

# Understanding Online Complaints Crucial for Hotels in Mainland China

Hotels in China should take the opportunity to learn about how they can improve their services by understanding and acting on customers' online reviews, according to Dr Norman Au and Professor Rob Law of the SHTM and a co-researcher. In a recently published article, the researchers examine the content of online hotel reviews posted by guests, identifying cultural differences in the nature and number of complaints made by Western and Chinese customers. They advise that hotel managers need to understand these differences so that they can use them to "build strong brand value" and avoid the "devastating consequences" of poor business practices being exposed to the public.

## **The Value of Complaints**

It is impossible, the researchers claim, for hotels to avoid customer dissatisfaction completely. Rather, if they wish to secure repeat business, hotels need to use customer complaints to better understand what the public is looking for, and how they can formulate "effective complaint handling strategies and improve service quality".

Culture may be an important factor in determining which customers are most likely to complain, what they complain about and how they voice their complaints. The researchers explain that Asian customers in particular are more likely to express their

dissatisfaction by passing on their negative experiences to friends and family, rather than making a direct complaint. Asian customers are not only less familiar with the "channels for complaining", but also fear losing face if they risk a personal confrontation by complaining to the hotel directly.

While complaints were once made primarily through written communication or in face-to-face interactions with hotel staff, disgruntled customers are increasingly likely to post their views online for all to see, at least potentially. As the researchers point out, the Web offers Chinese people "unprecedented freedom" to voice their opinions, because user-generated content is generally anonymous and provides a "safer alternative channel" that avoids direct confrontation. They speculate that this change may "even challenge traditional Confucian values of collectivism and harmonious relationships".

Given these recent changes, the researchers conducted a study to examine the types of complaints made by travellers in online reviews of Chinese hotels. They were particularly interested in whether cultural and other differences influenced the likelihood of complaining and the types of complaints made by Chinese and non-Chinese hotel guests.

## **Online Hotel Reviews**

The researchers used online reviews of hotels in Beijing, Guangzhou

and Shanghai, selecting those locations both because they are "official tourist cities" with scenic attractions, historical sites and business significance and also because "they have been among the top tourist destinations in China for many years". The two Internet travel sites chosen, Ctrip – a Chinese site – and TripAdvisor – an international site – also had special significance.

Ctrip, the researchers explain, is the "leading provider of hotel accommodation, airline tickets, and packaged tours in China". As one of the best-known travel brands in China, the site facilitates the booking of more than 5 million hotel night stays a year. Comments are required to use simplified Chinese, and commenters must have a mobile phone number registered in China.

TripAdvisor, in contrast, is an American site on which English is used. The researchers chose it "because of its large coverage of travel destinations and accommodation reviews". With 20 million members, the site has attracted more than 40 million reviews and opinions.

The researchers focused on 445 reviews posted by Chinese guests on Ctrip and 377 posted by non-Chinese guests on TripAdvisor. To identify what factors "motivated customers to post negative comments online", they examined the contents of the reviews and grouped them into 11 categories: service quality, cleanliness, space, location, noise, food, facilities, price, amenities, décor and miscellaneous.

## **Poor Service Quality Problematic**

The review category that generated the most complaints overall was service quality, which accounted for 42% of the complaints from Chinese and 54% from non-Chinese customers. According to the researchers, this indicates that service quality is what customers “care most about”. Some examples of poor service include doormen failing to help guests with luggage, and difficulties with non-functioning business facilities.

Hotel décor and facilities were also the focus of many complaints, suggesting that while such preferences can be highly subjective, in many cases the hotels did not meet customers’ expectations. Interestingly, whereas the non-Chinese guests tended to focus on the general facilities, such as whether the lights worked or the room needed refurbishing, Chinese customers were more likely to criticise the lack of a luxurious feel, and did not seem to like traditional Chinese décor. The researchers interpret the difference as reflecting Western culture’s focus on individual needs compared with Chinese culture’s focus on “external appearance” and the “impression projected to others”.

Although cleanliness received the fewest complaints, the researchers suggest that it “still requires serious attention from management”, as guests noted dissatisfaction not only with dirty furnishings, carpets and so on, but also with dirty water. Hotels should also address problems with the “inconsiderate behaviour” of staff and other guests. Complaints in this area included noises such as staff vacuuming and talking loudly outside guest rooms early in the morning, and neighbouring guests making too much noise late at night.

## **Cultural Differences in Complaints**

Complaints about price were much more likely to come from non-Chinese than Chinese customers, with almost 30% coming from the former and only 10% from the latter. The researchers argue that the “cultural element of face” can explain the low number of complaints about price from Chinese customers, because making such a complaint would imply that they were “not willing or generous enough” to pay. This was particularly the case for high-end hotels, which accounted for less than 5% of complaints from Chinese customers.

The two groups also expressed different views about the location of the hotels at which they stayed, with non-Chinese customers almost twice as likely to voice dissatisfaction with an inconvenient location, particularly if there were no shops and restaurants nearby. The researchers note that the Chinese customers were less troubled by the language barrier and more likely to “know how to get around” and find good local restaurants.

The researchers suggest that although Chinese customers are less likely to post negative online reviews than Western customers, their “accommodating reactions” imply that the “traditional culture of face” is still important in Chinese customers’ online interactions. Consequently, managers should not assume that Chinese customers are satisfied “just because they have not complained”.

## **Adapting to the Digital Economy**

The nature of online complaints about hotels is likely to change quickly, the researchers forecast, as

Chinese people become more used to the anonymity of the Internet and are increasingly exposed to Western culture and values. To adapt, hotels in China need to start using the “collective attitudes of customers” to improve customer value, create more innovative products and target their services at different market segments. One possibility is for hotels to continuously monitor review sites so that they can respond appropriately to negative feedback. They could even “actively interact” with customers through social networking sites to encourage them to share their views. As the researchers caution, in the digital economy, organisations cannot survive without constantly innovating and adapting to the “shifting environment” shaped by advanced technologies.

### **POINTS TO NOTE**

- Online reviews are an important source of information for hotel managers.
- Cultural differences influence the nature of customer reviews.
- Service quality is the most complained about aspect of hotels in China.
- Chinese customers are less likely to complain in attempts to avoid losing face.

Au, Norman, Buhalis, Dimitrios and Law, Rob. (2014) “Online Complaining Behavior in Mainland China Hotels: The Perception of Chinese and Non-Chinese Customers”. *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 248-274.