

Measuring Service Quality: A Challenge for Hotel Managers

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Service Quality is a central factor for the improvement of competitiveness in the tourism sector. Our research addresses this issue in the Greek luxury hotel sector.

The hospitality sector is one of the fastest growing sectors worldwide. It constitutes the basic factor of Greece' economic growth and contributes significantly to the country's trade balance. In this context, service quality measurement is a great challenge for the hotel managers. Measuring customer perception of service is a starting point of management assessment of what can be done to improve service quality.

One of the most common ways for managers to measure service quality is the guest questionnaire. The guest questionnaire (which the industry also calls a "common card") is a hotel tradition (Barsky & Nash, 2001) often described as a guest satisfaction survey (Prasad, 2003). The most favored questionnaire variant is one that combines closed multiple choice questions with some open-ended questions, which, together with other collaterals, are placed in the guestroom (Lewis, 1983; Losekoot, Wezel, & Wood, 2001; Trice & Layman, 1984) for the guest to use on demand. This passive method of measuring service quality through guest feedback is the primary one that mainstream hotels use (Barsky & Huxley, 1992; Geller, 1984) and may be the only formal feedback mechanism employed.

A change and evolution for the hotel managers would be the shifting from a paper questionnaire to an electronic format (e-format) and the implementation of "mystery shopping" as service quality measurement tools. Other service industries such as airlines have influenced the shift to the e-format (Dandapani, 2006), and the proliferation of online e-commerce card services' suppliers targeting the hotel industry is increasingly evident (Yelkur and DaCosta, 2001) with hotels commonly providing guest feedback links on their websites.

Concerning mystery shopping it uses trained researchers to act as customers or potential customers of an organization with the intention of monitoring and assessing the quality of the customer service experience, and the processes and procedures used in the delivery of the service. In research terms it is a form of participant observation, or "disguised observation" (Hair et al., 2003). The mystery shoppers taste the customer experience first hand with the instruction to test it methodically, usually against a specific service standard (Wilson and Gutmann, 1998). They complete a report on their service experiences. It provides a "snapshot" of the service being provided at one place at one time, unaffected by previous experiences (Guzman, 1992), thus providing reinforcement of what otherwise only can be assumed to take place. Organizations can use the feedback in a variety of ways, with typical uses being the improvement of service processes and staff behavior, with the primary intention to make the customer's next experience of the organization better than it was before. Mystery shopping in short term tends to lead to improvements to the quality of service Wilson, A. (1998). An integration of mystery shopping results and questionnaire results of guest satisfaction, could provide hotel managers with more information regarding hotel's service performance.

An ongoing research project within MSL aims at addressing the service quality problematic in the Greek luxury hotel sector, by developing and testing a conceptual service quality measuring model reliant on both employees' and customers' perception of service quality.

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