

Customer Service and Hospitality Industry in Nsukka Urban

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Abstract

A country's hospitality industry is more or less a window into the country's "soul" or image. Every country, including Nigeria, wants to uphold a good image of itself especially to outsiders. The state of Nigeria's hospitality industry, according to hotel users appears to fall short of expectations. Part of the reason for this comes from poor customer service, which is the life line of any hospitality business especially hotels. This study examines user-satisfaction of hospitality services in Nsukka urban. The survey design method was used to collect data from a hundred persons, who have in one way or the other used hospitality services in Nsukka urban. Research results reveal that majority of the respondents believe that customer service is poor particularly with respect to cordiality, slow service delivery, poor communication skills, among others, and that, management is mainly to blame in this regard. The study recommends, among other things, that management should make the measurement of quality of service and feedback from customers a basic part of everyone's performance indicator. Customer relations are critical to the success of any hotel business and should be taken very seriously by hotel management to ensure quality and excellence in Nigeria's hospitality industry.

Introduction

Man requires to communicate as the basic essence of survival. It is impossible for an individual to survive in the business industry without proper communication. "Communication is an aid used in everyday life, be it personal or business. In the business world, good communication is important for the daily operation of the company, [as it can] affect sales and profitability. Without good business communication, the internal and external structure of a business can face numerous challenges that can ultimately lead to its demise" (Lorette, 2014). Efficient communication is therefore a must for any business. "When communication lines are open between a business and its customers, it can directly affect the sales of the business. When a business effectively communicates to its prospective customers and customers how its products and services can benefit them, it converts prospective visitors into actual customers. Good communication ultimately boosts the bottom

line of a business", which is to make profit and ultimately make it to continue to stay in business (Lorette, 2014). The need for effective communication in the tourism industry has been echoed in 'Ask anything' (2014), which asserted that "Communication is vital to the success of tourism businesses since it is only through the effective use of communication that tourism marketers can offer to customers tangible cues about those intangible experiences. Also, while communication is an essential component in the conduct of any service business, it has got an overarching role in tourism."

Indeed, good communication methods can lead to success, bad communication can lead to lack of patronage by intending customers subsequently resulting in failure. This lends credence to the assertion by Klazema (2014) that "No business would succeed without customers, and every company exists to serve them." This notion is supported by Sugandhi (2002) when he noted that "Any business begins and ends with the customer." Communicating with customers is every bit as important as communication within the workplace. It is no wonder therefore that "...service organizations are shifting their focus from 'transactional exchange' to 'relational exchange' for developing mutually satisfying relationship with customers. Serving the customers, in true sense, is the need of the hour as the customer was, is and will remain the central focus of all organizational activities" (Enyioko and Onwusoro, 2014). Today, many organizations have found the need to establish customer relations unit to ensure that the desires of their customers are adequately addressed.

These units are sometimes subsumed under Public Relations or external relations departments by some organisations. Their main interests revolve around maintaining and servicing of customers. Any business benefits from good customer relations. "Customer relations, or customer service, refers to the way a business communicates and interacts with the public to gain and retain customers" (Demand media, 2014). Customer relations is key to understanding consumer motivation. Organizations and companies may provide excellent service to their customers: through sending them information or messages they need to make them aware of the company and the services being offered, which in turn boosts the sales of the company; or by handling customer complaints promptly and effectively and also through free product or service discount offer.

In the hospitality industry, good customer relations is pivotal to its success. The impression of customers upon their visit to any hospitality outfit, the way they were received by the front officers, and

the overall attitude of staff all through their stay, are critical to the success of the business. Consequently, there is need to reposition Nigeria's hospitality industry so as to portray a good image of the country both from within and without. These would enable them explore and exploit the favourable opportunities that are available to the industry. Three main reasons account for these vintage position.

1. Current democratic dispensation in the country which encourages both foreign and local travellers.
2. Government's favorable policy namely, attraction of foreign investment and encouragement of local entrepreneurs to spur the growth in the industry.
3. Enabling international environment particularly expansion of international trade and manufacturing world which encourage foreign travel. The consequence of the above is increased demand for the accommodation trade.

Although the above scenario appears favourable and enticing, many hotel users have complained and continue to complain about poor service delivery in Nigeria. In her article titled "Courtesy and the Nigerian Hospitality Industry" Funke Adetutu (2010), argued that "customers are not placed at the core of service provision... there are cases where a customer walks into a hotel and the receptionist promptly asks "yes what do you want?" or "can I help you?" in a very patronizing yet rude tone suggesting the customer is there at the wrong time.

Studies have revealed that a larger percentage of customers that visit Nigerian hotels are dissatisfied with the quality of service they receive. There have been complaints about the non-chalant and unwelcoming attitude of the customer service staff/employees. As Akparata (2011) puts it ... some receptionists see nothing wrong in chewing bubble gum while attending to customers.... Some other do not even show decorum in the way they speak to customers. The implication is that staff lack proper orientation and training that are required to enhance good customer relations in the industry. The above and other emerging issues have posed and continued to pose problems resulting in diminished image for the industry and country at large, particularly if we remember that the image of the country is mirrored by the kind of treatment they receive in the hotels. This becomes pertinent when it is realized that hotels constitute a second home, sometimes referred to as home away from home, for visitors. They also expect comfort, admiration, hospitality and care. Any denial of these attributes creates an ugly image and impression before the customers. What then must be done by hospitality industry to redress the above issues? It is in attempt

to answer these questions that this study has been conceived. The essential aim is to determine the state of customer satisfaction among users of hotels in Nsukka with the object of finding the way forward.

Public Relations in the Hospitality Industry

For any business or organization to excel in the competitive market, the right image must be portrayed and in the case of hotels, excellence in customer service is of utmost importance. This can be best achieved by taking positive steps to make themselves friends of their various publics, hence the need for Public Relations (PR). According to Flynn, Gregory and Valin (2008) PR "is the strategic management of relationships, between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest". It "informs, creates ideas, persuades people and makes things happen. It establishes and maintains mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics" (The Professional Communicators coach, 2007). PR essentially entails doing things people like and doing them the ways they like them.

PR is at the core of hospitality industry, and as Jennifer Rodrigues (2009) puts it, PR is "... a highly effective tool for generating awareness and visibility for an individual property, hotel chain or brand. It can deliver a message of credibility that no advertising programme comes close to. Public relations transcends the mere distribution of press releases, but entails at the same time, telling a story- a compelling story- that will generate genuine interest and permeate the consciousness of potential guests, gain recognition and mitigate negative attention. It also entails defining who and what a hotel is, and presenting such messages to the public.

PR and Communications are so important and critical in overall hotel operations that Didi Lutz (2014), an internationally acclaimed hospitality public relations professional, observed amongst other issues that it is the responsibility of PR professionals to create hotel's messages and filter them to potential guests.... Hence, PR is expected to shape events into newsworthy items so as to attract editors to write about them and create photo opportunities for the hotel.

The hospitality industry can only maintain a positive image with effective, continuously updated and adapted PR. This brings the issue of training and retraining by individual hotels to the fore; especially when it is realized that there are various hotels to choose from and most of them offer similar prices and accommodations especially in Nsukka. What

makes the difference in the customers' experience is the personalized services that are rendered. Ned Benderson (www.ezinearticles.com) proposed that the management of any hotel organization/business should beware not to make assumptions of what the employee knows and shouldn't leave things open to interpretation. There must be an orientation for every employee hired to make sure they have the right idea about what is expected of them so as to guide as they discharge their responsibilities.

Customer Service in Hotel Business

Strong customer service is a valuable asset especially in today's high-tech oriented, increasingly impersonal business world. The way employees communicate can make or break a company (Hotel Mule, 2010). However, poor customer service in Nigeria appears to be what most hotels have in common. A number of times, customers could be kept waiting and unattended to, while the receptionist is on the phone or doing some other things else. There are situations where the customers is completely ignored or even yelled (shouted) at if he/she happens to demand attention as his/her right.

The above scenario only portends doom for any establishment. Researches have shown that people that have had positive experience with a company's customer service department will likely tell two or three others about their experience. But a person who had a bad customer service experience will likely tell between nine and 20 people. It is therefore pertinent that hotels and restaurants and indeed every hospitality service provider sustain customer happiness and satisfaction through efficient and people-friendly customer relations. It has been argued that satisfied customers are the bedrock of any successful organization. They provide the pedestal for "growth, enhance profitability, fight out competition and carve a niche in the market place" (Enyioko and Onwusoro, 2014).

In the hospitality industry, services "MUST exceed expectations and customer needs, since in the words of Orilio (2013) "service is the most important thing a company has to sell." He noted that although "service is elusive and intangible... it is the life' blood of the [hospitality] industry... [and] truly makes the difference when two businesses have the same product". Today, customers' expectations transcend the mere provision of the product on offer, but also entail all the additional elements of service that they receive including, greetings at entry points, refund for faulty product that they have paid for and help that they receive when they have a complaint. "It is difficult to attract customers,

and a key aspect of customer relations is retaining a loyal base of customers who keep coming back to the company" (Demand media, 2014).

Tolani Adejo, an etiquette coach in a chat with Mazi Binnaisa of *Next* magazine (Aug 3rd 2010) observed that customer service and service quality is cultural to some extent, "so you cannot have the same service you have in the United States in Nigeria or elsewhere". She explains that in the United Kingdom (UK), swiftness is more appreciated than the fake smile common in the United States. Relating this to Nigeria one can understand why customers tolerate lackadaisical services; being saucy and rude appear to get you swifter service than when you are polite.

Bayo Ogunnaike also in a chat with *Next* magazine believes that it is simply a joke to spend so much money advertising in Nigeria if simple politeness is not invested in. He said that the hospitality sector should combine gigantic projects such as carnivals from the tourism sector, with simpler, more sustainable aspects of hospitality which involves training on customer service. According to him "no one will return to an establishment where they are treated badly, unless they have no choice, which is often the case in Nigeria. Nigerians are so into the "the devil I know is better than the Angel I don't know" concept which is why customers keep returning to a hotel organization no matter the type of service they receive because it is familiar to them. A lovely hotel with marble floors shouldn't be what will bring customers back because everyone now has a marble floor; it should be the courtesy of the staff and quickness of service.

As competition becomes keener, hotels are daily coming out with new tricks to stay ahead of competitors. While some provide complimentary breakfast, others provide free internet service, cosmetic bags which include toothbrush, soap, hand cream etc; hotel owners invest so much in facilities, But they hardly invest in their workers. Many members of their staff are not only untrained and inexperienced; they are also impatient and sometimes abusive.

Research Method

The design for this study is a descriptive survey aimed at examining the state of customer satisfaction among users of hotels in Nsukka. The survey research method was used because the nature of the study demands the opinion of people. All adults-male, female, students and workers- resident in Nsukka, temporarily or permanently, constitute the population of this study. Using purposive sampling technique, a sample size of 100 respondents was drawn from the entire population, to elicit

information on the subject. The research subjects are those who have visited hotels in Nsukka, in the past for one reason or the other. The results were analysed with simple summary statistics.

Results

Research results reveal that of the respondents who have visited hotels in Nsukka, with 61.3% indicated that services rendered were poor, 20% noted that they were fair, while 16% indicated that the services were good. However, only 2.7% indicated that service rendered were excellent. This is graphically represented in the table below.

Table 1: What kind of service did you receive in the hotel on your first visit?

Response	No of respondents	Percentage
Excellent	2	2.7
Good	15	16
Fair	19	20
Poor	58	61.3
Total	94	100

A follow up question was asked in order to find out if the respondents continued using the hotels despite the low rating and why. The responses are presented in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Did you make a repeat visit to the hotel?

Response	No of respondents	Percentage
Yes	53	56
No	41	44
Total	94	100

Fifty six (56%) of respondents indicated that they continued to use the hotels while 44% claimed that they did not go back to the same hotel.

Table 3: Why the Repeat Visit?

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage
The staff are friendly	8	16
I am familiar with the envi	11	20
Have no alternative	34	64

Total	53	100
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Majority of the respondents (64%) who made repeat visits to the hotels, noted that they did so because they had no alternatives, 20% noted that they did so because they were familiar with the hotel environment while, 16% claimed that the hotel staff were friendly.

Table 4: From your experience, how would you rate customer service in Nigeria's hotel industry?

Response	No of respondents	Percentage
Very high	0	0
High	21	22.3
Moderate	30	31.7
Low	43	45.7
Total	94	100

Overall, the respondents (45.7%) rated customer service in Nigeria's hotel industry lowly. Nevertheless 31.7% rated them moderately while 22.3% rated their service highly.

Discussion

An analysis of the quality of service in the study domain shows that it is generally poor. Staff attitude constitute the main impediment to the quality of service rendered, followed by poor supply of quality facilities. While some respondents complained about being ignored and not welcomed, others claimed that they were uncomfortable in the hotel because of inadequate power supply. The above view has been echoed in Nairaland Forum (2014) when it noted that it has however been proven from facts and experience that Nigerian employees tend to be very rude to customers, especially when they are perceived as having no money. Furthermore, some hotel staff attend to customers as if they are doing the person a favour and also expect the customer to personally motivate them before they can serve him/her better.

Given the above responses, we sought to know if respondents patronized the hotels after their initial encounters. A simple majority claimed that they made repeat visits inspite of the poor service. A number of reasons were advanced to explain this development. First the respondents claimed that they had no option given the dearth of hotels in the area. Second, some have become so familiar with the hotel and environment that they patronise them irrespective of the quality of

service. Thirdly, some claimed they have made friends with the staff of the hotel and therefore quality of service has become more or less a non-issue. It would appear that some other considerations may have informed the decision of respondents to pay repeat visits regardless of quality of service. Among them are:

1. Security and safety of the hotels and their adjoining environment.
2. Easy movement to and fro, which may be as a result of good location of the hotels.
3. Proximity of the hotels to customers' points of business/business destinations and
4. Financial considerations including room rates and transport fare charges.

Given the above scenario, we sought to rate customer service in the study area in 4-dimensional scales- very high, high, moderate and low. Majority claimed that it is low. Nairaland (2012) gave a graphic picture of some factors / issues that account for poor customer service in Nigeria as follows:

1. Lack of knowledgeable and well trained customer service personnel;
2. Lack of orientation/ on the job training;
3. Poor remuneration and the consequent low level of commitment and;
4. Rudeness and poor attitude to work.

Drawing from the above, one may ask if hotels in Nsukka have Customer Service departments. Secondly what kind of personnel man the departments? Thirdly, are they adequately trained? Finally, do they have a sense of customer service? On the spot assessment of many hotels in Nsukka show that they generally lack Customer service departments and consequently adequately trained personnel that should manage the department(s). It is also observed that many hotels use untrained persons, sometimes children of the proprietors who are awaiting results for admission into tertiary institutions. Therefore, customer service is either a secondary consideration or may not have even been considered at all by the proprietors of many hotels in the study area. Furthermore, the lack of star hotels in Nsukka may account in part, for this development.

Recommendations

1. There is need for trained staff on customer relations bit in the hotels.

2.Specialized department with people trained in Public Relations should be established.

3.Hotels should give their staff good orientation on employment to direct them.

4.There should be regular short (refresher) courses to inculcate in staff the culture of customer service.

5.Good remuneration is essential to encourage commitment.

6.There should be promotion of good work ethics in general.

Finally staff promotion and appraisal should be guided by their competence, performance and amiable customer relations, the last of which may be measured with customer feedback.

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