SERVICE QUALITY IN FOUR-STAR HOTELS IN BULGARIA – EVALUATION, ANALYSIS AND TRENDS
КАЧЕСТВО НА ОБСЛУЖВАНЕ В ЧЕТИРИЗВЕЗДНИТЕ ХОТЕЛИ В БЪЛГАРИЯ – ОЦЕНКА, АНАЛИЗ И НАСОКИ ЗА РАЗВИТИЕ

Ivanka Vassileva Lulcheva

Agricultural University – Plovdiv

E-mail: ivanka.lulcheva@yahoo.com

Abstract

The development of tourism as a strategic and structural sector of our economy is strongly dependent on the quality of services in the hotels. The aim of this survey is to assess the quality of service in four-star hotels in Bulgaria, to reveal the omissions in this activity and based on that, to identify and take measures to improve the services in these hospitality premises. In the current research, three key stages of service in the hotel are outlined: *check-in reception services*, *service during stay*; *check-out services.* For the right service rating, these criteria are set up through separate indicators, which are thoroughly examined. In this sense/ respect, the quantification of the criterion, *reception services*, is performed by the following service indicators: *during reservation*, *check-in* and *accommodation*. The evaluation of the criterion *service during stay*, was conducted by means of the following indicators: *room service for the over night stay*, *in the restaurant* and *ongoing service*. The third criterion for service at check-out, the following indicators were evaluated: customer service at the reception upon check-out and customer satisfaction feedback.

The results of the survey conducted by us, show that in most of the surveyed four-star hotels, the quality of service found does not correspond to the category of the hotel, despite the magnificent facilities available. The basic characteristics of quality have been achieved and customer expectations have been partially satisfied, but the so specific attention to guests has not been paid during the service. Although there is satisfaction with the services, where specific needs and desires have been taken into account, this satisfaction is so insignificant that it does not influence very much the choice of the same hotel in subsequent accommodation.

This article has expressed a practical-executive focus. Measures for improvement were outlined based on the deficiencies in the activity of *customer service*.

Key words: quality of service, four-star hotel, evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The development of tourism, as a strategic and a structurally defining sector of our economy, is strongly dependent on the quality of services in hotel restaurants. According to Ribov (2005), the recommendations of the American Institute for Strategic Planning should be followed, which state that "investments, market share, and net profit, expressed as a percentage of sales, are directly depend on quality."

Quality in hospitality industry is connected with the satisfaction of basic (sleeping, eating, etc.) and additional needs, the creation of exciting experiences (comfort, good mood, knowledge, etc.) that determine the advantage over competitors and are at the base of modern understandings of quality. The understanding of quality passes through various stages and it is useful to know its development, so that every manager can decide on his/her approach and its advantages and disadvantages. Ishikawa (1994) defines quality as "a property, actually satisfying the consumer."

The consumer and the producer understand quality in different ways, which gives rise to the main contradiction. Producers view quality in terms of its objective characteristics and define it in the conditions of the technical requirements for controlling the production process. A lot of producers are surprised that high quality products, which meet corporate standards, are not profitable at the market. This is so because consumers have different requirements and expectations and their quality assessment depends on their experience, gender, education, social, professional, marital status, mood, etc. Quality requirements are hard to define, as they are often intangible and difficult to mea-sure, assess and quantify.

Based on the definition, provided by the World Tourism Organization (www.world-tourism. org), we view quality in hospitality industry as

a result of the process of satisfying the needs, desires and expectations of consumers by offering legitimate products and services at an affordable price, in accordance with the requirements (of the product and the service) for safety, hygiene, accessibility, transparency, authenticity and harmony of the tourist activity, while considering the human and natural environment. According to us, it is achieved and assessed at a certain moment, the moment of contact with the consumer, the moment of consumption of the service, the moment of its production. Its improvement is a constant and continuous process and cannot be achieved by single or isolated attempts.

As a process, hospitality industry is a process in which conditions are created for the reception and consumption of the purchased hotel services. It comprises realization of their value and creation of conditions for their consumption. Its quality is defined as the way in which products or services are provided to the customer or the additional services he/she receives (Glushkova, 2010).

The quality of service is much more difficult to measure as compared to the product quality. The difficulties are from the hotel`s product base. It is much more complicated than the products with raw material production. It is heterogeneous and consists many connected components, from various suppliers, from public, private and voluntary sectors. And it has its own tangible and intangible part. Some elements of service can be measured (for example, waiting time, frequency of service, the number and types of services, included in the basic price, etc.), but others (for example, friendly attitude, an amiable smile, serene atmosphere, etc.), are difficult to assess (measure) (Stamov, Alexieva, 2005).

Quality in hospitality industry is not determined from one single service. It is rather viewed as a complex. It can be measured at different stages of the process of service provision: initial stage, provision or consumption. All hotel guests have different ways of perceiving the quality of their stay, but hotels are constantly trying to establish feedback with them to see if service is improving. One way of doing this is the survey. According to Glushkova (2010) "Consumers develop feelings of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, based on the level of expectation, attitudes and intentions towards a still untouched product or service and the degree of overlap between expectations and reality."

The aim of this survey is to assess the quality of service in four-star hotels in Bulgaria, to reveal the omissions in this activity and based on that, to identify and take measures to improve the services in these hospitality premises.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analyzed criteria and indicators are defined on the basis of a survey conducted among managers, employees of marketing departments and senior administrators in a 15 four-star hotels during the period 10.02-10.05. 2015 г.

The main purpose of the methodology estimations of the quality of service at the premises of research, is to determine the level of quality of service at a given time. The estimations are based on the methodology of Professor Ribov (Ribov, 2003). In general, it helps to build an algorithm to analyze and evaluate the quality of service in hotels.

In the current research, are outlined three key stages of service in the hotel: К1 – reception services, К2 - service during stay; К3 - check-out services.

To rate the service quality of the hospitality, are used complex quality criterion (К). It is obtained as the sum of the above mentioned criteria К=К1+К2+К3, by the formula: К1= К1.1+К1.2+К1.3; К2 = К2.1+К2.2+К2.3; К3 = К3.1+К3.2, wherein: К1.1, К1.2, К1.3; К2.1, К2.2, К2.3 и К3.1, К3.2 are single indicators. The criteria are evaluated by the methods of the expert and the ball ratings.

When the general quality rating have been set, each indicator is involved by a different percentage, depending on certain conditions. The parameters combined have no equivalent values in meaning, i.e. an important term for a correct analysis of the level of quality of the studied object, is to determine the parameters of importance (influence) of the various indicators. These are the quantitative characteristics of the importance of researched indicator, compared to others. With the support of expert method were defined the influence ratio (impact). The method is based on a decision taken by a group of highly specialized experts in the field of hotel management using the "poll" method, which is averaging the assessments of the participating experts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the grounds of a comprehensive interview with experts in the field of hospitality industry, there have been three key stages of hotel service outlined: check-in and accommodation services, service during the stay and check-out services, decomposed into sublevels.

The successful assessment of service depends on the accurate and thorough survey of the values of individual indicators. Reliability of the results obtained depends on the correct grouping of single indicators into clearly defined group indicators and on determining the necessary empirical research

methods of quality assessment. In this sense, the quantification of the criterion of providing reception services was done with service indicators: when making reservations, check-in and accommodation. The assessment of the criterion of providing services during the stay was conducted with indicators for: room service for the overnight stay, the restaurant tendance and the ongoing service. Regarding the third criterion for service provision upon check-out, the indicators: of customer service at the reception upon check-out and customer satisfaction degree were assessed.

The resultant value of the aggregated complex indicator K is 0,70. It shows that, in the surveyed four-star hotels, the basic characteristics of quality have been achieved and customer expectations have been partially satisfied, but the so specific attention to guests has not been paid during the service. Although there is satisfaction with the services, where specific needs and desires have been taken into account, this satisfaction is so insignificant that it doesn't influence very much the choice of the same hotel in subsequent accommodation. The deviation of the aggregated complex indicator from its base value of 1 is 0.30.

The above-described contact zones for interaction with the customers are characterized with their own peculiarities and requirements, conditioned by the various duties and responsibilities of the staff in customer service.

Out of the three criteria, according to which the quality of service in four-star hotels has been measured, the criterion of providing reception services ranks second, with a weighing coefficient 0.3 in the overall ball assessment (second place with 34,61%). The process of reception service includes acceptance of reservations, receiving the customers in the hotel and accommodation in a room for the overnight stay. The front office staff have main responsibilities in these processes and their duties are related to gathering, storage and analysis of customer data. These functions often demand simultaneous performance, which requires high qualifications of the staff, and quick analytical thinking.

Modeling the process of customer service during the time of their stay includes room service for overnight stay, restaurant tendance and ongoing services. The time, spent by the guests in the hotel, is the most interesting and creative stage in the course of their service. At this stage, all departments of the hotel are involved in the communication and the provision of services. It is this criterion that has the greatest weighting coefficient in the complex assessment of the quality of service - 0.5, which is half of the aggregated ball assessment (50.66%).

The third criterion for service provision upon check-out is used when we assess the indicators of customer service at the reception upon check-out and customer satisfaction degree. The result of this criterion is 0.16 ball assessment, the weighing

Table 1. Service quality assessment

Simbol	Criterion	Impact in total assessment	Ball assessment
K 1	**Criterion of providing reception services**	**0.3**	**0.18**
K1.1	Reservation service	0.1	0.7
K 1.2	Check-in service	0.1	0.6
K 1.3	Accommodation service	0.1	0.5
K 2	**Criterion of providing services during the stay in hotel**	**0.5**	**0.36**
K 2.1	Restaurant tendance	0.2	0.16
K 2.2	Room service for the overnight stay	0.2	0.13
K 2.3	Ongoing service	0.1	0.07
K 3	**Criterion for service provision upon check-out**	**0.2**	**0.16**
K 3.1	Customer service at the reception upon check-out	0.1	0.9
K 3.2	Customer satisfaction degree assessed	0.1	0.7
Total		**1**	**0.70**

Source: Owne research

coefficient is 0.2 in the overall ball assessment (third place with 14.73%). This result is due to the fact that the quality of service depends on the abilities of the service staff to anticipate the needs, preferences and expectations of the customers in the hotel, using the techniques of communication, observation and analysis of the data received. The service staff should recognize the mood of the guest, his/her habits and lifestyle, and based on them, they should offer that kind of service which exceeds the guest's expectations. Staff duties include gathering, storing, analyzing and exchanging customer data, as the ultimate goal is to provide excellent service and cause emotional satisfaction. The information that the staff have during the period of stay of the customers is more diverse, compared to the information from the reception service. The reason for this is the possibility for all departments to participate in the provision of services, during which constant exchange of customer data is carried out all the time.

While looking through the results of a survey conducted, certain problems were identified in the processes along the entire chain of customer service from receiving, check-in and accommodating them to their check-out:

• not enough attention was paid to specifying the requirements for the quality of input and output in each process, as well as the resources and activities, involved in these processes;

• incompetent analysis of the customer data and insufficient information supply, which are critical conditions for conducting segmented customer analysis;

• poor optimization of the organizational structure of management in the surveyed four-star hotels;

• in most of the surveyed hotels, there was a lack of proper preliminary selection of the staff with skills to approach individually the guests in the hotel, caused by their poor qualifications, professional incompetence, lack of interest in work and intrinsic motivation;

• despite the explicitly formulated rules, duties and responsibilities in the surveyed hotels, there is no precise system for assessment of the quality of the activities done by each member of the staff, which would enable an objective measurement of the quantitative and qualitative parameters of service;

• in most of the surveyed four-star hotels, there was a lack of comprehensive, objective and constant monitoring of the quality of service. This requires the creation of a system to establish hotel customer feedback, by means of which to measure the level of customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the survey, conducted by us, show that in most of the surveyed four-star hotels, the quality of service found does not correspond to the category of the hotel, despite the magnificent facilities available. Poor quality is either the result of a lack of a clear idea/interest in it or the use of an improper system to improve quality.

Hoteliers do realize the need to improve the quality of service and they take various steps and manifold tools to achieve it. The behavior of managers should meet the accepted values and norms and should be followed by the staff. Hotel managers and owners need to maintain and promote the cycle of continuous improvement of the processes. One of the most important conditions for proper management of the process of improving service quality is the formation of collective consciousness in all departments of the hotel.

The assessed level of service quality in the above four-star hotels is valid only for a particular time. This article has expressed practical-executive focus. Hotel managers can interpret the results of the survey and use them for the purposes of improvement.

Based on the results, obtained from the survey, **guidelines** have been given for the future development of the surveyed four-star hotels.

1. Regarding reception services, it is necessary to improve the processes, related to customer service upon making reservations, reception and accommodation. The efforts of the receptionist should be focused on finding out the customers' requirements and their expectations. For this purpose, an in-depth analysis of both the existing and the new-coming information is required.

2. Regarding the reservation of services, it is essential to embed reservation forms on the websites of the hotels, wherein the customers share their preferences and require additional information on the issues they are interested in. In this way, they will be provided with a choice of room per night, as well as further information to ensure a pleasant stay.

3. The reception of customers creates their first impressions of the hotel. Here, it is recommendable to do it according to the national characteristics, traditions, rituals and personal features, established depending on the information available about the customers.

4. This information is necessary for the good quality of customer service in the restaurant. It includes the preferences and established eating

habits, customers' health, including the presence of allergies, diets and so on. Room service is also limited to considering the preferences and requirements of the customers.

We recommend having synchronization of the information between the individual departments in the hotel and using it effectively. Regarding the ongoing services, in order to better satisfy customer needs, it is advisable to offer a variety of additional services, which requires close cooperation with other suppliers. Here, there are quite a few possibilities for the hotel, but they also depend on the established relations with the suppliers of products and services.

5. With customer check-out, the main direction, in which it is necessary to work, is to make an effective and targeted use of the information, gathered from the guests' stay in the hotel. It is therefore important to urge the guests to share their experiences in the hotel. The use of the modern means of communication is also advisable. This requires training the staff how to use the information on the Internet and read forums and blogs in order to extract the information needed and to provide good quality service.

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