

Engage the Facebook Generation, Hotels Urged

Hotels should make greater use of social media to evaluate their performance from the customer's perspective, argue the SHTM's Bona Kim, Sam Kim and a co-researcher in a recently published study. Having analysed hundreds of online hotel reviews, the researchers identified the hotel features that customers find most satisfying and dissatisfying. Their results provide helpful suggestions for how hotel managers can make effective use of social media to monitor and respond to customers' positive and negative experiences.

Rising Importance of Online Reviews

With the continues development of social media, customers are increasingly sharing their experiences through online review websites. As "one of the most accessible tools" for understanding customers' experiences, online hotel reviews represent a form of "electronic word-of-mouth" and have become an important source of information for customers planning a hotel stay. In turn, hotels are also increasingly turning to social media as a means to better understand the "customer experience", because knowing what makes customers satisfied helps hotels to improve their service quality.

It is generally assumed that what makes customers satisfied can also make them dissatisfied. However, the researchers point out that the specific factors which cause satisfaction do not necessarily generate dissatisfaction, and vice versa. As different sets of satisfiers

and dissatisfiers have been identified, it may be a fallacy that they lie on a continuum. However, there have been few studies in this area, which motivated the researchers to investigate further.

Customers use their own frames of reference when evaluating hotels, and their level of satisfaction is largely dependent on their expectations in particular settings. The researchers explain that different classes of hotel aim to provide services, products and features at a "certain level of quality", and customers do not expect the same level of quality from a one-star budget hotel as a five-star luxury hotel.

TripAdvisor Reviews

To test their predictions, the researchers conducted a study of online hotel reviews to identify both satisfiers and dissatisfiers and explore how they differ according to customers' expectations, categorised as high or low depending on the hotel class. They retrieved reviews of New York hotels from the TripAdvisor website, chosen because it is one of the most prominent user-generated review sites. New York was selected because it is the biggest city in the USA, and a popular tourism destination with a diverse range of hotel classes.

TripAdvisor reviews provide an overall numerical rating from 1 (terrible) to 5 (excellent), together with customers' written comments. The researchers chose to analyse reviews in the "excellent" and "terrible" categories to focus on

the most and the least satisfied customers. They categorised the class of hotel according to TripAdvisor's rating system: one and two star hotels were classified as "limited-service" and four and five star hotels as "full-service". The reviews for the 50 top-ranking and 50 bottom-ranking hotels were chosen, and the researchers analysed the content to identify the hotel features that contributed to customers' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their stay.

Satisfaction versus Dissatisfaction

Overall, the 50 full-service hotels generated 42,659 reviews, almost 68 per cent of which rated the hotels as "excellent" and 1.6 per cent as "terrible". The 50 limited-service hotels generated 27,525 reviews, of which almost 16 per cent gave an "excellent" rating and just over 14 per cent gave a "terrible" rating.

The researchers stress that the difference in the overall number of reviews between the two classes of hotels suggests that guests of full-service hotels participate more actively in sharing their experiences. The high proportion of positive to negative reviews for full-service hotels indicates that their guests are generally satisfied.

In contrast, the similar number of positive and negative reviews for limited-service hotels indicates a much lower overall level of satisfaction. The researchers suggest that although guests may generally have lower expectations of limited-service hotels, some

managers may need to “proactively improve” their facilities and services to meet them, such as by using social media to monitor customer satisfaction and identify areas for improvement.

The researchers point out that around a third of both the positive and negative reviews contained both unfavourable and favourable comments. This seems rather surprising, given that the overall ratings of these reviews were at either extreme of positive or negative. As many customers commented on “neutral features” that did not seem to affect their overall rating of the hotel, it seems to imply that hotels cannot realistically expect to provide perfect services because customers have different perceptions of and expectations about what is most important.

Most Important Satisfiers and Dissatisfiers

The researchers compared the most important satisfiers and dissatisfiers, ranked according to the number of times they were mentioned. For full-service hotels, the number one satisfier was location and the number one dissatisfier was the attitude of the staff. The only hotel features that ranked in the top-10 for both satisfiers and dissatisfiers were the attitude of the staff and service, confirming the researchers’ view that they do not represent a continuum. Guests of these hotels generally expressed satisfaction with the room size, the bed and other tangible aspects, whereas they expressed dissatisfaction with less tangible aspects such as service, noise and the attitude of the management.

For limited-service hotels, there was more of an overlap between satisfiers and dissatisfiers. Location was again the most important satisfier, whereas dirtiness was the top dissatisfier. Six features ranked in the top 10 for both satisfiers and dissatisfiers: the attitude of the staff, the cleanliness of the room, its size, the bed, the bathroom and the room rate.

The researchers emphasise the particular importance of service-related factors for full-service hotels, which are expected to provide a remarkable level of personalised high-end services and facilities that are “essential not only to pleasing customers but also to ruining their experiences”. In contrast, service did not rank highly as either a satisfier or a dissatisfier in limited-service hotels, which is understandable because this class of hotel generally seeks to provide only basic facilities. Managers of limited-service hotels should thus focus on the condition of the rooms, particularly their cleanliness, and providing value for money.

Noting that the attitude of the staff ranked highly as both a satisfier and a dissatisfier for both classes of hotel, the researchers conclude that this is the “most significant factor” for all hotels. Even in limited-service hotels where guests may not have high service expectations, a “courteous staff attitude” goes a long way towards ensuring satisfaction.

Free Communication and Monitoring Tool

An important message for hotel management is that success comes not just from generating satisfaction but also from avoiding dissatisfaction. As social media have become such essential parts of people’s lives, they offer

hotel management free access and interactive communication with customers. The researchers label them as amongst the “best means of enhancing service quality and facility improvement”. Hotel managers are thus advised to “proactively utilize cyber space” as a communication and monitoring tool.

POINTS TO NOTE

- Online hotel reviews are important sources of information for both hotels and their guests.
- Hotel guests’ expectations differ according to the class of hotel.
- Different classes of hotel should increase satisfaction and reduce dissatisfaction.
- Hotels should monitor online reviews to assess their own performance.

Kim, Bona, Kim, Seongseop and Heo, Cindy Y. (2016). “Analysis of Satisfiers and Dissatisfiers in Online Hotel Reviews on Social Media”. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 28(9), pp. 1915-1936.