Using the Critical Incident Technique to Assess Gaming Customer Satisfaction

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Abstract

Before gaming organizations can initiate efforts to service their customers, they must be able to effectively manage the service encounter. Although every service encounter is not necessarily critical to satisfaction, it is not always obvious which are crucial to the customer and which are not. Using critical incidents reported by gaming customers and employees, this study identifies service encounters that both parties perceive as being very satisfactory or very dissatisfactory from the customer's point of view. Identifying particularly positive and negative customer service experiences can provide direction for management in allocating resources specifically to those areas that maximize customer satisfaction and correct those that cause customer dissatisfaction.

Keywords: casino, critical incident technique, customer satisfaction, customer service, gaming

Introduction

Chief executives of today's prominent gaming firms realize that the foremost way to drive profitability is to make front-line employees and customers the focus of management efforts. Investment in staff, technology, innovative hiring and training protocols, and revised remuneration policies that reward employees for exceptional customer service are being progressively integrated into the gaming organization culture. These practices represent a fresh vision as well as a radical shift in the way service firms manage and measure success.

In this new paradigm, success is equated with superior service quality. Successful companies must dominate the quality dimension by not only supplying a quality product, but also by fostering good interactions between customers and employees (Gronroos, 1995). Service quality, particularly in terms of interpersonal contact, is vital to the success of any organization (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithmal, 1985). It is during these "moments of truth" that the customer judges the casino's quality. The gaming firm should approach each service encounter as an opportunity to demonstrate its ability to be a quality service provider, build trust, and strengthen a relationship. On the other hand, each encounter between a customer and an employee also opens the possibility of reducing perceptions of quality, destroying trust, and decreasing customer loyalty (Bitner, 1995).

Customers judge service encounter satisfaction on a continuum with the result being determined by an evaluation between expectations and outcomes (Oliver & Brief, 1977-1978). Satisfaction occurs when the service provided meets or exceeds the customer's expectations. In service organizations, it is frequently the employee-guest interaction that determines the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction for the guest.

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Although both parties expect the service delivery to run smoothly, the very nature of services can result in occasional lapses of quality. Service promises are most often honored or broken by front-line employees (Bitner, 1995).

Not all guest-employee service interactions, however, are equally important. For every organization, there are apparently particular critical encounters that are key to both customer satisfaction (Bitner, 1995; Headley & Choi, 1992) and employee satisfaction (Bitner, Booms & Mohr, 1994). Several researchers found that customer attitudes toward service quality were strongly related to employee views of the service customers received (Schneider, Parkington, & Buxton 1980). A study of critical service encounters from the employee's perspective found that a primary source of customer dissatisfaction was the customer's own behavior (Bitner, et al., 1994).

The Service Encounter in the Gaming Industry

Although service encounter research has been conducted in a variety of fields, including sectors of the hospitality industry, it is lacking in the area of gaming. For reasons ranging from negative economic conditions in some states to increased public acceptance to the positive inducements extended by Federal law to Indian-owned casinos, gaming is this country's fastest growing industry (Fenich, 1995; Simpson, 2001) and has attracted tens of millions of regular new patrons and players. Merrill Lynch (2001) estimates that in 2001 tribal casino revenues will grow by 29%, riverboat revenues by 6%, and Nevada casinos by 2%. Increased growth also means increased competition for the gaming customer; yet gaming experts feel that casinos will continue to thrive as long as they adjust to changes in customer desires (Fenich, 1995).

Marketers know that the gaming product is rather similar at each location. Customers are no longer solely satisfied only with slot machines, table games, and sleeping accommodations. Although the newer casinos boast innovative themes, decors, wild animal shows, and special effects, each property still has a complete display of machines of every kind and the same table games with basically the same rules. People can be thrilled by the technological magic of a heavily themed property once or twice, but after that, the sense of spontaneity is lost (Klein, 2000).

Today's gaming customers are seeking not only a complete entertainment experience, but value. Customers count on value with every service interaction. Klein (2000) describes value as "something like knowledgeable and courteous assistance, prompt answers to inquiries, value-based recognition of their patronage, and above all, a delightful experience that will compel a return visit" (p.20). Gaming operators who practice this concept strive to remove service barriers and create pleasant, spontaneous guest-staff service encounters. Each interaction provides an opportunity to create the perception of superior value, caring, and customer service in the eyes of the customer. Successful management of the service encounter may be emerging as a key factor for profitability in the casino industry.

Objectives of the Study

The overall goal of the study described in this article was to assess the level of congruence between the critical incident perceptions of guests and contact employees in the gaming industry. The first objective was to examine the customers' and contact employees' perspectives of critical encounters and to understand the types of circumstances and behaviors that these two groups believe underlie customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The second purpose was to determine the level of congruence between the critical incidents reported by the two groups, and how this level can impact an organization's ability to provide quality in service encounters. It was felt that if the gaming organization, as represented by its customer-contact employees, has perceptions of critical service encounters that are congruent with guest perceptions, the organization will be better able to serve its customers.

Methods

Data for this study were collected using the critical incident technique (CIT). This method is applicable to obtaining information regarding the perceptions of both parties involved in the service exchange (Nyquist, Bitner & Booms, 1985; Bitner, Booms & Terrault [BBT], 1990; Bitner, et al., 1994; Chung & Hoffman, 1998). For this study the CIT methodology used asked guests to recall a particularly satisfying or dissatisfying interaction with an employee and then asked the employee to recall, from the guest's point of view, a particularly satisfying or dissatisfying interaction that a guest had with an employee.

As recommended by Headley and Choi (1992) and Bitner, et al. (1990), and Bitner et al. (1994), the same basic set of questions was asked of both customers and employees in one particular casino. The questions (found in Figure 1) and criteria were adapted from the critical incident studies of Bitner, et al., (1990,1994). To be critical the incident must have (a) involved an employee-customer interaction, (b) been very satisfying or very dissatisfying from the customer's viewpoint, (c) been a discrete episode, and (d) had enough detail to be visualized by the interviewer. The incident must have occurred within the past calendar year.

Survey Instrument for Slot Customers

Think of a time when playing slots at this or at another casino that you had a particularly satisfying/dissatisfying experience as a result of something an employee said or did. Ask the following questions:
1.   When did the incident happen?
2.   What specific circumstances led up to this situation?
3.   What did the employee say or do?
4.   What resulted that made you feel the experience was satisfying/dissatisfying?

Figure 1: Survey Instrument used with the slot tournament customers

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The study was conducted at a major (over 2,000 rooms) Las Vegas Strip Hotel. A convenience sample of slot players and slot department employees, respectively, represented the guests and customer-contact employees in the service interaction. Incidents were collected by the principal researcher and two graduate students trained in the use of critical incidents, during customer registration for three different slot tournaments. Each interviewer asked the slot tournament players the questions listed in Figure 1 and recorded the answers on standardized questionnaires.

Over the course of the three slot tournaments, 213 incidents were collected from 149 customers. Although they were asked to recall one incident, some customers offered to report more than one incident. Thirty-two incidents failed to meet criteria, leaving a total of 181 useable customer incidents (97 satisfactory and 84 dissatisfactory).

The slot department employees were interviewed over the course of six sessions to ensure that the various shifts and workdays were covered. The employee sample consisted of 101 employees that generated a total of 167 useable incidents. As with customers, some employees were able to recall more than one incident. The same questions (see Figure 1) were asked, but employees were requested to respond from the customer's point of view.

Results and Discussion

A major contribution of the research of Bitner, et al. (1990, 1994) was the development of a critical incident sorting and decision tree used to categorize incidents. This classification scheme was adapted to this study. Original responses to interview questions were coded, or judged to be in one of three Bitner groups: Employee Response to Service Delivery System Failures; Employee Response to Customer Needs and

Requests; and Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions. Two judges completed the initial round of coding, and then a third judge independently coded the incidents in order to obtain measurements of inter-rater reliability. The inter-rater reliabilities for the three major groups and their individual categories were 95 percent and higher. The majority of the customer- and employee-reported incidents could be classified within the original scheme of the major groups of Bitner, et al. (1990, 1994) as shown in Tables 1 and 2, suggesting that this service encounter classification can be utilized in the gaming industry. However, four new categories peculiar to the gaming industry were required to successfully classify all incidents.

Table 1. Group and Category Classification by Type of Incident Outcomes as Reported by Customers

Group and Category	Satisfactory No.	Satisfactory %	Dissatisfactory No.	Dissatisfactory %	Row Total No.	Row Total %
Group 1: Employee Response to Service Delivery System Failures						
A. Response to unavailable service	2	22.2	4	14.3	6	3.3
B. Response to unreasonably slow service	0	0	8	28.6	8	4.4
C. Response to other core service failures	7	77.8	16	59.1	23	12.7
Subtotal, group 1	9	9.3	28	33.3	37	20.4
Group 2: Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests						
A. Response to special needs customers	3	17.6	6	15.8	9	5.0
A1. Response to special needs customers regarding non-smoking room*	0	0	2	5.4	2	1.1
B. Response to customer preferences	6	35.3	8	21.6	14	7.7
B1. Response to customer preferences for non-smoking room*	0	0	9	24.3	9	5.0
C. Response to admitted customer error	2	11.8	0	0	2	1.1
D. Response to potentially disruptive others	0	0	0	0	0	0
E. Response to requests about casino services*	6	35.3	12	32.4	18	10.0
Subtotal, group 2	17	17.5	37	44.1	54	29.9
Group 3: Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions						
A. Attention paid to customer	42	59.2	9	47.4	51	28.2
B. Truly out of the ordinary employee behavior	15	21.1	0	0	15	8.3
C. Employee behaviors /context of cultural norms	0	0	7	36.8	7	3.9
D. Gestalt evaluation	10	14.1	0	0	10	5.5
E. Performance under adverse circumstances	1	1.4	2	10.5	3	1.6
F. "Comp" service**	3	4.2	1	5.3	4	2.2
Subtotal, group 3	71	73.2	19	22.6	90	49.7
Column Total	97	53.6	84	46.4	181	100

* supplementary categories
** new category

Group One - Employee Responses to
Service Delivery Systems Failures

When some aspect of the usual service delivery system fails, the customer frequently looks to the employee to rectify the situation. The manner in which the employee responds can determine the customer's level of satisfaction or disappointment. The majority of satisfactory customer-reported service failures in this group (78 percent) concerned physical problems with the accommodations, such as room keys not working and soiled bed linens. Other issues concerned slot machine malfunctions, room reservations, and slot change and fill procedures. By responding promptly and rectifying the situation, such as by giving complimentary room upgrades, customers reported that problems that could have become major issues did not affect their overall satisfaction level.

Fifty-seven percent of the customer-reported dissatisfactory incidents in this group also concerned inadequate responses to service delivery system failures. Examples included slot machine malfunctions, room problems, language barriers when communicating with employees, slow food and beverage service, poor in-house phone service and the lack of prompt change service. Customers reiterated that it was the employee's unwillingness to attempt to correct the situation, rather than the situation itself, that caused their dissatisfaction with the service.

Employees noted that they perceived customers to be unhappy with the speed and quality of change, booth cashier, and slot machine fill service. In some cases, employees reported observing co-workers who deliberately failed to acknowledge customer requests. Most of the change service dissatisfactory incidents, however, involved procedures that were out of the employees' direct control. For example, customers would request change when two employees were counting the bank at shift change. Policy dictates that they cannot give customers change during this procedure. The customer, however, does not typically understand this process as it takes place out on the casino floor. This indicates either a need for customer education or a location change.

Table 2. Group and Category Classification by Type of Incident
Outcomes as Reported by Employees

Group and Category	Type of Incident Outcome					
	Satisfactory		Dissatisfactory		Row Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Group 1: Employee Response to Service Delivery System Failures						
A. Response to unavailable service	1	14.3	1	7.7	2	1.2
B. Response to unreasonably slow service	2	28.6	8	61.5	10	6.0
C. Response to other core service failures	4	57.1	4	30.8	8	4.8
Subtotal, group 1	7	6.3	13	23.7	20	12.0
Group 2: Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests						
A. Response to special needs customers	12	33.3	1	3.3	13	7.8
A1. Response to special needs customers regarding non-smoking room*	0	0	0	0	0	0
B. Response to customer preferences	2	5.6	2	6.7	4	2.4
B1. Response to customer preferences for non-smoking room*	0	0	0	0	0	0

C. Response to admitted customer error	0	0	0	0	0	0
D. Response to potentially disruptive others	0	0	1	2.7	1	.6
E. Response to requests about casino services*	21	58.3	22	73.3	43	25.7
F. Response to customer requests for comps**	1	2.8	4	13.3	5	3.0
Subtotal, group 2	36	32.1	30	54.5	66	39.5
Group 3: Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Employee Actions						
A. Attention paid to customer	47	68.1	8	72.7	55	32.9
B. Truly out of the ordinary employee behavior	9	13.1	0	0	9	5.4
C. Employee behaviors/context of cultural norms	3	4.3	2	18.2	5	3.0
D. Gestalt evaluation	2	2.9	0	0	2	1.2
E. Performance under adverse circumstances	8	11.6	0	0	8	4.8
F. "Comp" service**	0	4.1	1	9.1	1	.6
Subtotal, group 3	69	61.6	11	20.0	80	47.9
Group 4: Problematic Customer Behavior						
A. Drunkenness	0	0	0	0	0	0
B. Verbal and physical abuse	0	0	1	100.0	1	.6
C. Breaking company policies or laws	0	0	0	0	0	0
D. Uncooperative customer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Subtotal, group 4	0	0	1	1.8	1.6	.6
Column Total	112	67.1	55	32.9	167	100

* supplementary categories
** new categories

Group Two - Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests

Customers often ask employees to alter company policies or procedures to suit their personal preferences. The employees' willingness or ability to modify the usual service delivery system can significantly impact the customers' positive or negative evaluation of both the service experience and the organization. The employee, however, may or may not be empowered by the organization to accommodate certain requests. To be classified in this group, incidents were required to have either an explicit or implied customer request for individualized service.

As shown in Table 1, 44 percent (see Table 1, subtotal group 2) of the total number of customer-reported dissatisfactory incidents from groups one, two and three, were classified in this group. In other words, customers did not feel that employees did enough to fulfill their service requests. This was particularly true when the organization failed to honor the request for a non-smoking room.

In each instance, the customer asked for a non-smoking room when making a reservation. Since the employee taking the reservation did not specifically state, or the customer chose selectively not to hear, that a non-smoking room could not be guaranteed, the customer assumed that a non-smoking room had been reserved. This perceived service promise was broken when upon arrival customers were told that there were no non-smoking rooms available and nothing could be done to honor their request. One customer, for example, stated she made a reservation three months in advance for a slot tournament and had requested a non-smoking room. The reservation clerk confirmed that a room, at a certain price, was available for that date. The clerk failed to mention that the room may or may not be a non-smoking room. Based on the employee's response, however, the customer assumed that a non-smoking room had been reserved. "When I checked in, I was given a smoking room. I told the girl that I made a reservation three months ago, and she said that there were no non-smoking rooms available. She didn't even make an attempt to find one for me" (Johnson, 1999, p.

147). Not only did the organization fail to meet the customer's expectation, the problem was compounded upon arrival by the employee's response to the customer's request.

The lack of a non-smoking room was particularly upsetting to those patrons with respiratory conditions. As stated by one customer: "I asked for a non-smoking room because I have asthma. When I checked in, the girl said that there weren't any available. I explained to her that I have asthma, and that a room with smoke residue would make it hard for me to breathe, but she just said there were no non-smoking rooms available. She didn't help me at all, and I had to take the smoking room. I didn't feel good for the entire stay" (Johnson, 1999, p. 147).

The availability of non-smoking rooms was a particular problem for the hotel/casino in which this survey was conducted as only ten percent of the rooms were designated as non-smoking. According to policy, employees must tell customers that a request for any type of room accommodation (non-smoking, certain location, handicapped-equipped room, or room with a view) will be noted, but cannot be guaranteed upon arrival. This study found that the policy was not always followed. Employees at this property were not empowered to make room changes without authorization from a supervisor. This additional step in the service process only served to increase customer irritation. Employees can also become frustrated when they feel powerless to correct a service failure or adapt the system to fulfill a customer need. Management, therefore, needs to ensure that employees are familiar with systems and their constraints and empower them to correct service failures.

In this study, a number of dissatisfactory incidents resulted from not only the lack of non-smoking rooms, but the resulting front desk employee's response to the customer upon check-in. Service reliability can be the single most important factor that customers' use to evaluate service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Inconsistencies in expectations and experiences directly affect the guests' evaluation of the service experience (Brown & Schwartz, 1989). Management must continually review and analyze service processes in order to identify and correct the root causes of service failures (Shostack, 1984).

The ideal solution would be to offer more non-smoking rooms. In this study's casino, the ability to honor room reservation requests such as non-smoking or certain locations was an operational problem for several reasons. When occupancy is running high, the hotel/casino must match room availability of people who are leaving with people who are arriving. For example, if the property has 2,000 rooms and turns these rooms over every three days, there is a substantial chance that a specific room that a customer requested is still occupied. Another issue was the high cost of changing smoking rooms to non-smoking rooms. Management, therefore, needs to ensure that employees correctly execute the reservation process by clearly stating that a non-smoking room cannot be guaranteed. This should also be indicated on the written reservation confirmation that is mailed to the customer.

The availability of non-smoking rooms is an issue that this study's property and other gaming properties need to evaluate seriously. According to the American Lung Association (2002), there are 44.8 million ex-smokers in the United States and 34 percent of current smokers are trying to quit. Given the older age of the target customer at this property (the mean age of the sample was 60) and the trend towards a smoke-free environment, the hotel/casino should evaluate the number of non-smoking rooms on its property.

A similar service scenario occurred when customers requested specific room locations due to disabilities. Customers asked for rooms located near an elevator or in a certain tower to expedite their mobility around the property. Since the employee taking the reservation did not inform the customer that specific rooms or locations could not be reserved, the customers again assumed that their requests had been fulfilled. Upon checking in, they were very annoyed that their special medical needs were not considered.

In this study, seven percent of the total number of incidents reported by customers and employees involved a customer with a disability. These situations presented employees with a wide range of service opportunities, including transporting customers in wheelchairs, guiding blind customers, and dealing with customers afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. Of the customer-employee interactions that involved a disabled customer, 38 percent were viewed negatively by either the customer or the employee. This information supports the need for employee training on how to provide appropriate and dignified service for mentally and physically challenged customers.

One suggestion, and an idea for future research, would be for gaming properties to survey their customers in regard to preferences for non-smoking rooms. The property would then have a more definitive idea of the number of non-smoking rooms needed to accommodate its guests. New properties or those under expansion may consider building dedicated non-smoking towers or wings, or even a small non-smoking hotel adjacent to the casino. It would also be worthwhile to survey the customer base to determine the extent of special needs accommodations. Providing additional special access services may create a marketing niche, as well as extend positive word of mouth.

Group Three - Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions

Creating a service culture involves more than teaching employees to say: "Have a nice day." It means that employees should remember and greet customers by name, can anticipate customers' needs, are able to read body language, and will take sincere pleasure in going out of their way to provide assistance. These types of events were categorized in group three.

This group, in particular the category "attention paid to customer," contained the most satisfactory customer and employee-reported incidents. Customers were impressed when employees remembered their names, talked to them about personal rather than gaming interests, anticipated their needs before they had to ask for help, wished players good luck, congratulated winners, and helped customers pick "hot" slot machines. It is, however, against casino policy for employees to make suggestions to customers about which slot machine is going to hit. The question is whether or not this policy violation is in response to pleasing the customer or the anticipation of receiving a tip if the machine does hit a jackpot.

During the interview process customers also described events that they considered as "truly out of the ordinary employee behavior." These involved customer recognition in the form of gifts, such as flowers sent to the room for a customer's anniversary or a fruit basket for a birthday. This information was obtained from the players' database maintained by the casino and, depending on the level of play, such gifts were routinely sent to customers. Customers, however, perceived these gestures as special and personal recognition on the part of the individual employee rather than the organization.

Many staff members said that getting to know the customers on a personal level was a very important, as well as a fun, aspect of their jobs. They mentioned that customers enjoyed talking to them about their families and personal interests. Employees cited examples of anticipating customer needs, such as carrying coins to the booth for elderly customers, helping customers learn how to play the different machines, and pointing out safety and security precautions. Many of these situations involved older customers who employees felt required extra assistance. One employee gave the following example: "I had a senior that hit a large jackpot. I suggested that he take payment in a check so that he wouldn't risk having a lot of cash around. I watch over my seniors so they don't get robbed" (Johnson, 1999, p. 154).

Employees also reported some dissatisfactory incidents regarding "the attention paid to customers." These concerned failure to greet or acknowledge a customer by name, failure to provide service until a tipping situation arose, and slow change service. Employees acknowledged that they had observed co-workers who had blatantly failed to respond to verbal or body language requests for change service.

New and Supplementary Categories

One new category emerged during the course of coding the customer and employee reported incidents (see Tables 1 and 2). This category under group 3, Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions, refers to "comp" service, or a free service offered to the customer without the customer's request. Examples include offering the customer a free drink, meal, show, or a room night. Comps can be considered a unique feature of the gaming environment and, therefore, were not included specifically in the BBT schemata. In other service industries, complimentary services, such as not charging the customer for a meal when the food was poorly prepared, are typically part of a service recovery strategy. In the casino context, comps are not offered in response to a service problem, but as a means to encourage and reward slot play.

Experienced players are generally aware that comps are acquired based on the monetary amount of play. But inexperienced players or those not keeping close track of their play may perceive the comp as an unexpected treat. Customers in this study reported that the small gesture of offering a complimentary meal or show made a positive impression on the customer. Comp policy, however, can create difficult situations for the casino staff.

Employees reported dissatisfactory incidents when customers asked for comps that they were unable to provide. These events accounted for 13 percent of the dissatisfactory incidents in group two. Employees perceived that the customer was dissatisfied when he or she requested a free meal or room and the employee had to say no. Employees were following the casino's policy of matching comp availability against slot play. In these instances, the customers had not played enough to "earn" the free services.

New customers can pose another problem. They may feel entitled to receive free drinks and food as part of the Las Vegas gaming experience, and are disappointed when reality does not match perception. As one employee stated: "A customer asked me for a comp. He had been playing for several hours and wanted a free breakfast. I didn't have the authority to approve the request. I had to call the supervisor which made the customer unhappy because he thought he should be immediately entitled to a free breakfast. He didn't want to talk to the supervisor" (Johnson, 1999, p. 152).

The employees felt that denying the customer's comp request was particularly dissatisfying when in prior visits to the casino the customer's play justified complimentary services. Customers did not, or refused to acknowledge that, on this particular visit their play was insufficient to be eligible for comps. Employees reported feeling "caught in the middle" between following company policy and pleasing the customer. Although employees did resolve to follow company policy, they indicated feeling badly that the customer was upset, particularly when they knew they would have future interactions with that player.

One "supplementary" category and two "supplementary" subcategories were also used to classify data in a manner that would be more useful to the casino manager (see Tables 1 & 2). These concerned: (a) the non-smoking environment due to medical conditions; (b) the non-smoking environment for personal preference; and (c) the response to customer requests concerning casino services.

The general clientele of the slot segment of the casino industry is the older person. The mean age for both men and women in this study was 60. It is expected that this older group of customers would have more chronic medical conditions, and as a whole is more concerned with health issues than are younger patrons. In this study, customers with chronic conditions or medically induced disabilities (such as emphysema or heart disease) were very vocal about having non-smoking rooms. Although under the BBT format these incidents could be classified as "response to special needs customers," the researcher determined that this information should be separated to provide more insight to management regarding this type of customer. As the overall U.S. population continues

to age, providing health appropriate environments for these customers will become increasingly important. By analyzing these specific incidents as a separate sub-category, casino managers can better evaluate the current status of accommodating these customers as well as planning for future needs.

A similar case exists for categorizing the incidents in which customers failed to receive the requested non-smoking room. Although these incidents could be classified under the BBT system as "response to customer preferences," the researcher determined that these data would be more meaningful to management as a separate sub-category. In this study, 24 percent of dissatisfactory incidents in group 2, "Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests," were directly initiated by a customer not receiving the requested non-smoking room. At this particular property, only 10 percent of the rooms are designated as non-smoking rooms. Placing these incidents in a separate, supplementary sub-category highlights the importance to management of evaluating the current smoking/non-smoking room mix and its resulting impact on customer satisfaction.

Although the schema of Bitner, et al. (1990) has categories for requests for customer preferences and employee response to other core service failures, this study found customer reported critical incidents involving requests for functional services, that were specific to casino operations. Bitner, et al. (1990) interpreted a request as a personal preference (such as asking for a room with a view or a particular seat in a restaurant) or an extension of service beyond the norms of the organization. New customer requests found in this study revolved around casino-specific services, rather than personal preferences, such as obtaining tickets for casino-promoted events, assisting customers with tournaments and change service, or explaining to customers how to play new slot machines. Since these customer requests pertained to casino operations or using gaming equipment, the researcher classified them in a separate supplementary category to distinguish between general requests and preferences and those concerning the use of casino services and games.

These requests comprised 32 percent of the dissatisfactory and 35 percent of the satisfactory customer-reported incidents and 73 percent of dissatisfactory and 58 percent of the satisfactory employee-reported incidents in group 2, "Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests". Since these incidents were specific to the gaming industry, they were classified in the supplementary group "Response to Requests About Casino Services" rather than as the BBT category "Response to Other Core Service Failures".

Hotel/casinos typically have two management groups, one that manages the hotel and one that oversees the gaming operation. This management structure has the potential to impede information sharing. Although the guest is a customer of both the hotel and the casino, the service issues in each area can be substantially different and, therefore, need to be identified by management as concerns unique to the particular service area. By grouping these incidents as a "Response to Other Core Service Failures" managers will not be able to discern if customer issues exist with the hotel operation, such as not having a clean room, or with the casino side, such as not being able to get prompt change service. In addition, many customers are first-time gamblers and require information and assistance peculiar to that environment. New customers can be overwhelmed by not only the size of the hotel/casino, but by the intensity and variety of stimuli present in the environment. These incidents, therefore, were broken out for management purposes to use in evaluating gaming operation specific problems as opposed to overall hotel service failures.

Managerial Implications

Management plays a crucial role in developing and maintaining the type of service climate in which an employee's ability to provide excellent service is encouraged and

rewarded. It is the role of top management to foster an organizational culture focused on superior customer service. In this particular hotel/casino, based on the identified congruence level of employee and guest critical incidents, it appears that the management has instilled a service culture that encourages employees to develop strong customer-employee bonds.

The employees' role in giving good customer service is also facilitated by management implementing policies and procedures that are focused on meeting customers' needs. On the other hand, the employees' ability to help customers can be hindered when management demonstrates more concern for system maintenance and strict policy adherence than it does for customer satisfaction. Management needs to empower employees to cultivate interpersonal relationships with customers and allow flexible application of policies as they apply to serving the customer. In this study customers rated reserving and obtaining a non-smoking room and change service as highly dissatisfactory. This suggests a need for management to review these processes to make them more customer-friendly.

> **It is the role of top management to foster an organizational culture focused on superior customer service.**

The ability of the employees in this study to understand what constitutes satisfactory and dissatisfactory service encounters may also be related to the organization's hiring and training practices. Even satisfactory performance requires more than technical knowledge. Hogan & Busch (1984) call this non-technical aspect of the service encounter the "service orientation." The service orientation is a group of attitudes and behaviors that influences the outcome of the service interaction between customers and employees. Skills such as filling a slot machine with coins are more easily taught than behavioral flexibility and empathy. Actions such as treating customers with courtesy, consideration, and tact, as well as being perceptive about customers' needs, strongly impact the customer's overall perception of satisfaction and promote customer loyalty. On the other hand, employees who are thoughtless, rude, and imperceptive can induce customer dissatisfaction and reduce, or even eliminate, the opportunity to create a long-term customer service relationship. As stated by Berry (1995), "regular, open, two-way communication conveys the firm's interest in the customer's welfare" (p. 243).

Hiring service-oriented employees, however, is only one part of the process of developing and maintaining the commitment to customer service via open communication between customers and employees. The employees' opportunity to engage in successful customer interactions can be improved with training. This study, for example, found that employees needed more training in how to handle situations involving disabled customers.

As noted earlier, the majority of satisfactory incidents for both customers and employees stemmed from unprompted and unsolicited employee actions. This finding supports the need to train employees in identifying with their customers. As one customer interviewed stated:

" We were playing in the slot tournament and my brother showed up expectedly. Although he wasn't registered for the tournament, the slot coordinator gave him a ticket to the tournament dinner so he could be with us" (Johnson, 1999, p. 150). Such spontaneous and unsolicited employee actions clearly make a lasting positive impression on casino guests.

Conclusion

Through the collection of critical incidents, this study identified service encounters in the gaming environment that customers and employees perceived as being satisfactory and dissatisfactory from the customer's point of view. A good investment for any gaming or other service organization is to take the time to collect and chart the flow

of satisfactory and dissatisfactory customer and employee reported incidents. By analyzing this information, employees and management can avoid potential negative service issues, develop recovery strategies, direct training, and focus on what truly makes the customer happy.

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