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Hotel Guest e-questionnaires: Implications for Feedback and Relationships

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Keywords

hospitality, service quality, relationship, guest questionnaire

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Introduction

The guest questionnaire is a hotel tradition and the mainstay of guest feedback elicitation in use by mainstream hotels. The literature shows hoteliers to have widely embraced e-mail as a communication tool (Murphy et al, 2003; Wei et al, 2001); and there appears to be an emergent trend of it superseding the traditional, paper-based channel of guest-hotel communication. While prior studies in this area have primarily been of guest-to-hotel e-mail response quality (Pechlaner et al, 2002; Schegg et al, 2003, 2006; Matzler et al, 2005), this paper addresses hoteliers' views on two-way e-mail guest communication. It also explores relationship-building between hotel and guest by examining and comparing the cues contained

in paper and e-mail hotel guest questionnaires which encourage guests to provide feedback via paper, e-mail or hotel/chain website.

Guest communication in the hotel industry

The importance of communication in the hotel industry, given its characteristic people-centricity (Lewis and Chambers, 1989; Schneider and Bowen (1993) in Cheng and Brown, 1998; Thompson and Abbott, 1990) and high contact service setting (Bitran and Hoeh, 1990) is widely acknowledged: effective internal and external communication is key to efficient day-to-day operations, and has long-term managerial implications (Garrett and Meyers, 1996; Susskind, 2001). Hotel-to-guest communication typically occurs via Marketing Communications (Gilbert et al, 1999) and during hotel employees' interactions with guests.

Guest-to-hotel communication mostly occurs when guests communicate with front-of-house staff, but also, traditionally, by way of guest questionnaire (also known as a 'comment card'). Hoteliers purport to place high importance on guest communication per se and the widespread use of guest questionnaires is reflected in the literature (Banker et al, 2005; Barsky and Labagh, 1992; Heung and Lam, 2003; Pullman and Cleveland, 2004; Tordjman, 2004; Wisner and Corney, 1999). The paper-based guest questionnaire would appear to be obligatory, given its ubiquitousness - guests expect to find a questionnaire in their guestrooms (Chipkin, 1999). It is a tool with which "the hotel industry is familiar" (Barsky and Labagh, 1992, p. 40) despite criticisms of low response rates (Dillman, 2000; Gabbie and O'Neill, 1996; Gundersen et al, 1996; Lewis and Chambers, 1989; information yields that often cannot provide actionable feedback for managers (Barsky and Nash, 2001; Gundersen et al, 1996; Jones and Ioannou, 1993); and poor representativeness (Barsky and Nash, 2001; Heymann and Schall, 2002; Lewis and Pizam, 1981; Meyer and Westerbarkey, 1996).

E-mail: a customer interface

Murphy et al (2007, p. 743) underscore the popularity of e-mail in the hospitality industry providing "a unique opportunity for personalized and intimate interactions with guests, thus enhancing *customer relationships*" (italics added); however they suggest its application by hotel operators is unsophisticated. Nevertheless, large hotel chains, such as Hilton and Marriott, have been reported in the press as phasing out paper questionnaires and surveys in their North American properties, replacing them with e-mail based derivatives (Alexander, 2006). Their action suggests they believe the technology is proven and the most hotel guest is receptive to it. This uptake is likely to be buoyed by reports that extol the virtues of e-mail. For example, two commercial studies on the effectiveness of e-mail communications found it to be an effective marketing tool (Nelson, 2006). Grönroos et al (2000, p. 250) highlight the interactive nature of e-mail which, as a major part of the communication element of the Internet offering, "illustrates the dialogue that can occur between the service provider and the customer". This dialogue, according to Schegg et al (2003), can be facilitated in hotels by websites and e-mail. Apart from a customer interface function, e-mail also provides opportunities for marketers to create and maintain dialogue with customers (Grönroos et al, 2000; Newell, 2000).

Other studies, however, indicate the pace of uptake to be varied. In Turkey, Aksu and Tarcan (2002) found the dedicated e-mail channel for guest complaints to be in its infancy;

and similarly in Switzerland, Frey et al (2003) discovered variability at the implementation stage. Murphy et al (2006) found that the sophistication of e-mail application by Swiss hotels is also variable.

Changing of the guard: paper to e-questionnaire

Susskind (2006) found in his study of communication-channel preferences of restaurant guests that written communication directed at management (letter, e-mail or web) was preferred over questionnaire/comment card to convey a complaint, suggesting the migration to e-questionnaires may be underpinned by a perception that the virtual variant is more effective than the traditional paper counterpart. However, studies have shown e-mail responses to be ineffectual (Murphy and Tan, 2003; Schegg et al, 2003), and operationalization deficient (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007; Fux et al, 2006; Schegg et al, 2006). This indicates the need for an assessment of the question: how do hoteliers at the property level perceive e-mail communication with their guests in terms of proactively obtaining guest e-mail addresses and utilizing them as part of their managerial modus operandi? This is particularly pertinent given that technologically sophisticated guests are generally more demanding, requiring an immediate response via e-mail (Mattila and Mount, 2003). This resonates with recent findings that timeliness is a key element of the customer's attitude toward the hotel, leading to customer satisfaction and establishing customer loyalty (Jones et al, 2007; Zehrer and Pechlaner, 2006). According to Alexander's (2006) newspaper article, fast response was the underlying reason for Marriott to switch to e-mail. Tardy or inconsistent e-mail response would therefore be off putting guests who may wish to volunteer feedback. As a consequence, a hotel would potentially lose the opportunity to seize upon negative critical incident knowledge that would mitigate switching behaviour in guests (Colgate et al, 2007). Notwithstanding the limitations of the static service-encounter-based variant of the critical incident technique (Roos, 2002) applying to paper and e-questionnaires, these tools continue to be relevant and useful to hotel management.

Hotelier-Guest Relationships

Hoteliers use the term 'relationship' to characterise an interaction between the customer and the service-providing employee (King, 1995; King and Garey, 1997). Price and Arnould (1999) show the parochial usage of the term relationship to be confounding, while McColl-Kennedy et al (2003) assert it is subjective, due to the variations of relationships available to consumers. Hoteliers continue to use the generic term despite its complexity (Louvieris et al, 2003). Literature directed at operators (Guttek 1995, 1997; Guttek et al. 2002; Magnini and Honeycutt Jr., 2005) indicates the need to differentiate between the different 'relationships' occurring between customer and service provider. Perhaps the use of the term has been perpetuated by the media as demonstrated by a declaration made by a travel industry pundit that e-mail is a facilitator of customer relationship (Hareveldt in Sharkey, 2003).

Roos (2002), however, points out, that relationships between customers and service providers extend beyond face-to-face encounters, as new technology has been increasingly used to control and support service encounters. Relationships, pseudo-relationships, encounters and enhanced encounters apply to the hotel industry (Guttek, 1995, 1997; Guttek et al, 2002). More recently, Riley (2007) notes that 'relationship encounters' is a tourism and

hospitality phenomenon. Therefore, the question arises: is a relationship in hotels a misnomer? The frequent posting movement phenomenon by hoteliers, especially those with hotel chains (Clark, personal interview, 2005; Al-Bala'a, personal interview, 2007), strongly suggests such hoteliers not to have relationships per se, but rather enhanced encounters or 'commercial friendships' (Price and Arnould, 1999).

Notwithstanding the semantic issues, Lin's (2007) study of customer satisfaction in Taiwan used a comprehensive perspective serving to highlight the importance of the interaction between service provider and customer. He found the interpersonal-based service encounter to be better than the technology-based service encounter in functional quality; while the technology-based service encounter is better than the interpersonal-based service encounter in technical quality. He also found functional quality has a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction; service quality has a positive and significant effect on service value; and service value has a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction. Therefore the service encounter has a positive and significant effect on relationship involvement; and relationship involvement has a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction.

There has, however, been no indication that hotels in Asia Pacific have followed the path taken in North America in the matter of the continued widespread use of paper guest questionnaires. Given that e-mail evaluation is in its infancy (Murphy et al, 2007), it was appropriate to conduct an exploratory study in the Asia Pacific region on the uptake of this emerging trend. The objectives were:

- 1) To explore hotelier attitudes toward e-mail as a communication channel with guests;
- 2) To determine if hoteliers elicit guests' e-mail addresses in their existing paper questionnaire and, if so, is this a prelude to engender subsequent e-mail communication; and
- 3) To discuss to what extent e-mail communication between the hotelier and guest engenders a "relationship".

Methodology

Two methods were used to achieve the objectives:

- a) Content analysis of hotel questionnaires used by hotels in Perth, Penang and Singapore obtained by convenience sampling ($n = 71$) to ascertain guest e-mail information gathering initiatives via prompts and/or data fields. Selection criteria included:
 1. Hotel category which was high to mid-range in accordance with the World Tourism Organisation model of minimum hotel standards (cited in Lawson, 1995);
 2. Target respondents (guests staying in the hotel);
 3. Placement of questionnaire (in-room: situated anywhere within the confines of the guestroom); and
 4. Principal language (English).

The primary researcher made 'cold calls' at hotels and requested from the Front Desk personnel an in-room guest questionnaire, that is the questionnaire provided to guests who are registered and staying at the hotel. If a hotel placed more than one questionnaire in the

guestroom and the items were not duplicates, both questionnaires were included in the sample. Food and beverage outlet questionnaires intended for diners and city guests were not collected. The sampling was not random so the findings are not generalizable.

- b) GM interviews conducted in Perth, Penang and Singapore ($n = 22$) to explore hotelier attitudes toward e-mail communication with guests and efficacy in complaint handling. Access to the respondents was through personal contacts of the primary researcher. Criterion purposive sampling was used to overcome the anticipated unavailability of respondents due to the peak holiday season. The selection criteria were as follows:
 1. General Manager or Hotel/Property Manager position. If unavailable, the Executive Assistant Manager (EAM), Rooms Division Manager (RDM), or Front Office Manager (FOM) would be acceptable if suitably qualified.
 2. Employment at a 3-star rated hotel or above.

Results of Content Analysis

The analysis of the cues in the pro-forma content of the questionnaires notifying guests that e-mail communication was available using prompts or solicitation of guest e-mail addresses revealed:

- a) Variable attitudes towards e-mail data collection; and
- b) Variable usage of e-mail according to hotel affiliation (independent versus chain).

a) Variable attitudes towards e-mail data collection

Half (50.7%) of the sample ($n=71$) had a dedicated guest e-mail field in the questionnaire. In contrast, 80.3% contained a standard mailing address field while 40.9% had a telephone number field. This data suggests that, while some hoteliers considered e-mail as a viable mode of hotel-to-guest communication channel, it had not been fully embraced across the board at that time (2005). Further, although some questionnaires did not contain a mailing address field, they did prompt the guest for a room number which would have allowed the hotelier to trace such details from the mandated, hotel property management system guest history collected at guest registration. Data such as e-mail address, however, is discretionary and optional. One hotel did not solicit the e-mail field as a direct communication link per se, but as a means to distribute their 'e-mail special offer updates'. Only five questionnaires (7%) contained a fax number field indicating a general abandonment of old technology. While hoteliers would appear to discard old technology readily, they seem less ready to adopt new technology, contradicting the observation made that global hoteliers were quick to embrace e-mail demonstrating their attitudes to be synchronous with the pace of information technology (Wei et al, 2001).

Of the sample, only 26.8% had provided their hotel e-mail address on the questionnaire, thereby indicating that, while hoteliers may consider e-mail as form of hotel-to-guest communication channel, they do not accord the same viability to it as a guest-to-hotel channel. This sits well with the findings of Luck and Lancaster (2003) which showed that hotel groups in the UK used the Internet to provide information to, rather than to gather information from, their guests. While the hotel would be able to respond to an e-mail from a guest simply by

using the ‘reply’ function of its e-mail application, it did not facilitate or encourage a guest to e-mail feedback in lieu of using the paper questionnaire. Further observations appeared to show a random approach to the utilization of e-mail:

- Of those questionnaires that appeared to solicit guests’ e-mail addresses ($n = 34$), 38.2% contained the hotel e-mail address. It can be surmised then that, among those hoteliers who find the e-mail a viable way to contact their guests, some do not necessarily consider this form of communication as a viable one for their guest to contact the hotel.
- A few hotels ($n = 5$) provided their e-mail addresses on their questionnaires without soliciting the guest e-mail address. This suggests some hoteliers may wish to provide a guest with the option of contacting the hotel by e-mail and therefore be seen as reactive rather than proactive in establishing an e-communication link.
- An e-mail address, (privacy@examplehotelchain.com) was provided by one hotel from a large international chain, allowing guests to contact the chain with any queries regarding data confidentiality of the questionnaire/survey; therefore it was not intended to solicit guests’ e-mail addresses for purposes of initiating communication or to respond to non-privacy related enquiries.

The data show e-mail addresses provided by the hotel relate mostly to:

- 1) Room Bookings (e.g. reservations@hotelx.com; stay@examplehotelchain.com), and
- 2) General Information (e.g. info@hotely.com; hotelz@examplehotelchain.com; emailus.country@examplehotelchain.com; country@examplehotelchain.com).

One hotel did not indicate to whom the e-mail should be directed, but clearly identified the location and chain (am@city.examplehotelchain.com.au), while another incorporated only the first three letters of the hotel name and the chain name in its e-mail address (pen@xyzhotels.com.sg). One chain hotel questionnaire used a general manager-specific e-mail address (gm@examplehotelchain.com.sg) which would be directed to the incumbent general manager, but this was property specific and unique because questionnaires belonging to sister hotels did not apply this convention. Therefore, in all, with one exception, no attempt was made to forge a direct link with the hotelier, indicating its perfunctory role. The conclusion to be drawn is that hotels wish to foster a pseudo-relationship with their guests, further evidenced by inadequate e-mail addresses and website domain name matching (Hashim and Murphy, 2007). The practice of permitting variations in chain hotel e-mail addresses between and within brands may suggest an attempt to create differentiation which may overcome the impersonality associated with an inflexible corporate identity. The motivation for this differentiation could be an attempt to foster a closer association with guests within different market segments. However, it might just indicate a casual attitude towards e-mail communication. The possibility of using the general manager’s direct e-mail, although operationally impractical, cannot be discounted even though it is questionable that a logistical issue would outweigh the benefits of personalization (Schaefer and Dillman, 1998).

Given the tendency for customers to view “individual service providers erroneously as if they are the organization” (Wollard and Rocco, 2006), it would seem appropriate that hotel general managers would want to establish a clearly definable contact within the hotel for guests to e-mail for matters other than room reservations, particularly concerning complaints.

b) Variable usage of e-mail according to hotel affiliation (independent versus chain)

The findings indicate a disparate attitude toward e-mail between chain and independent hotels. Of the 26 questionnaires with dedicated guest e-mail fields, eight belonged to independent hotels (23.5%) with the remainder being either managed or franchised chain hotels. Both large and medium/small chains appeared to demonstrate an equal tendency to obtain e-mail data from guests.

The following can be surmised from the data:

- Chains are more inclined to communicate with guests via e-mail. This may be due to the resources possessed by a large organisation allowing for data management. This practice, however, may reflect the chain ethos but not necessarily represent that of the franchisee.
- The usage of e-mail is a chain characteristic, irrespective of the size and type of chain.
- Independent hoteliers may be slow in the uptake of e-mail as a guest-to-hotel communication channel. This slow uptake could be due to the mindset of the hotelier vis-à-vis technology (Rowe and Ogle, 2007). The link between hotelier predisposition to technology and technology output is furthered by the argument of Winata and Mia (2005) that the use of information technology for communication (ITC) enhances inherent management processes and decision styles in an organisation, thereby insinuating ITC adoption is highly dependent on the mentality of the manager. Pechlaner et al (2002) report that hoteliers' attitudes toward the Internet impacted on the type of e-mail response.

GM Interviews

The in-depth interviews revealed diversity in hotelier attitudes towards e-mail as a vehicle for hotel-guest communication:

a) General inclination to use e-mail evidenced by no less than 15 respondents who stated unequivocally they had and would use e-mail to communicate with guests. The willingness to use e-mail, however, might not be wholehearted, as one respondent said:

....not a lot of people actually put their email address on there... but if they have bothered to put an email address on there, I would suggest that the thought was that they were expecting an email...(Respondent # 17).

b) Increased e-mail traffic with guests as emphasized by respondent # 3:

Quite a lot of people put their email address these days so it's generally one of the two (e-mail and telephone)... very rarely do I actually mail a letter these days.

c) The impersonal nature of e-mail, respondent # 5 declaring that, notwithstanding having used telephone and e-mail responses, *due probably to my age, I still feel e-mail is a little bit impersonal still... I still prefer the written letter.* This sentiment was shared by respondent # 17 who, while maintaining that *a proper document with a letterhead on it is most probably the way to go, grappled with what is the difference between a letter and an email... a letter is generated again on a typewriter or from a computer, it is not as if it is the days when somebody actually sat down and wrote by hand.*

d) Technological issues:

Some conservative hoteliers may not be entirely comfortable using new technology due to its impersonal connotations; therefore they present with adoption issues compatible with the perception of a tendency for resistance to change in the industry, with some members being the last to adopt new technology. Lam et al, (2007) suggest that hotelier mindset influences the uptake and adoption of IT; therefore, if the hotel manager is uncomfortable with the technology, the possibility exists of a 'trickle down' effect. Hotelier conservative attitudes may not be reflective of personal views on technology but rather, as respondent # 10 implied by saying his mother *still writes letters – there are millions of people in the world who are still like that*, which is indicative of guest attitudes toward technology.

Murphy et al, (2006) recently exhorted hoteliers to “establish and train (their) staff on email policies” although the necessity of basic e-mail procedures was previously identified (Murphy et al, 2006; Schaefer and Dillman, 1998). A lingering discomfort with e-mail usage felt by some hoteliers remains, despite it being widely available since the mid-90s (Wei et al, 2001), and considered a guestroom amenity (Shundigg, 1997; Wolchuck, 1997). Could this be attributed to a concern that the inclusion of an e-mail field on the paper questionnaire would create clutter or be a garnish?

Relationship

Two respondents referred to the term 'relationship' during the course of the interview. One respondent indicated that a relationship was a longer term interaction thereby indicating an appreciation for the definitional distinction between service encounter and relationship, but apparently not as further discrimination between relationship and pseudo-relationship:

To me it's all about relationship building and that relationship is built over perhaps not so much as always on an official basis.... on a casual basis, we get to know the people a little bit better (respondent #10)

The respondent, however, implied personal relationships to be important in the hotel industry, and that he would *invite people in for dinners,... do entertaining, correspondence through e-mails, etc.*

This appears to contradict the view of one respondent that relationships with guests could be problematic when lamenting that *becoming too closely attached* (can manifest in) *some customers* (to) *start bullying the staff* (respondent #6).

One respondent underscored the importance of commercial friendship by stating *what I believe what makes you comfortable is if you know the guy that is there. You know the GM or the FOM or the concierge or the housekeeper or something, then everything else is a lot easier to follow* (Respondent # 20) so countering the pseudo-relational orientation of the sampled questionnaires.

Conclusion

E-mail communication is widely embraced globally as shown by studies such as that on Swiss SMEs (Schubert and Leimstoll, 2004) and Australian travel agencies (Vasudavan and Standing, 1999). According to Werthner and Ricci (2004), the tourism industry is the leading application in the business-to-consumer (B2C) arena. Based on the findings of this study, the hotel sector would appear to lag behind the other sectors in highlighting the B2C orientation of e-commerce in the treatment given to e-mail communication. This appears to contradict the findings of a study by Wei et al (2001) of international hotel executives which found 97.5%

of hotels at which the respondents worked to use e-mail; and also e-mail to be commonly used for contacting guests (66.1%).

A bandwagon effect apparently occurs in the hotel sector concerning the uptake of e-mail as a primary method of hotel-guest communication, given recent studies show poor quality in feedback. This concurs with the view of Murphy et al (2003) who contend hoteliers have been party to the internet bandwagon effect, with some not fully realizing the potential of e-mail as a business-communication tool, despite hosting websites.

Questionable efficacy of e-mail-based communication channel as a platform for relationship building is noted. 'Relationship', in the context of the hotelier lexicon, is the interaction between hotelier and guest, and may not constitute a relationship per se, or as defined by Gutek and Welsh (2000) as interactions involving situational adaptation, mutual trust and knowledge, and an expectation of continuity. The degree of relationship is not clearly distinguished in the hotel industry, being commonly used interchangeably with service encounter. Perhaps this occurs because the distinction between the two becomes blurred as it could be in "boundary open" transactions which Arnould and Price (1993) describe as those "resembling a meeting between friends", commonplace in the hotel context. Given the cynical view from a customer perspective, the relationship may actually be spurious (Liljander and Roos, 2002) with companies "pretending it's a relationship" (Gutek and Welsh, 2000, p. 3). A perception is thereby connoted that the actions taken by the establishment are mercenary, manipulative and plastic, requiring a concerted effort to project genuineness being paramount. This cannot be undermined by initiatives that could be considered impersonal or mechanical; these surely further eroding the tenuous relationship which the hospitality industry strives to develop. What appears to be a notion of relationship occurs between the service provider, in this case the hotel chain or a hotel as a business entity, and the customer, viz the guest.

However in some cases, a personal relationship which can be described as a compound bond of social, cultural, ideological and psychological aspects (Liljander and Strandvik, 1995) may form between hotelier and guest, becoming long-term, despite career movement attributable to the use of chain domain e-mail addresses, provided the individual hotelier remains with a particular chain. Hence the relationship extends beyond being centred on relational benefits, such as special treatment (Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner, 1998) accessed when a guest 'knows' the hotel general manager.

The adoption of the e-questionnaire as a direct replacement of the paper questionnaire can arguably be premature given the indicators that: response mechanisms are in their infancy, the disparate hoteliers' attitudes are ambivalent, a uniform convention on e-mail etiquette is deficient, and the intrusion of legality issues (Mills, Clay and Mortensen, 2000). It would appear that, although the hotels sampled had, similar to that noted by Frey et al (2003) in their study of Swiss hotels, gone beyond the initiation phase of having websites and e-mail, there had been marginal movement toward the implementation phase by which time policies governing operational administration should be in place. This delayed implementation is untenable, given that the procedure consists of the "seemingly simple task of answering e-mail(s) promptly, politely and personally" (Frey et al, 2003). E-mail, despite its lack of maturity as a guest communication channel, if properly executed, plays an important function as an adjunct to the paper questionnaire, and as a component of a multi-channel approach (Schijns, 2004).

The small sample of questionnaires and GMs represents the main limitation of this paper thereby necessitating a cautious approach in making generalisations of e-questionnaires in Asia Pacific hotels. The findings suggest the adoption of e-questionnaires as a direct replacement of the paper questionnaire is premature given divergent hotelier views and shortcomings in e-mail response administration. However, if properly executed, e-mail can play an increasingly important adjunct role to the paper guest questionnaire as a part of a multi-channel approach.

Future research

A longitudinal content analysis of hotel guest questionnaires would reflect the extent of change in hotelier acceptance of e-mail as a hotel-guest interface. Further data gathering is needed to investigate response mechanisms in the event of property rebranding, property closure or key personnel change. Sample responsiveness by applying the EMSQ model (Murphy et al, 2007b) to determine the effect of the 'warmth' factor on feedback elicitation and relationship building should be tested.

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