

Guest Satisfaction: Another Perspective

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Volume 8, Number 2, July 1989

Hébergement et tourisme

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080318ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1080318ar>

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Publisher(s)

Université du Québec à Montréal

ISSN

0712-8657 (print)

1923-2705 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ha Tran, V. (1989). Guest Satisfaction: Another Perspective. *Téoros*, 8(2), 8–9.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1080318ar>

GUEST SATISFACTION: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Dans cet article, l'auteur discute du concept de satisfaction du client dans l'industrie hôtelière et particulièrement dans un contexte de segmentation du marché et de positionnement concurrentiel. L'auteur termine en discutant des différentes techniques de mesure de la satisfaction.

In many service industries and particularly in the Hotel industry, "Guest Satisfaction" seems to be a buzz word which is always proclaimed by hoteliers ranging from of 1/2 star properties to 5 star hotels. Everywhere you turn, it seems that there is no need to preach about guest satisfaction, the industry already knows. It is similar to the fact that today's society is aware that cheating and stealing are bad, yet cheating and stealing are commonplace in this very same society.

The more one tries to dwell into the question of Guest Satisfaction, the less one is satisfied that the question is anywhere nearly capable of being answered. It is true that the majority of the hoteliers realize that without making their guest happy and satisfied, there will be no repeat business, or to the other extreme, no business whatsoever. But life is not that simple. The effect of competition is always forcing hotel facilities to outperform one another. There are many types of customers, each segment demands a different set of attributes for their complicated matrix of requirements, leading to the fact that one set of attributes may satisfy one group of customers yet alienate another.

Combined with all these complications, the hoteliers themselves are working within budgetary constraints, which invariably does not allow them to be everything to everyone. The economics of reality forces every one of us to make a choice, and if that choice is well made and well executed, the results will be PROFITS, otherwise, it may lead to mediocrity, or even failure.

We shall attempt to answer the question of how competently the industry is treating the matter of Guest Satisfaction.

Guest satisfaction in the age of market segmentation

The 80's have been predominated by the advent of a rapid growth in the area of market segmentation. As predicted by John Naisbitt in

the early part of the 1980's, the market is undergoing a polarization process, which has resulted in an expansion of the first class, deluxe accommodations while at the same time increasing the number of no-frill economy hotels. Not only has the segmentation taken the form of an economic differentiation (based on price, value etc.), it has also taken the form of a psychographic differentiation (i.e. similar pricing yet appealing to different psychographic profiles such as pretentious versus friendly; conservative versus non-conformist etc.).

In the midst of this market segmentation era, when one speaks of Guests, one must be careful since there is no longer a common definition of the guest profile, and there is no longer one all encompassing formula that should be applied in order to satisfy guests.

To prove this point, it is no longer possible to give one definite answer to any one of the following questions: is it appropriate for a bell-person to be friendly with customers? Should we provide a swimming pool to our guests even though only 15% of them use it while the rest have to pay for it? etc.

What it eventually boils down to is, before we determine the level of guest satisfaction, we must define *who* the guests are that we wish to attract and serve. To define the target consumers, the hotelier needs to analyze the market, the customers, the competition and the products/services that are being offered within the market trading area. This whole exercise is called market positioning and whether it is done formally or intuitively, some form of positioning is always taking place.

Guest satisfaction and positioning

Each hotel operates under a BRAND. Positioning is the art of communicating an image, a promise which becomes associated with the brand, so that when people will think of the brand, they will immediately associate it with a series of benefits which they will receive by using this particular brand. Positioning starts with the selection of the target customers and the series of attributes that will appeal to this particular target market. This group of attributes will make the hotel(s) the unquestionable winner in the minds of this particular market segment. The

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next step in the positioning process is the development of a communication strategy which will convince the target consumers that it is this particular hotel(s) which will deliver the set of attributes that will satisfy their needs (be it physiological, emotional or logical needs). Once the customers are convinced at this juncture they will try the hotel(s) which will make an attempt to deliver their promise. Three situations will eventually occur:

- 1- If the promise is met, the customers will walk away happy and will most likely return to the same facility on their next trip.
- 2- If the promise is not met, the customers will be unsatisfied, and will most likely not return. However, they may voice their negative opinions to the hotel management and continue to give this facility another chance.
- 3- If the promise is not met, a customer will just walk away in disbelief and will vocally express his negative opinions about the property. In this case the hotel may not hear any feedback from the customer, and the damage will be irreversible.

It is important not to forget that by establishing a distinct market position, we are indirectly alienating the customers that we are not trying to attract. Should this segment end up staying in our particular hotel(s), they will most surely be unhappy. When we obtain feedback from this group, we should be careful not to overact to their opinion.

On the other hand, it is of utmost importance to find out if the target customers we are trying to attract are indeed happy and satisfied with our product. By opening a communication channel with our target customers, we will find out if the promise has been met; if some of the attributes are out of line, are not important, or if some other attributes are missing which should be added, etc. Positioning is never a static situation, it is actually a dynamic process since the customers are also changing and a smart marketer must always be in-tune with the changing customers' aspirations.

A clear positioning will have an important structural impact to all aspects of the hotel operations. A luxurious, pretentious environment requires different types of employees, different types of training and various customer relation skills. On the other hand, an economy hotel would require a totally distinct set of people, skills, etc... A luxury image should be reflected throughout the entire operation. Since customers are paying a hefty price for the services being offered they should not be subject to any excuses. An economy hotel, on the other hand, can afford to cut corners since frugality is accepted by the economical consumers even before they enter the establishment.

Guest satisfaction varies between each type of positioning. Without this understanding, it is not possible to accurately measure the level of satisfaction, to gauge how well the property performs and it is not possible to fine-tune the operations to deliver a superior product (within the target market) that will bring a greater amount of guests.

How guest satisfaction is monitored

One of the objectives of a Guest Satisfaction monitoring system is to establish trends which will measure against pre-established goals. Many hotels, independent or even large chains, carry a guest comment card in-room in order to obtain feedback from customers. However, it is unfortunate that this process does not go beyond the mere answering of a criticism by sending the upset customers a "bribe". Some American chains have recently introduced an electronic feedback system upon the checking out of their guests. There are many ways to monitor guest satisfaction, but again, in the writer's opinion, this investment is only worthwhile if management has a genuine interest in obtaining feedback and are honestly seeking ways of improving guest satisfaction. Otherwise, a negative impact may occur due to customer's perception of the company giving "lip service" to consumerism.

The following are some techniques most widely used in order to obtain consumer's feedback:

- Meet and chat with your guests in the lobby. This age-old technique is very effective in bringing out a lot of unexpected reactions from guests, however it runs the risk of being subjective, full of bias and a lack of a scientific base.
- Comment cards: fairly inexpensive and effective, however it needs to be treated statistically because the feedback information will usually come from the two extreme groups: the extremely satisfied or the extremely unhappy. The response rate is usually low, unless the entire staff of the hotel actively participates in suggesting guests to provide some form of feedback.
- Lobby intercepts: usually conducted by a professional market research house. Guests will be invited to answer a questionnaire (with or without incentives). The surveys are usually done on an ad hoc basis, and most of the time are used to confirm or refute certain hypothesis. This is not the most effective way to measure customer satisfaction on an ongoing basis.
- Telephone survey using the hotel guest list. A random sample of guests who stayed at the hotel over the past period (month, quarter, etc.) will be drawn and interviewed over the phone. This process is quite expensive and therefore is not done often enough to provide

operational diagnosis for immediate corrective actions.

- Focus Groups: groups of hotel guests are invited to participate in an informal discussion about the hotel. This type of exercise sometimes provides a large amount of good qualitative information, yet lacks the statistical basis for decision making. Focus groups are usually used to obtain qualitative feedback and should not be used to measure customer satisfaction.
- Participation in a syndicated Guest Service Monitoring System: this may be the most effective, least costing system, which does not only provide feedback from your guests, but also provides a comparison of how well your hotel performs against its competition. This system comes with a monthly trend and performance report.

As a final note, the writer is of the opinion that in order to outperform the competition in this competitive market, it is important to approach the situation systematically: at first to review the hotel positioning; to review the product offerings and to set up staff training, adjust the F.F.&E. (furniture, furnishings and equipments) programs accordingly; set up a communication plan to effectively promote the image of the hotel; and finally set up a Guest Satisfaction Monitoring system to make sure that the positioning and strategies adopted by management are producing results. Unless this process is done in such a systematic manner, the prospects of excelling as a consumer-driven company will be no more effective than a random shot in the dark.