observed in areas of technology, telecommunications and in particular, customer services. This has led to the understanding that service organizations need to mobilize their workforce in order to compete with other service providers, thus, ensuring its survival in the market. Basically, the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) describes service organizations as those "...primarily engaged in providing a wide variety of services for individuals, business and government establishments, and other organizations" (Evans & Lindsay, 2005).

At present, stiff competition between service organizations has created many challenges in the services industry which include a dynamic change in customer demands and expectations, an increase of global competition and the development on e-businesses majoring in services. These service organizations compete with some extent to the basis of delivering better service. As a result, there is an increase of service organizations which placed major emphasis on improving their service quality.

According to Brown, Gummesson, Edvardsson and Gustavsson (1991), service quality is difficult to define due to its intangible nature of the service offering. This is because the intangible nature of the service is elusive where it can't be seen, touch, smell or inspect (Martin, 2001). Thus, the definition of service quality differs and varies from one to another. This is in line with the saying of "service quality is in the eye of the customer" (Heineke & Tsikriktsis, 1998). Therefore, various definitions were generated by researchers as they defined service quality from different perspectives.

However, according to Chia, Chin and Chin (1998-2001) service quality can be defined as a "comparison between customers' expectations and the perception of the service that they actually received". This explains that service quality is mainly about matching customers' expectations and their perceptions of services received. On the other hand, delivering quality service is "conforming customer expectations on a consistent basis" (Lewis & Booms, 1983 cited in Brennan, 2003). In other words, quality service is primarily an organizational process of

meeting customers' expectations regularly through providing excellent service delivery.

As the increase of the importance on improving service quality in the organization, both private and public sector had generated numerous efforts to ensure that their organization provide the best quality service to their customers. Generally, the issues of service quality have attracted attention from countries around the world as more and more organization begins to deliver quality service to their customer. Historically, countries like the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, Canada and New Zealand have placed great emphasis on delivering quality services in the public sector.

In Malaysia, service quality has long been recognized as an important issue in both the public and private sectors. However, only in recent years, greater attention had been focused on the concept of service quality as the nation has gradually begun to understand the vital importance of the services sector. The importance of the services sector has increased due to the rise in the number of jobs which stem from service organization that exists from both government bodies and private companies. Moreover, the community is starting to appreciate and placed certain value of satisfaction on the delivery of services by both government bodies and private companies.

Table 1  
Malaysia: Contribution of Services to Employment, 1980-2002

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2002
Construction	5.6	7.6	6.3	8.9	8.1	8.0
Transport, storage & communications	3.9	4.3	4.5	5.0	5.0	5.2
Finance, insurance, real estate & business	2.9	3.5	3.9	4.7	5.5	6.2
Government services	13.3	14.6	12.7	10.8	10.6	10.4
Other services	20.3	22.6	26.1	25.5	27.6	28.4
<b>Total services</b>	<b>46.0</b>	<b>52.7</b>	<b>53.5</b>	<b>54.8</b>	<b>56.8</b>	<b>58.2</b>
Agriculture and mining	38.5	32.1	26.6	19.5	15.6	14.6
Manufacturing	15.5	15.2	19.9	25.7	27.6	27.1

*Notes: Government services include public administration, health, education and defense; other services include electricity, gas and water, wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants, and other services.*

Source: Ministry of Finance, Economic Report, various issues (Vijayakumari 2003, p.5).

Based on Table 1, the employment for the services sector in Malaysia accounted for 58.2 per cent from the total employment in 2002. Besides that, the employment rate for government services was 10.4 per cent. Therefore, the relatively high share of employment in the services sector reflects the presence of many labor-intensity in this industry as well as the contribution from this sector that added up the country income (Sieh, 2000, p.6 cited in Vijayakumari, 2003). The increased numbers of employment from 46.0 per cent in year 1980 to 58.2 per cent in year 2002 has also indicated that the world economic had undergo a huge business transition which have shifted from product oriented business to the services oriented business.

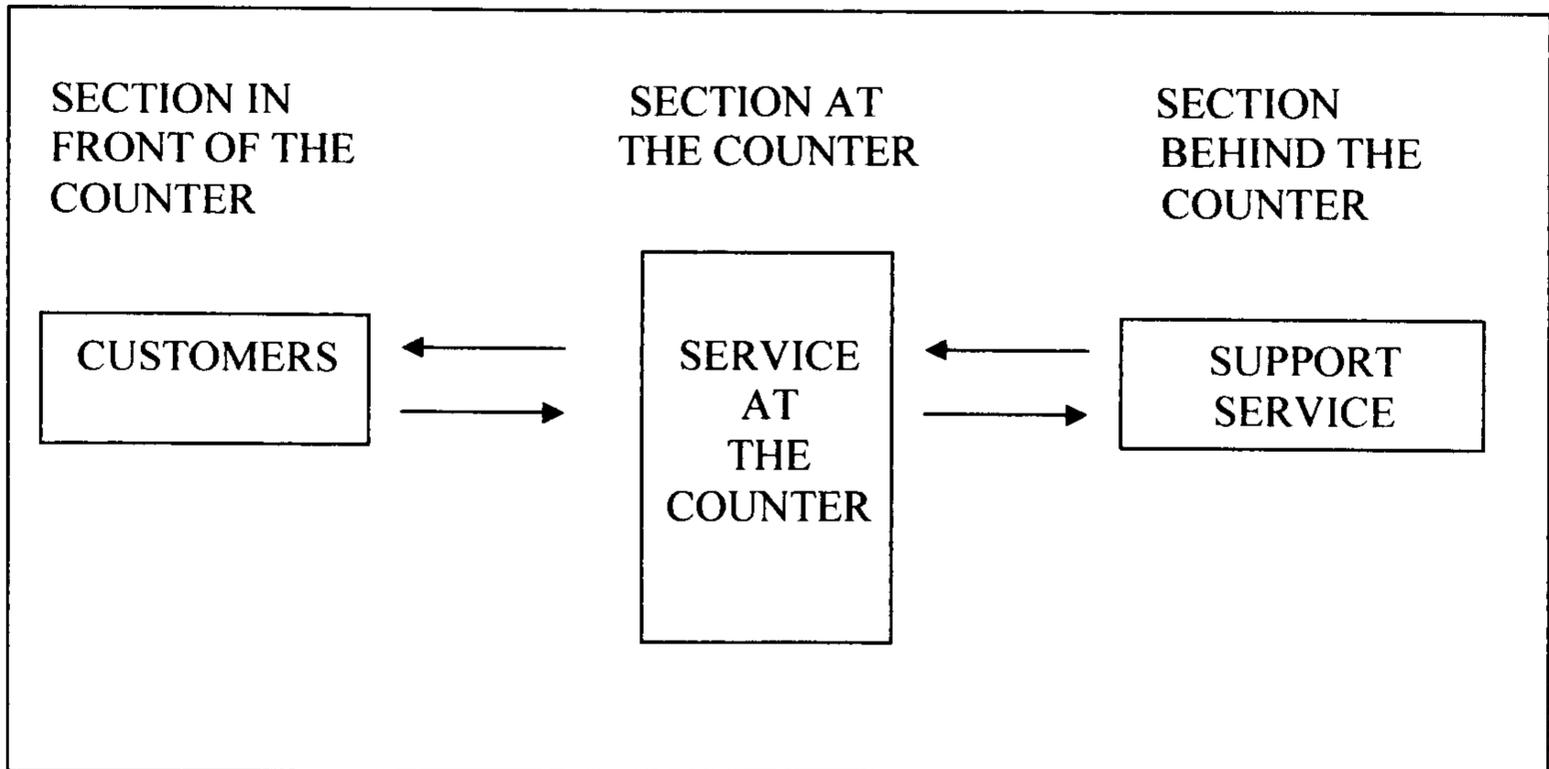
In general, it is important for service organizations especially the government, to be aware of the customers' perceptions towards the services provided and the expectation of quality from services delivered. This is because; the good image of the public services must be upheld and maintained. Moreover, their customers, the local community, should be given the best treatment because it helps in fostering good relationship between the community and the public services. Therefore, the method used in measuring quality is important in ensuring the satisfaction levels of services offered to customers are obtained. This enables them to improve existing quality services provided to customers.

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

The key component known to determine the success of service organizations lies in the perceptions of customer towards the service quality of existing counter service. Basically, the reason counter service plays a vital role in determining the success of service organizations is because it is one of the primary image building features in the organization. Thus, both the public and private sector image depend heavily on their organization's counter service to serve their customers and meet the customers' need. In Malaysia, the counter service in the public sector is responsible for the issuing of licenses, permits, passports, identity cards, certificates of marriages and citizenship, collection of revenue and processing of application for essential facilities (adapted from Pekeliling Kemajuan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2004).

Generally, the concept of counter service is described as below;

Figure 1  
Concept of Counter Service



Source: adapted from Pekeliling Kemajuan Pentadbiran Awam (2004, pg 185).

Based on Figure 1, the counter service concept in the Malaysian public sector comprised of three main components. These components include;

- i. Section in front of the counter which is the customers,
- ii. Section at the counter that is the service at the counter and lastly,
- iii. The section behind the counter which is the support service.

The section in front of the counter refers to the waiting area where customers await their turn to be served. Here, it is important for the organization to provide sufficient and appropriate facilities such as visible notice boards and signage, accessible enquiry counters, comfortable waiting area where sufficient seats are available and a systematic queuing system.

The section at the counter refers to the place where the counter staff interacts directly with the customers. This is the place where the service delivery takes place and the stage where the counter staff meets the customers, provide service and terminate the service. On the other hand, the section behind the counter service refers to the role that management and staff plays. These roles include planning, controlling, and evaluating all the undertaken decision with the available information. This section monitors daily administrative activities while ensuring that all staffs and officers contribute and supports the decision and planning made. Thus, these three components are interrelated where each component plays an important role in determining the success of an organization service delivery process.

Therefore, if the service delivery to customer is poor in any of the stages, this would create a negative perception on the organization. Moreover, as what every business rule is, customer is always right and it is difficult to retain the customer loyalty and trust once they hold a negative impression towards the organization. Besides that, studies have showed that organizations are able to increase their profit by almost 100 per cent by retaining just 5 per cent more of the customers than their competitors (Evans & Lindsay, 2005). Therefore, it is important for organizations to give a positive impression to customers.

Apart from that, Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) pointed out that excellent service is a strategy that will bring profit to the organization because it will attract new customers, gain more business with existing customers, minimize lost of

customers and minimize mistake that required the re-performance of services (cited in Johnson & Sirikit, 2002). Organization that delivers quality services to customer will be able to meet the customer needs and expectation. Typically, customers that are satisfied with the organization quality service will reinforce the perception that they receive good value of service with the price that they paid for it (Manoj & Shirish, 2006). Therefore, it is important for service organization to deliver quality services since the customers could assist in generating tangible and intangible benefits for the organization.

In the public sector context, it is vital that excellent service quality is served to its' community since their main customer is the citizen or local community. In addition, by providing quality service, it helps in ensuring that the organization becomes profitable through timely payments of bills and summons while generating good corporate image. Moreover, the organization is able to increase the confidence of its citizen towards the public sector management.

As our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have stressed, the quality of service and delivery in the public sector is a critical determinant of the nation's competitiveness and therefore, urged the public sector to improve and provide quality services for the country to maintain its competitiveness in the global economy (The Star, September 3, 2005). Apart from that, during the National Quality Conference 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, our Prime Minister also stated that the global customer will apply global benchmarks and standards, thus,

the service providers in Malaysia must meet high standard or risk failing to survive at the regional or global marketplace (The Star, September 3, 2005).

Therefore, service organizations need to strive in providing the best services and treatment not only to their external customers' but their internal customers' as well. In general, the internal customers in this study are employees who deal either indirectly or directly with customers. This is because the employees, especially those in the front line, will influence the customer perception if the customer perceived the quality service that she or he received does not met her needs and wants. As a result, the organization will receive a negative impact from this situation. Therefore, the employees play a vital role in delivering quality service to their customers.

Besides that, efforts by the Malaysian government to introduce awards to improve organizational processes and service delivery have showed their dedication towards improving service quality in the public sector. These awards include the Local Authority Quality Award, Prime Minister's Quality Award, Public Service Quality Award, Public Service Innovation Award, District Office Quality Award, Quality Control Circle Award and the Client's Charter Quality Award (Muhammad Rais Abdul Karim, 1999). Therefore, this is one of the approaches to promote quality service among service organizations in Malaysia.

In addition, the Malaysian government has implemented the Excellent Service Awards to encourage the public servant to provide the best service at all time.

This appreciation award is important to provide the needed motivation and example to public servants to improve their performance, in line with the aim of providing quality service (Guideline for the Improvement of the Quality of Customer Services, 1991).

Therefore, in the interest of the Malaysian government urge for the service providers to deliver services beyond customer expectations, a study on the customers' perceptions towards the quality counter service was conducted. This study was carried out in the public sector and the result of this study would determine the estimated level of the service organization performance in Malaysia.

## **1.2 Organization Background**

Dewan Bandaraya Kuching Utara (DBKU) was established after Kuching was awarded city status in 1<sup>st</sup> August 1988. The supervision of DBKU is on the northern part of Kuching city. Basically, some of the services offered by DBKU includes, issuing of licenses, permits, parking compounds as well as registration of architects and engineers who wish to practice in the DBKU area and garbage collection services (Background, 2002). The residents within the proximity of DBKU are approximately 133,600 people and the number of property under DBKU is approximately 22,398 (City Boundary, 2002).

DBKU was chosen for this study because it is one of the public sectors in Sarawak that placed great emphasis on delivering quality services to the customers. This is in line with DBKU mission which is “to enhance the quality of life of our community through excellent delivery of service”. In addition, DBKU has received many quality awards such as the Prime Minister’s Quality Award, Public Service Quality Award, Local Authority Quality Award, Public Service Innovation Award and District Office Quality Award (Anugerah, 2002).

Therefore, this has prompted the researcher to study DBKU customers’ perceptions since greater emphasis was allocated on delivering quality service.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Counter service is the front line of the organization and it represents the image of the organization. Cook & Verma (2002) pointed out that “ultimately, the front-line service employees are the critical link to the customer. They are responsible for both understanding the customer needs and interpreting customer requirements in real time”. This means that the front line staffs have responsibilities in delivering high quality services to the customers while transforming the customer’s needs and requirements to the desired ones. At this time, the customer will evaluate the quality of the services that were provided by the organization.

“Jezz Bezos, president of Amazon.com, expressed it best when he said: “if you have an unhappy customer on the Internet, he doesn’t go and tell six friends, he

tells 6000 friends'' (Johnson & Sirikit, 2002). This means that if the customer is unhappy or dissatisfied with the service delivery, the poor service delivery could be notified to 6000 customer. This statement proves that customer dissatisfaction can bring disastrous effect to the organization rapidly with the advancement in technology.

In Malaysia, the public servants are seriously urged to improving the quality service in their organization. It is important to take note that the public servants are not only dealing with ordinary customer but the nation. Emmanuel (2001) pointed out that grouses such as rude counter service staff, lack of time etiquette and archaic office procedures irritate customer and encourage them to complaint to the media, politician or via consumer groups. She also stated that most consumer complaint were about the lack of response from government departments (New Straits Times, July 20, 2001).

In a press statement, our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi mentioned that he would be paying a wide attention to government frontline departments where departments dealing with the people over-the-counter service is very essential and needs to be improved. (Sarban Singh, Firdaus Abdullah & Shamini Darshini, 2003). Furthermore, Malaysian government issued The Guideline for the Improvement of the Quality of Counter Services that outlines the basic guidelines for the Government Department to upgrade their counter service. This guideline does not only involved management officers but it is also

involved the counter staff as well (adapted from Pekeliling Kemajuan Pentadbiran Awam, 2004).

In line with this statement that shows emphasis on counter service, it is notable that some of the earliest countries that took action in improving its public service image were the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. For instance, New Zealand improved its public image by providing more efficient and responsive services to the citizens (Sekoto, Bloemfontein & Straaten, n.d.) while France issued a *Charte des services publics* that outline the basic principles such as transparency and responsibility, simplicity and accessibility, participation and adaptability, trust and reliability for the government to follow when providing services (Service Standards, n.d.).

On the other hand, Malaysia has issued several good operational principles as a foundation in providing public services which are establishing a customer driven strategy, setting of performance standards in accordance with the strategy, manpower management for the accomplishment of the strategy and improving the systems and work procedures for the achievement of the strategy (Guideline for the Improvement of the Quality of Counter Services, 1991).

However, the only difference between the foreign countries and Malaysia is that the issue on improving the public services in Malaysia has just recently gained attention in the government sector over the last decade when the Prime Minister's Department established the Guideline for the Improvement of the Quality of

Counter Services in July 1, 1991 (Guideline for the Improvement of the Quality of Customer Services, 1991). Thus, relevant research should be conducted to enable the Malaysian public sector to keep pace with other countries that has performed well in delivering quality service to the citizens.

In addition, few studies have been carried out specifically to observe the customer perceptions towards quality counter service. Most of the past research focused on the five dimension of service quality which is tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Therefore, there has been lack of studies concerning the other dimension of service quality which is competence, courtesy, credibility, security, access, communication and understanding the customer.

Below are the questions that this paper attempts to answer:

- What are the customers' perceptions towards a quality counter service?
- What is the extent of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence and courtesy towards affecting the customers' perceptions?
- What is the extent of credibility, security, access, communication and understanding the customer towards affecting the customers' perceptions?
- What is the dominant factor affecting the customers' perceptions towards a quality counter service?

Therefore, these issues and questions have prompted the study on the ten dimensions of service quality as well as to determine the customers' perceptions towards the quality services offered by the government counter service.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study were divided into two parts; general objective and specific objectives.

##### **1.4.1 General Objective**

The general objective of this study is to identify the customers' perceptions towards a quality counter service.

##### **1.4.2 Specific Objectives**

The specific objectives of this study are listed as below:

1. To determine the relationship that exists between customers' perceptions on tangibles towards counter service.
2. To determine the relationship that exists between customers' perceptions on reliability towards counter service.