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USING THE “LEARN MODEL” TO RESOLVE GUEST COMPLAINTS

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Abstract: The demands of guest in the hospitality industry and their satisfaction with the services they have consumed have become a prevailing competitive tool. Today, the guest as an individual is capable of damaging the reputation of a hospitality service provider by telling others of his/her experiences of the shortcoming of services rendered and consumed. Complaints against hospitality establishments are often calls of attention to the need for improving not only the overall process of preparing and rendering service or one of its parts but also the entire way operations are organised in a hospitality facility.

What guests really mind and what causes customer-defection is an indolent and negligent attitude of a hospitality establishment towards guest complaints. In principle, complainants do not have a negative view of a specific hospitality facility and most guests do not make formal complaints. Instead, they choose to simply leave a facility when something is not to their liking, never to return, and turn to the competition.

The purpose of this paper is to explain how the objections and formally expressed complaints of guests can be transformed into stronger loyalty towards a hospitality facility or specific type of service, because guests who have seen their claims resolved in a satisfactory manner are very likely to tell others of their experience. To this end, the paper focuses on the LEARN Model for resolving guest complaints against hospitality services.

Keywords: guest, complaint, hospitality, LEARN Model.

INTRODUCTION

For a better understanding of this paper, the following section provides a brief overview of the linguistic similarities and differences of the terms that are commonly associated to the expression of a guest's discontent with services rendered.

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The term *claim* refers to “an appeal, protest, reproach to the quality and quantity or delivery times of goods or services rendered”.²

The term *objection* refers to an “expression of discontent caused by someone’s actions or mistake”,³ while *grievance* refers to a “written statement against an illegal or irregular procedure” or “an expression of dissatisfaction with someone’s actions”.⁴

Although the terms *claim*, *objection*, *grievance* and *complaint* almost always refer to the same thing, the term *complaint* will be used in this paper as it implies “complaining against someone or something”⁵, or “expressing discontent”⁶, and the officially prescribed form in the “*Ordinance on the Form, Contents and Manner of Keeping the Book of Complaints*” also contains this term.

The statement that guests will turn to the competition because of shortcomings and problems linked to services does not stand. What makes guests really angry and causes customer-defection is an indolent and negligent attitude toward their complaints. No formula exists in the hospitality business that will produce a “totally satisfied guest”, because this is simply impossible to do. Although there will always be complaints, and guests will continuously find new reasons to complain, it should be underlined that it is far more difficult to win a new client than retain an old one, and certainly many times more expensive.

For as long as the hospitality industry has been around, guests have always made various complaints and objections against hospitality staff and facilities. Objections made to the staff most often relate to the quality of services in hospitality facilities, the quality-price ratio, amenities, cleanliness, the staff’s attitude towards guests, and then to various other circumstances. Generally, verbal objections are made more frequently than written objections, and they are more temperate. Written objections can be found in books of complaint, in the letters of guests to hospitality managers, and in surveys that hospitality establishments carry out among their guests. Increasingly, written objections are also appearing in the letters of readers in newspaper articles, magazines and, most recently, on Web pages (in Blogs).

The research and analysis of these sources of written objections of guests generated over a longer period have led to a conclusion, that is almost a rule: Written objections, in whatever form they may take, are almost never limited to only a single reprimand, that is, the dissatisfied consumers of hospitality services never focus on only one failing but always tend to list a number of them. As a rule, dissatisfied guests who are discontent with a specific segment of overall hospitality services will first express their discontent verbally to the appropriate person in the hospitality facility. Providing this verbal objection results in a positive effect for the guest, that is, the reason for the objection has been removed, the guest will feel no need to write about this to anyone or anywhere.

² Anic, V., Goldstein I., *Rjenik stranih rijeci*, Novi liber, Zagreb, 2005, p. 491.

³ Anic V., *Rjecnik hrvatskog jezika*, Novi liber, Zagreb, 200., p. 429.

⁴ Anic V., op.cit., p. 439.

⁵ Anic V., op.cit., p. 663.

⁶ Anic V., op.cit., p. 663.

If, however, a verbal objection fails to eliminate the cause, in most cases it will be followed up by a written objection, considerably more cutting and of greater breadth than the verbal one, because, in the large majority of cases, the guest is likely not to keep only to the main reason of the objection, but will instead list other reasons of discontent as well to support his written statement. Hence, in almost all written objections a number of points or matters of objection can be found, although only one was crucial in instigating the written statement.

The above leads to the conclusion that hospitality establishments must give their full consideration to verbal objections, show attention and try to eliminate or alleviate the reasons for the objection. This will help to avert grievances from being made beyond the hospitality facility and prevent the dissemination of a negative image of the hospitality facility, as guests are inclined to expound to the people of their milieu in order to convince them in the rightness of their actions.

1. NEW VIEWS ON GUEST SATISFACTION

Although most hospitality workers do not enjoy listening to the complaints of their guests, they must realise that guests also do not enjoy in making complaints. Also, they must be aware that guests who have not had the opportunity to express their grievances are likely to tell their friends, relatives and even business partners of their bad experience. The best technique for handling a misunderstanding with an unreasonable guest is the explanation technique or fact-asserting technique.⁷ When a problem is quickly resolved, it leaves the guest feeling that the staff is there to meet his needs. For this reason, each complaint is welcome as an opportunity to improve guest relationships.

A psychological approach to resolving all kinds of complaints is an exceptionally important pointer in dealing with guests, and it can go a long way to enhancing the image of a hospitality facility. What is most important is that the complaints of guests are handling by competent people, making the guest feel that his objections will not be neglected but will be seriously looked into. Taking the complaints of guests lightly has cost many hospitality establishments a lot of money, which they have lost – in court! Hence, attention should be called to the methods of handling guest complaints in various cases:⁸

1. When the guest is in the right:
 - a) Do not try to skate over weaknesses or intentionally make them seem smaller than they really are,
 - b) Specify the reasons that have led to a complaint,
 - c) Apologise to the guest and express your regret for what has happened,
 - d) Let the guest know that the hospitality establishment cares about him.
2. When rejecting groundless complaints:
 - a) Seek to be especially careful and give reasons to support why the complaint is being rejected,
 - b) Show the guest the results of the inquest,
 - c) Give advice in avoiding similar situations in the future.

⁷ Iverson, K.M., *Introduction to Hospitality Management*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1989, p. 151.

⁸ Iverson, K.M., op.cit., 87.

3. When accepting groundless complaints:

- a) Do not keep this fact from the guest, whatever the reason for accepting a groundless complaint may be (the guest should be made aware that his objection has no grounds even though his complaint has been accepted),
- b) Using tact, make it perfectly clear to the guest that the hospitality establishment has gone out of its way to meet him halfway.

Complaints may have considerable and unpleasant consequences for all those involved. Practise has shown that a guest making an objection is usually happier receiving a sincere and reasoned apology than being offered a drink or some other form of redress. When handling a complaint, it is imperative for the guest to receive the impression that he is being taken seriously. In properly assessing a complaint, special attention should be focused on the guest's behaviour while he is lodging a complaint.

While guest complaints that have been made known to the hospitality staff provide the staff with an opportunity to eliminate any weaknesses in their business, unarticulated objections are not a good thing for service providers. Not knowing what a complaint is all about makes it impossible to correct what is bothering a guest. Today, the dictum "Satisfy the guest" has a completely different meaning, because guests are now more educated, better informed, more discerning and aware of their options. Expecting the appropriate value for their money, they expect more, complain more and know they can change what they do not like. Not surprisingly then, hospitality establishments are increasingly focusing on the fact that a timely reaction to guest complaints plays a vital role in their guest retention scheme.

In this case, consumer satisfaction can be made into a potential marketing tool. The benefits resulting from efficiently dealing with guest criticism need to be realised, as the service staff will fall short of performing their role if they do not do their jobs in a way that will satisfy the guest.⁹ Managing guest criticism can have a positive impact on profits, in a number of ways:

- ◆ Being responsible towards guests helps in maintaining control over guests, because if their objections or complaints are not resolved to their favour they are likely to turn to another service provider;
- ◆ An appropriate policy for resolving complaints and objections can help to reduce high costs of third-person relationships or demands for compensation against defects, poor quality services, etc.
- ◆ And what is most important, the efficient resolution of complaints and objections can lead to considerable sales to other, new guests.

This process has dual economic effects:

- a) By correcting the underlying causes of mistakes or problems, the quality of products or services is improved, and each such improvement is, in turn, reflected in increased sales.
- b) There is a drop in the overall costs of resolving guest complaints and objections, because of the decline in the number of complaints and objections made.

⁹ Eiglier, P., Langeard, E., *Marketing usluga*, (translation), Vitagraf, Rijeka, 1999, p. 48.

In the case of frequent complaints, the management needs to develop a strategy for all departments in which action is planned that will prevent guest complaints before they happen. This is the way to ensure that guests will get the product or and service they want, when they want it, against the standards they expect, and at prices they find suitable and reasonable.¹⁰

2. THE “LEARN MODEL” IN RESOLVING GUEST COMPLAINTS

To communicate successfully with guests, employees in the hospitality industry must feel confident and be empowered to resolve the complaints of guests. In this section of the paper, we will look at the process of resolving guest complaints using the LEARN Model. This model calls for the following action:

1. Use the LEARN Model to accurately assess guest complaints and to rectify shortcomings.
2. Act within the framework of guidelines set down by management for resolving complaints made by guests.
3. Resolve all problems in a professional manner.
4. Inform management about all guest complaints and the manner in which they have been resolved.
5. Create an atmosphere in the hospitality facility that will encourage guests to express their complaints without hesitation.
6. Your behaviour should show guests how valuable and important they are to you – in particular, when they are reporting a problem.

When a guests reports about a certain problem or makes a complaint, the staff generally wants to LEARN what has caused the guest to become upset and to rectify this. The LEARN Model¹¹ is an excellent way to achieve this, as it represents a specific process, the application of which facilitates the resolution of guest complaints. LEARN means:

- ◆ L (*Listen*) – Listen to the guest.
- ◆ E (*Empathise*) – Empathise with the guest.
- ◆ A (*Apologise*) – Apologise to the guest.
- ◆ R (*React*) – React to the guest’s situation.
- ◆ N (*Notify*) – Notify the manager responsible and monitor the process.

The methodology of using this useful tool in resolving guest complaints is executed through the following steps.

Step 1: Listen

It is necessary to:

- Show genuine interest in the guest’s problem.
- Listen to the guest with a service frame-of-mind. Bear in mind that the staff is there to help the guest.
- Find out the facts and how the guest feels and what the guest needs.

¹⁰ Lashley, C., Lincoln, G., *Business Development in Licensed Retailing (A unit manager's guide)*, Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford, 2003, p. 243.

¹¹ This model represents a modification of a document of the association Fairfield Inn, USA (June 2003).

Step 2: Empathise

It is necessary to:

- Enable the guest to appropriately express himself concerning his problem.
- Show that you understand the guest's feelings.
- Explain to the guest that you would feel the same way if you were "in his shoes".

Step 3: Apologise

It is necessary to:

- Not take the guest's complaint personally. Maintain a professional and calm attitude.
- Apologise to the guest for his displeasure (this can be done without accepting blame!)
- Be sincere.

Step 4: React

It is necessary to:

- Pose open and close-ended question, if required, to fully comprehend the problem.
- Offer to help. Put forward options or alternatives, and state what can or will be done.
- Apply the method aimed at defining what kind of response is needed to resolve the problem.
- Let the guest know when the problem will be resolved.

Step 5: Notify

It is necessary to:

- Convey all information to the manager in charge who is capable of resolving the problem, if you cannot resolve the problem by yourself (and then follow-up on the activities of that manager to ensure that the problem can be resolved!)
- Ask the guest if he is satisfied with how the problem has been resolved.
- Document and report the situation to avoid the problem from occurring again

The following section focuses on the Service Recovery Model as a logical sequence of the fourth step of the LEARN Model on how to react to guest complaints.

3. THE SERVICE RECOVERY MODEL IN RESOLVING COMPLAINTS

The Service Recovery Model will help in identifying the level of service needed in resolving a specific problem or guest complaint. This model is applied in Step 4 of the LEARN Model, that is, in the React step. The Service Recovery Model (Fig. 1) is used to set straight the impaired relationships with guests who are dissatisfied with services, and it provides an opportunity to transform a tragic moment into a magic moment!

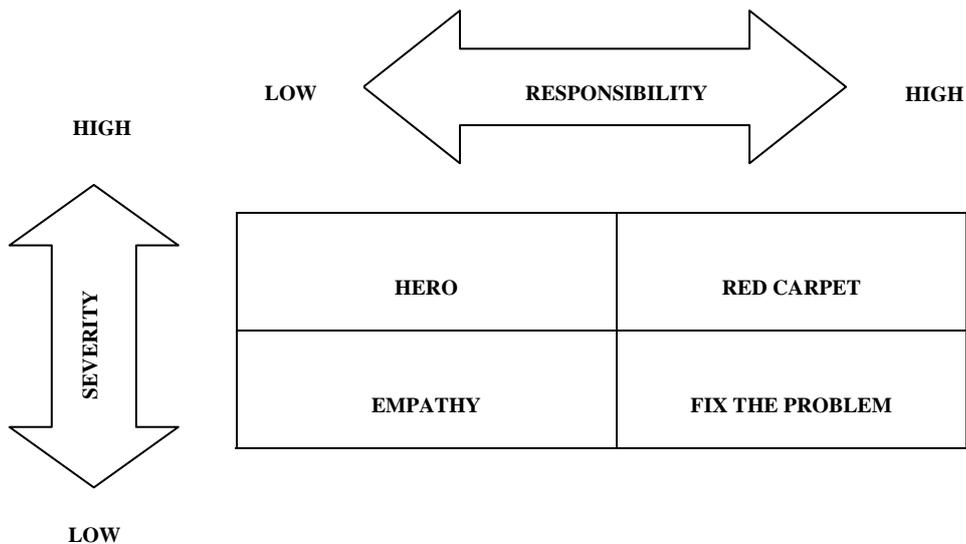
The horizontal axis presents the responsibility or “fault” of the hospitality establishment. For example:

- ◆ *Low responsibility* of a hospitality establishment would be bad, rainy and cold weather that prevents guests from spending their day on a nature walk as they had originally planned.
- ◆ *High responsibility* of a hotel would be the staff forgetting to replace towels in a hotel room.

The vertical axis illustrates the severity of a guest’s problem. For example:

1. *Low severity* would be a burned out light bulb in the bathroom of a hotel room.
2. *High severity* would be not delivering a very important telefax message that the guest was expecting.

Figure 1: Service Recovery Model



Source: by the author based on documents of the Fairfield Inn, USA (June 2003)

Based on the identified level of responsibility of a hospitality establishment and the level of severity of a guest’s problems, it is possible to provide several potential options as illustrated in the squares of Figure 1.

1. Definition of *Fix the Problem*. This option is used for situations that belong to the *high responsibility/low severity* square. The appropriate solution is to immediately correct the problem at hand. When a guest is given a room but cannot take a

shower because the light bulb in the bathroom has burned out, the problem can be resolved simply – by replacing the light bulb.

2. Definition of *Empathy*. This option is applied for situations belonging to the *low responsibility/low severity* square. In such situations, the right solution is to empathise with the guest. The guest wants to feel understood and for someone to identify with the situation he is in. For example, if bad and cold weather is preventing the guests from going to the beach as they had intended, they should be told that their feelings are understood, and that it is terrible they cannot go to the beach today. Then propose some indoor activities that they might enjoy.
3. Definition of *Hero*. Situations that belong to the *low responsibility/high severity* square call for a hero. The appropriate response is to become a “hero” in the eyes of the guest. For example, when a guest forgets to book a table at a good restaurant and all other locations are booked, use your connections to call the restaurant and make the reservation for the guest.
4. Definition of *Red Carpet*. This option should be used for situations that fall into the *high responsibility/high severity* square. In other words, when the hospitality establishment has really bungled it! The appropriate solution is to “roll out the red carpet” and treat the guests like royalty. For example, when a room attendant accidentally drops a diamond ring down the bathroom drain, immediately stop all activities and focus exclusively on this problem! Call the Maintenance service at once and offer to have the ring professionally cleaned after it has been retrieved.

In some situations, it is not the hospitality facility but the presence of other guests that may be the cause for unpleasant guest experiences. For example, complaints about noise coming from neighbouring rooms or about the uncivil behaviour of other guests in the hotel’s public rooms may be reasons for guests to demand redress for disagreeable experiences. In a hospitality establishment, three key situations may occur in which it is vital to apply the “smoothing and deduction” process:¹²

1. when the service provider has made a mistake,
2. when the shortcomings are linked to the hospitality establishment (ambience, technology, equipment and devices),
3. when the problem is linked to the guests – the service users.

Here the term “smoothing and deduction” is used to refer to a drop in sales revenues as a result of discounts granted to guest because of:¹³

1. mistakes made in registering the turnover realised, or
2. indemnification made to guests because of a hospitality establishment’s shortcomings.

¹² After Hayes, D.K., Ninemeier, J.D., *Hotel Operations Management (Upravljanje hotelskim poslovanjem - prijevod)*, M plus, Zagreb, 2005, p. 181.

¹³ Hayes, D.K., Ninemeier, J.D., op.cit., p. 558.

For example, the total amount of smoothing and deduction relative to the overall revenue from sales of food and beverages can be calculated for a specific period using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Total monthly amount of smoothing and deductions}}{\text{Total revenue from food and beverages}} = \% \text{ of smoothing and deductions}$$

This amount will depend upon a number of factors, the most important being:

1. the age of a hospitality establishment and how well it is equipped and furnished,
2. the expertise of a hospitality establishment's management and its production and service staff,
3. the properties and characteristics of a hospitality establishment's guest.

The person in charge of a hospitality establishment must know, at all times, how high this percentage of smoothing and deduction is, although it would be preferable if he/she were able to uncover the reasons behind any increase in this amount in the observed period.

CONCLUSION

When guest complaints are handled in a timely and proper manner, they can become an important source of information concerning the level of service quality in a hospitality facility. Complaints that are resolved in a constructive way can be transformed into a positive experience, tying a guest even closer to the facility in question. However, total quality is impossible to implement without an appropriate process in place that will make all employees aware of the positive aspects of guest complaints. In other words, every hospitality worker needs to acquire such a level of education that will enable him to see guest complaints as a valuable source of information about quality achieved rather than as a "skirmish" between a guest and a hospitality facility or any of its parts.

These forms of education, which need to take into account staff incentive, will help workers to resolve or prevent potential problems. From the guest perspective, good service increases the market value of services of equal quality, and it enables hospitality facilities to stand out from their rivals by providing good and better services.

As a result, many opportunities and temptations will arise, because as soon as someone comes up with a product or service to attract customers, their rivals begin to compete in trying to do it better.¹⁴ The outcome of this will be an increase in the standards of preparing and providing services, and in this increase, what will distinguish one hospitality establishment from another is the attention attributed to the timely and appropriate resolution of guest complaints. This is the arena in which hospitality establishments will wage war with their rivals in the future. In this battle, the LEARN Model in resolving guest complaints can prove to be of great assistance.

¹⁴ Cetron, M., *Changing customers, changing strategies*, IH&RA 36. Congress Report, Paris., 1998, p. 5.

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