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Consumer Research and Service Staff Involvement in the Service Development Process

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to apply consumer research techniques to the development of services. The study also developed ways for involving both the consumer and service staff in the first stage of Service Development. A new model for the first stage of Service Development was proposed and tested.

One of the first of its kind in the public domain in New Zealand, this study presents an empirical evaluation of the application of consumer research techniques to local government Service Development. Four Service Development case studies were conducted with the Palmerston North City Council, New Zealand. The research focused on the first stage of Service Development and therefore much of it was oriented towards methods and techniques for eliciting, transforming and representing consumer requirements for the development of services. The model included the sub-stages of service development strategy, opportunity identification, needs analyses, service idea generation and screening, detailed investigation, service concept development and evaluation.

The nature of a service product being a result of the interaction between the service staff and consumers required that Service Development involve these two key groups. Consumer research techniques were selected and applied based on the results of the literature review, the research objectives, the nature of services and the outcomes desired. Methods for involving both service staff and consumers in the process of early Service Development were examined and the new model was tested empirically.

The main consumer research techniques included mail surveys, telephone interviews, personal interviews, self-administered surveys and focus groups. The new technique of joint focus groups with service staff and consumers was trialled. As part of the focus groups, some idea generation techniques such as word-storming, postbox technique, brainstorming and role-playing were tested with consumers, and where appropriate with service staff. Some of the traditional consumer research techniques used in Product Development needed to be modified slightly to accommodate the intangibility of services. For example, stimulus material such as word lists, video clips and visual collages were provided to respondents as tangible references to stimulate idea generation. Consumer

techniques that allowed for the exploration of the interaction between service staff and consumers, and those that permitted the presentation of tangible stimuli were found to be more useful.

Analysis tools such as the Quadrant analysis and Perceptual Mapping techniques were used successfully to represent consumer attitudes and perceptions towards the services that were studied. Segmentation of consumers based on consumer attitudes towards the specific service are recommended rather than only demographic segmentation. Matrices were developed to systematically and rationally move from one sub-stage to the next.

A Service Development framework that incorporates the participation of consumers and service staff in the Service Development process was created based on the literature and the service context. This model was applied and tested in the four case studies with a local government in New Zealand, to produce the final NuServ model for Service Development.

The extent of involvement of service staff in service delivery varies and therefore a range of services was selected within the local government, where a real opportunity or need for service improvement or development existed. A key message that emerged from the research is that Service Development benefits from the participation of both consumers and service staff. Service developers should adopt the consumer research techniques for a more participatory process of development. The Service Development model provides a process guide to service managers for developing and improving services. This research also provided insights and new directions for future studies in Service Development.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS v

LIST OF APPENDICES xvii

LIST OF FIGURES xviii

LIST OF TABLES xx

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO SERVICE DEVELOPMENT 1

1.1 Need for Service Development in local government 1

1.2 New Zealand local government services 2

1.3 Definition of Services 4

1.4 Service Characteristics 4

1.4.1 Intangibility of Services 4

1.4.2 Inseparability in Services 5

1.4.3 Variability in Services 5

1.4.4 Perishability of Services 5

1.5 Local government Services in Palmerston North 6

1.6 Service Development Process 8

1.7 Involvement of Consumers and Service Staff in Service Development 12

1.7.1 Role of Consumers in Services 12

1.7.2 Role of Service Staff in Services 13

1.8 Need for Consumer Research in Service Development 14

1.9 Research Theme 16

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT IN SERVICE DEVELOPMENT 17

2.1 Introduction 17

2.2 Consumer and Service Staff relationships in Services 18

2.3 The Challenge of Service Development 20

2.4 Purposes served by Service Development 22

2.5 Success Factors in Service Development 23

2.6 Service Development Process 25

2.7 Local government Service Development 28

2.7.1 Local government Service Culture 28

2.7.2 Decision-making in Local government Services 29

2.7.3 Palmerston North Council's Strategy for New Services 30

2.7.4 Consumer Involvement in Government Services 31

2.8 Consumer Research Techniques 33

2.8.1 General Techniques 33

2.8.2 Consumer in the Development Process 37

2.9 Consumer Research in Local government Service Development 39

2.9.1 Importance of First Stage of Service Development 39

2.9.2 Activities in the First Stage of Service Development 39

2.10 Summary of Consumer Research in Service Development 40

2.10.1 Researching the Consumer and Service Staff Involvement 41

2.10.2 Consumer Research and Service Development 42

2.11 Research Aims 42

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH PLANNING AND METHODOLOGY 44

3.1 Case study Method for Service Development Research 44

3.2 Research Plan for Case studies 46

3.3 Research Environment and Case studies Organisation 47

3.3.1 Stages of Service Development and Case studies 47

3.3.2 Project Review and Control 51

3.3.3 Case studies Overall Organisation 51

3.3.4 Selection of Respondents 53

3.3.5 Selection of Consumer Research Techniques 54

3.3.6 Timing of Case studies 57

3.4 Qualitative Research Methods in the Case studies 58

3.4.1 Focus Groups 59

3.5 Quantitative Research Methods in the Case studies 63

3.5.1 Strategic Service Research 63

3.5.2 Customer Service Research 63

3.5.3 Visitor Service Research 64

3.5.4 Bicycle Service Research 64

3.5.5 Questionnaire Design 65

3.6 Ethical Considerations in the Research 68

3.7 Analysis Techniques Used in Case studies 69

3.8 Modelling of Service Development 71

3.8.1 Stages in Service Development Model for Government Services 73

3.8.2 Consumer Participation in the Service Development process 75

3.8.3 Service Staff Participation in the Service Development Process 76

CHAPTER 4 CASE STUDY 1 – STRATEGIC SERVICE RESEARCH.....77

4.1 Introduction & Objectives.....77

4.2 Activities.....78

4.3 Techniques.....80

4.4 Outcomes of First Survey.....82

4.4.1 Consumer Service Needs Identified at Focus Groups.....82

4.4.2 Identification of Service Attributes in Focus Groups.....82

4.4.3 Consumer Evaluation of Overall Service.....83

4.4.4 Evaluation of Service Relationship Attributes.....84

4.4.5 Evaluation of Reports & Information Service: External Consumers.....85

4.4.6 Evaluation of Reports & Information Service: Internal Consumers.....85

4.4.7 Consumer Comments.....87

4.4.8 Service Ideas and Improvements.....88

4.5 Analysis of Outcomes (First Survey).....88

4.5.1 Comparison of Internal and External Consumer Evaluations.....88

4.5.2 Service Attribute Mapping and Analysis.....89

4.6 Decisions on Strategic Service Research 1997.....90

4.7 Outcomes of Second Survey.....92

4.7.1 Consumer Evaluation of Overall Service.....92

4.7.2 Evaluation of Service Relationship Attributes.....92

4.7.3 Evaluation of Reports and Information: External Consumers.....94

4.7.4 Evaluation of Policy Service, Reports and Information: Internal Consumers.....94

4.7.5 Service Ideas and Improvements.....96

4.8 Analysis of Outcomes (Second Survey).....96

4.8.1 Service Attribute Mapping and Analysis.....96

4.8.2 Comparison of Internal and External Consumer Evaluations (1998) 97

4.8.3 Comparison of Overall Evaluation between 1997 and 1998 98

4.8.4 Comparison of Service Relationship Evaluations between 1997 and 1998 .98

4.8.5 Comparison of Internal and External Consumers' Relationship Ratings between 1997 and 1998 99

4.8.6 Comparison of Reports and Information Ratings between 1997 and 1998 - External Consumers only 99

4.8.7 Comparison of Policy Service, Reports and Information Ratings between 1997 and 1998 - Internal Consumers only 100

4.9 Decisions on Strategic Service Research 1998 101

4.10 Outcomes of Third Survey 103

4.10.1 Consumer Evaluation of Overall Service 103

4.10.2 Evaluation of Service Relationship Attributes 103

4.10.3 Evaluation of Reports and Information: External Consumers 104

4.10.4 Evaluation of Policy Service, Information & Reports: Internal Consumers105

4.10.5 Consumer Comments 106

4.10.6 Service Ideas and Improvements 106

4.11 Analysis of Outcomes (Third Survey) 106

4.11.1 Comparisons of Internal and External Consumer Evaluations 106

4.11.2 Service Attribute Mapping & Analysis 107

4.11.3 Comparison of Relationship Evaluations between 1998 and 1999 108

4.11.4 Change in Evaluation of Reports and Information: External Consumers .. 109

4.11.5 Changes in Evaluation of Policy Service, Reports and Information: Internal Consumers 110

4.11.6 Comparisons of Internal and External Consumer Evaluations between 1998 and 1999 Surveys 111

4.12 Comparison of Overall Service Evaluation across three Surveys 112

4.13 Decisions on Strategic Service Research - 1999.....113

4.14 Discussion & Evaluation of Activities and Consumer Techniques.....114

4.14.1 Modelling of Service Development.....114

4.14.2 Consumer Participation in Strategic Service Research.....115

4.14.3 Service Staff Involvement in Strategic Service Research.....116

4.14.4 Consumer Techniques in Strategic Service Research.....117

CHAPTER 5 CASE STUDY II – CUSTOMER SERVICE RESEARCH..... 119

5.1 Introduction & Objectives.....119

5.2 Activities and Techniques.....120

5.2.1 Outline of the Activities.....121

5.2.2 Qualitative Techniques.....122

5.2.3 Quantitative Techniques.....123

5.2.4 Analysis Techniques.....124

5.3 Qualitative Research Outcomes.....125

5.3.1 Service Attributes Identification.....125

5.3.2 Service Staff Needs.....127

5.3.3 Consumer Attitudes Towards Customer Service.....128

5.3.4 Consumer and Service Staff Interaction.....130

5.4 Quantitative Research Outcomes.....131

5.4.1 Consumers in Survey.....131

5.4.2 Overall Evaluation of Customer Service by Consumers.....131

5.4.3 Consumer Attitudes towards Personal Service Attributes.....132

5.4.4 Importance Rating of Service Attributes by Consumers.....133

5.4.5 Consumer Attitudes to General Service.....133

5.4.6 Service Improvements Needed.....134

5.4.7 Evaluations of Frontline Service Staff and Internal Service Staff 135

5.5 Analysis of Outcomes 136

5.5.1 Comparison of Importance and Satisfaction of Service Attributes 136

5.5.2 Identification of Service Attribute Improvement 138

5.5.3 Service Idea Selection 139

5.6 Decisions on Outcomes 139

5.6.1 Service Improvement Suggestions 140

5.6.2 Important Areas for Service Improvement 141

5.6.3 Physical Area for Service Improvement 142

5.7 Discussion and Evaluation of Activities and Consumer Techniques..143

5.7.1 Modelling of Sub-stages in the Service Development Process 143

5.7.2 Consumer Participation in Customer Service Research 144

5.7.3 Service Staff Participation in Customer Service Research 145

5.7.4 Consumer Techniques Used in Customer Service Research 146

CHAPTER 6 CASE STUDY III – VISITOR SERVICE RESEARCH 150

6.1 Introduction 150

6.2 Objectives 151

6.3 Activities 151

6.4 Techniques 152

6.4.1 Secondary Research 152

6.4.2 Focus Groups with Consumers 153

6.4.3 Focus Groups with Service Staff 155

6.4.4 Face-to-face Intercept Interviews 156

6.5 Qualitative Outcomes 157

6.5.1 Attributes of Visitor Services 157

6.5.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of Services for Visitors 158

6.5.3 Visitors' Ideas for Service Improvements and New services 159

6.5.4 Service Staff's Ideas for Service Improvements and New Services 161

6.5.5 Service Staff's Screening of Service Improvements and New Services 161

6.6 Quantitative Research Outcomes 161

6.6.1 Profile of Visitors 161

6.6.2 Visitor Activities 164

6.6.3 Visitor Use of Transport 166

6.6.4 Visitor Perceptions of Palmerston North as a Visitor Destination 167

6.6.5 Like/Dislike Rating of Service Attractions 168

6.6.6 Visitor Use of Information Sources 169

6.7 Importance and Evaluation of Service Attributes 171

6.7.1 Ideas for New Visitor Services and Improved Services 172

6.8 Analysis of Outcomes 174

6.8.1 Identification of Target Visitors 174

6.8.2 Service Attributes – Importance and Improvements 175

6.8.3 Comparison of Service Ideas obtained using two Techniques 175

6.9 General Conclusions, Discussion of Outcomes and Decisions 176

6.9.1 New Service Ideas and Improvements 177

6.10 Discussion and Evaluation of Activities and Consumer Techniques .. 178

6.10.1 Modelling of the Service Development Process 178

6.10.2 Consumer Participation in the Visitor Service Research 179

6.10.3 Service Staff Involvement in the Visitor Service research 180

6.10.4 Consumer Techniques used in Visitor Research 180

CHAPTER 7 CASE STUDY IV – COMPLETE STAGE 1 IN SERVICE DEVELOPMENT 182

7.1 Introduction 182

7.2 Objectives 183

7.3 Activities 184

7.4 Techniques 189

7.4.1 Secondary Research 189

7.4.2 Focus Groups on Consumer Needs and Service Barriers 190

7.4.3 Consumer Telephone Survey 194

7.4.4 Service Idea Generation and Screening 195

7.4.5 Service Concept Development and Evaluation Techniques 195

7.5 Initial Outcomes 197

7.5.1 Statistics on Cycling in the City 197

7.5.2 Current Bicycle Usage in the Study City 200

7.5.3 Outcomes of International Secondary Data Analysis 200

7.5.4 Focus Groups with Cyclists and Non-cyclists 201

7.6 Qualitative Outcomes - Identification of Service Needs and Barriers - 204

7.6.1 Barriers to Cycling Services 204

7.6.2 Motivations of Cyclists 204

7.6.3 Contextual Factors that Facilitate or Impede Cycling Services 205

7.6.4 Service Attributes for Cycling 207

7.7 Quantitative Outcomes - Service Needs and Barriers 207

7.7.1 Major Barriers to Cycling 207

7.7.2 Consumer Attitudes to Cycling 209

7.8 Service Idea Generation and Screening 209

7.8.1 New Service Ideas and Improvements 209

7.8.2 Service Ideas Screened 210

7.8.3 Major Barriers and Related Service Ideas 211

7.9 New Service Concepts 212

7.9.1 Service Attributes and Consumer Perceptions 212

7.9.2 Service Concept Development 213

7.9.3 Service Concept Evaluation 214

7.9.4 Service Development Plan 216

7.10 Analysis of Outcomes 218

7.10.1 Overall Analyses of Consumer Perceptions 218

7.10.2 Likelihood of Increased Cycling on introduction of new services 219

7.10.3 Attributes Analysed by Consumer Segment Groups 219

7.10.4 Analysis of Barriers by Age Group 220

7.10.5 Analysis of Barriers by Cyclists and Non-cyclists 220

7.10.6 Comparison of Scaling Techniques 225

7.11 Discussion of Decisions and Outcomes 226

7.12 Discussion and Evaluation of Model, Consumers and Service Staff, Consumer Techniques 228

7.12.1 Modelling of the Service Development Process 228

7.12.2 Consumer Participation in Bicycle Service Research 231

7.12.3 Service Staff Involvement in Bicycle Service Research 232

7.12.4 Consumer Techniques Used in Bicycle Service Research 232

CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS 234

8.1 Introduction 234

8.2 Research Context 235

8.3 Consumer-Service Staff Relationship 236

8.4 Organising Consumer Research in Service Development 237

8.5 Service Development Model Involving Consumers and Service Staff in the First Stage of the Process 238

8.5.1 Activities in the Development Process 239

8.5.2 Benefits of the Process Model 243

8.6 Techniques 244

8.6.1 Involvement of Consumers in Service Development 245

8.6.2 Involvement of Service Staff in Service Development 248

8.7 Case studies - Evaluation & Reflection 249

8.7.1 Strategic Service Research 249

8.7.2 Customer Service Research 250

8.7.3 Visitor Service Research 251

8.7.4 Bicycle Service Research 253

8.8 Evaluation of Consumer Research Techniques 256

8.8.1 Focus Groups 258

8.8.2 Quadrant Analysis 259

8.8.3 Idea Generation 259

8.8.4 Role Playing 259

8.8.5 Scaling Techniques 260

8.8.6 Perceptual Mapping Technique 260

8.8.7 Surveys 261

8.9 Modifications of Consumer Research Techniques 262

8.9.1 Limitations of the Research....263

8.10 Conclusions and Recommendations 263

8.10.1 Service Development Model....263

8.10.2 Consumer Research in Service Development....264

8.10.3 Benefits of Consumer & Service Staff in Service Development 267

8.11 Future Research 271

BIBLIOGRAPHY 274

APPENDICES 286

List of Appendices

Appendix 3.1 Secondary Data Collection 286
Appendix 3.2 Interviewer's Guide for Visitor Survey 287
Appendix 3.3 Example Guide for Focus Group Discussions 288
Appendix 3.4 Checklist for Ideas Screening 290
Appendix 3.5 Research in Practice 291
Appendix 3.6 Consumer Research Ethics 295
Appendix 3.7 Letter to High School Principals 296
Appendix 3.8 Consent Form 298
Appendix 4.1 Consumer Evaluation of Overall Service – 299
Appendix 4.2 Significance Test Formulae 300
Appendix 6.1 Letter for Personal Interviewing 301
Appendix 7.1 Benchmarking Material 302
Appendix 7.2 Experts used in the Bicycle Research: 303
Appendix 7.3 Comparative Travel Data in Palmerston North and Two New Zealand Cities 1996 304
Appendix 7.4 Barrier Ratings 305
Appendix 7.5 Individual Barrier Rating Graphs 306
Appendix 7.6 Perceptual Distribution of Attributes 309

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Council Services and Consumers 7
Figure 1.2: Earle's Product Development Process 9
Figure 1.3: New Service Development Process (Terrill et al.) 10
Figure 2.1: New Service Development Models 27
Figure 2.2: Council's Significant Services and Activities Plan 30
Figure 2.3: Activities in the First Stage of Service Development 40
Figure 3.1: Conceptual Model of Service Development 73
Figure 4.1: Consumer Evaluation of Overall Service (1997) 84
Figure 4.2: Analysis Mapping of Attribute Evaluation and Importance 89
Figure 4.3: Overall Consumer Evaluation of the Service (1998) 92
Figure 4.4: Analysis Mapping of Attribute Evaluation and Importance 97
Figure 4.5: Consumer Evaluation of Overall Service (1999) 103
Figure 4.6: Analysis Mapping of Attribute Evaluation and Importance 108
Figure 4.7: Comparison of Overall Service Evaluation across all Three Monitors 112
Figure 4.8: First Sub-stage of the Service Development Process 115
Figure 5.1: Overall Evaluation of Customer Service 132
Figure 5.2: Importance-Satisfaction Grid 137
Figure 5.3: Building the NuServ Model of Service Development 144
Figure 6.1: Visual Collage used in Consumer Focus Groups 154
Figure 6.2: Companion Type 163
Figure 6.3: Distribution of Visitors' Ages 163
Figure 6.4: Home Districts for Visitors 164
Figure 6.5: Visitors' Length of Stay 165
Figure 6.6: Reasons for Visiting Palmerston North 166
Figure 6.7: Means of Transport in the City 166
Figure 6.8: Visitor Perceptions of Palmerston North as a Visitor Destination 167
Figure 6.9: Sources of Visitor Information 170
Figure 6.10: New Visitor Services 173
Figure 6.11: Perceptual Rating of Visitor Experience based on Expectations 174
Figure 6.12: Difference between Importance and Satisfaction 175
Figure 6.13: Building the NuServ Model of Service Development 179

Figure 7.1: Visual Collage used in Consumer Focus Groups 192
Figure 7.2: Ratings of Major and Very Major Barriers 208
Figure 7.3: Perceptual Map of Travel Modes as Perceived by Consumers 218
Figure 7.4: 'Bad weather conditions' as a Barrier to cycling 221
Figure 7.5: Barrier Ratings for 'Danger from Road Traffic' 222
Figure 7.6: Barrier Ratings for 'Bicycle Theft and Vandalism' 222
Figure 7.7: Barrier Ratings for 'Young Children Rules' 223
Figure 7.8: Barrier Ratings for 'Poor Road Conditions' 224
Figure 7.9: Barrier Ratings for 'Time to Destination' 224
Figure 7.10: Complete Stage 1 of Service Development 229
Figure 8.1: Continuum of Consumer and Service Staff Input 238
Figure 8.2: NuServ Model – First Stage of Service Development 243
Figure 8.3: Involvement of Consumers and Service Staff in Service Development 246

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Differences in the consumer interactions in the development processes for Products (Goods) and Services.....19

Table 2.2 Consumer in the Development Process of Products and Services 38

Table 3.1 First Stage of Service Development – Activities & Decisions.....48

Table 3.2 Checklist for Review of Case study Research.....52

Table 3.3 Consumer Characteristics in the Case studies.....56

Table 3.4 Main Research Techniques Used in the Case studies 57

Table 3.5 Research Time Frame.....58

Table 3.6 Use of Focus Groups in early Service Development.....61

Table 3.7 Sample School Characteristics for the Bicycle Quantitative Research 65

Table 4.1 Response Rate in Mail Surveys 1997, 1998 and 1999 79

Table 4.2 Consumer Requirements and Service Needs.....82

Table 4.3 Evaluation of Service Relationship Attributes: All Consumers 1997.....84

Table 4.4 Evaluation of Reports & Information Service:External Consumers 1997 85

Table 4.5 Evaluation of Reports & Information Service: Internal Consumers 1997 86

Table 4.6 Evaluation of Policy Service: Internal Consumers 1997.....86

Table 4.7 Comparison of All Consumer Evaluations of Service Relations 89

Table 4.8 Evaluation of Service Relationship Attributes: All Consumers 1998.....92

Table 4.9 Evaluation of Reports and Information: External Consumers 1998 94

Table 4.10 Internal Consumer Evaluation of Information and Reports 1998 95

Table 4.11 Internal Consumer Evaluation of Policy Service 95

Table 4.12 Comparison of All Consumer Evaluations 1998.....97

Table 4.13 Change in Overall Evaluations Between 1997 and 1998 98

Table 4.14 Change in Evaluation of Relationship between 1997 and 1998.....98

Table 4.15 Comparison of Change in All Consumers' Relationship Evaluation between 1997 and 1998 99

Table 4.16 Change in Evaluation of Reports and Information between 1997 and 1998 – External Consumers 100

Table 4.17 Change in Evaluation of Policy Service, Reports and Information between 1997 and 1998 – Internal Consumers 101
Table 4.18 Evaluation of Service Relationship: All Consumers 1999 104
Table 4.19 Evaluation of Reports and Information: External Consumers 104
Table 4.20 Evaluation of Policy Service, Reports and Information: Internal Consumers 1999 105
Table 4.21 Evaluation of Policy Service, Information and Reports:Internal 1999 ... 107
Table 4.22 Evaluation of Reports and Information: External Consumers 1999 107
Table 4.23 Change in Evaluation of Reports and Information between 1998 and 1999 - External Consumers 110
Table 4.24 Change in Evaluation of Policy Service, Reports and Information between 1998 and 1999 - Internal Consumers 111
Table 4.25 Change in All Relationship Ratings in 1998 and 1999 112
Table 5.1 Activities in the sub-stages of the NuServ Model 121
Table 5.2 Preliminary Attributes for new Customer Services 126
Table 5.3 Evaluation of Service Attributes by Consumers 132
Table 5.4 Importance of Service Attributes to Consumers 133
Table 5.5 Consumer Attitudes to General Service 134
Table 5.6 Consumer Comments about the Customer Service 135
Table 6.1 Matrix of Activities in Visitor Service Development Research 152
Table 6.2 General Word-associations for Visitor Services 157
Table 6.3 Service Attributes for Science Centre 158
Table 6.4 Focus Group Summary on Strengths and Weaknesses of Palmerston North for Visitors 159
Table 6.5 Rating of Likes and Dislikes of Specific Visitor Service Attractions 169
Table 6.6 Importance of Service Attributes by Visitors 171
Table 6.7 Evaluation of Service Attributes by Visitors 172
Table 6.8 Comparison of Service Ideas obtained using two Techniques 176
Table 7.1 Bicycle Service Development Research Plan 188
Table 7.2 Characteristics of Sample in Quantitative Survey 197
Table 7.3 Travel to Work or Study in Palmerston North in 1986, 1991, 1996 199
Table 7.4 Comparison of Bicycle Usage in three cities 200
Table 7.5 Summary of Secondary Information 200

Table 7.6 Summary of Likes and Dislikes about Cycling 203
Table 7.7 Comparison of the Number of Service Ideas Generated by Consumers and Service Staff in the Focus Groups 210
Table 7.8 Screened List of Ideas by Consumers and Service Staff.....211
Table 7.9 Major Barriers and Final Service Ideas 211
Table 7.10 Analysis of Barriers between Age groups and Cyclists/Non-cyclists.....225
Table 8.1a Planning Matrix for First Stage of Service Development.....241
Table 8.1b Planning Matrix for first stage of Service Development 242
Table 8.2 Summary Evaluation of Consumer Methods.....258
Table 8.3 Modifications to Consumer Research Techniques.....262