Customer Perceptions on Service Quality of Front Office Staff at Hotel

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ABSTRACT   *All of the service businesses are trying their best to improve their **service quality** in order to make customers satisfied with their services, especially the hotel industry. If the **service performance meets or exceeds customers' expectation, customers will be satisfied.** On the other hand, customers are more likely to be dissatisfied if the service performance is less than what they have expected. Researches proved that service quality is an important element to make customers satisfied with the hotel services. The objectives of this study are to **assess customers' expectation and perception level towards service quality of the front office staff** in five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al. 1988). SERVQUAL is used here as a tool to find the gap towards service quality of the front office staff in a hotel. Hotel management must seriously look in to key findings of research and take necessary steps to implement given suggestions to improve the service quality of front office at hotel. If the corrective actions on tangibility and reliability dimensions are taken, it is sure that it leads to improvement in service quality and it results in to customer satisfaction*

Introduction

According to Asian Development Outlook, the trend of world markets has changed noticeably from agricultural to service markets. All of the service businesses are trying their best to improve their **service quality** in order to make customers satisfied with their services, especially the hotel industry.

Hotel operators now focus more on the **quality standards** in order to meet the basic needs and expectations of the customers. Once customers and requirements are clearly identified and understood, hotel operators are more likely to anticipate and fulfil their customers & needs and wants (Juwaheer & Ross, 2003). The more satisfied the customers are, the more likely they are to return or prolong their hotel stay (Choi & Chu, 2001).

At present, hotel visitors in south India seem to have high standards and demands for excellent service. The hotels have increased their standards and now instead of having only a nice room to draw customers in, they offer - **high quality staff** as an amenity as well. **Guest satisfaction** is the highest priority for owners and managers competing with hundreds of others, and personal service is at the top of the travellers and list of the most important things when considering a hotel to stay in (Wipoosattaya, 2001).In the hotel industry, **hotel staff** is ranging from **top management staff to front line staff** (i.e. house keepers, receptionists, front cashiers).

Front office staffs are considered as a supporting factor in determining customer satisfaction when deciding to return, to recommend the hotel, or in demonstrating loyalty to a particular hotel (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000).

Hogan (2006) in his thesis work presented that **front office staff are the nerve center of all hotels**, and the front office is essential to keep up with what is happening at all areas of the hotels.

Service Quality

Parasuraman et al. (1985) defined **service quality as a function of the differences between expectation and performance** along with ten major dimensions. In later research, Parasuraman et al. (1988) revised and defined the **service quality in terms of five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.**

In the hotel industry, most researchers are interested in **maximizing customer satisfaction**; satisfied customers tend to return and make the profit to hotel. Hernon & Whitwan (2001) defined customer satisfaction as a measure of how the customer perceives service delivery. Liu (2000) stated that customer satisfaction is a function of service performance relative to the customer expectation.

If the **service performance meets or exceeds customers' expectation, the customers will be satisfied**. On the other hand, customers are more likely to be dissatisfied if the service performance is less than what they have expected. As mentioned earlier, a greater number of satisfied customers will make the hotel business more successful and more profitable.

Review of Literature

Front office staff service quality is gaining momentum as there is a direct contact between the customer and front office staff.

According to Kandampully et al (2000) front office staffs are considered as supporting factor in determining customer satisfaction and various research shows that there were significant variations between dimensions of service quality of front office staff among hotels.

Min and Min (1997) presented the idea that front office services have the attributes that are considered most important, particularly in forming the following impressions of **service quality; tangibility (how well the hotel staff are dressed); reliability (ability to resolve problems encountered by guests); responsiveness (convenience of making the reservation, promptness of check-in/checkout process, hotel/tour guide information); assurance (security and safety of guests); and empathy (caring and individualized attention).**

Dr. P. Srinivas Rao and Dr.Padma Charan Sahu , (2013) identified five factors of service quality by focusing on the front office staff only, and explored the customers' expectations and perception levels of these services

Problem Statement

Hotel Visitors in south Indian seems to have high standards and demands for excellent service. Service quality is perceived differently by tourists in different parts of the world. Hotel operators are paying more attention than ever to the needs and expectations of the customers by consistently improving the quality of the service offered to the customers. Researches proved that service quality is an important element to make customers satisfied with the hotel services.

Objectives of the Study
The objectives of this study are:

1. **To assess customers' expectation and perception level towards service quality of the front office staff** in five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al. 1988).
2. **To analyze the discrepancy gap between customers expectation and perception towards service quality of the front office staff.**

Research Questions
1. What is the level of customer's expectation and perception towards service quality of the front office staff?
2. What is the discrepancy gap between customers& expectation and perception towards service quality of the front office staff?

Significance of the Study
This study will be as a practical guideline for the hotel management, especially the front office department. The outcome of this study will **develop the service quality of the front office staff** in order to meet their customers 'needs and wants. If the gap score is low, it results into customer satisfaction and in contrast, if the gap score is high, then the hotel owner requires arranging training program for their staff to improve the service.

Scope of the study
Customer satisfaction relied on customer expectation and customer perception towards 5 service quality dimensions of front office staff.

Research Methodology
The objective of this paper is to analyze the discrepancy gap between customers' expectation and perception towards service quality of the front office staff in a hotel whose identity is intentionally concealed to make the study technically feasible and a hypothetical name, say XYZ hotel, is used here for identification.

SERVQUAL is widely recognized and used tool to measure the service quality of the front office staff in a hotel. Thus, SERVQUAL is used here as a tool to find the gap towards service quality of the front office staff in a hotel.

Population & Sample
Population of this study includes guests who are visiting to XYZ hotel and the samples of 120 respondents were selected based on convenience sampling method.

Administration of Questionnaire
The questionnaire was based on the SERQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al (1998) with 22 statements under five dimensions. Slight modification is made to attributes of service quality dimensions of original model of SERVQUAL in order to make the attributes more relevant to the front office staff service quality. The responses were captured in five point Likert scale and the gap score is calculated by deducting expectations from perceptions (E-P).

Data Analysis and Interpretation:
Table 1: Demographic profile of the Respondents

Parameter	Frequency	Percentage of Respondents
Gender		
Male	72	60
Female	48	40
Total	120	100
Age		
Less than 25 years	45	37.5
25-35 years	38	31.7
36-45 years	20	16.7
46-55 years	15	12.5
More than 55 years	2	1.6
Total	**120**	**100**
Occupation		
Government official	18	15
Employee	36	30
Owner / Private Business	39	32.5
Student	27	22.5
Total	120	100
Purpose of trip		
Vacation	66	55
Honeymoon	27	22.5
Seminar	14	11.7
Business	13	10.8
Total	120	100
Number of times stayed in hotel in the past		
One time	43	35.8
Two times	40	33.3
Three times	16	13.3
Four times	12	10
More than four times	9	7.5
Total	**120**	**100**

Source: Primary Data

Interpretation:

- ❖ It is inferred from the table-1 that, 37.5 % and 31.7% of respondents are belongs to the age category of less than twenty five and 25-35 respectively.
- ❖ 55 percentage of respondent's purpose of stay was vacation
- ❖ It is evident that 35.8 percentages of respondents stayed in the hotel first time and 33.3 percentage of respondents said that they stayed two times in the hotel in the past.

Table- 2
Step –I: Designing SERVQUAL Instrument

Dimensions	E	P	Gap Score E-P	Expectation Mean	Expectation Std. Deviation	Perception Mean	Perception Std. Deviation
Tangibility							
1. The staff dresses appropriately.	3.94	3.58	0.36	0.788	0.807	0.716	0.742
2. The staff uniform is clean.	3.84	3.57	0.27	0.768	0.766	0.714	0.666
3.The staff provide the services with smile	3.77	4.04	-0.27	0.754	0.687	0.808	0.766
4.The staff have attractive appearance i.e. elegant, smart, etc	3.85	3.44	0.41	0.770	0.710	0.688	0.495
Total	**15.4**	**14.63**	**0.77**				
Average Gap Score (Total of E-P/4)			0.192				
Reliability							
5. The staff can provide the services as promised to the customer.e.g. Up-graded room, early check in and late checkout.	3.97	2.97	1	0.794	0.887	0.594	0.497
6. The staff provides accurate information to the customer. e.g. hotel facilities, recreational facilities and tourists' attraction places.	3.82	3.5	0.32	0.764	0.772	0.700	0.610
7. The staff performs the service right at the first time (for example, the receptionist has your correct record of your booking details).	3.63	3.62	0.01	0.764	0.772	0.700	0.610

	E	P	E-P				
8. The staffs are ready to help the customer (for example, once you arrive at the front desk of hotel, the receptionists ask you if she can help you).	3.99	3.44	0.55	0.726	0.837	0.724	0.797
Total	**15.41**	**13.53**	**1.88**				
Average Gap Score (Total of E-P/4)			0.47				
Responsiveness							
9. The staff tells the customers exactly when services will be provided (for example, the receptionist informs you about breakfast time during your check in).	3.91	2.91	1	0.782	0.781	0.582	0.482
10. The staff provides prompt service to the customer (for example, the receptionists serve you a welcome drink immediately during your arrival).	3.67	3.08	0.59	0.734	0.675	0.616	0.565
11. The staff is willing to help the customer. E.g.giving direction to the customer about the hotel facilities and service.	3.09	3.62	-0.53	0.618	0.559	0.724	0.622
Total	**10.67**	**9.61**	**1.06**				
Average Gap Score (Total of E-P/3)			0.353				
Assurance							
12. The staff has product knowledge of hotel information e.g. describing all room types and the Restaurants.	4.05	3.35	0.7	0.810	0.888	0.670	0.760
13. The staff has required skill to perform service (for example, the receptionist can explain clearly about the hotel direction).	3.72	3.45	0.27	0.744	0.752	0.690	0.791
14. The staff speak with customer using an appropriately address forms (for example, hello, may I help you, Sir/ Madam?).	3.57	3.62	-0.05	0.714	0.669	0.724	0.722
15. The staff are trustworthy.	3.05	3.67	-0.62	0.610	0.528	0.734	0.657
16. The staff makes the customer feel safe when staying at the hotel (for example, the doorman observes the person who comes in the hotel).	4.26	3.46	0.8	0.852	0.709	0.692	0.714
Total	**18.65**	**17.55**	**1.1**				
Average Gap Score (Total of E-P/5)			0.22				
Empathy							
17. The staffs are able to communicate with customer in English.	3.99	3.61	0.38	0.798	0.856	0.722	0.820
18. The staff are able to communicate effectively with customer	3.54	3.46	0.08	0.708	0.533	0.692	0.577
19. The staff shows personal attention to the customer (for example, the bell boy helps you to carry your luggage during your check out).	3.76	3.63	0.13	0.752	0.753	0.726	0.556
20. The staff knows the customer specific needs (for example, the doorman opens the door while you are entering the hotel).	3.83	3.6	0.23	0.766	0.799	0.720	0.633
Total	**15.12**	**14.3**	**0.82**				
Average Gap Score (Total of E-P/4)			**0.205**				

Source: Primary Data

Table-3

Step –II: Calculation of Un-weighted Score

S.No	Dimensions	Gap Scores
1	Average Gap Score for Tangibility	0.1925
2	Average Gap Score for Reliability	0.47
3	Average Gap Score for Responsiveness	0.353
4	Average Gap Score for Assurance	0.22
5	Average Gap Score for Empathy	0.205
Total		**1.441**
Average Un-weighted Score(Total/5)		**0.288**

Source: Primary Data

Table-4

Step-III: Data Analysis and Necessary actions required

Dimensions	Expectations (E)	Perceptions (P)	Total Gap Scores (E-P)	Average Gap Score
Tangibility	15.4	14.63	0.77	0.1925
Reliability	15.41	13.53	1.88	0.47
Responsiveness	10.67	9.61	1.06	0.353
Assurance	18.65	17.55	1.1	0.22
Empathy	15.12	14.3	0.82	0.205

Source: Primary Data

Table-5

Number of customers planned to return to Hotel

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	95	79.17
No	03	2.5
Not sure	22	18.33
Total	**120**	**100**

Source: Primary Data

Interpretation:

It is inferred from the table-5 that, 79.17 percentages of respondents said that they have a plan to return the hotel in due course of time.

Findings

It is found from the analysis that attribute of staff provide the service with smile in the tangibility dimension has perceived value of 4.04 which is greater than the expected value of 3.77. Responsiveness attribute of staff is willing to help the customer has higher score and it is found that hotel front office staff is willing to help the customer. Through analysis it is evident that hotel staffs are trust worthy. Based on the overall average gap score, reliability has the highest gap score of 0.47, reason behind this high gap score is that staff failed to provide the services as promised to the customer. It is evident from standard deviation analysis that staffs are unable to communicate in English.

The staff can provide the services as promised to the

customer(e.g. Upgraded room, early check in and late checkout) in the reliability dimension and the staff tells the customers exactly when services will be provided (for example, the receptionist informs you about breakfast time during your check in) in the responsiveness dimension and the staff has product knowledge of hotel information (e.g. describing all room types and the restaurants) in the assurance dimension and also the staff shows personal attention to the customer (for example, the bell boy helps you to carry your luggage during your check out) in the dimension of Empathy has the least perceived standard deviation as compared to its expected standard deviation.

The staff is willing to help the customer (e.g. giving direction to the customer about the hotel facilities and service) in responsiveness dimension and the staff are able to communicate effectively with customer in the empathy dimension has the highest perceived standard deviation as compared to its expected standard deviation.

Suggestions
Management has to ensure that front office staff at the hotel provides the services as promised to the customer and also to ensure that staffs are wholeheartedly ready to help the customer. Hotel management has to take steps to improve the proficiency of language of front office staff.

Conclusion
Application of SERVQUAL model for research is extremely universal with respect to the service organization and it has been used here for analyzing service quality of front office at hotel. Such analysis is handy in defining the weak areas where immediate corrective action is required. Hotel management must seriously look in to key findings of research and take necessary steps to implement given suggestions to improve the service quality of front office at hotel.

Practical implications
If the corrective actions on tangibility and reliability dimensions are taken, it is sure that it leads to improvement in service quality and it results in to customer satisfaction. Hotel needs to undertake service quality measurement on periodical intervals to identify the gap between customer's expectation and perception.

Suggestions for Further Research
Since this research was concentrated on only one area of southern Tamilnadu in India, it is important to increase the scope of the study in terms of geographical location and as well as sample size to improve generalization of the findings.

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