

# CUSTOMER SERVICE CHALLENGES: CASE STUDY REVIEW OF THE NEW ZEALAND PROPERTY MANAGEMENT SECTOR

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the key challenges to delivering sufficient customer service, factors that influence service quality and customer satisfaction to tenants in the New Zealand rental market. This research reviewed data collected by Consumer New Zealand from its nationwide survey of 1062 tenants renting properties in New Zealand and found that property owners (landlords) provide better services than property service managers, bad communication between tenants and landlords or property service managers led to breaching of tenants' rights, and often tenants were unable to demand for their rights due to lack of tenure security. This research opines that adopting consumer-oriented business tactics would successfully solve the challenges between property service managers and customers (tenants and landlords). To enhance quality customer service and customer satisfaction, this research recommends that property service management organisations and property service managers conduct in-depth SERVQUAL style surveys among their customers, that using a balanced Scorecard approach would help set goals, focus on customer needs and related internal processes, and measure progress according to customer service improvement needs.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays customers are more informed of and are concerned about the quality of the service they seek (Vatjanasaregagul & Wang, 2007). Property service managers (PSM) should be able to pay attention and respond to both tenants' and landlords' needs and concerns. This research investigates customer service challenges in the New Zealand (NZ) rental market. It examines how the property management (PM) sector could provide better tenant services and identifies reasons why real estate customers are dissatisfied with their property management services. It also considers the need for PM companies to provide sufficient customer service to tenants in the NZ rental market and considers factors influencing service quality and customer satisfaction in the real estate sector. Major rental market issues are communication difficulties between tenants and PSM (Wilson 2018). As a result, the government made changes to tenancy rules effective from 26 November 2022 to secure tenants' rights (TenancyService, n.d). This is structured into the following sections: introduction, literature review, service quality model, data collection, data analysis, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

On review of the study carried out on 1062 tenants renting property in New Zealand Consumer NZ's (2018) report revealed that 35% of tenants rated their PM service high and 42 % of tenants reported PM response delays to their requests and needs. Further, the study indicated that 37% of tenants worried that complaining would lead to a rent increase, 41% believed their request would be rejected, and 39% were concerned about getting bad references when moving to a new rental property. Considering this information, recommendations are provided around the best methods the PM sector could adopt to assist in alleviating the tenant- landlord customer relationship.

*Keywords: customer service, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, customer dissatisfaction, service quality.*

### Research questions

1. What are the barriers to delivering sufficient customer service and the factors that can enhance service quality and customer satisfaction in the New Zealand rental market?
2. Which possible managerial tools could be used for addressing tenant customer service challenges in the PM sector?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Service Quality Concept

Service quality and customer satisfaction are important aspects of business growth and development. Business growth and development are dependent on how well an organisation maintains its customers through service and how customers are kept satisfied (Edward & Sahadev, 2011). The term quality refers to the totality of structures and characteristics of a product or service that bears on its ability to please certain needs (Lindsey & Evans, 20013. Ennew & Waite (2007) argue that defining the quality of services is more complicated than the quality of material goods. This research opined that this is because the quality of the service is defined from the customers' perspective, based on their needs and desires. However, Omisakin et al., (2020) argue that understanding customer needs and desires enhances quality service and when excellent service is provided organisations will attain customer faithfulness. That is why it is necessary to recognise the service quality concept from the consumers' viewpoint in the NZ PM sector. Gronroos (1990) suggested that the probability of a company making a profit/loss is dependent on consumer estimation and the quality perceived the study was done through modern-day online reviews.

According to Zeithaml & Parasuraman (2004), service quality as a concept involves reliability, assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and tangibles features. Evans & Lindsey (2013) suggested people and technology as the key drivers of service quality. For instance, customer contact staff in a PM company need access to the right technology to improve their performance such as increased productivity, communication, and different communication channels to handle almost any customer problems. This research argues that customers evaluate service mostly by the quality of human interactions. As a result, service workers must be experienced in managing customer interactions and be customer focused. However, providing appropriate training to service workers is important. In the property management service industry, delivering a quality service is essential to retain tenants and good service should be a criterion upon which customers differentiate one property management company from another (Baharum et al., 2009). Delivering quality service helps companies to achieve and sustain a competitive advantage and helps determine business success or failure (Baharum et al., 2009).

### Customer Satisfaction Concept

Kundu & Datta (2015) argue that customer satisfaction is the buyer's cognitive state of being adequately or inadequately rewarded for the sacrifice undergone in a buying situation. Similarly, customers will be satisfied if expectations are met or surpassed, and dissatisfied if the expectations are not met (Narteh 2015). According to Hui and Zheng (2010), service quality is one of the tools for determining customer satisfaction and these two concepts are obviously related to each other and important in the service industry. Hui and Zheng (2010) further claim that the customer satisfaction concept is generally considered as a post-choice evaluative judgment of a specific transaction, the overall feeling, and a function of perceived quality. Customer satisfaction appears when the value and customer service provided meets or goes beyond the consumer's expectations. Meeting customer expectations is an essential aim of every service-oriented business.

The property management sector is purely service-oriented involving varied service relationships with long-term contracts (palm, 2015). As a result, it must engage and ensure its customers attained the expected satisfaction from the services provided Pinder et al., (2003). Pinder et al., (2003) suggested that property management companies should focus on providing excellent service for their existing customers rather than attracting new ones, as it can be more rewarding if existing customers with long-term contracts attain excellent service. Similarly, Matzler & Hinterhuber (1998) argue that the cost of attracting new clients in the PM sector is considerably greater than retaining existing clients. Therefore, retaining existing clients through the provision of excellent service will lead to growth (Palm, 2015). Delivering good service is crucial to tenant customers' satisfaction leading to a better relationship between the tenant renter and the organisation (Karna, 2004). Quality service is of high importance for PMs and cultivating good relationships with customers is a priority (Lindholm, 2000. Nowadays, tenants are more demanding and concerned about the services they are receiving, and PMs must satisfy customers' expectations (Baharum, et al., 2009). However, meeting PM customers' satisfaction requires effective communication, while meeting tenants' needs will influence tenants' overall satisfaction (Sanderson, 2014). However, the issue of tenants attaining their expected satisfaction during the Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic, especially during lockdown was minimal (Baker & Daniel, 2020). For instance, Baker & Daniel (2020) found that the only concerns for tenants during Covid-19 were the lockdown measures leading to skipping meals, inability to pay rent and other bills, retrenched tenants struggling with household finance, tenants demanding a rent reduction from their PMs and or landlord. During the same period, in 2020 23% of tenants found their home not warm enough during spells of cold weather, 27% had problems with mould, and 21% reported problems of dampness (Baker & Daniel, 2020). Yet all these were not addressed by either the PMs or the landlord (Yiu, 2021). Despite these issues, housing prices in NZ increased by about 20% in 2020, one of the highest in the world (Yiu, 2021). Contrary to this, McKnight (2023) found the NZ property market was falling consistently. The author claimed that it fell 12.4% between the price peak in November 2021 and October 2022 (Yiu, 2021). According to Jagun, et al. (2022), to ensure that property developments continue to be profitable ventures trusted by property consumers relative to the property management industry, the government must constantly intervene in housing policies and promote constant market-driven practices. Similarly, Bragaglia & Caruso (2020) opined that being constantly intervening in housing policies and promoting market driven practices roles would help the government expand control over public and private property developments and management.

## SERVQUAL service quality model

According to Parasuraman, et al. (1985), service quality is connected to the customers' perceptions and expectations and can be evaluated by the degree of difference between customer expectations or desire and their experience of what they received as described by the SERVQUAL model. The SERVQUAL model was created by Parasuraman et al. (1985) and is the most widely used tool for service quality measurement and quantifies service quality as a discrepancy between the perceived and expected service.

Parasuraman et al. (1988) stated that the SERVQUAL model delivers a basic outline through expectations or perceptions, with a structure covering five service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. This model defines service quality as a difference between perceived and expected service. The service is considered excellent, good, or bad according to the perceptions met by comparing results (Parasuraman et al., 1985). This research evaluates how the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model could be used in the PM sector to attain positive perceptions of services provided to tenants by PMs.

## SERVQUAL models five dimensions

According to Parasuraman et al. (1994), the SERVQUAL model is based on five service quality dimensions:

1. **Tangibles:** the appearance of the physical facilities, communication materials, equipment, and personnel appearance. A PM company should conduct surveys among customers about their feelings about the physical layout and facilities offered to their customers.
2. **Reliability:** the capability to perform the promised service dependably and precisely. A reliable PM company must deliver on agreements to provide service, delivery, problem resolutions and prices. A PM company should conduct surveys relative to questions about billing, challenges, and documentation.
3. **Responsiveness:** the willingness to help and provide prompt service. APM company must be responsive to customer requests and compliance. This requires PSM company to conduct surveys on client knowledge of approvals and legal processes in property management.
4. **Assurance:** the PM company employee's knowledge of courtesy and the organisations capability to inspire trust and confidence. This dimension defines an employee's credibility and competence. For instance, employees that link customers to the PM must continuously create trust and confidence towards attaining customer loyalty. However, surveys should be conducted on the competency of the PM, quality of services, security, health, and safety topics and meeting government legislation.
5. **Empathy:** the caring individualist attention to the customer. This is about individual attention and communication leading to customer loyalty. To attain this, PM companies should survey to gain an understanding of their customer needs and how efficient their communication is with tenants.

The SERVQUAL five dimensions examine the quality of service in terms of the process, interaction, and service outcomes for PM companies' customers (Sanderson, 2014). Chen et al., (2016) argue that for the PM sector to realise significant revenue and growth, attaining service quality and consumer satisfaction must be prioritised.

Table 1 presents how the SERVQUAL five service quality dimensions could be applied to property management services.

**Table 1: Application of the Five SERVQUAL Dimensions to Property Management Services**

SERVQUAL DIMENSIONS	OCCUPIER SATISFACTION STUDIES
Tangibles: the appearance of the physical facilities, communication materials, equipment and personnel appearance	<b>Physical Aspects</b> ✓ Location ✓ Property Specification ✓ Estate ✓ Parking ✓ Public Transport ✓ Tenant mix  <b>Service Aspects</b> ✓ Marketing & Events ✓ Amenities ✓ Lifts ✓ Reception
Reliability: the capability to perform the agreed service without fail and precisely	✓ Maintenance ✓ Cleaning ✓ Billing and documentation ✓ Waste management

SERVQUAL DIMENSIONS	OCCUPIER SATISFACTION STUDIES
Responsiveness: the willingness to provide prompt service in a helpful manner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Responsiveness</li> <li>✓ Approval &amp; legal processes</li> </ul>
Assurance: the employee's knowledge of courtesy, credibility, and competence to inspire trust and confidence. The employee who links the consumer to the company should create and gain the trust from the consumer to gain customer loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Security</li> <li>✓ Health &amp; Safety</li> <li>✓ Professionalism &amp; customer service</li> <li>✓ Leasing process</li> </ul>
Empathy: the caring individualised attention to the consumer, It is derived from communication and understanding the consumer and increases enhanced loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Understanding needs</li> <li>✓ Communication</li> </ul>

Source: Sanderson (2014)

### 3. DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS

This research adopted two main research methodologies. The qualitative research method was used to conduct a systemic review of relevant literature related to the research, service quality concept, customer satisfaction concept and SERVQUAL service quality. The quantitative method was used to review data collected by Consumer NZ from its nationwide survey of 1062 tenants of rented properties in NZ between December 2017 and February 2018. Consumer NZ collected the data through the distribution of survey questions to the PM customers and online reviews for the PM organisation (Brannen, 2016). The combination of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies in this research helped with improved research findings, generalisability and provided a better understanding of research problems (Gunnel, 2016). The data was collected, analysed, and interpreted to connect information with the research questions, literature, and theoretical concepts of the research. Category C Ethical Consideration was approved by the Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus (OPAIC) Ethics Committee 27/10/2020.

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND CONCLUSION

Data was analysed from 1062 tenant participants who completed the nationwide survey by Consumer NZ in 2017 to 2018, using a descriptive statistic chart. The analysis indicated that 37% of the tenant participants in the survey rented through a PM company and 59% of tenant participants rented through a private property owner. According to the survey 4 out of 10 tenant participants reported living in quality warm and cosy properties. Similarly, 4 out of 10 tenant participants reported they were getting great value from their landlords. Challenges were drastically reported by tenants who rent through a property company rather than private landlords (Consumer NZ, 2018).

#### Tenant satisfaction

Figure. 1 shows tenant participants' satisfaction level on the condition of the property, provided service and overall value for money from PM companies and property owners.

Figure 1: Tenant Participant Satisfaction Scores



Source: Consumer NZ (2018)

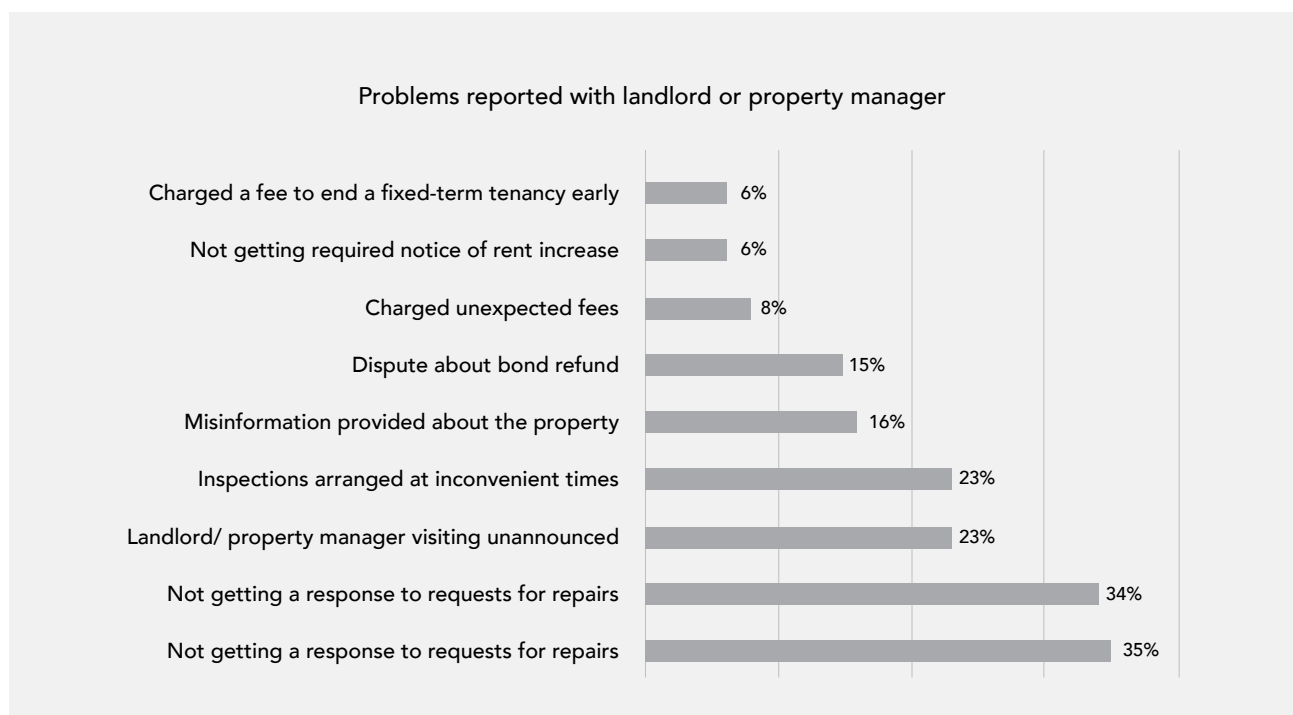
Figure.1 introduces Consumer NZ survey data of 1062 consumers rating service from PM and landlords. Satisfaction scores show the percentage of tenant participants who gave a rating of 8, 9 or 10 on a scale from 0 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). Only 35% of tenant participants rated their PMs service highly. In contrast, 54% of tenant participants renting from a private landlord were happy with the service. Just 36% of tenant participants rated the condition of the property highly. In comparison, 51% to those who rented from the landlord directly. The figure 1 illustrates that tenant participants received better value for money from private landlords (51%) than PM companies (32%). Value for money in this context is beneficial improvements that help the tenants. This reveals that most tenant participants consider dealing with the landlord to be satisfactory in relation to the provided service, condition of the rental property and benefits they received from property owners. While tenant participants were happy with the PMs services provided, the condition of the rental property and beneficial improvements received during the tenancy. The conclusion drawn from the analysis was that private property owners (landlords) provide better tenancy services than professional PM companies.

### Issues reported by tenant participants

Consumer NZ survey found that PM companies were more likely to delay requests for repairs than landlords. 42% of tenant participants reported that the PSM ignored their request for repairs and did not respond, while 1 in 4 tenant participants said their landlord or PSM visited unannounced and breached tenancy legislation and 1 in 10 reported being charged unexpected fees. (New Zealand Herald, 2018).

Figure. 2 shows that tenant participants perceived reliability, communication, and responsiveness, as aspects of service that could be improved.

Figure 2: Problems reported by Tenant Participants with the Landlord or Property Service Manager

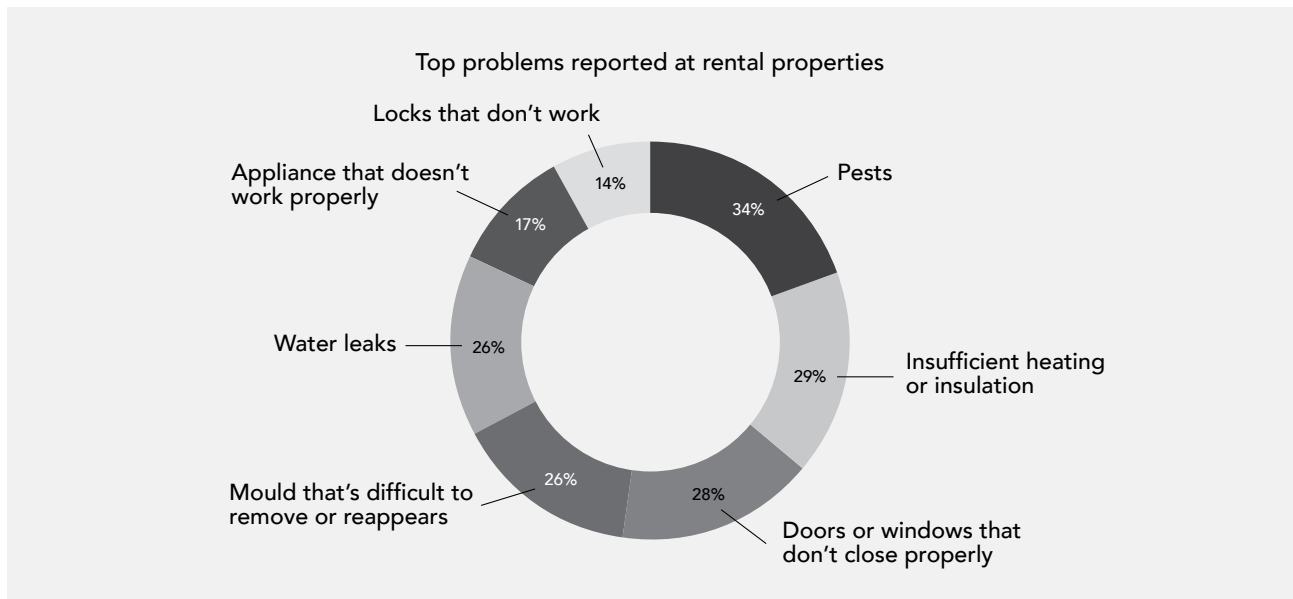


Source: Consumer NZ (2018)

Figure. 2 represents issues reported by renters with property owners and PM. 35% represent promised repairs have not been done, also 34% of tenants did not get a response to repairs requests. 23% of tenants complained about property owner or PSMs unannounced visits and inspections at inconvenient times. 16% reported misinformation provided about the property and 15% said they had a dispute about the bond refund. Furthermore, 8% said they were charged unexpected fees. 6% said they did not get the required notice of a rent increase and were charged a fee to end a fixed-term tenancy. It is found that renters reported on issues related to performing the agreed service by the landlord or the property manager, such as promised repairs not being done. These issues are related to the company's trustworthiness, misinformation about the property, bond refund issues and unexpected fees. Tenants were not happy with the landlord/PSM's unannounced visits and inspections at inconvenient times. This indicates a poor communication style and breaching of tenants' rights.

Figure. 3 provides insights to improve such aspects of service as understanding needs. It shows the top problems reported by tenant participants of rental properties.

Figure 3: Top Problems for Tenant Participants of Rental Properties



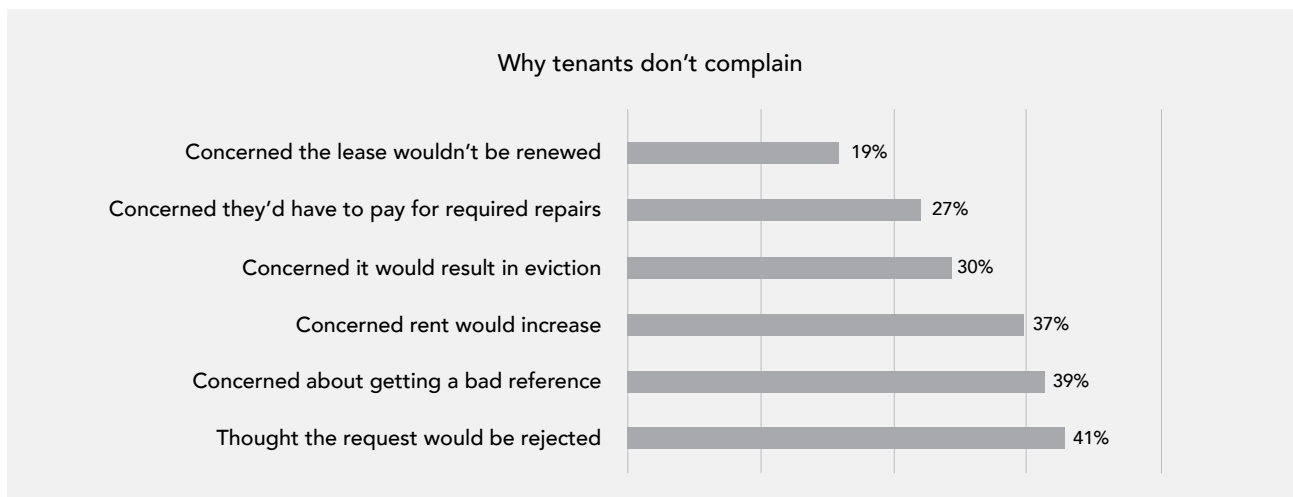
Source: Consumer NZ (2018)

According to Figure. 3, 34% of tenant participants reported pest issues at the property, 29% insufficient heating or insulation, and 28% reported doors or windows that did not close properly. While 26% said they had trouble with mould at the property and water leaks, 17% reported appliances that did not work properly and 14% reported lock issues at the rental property. Consumer NZ (2018) identified that tenants who have direct dealings with PMs are more likely to complain about heating, insulation, and mould issues at the rental property. This finding is synonymous with Nadkarni (2018) who argued that PM companies are more likely to have home heating and mould issues compared to renting direct from the property owners, landlords. Newton (2018) argues that NZ rental properties are in significantly worse condition compared to owner-occupied homes and 32% of rental houses in NZ are poorly maintained.

**Reasons tenant participants do not complain**

The findings indicated tenant participants renting through PM companies were more likely to worry about the repercussions of complaining.

Figure 4: Reasons Tenant Participants do not Complain



Source: Consumer NZ (2018)

Figure. 4 indicates that 41% of tenant participants did not complain about issues because they thought their complaint would be rejected; 39% worried about getting a bad reference, 37% worried about their rent increasing, 30% thought it would result in eviction and 27% were concerned they would have to pay for the required repairs. However, 19% of tenant participants are concerned the lease would not be renewed. These findings indicated that the major challenge for tenant participants in being able to fight for their rights is due to the lack of tenure security.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

### Survey

Customer satisfaction is a priority for the PM industry. It is crucial for them must know how tenants and landlords feel about their experience using PM agency services. Seeking feedback from PMs to elicit complaints and compliments should be completed with approaches involving interviews, focus groups and surveys. Questionnaires should be commonly administered to measure customer satisfaction. This recommendation is synonymous with organisations such as Uber, Airbnb, and Facebook which access customers' feedback through customer surveys to build loyalty (Pelican, 2020). According to Pelican (2020) on every Uber ride, there is a real-time customer satisfaction survey completed by the driver and client. Also, every six months, Uber drivers are invited to rate the Uber company directly to determine the level of employees' job satisfaction (Alexander et al., 2022). Adopting this strategy PM companies with the chance to identify opportunities for improvement to allow them to grow and improve.

### SERVQUAL-style survey for the Property Management sector

Property management companies should regularly invite customers to write Google reviews for the company. To better integrate consumer voices into service improvement, easy-to-use and in-depth surveys help PM companies identify issues, as customer satisfaction is vitally important for PMs in a successful business operation. However, this research implores PM companies to perform SERVQUAL-style surveys among their customers at PM offices as well as online on their company's website. This will help PM companies to work toward tenant satisfaction using the SERVQUAL model tool. This tool is commonly used for service quality evaluation. Using this, PM companies will be able to measure customer attitudes. Typical SERVQUAL-style survey questions to be used by PMs companies should be based on assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness, and tangibles. (Bebko, 2000). The questionnaire should be designed by a PM company and must consider the five dimensions relative to service as listed below in Table 2 with questionnaire examples.

Table 2: Dimensions in relation to service aspects in a questionnaire

DIMENSIONS	ASPECTS OF SERVICE	EXAMPLE OF ITEM FROM QUESTIONNAIRE
Assurance	Competence, respect for customers, effective communication, and attitude conveyed to customers.	How would you rate the level of communication from us?
Empathy	Approachable service representatives, And staff who understand customer needs.	What could we do to improve our service for you?
Reliability	Complete the service on time, consistently, and error-free.	Have there been any undertakings made to you that have not yet been fulfilled?
Responsiveness	Ability to respond promptly.	How would you rate the level of responsiveness to requests for service?
Tangibles	Appearance of the physical facilities.	How would you rate the quality of our facilities?

A questionnaire will help elicit consumers' opinions on services such as communication, understanding needs and value for money satisfaction.

### The Balanced Scorecard approaches

In addition to the survey, this research recommends the use of a Balanced Scorecard approach for PM companies. According to Graetz et al. (2014), the Balanced Scorecard concept (BSC) is a visual approach to examine and evaluate a company's performance by four key indicators: mission, customer, internal business processes, learning and growth metrics. The BSC identifies drivers of a company's performance and outcomes. The application of BSC will help PM companies evaluate their strategic management performance from four perspectives: mission, customer, internal business processes, learning and growth. The mission perspective will enable PM companies to identify areas that impact performance and overall achievements. The customer perspective will help with market share, customer satisfaction, customer service and brand awareness objectives. Internal business processes will help PM companies improve their process performance and metrics for efficiency. It represents the main operational issues and processes effectiveness for review. This involves process improvements, quality optimisation and capacity. Learning and growth will help PM companies with their intangible drivers of performance, such as leadership, capability, skills, people satisfaction and technology objectives (Burghall et al., 2014). According to Kaplan & Norton (1992) adopting BSC will help PM companies monitor and improve aspects of their performance by setting goals based on its strategy, focusing on customer needs and the development of internal processes.

**Table 3: Balanced Scorecard Approach for Property Management Companies**

PERSPECTIVES	OBJECTIVES	MEASURES
1. Mission level	Achieving excellence in customer service	1. Number of initiatives implemented in the company's' operations to service improvement 2. Increase positive feedback from customers
2. Customer	1. Communication with customers 2. Gathering and acting on customer feedback 3. Understanding the customer's viewpoint	Monthly present reports on company's customer feedback.
3. Internal process	1. Being responsive in terms of quality 2. Being responsive in terms of speed 3. Selecting the right staff	Number of employees aware of a set of guidelines in terms of quality and quick service should be the blueprint to be followed by having a clear standard.
4. Learning and growth	1. Training and development of employees in soft skills 2. Empowering staff	1. Number of employees attending and passing training courses on service excellence 2. Monthly meeting for staff and to discuss their individual responsibility/ies towards a particular customer service initiative

Table 3 above represents the BSC approach designed by the researcher considering the most important aspects of customer satisfaction relative to the PM sector. According to the United Kingdom Institute of Customer Service (2011), the most essential factors of customer satisfaction from the perspective of PM companies are: understanding the customer's viewpoint, gathering, and acting on customer feedback, training, and developing of staff soft skills, selecting the right staff, being responsive in terms of quality, empowering staff, and being responsive in terms of speed. The approach will assist PM companies to improve and control business functions regarding customer service United Kingdom Institute of Customer Service (2011).

## CONCLUSION

This research examined the key challenges of tenants and what factors NZ PM companies could adopt to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction. Data collected by Consumer NZ from its nationwide survey of 1062 tenant participants of rented properties in NZ was reviewed. The research found the following challenges faced by tenant participants were landlords providing better services than professional PSMs, poor communication styles between tenant participants and landlords or the PSMs leading to breaches of tenant participants' rights. These challenges left tenant participants feeling as though they were not able to fight for their tenancy rights for lack of tenure security. Overall, to attain customer satisfaction in the PM sector, this research recommends:

1. customer satisfaction feedback completed through surveys and interviews.
2. customers are requested to provide reviews via platforms such as Google; and
3. PM companies to use SERVQUAL-style surveys circulated to customers and available online via the PSM's website.

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