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Personal Care Amenities: Are They Important Attributes in the Selection of Hotels?

Abstract

Personal care amenities (PCA) are a big business in the lodging industry today. For several years hotel industry vendors and marketing consultants have claimed that PCA are very important to hotel guests and are a "must" for every hotel operation. The purpose of this study was to make one attempt to validate or discredit these claims based on actual guest feedback.

Keywords

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Personal Care Amenities: Are They Important Attributes in the Selection Of Hotels?

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Personal care amenities (PCA) are a big business in the lodging industry today. For several years hotel industry vendors and marketing consultants have claimed that PCA are very important to hotel guests and are a "must" for every hotel operation. The purpose of this study was to make one attempt to validate or discredit these claims based on actual guest feedback.

The availability of personal care amenities (e.g., bathroom amenities) in hotels is not new. European hotels and inns have pampered their guests with special personal care items for many decades. Since the early 1980s the American lodging industry has played catch up with its European counterparts. With intense industry competition, new attitudes concerning the importance of personal care amenities (PCA) as an effective marketing tool have emerged with a virtual explosion of hotels offering expanded PCA packages. A 1987 Laventhol and Horwath report on the hotel industry indicated that 73.6 percent of the hotels surveyed in their study offered guests PCA.¹ According to this study, the only guest service that ranked higher than PCA was free parking.

A majority of the hotel industry trade literature has suggested that the costs of PCA packages are quite minimal and that every hotel should have a budget for these items. PCA vendors have heavily promoted the possible guest benefits of these items in their promotional ads and flyers. Vendors point out the low unit costs of many PCA items and the "enthusiasm" and "improved guest satisfaction" generated by hotel guests. More often than not empirical support for these claims is lacking.

From the vendors' perspectives the decision to choose a PCA package is quite easy. PCA are easy to pre-cost so the hotel knows exactly how much it will cost to service a room and what percentage this cost is compared to the room rate. According to RoomMates, a full line PCA vendor, most packages range in price from 60 cents to \$5.² Even though RoomMates indicates that there is no rule of thumb for a percentage of

a hotel's room rate, "1.5% to 3.5% seems to make sense to many operators."

The various PCA boosters suggest that these packages help offer the guests a comfortable environment that allows them to function optimally in an unfamiliar environment. It has also been suggested that a hotel that satisfies the most urgent guests' needs, and does so in an especially memorable way, succeeds at converting the one-time or occasional guest into a loyal customer. Lima, an editor of a leading hotel trade publication, contends that developing guest loyalty may in fact be the major hotel marketing challenge of the next decade and one reason to expand PCA packages.³

PCA Packages Promote Hotel Images

In a recent trade article one marketing consultant reports that PCA not only provide the touches of extra comfort, but may also promote a hotel's image of elegance, service, or style.⁴ The author further suggests that PCA provide hotels the opportunity to differentiate themselves and promote perceptions among their guests that they are getting an increased value for the lodging expenditure. According to both of these sources a major reason for the recent surge in PCA packages is increased sophistication on the part of today's traveler and the expectation of finding a PCA package upon entering the room.

In a recent trade article, a hotel owner suggests that extending PCA beyond the guests' real needs makes a lasting impression that gives guests an incentive to return.⁵ His "comfortable and warm home" philosophy is a basic one: "really pamper guests and they will return to your property." According to Davis, this also applies to items that the guest might have forgotten to bring to the hotel. Davis suggests that a few extra PCA really make guests feel at home and will assure a more relaxing and pleasing stay.

Several factors are said to come into play when selecting a PCA package. Included in these may be the type of guest, the room rate, and the competitive nature of the market.⁶ Dilling states, for instance, that business and pleasure travelers may have very different PCA needs and that hotels need to take into account the predominant type of guests it attracts. Likewise, other common demographic variables such as age, sex, gender, and level of income may need to be considered when choosing packages. Another contention is that guests with higher levels of income are more likely to frequent exclusive shops and, therefore, may expect an upscale PCA package. This expectation may not be shared by someone who buys toiletry items at the supermarket. Dilling suggests that a junior executive from an urban area may expect a trendy mineral water, whereas an older businessman might care less about this type of extravagance. Another claim is that female travelers may need special amenities such as talc, bath oils, gels, and cotton balls.

The vast majority of the hotel trade literature suggests that for hotels to capture a greater market share, PCA packages are the rule rather than the exception to the rule. Interestingly, a review of this literature failed to find articles suggesting that PCA packages offer minimal or no "benefit" to the hotel guest. It is quite possible that some hotel guests prefer a "no frills" room with the lowest possible room rate. For

this type of guest, PCA packages drive up room rates and therefore may not meet guest needs.

Most of these PCA “theories” mentioned in the trade literature are not substantiated with empirical market research data. Therefore, it is assumed that the authors’ claims are personal opinions based on limited observations or single case studies. They do agree, however, that identifying the guests’ needs through in-house market research is very important, and that aside from the necessity of providing each guest with a bar of soap, virtually no decision regarding PCA is a matter of certainty or consensus.

Empirical Research Is Limited

To date, one empirical study has been reported that investigates PCA and the importance guests place on them. In this study guests staying at a variety of hotels were asked to rate their satisfaction with their hotel room.⁷ They were randomly assigned to one of two study groups. The control group received no PCA while the experimental group was provided with a “basic amenity package.” The study, commissioned by Procter and Gamble, concluded that a basic amenity package of shampoo, mouthwash, and skin lotion (costing \$1 at the time the study) “makes a difference” to hotel guests and increases the “guest satisfaction” with the hotel. It is extremely difficult, however, to draw these conclusions since the satisfaction ratings from guests who had PCA in their room was not statistically significant from those guests in the control group.

In a very comprehensive national market research project funded by the Dial Corporation, data were collected from 1,854 frequent travelers on how important various hotel attributes (e.g. location, service, rates, safety, etc.) were in selecting a hotel for the first visit.⁸ Respondents were asked to numerically rank order specific hotel attributes. The data showed that guests ranked a “clean and comfortable room” as the number one reason for selecting and returning to a hotel, but the findings did not conclude that PCA packages were attributes used by guests to select a hotel.

The study also investigated the PCA expectations of frequent travelers. The research findings suggest as travelers moved up the hotel price classification (economy to luxury), guests expected to have more PCA provided. Guests who used economy hotels generally expected to find no more than a basic bar soap, but a majority of guests who stayed in mid-priced or luxury hotels expected shampoo, shoeshine cloths, shower caps, and several other items.

Cadotte, a professor of marketing, suggests if guests are willing to speak out about certain attributes (e.g., on surveys) they are certainly willing to take into account the firm’s performance on the attribute when making a decision about selecting and returning to the hotel.⁹ He also indicates the key to guest satisfaction in hotels is to concentrate on the factors (benefits) that matter most to guests. Lewis, a noted hospitality marketing researcher, has also pointed out that there are many possible attributes guests trade off in a total “benefit bundle” when choosing a particular hotel.¹⁰ Lewis also has indicated the importance of isolating attributes that seem to motivate guests when selecting hotels.

As the literature review suggests, there continues to exist confusion concerning the importance of PCA as hotel selection attributes. At this point in time there is no empirical evidence to support the contention that PCA packages differentiate a hotel property or motivate a hotel guest to choose one hotel property over another.

In an effort to gain more insight into this area, the authors conducted an "exploratory study" on PCA and the effect of such attributes on hotel selection, seeking to ascertain if PCA act as selection attributes and provide a viable way to differentiate hotels and if various market segments (e.g., age, sex, gender, income, purpose of visit) exhibit different attitudes toward PCA and their importance in the selection of hotels.

Study Involves Southeastern City

The data collected for the research study was a non-probability sample and was specifically designed to provide the researchers with enough data for reasonable cross-tabulation analysis. Accordingly, there is no attempt to generalize these findings to a larger population, that is, all hotel guests across the U.S. Data were collected from 178 guests at three full-service urban hotels in a medium-sized southeastern city. The three hotels participating in the study were a Hyatt, a Hilton, and a Holiday Inn. Each allowed the researchers to interview guests immediately after check-in and prior to entering their rooms.

The survey instrument used a Likert-type scale and required respondents to indicate a degree of agreement or disagreement with three statements concerning PCA: PCA are expected, the reputation of PCA would determine selection of hotel, and PCA would justify a higher room rate. Guests were also asked to provide several socio-demographic variables, including age, sex, gender, income level, travel purpose, and payment for the hotel room (personal or employer). These variables were used in the study for segmentation analysis.

The study used frequency and cross-tabulation analysis, a common format used in marketing research since it provides easy comparison among common industry segmentation variables. Comparisons by socio-demographic segments are useful in analyzing markets to determine if different guests have similar attitudes concerning the attribute under study. Possible relationships or conditional association may be inferred between two variable categories as a result of cross-tabulation analysis. The chi square test of association between two nominally scaled variables was used to determine whether a relationship other than chance exists between the segmentation variables and the guest attitude under study. Cross-tabulation and chi square analysis is somewhat limited, since it does not enlighten the researcher regarding the interactive effect of variables or "benefit bundle," that is, several hotel selection attributes.

Travelers Do Expect PCA in Rooms

Table 1 gives a breakdown of the 178 respondents based on the segmentation variables used in the study. In order to present the data in the most effective visual manner, the responses of the 178 hotel guests were collapsed from four categories (strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, and disagree) into two, agree or disagree.

Table 1
Profile Of Hotel Respondents*

Segmentation Variable	n	%
Age		
39 & Below	72	(40.4%)
40 & Above	106	(59.6%)
Total	178	
Sex or Gender		
Male	122	(68.5%)
Female	56	(31.5%)
Total	178	
Household Income		
\$39,999 & Under	92	(51.7%)
\$40,000 & Above	86	(48.3%)
Total	178	
Travel Purpose		
Pleasure	66	(37.1%)
Business	112	(62.9%)
Total	178	
Method of Payment		
Personal	73	(41%)
Employer	105	(59%)
Total	178	
* Hotels include Hyatt, Hilton, and Holiday Inn		

The first question on the survey instrument asked the hotel guests to agree or disagree (strongly) with the following statement: "I have come to expect a large selection of personal care amenities in my hotel today." Of the 178 persons interviewed, 56.2 percent either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 43.8 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. On this statement, two of the five segmentation variables proved to be significant. The data suggest that females expect more PCA in their rooms, with 66 percent of the females agreeing to this statement versus 51.6 percent of the males agreeing to the same statement. The chi square value was 17.3 and significant at .02. Business travelers also seem to expect more PCA in their rooms, with 61.6 percent agreeing to this statement versus 46.9 percent of pleasure travelers. The chi square value was 9.5 and significant at .05. The remaining variables, age, income, and method of payment, did not show significant differences on this question.

The second question asked the hotel guests to agree or disagree (strongly) with the following statement: "I would select a hotel based on the reputation of the personal care amenities." Of the 178 persons interviewed, 85.4 percent either agreed or strongly agreed. Approximately 84 percent of the respondents who had a household income of less than \$39,999 agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 87.2 percent of the respondents with household incomes over \$40,000 agreed or strongly agreed. The chi square value was 8.7 and significant at .05. Business travelers seem to appreciate PCA, with 91.1 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing with the above statement, while only 75.8 percent of the pleasure travelers agreeing or strongly agreeing. The chi square value was 11.4 and significant at .02. The remaining variables of age, gender, and method of payment did not show significant differences on this question.

The final question on the survey instrument asked the guest to agree or disagree with the following statement: "I am willing to pay a slightly higher room rate to have a large selection of personal care amenities in my room."

Approximately 75 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Only 25.3 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. For the first time in the study none of the segmentation variables produced significant differences on this particular question.

Study Supports Positive Trade Literature

The research findings suggest that a majority (at least 75 to 85 percent) of the hotel guests in this study considered PCA as an important benefit and are quite willing to select hotels based on the reputation of their PCA packages. Based on the findings, we can also assume that certain hotels may be able to use PCA to help differentiate their hotel from competitors, since most guests (85 percent) think of PCA as benefits, but still do not expect to find them (56 percent) in their room. In general, this study provides some support of the various positive trade literature claims cited by vendors or marketing consultants.

The findings also suggest that there are significant differences between socio-demographic market segments, including the variables gender, household income, and purpose of travel. These findings suggest that females, business travelers, and persons with higher incomes might find PCA packages more beneficial.

The authors suggest some caution and reservation in the interpretation of these findings. The selection of hotels by guests is a very complex process and the measurement of selection attributes (or benefit bundle) is a very difficult process, with the possibility of error at various steps in the research process. The respondents' positive attitudes toward PCA may be in part due to the sample size, geographic location, the survey research method, and, finally, the isolation of only one attribute on the instrument.

The findings do suggest that PCA should be taken very seriously by hotels and that further research in this area needs to be conducted to further validate the literature on this topic. Expanded PCA research

projects, specifically on a national population, may provide additional insights concerning the PCA needs and desires of hotel guests.

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