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Developing a dining customer satisfaction measurement and response tool

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Introduction

How often do dining experiences fail to satisfy customer expectations? And when they do fail, how often (if ever) does management effectively rectify those situations? The answers to these questions might just be surprising. But the more important question may be: "Why do some dining experiences fail to satisfy customer expectations?" The answer is two-fold and lies in employee training. First of all too many employees are ill equipped in terms of the interpersonal communications skills that are crucial in dealing with customers under any circumstances, let alone those under which customers are dissatisfied. Secondly, managers lack the right customer service satisfaction measurement and response tools to effectively deal with customers.

There are many different types of customer service auditing processes that have evolved over the decades within the hospitality industry. However, in spite of some of those processes exhibiting more superior benefits than others, very few, if any, ever end up getting reviewed by management. And those that do are rarely reviewed thoroughly enough to be utilized, applied, or implemented. Current research reveals that some customer satisfaction measurement tools are out there but are not being taken advantage of. Perhaps this is because they fall short of management expectations in terms of their overall effective usefulness.

Purpose

There are many customers and guests who depart a hotel or its dining and entertainment facilities with a "bad taste" in their mouths due to customer service situations that either went wrong completely, or simply did not meet those particular guests' expectations. This frequently results in the seeking by guests of better service experiences by going to the competition, which

ultimately represents lost or foregone revenue. These are situations from which management could have actually benefited. It is merely a matter of construing them as opportunities to consummate long-term customer relationships. This misconception is often due to ignorance or oversight on the part of management regarding what customers' true perceptions of their service experience are, mostly resulting from inadequate customer service satisfaction measurement systems.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a dining customer satisfaction measurement and response tool. This pro-paper will accomplish this objective through the compilation of information obtained through various forms of research into the area, including field interviews with hospitality managers and customers. It will report findings on current experimental and secondary data on the topic. It will then take a closer look at the flaws, oversights, and consequences of the continued acceptance of customer satisfaction auditing processes that merely meet (or even fall short of) the current hospitality industry standard.

Justification

A more accurate customer satisfaction measurement and response model can be developed to include specific steps management can take to resolve unsatisfactory customer service experiences as defined by each individual guest. This involves reviewing the problem of foregone future patronage due to inadequate customer conflict resolution and thorough research into the subject. It is possible to tailor the conflict resolution process to suit each individual guest's expectations (within reason of course). Management can then implement these steps into their employee/management training programs to accomplish customer service relationships that will literally last forever.

Finally, the implementation of this premier auditing system will enable hospitality organizations to retain the astronomical sums of revenue that were previously and otherwise foregone to the competition via the pockets of dissatisfied guests that management was either unaware of, unconcerned about, or "ill equipped" to deal with effectively.

PART TWO

Literature Review

Rotfeld (2002), contributes employee-training budget reductions as the primary cause of insensitive actions and lacking marketing perspectives on the part of many hospitality employees. Rotfeld claims that "even the large organizations report reductions in time or budgets allocated to employee training, such that it is now best stated in minutes instead of hours or days" (p.480). He then goes on to assert that "the marketing questions are really quite straightforward and simple." (p.481) Yet, too many employees lack the tools required to interact with customers in a manner that is appealing and accurately represents the organizational culture. But in addition to more effective interpersonal communication skills, employees also need an understanding of what comprises customer expectations. This is sometimes qualitative in nature, and sometimes quantitative.

Qualitative Approach

Authors Stauss and Neuhaus (1997) discussed a plausible explanation for false positive results of customer satisfaction reports due to the "tools of measurement" used in most evaluations, based on a qualitative approach to customer expectations. The authors clearly established a connection between their hypotheses and the qualitative dimensions of satisfaction/dissatisfaction through their use of job satisfaction research. The authors then go on to reveal through the "qualitative satisfaction model,...that certain combinations of emotional,

cognitive and intentional components lead to qualitatively different satisfaction types." (Stauss and Neuhaus, 1997, p.238). This is why satisfaction measurement tools need to be tailored more so they are geared towards equipping (through informing) managers of these qualitatively different satisfaction types. Yet, thus far, no such tool exists!

Quantitative Approach

Mattila (1999) based an interpretation of the overall physical environment of hotels in Southeast Asia on a standard quantitative sampling strategy that dealt with the use of conjoint analysis with business executives as the population. The author was effective in communicating that the overall physical environment of a hospitality facility might play a more "prominent" role in determining customer satisfaction than mere service alone. This is important because when developing a customer satisfaction measurement tool, it is crucial to take into account customers' perceptions of not just the overall physical environment of the subject facility, but the physical amenities as well and how they play into the overall customer service experience. This way, managers can take those quantitative aspects of the customer's experience into account when attempting to rectify or improve that experience. The sample size in Mattila's (1999) study consisted of focus groups of 145 executives from the top 1000 companies in Singapore. Mattila then used ladder interviews in order to more accurately ascertain the respondents' reactions to both the questionnaires and the physical characteristic variances in each of the hypothetical luxury hotels. Through a more quantitatively analytical approach, Mattila clearly conveyed that many customers prefer to have physical amenities readily available on a more self-serve basis rather than having to wait for inefficient employees to provide those services unsatisfactorily. This research demonstrates the quantitative aspects of what can comprise customer expectations.

There is also the old mystery shopper form of service assessment. Mistie LoNardo, (2006) discussed through both basic and applied research, the importance of having mystery shoppers in order to ensure excellent customer service. There has been extensive research in the area of mystery shopping and it is indeed an effective tool. But mystery shopping rarely proves effective without the right mystery shopper to begin with. Goodwin (2006) presented ten tips to consider when selecting a mystery shopper (including the ensuring of the mystery shopper's industry experience and expertise). Goodwin emphasized the significance of accurate and prompt reporting combined with focus on customers with an emphasis on service quality. His article was based primarily on secondary data with a basic research approach.

There are a number of different types customer satisfaction measurement methods that have been engaged in the past. And although there are certain common elements that can be found in all forms of customer expectations, currently there is no research data on customer satisfaction measurement tools that customize the managerial response such that every customer's expectations are satisfactorily met. Obviously, customers expect to be treated with respect. This is why both employees and managers need to be made aware and continually reminded that there is an array of both intricate and subtle features of what spans the spectrum of customer expectations. But how can management be made aware and reminded of these features? While it is true they need more effective customer satisfaction measurement tools, they also need a tool that will gauge how they should respond to their data.

One such tool could consist of an "ego-check" that outlines certain questions managers need to ask themselves when engaging in an attempted customer conflict resolution process. Cunningham (2006) presented the notion that managers need to think about what it is exactly

that they expect to gain from verbal exchanges with dissatisfied customers: the best out of the situation? Or just ego-satisfaction?"

Cunningham (2006) described a scenario wherein he was dining and overheard the table next to him asking their waiter when they could expect their meals as they had been waiting a half hour. The waiter's response was to leave and come back with their ticket waving it in front of their faces showing them that the orders had actually only been placed 20 minutes ago. Cunningham used this as an example to demonstrate how often times employees (and managers alike) may succeed in satisfying their egos, while at the same time costing themselves future patronage from return guests who could have otherwise departed the establishment feeling good about their overall service experience.

Consequently, Cunningham (2006) suggests, "managers always remember that even though the customer may not always be right, he or she is still always the customer, and should therefore be treated like one whose continued return patronage is not only desired, but relied upon for the organization's financial stability." (p.14) This is important when composing a dining customer satisfaction measurement and response tool that, in quality and usefulness, exceeds those that are currently accepted as the current hospitality industry standard for obvious reasons. Cunningham's tips come into crucial play when developing the response portion of that tool.

Literature Review Summary

As it can be noted from these sources, there have been some significant studies conducted on the various forms of measuring customer satisfaction. There is a consensus as to the forms of assessing customer satisfaction that have become accepted as the industry norm, (i.e., mystery shopping, Likert scale feedback forms, etc.). However, Stauss, Neuhaus (1997) and

Cunningham (2006) seemed to have achieved research results that were closest to being the most effective in terms of their usefulness to hospitality managers. This is because they thoroughly sought out the true and accurate meaning of customer satisfaction by exposing the subjective aspects of the term from a qualitative perspective. This is crucial in determining whether or not the data generated by customer satisfaction measurement tools is accurate and consequently useful to any meaningful extent. This paper will focus primarily on an application and expansion of Stauss and Neuhaus (1997) and Cunningham's (2006) findings combined with supportive evidence as to why past forms of industry-accepted customer satisfaction assessment tools are inferior (i.e., why they are no longer the most useful and effective methods).

PART THREE

Introduction

A dining customer satisfaction measurement and response tool needs to measure all aspects of the customer's dining experience from the moment they first make contact with the dining room's employees to the moment they exit after paying their bill. The tool itself is a list of issues that range from point of contact sequence issues to timeliness and timing of all aspects of the dining experience, to the quality control issues of the products and services that comprise it. There are qualitative aspects of what constitutes appeal or lack of it within human interactions. As Stauss and Neuhaus (1997) alluded to, satisfaction is subjective depending on each individual's perception of it. This is why a customer satisfaction measurement and response tool needs to address universally accepted standards and sources of satisfaction before it can be capable of being tailored to each individual's definition of not just satisfactory service, but exquisite levels of service.

The tool will be defined in terms of how it measures the aspect of timeliness of the American dining experience. This can be accomplished by analyzing the universally accepted standards, styles, and sources of customer satisfaction. Furthermore, a look at what comprises the process of distinguishing more personalized standards of satisfactory (and even unprecedented) levels of customer service will be assessed. Finally, and most importantly, the research will reveal how the satisfaction measurement tool should be developed to measure overall quality of product and service within the dining experience.

Accepted Standards of Service

What are universally accepted standards and styles of satisfactory customer service? The greeter/host/hostess/maitre d, etc. should always smile when first greeting guests. This is considered hospitable in the minds of almost all dining patrons. This is all part of friendliness and hospitality. There is a sequence that follows the initial point of contact in a dining experience. After being greeted and welcomed, guests should be seated and asked if the section of the restaurant where they are being seated is satisfactory. These issues should be addressed in the form of direct questions as part of any mystery shopper list of items (LoNardo, 2006).

Even Stauss and Neuhaus (1997) agree that certain aspects of customer satisfaction, though qualitative in nature, are still accepted by the vast majority of customers. Another aspect of the overall dining experience that many patrons consider to be unanimously important when it relating to customer satisfaction, is the timeliness of the experience. Timeliness is an issue throughout the entire experience from waiting in line to be seated to waiting for the bus person to serve beverages, to waiting for the food server to take the order, deliver the appetizers, salads, soups, entrees, deserts, coffee, and finally, the check. There are tricks that management can utilize to help ease the perception of waiting in lines that have proven effective and should

subsequently be addressed in the mystery shopper's list of items to be measured for overall satisfaction from the customer's perspective. One such technique includes the use of *distractions* to make the perception of waiting seem less painful.

A distraction during dreaded waiting times to be seated is a useful technique employed by many restaurants and also comprises the quantitative and physical aspects of the overall dining experience. While a dining customer will likely assume that waiting in the bar and ordering a drink before dinner based on the suggestion of the host/hostess is an example of good customer service, in fact it can give restaurant staff members that extra needed time when it finds itself unable to immediately seat a reservation due to a backup of tables or booths. This is why snacks or appetizers should commonly be made available at the bar as well and should be considered a part of the customer satisfaction measurement tool in order to assess whether the patron felt disregarded during that initial contact period, or that he or she had to wait for unnecessarily long periods of time to be seated.

Distracting your customer with something interesting such as some form of entertainment (some restaurants have a cocktail pianist or singer) or food is an effective technique to counter those perceptions and should subsequently be measured by management. Moreover, food and entertainment distractions made available while waiting to be seated, can also make the customer feel empowered and more positively responsive to the physical amenities of the establishment. Although the sense of waiting may not be entirely reduced through distractions, it can still be tempered enough to the point where the customer does not feel powerless, bored, or more importantly, unimportant. These perceptions can be measured by having the mystery shopper take specific note of this aspect of his or her dining experience.

Once the patron is seated, the satisfaction measurement tool needs to address friendliness of staff such as bus persons, waiters, captains, etc. Did the bus person offer a choice of beverages immediately upon the patrons having been seated? Did he or she smile when approaching the guests? Did the waiter inform the guests of any specials or specialties of the house? Most importantly, did the food server write down the entire order carefully and repeat it back to the guests in order to ensure accuracy?

Next, the customer service satisfaction measurement and response tool needs to address whether or not the appetizers were brought out within 8-10 minutes. This goes to the timeliness section of the tool. Were the appetizers flawless in their quality? This goes to the quality section of the tool. This same process of assessment is applied to the salads, soups, entrees/main courses, deserts, coffee, and check delivery portions of the overall dining experience.

Implementation of the Tool

The issues that comprise the customer satisfaction measurement and response tool need to be carried by each employee working the dining room. Moreover, each employee needs to be trained fully to execute each aspect of the tool effectively and successfully. Employees should not be hesitant to communicate with guests verbally. By asking the guests continually if there is anything they would like that they are not receiving, there is a constant line of two-way communication. It is not always possible to merely deduce or surmise what it is specifically that guests desire throughout a dining experience. That is why continual communication is so vital. Stauss and Neuhaus (1997) emphasized the importance of communication with the customer. Mattila (1999) and Goodwin (2006) also touched on this issue. Implementation of a customer satisfaction measurement and response tool begins with training, persistent communication with

each guest, and keeping a portable, pocket-sized, miniaturized manual of the list of important issues in every staff member's pocket.

Each paper manual will contain multiple copies of the list of issues to be addressed during each dining experience and will be separated by date and table or booth number. This way, each aspect of each experience can be assessed and evaluated based on guests' reactions and responses to the questioning throughout their experience. All too often, the dining patron experiences frustration from not being able to grab the food server's attention when he or she wants or needs something. This can be exceptionally frustrating, especially when the guest wants to start consuming his or her entrée, but cannot begin without his or her A-1 steak sauce, for example. There is no such thing as too much asking when relating to the dining experience. Better to be a "pest" than a "neglector." By carrying this pocket manual in one's pocket, the staff can all keep track of what is transpiring in terms of customer satisfaction directly from the customer's mouth.

The response aspect of the customer satisfaction measurement and response tool is a little different in terms of how it is to be applied. The response to satisfied guests should always be one of gratitude and appreciation of any compliments, accompanied by an expression of desire for their return. However, if there is an issue of dissatisfaction on the part of the customer, it calls for immediate attention and efforts towards expedient and satisfactory resolution. The protocol should be to simply do what the guest wants – plain and simple. An example of this would be when a guest asks for mashed potatoes instead of baked, even though the menu states the entrée comes with baked potato. Even if the establishment's point-of-sale system is not equipped to deal with the pricing of substitutions, always bring the customer what he or she wants. Arguing about it is not worth losing the otherwise valuable revenue from that same

patron in the future for years to come, especially if the restaurant is located within a casino where he or she gambles frequently and with substantially large bets (Cunningham, 2006).

As Cunningham (2006) alluded to, ego can be the most expensive thing any person can own – or any hotel or restaurant can own. In terms of the response aspect of this customer satisfaction measurement and response tool, give the customer what he or she wants when responding to their concerns or desires. They are what support the operation of your business. Unless you own and operate in a city like Las Vegas, it is difficult to sustain those operations, let alone profitability with only one-time visits by guests. Employees need to be trained to effectively and harmoniously deal with customers at all times, especially those when guests are agitated for otherwise avoidable, ridiculous, petty reasons (Rotfeld, 2002).

The customer service satisfaction measurement and response tool needs to have specific processes and steps in place to effectively respond to customer concerns. One of the goals of this tool is to have its results enable management to provide response measures for its employees to avoid ever having to receive a customer complaint. Once a customer raises a concern or request, it should be satisfied immediately before a disagreement or reluctance on the part of management ever leads to the customer executing a complaint. This tool will enable managers to prevent customers' concerns from ever leading or rising to the level of a complaint.

The primary objective of the tool is to empower employees with the autonomy to extinguish fires on the spot before they spread out of control. Again, by continually communicating with the dining guest, employees should be able to ascertain what it is that specifically comprises customer service satisfaction as defined by each individual patron. (Stauss & Neuhaus, 1997). Otherwise, there are no real benefits that one can expect to be gained through implementation of the tool.

Benefits and Expected Results

Dining establishments everywhere can benefit from the implementation of this tool. Restaurants should expect stellar results from a tool (refer to Appendix) that continually ascertains customer satisfaction levels throughout their dining experience. It is not a complicated tool, obviously. Perhaps the logistics associated with implementing it may pose some challenges, but nothing that cannot be overcome with effective training. It stands to reason that future return patronage and anticipated consequential customer loyalty are not expectations that are unrealistic to project based on the effective implementation of this incredible tool.

This tool is designed specifically for the hospitality industry based on the types of issues listed in it, from the guest's initial arrival at the dining establishment, to their actual dining, to their exit. It addresses and measures all aspects of the overall dining experience, from friendliness and hospitality of staff, to promptness, efficiency, accuracy, and overall quality of products of service. This makes it applicable conceptually to virtually any industry by simply adapting the issues to whatever industry within which one seeks to measure customer satisfaction.

Recommendations for Future Research

One way to implement the tool is to conduct training seminars with role-playing wherein employees can serve each other with the tool in hand by following through with each step of it. For instance, those employees portraying the dining patrons could arrive at the host/hostess podium and monitor how the employee portraying the greeter greeted them. Anybody witnessing this event should then record in their portable manual, whether or not the host or hostess smiled when greeting the diners. In a similar fashion, the employees witnessing the role-

play would then record their comments in their manuals regarding how they were seated, served, the quality of the meals, etc., all the way through the entire dining experience process.

The training programs would have to entail all of the detailed steps that restaurant staff would need to take when responding to guests' concerns. They would also have to develop employee familiarity with all aspects and issues on the paper manual list and how each issue is addressed and recorded during the dining experience. Essentially, all restaurant staff members are continually taking notes on themselves and each other throughout the entire process. Once an entire shift is completed with comments and recordings that are comprised exclusively of nothing but praises and compliments based on customer feedback, the objective of the tool will have been achieved perfectly.

Conclusion

As this paper discussed, current hospitality managers are ill equipped to effectively deal with customer conflicts and unsatisfactory customer service. Some of the reasons for this consist of lacking budgets (Rotfeld 2002). Other reasons include inadequate customer satisfaction measurement tools that lack specific responsive steps. Moreover, it is difficult to objectively define customer satisfaction without taking into account qualitative and subjective factors (Stauss & Neuhaus, 1997).

Even when considering quantitative aspects (Mattila, 1999) of what constitutes customer satisfaction, there is still no current tool to measure it beyond comment cards and mystery shopping (LoNardo, 2006). This is why a customer satisfaction measurement and response tool needs to be developed. More importantly, the tool needs to spell out in detail, the specific steps to take when dealing with customers whose expectations of satisfactory service are not being met. The tool discussed in this paper is just that. It explains in detail how to deal with the

variances in customer expectations of satisfactory service. Finally, it enables managers to monitor customer experiences as they are transpiring, before it is too late to engage in customer recovery/retention. Most importantly, it empowers management to continually improve customer service to an extent that should prevent customer dissatisfaction and virtually eliminate customer complaints. All customers should never have to leave a dining experience with the drive to file a complaint. If something went wrong during the experience, it should be rectified immediately to an extent that makes the customer feel completely satisfied as if the dissatisfying event had not ever occurred in the first place. Finally, there is a customer satisfaction measurement and response tool that makes this unprecedented process of conflict resolution and quality improvement possible!

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Appendix

Name of Party:

Table or Booth #:

Number in Party:

All orders for this party:

Checklist:

Seating:

Y N

**If no, list all
responsive
action/s to
rectify
situation**

Was the party sat in a timely manner?

Was water served within one minute of having been seated?

Were beverage orders taken immediately?

Did all parties receive menus in a timely manner?

Were all orders taken efficiently and written down?

Was all the food satisfactory (including appetizers, salads, etc.)?

Was the check presented in a timely manner?

Checklist of actions to be taken generally:

1. Always smile
2. Always be friendly
3. Always comply with customer requests no matter what
4. Constantly check with guests to make sure they always have everything they want
5. Trust and empower your employees with the authority to waive certain minimal charges in order to efficiently resolve customer issues as they may arise
6. Pay careful attention to implementing the changes customers want (i.e., a point of sale system that can deal with charges of menu item substitution requests, etc.)