CUSTOMER PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY IN BOUTIQUE HOTEL LE SIX PARIS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine customer's perception of service quality in a Parisian boutique hotel. At the same time, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty are evaluated, as these two concepts are highly related to service quality. For this purpose a survey research has been chosen as the most appropriate research method. Data was collected from 151 customers who visited boutique hotel Le Six and a benchmark has been developed to interpret the results. The results of the study show that overall service quality at hotel Le Six is highly rated by its customers. Respondents are very satisfied with their stay, although they remain price conscious. An additional contribution of this study is the reconfirmation of the general conceptual framework of service quality in hospitality firms by Ekinci, Dawes and Massey (2008), in the unique setting of a boutique hotel.

KEYWORDS

Boutique hotel; service quality; customer satisfaction; customer loyalty.

RESUMEN

El objetivo principal de este estudio es evaluar la percepción de la calidad de servicio en un hotel situado en París. Al mismo tiempo, se evalúa también la satisfacción y la fidelidad de los clientes, ambos conceptos muy relacionados con la calidad de servicio. Para realizar este análisis. se ha considerado la encuesta como la metodología más adecuada para realizar la fase de investigación. Los datos se han obtenido mediante 151 encuestas realizadas a clientes que visitaron d Hotel Boutique Le Six de París y se compararon posteriormente para interpretar los resultados. Los participantes se mostraron muy satisfechos con su estancia en el hotel, teniendo en consideración los precios abonados. La contribución de este articulo es reconfirmar el marco conceptual general de calidad de servicio de empresas hoteleras por Ekinci, Dawes y Massey (2008), aplicado específicamente en hoteles boutique.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Hotel boutique, calidad de servicio, satisfacción del diente, fidelidad del diente.

INTRODUCTION

Hotel Le Six is an independent, luxurious four star boutique hotel situated on the Paris left bank, between Montparnasse centre and the Luxembourg Gardens. It is with its 41 rooms categorized in classic rooms, superior rooms, deluxe rooms and suites rather small, but expensive as shown by the average rate per night of 235.26 euro (Office du Tourisme et des Congrès, 2010).

As most industries, the Parisian hotel business has suffered severely from the worldwide 2009 economic and financial crisis. Recently it has recovered, reaching pre-crisis levels of economic parameters for which the explanation is twofold (Office du Tourisme et des Congrès, 2010). First, the average room rates in two, three and four star hotels have risen with respectively 3.4%, 7.6% and 4.9%. Second, the occupancy rates have improved due to the increasing number of foreign overnights originating from China, the rest of Asia, South-America, the Near- and the Middle East, leading to an overall 25% increase of overnights in 2010 compared to 2009.

Regarding the average occupancy rate, it is important to note that on average chain hotels (79.4%) have a better occupancy rate than independent hotels (75.7%) (Office du Tourisme et des Congrès, 2010). Moreover, the general ownership of Parisian hotels is shifting significantly; in the period 2000-2011 the share of available rooms belonging to chain hotels increased from 28.1% to 40.8%. Taking these trends into account, competition in the Parisian hotel industry is intensifying. Furthermore, independent hotels seem to lose out from chain hotels. Note that hotel Le Six is a privately owned hotel, which puts it in a weaker position compared to luxurious chain hotels.

How then can the management of a Parisian boutique hotel like hotel Le Six sustain and improve its market position? From the literature, an apparently positive relationship exists between the quality of the services offered and the success of a service firm. Service quality promotes customer satisfaction, which can lead to the attraction of new customers and the improvement of the loyalty of existing customers. Thus, service quality will potentially safeguard the competitive position of service firms (Pizam and Ellis, 1999; Akbaba, 2006). Therefore, in order to be sustainable and increase its success, it is important for the management of boutique hotel Le Six to research on service quality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To develop the context for this research, different constructs are discussed and are brought together in the conceptual framework.

BOUTIQUE HOTEL

Besides different attempts towards a comprehensive definition of the concept boutique hotel, the majority of practitioners and researchers have reached consensus regarding the most important defining characteristics of boutique hotels including size, location, architecture and design, services and quality provided.

SIZE: Boutique hotels are generally smaller in size than traditional hotels, with less than 100 rooms (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2005). Recently though, larger chains are trying to compete in this

market by starting up hotel brands that are different and unique. The well-known W brand of Starwood is an example of this venture (Lim and Edean, 2009). Yet, the majority of boutique hotels are privately owned, independent hotels, thereby contributing to their individual and unique character (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005). Lim *et al.* (2009) disagree claiming that the ownership of boutique hotels is evenly split among private and group enterprises.

APPEALING LOCATION: Boutique hotels are generally found in trendy neighbourhoods of suburban areas or city centres (Lim *et al.*, 2009; Albazzaz *et al.*, 2003). Nowadays, the concept is also introduced in rural locations and resort destinations.

ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN: Boutique hotels are commonly situated in historical buildings and sites or buildings with interesting architectural aspects (Agett, 2007; McIntosh *et al.*, 2005; Lim *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, the interior is tailored to the personality of the building with stylish, deluxe, design furniture; sometimes themes are incorporated as well, for example the decoration of each room might be based upon the works of a well-known painter (Lim *et al.*, 2009; Erkutlu *et al.*, 2005).

SERVICE: Boutique hotels have a high staff-to-guest ratio, allowing them to provide a personalized service (Lim *et al.*, 2009; Erkutlu *et al.*, 2005). Guests can be attended to 24/7 by the hotel staff, giving each guest a special and unique feeling throughout his/her stays. Interaction between staff and guests is more familiar, creating a more relaxed and homely environment (Agett, 2007; McIntosh *et al.*, 2005). Besides, most boutique hotels provide exclusive facilities like good quality restaurants, bars and lounges and spa's as an integral feature of their service. Furthermore, high-tech amenities such as high-speed Internet access, cordless phones, CD players, libraries of music and books are offered (Albazzaz *et al.*, 2003).

QUALITY: In every aspect of boutique hotels – food and beverage, interior design, services provided et cetera – the aim is to reach or even surpass the common quality standards laid out. According to Agett (2007) and McIntosh *et al.* (2005), clients are attracted to boutique hotels because of their quality image.

In conclusion, the main aim of boutique hotels is to offer their clients a unique experience through the pursuit of a unique environment, extraordinary features and personalized service. Nowadays, clients are willing to pay more for the extraordinary feeling offered by boutique hotels.

SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality is an elusive concept that is difficult to define and measure. Earlier studies defined quality as conformance to specifications, implying that the feature set of a product should match the standards predetermined by the management (Reeves and Bednar, 1994). However, such a management inspired definition can hardly be applied to quantify service quality because services are difficult to reduce to a set of standards. Consequently, more suitable definitions of quality have been developed, characterized by a consumer's perspective. Scholars have defined quality in three distinct ways: quality as excellence, quality as value and quality as meeting or exceeding expectations (Ekinci, 2008).

According to Ekinci (2008), the term 'excellence' in the first definition is highly subjective and thus difficult to measure objectively. Second, 'quality as value' implies that perceived quality equals perceived value. However, Bolton and Drew (1991) are able to differentiate value from quality by introducing price. They claim that perceived value is defined by the customers' trade-

off between benefits and costs. The benefit component might be the same as quality and thus the perceived value is determined by comparing the perceived quality to the price paid. Finally, the third definition of 'quality as meeting or exceeding expectations' is broader and more consumer-friendly, according to Ekinci (2008). Recent literature suggests that service quality is indeed the subjective assessment of service performance by consumers themselves (Dabholkar, Shepherd and Thorpe, 2000) and thus confirms the last definition.

Different models of service quality have been introduced by different scholars. The majority considers service quality as a multidimensional concept; however no consensus has been reached yet regarding the underlying generic and specific dimensions of service quality (Ekinci, 2008). The current debate is dominated by two research streams: the North American versus the Nordic European school of thought.

SERVQUAL, developed by scholars from the North American school of thought is the best known customer-oriented model used to measure service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). It measures the gap between customer expectations and their perceptions of the actual experience on a five dimensional scale: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance. However, these dimensions have shown to be indistinct and other models of service quality have shown to be more parsimonious (Carmen, 1990). Moreover, new dimensions have been found while applying the SERVQUAL model in diverse industries.

In contrast, supporters of the Nordic European school of thought have developed other well-known models of service quality based on three dimensions called physical quality, interaction quality and output quality. Service quality is determined by what customers obtain from a service firm and how customers obtain services. According to Brady and Cronin (2001), these models were more valid when applied to different service industries.

Following the Nordic school, Ekinci (2008) has developed a highly reliable multi-dimensional and multi-level model of service quality for hospitality firms. According to the author, service quality consists of primary and secondary dimensions. Two primary dimensions have been distinguished: output quality and interaction quality. Both dimensions are split up into secondary dimensions. Output quality consists of physical quality and product quality, while interactive quality is composed of staff behaviour and responsiveness. Depending on the type of hospitality service being researched, each secondary dimension can be split up into specific attributes that can be measured.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction have attracted the attention of many scholars leading to the development of different conceptualizations of satisfaction. Two common interpretations can be distinguished: transient and overall satisfaction (Ekinci *et al.*, 2008).

First, transient or transaction-specific satisfaction evaluates each single service encounter. Hotels offer many services to their customers, ranging from spa facilities to room service, thus customers encounter many services during their stay. Consequently, the researcher should capture the customer satisfaction after each encounter.

Second, overall satisfaction gathers, according to a mathematical function, all transient satisfactions a customer experienced during his stay. Next, performance satisfaction is defined as the overall satisfaction compared to one or multiple standards. Anderson and Fornell (1994) underlined

the popularity among researchers of the overall satisfaction theory because of its relation with consumers' intentions and business performance. However, Oliver (1980) found overall satisfaction as a function of transient experiences rather difficult to measure and argued its unsuitability in a service context with three arguments. First, overall satisfaction regresses fast towards the overall attitude the customer has of the firm researched. Second, customers find it hard to remember without any bias the satisfaction level of their first service encounter when experiencing multiple encounters. Third, customers might lack the resources to experience multiple service encounters with a specific firm.

Recently, researchers have transcended the paradigmatic discussion between transient and overall satisfaction and started focusing on the affective nature of satisfaction (Giese and Cote, 2000). Illustratively, Oliver (1997, p. 13) states that 'satisfaction is the consumer's fulfilment response. It is a judgement that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under- or over fulfilment'. Customer satisfaction is thus defined as the 'consumer's overall emotional response to the entire service experience for a single transaction at the post-purchasing point' (Ekinci *et al.*, 2008, p. 40). The appropriateness of this definition for evaluating services is twofold: services are intangible and the response of customers can best be captured after consumption.

CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Customer loyalty and retention have been an important focus of many organisations in their pursuit to remain competitive. Oliver (1997, p. 392) defines customer loyalty as 'a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronise a preferred product or service consistently in the future despite situational influence and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour'. According to Anderson and Jacobsen (2000, p. 67), customer loyalty is 'the result of an organisation creating a benefit for customers so that they will maintain or increase their purchases from the organisation'. Likewise, Zineldin (2000) refers to customer retention as the urge of an individual to do business with a particular company continuously. According to Hoyer and MacInnis (2008, p. 289), customer retention is 'the practice of working to satisfy customers with the intention of developing long-term relationships with them'. Thus, customer loyalty is achieved when customers are willing to re-purchase or re-use a same good/service because of the qualities of the good/service itself.

In conclusion, three conceptualizations of customer loyalty exist: singular, additive or interactive, whereby customer loyalty is interpreted as respectively an attitude, a behaviour or a combination of both towards the product/service at stake (East, Gendall, Hammond and Lomax, 2005). Recommendation is an attitude, whereas retention and search are behaviours. According to East *et al.* (2005), one should be careful when combining attitudes and behaviours, they strongly advise to measure customer loyalty as a singular concept. However, in this study customer loyalty is considered as an interactive concept of attitude and behaviour, yet the researcher carefully aggregates both.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The relationships between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty are visualised in the conceptual framework (see Figure 1) and explained underneath.
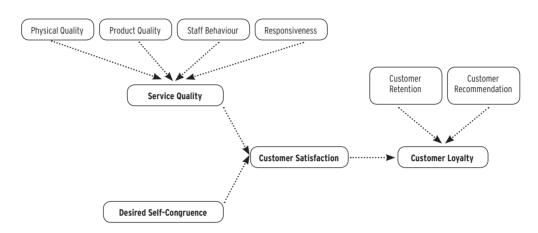
FIGURE 1. *Conceptual framework*

An obvious link exists between service quality and customer satisfaction; however the direction of the relationship remains doubtful. On the one hand scholars (e.g. Vavra, 1997) argue that service quality is reached when customers are satisfied with the services offered. On the other hand service quality is seen as an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1993). Recently, evidence has been found to verify this last unilateral direction (Dabholkar *et al.,* 2000). Therefore, in this research service quality comprising the secondary dimensions physical quality, product quality, staff behaviour and responsiveness, is considered as an antecedent of customer satisfaction.

Besides service quality, the self-concept has proven to influence customer satisfaction. Self-concept is a reflection of how an individual sees himself. Research has shown that consumers prefer products and services that are congruent with their self-concept; for instance Graeff (1996) found that customers have more positive attitudes to brands that are in line with their self-concept. Note that self-concept is multidimensional, but only two dimensions – ideal and desired self-congruence – have proven to be highly significant as antecedents of customer satisfaction (Ekinci *et al.*, 2008). Ideal self-congruence is the image of oneself as one would like it to be (Landon, 1974). Desired self-congruence induces goals and desires as reference points (Sirgy *et al.*, 1997). However, the main focus of this research is on the quality of the services offered by boutique hotel Le Six, thus only desired self-congruence is considered as an antecedent of customer satisfaction, besides service quality.

The most common consequence of customer satisfaction is known as customer loyalty, including the intention to recommend and the intention to return to the service firm. Evidence has been provided that intention to return – defined as 'a consumer's likelihood of re-purchasing the same service' (Ekinci *et al.*, 2008, p. 44) – is positively influenced by satisfaction and the consumers'

overall attitude towards a service firm (Szymanski and Henard, 2001). Note that the overall satisfaction of a customer is an emotional response towards a service encounter while the overall attitude is the reflection of the image a customer has of a firm. Consequently, customers with a positive attitude towards a service firm are more likely to return. Nevertheless, a consumer's overall attitude falls beyond the scope of this research and thus only overall satisfaction is considered as an antecedent of customer loyalty. As mentioned above, customer loyalty is defined as an interactive concept of intention to return and recommendation.

METHODOLOGY

In this study survey research is used, allowing the researcher to obtain a large amount of data from the researched population (Neuman, 2006; Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008). As such, the researcher is able to measure the dimensions of service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in boutique hotel Le Six. Moreover, the relationships between these concepts are verified. Finally, the performed analysis allows the researcher to objectively draw conclusions.

A sample of respondents has been generated from the researched population by using a non-probability sampling, more specifically the convenience sampling technique (Altinay *et al.*, 2008). Thus, the most approachable hotel visitors form the sample of the researched population, leaving it to the individual's willingness to participate in the study. The data have been collected in French and English to avoid the exclusion of many potential respondents. Finally, the sample consists of 151 respondents, a sample size that allows the researcher to statistically analyse the data.

The content of the initial questionnaire was pre-tested with colleagues of the front desk and fifteen respondents. Then, the revised questionnaire was distributed to hotel visitors at the end of their stay, a day before check-out. As such, the customers were able to evaluate their level of satisfaction. The questionnaire evaluates four theoretical concepts: service quality, overall consumer satisfaction, desired self-congruence and customer loyalty. Remark that service quality is measured along five dimensions: physical quality, product quality, staff behaviour, responsiveness and overall service quality. Also, personal information from the respondents is gathered at the beginning of the questionnaire.

As already mentioned above, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the level of service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in boutique hotel Le Six. Consequently, reporting descriptive statistics per question suffices to draw helpful conclusions for the hotel management.

In addition to the research specially performed for the hotel management of boutique hotel Le Six, the existence of the relationships between service quality, desired self-congruence, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is verified. In order to obtain this goal, correlations are calculated. It should be remarked that the data of these theoretical concepts are discrete and non-normally distributed and therefore the Spearman's method is chosen to calculate the correlations.

FINDINGS

Hotel Le Six is mainly visited by tourists originating from English speaking countries, who highly perceive the quality of the services offered. Among the four service quality dimensions (physical quality, product quality, staff behaviour, responsiveness), product quality was by far the least appreciated.

Clients of hotel Le Six, highly appreciate the overall quality of the services offered. These answers allow us to conclude that boutique hotel Le Six has reached its main aim in offering high-end quality services to its diverse clientele. Although minor remarks are made at individual measurements, overall clients seem to enjoy the unique atmosphere created by the architecture, interior, products offered and staff behaviour in hotel Le Six.

Furthermore, respondents are very satisfied regarding the services offered by boutique hotel Le Six. However, the price consciousness of customers is obviously present even though hotel Le Six attracts high-end customers. Clients are willing to pay a much higher price than for the average hotel in the neighbourhood, but they also want to get the best possible service. Therefore, hotel Le Six's management should bear this price sensitivity of their customer base in mind; service quality should not diminish, if there is no price decrease.

Overall, services and treatments are received as desired. However, some ambiguity remains when interpreting the disunity among the respondents and the sometimes illogical consecutive scores concerning the desired self-congruence questions. Unfortunately, no comments were left explaining the extremely positive feeling.

Finally, the visitors of hotel Le Six are not the most loyal ones. The disloyalty is driven by retention rather than by recommendation; behaviours seem more difficult to influence than attitudes. Two reasons can explain the difficulties faced when trying to change behaviour. First, hotel Le Six is mainly visited by tourists from other continents. These visitors will most likely not revisit Paris in the short term. Moreover, when returning to Paris, they might prefer to stay in another part of town. Second, visitors attracted once by the unique characteristics of a boutique hotel, are probably less likely to re-visit the same setting as their choice is based on unique and alternative experiences.

Testing the conceptual framework allows the researcher to draw the following conclusions. Customers highly appreciating the behaviour of staff will probably appreciate the overall service quality. Thus, efforts to increase the overall service quality will have the most effect when targeting a change of staff behaviour rather than a change of physical quality, product quality or responsiveness. Moreover, customers overall appreciative of the services are more likely to be satisfied and as such will show more loyal behaviour and attitude towards the service firm.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate customer's perception of service quality in boutique hotel Le Six. In the first place a theoretical framework for service quality in boutique hotels was developed based on an extended literature review. After defining the different concepts, an already empirically validated questionnaire measuring service quality for hospitality firms, was modified

to suit the context of boutique hotels. Next, data were gathered from hotel visitors using the adjusted questionnaire. Analysing the data allowed the researcher to draw conclusions and give recommendations to hotel Le Six.

Overall, the quality of the services offered by boutique hotel Le Six is very high. Three of the four secondary dimensions (physical quality, staff behaviour and responsiveness) have determined this positive perception. In contrast, the product quality dimension is relatively poorly perceived.

From testing the conceptual framework, the researcher can conclude that the perception of service quality is best reflected by the perception of staff behaviour. Moreover, customer loyalty is a direct result of customer satisfaction. Finally, customer satisfaction is best reflected by the perception of overall service quality; desired self-congruence only plays a minor role.

Ultimately, the hotel management wants to improve the loyalty of customers, which can be achieved by improving customer satisfaction and consequently overall service quality. The level of overall service quality is determined by four dimensions which are under the control of the hotel management. As such, an indirect relationship exists between the four service quality dimensions and customer loyalty. Thus, the level of customer loyalty can be increased by ameliorating the means or improving the skewness (decreasing the standard deviation) of the service quality dimensions. Moreover, the findings from the calculated correlations suggest priorities in improving customer loyalty. The increase of the mean and the improvement of the skewness should be targeted in the following order: staff behaviour (first), responsiveness (second), physical quality (third), product quality (fourth).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As questionnaires almost never reveal why a respondent scored a certain statement or question so negatively or positively, customers could be interviewed when specific results need clarification. For example, the desired self-congruence measure is now hard to interpret and could thus benefit from clarification interviews.

The researcher found it difficult to interpret objectively the descriptive statistics calculated from the questionnaire results. Therefore, a benchmark was developed but in an ad-hoc way, meaning that the benchmark fits the current data well (successfully indicates the critical points of attention), but might be too strict or too tolerant in other contexts. Thus, future research should explore other approaches to interpret the results from the standardized questionnaire. Below, suggestions are made to create an appropriate benchmark for the mean values and to interpret the observed standard deviations.

First, conducting the same research in other four star boutique hotels and aggregating the data, might create a scientifically based benchmark that can be used to evaluate the current level of service quality in hotel Le Six. This type of research is commonly called performance benchmarking (Bhutta and Huq, 1999). Regarding performance benchmarking, Post and Spronk (1999) created a potentially interesting assessment methodology called interactive data envelopment analysis.

Second, the researcher is convinced that the philosophy of six sigma can result in a better overall perceived service quality. It allows the service firm to reduce the costs of poor quality so

that a more consistent process for service delivery can be achieved (Antony, Antony, Kumar and Cho (2007).

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