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A study on measurement of customer satisfaction in hotel industry

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Abstract

One of the biggest contemporary challenges of management in service industries is providing and maintaining customer satisfaction. Service quality and customer satisfaction have increasingly been identified as key factors in the battle for competitive differentiation and customer retention. A research claim that overwhelming customer demand for quality products and service has in recent years become increasingly evident to professionals in the tourism and hotel industry. Among all customer demands, service quality has been increasingly recognized as a critical factor in the success of any business.

Keywords: Customer satisfaction, service quality, measurement techniques, content analysis, hotel industry

1. Introduction

During the past few decades, customer satisfaction and service quality have become a major area of attention to practitioners and academic researchers. Both concepts have strong impact on business performance and customer behavior. Service quality leads to higher profitability and customer satisfaction (Oliver, 2010) [9]. Furthermore, a number of empirical studies indicate a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty as well as between customer satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth. Therefore, one of the key strategies for customer-focused firms is to measure and monitor service quality and customer satisfaction.

Several tools are available for measuring customer satisfaction. In hotels, one of the most popular is a guest comment card (GCC). GCCs have the advantages of small size, easy distribution and simplicity. When analyzing data gathered in such a way, managers can get information about the attributes that have an impact on guests' satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction is typically defined as a post consumption evaluative judgement concerning a specific product or service. It is the result of an evaluative process that contrasts pre-purchase expectations with perceptions of performance during and after the consumption experience. The most widely accepted conceptualization of the customer satisfaction concept is the expectancy disconfirmation theory.

The theory proposed that satisfaction level is a result of the difference between expected and perceived performance. Satisfaction (positive disconfirmation) occurs when product or service is better than expected. On the other hand, a performance worse than expected results with dissatisfaction (negative disconfirmation).

Studies show that customer satisfaction may have direct and indirect impact on business results. Study concluded that customer satisfaction positively affects business profitability.

The majority of studies have investigated the relationship with customer behavior patterns.

According to these findings, customer satisfaction increases customer loyalty, influences repurchase intentions and leads to positive word-of-mouth. Given the vital role of customer satisfaction, it is not surprising that a variety of research has been devoted to investigating the determinants of satisfaction.

Satisfaction can be determined by subjective (e. g. customer needs, emotions) and objective factors (e. g. product and service features). Applying to the hospitality industry, there have been numerous studies that examine attributes that travelers may find important regarding customer satisfaction.

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1.1 Review of related literature

Atkinson (2008) ^[2] found out that cleanliness, security, value for money and courtesy of staff determine customer satisfaction.

Knutson (2013) ^[8] revealed that room cleanliness and comfort, convenience of location, prompt service, safety and security, and friendliness of employees are important. He stated that employee attitude, location and rooms are likely to influence travelers' satisfaction.

A study conducted by Akan (2014) showed that the main determinants of hotel guest satisfaction are the behavior of employees, cleanliness and timeliness.

Customer satisfaction has been a popular topic in marketing practice and academic research since Cardozo's (2012) initial study of customer effort, expectations and satisfaction. Despite many attempts to measure and explain customer satisfaction, there still does not appear to be a consensus regarding its definition (Giese and Cote, 2010) ^[6]. Choi and Chu (2011) ^[5] concluded that staff quality, room qualities and value are the top three hotel factors that determine travelers' satisfaction.

Providing services those customers prefer is a starting point for providing customer satisfaction. A relatively easy way to determine what services customer prefers is simply to ask them.

According to Gilbert and Horsnell (2013) ^[7], guest comment cards (GCCs) are most commonly used for determining hotel guest satisfaction. GCCs are usually distributed in hotel rooms, at the reception desk or in some other visible place. However, studies reveal that numerous hotel chains use guest satisfaction evaluating methods based on inadequate practices to make important and complex managerial decisions.

The most commonly made faults can be divided into three main areas, namely, quality of the sample, design of the GCCs, and data collection and analysis. In order to improve the validity of hotel guest satisfaction measurement practice, Barsky and Huxley (2012) ^[3] proposed a new sampling procedure that is a „quality sample“. It reduces non-response bias by offering incentives for completing the questionnaires. The components of their questionnaire are based on disconfirmation paradigm and expectancy-value theory. In this manner, guests can indicate whether service was above or below their expectations and whether they considered a particular service important or not.

1.2 Service quality

Service quality is a complex, elusive, subjective and abstract concept. It means different things to different people. The most common definition of service quality is the comparison customers make between their expectations and perceptions of the received service. Quality is a multi-dimensional concept.

The gap is measured by the difference between perceptions and expectations scores and indicates the level of service quality. If the result is positive, perceived service exceeds expected service. A negative result means low quality of service. According to this instrument, service quality occurs when perceived service meets or exceeds customer's expectations.

The SERVQUAL instrument has been widely applied in a variety of service industries, including tourism and hospitality. Research related to this sector can be divided into measuring service quality in historic houses. It should

be noted that service quality and customer satisfaction are distinct concepts, although they are closely related. According to some authors, satisfaction represents an antecedent of service quality.

In this sense, satisfactory experience may affect customer attitude and his or her assessment of perceived service quality. Thus, satisfaction with a specific transaction may result with positive global assessment of service quality. Other authors argue that service quality is antecedent of customer satisfaction. This group of authors suggests that service quality is a cognitive evaluation, which may lead to satisfaction. Hence, customer satisfaction is the result of service quality.

To sum up, the relationship between quality and satisfaction is complex. Some authors have described it as Siamese twins. Although there still remain a lot of unresolved questions, it can be concluded that service quality and customer satisfaction can be perceived as separate concepts that have causal ordering.

1.3 Content Analysis

Content analysis is an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications. It provides scientific, objective, quantitative and generalizable description of content.

Content analysis can be performed on virtually any medium with verbal and/or visual content – printed material, radio and television programs, recorded meetings, movies, songs, etc. It has been extensively used in marketing and consumer behavior research. The basic technique of content analysis entails counting the number of times pre-defined categories of measurement appear in a given content. An effective content analysis should meet several requirements.

First, a representative, randomly drawn sample should be selected. Second, the units of measurement, that is, the criteria of analysis must be clearly defined. These units can be specific a word, phrase, theme, paragraph, symbols, pictures, tables, or simply the existence or non- existence of some event or claim. Third, data categorization must be systematic. It must be clear that an item either belongs or does not belong to a particular category. Finally, statistical analysis and interpretation of data can be conducted.

Reliability and validity of the instrument and collected data should be demonstrated as well. Study identified three types of reliability for content analysis, namely, stability, reproducibility and accuracy. Reliability can be achieved by using several coders (judges) for processing the same content. Discrepancies between them should be minimal. Another factor to consider is the reliability of the coding instrument, which reduces the need for multiple coders. On the other hand, validity is defined as the extent to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure. In the field of content analysis, choice of categories and content units enhances or diminishes the likelihood of valid inferences.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine hotel guest comment cards (GCCs) and customer satisfaction management schemes in hotels of Opatija Riviera (Croatia). In order to do this, GCCs were gathered and analysed. Furthermore, personal interviews with hotel managers were conducted to determine the ways GCCs were distributed and processed.

Of 25 hotels, 19 (76%) use GCC for measuring hotel guests' satisfaction, while 6 of them (24%) do not use GCC. In one hotel, GCC was not available. As the majority of hotels in the Opatija Riviera are part of one of the three hotel chains, seven different GCC were gathered.

3. Results

First, results of personal interviews with hotel managers are presented.

Frequency of gathering information: All hotels in a sample that measure hotel guests satisfaction (19), gather information on a regular basis. GCCs are placed in every taken room.

Ways of gathering information: In all 19 analyzed hotels, information is gathered using GCCs. 74% of interviewees answered that they gather information via complaints and praise as well. Personal contact with guests is used in small luxury hotels. Almost 38% of hotel managers revealed that they receive information on hotel services from guests' letters, comments on the hotel's web sites, or internal comments made by the hotel's employees.

Response rate: The number of returned GCC is low. The majority of the hotels in the sample (42%) have a response rate from 5% to 10%. In five analyzed hotels, the number of completed GCCs is estimated to be up to 30%, while in only two hotels is the response rate higher than 50%. Sampling methods: In 95% of hotels, GCCs are distributed to all guests. Only in one hotel, guests are selected randomly.

Process of GCCs dispersal: In 79% of hotels in the sample, GCCs are distributed by the housekeeping department staff according to the check-in data. Completed GCCs are according in the marketing department. In three hotels, this is conducted by the operations department. In one hotel, GCCs are distributed via the reception desk.

Staff: In all hotels in the sample (19), hotel staff is familiar with the process of measuring hotel guests satisfaction. Regarding the way GCCs are distributed, it is believed, that hotel employees do not need additional training in order to motivate their guests to complete GCCs. In accordance, employees are not rewarded for motivating guests.

Results presentation to management: 42% of the interviewed hotel managers claim that they receive an analysis report once a month. In two cases, the answer was "other", with the explanation that management is informed occasionally, sometimes even daily.

Handling complaints: In the case of a complaint received, management takes appropriate measures to fix the problem (apology, repair, etc.).

Methodology of GCC design: In all hotels in the sample, GCCs are designed according to the managers' personal experience. Two hotel managers indicated that they adopted some questions from the practice of other hotels.

Timing the survey: In all analyzed hotels, GCCs are distributed to hotel guests during their stay. Conducting the survey during checkout or a few days after leaving the hotel is not a practice.

GCCs accessibility: In 63% of hotels, GCCs can be found in a folder on a room table. In five hotels, GCCs are placed in a visible place in the room (bed, table). Only in two hotels analyzed are GCCs accessible at the reception desk. One of the possible reasons for low response rates could be that the GCCs are not placed in visible places, considering that in the majority of hotels they are hidden in a folder.

Foreign languages: In addition to the Croatian language, GCCs are also translated in the English (all hotels), German (15 hotels) and Italian language (12 hotels). It can be concluded that all analyzed hotels do not have GCCs translated in the German and Italian language, although travelers from these countries are repeat customers on the Opatija Riviera.

Special request letter: In order to indicate the importance of guests' attitudes about hotel services recommends writing a special request letter. According to the findings, this practice is employed in two hotel chains in the United Kingdom. Hotel managers in this study do not use this technique as a way of motivating guests to complete the GCC.

Returning the GCCs: According to the answers received, hotel guests have several possibilities of where to return completed GCC. In the majority of hotels in the sample (63%), completed GCCs can be put into the box near the reception desk. Guests can return their answers to the check-in staff or leave them in their room, as well.

Incentives to guests: The majority of the analyzed hotels (68%) do not provide any kind of incentive to the guests. In six hotels, partial incentive is provided for returning the questionnaire. This means that instead of rewarding all the guests who took part in the survey, the incentive is given only to a guest who is randomly selected.

Reasons for not conducting GCC surveys: As it was indicated earlier, out of 25 hotels in the sample, in 24% of them GCCs are not used for measuring guests' satisfaction.

Reasons for this are the following: guests ignore the questionnaire, hotels do not want to disturb guests with the cards, hotels are considering the GCC practice, or are just not interested in it.

4. Conclusion

This study can be of great use to hotel managers in providing a direction on how to conduct and modify the existing practice of measuring customer satisfaction in hotels. The primary objective of GCCs is to understand guests' needs, gather their opinions and comments, most importantly, to assess guests' satisfaction with services provided. Although in 76% of analyzed hotels, GCCs are recognized as an important tool for measuring guest satisfaction, results indicate that in most hotels measurement practice should be improved.

Findings indicate that in most hotels GCCs can be found in a folder on a room table and are not distributed randomly. Guests can complete GCCs during their stay at the hotel. Response rates are low and no incentives are provided for completing questionnaires. GCCs are designed according to managers' personal experience, and managers usually receive analysis reports once a month. Furthermore, the diversity of GCC design is evident, and no single GCC within the survey sample meets all the best practice criteria. The majority of GCCs do not have effective question order, only a few of them provide measure of overall satisfaction, and only one includes the question about meeting guests' expectations.

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