

Animation 4.5

We've already talked about the Servuction System in chapter 1. Over the years, the extent to which service is provided by infrastructure or by personnel has changed. In many modern service operations the customer has increasingly taken responsibility for their own service and in effect become a co-worker though using self-service technologies.

This has led to the idea that service encounters can be either 'high tech' or 'high touch'. High tech services have little or no personnel input, customers interact just with technology. High touch on the other hand has high levels of personal service.

The barrier between back office and front office has been taken down. This is often termed production-lining of the service whereby plant, equipment and employees are arranged in a product flow layout. This notionally removes the distinction between back-of-house and front-of-house as service delivery is thought of and managed as a single integrated process.

The fast food sector was one of the first to do this. In the traditional restaurant setting, the kitchen was back of house and the dining area was front of house, and customers could neither see nor enter the kitchen.

In fast food there is no wall between the service area and the production area, the back of house is open for all to see. This was done for two reasons. First it helped fast food employees to see front of house to gauge how busy the restaurant is, thereby enabling them to speed up or reduce the scale of production.

Second it reassured the customer that low cost food was safe to eat because they could see for themselves how clean and well operated the kitchen was.

Another way for service operations to open up the customer's domain is to increase the size of the front of house activity. This is now done with many high street banks. Automation of services whereby the line between equipment and personnel is shifted.

A further extension of this is decoupling in which some, if not all, back-of-house activity can be physically removed from the front-of-house premises. By doing this, back-of-house can be centralised into a larger, more efficient operation, taking advantage of economies of scale.

For instance, many health authorities and local education authorities have created central food production facilities which produce meals for several different hospitals and schools. They provide cook-chill meals which are transported each day to the cafeterias where they will be served and eaten.