

Diagnosing Guest Satisfaction In South African Hotels: The Case Of East London, South Africa

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Abstract

In numerous hotels, quality service is highly employee-centred. This paper aims to analyse and gather information on the satisfaction of customers and the hotel that could be used to enhance the quality service in hotels. The strategic focus of the hotel is to determine guest satisfaction to accomplish this there is need to understand what constitute customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. In essence, this paper explores the effect of guest satisfaction within the hospitality industry. Appreciating the variations between guests and providers in the applied dimensions of quality is crucial. The strategic focus of the hotel is to assess guests in order to optimise guest wealth so that the hotel can strengthen its departmental services by introducing more strategies using the service quality tool called guest content card (GCC). A hotel management intervention implements techniques for achieving satisfaction with service. In addition, a hotel establishment's designation helps to assist a hotel in being a market leader. The researcher investigates guest satisfaction in hotels in East London (EL), South Africa. Data was gathered using the GCC quality of service tool. The findings of this manuscript contribute towards enabling numerous hotels in and around EL to develop efficient and effective guest services. Additionally, from the findings of this study, there will be an enhancement in the awareness of the variations between guests and essential facilities in the applied dimensions of quality. The findings of this study also provide the hotel management staff with an overview of the latest procedures for guest satisfaction calculation and management in EL hotels.

Keywords: Service quality, customer loyalty, SERVQUAL, customer satisfaction, guest satisfaction

Introduction

Customer satisfaction is a commercial concept that prioritises providing customers with high-quality services, recognising and considering their expectations, as well as proving that their demands can be fulfilled. Customer happiness and service quality are essential for an organisation to prosper (Alqasa et al., 2022; Gronoos, 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Organisations exist because they have customers to service, as noted by Valdani (2009); therefore, bringing about high-quality treatment that leaves consumers happy is the key to achieving lasting advantage (Shemwell et al., 1998). The struggle for a competitive edge and customer loyalty revolves around quality service and customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction results from a customer's assessment of the value received in a business undertaking or interaction, where worth is equivalent to service performance in comparison to the value anticipated from transactions or connections with rival companies (Blanchard & Galloway, 1994; Heskett et al., 1990; Zeithaml et al., 1990). Assessing and understanding customers' expectations and being capable of fulfilling them is crucial for achieving consumer loyalty and satisfaction. Quicker and more efficient understanding and satisfaction of customers' expectations by industries results in more profitability than delayed understanding and fulfilment by industries (Song et al., 2022; Barsky & Nash, 2003).

Providing and maintaining client happiness is currently one of the most prominent issues facing managers in the hospitality industry. In the tourism sector, customers' need for high-quality commodities and services has become increasingly obvious to personnel (Yen & Su, 2004; Lam & Zhang, 1999). Customer satisfaction provides a framework for defining the strategic mission of the business, and guest interactions are a strategic advantage of the company (Bavik & Kuo, 2022; Gruen et al., 2000). Positive interactions in this situation can improve customer loyalty and profitability. Due to the strong relationship between service quality dimensions and customer levels of satisfaction, interminable and mutually beneficial relationships between consumers and hospitality and tourism businesses are becoming increasingly crucial (Choi & Chu, 2001), and they increase the likelihood of consumers returning to the same businesses. Tourism and hospitality service-providing enterprises, notably hotels, are continuously expanding their operations to boost the perceived quality for customers and the overall performance of their businesses to increase customer happiness and loyalty, which will lead to better interactions with each customer (Amoako et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2007). Relationship quality has a strikingly beneficial influence on the attitude of patrons: it boosts levels of customer loyalty and fosters good word-of-mouth (WOM) promotion (Kim et al., 2001).

In this paper, after reviewing the key publications on customer loyalty and satisfaction in the hotel industry, there is need for an examination of a real case (numerous hotels in EL, South Africa). The paper determines whether there is a meaningful relationship between the customer-oriented marketing approach used by administrations of these numerous EL hotels

and the consequential outcome regarding customer satisfaction. The paper uses semi-structured and uncontrolled consultations with administration and customers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), with the example of EL hotels being studied using the critical incident paradigm (Hayes, 2008). The research investigation uses interviewing techniques to collect data to assess the impact of a customer-oriented corporate strategy on guest satisfaction in EL hotels. The findings are reviewed to uncover any discrepancies between managers' expectations and actual performance. The review of the findings also includes the hotel's overarching performance and each provider's specific degree of guest satisfaction. The paper concludes by reviewing the findings and making suggestions for the hotel's handling of guest satisfaction in EL hotels.

Literature Review

Previously, tourism was frequently seen as the inevitable result of a region's rich natural and cultural heritage. According to this perspective, the function of tourism and hospitality businesses is restricted to providing services to tourists and cannot affect market needs. Zhou et al. (2022) contend that marketing initiatives should focus on emphasising the destination's environmental features to attract new consumers. The desire for greater standards from tourists has increased the competitiveness among tourism and hospitality service providers and brought to light how the quality of the services offered by the surrounding hotels affects a destination's appeal as a tourist attraction. According to numerous studies (Bastidas-Manzano et al., 2021; Opermann, 1998; Le Blanc et al., 1996; Stevens et al., 1995; Barsky & Labagh, 1992; Le Blanc, 1992), offering quality services and enhancing guest satisfaction are essential aspects bolstering the performances of businesses in the hospitality and tourism industries. Hotels with high-quality services will inevitably increase their profitability (Pereira et al., 2021; Oh & Parks, 1997). Independent hotels should be able to serve customers more effectively than their competitors in a competitive tourism and hospitality sector that provides standardised services (Choi & Chou, 2001).

Tourism and hospitality service providers must achieve maximum consumer satisfaction for the service offered to win clients' loyalty and outperform rivals. Numerous studies have examined guests' requirements and preferences even in the hotel industry (Zhou et al., 2022; Choi & Chou, 2001; McCleary et al., 1993; Rivers et al., 1991). A study by Wuest et al. (1996) found that guest satisfaction is affected by particular essential infrastructure and amenities provided by the hotel during the guests' hotel stay. Tidiness, pricing, placement, security, personalised service, physical attributes, facilities for leisure, quality service, compelling brand and prestige are recognised by guests as being crucial in deciding the image of the hotel, in turn influencing the level of guest satisfaction (Pavlova, 2020; McCleary et al., 1993; Ananth et al., 1992; Barsky & Labagh, 1992; Rivers et al., 1991; Atkinson, 1988; Cadotte & Turgeon, 1988; Knutson, 1988; Wilensky & Buttle, 1988).

Furthermore, according to a survey conducted by Barsky and Nash in 2006 covering the major hotel chains globally, the relevance of guest rewards programs for choice of where to lodge went from 32% to 34% between the years 2002 and 2005. While many tourists undoubtedly prioritise discovering new places, research has shown that a sizable proportion of customers exhibit considerable loyalty by returning to the same vacation destination year after year (Correia et al., 2015; Fyall et al., 2003; Oppermann, 1998).

Investigations on customer loyalty point to five different dimensions that influence returning to the same tourist destination time and time again: the eagerness to lessen the probability of getting an incorrect alternative destination, the probability of running into the same people again, the emotional attachment to a particular place; the ability to discover the place more thoroughly; and the desire to share the destination with others. Hotel operators must completely understand which service characteristics are often likely to affect guests' decision-making (Baek & Lee, 2021; Richard & Sundaram, 1993). Approaches to customer satisfaction can assist businesses in determining the key factors influencing consumers' purchasing experiences and post-purchase conduct, such as further purchases and positive marketing (including WOM publicity) (Choi & Chu, 2001; Pizam, 1994; Fornell, 1992; Halstead & Page, 1992; Knutson, 1988; Berkman & Gilson, 1986). A happy customer spreads good WOM about the business for free, more effectively, and more credible than traditional advertising (Kalinic et al., 2019; Villanueva et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2006; Tarn, 2005). The internet and social media also enhance the WOM effect (Shrafat et al., 2021; Dominici, 2009; Trusov et al., 2009) for hotels. The foundation for creating guest loyalty and, as a consequence, a long-term connection is guest satisfaction. This fosters customer loyalty and boosts the hotel's reputation. More so, building relationships with guests encourages business retention.

On the other hand, a dissatisfied consumer can threaten the company through reputational damage. Only 4 percent of dissatisfied consumers report their dissatisfaction to the company in writing, according to Cherubini's (1997) research, yet each dissatisfied customer who does not lodge an official complaint causes bad WOM that can affect up to 1000 other people. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the significance of particular qualities guests consider when choosing a hotel and to routinely measure the degree of guest satisfaction. The prosperity of the tourism and hospitality industry depends heavily on research on guest happiness, which converts into the evaluation of whether or not guests will recommend a hotel to other travellers or return to it themselves. Negative visitor reviews result from a hotel's failure to focus on the aspects guests value most, reducing the likelihood of repeat business.

Methodology

Knowing what guests think is vital for measuring guest satisfaction in the hotel industry. Each visitor has different perceptions of the hospitality services they receive, so it is crucial to understand their perceptions individually and collectively. Other important steps include

identifying guest expectations, demands, and queries, closing the gap between those expectations and the services provided, and managing the systemic undertakings of the business. The homogenous grouping represented by guest loyalty can be identified using behavioural and attitudinal factors. The study focuses on several hotels in East London, located on the Eastern Cape's coastline in South Africa. The study was conducted using a combination of desk and field research throughout the summer of 2019. A desk analysis was conducted first, then a survey was distributed to hotel management and guests of these various EL hotels, and finally, the data was cross-checked. Additionally, concurrent studying of the various hotel websites and the area to ensure the accuracy of the details given to clients was carried out; a questionnaire was administered to the city director to verify the findings of the interview; conversations were held with the management of the various EL hotels to confirm the existence of a customer-oriented mindset; and lastly, a questionnaire was handed out to 100 guests of the numerous hotels using the Critical Incident Approach (Hayes, 2008).

The Critical Incident Approach concentrates on getting feedback from clients regarding the products and services they have previously used. Customers and employees can both benefit from this strategy. Semi-structured conversations were conducted with visitors as part of the investigation. An interview protocol was created based on the desk research into the various hotel website and other marketing materials. A semi-structured conversation is a flexible interviewing technique that enables additional questions to be raised in response to the interviewee's responses. This interviewing methodology's versatility with questions allowed us to cast light on particular guest needs that the various hotel managers may have yet to be aware of.

The instances were then utilised to develop satisfaction factor categories based on words frequently appearing in incident statements. Then, these guest satisfaction metrics were used to identify essential guest quality needs. Using the Critical Incident Approach, there were 100 semi-structured interviews with guests, asking each to list five favourable and five unfavourable facets of the various EL hotels' overall service. The five favourable elements are the management, children's facilities, amount of services offered, family-friendly environment, and quality entertainment. The five drawbacks identified were holiday package costs, beach cleanliness, inadequate transport services in EL, concierge service, room cleanliness, and comfort. The surveys about the quality of each service were then delivered to the same target using semi-structured interviews. Fifty vocal phrasings that guests used to characterise services were categorised. With the help of the data amassed during the interviews, the degree of client satisfaction for each service rendered was calculated. The outcomes of the various EL hotel management's impressions of the quality of services were then compared with those of the guests for each service provided by the other numerous EL hotels to confirm the existence of a genuine guest-orientated attitude on the part of the hotel management.

Analysis and Results

Unstructured interviews were conducted with the various management, and it became clear that households are the target market for the various EL hotels. The hotel management views families as the best demographic to approach since they are more understanding of guest loyalty programs. With 20% of visitors who have previously spent their vacations there, the hotels have a high proportion of return business. The hotels give numerous opportunities for guests to visit the major tourist destinations in EL, particularly during the summer and national holidays. The hotels hosted roughly 35,000 visitors in 2019. Desk research revealed that the hotel company's vision directly relates to guest satisfaction. Desk research and unstructured interviews with the various hotel management revealed that management actively promoted and regulated guest loyalty rewards programs, specifically the director of the marketing department. Marketing of advertising materials via travel companies, experiential excursions where local tour companies, reporters, and influencers were asked to visit the various hotels, websites and television shows describing the hotels, involvement in festivals, and marketing communication were the main routes of publicity. The services that were investigated through semi-structured interviews were basic service opinion, activity flow, receiving by front-desk staff, suite quality, food service, tours and excursions service, coastal service, and leisure. Interviewees were requested to express five favourable and five unfavourable aspects of the overall service impression, and they had a limit of one to two sentences per question for each topic about a particular service.

The semi-structured interviews revealed an overarching high degree of guest satisfaction. The hotels' main strong points were the dining facilities, recreational options, and clubs; the beaches and rooms were their weak points. Using the Customer Satisfaction Convergence Matrix, findings about how the different hotel managers perceive the level of service they provide with those of the guests were compared (Cuomo, 2000). The study indicates that the various EL hotel managements have a realistic perspective of the degree of guest satisfaction because, in the scenario studied, both management and customers had an overall good perception.

Conclusions

The study's qualitative examination of the numerous hotels in EL demonstrates that the degree of guest satisfaction is high when both the overall analysis and the individual services are taken into account. In the entertainment and restaurant industries, human resource management proved remarkably effective. When the various hotel management were questioned about the findings, it became clear that they did not share the study's findings about the inadequacies in beach services and room services. Although the different hotels' design quality significantly impacts the latter services, substantial efforts to customise them

could result in some improvement. This finding shows a contrast to the suggestion by Zhou et al. (2022) that marketing initiatives should focus on emphasising the destination's environmental features to attract new consumers. There is a need for beach services to be upgraded and marketed so as to attract new customers.

The uniformity of services, which hinders the potential to tailor the offers to particular guest demands, is generally the main problem preventing the numerous EL hotels from achieving better guest satisfaction. It was clear from the unstructured interviews with the managers of the several hotels that the companies had employed "push" promotional strategies. This finding is consistent with the findings of authors such as Pavlova (2020); McCleary et al. (1993); Ananth et al. (1992); Barsky and Labagh (1992) that point out the need for personalised customer service in hotels to enhance guest satisfaction. However, this study found that the decision to supply tourist services was made by management, not in consultation with visitors or considering their individual needs. Therefore, the services offered by EL hotels need to be differentiated based on guest satisfaction.

A structured Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system needs to be fixed in the guest satisfaction management systems of the numerous EL hotels. Even if there is a client database, the data collected could be more organised, making it easier for management to locate and utilise the information for monetisation strategies. This finding aligns with the argument by Baek and Lee (2021) as well as Richard and Sundaram (1993) that hotel operators must completely understand which service characteristics are often likely to affect guests' decision-making. The various managements need to gain knowledge of what rivals are doing because there is no comparative data on guest satisfaction levels. The numerous hotels in EL have a strong prospect of satisfying guests and competing in the tourism and hospitality sectors; however, to raise their calibre for guest satisfaction, the various hotel managements must implement newer, more sophisticated CRM techniques. Decision-making methods about the most critical factors affecting guest satisfaction should also consider an unstructured customer database, financial reporting, and expenditure data. The fundamental limitation of this study was that it was limited to only EL hotels and no other hotels in the Eastern Cape, even though the specific case of EL hotels was selected because it is illustrative of other comparable companies in the region. In the coming years, the researcher intends to do additional qualitative sampling methods on different hotels in the Eastern Cape and compare the findings to have a broader perspective on guest satisfaction in South African hotels.

Resources

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