

Strategies for Sustainable Quality Service Delivery in Hotels in Owerri

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Abstract

This study sought to determine strategies for sustainable quality service delivery in hotels in Owerri. Two research questions guided the study. The study population comprised all customers of registered hotels. It is an infinite population. The researcher used Cochran (1977) formula for determining sample size for an infinite population, and it gave a sample size of 384. A structured questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection which was validated by academics in Hospitality Management and Tourism, and Marketing. Crombach Alpha Coefficient of 0.73 was obtained confirming the usability of the instrument. Convenient sampling technique was adopted for data collection, which was analyzed using frequency, mean, and standard deviation. Findings revealed that the level of quality service delivery in the hotels studied was very poor as shown by the clustered mean. Similarly, the respondents agreed on specific strategies such as marketing research and anticipation of guest needs, employee empowerment, and training, among others for improving quality service delivery in hotels in the study area. Given the findings of the study, recommendations were made to the effect that hotel operations are encouraged to carry out periodic service quality assessment to determine customer service quality perceptions and also develop sustainable feedback mechanisms such as comment cards and other online interactive platforms that can facilitate constant updates on customer needs and wants.

Keywords: Service, Quality, Improvement, Hotels, Sustainability

Introduction

The hotel industry is experiencing increased competitive pressures as a consequence of the combined effects of the worldwide economic and technological advancement, and globalization. The heightened competitive atmosphere in hotel operations has modified the service delivery ethos and intensified the need for research on service quality management that has the most significant strategic differentiation potential for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. Furthermore, the increasingly knowledgeable and discerning guests are more eager than ever before to switch their allegiance to other companies perceived as providers of quality products and services (O'Neil 2001). As a result of competitive pressure, service quality management has emerged as a fundamental organizational strategy for survival. This provides the impetus and justification for current investment in service quality improvement initiatives (Hellstand, 2010).

Service quality touches on all aspects of hotel operations including but not limited to; design and layout, menu planning, purchasing,

furnishing, production and processing, packaging and delivery. Service quality has therefore emerged as one concept that has aroused increased interest both in the business world and in the academia. This has become increasingly in the hospitality sector where the goods and services offered are strikingly the same, thereby making service quality the only differentiating factor (Hellstand, 2010). Some of the characteristics of successful business organizations include presentation and constant improvement of qualitative services as well as formulation and implementation of new strategies that will aid its progression, and meet the expectations of customers (Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler, 2009); Bello and Majebi, 2018. Quality itself is conformance to specification, which would mean that positive quality is achieved when a product/service specific quality meets or exceeds preset standards or promises (Ekinici and Sirakaya, 2004). Service quality assessment is dependent on consumer needs and expectations, and it remains indispensable in the marketing of services.

The choice of hotels has become an issue among actual and potential lodgers on account of the premium they place on service quality. Since there are many hotels in the market providing the same or similar services, it is essential not only to attract, but also to keep the customer (Presbury, Fitzgerald, and Chapman, 2005). To maintain the position held and remain competitive in the future, quality services to retain old customers, and attract new customers need to be provided.

With an increasing dynamism and competitive nature of the business environment, it has become imperative for hotel organizations to pay attention to service quality and its improvement cues. Studies have shown that customer satisfaction, and loyalty are derivatives of service quality (Kamdampully and Hu, 2007; Chang, 2008, Belo, 2017). Thus, achieving customer satisfaction and loyalty can only come through continuous and sustained improvement in quality service delivery. The satisfaction and loyalty of customers have both direct and indirect impacts on the hotel industry (Kandampully and Hu, 2007). The loyalty of existing customers is paramount, given that the attraction of new customers is much more expensive than the retention of existing ones (Wong and Sohal, 2002; Jasinskis, Reklaitiene, and Svagzdiene, 2013; Balciunas, Jasinskis, and Koisoava, 2014; Dabija, Dinu, Tăchiciu, and Pop, 2014).

Some researchers have examined the quality of services offered in the hotel industry vis-a-vis the relative importance of various attributes to customers. Such attributes act as determinant factors for the hotel selection and preference and customers' judgment upon service quality (Nadiri and Hussain, 2005). These studies have however concentrated on developed economies of the world; Europe, America, and Asia. In Nigeria, there is

limited documented evidence (Belo, 2017) of such a study, particularly in hotel operations. This becomes a gap.

Similarly, research findings have shown for instance that customer characteristics might influence service quality perception (Balciunas et al., 2014; Dabija et al., 2014). This means that customer characteristics might be defined or influenced by geographical location. Therefore, it is in an attempt to narrow these gaps that this study is carried out to determine strategies for optimizing service quality in hotel operations in Owerri, Imo State.

Concept of Service Quality

A service is an economic activity that creates value and provides benefits for customers at specific times and places by bringing about the desired change in or on behalf of the recipient of the service. Although the process may be tied to a physical product, the performance is transitory, often intangible and does not usually result in ownership of any of the factors of production (Lovelock and Wright, 2005). However, being able to satisfy given needs reflects the value (or quality) of the product or service to the customer, including the economic cost, safety, reliability, and maintainability. Therefore, a customer's evaluation of service quality and the resulting level of satisfaction are perceived to affect bottom line measures of business success (Kofi, Zakari and Soali, 2013).

Quality is a strategic element of global management which determines the services competitiveness both domestically and internationally (Stanciu 2007). One of the most concise significance of "quality" is the ability to use it since it consists of those features that meet consumers' needs (Kofi et al., 2013). Quality means fitness for purpose or lack of any deficiencies.

Regarding services, quality usually involves a comparison between the provided service and the one expected by the consumers (Ioncica 2006). When the expectations are met, be they objective or subjective, they will favorably appreciate the service quality. It is a consumer's overall impression of relative inferiority and superiority of the organization and its services. Parasuraman (2000) presented a definition of service quality as "the degree of discrepancy between customers' normative expectation of the service and their perception of the service performance". Service quality has become a distinct and important aspect of the product and service offering, (Caruana 2002). According to Mohammad, and Alhamadani (2011), service quality is the lifeblood of every business. Thus, the attainment of quality in products and services has become an issue of concern of the 21st century. Customers judge service quality relative to what they want by comparing their

perceptions of service experiences with their expectations of what the service performance should be.

Companies have found that to increase profits and market share; they should pay much attention to service quality. Many researchers suggest that customers assess service quality by comparing what they feel a seller should offer against the seller's actual service performance (Makeeva, 2010). The search for service quality is with no doubt the most critical consumer trend of the new era, as consumers now are demanding for higher quality in products and services than ever before. Quality has been recognized as a strategic tool for attaining efficiency and business performance. Service quality is therefore considered as the extent to which the needs or expectations of the customers are met in a service encounter. Thus, it is predicted that customers will judge quality as 'low' if performance does not meet their expectations and as 'high' when performance meets or exceeds expectations (Suman and Garg, 2012).

The association between service performance and service quality has a hugely important role to play in management and marketing for service operations such as hotels and restaurants (Heskett and Sasser 2010). Further to this, service quality has been found to relate to behavioral outcomes, especially in the form of word-of-mouth, complaint, recommendation and switching cost (Al-Rousan, Ramzi, and Mohamed, 2010). Kumar (2008) argued that service quality is contributed by not only the service itself but also the production process, the time of production, the employee's behavior to the customers, the delivery process and the waiting time for accepting service. With the delivering of final service, both the company size and the operational procedure have a significant contribution to the service quality measurement.

Dimensions of Service Quality

Service quality consists of five aspects such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Reliability is considered the vital core of service quality. Other dimensions will matter to customers only if a service is reliable because they cannot compensate for unreliable service delivery (Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml, 1988). The five service quality dimensions are explained thus:

1. **Reliability:** Consists of accurate fulfillment; accurate record; accurate billing; accurate calculation of commissions; keeping services promise, (Saghier and Nathan 2013). This depends on handling customer service problems; performing services right the first time and maintaining the error-free record.
2. **Tangibles:** is seen as the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and written materials. Ananth, Ramesh, and

Prabaharan, (2011) referred to tangibles in their study of private sector banks as modern looking equipment, physical facility, employees appearance, and visually appealing materials. A company should want all their customers to get a uniquely positive and never forgotten first-hand impression that would make them more likely to return in the future, (Delgado- Ballester, 2004).

3. **Responsiveness:** refers to the willingness of the company to help its customers by providing them with good, quality and fast service, (Umesh, 2014). Responsiveness is also seen as the willingness and the readiness of employees to provide service, and also involves timeliness of service.
4. **Assurance:** is seen as knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. If the customers are not comfortable with the employees, there are rather large chance that the customer will not return to do further business with the company, (Delgado-Ballester, 2004).
5. **Empathy:** refers to how the company cares and gives individualized attention to their customers, to make the customers feel extra-valued and special, (Umesh, 2014). Delgado- Ballester (2004), maintains that if the customers feel they get individualized and quality attention there is a huge chance that they will return to the company and do business there again.

Service Quality and Hotel Operations

The hotel provides facilities for the transaction of business, for meetings and conferences, and recreation and entertainment. Quality service delivery in hotel operations includes technical quality which reflects on the 'what' of service quality and functional or process quality which reflects on the 'how' of service quality (Vitkiene, 2004). Kinderis, Zalys, and Zaliene (2011) notice that technical quality is what the customers receive during their stay in the hotel. There is no one opinion in which technical or functional quality is more important (Kinderis et al. 2011).

Vengriene (2006), noted that the customer appreciates the professionalism and skill of hotels' employees. However, some hotel experts suggest taking into account what is more appreciated by a customer (Kinderis et al., 2011). Since customers participate in the delivery and consumption of services, they interact closely with various service aspects in organizations. This knowledge gives them the opportunity to assess critically the services provided by organizations. Hence, excellent service quality plays a critical role in adding value to the overall service experience (Shahin and Debestani, 2010).

Disconfirmation theory argues that satisfaction is related to the size and direction of the disconfirmation experience that occurs as a result of comparing service performance against expectations (Ekinici and Sirakaya, (2004). Szymanski and Henard in (Petrick, 2004) found in the meta-analysis that the disconfirmation paradigm is the best predictor of customer satisfaction. Ekinici and Sirakaya (2004) cited Oliver's updated definition of the disconfirmation theory, which states that "satisfaction is the guest's fulfillment response. Belic, Cerovic and Dragicevic (2011) revealed that inadequate interior and exterior design, equipment of premises and lack of additional programme constituted the key challenge in spa hotels. They concluded that building and structuring of objects in accordance with modern guest requirements would lead to longer tourist season and better positioning of spa hotels in the market. Similarly, Cairncross, Wilde, and Hutchinson, (2008), in their work on Training and service quality in regional Australian restaurant; found that the respondents identified training as a way in which to achieve professionalism, improve the levels of service quality, improve consistency and maintain a standard.

The main objective of the study is to determine strategies for service quality improvement in hotels in Owerri, Imo State. Specifically, the study sought to determine: 1. Service quality dimensions that influence service quality assessment of hotels in the study area and 2. Service quality improvement tools for hotels in the study area.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design and was carried out in Owerri, the capital of Imo State. The choice of this area of study became necessary on account of the numerous hotel organizations that operate in the area.

Population and Sample for the Study

The customers of registered hotels in Owerri formed the population for the study. The population is an infinite one. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formular for estimating sample size for an infinite population cited in Hirut (2015) which gave three hundred and eighty-four (384) as sample size. For this study, the hotels in Owerri were grouped into three distinct clusters, with five (5) hotels in each cluster (based on the capacity of the hotel), and with one hundred and sixteen (116) copies of the questionnaire targeted at each cluster. A convenience sampling technique was adopted for the study, as only customers that were accessible during the study were used. Out of the three hundred and eighty-four copies

of a questionnaire distributed, only 300 copies were found to be usable for the study.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data was generated through the use of a well-structured questionnaire which was validated by three academics in Hospitality and Tourism Management discipline. The instrument used a five (5) point Likert scale of strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Three research assistants were used for the study.

Data Analysis Technique

Data generated were analyzed using mean, and standard deviation and the mean was computed by assigning values to the Likert scale. The decision rule was 2.5; meaning that any mean value below 2.5 was regarded as rejected while any mean value above 2.5 was regarded as accepted.

Findings

Service quality dimensions that influence service quality assessment in hotels in the study area.

Table 1: Mean responses of guests on service quality dimensions that influence service quality assessment in hotels in the study area.

S/N	ITEM	\bar{X}	SD	REMARK
Tangibles				
1.	The hotel has furniture that are modern and comfortable	2.94	0.96	Agreed
2.	The interior decoration of the hotel is quite appealing	2.90	0.92	Agreed
3.	The employee appearance is neat	2.78	0.84	Agreed
4.	The hotel facilities are up to date	1.95	0.82	Disagreed
5.	The hotel is clean	2.00	0.81	Disagreed
6.	Facilities and services are readily available for customers use 24 hours.	1.84	0.96	Disagreed
Reliability				
7.	The hotel management keeps accurate records	1.95	0.89	Disagreed
8.	The hotel is committed to delivering promised service	1.90	0.89	Disagreed
9.	Staff offer prompt service	1.91	0.89	Disagreed
10.	The hotel staff are dependable	2.71	0.92	Agreed
11.	The staff are concerned with problem-solving	1.95	0.89	Disagreed
Responsiveness				
12.	The employees are courteous	2.54	0.94	Agreed
13.	The employees give special attention	1.98	0.94	Disagreed
14.	The employees adopt services to meet guest needs	1.97	0.89	Disagreed

15.	The staff are willing to help guest	2.99	0.82	Agreed
Assurance				
16.	The hotel staff are polite	3.00	1.11	Agreed
17.	The staff impact confidence on the guests	1.82	0.93	Disagreed
18.	The staff are friendly	2.98	0.85	Agreed
19.	The staff are trustworthy	2.13	0.95	Disagreed
20.	The guests feel safe when dealing with the staff	2.01	0.88	Disagreed
Empathy				
21.	The staff give individualized attention to guests	1.86	0.95	Disagreed
22.	Staff give personalized services to their guests	1.95	0.93	Disagreed
23.	Staff know guest needs	2.01	0.97	Disagreed
24.	Staff have guests best interest at heart	2.32	0.98	Disagreed
TOTAL:		54.39	21.81	Clustered mean 2.27

Source: Field survey, 2017.

N=Number of guests; 300, \bar{X} = Mean response of guests, **SD** = Standard Deviation.

The table above shows that the respondents did not agree on some of the items tested. The analysis revealed that only three items tested under Tangibles, one under Reliability, two under Responsiveness, and two under Assurance, were accepted, while none was accepted under Empathy. Tools used for service quality improvement in hotels in the study area.

Table 2: Mean responses on the tools for service quality improvement.

S/N	ITEM	X	SD	REMARK
1.	Marketing research and anticipation of guest needs	3.12	0.97	Agreed
2.	Employment of potential self-motivated, enthusiastic people	2.89	0.89	Agreed
3.	Employee empowerment and training	2.88	0.81	Agreed
4.	Giving individualized attention to the customers' complaints and expectation	3.00	1.09	Agreed
5.	Printing comment cards and providing suggestion box	2.99	0.93	Agreed
6.	Proper investment of time and resources by hotel operators in determining guests' needs	2.97	0.89	Agreed
7.	Regular facility maintenance activities	2.85	0.94	Agreed
8.	Handling guest complains and suggestions quickly	2.94	0.84	Agreed
9.	Undertaking regular survey research activities to keep track of customer satisfaction level	2.65	0.87	Agreed
10.	Customers' service quality expectations and perceptions should always be the main concern of the hotel	2.79	0.96	Agreed
11.	Having guest-centric ideology	2.80	0.86	Agreed
	Clustered mean	2.90		
Total		31.88	10.05	

Source: Field survey, 2017.

N= Number of guests; 300, \bar{X} = Mean response of guests, **SD** = Standard Deviation.

Table 2. Above shows that the respondents accepted all the items treated as tools for improving service quality delivery in hotels as all items had mean scores of above 2.5.

Discussion of Findings

The result of the clustered mean (\bar{X} 2.27), on dimensions of service quality, revealed that the hotels studied are not doing enough regarding service quality improvement and thus were rated low by the respondents. Kotler and Armstrong (2010) maintain that service quality remains what the customer says it is. Therefore, being able to satisfy given needs reflects the value (or quality) of the product or service to the customer, including the economic value, safety, reliability, and maintainability (Kofi et al., 2013).

A similar view was canvassed by Suman and Garg (2012); Umesh (2014), that customers will judge quality as low when it falls short of their expectation and high when performance meets or exceeds their expectations. Further to this, Heskett and Sasser (2010) found that service quality is contributed by not only the meals, beverages, and beds, but also the production process, the time of production, employees' behaviour towards the customers, the delivery process and the waiting time for accepting service. Similarly, Blessic et al. (2011) found that building and structuring of objects by modern guest requirements in Spa hotels would lead to longer tourist season and better positioning of Spa hotels in the market.

The clustered mean for service quality improvement tools gave \bar{X} = 2.90. Therefore guests accepted the various tools for improving service quality. This corroborates Chang (2008) who opined that the concept of service quality should be generally approached from the customer's point of view because customers may have different values, different grounds of assessment, and different circumstances. Further to this, Kinderis et al., (2011), maintain that taking into consideration what is more appreciated by customers is key to meeting customer expectations. This has become necessary since customers participate in the delivery and consumption of services, and interact closely with various service aspects in organizations. This knowledge gives them the opportunity to assess the services critically as being provided by service organizations.

Conclusion

The findings indicated that service quality was low in the hotels studied. Consequently, the following recommendations became pertinent.

1. Hotel operations are encouraged to carry out periodic service quality assessment to determine customer service quality perceptions.
2. Hotels should develop a sustainable feedback mechanism that can facilitate constant updates on customer needs and wants such as comment cards and other online interactive platforms.
3. Hotels should view service quality as a continuous process and not a one-off exercise so that every effort should be geared towards total quality management.

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