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An Examination of Quality Service Perceptions in a Hotel

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Abstract

Perceptions of managers and employees on topics related to quality and quality service in a hotel were studied to define the term "quality" and the activity of "quality service" delivery, looking at differing definitions of the terms and the activity and the identification of problem issues relating to training, communication, recognition, and department coordination. Recommendations for action included changes in the training program, a reemphasizing of the incentive programs, the development of Quality Improvement Teams, improved communication, and increased service delivery leadership.

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In a highly competitive business environment, the provision of quality service can make a difference with respect to generating market share and higher profits and increasing customer loyalty. Desatnick writes, "Service is the new standard by which customers are measuring an organization's performance. It is not a competitive edge, it is the competitive edge."[1] In meeting this edge, Schaaf comments that the bar (edge) of meeting customer satisfaction is continually moving.

Organizations must continually assess what the customer wants and how that "want" is being met.[2]

To do this, a wide variety of approaches have been identified. Berry and Parasuraman[3] describe the development of a service-quality information system to learn what customers feel and want. They suggest using multiple methods such as a variety of transaction, market, and employee surveys. The advantages and disadvantages of using many of these methods in a hotel setting have been discussed by Ford and Bach.[4] Chung[5] has suggested the value of obtaining employee feedback as a method of understanding customers' needs.

Customer service is often defined as being nice to customers and meeting and/or exceeding customer desires or expectations. According to Norman,[6] service functions are activities that relate to the transaction of intangibles, that influence

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access to and availability of physical objects, and that influence the utilization of other tangibles or intangibles. As services cannot be created and stored, they are often produced and consumed in front of the customer. Rathmell[7] saw a service as an act, a performance, or an effort. Customer service has also been viewed as all of the activities a firm incorporates for showing the benefits of the service to the customer,[8] those "moments of truth" when the organization and customer come face-to-face.

Quality is defined

Garvin has identified five approaches to the defining of quality: transcendent, product-based, user-based, manufacturing based, and value-based.[9] Within the area of defining quality service, the "user-based" approach has been most often implemented. The delivery of quality customer service has often been viewed from two different orientations. The first involves the personality of the service provider, that is, how the service provider naturally behaves toward the receiver. A second orientation examines quality customer service from the orientation of the training the server receives and the service culture of the organization. This includes the total organizational context in which the provider operates. A more recent view sees customer service as the inclusion of all activities.

In their study of customer perceptions and expectations of service, Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry present a "Customer Assessment of Service Quality." In this model they refer to the perceived service quality as being the difference between what the customer wants and the perceived service received. From this they developed a "Conceptual Model of Service Quality" which sought to identify service gaps and a process for the improvement of the quality of service. Their Gaps Number 2 and Number 3 relate to the manager-employee-delivery system.[10]

Heskett[11] refers to the effective service organization as one which has a targeted market segment, a well-defined service concept, a focused operating strategy, and a well-designed service delivery system. He goes on to suggest that within this context, managers communicate a set of values and enthusiasm for service to the employees.

In a study of bank tellers, Schneider[12] found that organizational climate has an effect on the performance of employees, and that climate is felt by customers. He found that the style of the manager and the policies, often unwritten, impact the behavior of the customer contact personnel. Schneider also reported that often there are discrepancies between employee and management perceptions of service facets. He refers to those managers who promote behavior which shows a concern for customers as "service enthusiasts" rather than the rule and procedure bound "service bureaucrats."

Quality is an attitude

Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml have stated that "quality of service is more than a set of activities; it is, in the final analysis, primarily an attitude."[13] Collier suggests that excellent service/quality has both an external and an internal focus. It is consistently meeting or exceeding customer expectations and service delivery system performance criteria.[14] The delivery of "great service" has been referred to by Berry as creating an ownership feeling within the organization; it is collaborative and it is the inspiration to excel. He goes on to refer to great service as the element of pleasant surprise, doing for the customer what other companies will not do for them.[15]

From the preceding, it would seem that managers are able to impact the service climate and, hence, the service provider. Furthermore, it would seem that a high level of agreement between service manager and service provider would facilitate the delivery of quality service. Although a variety of quality improvement programs have been initiated, questions regarding service delivery still prevail.

Study explores guest service

This study was undertaken to better understand the feelings of the management and employees of a full service hotel with respect to the delivery of quality guest service. It seeks a beginning to the study of the relationship between managers and employees on issues related to service delivery.

The survey results will aid in the identification of manager and employee concerns and offer suggestions for the improvement of customer service in a hotel.

The specific objectives were as follows:

- to determine how the concept of quality service delivery is defined by managers
- to determine how the concept of quality service delivery is defined by employees
- to determine how the concept of quality service is communicated, evaluated, and reinforced
- to determine how hotel personnel feel the delivery of service might be improved in the hotel

In addition, it was hoped to be able to identify quality service related issues and present a process of quality service improvement.

Two surveys were used

Two questionnaires were prepared, one for members of the management staff and one for hourly employees. Information was sought to identify the position of the respondent, length of service with the hotel and length of time in the position. Study participants were to respond to open-ended questions which would help to identify the words and phrases managers and employees use to define the terms "service" and "quality service." Additional items related to the identification

of feelings regarding the service provided at the hotel, as well as how the concept of quality service delivery was communicated and how it was recognized. Open-ended items sought to permit the respondents to describe their feelings as they chose. The qualitative analysis looked for common themes and extremes of feeling. Statistical analysis was not attempted due to the small number of participants in the study and the nature of the open-ended questions and ensuing responses.

Twelve questionnaires were given to managers and supervisors, with seven being returned. The manager/supervisor group averaged 3.5 years in their present position and five years in that hotel. Two of the these had been promoted from hourly positions. Nineteen questionnaires randomly were given to hourly employees who had extensive guest contact; 11 were returned. These employees were from the front office, housekeeping, and guest services areas. The employees averaged 1.8 years in their present position and five years experience at that hotel. Several of the employees had been with the hotel since opening.

The property used in the study is a full-service, mid-level, suburban airport hotel which opened in January 1988 to serve the business travel market. During the week its primary customer base consists of the business traveler who is staying for one to two nights. The hotel also serves as a conference center and location for small conventions and is the center for many business training activities.

This hotel contains 247 guest rooms, a large ballroom which may be divided into two smaller ballrooms, and several smaller meeting rooms. In addition, there are 10 meeting rooms which may be configured into classroom, conference, banquet, reception, or theater-style, depending on the need. There are also a restaurant, lounge, exercise room, and swimming pool. The large lobby is suitable for displays, receptions, and break-out sessions, as well as the front desk guest reception area. The opportunities for guest/employee interactions are many.

The hotel's general manager is a part of and responsible to the management contract company which is also a partner in the ownership of the hotel. Additional positions on the management staff include an assistant general manager, a front office manager, a restaurant manager, a human resources manager, a sales and catering manager, an accounting supervisor, a housekeeping supervisor, and a maintenance supervisor. There are over 150 hourly employees to serve guests. The major functional divisions of the hotel are executive office, sales and catering, food and beverage department, rooms department, housekeeping, and maintenance.

Hotel has low turnover

The organizational structure is essentially flat, with few levels between the general manager and

front-line employees. The general manager maintains a policy of accessibility and is often found walking about the hotel speaking with employees and guests. In comparison to the hospitality industry in general, this property has had a low employee turnover rate. Employees receive an orientation from the human resources director and position training from their supervisor, which involves video, booklets, procedure manuals, and supervised hands-on activity. There are several proprietary programs being used system-wide to promote quality service in all the hotels of the chain. In addition, there are training sessions on specialized topics for all affected employees.

Monthly the hotel recognizes the employee of the month as identified by the executive staff. At the annual awards banquet the employee of the year is honored, as are others giving exemplary service. The hotel sponsors an annual picnic in addition to employee luncheons. Other incentives are used to recognize and reward quality service to the guest.

The local competitive environment is expanding. A full-service hotel serving the business market has recently opened next to the study hotel. Nearby are five additional hotels, being both limited service and full service. In many instances they compete for the business of the same travelers. This competitive situation has served to increase the need to meet the desires of the customer in more effective ways. The limit-

ed labor market and competition for high quality oriented employees also has increased the need for hotels to seek greater efficiencies in operations.

To help improve service delivery, the hotel management does a monthly evaluation of comment cards, guest complaints and compliments, personal communication with the guest, and examination of repeat business. The management contract company also attempts to listen to the customer using a variety of methods not unlike those previously referenced.

Indicators such as low employee turnover, higher than average occupancy rate, and profitability would suggest that this hotel is managed in a quality manner. Additionally, the reception of quality service awards over several years from the national chain and management contract company reinforce this. There appears to be a high level of agreement among managers and employees on the issues related to the delivery of high levels of service.

Quality definitions vary

In defining the concept of "quality," managers and employees often used different terms. Managers almost uniformly used the words "excellence," "value," and "reliability" to describe quality. Employees varied more in describing quality as giving the customer your best, something that has good value and character to it, getting what you pay for and more, and giving customers what they are expecting and then some.

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Employees were more service activity oriented than managers in their descriptions.

Service is defined

When asked to describe what the term "quality service" meant, managers used the following phrases: anticipating and exceeding the needs of guests, service with a high degree of excellence, giving the best at all times, and being consistent and reliable. Employees described quality service as delivering a job that a guest feels has a value to it, leaving the guests feeling good about their choice of buy, exceeding your expectations, giving guests the uppermost service from the time the customer steps through the door until they leave, and taking the incentive to do your best but knowing your limitations as well.

When asked about the communication of quality service to employees, managers referred to the training sessions, example setting, department meetings, memos, and discussion of situations involving excellent service at employee luncheons. Employees generally felt managers attempted to communicate and promote quality service, although they were not as pleased with the training they received. They felt that there was training, but it was not very effective. Employees further felt that while there were weekly meetings, memos, and comment card feedback, management should be more involved in demonstrating quality service.

While managers generally felt employees worked together to give quality service, employees were not at the same level of agreement on the issue. About one-third of the employees said this is an area that needs work. They indicated that communication between departments was poor and could be improved upon.

Both managers and employees saw the guest as desiring a high level of service at the hotel. They used terms such as 100 percent guest satisfaction, exceeding expectations, no negative experiences, friendly service, and value for the money. The employees also felt that the facilities in the hotel helped to promote quality and service to the guest.

Improvements were suggested

When asked where the delivery of quality service might be improved, both managers and employees named the rooms and front desk areas. Specific activities were not mentioned by respondents. In discussing the major impediments to the delivery of quality service, managers indicated that finding and keeping quality employees is a problem. They also indicated a lack of training and "poor" communications as areas of concern. Employees mentioned "bad" communication and poor follow-up, and that management does not want to spend the money to make necessary improvements. Specific improvements were not mentioned.

Both groups indicated that improvement could be made through better staffing, increased

training, more communication, and rewards for performance. Also listed by employees as being important were leadership, management control, and not changing the rules every day. Training was mentioned as both a present problem and a potential solution.

Employees and managers believed guests desired a high level of service, but that this service was not always delivered. There appeared to be a lack of common agreement of the definition of quality and how quality service should be delivered. Respondents indicated problems in communication, coordination, training, and teamwork. Examination of the responses also indicated a desire to discuss these issues and deliver a high level of quality service to guests.

Hotel moves forward

The hotel is presently doing many things to promote quality service. It should build on the existing platform and go to the next step of tying all facets together. The following recommendations are based on the responses to the survey questions:

- **Training:** All new employees should participate in a formal quality training program to develop a more common understanding of the term "quality" and the activity of delivering "quality service" to the guest. The training program should be re-energized by increasing the involvement of the supervi-

sor and employee in the learning and performing process. Training might include discussion of why the procedures are as they are and how they work to promote quality service. It is further suggested that during the different phases of training, the employees continually be asked how they feel their behavior will affect guest satisfaction. It will be important to internalize the desire to provide quality service so that it becomes a more natural part of behavior. Monthly refresher sessions should reinforce the desired performance. It is important that the individual conducting the training be knowledgeable in the methods of systematic on-the-job training, have a desire to be a trainer, and be given the needed time to do the training.

- **Incentive Programs:** The hotel presently has a variety of performance recognition and incentive programs. Employees need to better understand these programs and what needs to be done to be recognized. The incentive program should be re-energized by more fully explaining the rules and criteria for each program. Employees should be told why other employees are recognized and what they must work on to be also recognized. Employees should demonstrate how the reward

system is related to the actual performance of quality service. It is also important to be certain the recognition and rewards given are valued and desired by employees. A guest-nominated employee recognition program could be tied to the incentive program.

• **Team Building:** This activity is in two parts. The first concerns the actions of employees as members of a functional team. Often individuals must be taught to work together on what to do and what not to do to benefit the guest, the hotel, and themselves. The second part concerns the development and use of Quality Improvement Teams (QIT), comprised of individuals from across departments considering a variety of operational issues. The QITs might also work on problems identified by guests in face-to-face contact as well as from guest comment cards and surveys. The members should be trained in group communication and problem solving techniques.

• **Communication:** Problems of communication between departments should be identified, as well as areas for improvement from employee feedback surveys. The QITs could work on issues identifying the causes of problems and recommend ways of overcoming them. Management needs to continue to identify and com-

municate performance standards and goals to all levels.

• **Leadership:** Managers must first agree on what is important in the delivery of quality service and how it is to be delivered. The leadership of the hotel must not only identify the need for the delivery of quality service, but must demonstrate the delivery of quality service. Employees need to see managers consistently performing what they say they want, since managers set the tone for the delivery of service. Employees will often imitate behaviors they see managers exhibiting, and those behaviors must be consistent with what is said is important. The creation of a culture of quality service is important to maintaining a quality service performance environment.

Service comes first

Many of the issues relating to quality and the delivery of quality service identified in this project are common to a variety of hospitality businesses. If hospitality establishments are to deliver a defined level of quality to customers, they must first identify what quality is and the level of quality they desire and can afford to deliver. The service concept must be communicated to those who are most responsible for its delivery and operating systems must be in place to assist. This communication of quality must be enforced by actions other

than memos, posters, and short-term instruction.

It is imperative that management behavior continually models the desired approaches to the delivery of quality service. Positive recognition and valued rewards must be utilized to reinforce the delivery of quality service. The organization leadership must create an environment which promotes and rewards quality service.

If the service organization is to be successful, it must pay attention to those factors which drive the service-profit chain as described by Heskett, et. al.[16] Management must demonstrate the recognition of the relation of the front-line employees to the success of the firm and those factors which impact the performance of the employee. Martin[17] suggests that we may be entering a post-TQM era, but the notions of TQM have impacted us in important ways, one of which is the achieving of total organizational commitment to the delivery of quality services and products. This requires an organizational culture which supports the desired day-to-day operations. Agreement on service-related issues among members of management and employees will support that culture. This study shows that there may be much to be done in this area.

The use of an open-ended questionnaire is often useful to help identify the feelings of others. Employees are able to, in their own words, describe how they see the concepts of "quality" and "quality service" in the establishment. They are often able to suggest ideas which will enable them to better deliver the level of performance the hotel advertises. The delivery of quality service involves an understanding of the attitudes and behaviors desired and the systems and people to deliver it in a manner which encourages the guest to return. It encourages strong and open communication. The anonymous open-ended questionnaire is one approach to identify gaps in communication and then design and implement appropriate methods of closing the gaps.

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