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Assessing Customer Perception of Frontline Staff and Its Effect on Customer Loyalty

Mintah Prempeh, V.
Lecturer, Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Sunyani Polytechnic, Ghana
Commey, V.
Lecturer, Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Sunyani Polytechnic, Ghana
Ruth Anang
Student, Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Sunyani Polytechnic, Ghana
Afriyie Nkrumah A.
Lecturer, Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Sunyani Polytechnic, Ghana

Abstract:
The hotel industry is very significant to Ghana's tourism potential and economic growth. In order to make sure the hotel industry meets the requisite international standards, this study sought to examine the perception of customers of frontline staff. Two of Ghana's topmost hotels, the Hotel A, which is a five-star hotel and Hotel B, a four star were selected purposively for this study with a sample size of 100 customers selected randomly. The findings of the survey revealed that 94% of the respondents indicated that their overall perception about the frontline was good. Similarly, 90% of the respondents indicated they have good perception about the frontline staff of Hotel B. Among the factors customers consider in forming their perception, neatness, courtesy and good communication skills were ranked at Hotel A. Customers ranked courtesy, neatness and good communication skills at hotel B. The study recommends that Management of both hotels and for that matter all the top hotels should put more into training and empowering frontline staff on problem handling and responsive skills. Management should also consider periodic internal surveys to ascertain the changing perceptions of customers and identify areas that need improvements.

Keywords: Customer perception, behaviour of frontline staff, topmost hotels

1. Introduction

In today's competitive world of business, many organizations are implementing external marketing programs designed to attract new business and customers. Unfortunately, the cost can be very high with little return on investment. What is often lost in the mix is the fact that it can be much more cost effective to have a loyal customer base that returns again and again rather than constantly seeking the next new customer (Dominici and Guzzo, 2010). Not that there is anything wrong with the search for new customers, but if that is the primary focus, then a great opportunity may be missing with the existing clients. When efforts and attention are placed on the new customers to they feel appreciated, they tend to be more loyal. Loyal customers are often willing to spend more and tell others about the experience they have with the business.

The concept of customer loyalty is not new to Ghana's hotel industry. The practice is believed to be more characterized with the service industry. This is due to the fact that, service definition is an intangible activity and therefore has a zero shelving life (Kotler, 2001). Due to the inseparable nature of service provision, a perception that is formed by the customer about the service provision is very significant when the product is experienced. One of the significant service sectors in the service industry in Ghana is the Hospitality industry. According to the Ghana Tourist Board Report, 2006, the hospitality industry is made up of the Restaurants, Hotels and Guest Houses in the Country. The sector's contribution to the tourism sector's revenue in 2006 was 65% and its main customers were believed to be foreigners.

Recently, it has been observed that the hotel industry in Ghana has problems with quality service delivery (Africa News, 2007 p. 4). Another factor that seems to be militating against efforts at boosting the hotel industry in Ghana is the dearth of suitable accommodation and the problem of customer satisfaction (Ghana News Agency October, 2007). Since hotels provide services, there is no opportunity for recall or rework of "defective" services and they must do it right the first time and always (Woodside and Macdonald, 1994).

The customer is then viewed as champion in modern marketing as he seeks to satisfy a set of needs and wants partly related to the essential service like a hotel stay and partially to the subsidiary attributes like accessibility. Customers have their expectations on how these needs and wants are met and that consistently form impressions about the actual service offered them in comparing with their

expectations (Lewis, 1987). Arguably, the performance of every organization depends on how well it satisfies its sophisticated customers.

The modern customer is well educated, enlightened and has access to several choices depending on the occasion and situation in which he finds himself. However, the question is how does a hotel customer perceive frontline staff behaviour? Do such perceptions affect customer service delivery in hotels? What measures have been put in place by hotel management to empower frontline staff and manage customer perception? This study seeks to find answers to these questions and give recommendations to stakeholders of the hospitality industry on how to enhance their services delivery especially in the hotel industry.

1.1. Problem Statement

The lack of empirical research on customer perception and satisfaction especially in the hotel industry in Ghana is a clear fact. Due to the importance of the hospitality industry in terms of employment and revenue generation, there is a need to fill this literature gap to serve as a foundation for further research. In addition to this, the fact also stands by research that a good relationship between hotel guests and employees is a strategic asset for the hotel. Based on these two premises, this study seeks to assess the perception of hotel customers about hotel employees and evaluate whether this perception has any impact on hotel service patronage.

1.2. Study Objectives

The principal objective of this study is to assess the perception of customers about the behaviour of frontline staff of two major hotels in Ghana. Since service provision is intangible, the frontline staff embodies the physical evidence together with the environment of the hotel. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Assess the customer's perception of frontline staff of the selected hotel A and B.
2. Ascertain the effect of the perception in (1) on customer satisfaction
3. Identify measures hotel managers have put in place to empower frontline staff and evaluate mechanisms the selected hotels use to manage customer perception.

2. Literature Review

Perception is man's primary form of cognitive contact with the world around him. As all conceptual knowledge is based upon or derived from this primary form of awareness, the study of perception has always had a unique significance for philosophy and science. (Efro Robert, (1966). Also, Kendra Cherry (2007) defined perception as "our sensory experience of the world around us and involves both the recognition of environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli.

Loyal and satisfied customers are strategic asset to every hotel due to the competitive nature of the industry (Almanza, Jaffe, & Lin, 1994). Therefore, the satisfaction of the customer becomes the passport for the survival and growth of every hotel. This suggests that, the hotel industry should understand and be able to manage customer expectations, experiences and the customer decision making process. Reid (1983), points out that there are two major factors that influence customer decision in the hotel industry. These are:

1) Extrinsic influence includes culture, socioeconomic, reference group, and household,

2) Intrinsic influence covers needs, experience, personality and self-image, and perceptions and attitudes.

The ability of the hotel industry to live up to the value expectation affects both satisfaction and repurchase probability because customers are values-maximizers (Kotler, 2001).

2.1. Customer Satisfaction

According to Bear Ross (2014), satisfaction is a marketing term that measures how products or services supplied by a company meet or surpass a customer's expectation. Customer satisfaction is important in every organization because it provides marketers and business owners with a metric that they can use to retain customers and to manage and improve their businesses. Customer Satisfaction is important for the following reasons.

2.1.1. It Is a Leading Indicator of Consumer Repurchase Intentions and Loyalty

Customer satisfaction is the best indicator of how likely a customer will make a purchase in the future.

2.1.2. It's a Point of Differentiation

In a competitive marketplace where businesses compete for customers; customer satisfaction is seen as a key differentiator. Businesses who succeed in these cut-throat environments are the ones that make customer satisfaction a key element of their business strategy.

2.1.3. It Reduces Customer Churn

An Accenture global customer satisfaction report (2008) found that price is not the main reason for customer churn; it is actually due to the overall poor quality of customer service. Customer satisfaction is the metric a business can use to reduce customer churn. By measuring and tracking customer satisfaction a business can put new processes in place to increase the overall quality of its customer service

2.1.4. It Increases Customer Lifetime Value

A study by Info Quest (2007) found that a 'totally satisfied customer' contributes 2.6 times more revenue than a 'somewhat satisfied customer'. Furthermore, a 'totally satisfied customer' contributes 14 times more revenue than a 'somewhat dissatisfied customer'. Satisfaction plays a significant role in how much revenue a customer generates for your business.

2.1.5. It Reduces Negative Word of Mouth

McKinsey (2006), revealed that an unhappy customer tells between 9-15 people about their experience. In fact, 13% of unhappy customers tell over 20 people about their experience. That is, customer tell friends about their experience on organization products, either good or bad hence it is important for each customer to have a good experience (customer satisfaction) if an organization intends to retain customers and make profit. To conclude, Customer satisfaction is tightly linked to revenue and repeat purchases.

2.2. Customer Satisfaction and Perception

Customer satisfaction always comes down to perception. That is how a customer sees and experiences a product and service provided by an organization is what he or she makes of that organization not what the organization believes or thinks (values and missions).

Customer experience forms their perception and this determines if they would purchase from the organization again or not. Every customer has expectations and requirements; meeting and exceeding them is the objective, and defining them and understanding them is the challenge, however, when an organization is able to identify and meet this expectations, it leads to customer satisfaction and hence good perception also leads to referrals. The composition of customer requirements is neither static nor uniform. What works for one group will not work for another. What meets the needs during one period and with one product line or competitive market won't work in another. So it is critical for every business to be able to segregate or stratify its customer base to identify various groups and their specific needs in order to make good profit.

Also, taking into consideration the five dimensions of product service quality namely: Physical ability and capability to provide service, Consistency and reliability of service, Responsiveness and willingness to provide service, Knowledge and competence of employees providing service and Empathetic concern for the customer.

2.3. Behaviour

According to Cuban (2014), behaviour is the range of actions and mannerisms made by individuals, organisms, systems, or artificial entities in conjunction with themselves or their environment, which includes the other systems or organisms around as well as the (inanimate) physical environment. That is, behaviour is the response of the system or organism to various stimuli or imputes whether internal or external, conscious or subconscious, overt or converts, voluntary or involuntary.

2.4. Employee Behaviour

Globally, management has been trying since the beginning of time to have a positive impact on employee behaviour. Employees with the proper behaviour are an asset to an organization. Employees who exhibit poor behaviour generally require a lot of the organization's resource, time and effort to address and correct each issue.

Human behaviour is said to be influenced by both internal and external factors. Generally, employees' behaviour is shaped by their individual and organizational culture. These in the long run, impact their (employees) manner of communication (thus, interaction among themselves and with management). Below are a few of the forces that may influence employee behaviour:

1. Positive Environment: A critical internal force that influences employee behaviour is the actions of colleagues. Companies that can effectively build an internal culture that is based on mutual respect, teamwork, and support will attract and retain employees with good behaviour.
2. Technology: Technology is a significant factor that can have both positive and disruptive influences on employee behaviour. While technology can often help streamline processes and make work easier for employees, learning how to use new technology while remaining productive can be stressful. Factor in the rapid advent of technology, in general, and employers seem to be faced with an almost on-going need for new training, process improvement, and documentation.
3. Customer Demands: Customer demands can be an external force that exerts pressure on organizations to continually stay ahead of the competitive curve. Employees must adapt to the changing needs of customers, the growing shrewdness of customers, and the heightened expectations that customers put on employee behaviour.

2.5. Behaviour and Frontline Staff

Frontline staff has great impact on the reputation of an organization. Research so far has proven that not just companies top decision makers who can prevent risk to a firm's reputation, rather front line staff can make and unmake an organization since they are positioned at the primary or ground level dealing directly with customers. If an organization has good front line staff, then that organization can be sure to succeed. Thus their staff that deal with customers are responsible for customer satisfaction and when they understand and put in efforts to enhance that, then the organization can be sure of customer retention and customer loyalty. This is because the customers have had great experience with the firm.

According to Goldsmith et al., (1997), the effectiveness of hotel service is linked to the behaviour of the hotel employees. This is because, service is intangible and it is difficult to distinguish between the medium through which the service is provided and the service itself. Due to this, the customers' perception of service quality and satisfaction is directly linked to the authority, skills, motivation, courtesy and the experience of the frontline staff (Mahesh, 1988).

2.6. The frontline Behaviours that Can Ruin an Organization are:
1) Neglectful customer service
2) Lack of teamwork
3) Absenteeism
4) Lack of commitment
5) Lack of compliance

Figure 1: A diagram indicating Quality attributes of hotel staff
Source: Qualiac, 2014

Qualiac (2014) identified nine qualities of hotel frontline staff that have positive effect on customer perception and total customer satisfaction. These are expertise of the staff, availability of the staff when needed by the customer, flexibility in terms of service provision, straight talking devoid of lies, attention, respect for customer, and quality of service, partnership with the customer to identify requirements, creativity and utmost commitment. In this study, customers will measure the staff of Hotel A and Hotel B based on these attributes.

2.7. Service Quality in the Hotel Industry
Service quality has been identified as one of the key determinants of customer satisfaction in the hotel industry (Lazer and Layton, 1999). This is because, the hotel industry sells services and experiences which are produced and consumed immediately. It is very difficult to rework defective services. Service quality should therefore be right the first time and always. Since quality is subjective, it behoves on hotel frontline staff to customize service experiences to suit individual customer requirement and circumstances (Reeves and Bednar, 1994). To this end, Reeves and Bednar (1994) identified six service quality dimensions. These are in conformance to specifications, requirements, value, loss avoidance, meeting and exceeding customers' expectations and fitness for use. Drawing on these dimensions, Olsen et al (1998) define service quality in the hotel industry as doing the right thing right and consistently.

According to Kotler et al (2003), the concept of service quality has received more attention in the hospitality literature because quality has been linked to competitiveness and customer retention. Kwortnik (2005) emphasis that service quality goes defining a service as poor or excellent to include all factors that influence the perception of the customer about the service provision.
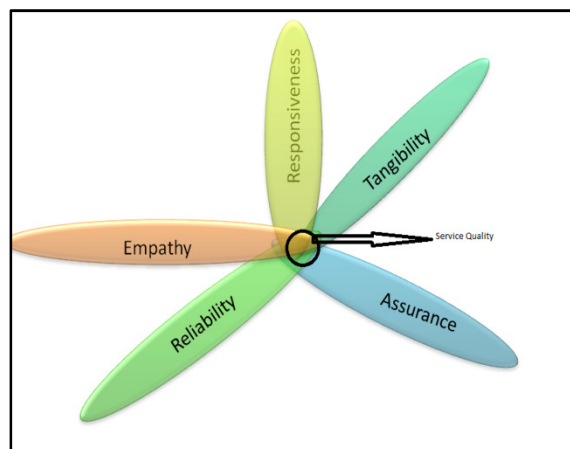

Figure 2: Service Quality dimensions
Source: Parasuraman et al, 1988

Figure 3 depicts the five dimensions as suggested by Parasuraman et al (1988). The first is the tangible dimensions which covers the design and decoration of the hotel, the dresses of staff and other attributes that can be seen and touched at the hotel. The second attribute is empathy. This attribute explains how sympathetic the hotel staff are to the needs of the customer. That is, it denotes the act of the hotel staff putting themselves in the shoes of the customer. The third dimension is responsiveness. This deals with how promptly hotel staff respond to customers' request and how fast customers' suggestions are work on. The fourth dimension is reliability which is about how dependable the hotel is in terms of honouring its promises. The final dimension, assurance, is a guarantee to the customer that his or her needs will be met.

2.8. Empirical Review
Though customer service in the hospitality industry has received a lot of attention in the literature, not much has been done on customer's perception of the behaviour of frontline hotel staff. Wong and Keung (2000), studied hotel customers' perception of hotel staff in the Front Office, Housekeeping and Food and Beverages department in China and reported four dimensions. This dimension includes (1) infringement of guests' property; (2) unethical behaviour; (3) benefiting at the expense of guest supplementary service, and (4) against company work rules.
In Ghana, Narteh *et al* (2013) report the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty in the luxury and first-class hotel industry. Analysis are used to test the impact of six key relationship marketing practices, namely competence, commitment, conflict handling, trust, communication, and relational bonds on customer loyalty. The findings suggest that all six relationship-marketing practices have a significant and positive effect on customer loyalty in the hotel industry in Ghana. Apart from extending knowledge on relationship marketing practices into a domain without much empirical work, the study also provides hotel managers with practical ways of implementing relationship-marketing strategies for achieving customer loyalty in Ghana. Mensah (2012) investigates customer perception of service provision in the food service industry in Cape Coast. The findings suggest that most of the respondents indicated that their expectations were not met and attributed this to poor staff behaviour and long waiting periods. A common phenomenon found among staff who provide direct services to customers. This permeates in all service sectors including the hospitality industry.
The above discussion implies that the perception of customers about the behaviour of hotel staff is an important determinant of customer satisfaction. Since limited or no study has been conducted on this topic in Ghana, it leaves a literature gap that needs to be filled. The purpose of this study is to fill that gap.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design
Various models are applicable to the dynamics of the behaviour of frontline staff in developing countries and to provide a framework to ascertain customer satisfaction, a model that captures customers want for prompt service by people who know what to do and how to do it without compromising on valuing them would seem appropriate for Ghana. Descriptive survey which is normally used togather information about respondents' feelings, attitude, opinion, interests, and problems was employed for this study. (Orodho and Njeru, 2004).Thus, the question is tackled from both quantitative and qualitative perspective using analysis of data gathered from staff and customers. The study relied on both primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected with a structured questionnaire whilst journals and other academic databases were consulted for the secondary data.

3.2. Population, Sampling and Analyses
The population of interest is the customers of selected hotels. A purposive sampling technique is used to draw a sampling of 100. That is 50 customers from each hotel. The data is cleaned, coded and analysed through the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software. The findings were presented in tables, graphs and charts. These was interpreted and meaningfully assigned so that appropriate recommendations are drawn.

3.3. Data sources and Sampling Plan
The study relied on both secondary and primary data. Secondary data was explored from relevant textbooks, journals and publications and magazines, news and print media. Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect the primary data. By employing non-probability sampling methods of *purposive* techniques; attempts were made to include as many respondents as practicable from the population of interest that consist of customers of both hotels. The sample size for this study is 100.

3.4. Overview of the Selected Hotels
The names of the selected hotels are withheld for ethical considerations
Hotel A has 100 spacious Executive double and four deluxe suites specially adapted for disabled. The hotel won the best 5-star hotel edition of Ghana Tourist Board Hotel Awards (2012).
 Hotel B is a four-star Superior First Class Hotel located in a safe and quiet suburb of Accra. This African-style hotel with 238 rooms is delightfully landscaped over spacious grounds with extensive tropical gardens and lush vegetation. It offers the ideal accommodation for both business and leisure travellers. Only 5 minutes (2km) drive from the Kotoka International Airport and 10 minutes' drive to the city centre and government ministries, the hotel offers a free airport shuttle service for the convenience of guests.

4. Results and Discussion
The results and discussion were done under the three objectives which guided the study.

4.1. Customer's Perception of Frontline Staff of the Selected Hotel A and B.

Perception	Hotel A (%)	Hotel B (%)	Total (%)
Neatness	94	90	Excellent
Courtesy	70	80	Good
Good Communication skills	75	63	Good
Indifferent	6	10	Indifferent

Table 1: Customer Perception
Source: Researchers fieldwork 2015

Table 1 shows the overall rating of the behaviour of frontline staff of the two hotels. Whilst 94% indicated that the overall behaviour of the frontline staff of Hotel A is good, 90% of the respondents indicated that the frontline staff behaviour of Hotel B is good. 6% of the respondents at Hotel A were indifferent whilst 10% were indifferent at Hotel B.

The result of the survey was that 94% of the customer respondents indicated that their overall perception about the frontline neatness was excellent. Similarly, 90% of the respondents indicated they have excellent perception about the frontline staff of Hotel B. Among the factors customers consider in forming their perception, they ranked neatness, courtesy and good communication skills as the most important qualities they observe on the frontline staff at both Hotel A and B, customers ranked courtesy, neatness and good communication skills as the most important attributes they observe on the frontline staff.

Responses from the Hotel managers and staff of both hotels on the effect of satisfaction level as follows: 1.Disagree 2. Not sure 3.Agree

Characteristics	1	2	3
	%	%	%
Lack of courtesy and good communication skills affect repeat service	4.0	0	96.0
Neatness of staff affect the satisfaction level of guests	2.0	0	98.0
Availability or absence of hot water unit to provide hot water and other things have negative or positive effect on the satisfaction level of guests.	10.0	0	90.0
Courtesy and good persuasive skills influence hotel clients to wish to return for a repeat service.	12.0	2.0	86.0

Table 2: Effects of the perception on customer satisfaction
Source: Field survey, 2015

The respondents also indicated that the absence or availability of amenities has negative or positive effect on the satisfaction level. For instance, courtesy and good persuasive skills influence hotel clients to wish to return for a repeat service. The management and staff of both hotels indicated that, they have suggestion boxes where customers' suggestions are collected and collated for actions to be taken. In addition, they organize periodic in-house training for their staff on customer service and service recovery.

3. Measures hotel managers have put in place to empower frontline staff and mechanisms selected hotels use to manage customer perception.
A critical look at the level of satisfaction of frontline staff in the hotels under discussion, we observed various level of measures that have been put in place to motivate staff namely
  ➢ Reducing Time Spent at Work: Frontline staff have a reduced time at work making working conditions and level of stress good and encouraging.
  ➢ Spiraling Wages: Employees are paid based on hours they work at most of this organizations so most of the staff are motivated to work well
  ➢ Human Relations Training: There are routine human training for employees so as to boost working habits.
  ➢ Communications: There is effective communication between managers and employees thus making it possible for employees to express their concerns to the management.

5. Conclusion
The hotel industry has a significant role to play in Ghana's quest to achieve higher middle income status. To make sure the hotel industry meets the requisite international standards, research is needed to examine the perception of customers of the behaviour of frontline staff. This is very important since the frontline staff are the first point of contact when a customer arrives at a hotel. In addition to this, first impressions are difficult to erase. Based on the findings it can be concluded that frontline staff of the top hotels in Ghana are doing well but yet the best is expected of them. Therefore, management should sacrifice diligently to give the staff the needed training the staff need to perform better to exceed customer expectation

6. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that Management of both hotels should train their frontline staff on attentive, problem handling and responsive skills. This training can be in the form of in house training or sponsored external training to upgrade their skills. In addition, management should consider periodic internal surveys to ascertain the changing perceptions of customers and identify areas that need improvements.

Future studies should look at the determinants of customer perception of the hotel industry.

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