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Hotel Front Office Training: Turning Expense Into Investment

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HOTEL FRONT OFFICE TRAINING: TURNING EXPENSE INTO INVESTMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

Hotel Front Office Training: Turning Expense Into Investment

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The process of employee training is typically looked upon as an expense, but perhaps a more insightful view would be to consider employee training an investment. This becomes possible when employees are taught to execute service-marketing principles during customer interactions. Well-executed interactions then lead to satisfied guests, repeat purchases, and company profitability. The purpose of this paper is to develop a customer focused training guideline integrating service-marketing concepts into the front office employee training process. A literature review was conducted to identify service marketing concepts and best training practices that can be applied to the hotel employee workplace. This information was then used to formulate an effective training guideline. Emphasis is placed upon four key service-marketing concepts and how they relate to the both the training environment and employee workplace. The guideline is designed to allow trainers and management teams opportunities to customize the training content, allowing for application across multiple hotel business models.

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Hotel Front Office Training: Turning Expense Into Investment

Introduction

The process of employee training is typically looked upon as an expense, but perhaps a more insightful view would be to consider employee training an investment. This thought has merit when training is looked upon as a component of marketing, rather than operations. The hospitality industry is unique in that the customer purchases a service rather than a product. The quality of this service is directly dependent upon the actions of the employee who delivers that service. The hospitality company who wishes to create a service that generates repeat purchases must ensure that service delivery continually meets (and sometimes exceeds) the needs and expectations of the customer. In most cases, employee training is the mechanism for teaching and ensuring satisfactory service delivery. The effectiveness of training depends upon the method almost as much as the topic (Knight & Salter, 1985). In order for employee training to impart the kind of service that customers desire, that training must be built upon effective teaching methods that can translate service marketing concepts into the day to day actions of front line employees. The integration of these core service delivery concepts and learning methods into hotel employee training is the centerpiece of this professional paper.

A literature review will serve as the research medium for developing a training program that extends beyond the fundamentals of checking a person in and incorporates the service marketing concepts that are so necessary for successfully operating a hotel. The literature review will focus primarily upon identification of service marketing concepts applicable to the day-to-day operation of a hotel, along with finding best practices with respect to hospitality training for incorporating these concepts into the operational training process for hotel staff. Part three of the

professional paper will summarize the results of the literature review and provide a guideline for incorporating service marketing concepts and best training practices into the training of front office employees.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to develop a customer focused training program integrating service-marketing concepts into the front office employee training process. The literature review will look to find marketing service concepts that can be utilized within the day-to-day functions of hotel employees. In order to ensure that these service-marketing concepts transfer from the training room to the actions of the front line employee, effective training methods are necessary. The identification of training methods and best practices that can be utilized to teach and instill service-marketing concepts into the actions and job duties of hotel employees shall also be identified in the literature review.

Justifications

Most training processes focus upon the development of technical proficiency and cost control, rather than teaching the employee how to meet and exceed the needs of the customer (Nolan, 2002). Training that focuses upon the technical aspects and expense can miss the mark in delivering the type of service that leads to customer satisfaction, repeat purchase and company profitability. In the hotel environment, the front desk agent is taught how to check the guest into the property management system, but are they taught how to utilize guest recognition, smile, listen and find ways to add value to the guest experience. The problem with most training regimes is that they overlook the opportunity to deliver key marketing service initiatives within the day to day actions of line level employees (Breiter & Woods, 1997).

The professional paper will look to solve this problem by researching service marketing

concepts and training methods that are adaptable to day-to-day hotel operations. The identification of marketing service concepts and the training methods that teach those concepts to hotel employees will allow for the development of a training program that will be customer focused. A customer focused training program is the first step in creating a service environment that leads to customer satisfaction and company profitability (Knight & Salter, 1985).

Constraints

The exploration and incorporation of marketing services concepts into the training regime of hotel employees is constrained in scope to front line employees in the front office. This constraint allows the professional paper to focus in on the operational details accomplished by agents who have a myriad of tasks and duties to perform on a daily basis. A goal of integrating services marketing concepts into front line employee training is to make these concepts more tangible to both the employee and the guest who receives services from that employee. In order to accomplish this task, service marketing concepts cannot remain a theoretical possibility, but must become an integral part of the employee's actions. Focusing upon specific hotel employee disciplines, rather than an overall hospitality viewpoint creates the opportunity to impart service-marketing concepts into specific employee actions.

Another constraint will be the scope for identifying training methods. The research into training methods and best practices will be limited to service employee type training. This will ensure that the training methods selected are appropriate for service type employees and promote the growth of a customer focused training program. An example of this is role-play type training methods. Role-play helps customer service employees integrate new knowledge into their day-to-day actions while honing their interpersonal skills (Swink, 1993).

Glossary

Service Standards – Operational standards based on pivotal customer requirements visible to and measured by customers (Bitner, Gremler & Zeithaml, 2009).

Service Encounters – Moments of time when employees interact directly with customers during service delivery. A critical juncture where promises are either kept or broken in the eyes of the customer (Bitner et al., 2009).

Role Play – A training method that allows trainees to assume roles and act out parts in a realistic situation or setting (Woods, 2006).

Conference Training – A training method that consists of one on one discussion between a trainer and a trainee (Woods, 2006).

Literature Review

Introduction

Hotel training challenges.

Front line hotel employees have the challenging task of being technically proficient with some of the most advanced hospitality and business software, while simultaneously mastering customer service skills. Typically this is accomplished with minimal professional education. Studies have shown that front office work does not require high levels of education (Baum & Devine, 2007). Although formal education may not be a requirement of hotel front line employees, job training is a very necessary, but underrated, function. The lack of front office and tourism type education places a greater emphasis on the training processes provided by a hospitality company (Baum & Devine, 2007). The training quality provided to front line staff is not always adequate. The average hotel employee gets their information from front line managers and supervisors, but these managers may not have training skills (Davies, 2006). The lack of professional training usually reduces the learning experience to sink or swim scenarios. Compounding the training quality challenge is the transient nature of the front line hotel position. The hospitality industry is a transient profession with many front line staff moving on after only a short period (Shailer, 2011). In many instances, employee training is provided simply to meet statutory requirements such as health and safety regulations (Baum & Devine, 2007). When not specifically required, training is frequently addressed as a reactive concern (Nolan, 2002).

Training and the competitive marketplace.

The gloomy training picture painted above needs to change if hotel companies are to offer a competitive product to the customer. This is especially true in today's service

marketplace. The current competitive environment has placed more demand upon each employee, asking them to work more efficiently and effectively than before (Bigger & Bigger, 2006). This is especially true with front office staff. Front office employees take on numerous roles including concierge duties, managing phone calls, and being a part of the hotel sales team (McCann, 2001). Front office employees must be skilled in a variety of functions in order to service the needs of the guest (Baum & Devine, 2007). The quality of service offered by the hotel employee is no longer something to be taken for granted, placing a greater emphasis on staff training. With an economy filled with smaller disposable incomes and more selective purchasing habits by customers, staff training is becoming more important to the success of hospitality firms (Shailer, 2011).

Economic factors.

Over the past three years, the hotel industry has had to adapt to the reality of a weakened economy. In order to make ends meet, many firms had to dramatically reduce expenses. Hotel training programs were one of the hardest hit areas when it comes time for shrinking the expense budget (Davey, 2009). When faced with quarterly profit margins, the training budget finds itself at the mercy of short-term needs. Due to the large amount of training that is associated with the service industry, training is quickly looked upon as an expense, rather than an investment (Baum & Devine, 2007). The intangible nature of training value makes it hard to be seen as a revenue generator by management. Many owners and managers regard human resources development as an expense rather than an investment (Nolan, 2002). Additionally, a worthwhile training process does have significant expenses when considering the fact that training costs are being spent upon short-term employees. Studies have shown that non-management employee attrition can cost as much as 30% of the employee's annual salary (Choi & Dickson, 2010). A Cornell University

study indicated the cost of turnover is about $5,000 per employee as measured in lost productivity and wages (Davies, 2006). In light of these expenses, reducing the training commitment is very inviting to a hotel that is struggling to show profit margin. Smaller hospitality operations usually find themselves unable to wait for the long term ROI of a training commitment (Nolan, 2002).

Searching for a Solution

This literature review will look to explore how the integration of service marketing concepts, teaching methods and best practices into a hotel training program can improve both employee performance and company profitability. It is hypothesized that hotel employee training programs that incorporate service marketing concepts, teaching methods, and best practices lead to improved employee performance, customer satisfaction and hotel profitability. Service marketing concepts related to front office hotel employees will be reviewed, along with the identification of training methods and best practices that can best teach these concepts to the employee.

A Customer Oriented Approach

It starts at the front desk.

The increased use of computer technology to manage hotel operations places a great emphasis upon the front office hotel staff to be proficient with operating a company's property management system (PMS). The need for PMS dexterity can quickly become the focus of any new hire training. Front office training of staff typically focuses upon the mechanics of the job at the expense of service skills (Feiertag, 2001). While technical expertise is required, the front desk staff still remains the focus point for customer interaction. The front office functions are the main contact points for many guest interactions. Each individual guest encounter can be

packed with its own list of guest service needs that require appropriate response. Front office

operations demand considerable emotional skill elements as well as technological proficiency

(Baum & Devine, 2007). When these initial guest requests are improperly handled, guest

satisfaction starts off on the wrong foot. Studies have shown that over 40% of customer

dissatisfaction comes from the employee's inability to execute service recovery properly (Chen

& Ro, 2011). Guests who check in to a hotel are looking for more than just a physical place to

sleep at night. Hotel guests demand a clean and comfortable room product, but they also demand

excellent customer service (Misek, 2003). The hotel customer sees the front desk as the hub and

nerve center of the hotel experience and with this perception are high service expectations.

Arriving guests expect to encounter the best and the brightest of the employees at check in

(Nozar, 1998). At the core of these expectations is a service standard that treats the guest with

respect and a welcoming atmosphere.

Keeping service in the mix.

Human relations skills are critical to employees who come in contact with guests (Chen

& Ro, 2011). Unfortunately, in the rush to be technically proficient with numerous systems and

processes, the front office staff can easily forego the warm welcome, the smile and the friendly

assistance for speedy processing, missing the mark and adversely affecting the overall perception

of the guest's hotel experience. Guest service is an essential part of the highly competitive

hospitality industry and can never be underestimated (Nozar, 1998). The solution to these issues

is a training program that synthesizes core service marketing skills into the day-to-day duties of

the employee. Adapting a service-oriented strategy requires hotels to provide employee training

on customer-oriented behaviors (Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009). Customer oriented service

personnel leads to guest satisfaction and profitability in the hospitality industry (Chen & Ro,

2011).

The moment of truth.

Studies indicate that service industry training programs need to incorporate service skills training to enhance the ability of employees to meet the needs of the customer (Chen & Ro, 2011). When customer needs are met, the hotel is able to differentiate itself from the competition based on service levels. Training development can offer the best opportunity for a competitive advantage in customer service (Nolan, 2002). When this competitive advantage is achieved, the training expense can become an investment that leads to profitability. This is a process that transpires within the simplest actions and transactions with the guest. Training staff in the techniques of point of sale is an important component of making each guest interaction a profitable one (Feiertag, 2001). A review of a typical hotel stay shows that there are numerous employee guest interactions from the day of arrival to the day of departure. Each interaction is its own moment of truth for either service success or failure. An unsuccessful "moment of truth" can devastate the potential for repeat purchase and profitability (Christou, Maroudas, Sigala, & Valachis, 2009). In order to prevent an unsuccessful encounter, the employee must be armed with the appropriate service skills. Interpersonal and problem solving skills are necessary traits of a hospitality-training program. The employee that is equipped with service skill training improves the opportunity for a successful service encounter. Service training guides and enhances an employee's ability to provide excellent customer service (Chen & Ro, 2011). When service skills are effectively incorporated into the employee training process, the hotel has a better chance of meeting guest expectations and generating repeat business. A training program that that incorporates customer service components is vital to the success of hotel operations (Breiter & Woods, 1997).

A winning formula.

The beneficiary of service training includes both the guest and the employee. When employees are successful with customizing a guest experience, they satisfy the guest and in turn feel good about their ability to help another person. This twofold benefit is made possible when training processes include both technical and behavioral components. Front line employee skill sets are important to the success of the hotel operation. Effective guest interaction techniques are a part of successful service training programs. Investment in service marketing training can improve the overall performance of both the employee and company profitability (Baum & Devine, 2007; Nozar, 1998). The following sections explore various service-marketing concepts that can be applied to the training processes of front office hotel employees.

The Consumer: Behavior Expectations and Perceptions

Behavior.

Service quality is extremely important in the hotel industry. When hospitality industry companies compete for business it is the service levels that create the all-important differentiation, leading to repeat business and increased profitability (Baum & Devine, 2007; Nolan, 2002). The employee who wishes to successfully administer customer service must understand customer behavior. Behavior based training is necessary to improve the customer interaction (Durett, 2006). Understanding how the customer perceives employee actions is an important factor when trying to meet guest expectations. Professionalism, behavior and attitudes of the employee are all part of a customers measurement of service quality (Christou et al., 2009). Although the increased use of technology has streamlines the overall process, the hotel experience is still dominated by employee guest interactions. The nature of the hotel business is that the effective performance of people defines business success (Nolan, 2002).

Expectations.

In order to meet guest expectations, the employee needs to know what those expectations are. All training programs must learn how to incorporate the voice of the customer. Guest input can be achieved through comment cards, mystery shoppers, surveys and employee observations (Breiter & Woods, 1997; Martin, 2004). These sources of guest information are excellent channels for identifying and understanding guest expectations. A good training program will utilize these channels to build effective service training programs. Specific customer service behaviors must be identified, taught, practiced and rewarded (Davis, 2005). Armed with concrete examples of what the guest is looking for, the employee is ahead of the game and in a position to excel during the guest interaction. The employee must not only meet, but also exceed customer expectations. Understanding guest expectations can help the employee empathize with the guest when they are upset. Check in staff has to face the public, and it is not always a happy public. Front line employee training sessions should cover how to deal with bad behavior from a guest. In most instances, the employee will learn that a friendly demeanor is at the core of every interaction. Front line employees must be trained to be flexible, tolerant, and amiable because technology cannot substitute for a welcoming employee. This leads to successful service encounters and satisfied guests. When guests are satisfied, they check in more frequently, stay longer and spread positive word of mouth (Baum & Devine, 2007; Davis, 2005; Feiertag, 2001; Marshall, 2005; Nozar,1998).

Perceptions.

Understanding the nuances that drive guest perceptions is difficult for most employees. That is why a good training program needs to clearly articulate this concept and emphasize the power of personal interaction. When employees understand the how and why of customer

service, they buy into the program. Explaining the reasons why service skills are taught is as important as the skill itself. Improved training in courtesy and communications can lead to increased guest satisfaction and better employee relations (Breiter & Woods, 1997; DiGiulio, 2009; Prewitt, 2009).

Meeting guest expectations.

Training front line workers to meet customer needs is critical to any hotel's success (Davis, 2005). Guest satisfaction is influenced by what an employee knows as well as how they act. Hotel front line employees are expected to know all about the property where they work. Operational information is necessary to respond to the needs of the guest (Prewitt, 2009). An effective training program will teach the employee the importance of property knowledge as well as show them where to get that knowledge when they are faced with a question that they cannot answer. Incorporation of tools that enable front office staff to be aware of the properties capabilities and status helps then to match these attributes to the guest needs of the guest (Nozar, 1998). Studies have shown that customers are more satisfied when served by competent and knowledgeable employees (Shailer, 2011).

Service Profit Chain: Converting Training Expense to Profit

Feeding the chain.

By its very nature the hotel industry is a labor-intensive service industry, depending upon the social skills of its employees (Nolan, 2002). Savvy operators realize the connection between engaged employees, delighted guests and operational performance (Davey, 2009). Strong social skills and engaged employees require a thorough training process that can impart these marketing services concepts from the training environment to the workplace. This starts with employee perception that they have been empowered and can execute what they have learned.

The degree that an employee perceives themselves as acquiring knowledge from the training process will effect that employees perceptions of self efficacy and eventual transfer of training (Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009). Studies have shown that enhancing the quality of training programs significantly increased employee satisfaction in the hospitality industry (Choi & Dickson, 2010). Although training expense is typically the first item slashed from a hotels budget, studies have shown that it is the most important component in building the morale, job satisfaction and commitment from employees (Nolan, 2002). When the employee is engaged, the service profit chain is fed and the results reach out to the customer and eventually to company profitability. Greater employee productivity leads to a more profitable organization (Knight & Salter, 1985).

Strengthening the employee link.

The competitive marketplace has increased the importance of developing the service quality of each employee. The guest measure of service quality begins with front line staff interactions. Hotels that prosper understand that the front line worker is the key to customer service. The success of the front line worker is directly related to the training and support provided by hotel management. Serving internal customers, particularity those that eventually interact with the guest is important to developing a positive work environment. A positive work environment sets the stage for employee satisfaction and eventual guest satisfaction. As you treat employees, so they will treat customers. The training process fuels the employee with the tools they need to service the guest. Training provides a level of confidence to the employee. When learning outcomes increase, trainees feel more confident in their ability to conduct the trained task (Davis, 2005; Higgins, 2005; Nolan, 2002; Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009; Onnismaa, 2008).

Within each training process, the trainer must view the trainee as the guest to be served. Training units must act like retailers, bringing value to the employee (Cooperman, 2010). As a culture of service is developed in the workplace, so too will a culture of service be transmitted to the guest from front line employees. This is the heart of the service profit chain concept and it not only must be taught, but it also must pervade the entire training process between trainer and trainee, providing a real time example of this all important service marketing concept. How long an employee has to wait for an answer to a training question is an example of how the training process mimics the service encounter (Cooperman, 2010).

Role reversal: Meeting the needs of the trainee.

The effect of training upon the service profit chain starts with the perception of that training from the employee. The employee who sees a direct connection between their training efforts and job performance has a greater capacity to transfer the training to the workplace (Almanza, Antun, Frash, & Kline, 2010). This direct connection also must be supported by a belief on the part of the employee that the training content can positively affect customer service. Before employees can master a new skill effectively, they must be convinced that it will help improve the organizations performance (Desmet, McGurk, & Schwartz, 2010). Assisting employees with their ability to transfer what is learned in training to the workplace is an important step in building up the service profit chain.

In many cases the appropriate method for teaching a particular concept depends upon the employee being taught. As employees change, so must the ways of imparting training. An example of changing employees can be seen in the different learning styles of different generations. The millennial generation identifies with technology and requires more group interaction and technological learning tools within the training environment than previous

generations. Older workers are typically inexperienced with new technologies. Just as with guests, each generation of employee will have certain needs with respect to maximizing their training experience. Older employees find themselves adapting to technology, while younger employees have grown up with technology. The effective program will take this into consideration when choosing the appropriate method with which to train the employee. By taking into consideration the needs and characteristics of the employee, the training process teaches the service profit chain concept in both content and context (Berta, 2001; Hanna, 2009; Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009).

Empowerment and the service profit chain.

A key ingredient of the service profit chain concept is employee empowerment. Employee empowerment is defined as enabling employees to make decisions to solve guest issues on their own. Empowerment requires very specific training in both application and administration if it is to be utilized effectively. Service training can have a significant effect on the success of an employee empowerment program (Chen & Ro, 2011). Empowerment is not simply giving things away or reducing room rates. Empowerment also involves the responsibility to utilize all of the hotels facilities and capabilities to service the guest. Improving the knowledge of the service product empowers the employee and increases their opportunities for meeting the guest's needs (Desmet et al., 2010).

In addition to knowledge and authority to act, the training process must teach employees how to successfully administer this knowledge and authority for the correct circumstances. Service training is critical to the employee perception of empowerment. The correct perception of empowerment will keep employees from misuse or underutilization of this most important tool for creating guest satisfaction. Empowerment provides the guest with quick response to

requests and solutions to service failures improving guest satisfaction. In addition to satisfying the guest, empowerment energizes the employee with a real sense of purpose and ability. Empowerment creates more job satisfaction and builds the self-esteem of the employee. By improving the overall outlook and performance of the employee, empowerment feeds the service profit chain. Employees feel a deeper level of emotional investment in the organization when they are empowered; this enthusiasm is then transmitted to the service encounter (Chen & Ro, 2011; Davis, 2005).

Employee input.

Treating each employee with respect is another key ingredient of the service profit chain. A training process that incorporates employee input and feedback follows service profit chain principles. In many training scenarios, insufficient time is spent on what the employee has to offer. Limited employee input into a training program builds resistance to that program. A more effective training method is to harness employee input. The best way to train is by focusing on how the individual employee works best. In order to know how the individual employee works, communication channels must be open between the trainer and the trainee. The employee should participate in setting the goals of the training process. Training customer (employee) feedback drives training goals. (Breiter & Woods, 1997; Hanna, 2009; Knight & Salter, 1985; Martin, 2004; Onnismaa, 2008).

In addition to establishing a culture of mutual respect and shared goals, employee input stimulates employee engagement within the training process. Trainee involvement creates buy in and ownership leading to satisfied employees. Employee input into the training process increases the transfer of training. The best method for ensuring employee buy-in to the training process is to listen to and incorporate their ideas into the training plan. Engaging the employee

as part of the solution, rather than part of the problem can make a big difference in customer service training (Almanza et al., 2010; Desmet et al., 2010; Knight & Salter, 1985; Prewitt, 2009).

Employee input is also a valuable source for identifying and finding the right solutions to each hotel's customer service challenges. Front line employees are the best people to fix customer service problems because they are the most closely involved in the process. Employee information can also be collected both before and after the training process through a number of means. Employee centered information from surveys, evaluations, and employee suggestions are critical to designing a training program as they identify the gaps in service. Departing employees can provide considerable insight into the problems they encountered when working with the company. Exit interview questionnaires are critical to collecting employee feedback upon departure. Training programs that utilize these types of employee input resources obtain valuable knowledge for both identifying training needs and improving existing training processes (Breiter & Woods, 1997; Choi & Dickson, 2010; Slack, 1993).

Service Standards: The Customer Defined Way

Meeting the needs of the customer.

Service standards are an important component of achieving customer satisfaction in the service industry (Chen & Ro, 2011). These service standards must be fashioned to meet the expectations of the customer. Service starts with attention to detail, kindness and connection with customers (Weinstein, 2008). These simple concepts are many times overlooked in the hotel training process for more lofty goals such as property management system proficiency. Although technical proficiency is a worthy training goal, it cannot take precedence over service standards. Studies have shown that the importance of soft skills such as verbal communication,

teamwork and interpersonal skills outweigh technological skills in front line service employees. The hotel front desk agent is consistently involved with guest interactions. Meeting and greeting customers is a core requirement of the front desk position (Baum & Devine, 2007). Hotel chains that excel in customer service show a dedication to service standards within their training processes. The Ritz Carlton is distinguished within the hospitality community for instilling customer service standards into the training of their employees. The Ritz Carlton service standards include very basic, but powerful tools. An example of this is the selective use of language. Employees are trained to use the word certainly or my pleasure, rather than OK (Allerton, 1993).

Consistency counts.

Good manners are good business (Durett, 2006). This statement is especially true for service industry providers such as hotel companies. Front office employees must exhibit good communication and emotional skills (Baum & Devine, 2007). An excellent medium for building these skills is the incorporation of specific service standards. Service standards need to be consistently applied and communicate to all employees. The best way to incorporate and communicate service standards is within the training process as this provides a forum for properly administering standards across a broad base of employees. Conformances to service standards are more likely to be met if they are communicated and understood properly by the employee (Chen & Ro, 2011).

Service standards help to maintain consistency across the front line staff. Service standards help to ensure that all employees are taught the same. Additionally, service standards create a common bond for the employees of a hotel firm. Consistent service standards for all employees create a more harmonious workplace. The Four Seasons brand focuses upon a

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specific set of service standards that all employees are taught ensure the consistent and superior service levels of their employees (Baumann, 2000; Bigger & Bigger, 2006; Prewitt, 2009).

Service standard characteristics.

Service standards are typically built upon a number of basic characteristics that a person can apply to a service encounter. Stressing core values such as using the guest name, smiling, providing assisting and thanking the guest are excellent service training topics (DiGiulio, 2009). A more complex service standard involves the acquisition and dissemination of property knowledge to the guest. Providing information to the guest is a big component of front office operations (Baum & Devine, 2007). When front line staff is cognizant of the products of the hotel, they become more empowered to offer assistance to the guest (Shailer, 2011). Due to the importance of communication skills with the service standard concept, the training process should feature a special focus upon language skills (Baum & Devine, 2007). Amid the turmoil of meeting room types, smoking preferences and reservation times, it is easy to underestimate the power of a well-executed service standard from a front desk employee. A friendly smile is welcome at the front desk and underestimating this will cost many hospitality firms repeat business. Another important service standard features the strategic use of the eyes. Eye contact is an important customer interaction skill. The use of the eyes is not easy and most employees can use all the training they can get to learn how to accomplish this type of service standard. When executed well, eye contact is a powerful weapon for building guest satisfaction. Recognition of the guest through eye contact adds respect and increases the value of the interaction (Feiertag, 2001). At the end of the service standard list is a true commitment to relate to the guests perspective on each and every service issue. Employees at all levels need to show empathy to the customer (Prewitt, 2009).

Tangibles, Intangibles and Customer Relationships

      The value proposition.

      In the world dominated by technology, the importance of establishing and maintaining customer relationships is easily lost in the shuffle for economic efficiency. A customer-centered business becomes even more important to ensuring human contact with the guest amid the influx of technological innovation. Evaluating a service oriented business such as a hotel by the value and strength of the customer relationship is also difficult when quarterly earnings statements measure success. Customer loyalty is judged not on repeat spending, but on professional respect and value (Cooperman, 2010). The marketing service concept of overall customer value is based upon a long-term view of the relationship. Understanding what drives long-term profitability from the customer is necessary if front line employees are to know how to service the guest. The front office staff must be trained to ask guests the right questions so that value and customization can be presented to each guest (McCann, 2001). Training processes must emphasize to the front line employee what actually drives a repeat purchase. The essence of the value model is for the customer to come back because there is personal and professional value in doing so (Cooperman, 2010). It is up to the front line employee to deliver that value through a high level of customer service.

      Making the intangible tangible.

      The hotel experience is a service, having unique features that separate it from product purchases. Services have the three unique characteristics of intangibility, inseparability and heterogeneity. An effective training program needs to address these concepts. Intangibility refers to the fact that services can only be experienced, not owned (Christou et al., 2009). The most important experience is the numerous interactions between the guest and the front line

employee. This is most prevalent at the front desk. Front office employees are in a position to both communicate and sell the service product to the guest, placing great importance on the service quality of this position (Baum & Devine, 2007). A big part of this service quality depends upon the choice of words that an employee uses, making this an excellent topic for front line employee training. Studies have shown that vocabulary training improves the employee's ability to convey value and service to the guest in tangible ways (Durett, 2006).

The service product difference.

Inseparability is defined as the feature of a service that does not allow production and consumption of the service product to be separated from each other and this places enormous emphasis upon the interaction between the guest and the employee (Christou et al., 2009). A good training program will stress this concept to help the employee empathize with the guest when they present their needs and appreciate the importance of each moment of truth. In this way the employee has a better chance of consistently meeting the expectations of the guest during each interaction. Heterogeneity means that it is difficult for service organizations to standardize the many "moments of truth" coming from a typical service encounter (Christou et al., 2009). The better an employee can articulate and administer the hotel product the more the customer can perceive a value from the service. Training must help the employee translate company benefits into tangible values that the customer can relate to (Desmet et al., 2010).

Tying it all together.

The concept of value and intangibility that describe customer relationships and services can be applied to the training experience. The employee becomes the guest who is receiving a service from the trainer that is intangible. A good training program will find ways to create value that is tangible to the trainee. The value model requires consideration of all aspect of

training, starting with the before and continuing well after completion (Cooperman, 2010).

Similar to customer relationships, the value of training must consider more than the immediate future. Training payback is a long-term investment (Nolan, 2002). Another way in which a training program can create a tangible value to the employee is through recognition of training achievement. A certificate of completion is a tangible way of expressing the fruits of the training process (Cooperman, 2010). Certifications help to substantiate and make tangible a successful training process, while rewarding the employee with recognition (Nozar, 1998).

Methods and Practices

The transfer of training.

The incorporation of service training into the operational training of front line employees is an important first step in creating an effective program. The next step is to ensure that the employee in their day-to-day duties applies the knowledge gained through training. For any training program to be effective, trainees must translate what they have learned into the job actions of the workplace (Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009). In many instances, the greater part of training is unable to be transferred to the day-to-day job duties (Christou et al., 2009). One of the reasons that training does not transfer to the workplace is the incorrect choice of teaching method. Traditional lecture modes cannot cater to the various paces present within a training group (Knight & Salter, 1985). Each employee is unique in the way they absorb information. If training knowledge is not transferred to the workplace, then the time and expense of the training process cannot produce the desired results. A McKinsey report stated that only 25% of respondents indicated that training programs improve business performance (Desmet et al., 2010).

Training time efficiency.

Effective training programs are critical to the success of a service organization (Bigger &

Bigger, 2006). Training effectiveness is more than just the content of the program. The

effectiveness of training depends upon the method almost as much as the topic (Knight & Salter,

1985). Additionally, successful training programs should continue on after initial orientation of

a new employee. Much of the hospitality industry looks at training as a single event rather than

an ongoing process (Nolan, 2002). A training program that continues on after the orientation

process is necessary to develop and maintain the quality of a front line employee's work (Knight

& Salter, 1985). In some cases, the total amount of training hours is limited due to both cost and

operational concerns. An American Society of Training and Development survey showed that

the average hours of training afforded to a front line employee is 34 hours (Davies, 2006). This

short training window places even more emphasis upon designing a program with effective

training methods.

Steps in the right direction.

Each training method that is chosen within the program design should be matched to a

specific type of skill or knowledge that is to be taught. A focused approach to specific training

processes is more effective than a shotgun approach (Davies, 2006). In this way an effective

training program will utilize multiple methods and practices to successfully transfer the variety

of operational and service skills required of hotel employees. Another factor of a successful

training program is employee buy-in to the program. Training methods should be chosen based

upon their ability to communicate and deliver a particular type of skill or knowledge. In this way

a variety of training methods may be needed to effectively transmit the numerous skills

associated with hotel front line employees. Training design can positively impact an employee's

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opportunity for transferring training knowledge into on the job actions (Almanza et al., 2010)

Making the commitment work.

Training itself is a service; therefore the same qualities that make up a successful service encounter must be built into the training process. Effective training programs engage the employee. Increasing both the capability and willingness to apply the learning outcomes leads to trainee's behavioral changes. When employee perceptions of training are positive, they have greater intention of transferring training skills to the working environment. The transfer of training processes to the work environment is the best measurement of success of a training program. As a guest creates perceptions of service that dominate their evaluation of that service, so too does the employee create perceptions of their ability to transmit what has been given in training to the workplace. Training self-efficacy is defined as the employee's perceived ability to behave as prescribed by the training program and when training content enhances post-training self-efficacy, a positive relationship between job involvement and transfer of training is expected. The self-efficacy of the employee must be considered when designing a training program. The nature of a training program (content and methods) influences the employee's level of self-efficacy (Christou et al., 2009; Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009).

Building a strong training structure.

The overall structure of the training process is an important consideration of the training design. Good training programs possess three distinct phases, pre training, training and post training (Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009). Properties that commit to a structured orientation and follow-up training process show positive effects in both employee performance and retention (Davies, 2006). Unfortunately, there are limitations to how long and how much can be built into a hotel training program. Training design and delivery greatly affects the cost of a training

program (Braunlich, Hu, Nelson, & Yu-Chin, 2003). Cost considerations will always be a factor in the design of an effective training program. The following sections review a number of training methods and best practices that can be utilized to teach and transmit service-marketing concepts to hotel front office employees.

Role-Play

The strategy behind the scene.

A good training program will incorporate opportunities for the employee to apply what they have learned in a real job setting. The role-play method can create this real job setting by taking into consideration the content and context of the work environment along with the needs of the employee. Role-play must be drawn from actual guest experiences. Role-play scenarios must incorporate what was learned in the training process. Role-play simulations need to fit the needs and skill levels of participants. Role-play simulations that recreate work conditions can be an effective way to train (Almanza et al., 2010; Prewitt, 2009; Slack, 1993).

Marketing services concepts can be intangible, making these concepts difficult to execute in the workplace. Theories and guidelines can be learned, but they need to be exercised in an actual encounter. The close relationship of role-play to actual job conditions helps to create these exercise opportunities. Training content that is directly related to the job task increases the potential for a successful transfer of training. Practicing service encounters helps employees to exercise their newfound knowledge and build confidence. The check in and check out process is excellent opportunities for role-play (Almanza et al., 2010; Swink, 1993).

Advantages of playing the role.

The role-play method offers numerous advantages to teaching service skills. Role-playing is an effective method for practicing customer interaction. Role-play is an excellent

method for communication training. Role-play can assist front desk employees with the ever-present customer interactions. Role-play provides an opportunity for improving the realism of the training situation   All of these characteristics make role-play an excellent choice for front line hotel employees (Dieckmann et al., 2005; Feiertag, 2001; Knight & Salter, 1985).

Another advantage of role-play is the opportunity to expose the trainee to the guest's view of an interaction. The immersion into the role of another person can help build empathy skills. Role-play also creates the possibility to exercise technical and interpersonal skills simultaneously. Role-play represents a useful medium for combining technical skills procedures and communication skills. Role-play training has a tendency to break down barriers between trainees, creating a more effective learning environment. Role-play creates employee involvement, promotes feedback and conversation within the training session. Role-play training sessions were found to create opportunities for student involvement and are more effective than non role-play sessions (Dieckmann et al., 2005; Feiertag, 2001).

Technology

The technological landscape.

Advances in technology continue to offer unique and customized opportunities for improving the training process. Advantages of interactive technology training include customized pace of instruction, immediate feedback and the ability to change learning scenarios based upon previous answers (Harris & West, 1993). This is especially relevant with front line hotel employees who typically are of a younger age and are comfortable with utilizing technology. Lecturing in a classroom setting is not enough to keep younger employees engaged. Today's young workers have grown up with computers, video games and the Internet and the incorporation of these technologies into the training process can assist in the learning process

(Berta, 2001). Millenials find social media tools more helpful in terms of learning and getting work done than generation X or Baby Boomers (Ketter & Ellis, 2010).

Hotel training lends itself to the use of technology due to the inherent small size of the management staff (Davey, 2009). A downsized or flattened hospitality organization can benefit from Internet based training as the management team does not have the burden of teaching every component of the training program (Braunlich et al., 2003). Technology also provides a stable and dependable delivery system for training material. Consistency of delivery and learn at your own pace are key attributes of technology training tools (Misek, 2003). Additionally, technological advances come in many forms, including multimedia, computers, mobile devices and the Internet. The following sections discuss these different types of technology and how they may improve the training process.

The Internet.

Internet based training is defined as instruction that is delivered over the Internet or over a company's intranet. The proliferation of the Internet into the day-to-day culture has made its use for training more feasible. The Internet is an emerging training delivery system. The benefits of Internet based training include cost reduction, flexibility, consistency and ease of revision. Hotel chains that administer training across multiple locations grapple with high costs and inconsistent training delivery. When hospitality firms operate multiple properties that are separated by great distance, Internet training can become an efficient training tool. Ease of access for the trainee is also improved. Internet based training provides the student with the flexibility to fit training classes into their personal schedules. In addition to alleviating issues associated with location and timing, Internet technology offers a number of operational efficiencies. Internet based training methods also provide economy of scale, reducing costs in

delivery, streamlining the revision process and creating built in documentation as users sign on and off the program (Braunlich et al., 2003; Lavra, 1997).

Multimedia and computers.

Multimedia training features the use of video and audio equipment to assist in the training process. Front desk functions such as guest registration, room key distribution and communication with guests can all be effectively taught through multimedia training tools. Recording and playing back guest request calls provides an excellent medium for building training case studies and behavior modeling. Video can also assist in highlighting the hotel amenities and in behavior modeling. The use of multimedia also promotes creativity and variety, increasing the overall interest of the training presentation. Training should be offered through multiple media, including technological interventions that promote oral, visual or hands on teaching methods. Studies have shown that trainee motivation to interact is greater with multimedia presentations (Almanza et al., 2010; Harris & West, 1993; McCann, 2001; Stone, 2010).

Computer based training offers a consistent and updatable platform with which to present training content. Many property management systems offer training modules that mirror the actual system. This creates an opportunity for practicing the improving technical proficiency, but it can also provide the means for teaching employees how to utilize the property management system to solve guest issues. Computer training environments help employees learn how the technology can assist them in meeting the needs of the guest (Bigger & Bigger, 2006; Harris & West, 1993).

Mobile technology.

The most recent addition to the technological landscape is the growth of mobile device

usage. Mobile learning is defined as any learning that takes place via mobile or portable devices such as cell phones, personal digital assistants, tablets, media players and e-books. The capability of mobile devices has dramatically increased in the past few years. Mobile technology has been one of the most quickly developing technological advances and is a perfect fit for today's culture. This technology also provides a new way of thinking about training facilities. Mobile training removes the problem of providing training facilities and can be shared across multiple users (Donahue, 2011; Stone, 2010).

The incorporation of mobile technology will be necessary in order to keep pace with the latest innovations and also the learning needs of the new generation of workers. Although the proliferation of mobile technology shows tremendous promise, its use must still be selectively controlled. Mobile learning should not be the whole learning experience and its incorporation should also consider who will use it and when. In some applications, mobile learning provides an excellent support medium for ongoing training. The best use of mobile learning is for performance support to help remember or apply something already learned, updating changes and adding new information and for troubleshooting. Portability of mobile learning devices allow for remote access to vital information and it can be utilized to provide short bursts of information that is easier to remember and immediate to apply (Donahue, 2011; Ketter & Ellis, 2010; Stone, 2010).

Case Study

Building a case for case study.

Providing employees with recaps and descriptions of day-to-day guest interactions, particularly challenging ones, helps the employee understand what to expect and how to successfully execute the guest interaction. Reviewing prior experiences helps the employee to

identify the most successful way to engage the guest (Almanza et al., 2010). In many instances, this type of information is delivered through verbal conversation or lecture. The case study method offers an opportunity for the trainee to read the scenario in a story format, then review and ponder the information at their own pace. Stories present a powerful and motivational tool for learning on the job behavior (Horey, 2009). This is especially effective when trying to present a scenario that has multiple layers of information. Going through complex case study scenarios helps the employee focus on the most important priorities (Prewitt, 2009).

Content and context.

Case studies can be used in conjunction with role-play to create an effective learning experience. Case studies are a good means of providing important base information to create realistic training situations and enhance trainee involvement when used as the framework for a role-play training session. The effectiveness of a case study is directly dependent upon its relationship to the workplace. Training must be pertinent to the workplace in order to claim success in the transfer of training process. Case studies should be developed from actual work related problems, using context and content that conform to the job position. Case studies with the correct content and context create value to the trainee. The case study method can also be used to build service standard skills such as language choice and empathy. Case studies that incorporate emotion can assist employees with guest empathy skills (Almanza et al., 2010; Dieckmann et al., 2005; Horey, 2009; Prewitt, 2009).

On The Job and Conference Training

Learning on the fly.

Informal on the job training dominates the hospitality landscape. This typically occurs due to budgetary concerns or a lack of a specific training program. One of the dangers of

informal on the job training is in the selection of trainer. On the job training by the wrong employee can lead to improper work habits. When on the job training is administered within a structured training program, it can be a valuable tool for transferring training to the workplace. On the job training is effective in providing real time opportunities for employees to practice their training skills. On the job training offers the opportunity to practice precisely what the job entails (Bigger & Bigger, 2006; Nolan, 2002).

On the job learning is a learning process based upon experience and learning by doing (Onnismaa, 2008). On the job training offers an opportunity for the trainer to review the employee's ability to execute training knowledge. The skills and knowledge that are acquired through the training process should lead to visible changes in both behavior and actions on the job (Christou et al., 2009). Critique and adjustment can then be made to improve both the employee and the training process. Another factor in creating an effective on the job training experience is the pairing of trainer and trainee. The best way to train people is to put inexperienced and experienced workers together (Onnismaa, 2008).

Talking through the training.

Conference training is a vital component of a hospitality-training program (Bigger & Bigger, 2006). It provides a forum for discussion between the trainer and trainee, allowing both transmission of knowledge and reception of feedback. This type of verbal communication is also in line with service marketing principles as well as appropriate for hotel front office staff that may require personal attention and the opportunity to get questions answered. Oral communication should be an integral part of a front line employees training program (Knight & Salter, 1985).

Testing, Evaluation, Follow-up

       Measuring training success.

       Measuring the effectiveness of a training process can be difficult. The measurement and determination of training effectiveness is not entirely straightforward especially in the hospitality workplace setting, which features a complicated mixture of service and technical proficiency (Almanza et al., 2010). The relationship between training and return on investment is not closely monitored in the hospitality industry (Choi, & Dickson, 2010). One way to measure training effectiveness is to identify how well the employee transfers lessons learned in training to the workplace. Transfer of training can be defined as the consistent on the job application of the knowledge and skills administered within the employee training process (Almanza et al., 2010). When training processes include marketing services initiatives, these initiatives must be included in the measurement. Employees must be evaluated on their willingness to embrace customer service standards as well as their technical proficiency (Davis, 2005).

       The survey says.

       Another way to measure training effectiveness is to obtain feedback from the trainee. This is similar to getting feedback from the guest to gauge guest satisfaction. Employee surveys are excellent tools for obtaining feedback from the training process. Surveys are an excellent method for measuring the effectiveness of training programs. Surveys can assist in collecting front line information regarding employee-training goals. Surveys and measurement before and after the training process help to identify and quantify the training gap that will lead to a service gap. The timing of a post training survey can also help improve the employee feedback. Surveys should be taken after a couple of weeks have passed so that the employee has a chance to show what they have learned. The information retrieved from trainee feedback can also

provide detail into what training processes worked best. Studies have shown that employees rate the training process higher when the training includes examples and methods that mirror actual on the job skills (Almanza et al., 2010; Berta, 2001; Christou et al., 2009).

Following up and keeping track.

Creating follow up opportunities with the employee after a formal training process is another method for obtaining feedback and also checking on the progress of the employee. Carefully structured debriefing periods are crucial to the learning experience. Training follow-up must occur at regular intervals. A training process must include follow-up support in order to provide a value to the employee. Whether it is a survey or follow up review, employee feedback and performance evaluations of the training process must be documented. All training programs require thorough documentation to ensure consistency and assist with follow up evaluations. Evaluation should be a regular, periodic process that looks to identify quantifiable measures (Bigger & Bigger, 2006; Cooperman, 2010; Knight & Salter, 1985; Slack, 1993).

Testing to be sure.

Another way to measure the success of training is to utilize pre and post testing of the employee. Pre class testing and post class exams are effective means for measuring the success of a training program. Written exams, practical exams and brief quizzes can all serve to assist in the evaluation of the training process. The pre test is often overlooked, but it is a vital component of the process. If a current measurement of knowledge, skill or job performance is not documented at the beginning of the training period, then there is no baseline with which to measure the success of the training process (Almanza et al., 2010; Ng, 2006; Knight & Salter, 1985).

The Role of Management

      Supporting the training culture.

Studies have shown that management support is vital to the success of the training

process. This is especially true when training is trying to impart service skills. Customer needs

training must coincide with support from management on those same principles and the

management team must prioritize service training. Management must walk the walk if they are

to expect employees to buy into service training. Supervisory support does not lead to a positive

transfer if the employee does not respect the skills of the supervisor. In addition to management

support, the service initiatives must also be a part of the overall company culture. Management

must create and support the training culture in the workplace. Senior management must lead the

way in developing a workplace culture that values and supports training initiatives. Learning

must be linked to the strategic goals of the company in order to achieve success in the service

industry (Almanza et al., 2010; Breiter & Woods, 1997; Chen & Ro, 2011; Davis, 2005; Desmet

et al., 2010; Ketter & Ellis, 2010).

      Being a part of the training team.

In addition to executing service skills in their daily job duties, management must also

play a tangible role within the training process. Guidance from management is an important step

within an effective training program. Management feedback and support contribute to the

employee's perception of the value of the training process. Training outcomes improve when

management participates in the process. This participation can be as simple as knowing what is

being trained and providing acknowledgement to the employee who executes what is learned in

training. Management must be cognizant of what is trained and how it is being translated to the

day-to-day job functions. Feedback and encouragement are beneficial to the development of

employee skills. Management should encourage employees to execute what they have learned in the training process (Almanza et al., 2010; Desmet et al., 2010; Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009; (Onnismaa, 2008).

Another component of management participation is to ensure that the training process continues long after the orientation is finished. The training initiative must continue on the job, many hospitality managers make the mistake of thinking the training process is over once the job starts. Management commitment to the training process is a key ingredient in the development of effective training programs. Engaging and motivating existing staff is an important component of follow up training processes (Almanza et al., 2010; "InterContinental offers", 2008; Nolan, 2002).

Other Training Considerations

Needs assessment.

The development of a good training program starts with a well-conceived needs assessment, which is defined as the gap between desired performance and actual performance. Identifying what is right and wrong with existing service helps to focus the training effort where it can best be utilized. A needs analysis helps to determine what needs to be taught. One of the best resources for needs assessment is the employee. Employee input is critical to the needs assessment process (Breiter & Woods, 1997; Bigger & Bigger, 2006).

Rewards.

Rewards are a powerful influence on employee behavior. Training programs must have a solid motivational element such as pay, rewards and recognition that serves to motivate and engage the employee. Rewarding good service also sends a message to fellow employees regarding the delivery of customer service. Rewards are especially important when trying to

reinforce an empowerment program. Without reward, empowerment is perceived as an added

duty (Chen & Ro, 2011; Knight & Salter, 1985).

Humor.

Humor is an effective tool for encouraging both learning and engagement in the adult

training process. Using humor is an effective way to keep the attention of the employee and help

them remember key service points. Humor relaxes the trainee and promotes a more comfortable

training environment. Training programs need to have a component of fun in order to maintain

the attention and commitment of the employee (Berta, 2001; Bigger & Bigger, 2006; Petrini,

1993).

Conclusion

The literature review presented many reasons for incorporating service-marketing

concepts into the hotel front office employee training process. Employee training has become

increasingly important for hotels to improve service quality. In the extremely competitive

hospitality environment, training needs to be focused on creating that unique customer service

experience that differentiates the firm from the competition and makes the customer feel like

returning. Additionally, a number of learning methods and best practices were identified that can

be used to improve service training effectiveness. Mixing a variety of training methods helps to

maintain the attention of the employee and the opportunity for a successful training experience.

The incorporation of standards and guides into the training process creates consistency of

delivery and improves the overall delivery of training knowledge. The literature review has

validated the hypothesis that hotel employee training programs which incorporate service

marketing concepts, teaching methods, and best practices lead to improved employee

performance, customer satisfaction, and hotel profitability. Superior training is the key to

developing superior hospitality skills (Bigger & Bigger, 2006; Cooperman, 2010; Davey, 2009;

Lavra, 1997; Namasivayam & Zhao, 2009).

PART THREE

A Customer Oriented Training Guideline

Part one identified a number of operational, economic and competitive issues that affect

the training processes of hotel front office employees. Ineffective transfer of training,

perceptions of costs and absence of a customer-oriented approach mark the training environment

of many hotel firms. The job duties of the hotel front office require the employee to perform

both operational and customer contact tasks. The growing dependence upon technology for

processing guests in the hotel environment make it easy for training processes to focus upon

technical proficiency at the expense of customer service skills. These skills apply during each

service encounter. It is in these events that the infusion of service marketing concepts can make

a difference in both employee performance and company profitability. Understanding which

service-marketing concepts apply to these situations, along with identifying effective methods of

instilling these processes into the day to day actions of the employee was the goal of the part two

literature review. The literature review was successful in identifying key service concepts,

training methods and best practices that can be utilized to address the inefficiencies identified in

part one, leading to improved employee job performance, competitive advantage and hotel

profitability.

Part three presents a training guideline for hotel front office employees by matching the

concepts, methods and best practices identified within the literature review to customer

interaction duties of front office employees. For hotel front office employees, customer contact

job duties revolve around the booking, arrival, guest requests and departure events. The

guideline shows how each service concept relates to hotel guest interactions and then identifies

how to apply effective methods and best practices to teach the concepts to the employee.

A CUSTOMER ORIENTED TRAINING GUIDELINE

FOR

HOTEL FRONT OFFICE EMPLOYEES

How to Satisfy Consumers: Managing Expectations and Perceptions

Workplace Integration

Customer behavior from booking to departure.

During each customer interaction, the front office employee is faced with a myriad of customer behaviors ranging from the soft spoken and benign to the outspoken and impatient. In either instance, the only behavior that is truly on trial is that of the employee. By managing their own behavior, rather than judging guest behavior, the employee is able to focus on something that they can control. The training process must stress that the service product being purchased by the customer starts during the booking process and does not end until the guest departs the property. Hotel customer perception of service quality is directly affected by the professionalism, behavior, and attitudes of front office employees (Christou, Maroudas, Sigala, & Valachis, 2009). Professionalism translates into a respectful and service oriented response to each and every question proposed by the consumer. Employee behavior and attitude must remain friendly and inviting as each initial service encounter can easily serve to persuade or prevent purchase decisions. In the hotel business, employee performance plays an important role in the overall success of the operation (Nolan, 2002).

Guest expectations during service encounters.

In order to meet and exceed guest expectations, the employee needs to know what those expectations are. All training programs must learn how to incorporate the voice of the customer and an excellent source of customer feedback can be derived from analyzing comment cards, mystery shops, surveys, and employee observations (Breiter & Woods, 1997; Martin, 2004)). Front office employee training must feature information that is derived directly from the customer rather than formulated by an upper level management opinion. Employees will relate

to and respect the need to meet and exceed guest expectations when they are given concrete information directly from the people to be served.

Guest perceptions of employee behavior.

The personal interactions that occur during the booking, arrival, guest request, and departure events can have a dramatic event upon the overall guest perception of the hotel stay. When front office employees are trained to meet the needs of the guest, the profitability of the hotel operation is improved (Davis, 2005). The training process must teach the employee the importance of guest perceptions during these interactions. This can also improve employee engagement. When employees understand the dynamics of guest perceptions, they are more confident and engaged in the challenge of customer service (Prewitt, 2009). This buy-in is important when part of building a positive guest perception depends upon the competency and knowledge of the employee. The training program must instill property knowledge as well as teach methods for finding information so that employees can direct and explain all of the opportunities and amenities that the guest may require or desire. Incorporation of tools that enable front office staff to be aware of the properties capabilities and status helps then to match these attributes to the guest needs of the guest. Studies have shown that customers are more satisfied when the employees they interact with are capable and well-informed (Nozar, 1998; Shailer, 2011).

Training Methods and Best Practices

Role-play.

An excellent method for acclimating employees to customer behavior, expectations, and perceptions is to utilize role-play. With scenarios designed from actual guest experiences the role-play can be customized to quickly expose employees to moments of truth (Prewitt, 2009).

This may require a certain level of exaggeration, but should still be accomplished within the context of the four key front office customer interactions. In some scenarios, the role-play can simply expose the employee to the customer behavior without the need for a response. This allows the employee to experience the behavior without the pressure of response. In other scenarios, the role-play can be structured to require a specific response from the employee that can then be evaluated by the trainer.

Case study.

Case study offers the opportunity to present the employee with the guest perception of a situation. This is accomplished by writing the scenario through the eyes of the guest. This also provides a shift in the focus of behavior from the guest to the employee, who is now being judged by the guest. The case study can then conclude with specific questions that require the employee to explore and comment on the guest perception of the employee behavior. This type of case study helps the employee to understand guest perceptions, leading to improved empathy skills.

On the job and conferencing.

An effective conferencing and on the job training technique that teaches the employee about customer behavior, expectations, and perceptions is to allow the employee an opportunities to field and respond to customer requests and complaints. This type of training is more advanced in nature and is best suited for more experienced employees or those who are undergoing periodic refresher training. The process starts with a detailed conference with the trainer or manager to outline the parameters of the situation. Telephone callbacks to guests who require a response can then be made under the supervision of the trainer or manager.

Technology.

The use of dual headsets and telephone recording equipment are very effective technological tools for assisting in customer behavior training via telephone conversations such as a response to guest complaints. The dual headset can be used by the trainer or manager to monitor an on the job training exercise. The voice recording of a guest complaint allows both the trainer and trainee to conference regarding the call, troubleshooting, and improving the employee's performance.

Testing, evaluation, and follow-up

Testing and evaluation of an employee's ability to meet customer expectations should include a review of the employee's knowledge of property amenities. Additionally, role-play exercises can be utilized to test the employee's ability to deal with customer behaviors. Follow-up opportunities should include observation of the employee during customer interactions. These observations should be documented and utilized in an employee conference to discuss, reinforce, and improve performance levels. A final document should be filed that highlights the results and action plans of the conference.

Management role.

The management role in training employees in customer behavior revolves around the management team following the same principals that they ask the employee to follow. An effective training program will include talks and examples from management on the why and how of maintaining professionalism during guest interaction. Supervisory support does not lead to a positive transfer if the employee does not respect the expertise of the supervisor (Almanza, Antun, Frash, & Kline, 2010). Managers cannot be "above the law" of customer service.

Applying Service Profit Chain Concepts to the Workplace

Workplace Integration

Supporting the employee in their day-to-day duties.

A more competitive marketplace has increased the importance of developing and

sustaining a strong level of service quality from each front office employee (Nolan, 2002). In the

hotel operation, the front office employees are at the tip of the customer service sword and must

be supported on a daily basis by both the management team and an effective organizational

environment. When these two components are provided, then the service profit chain concept is

being applied to the workplace. A service oriented training process is the first place to

emphasize this support. The second place is to evaluate and reward employees for executing

service concepts in their day-to-day duties. The employee who sees a direct connection between

their training efforts and job performance has a greater ability to transfer the training to the

workplace (Almanza et al., 2010). This direct connection also must be supported by a belief on

the part of the employee that the training content can positively affect customer service. Before

employees can master a new skill successfully, they must be convinced that it will help improve

the performance of the hotel (Desmet, McGurk, & Schwartz, 2010). Assisting employees with

their ability to transfer what is learned in training to the workplace is an important step in

building up the service profit chain. This type of support not only improves employee

performance, but also creates a culture of service within the company.

Creating a service culture in the workplace.

The culture of service within the workplace breeds positive attitudes. Employees learn to

support each other and also learn to look for that support in a non-threatening way. In many

workplaces, asking for assistance can be a sign of weakness. In a workplace dominated by a

service culture, asking for assistance is considered smart and employees who do so are seen as team players. This attitude of teamwork and service then translates into positive and service oriented attitudes during customer interactions at booking, arrival, guest requests and departure. The service culture starts with the way a trainer must conduct themselves during the orientation of new employees. Within each training process, the trainer must view the trainee as the guest to be served. Training programs must provide their service like retailers, bringing value to the employee (Cooperman, 2010).

Empowerment practices.

Employee empowerment is defined as enabling employees to make determinations on how to meet guest expectations (Chen & Ro, 2011). In many hotel operations, the ability to solve guest problems involves the authority to make exceptions to practices based upon the needs of the guest. It also means being able to create a fair and justifiable compensation for a service failure. In some instances, this may mean providing discounts or complimentary service. In other cases, it may mean being able to offer other comparable amenities in lieu of an amenity that has failed to satisfy a guest. Empowerment also involves the responsibility to utilize all of the hotels facilities and capabilities to service the guest. Improving the knowledge of the service product empowers the employee and increases their opportunities for meeting the guest's needs (Desmet et al., 2010). A training program must teach employees the need for empowerment and also the boundary lines for effectively administering an empowerment program. When training programs are geared to teach these principles and guidelines, the employee is better able to service the guest and is also rewarded with a sense of ownership in providing successful service encounters. Employees feel a deeper level of emotional involvement in the organization when they are empowered; this enthusiasm is then transmitted to the service encounter (Davis, 2005).

Obtaining employee input.

A training process that incorporates employee input and feedback follows service profit chain principles. Unfortunately, in many training scenarios, employee input is lacking (Onnismaa, 2008). The first phase of a training orientation program should be spent upon collecting information from the new hire and determining what their training needs are with respect to the front office job duties. This should include employee feedback regarding proposed training goals (Knight & Salter, 1985). One employee may have a natural affinity to service, while another individual may not. By identifying this information early, the training process can be tailored to focus upon the needs of each individual. This new hire solicitation should also include information on how the employee likes to learn and absorb information, allowing for customized approaches to administering the training material. The best way to instruct employees is appeal to their most efficient learning method. (Hanna, 2009).

When new hire input is captured at the beginning of the training process, the employee experiences first hand the culture of service that they must carry to the guest during their future encounters. In addition to establishing a culture of mutual respect and shared goals, employee input stimulates employee engagement within the training process. Trainee participation leads to commitment in the process and happy employees (Knight & Salter, 1985). This process of employee input is an excellent method for applying service profit chain concepts to the workplace.

Employee input is also very importance when addressing ongoing training efforts. In many cases, ongoing training is filled with tension from both the trainer and trainee as each party is on the defensive in this most sensitive process. By soliciting the employees input prior to an ongoing or follow-up training exercise, a team-oriented approach is established and the

opportunity for a successful exercise is increased. Employee input into the training process increases the transfer of training. The best method for ensuring employee buy-in to the training process is to listen to and incorporate their ideas into the training plan.   Engaging the employee as part of the solution, rather than part of the problem can make a big difference in customer service training. Training programs that utilize these types of employee input resources obtain valuable knowledge for both identifying training needs and improving existing training processes (Almanza et al., 2010; Desmet et al., 2010; Prewitt, 2009).

Training Methods and Best Practices

   Role-play.

The service profit chain concept of recognizing the value of the employee extends to the development of role-play scenarios. Employee input is also a valuable source for identifying and finding the right solutions to each hotel's customer service challenges. Front line employees are the best resources to identify and fix customer service problems because they are the most closely involved in the process (Slack, 1993). Front line employees are in a position to provide blow-by-blow descriptions of difficult service encounters. These narratives can be used to fill the role-play scenario with actual language, tone, and setting. Additionally, the employee can be solicited to find out where within the role-play scenario they felt assistance or better direction is necessary to improve performance. The role-play method can create this real job setting by taking into consideration the content and context of the work environment along with the needs of the employee.

The development of role-play scenarios must continually be updated and revised to reflect the latest service encounter challenges. The updating and development process must utilize employee feedback. This requires consistent communication with the front line staff.

When management periodically meets with the front line staff and solicits their input for role-play development, the service profit chain principle is at work, improving the training process and engaging the employees.

Another method for teaching the service profit chain concept through role–play is to utilize scenarios that are based upon employee-to-employee interactions. The content for these scenarios should also be built from employee input. In some instances, these interactions may involve different departments. Departments other than the front office should be solicited in order to incorporate the thoughts and perceptions of fellow employees who may not see the interaction the same way as the front office employee. If possible, fellow departmental employees can be used to play their normal parts within the role-play, creating a more dynamic realism. This type of role-play creates employee involvement, develops the service culture of the workplace, and feeds the service profit chain of the company. Studies have shown that role-play training sessions encourage and require trainee involvement and are more effective than non role-play sessions (Dieckmann et al., 2005).

The service profit chain concept of employee empowerment can also be taught and practices through role-play. One of the key factors of an empowerment program is the correct use of empowerment authority. Role-play scenarios should be developed that test the employees ability to choose the best empowerment solution for a given service encounter. When role-play scenarios contain forks in the road such as a choice decision, a freeze frame tactic can be utilized to focus upon the choice and also to create an opportunity for discussion between the trainer and trainees. It is at these junctures, that thoughtful teaching can be applied, allowing the trainee to step back from the situation and understand both the opportunity and consequence of their particular choice. Role-play offers opportunities for discussion on the specific details of a

particular interaction (Feiertag, 2001).

Technology.

Technology can assist in applying service profit chain principles to the workplace by creating more efficient methods of collecting data and information from the employee for the purposes of training development. Employee centered information from surveys, evaluations, and employee suggestions are critical to designing a training program as they identify the gaps in service (Breiter & Woods, 1997). This type of information must be documented and stored in a way that makes it easily obtainable and readily accessible as time passes on. Technology such as computer databases and electronic surveys are an excellent means for collecting and storing employee information for use in a training program.

Another way in which technology can be used to incorporate service profit chain concepts is by creating unique delivery methods that cater to the scheduling and learning needs of the employee. Technology solutions provide the benefit of customized rate of instruction, immediate feedback and the ability to change learning scenarios based upon the responses from the employee (Harris & West, 1993). Audio clips, videos and computer simulations can all be started and stopped during the training process. These tools also offer opportunities for portability so that training can take place in a variety of locations. When combined with the Internet or intranet, training program access, pace of instruction and documentation improve dramatically. Internet based training creates an opportunity for the trainee to have options when trying to fit training classes into their personal schedules (Braunlich, Hu, Nelson, & Yu-Chin, 2003).

Technology feeds the service profit chain by catering to the new ways in which younger generation employees choose to learn. Front office employees are typically of a younger age and

look for learning processes that feature technology because they are comfortable with it.

Lecturing in a classroom setting is not enough to keep younger employees engaged. Today's

young workers have grown up with computers, video games, and the Internet and the

incorporation of these technologies into a training program can assist in the learning process

(Berta, 2001). Just as younger generations of employees thrive upon technological training

initiatives, the judicious use of technology must also be considered when dealing with employees

who may not have the ability to learn in a technological environment. Baby boomers do not feel

as comfortable as the younger generations when utilizing technology (Ketter & Ellis, 2010). By

considering both the younger generation needs and the older generation capabilities, a training

program incorporates the principles of the service profit chain by recognizing the importance of

supporting and developing the employee in ways that work for the employee.

One of the most important components of the service profit chain is providing support for

the front line employee. Mobile technology is an excellent method for providing knowledge-

based support for the front line worker. When mobile devices are loaded with ready to use

training information such as property amenities, empowerment choices, or service reminders, the

employee is armed with a quick and accessible tool for meeting the needs of the guest. One of

the more important uses of mobile learning is for performance support to help remember or

apply something already learned (Donahue, 2011).

The rapid advances in mobile technology are creating more and more opportunities for

employee support applications. Mobile telephones, tablets, and even digital picture frames can

all be utilized to provide on the fly information to the employee. This could be food and

beverage outlet operating hours, menus, specials and even guest information. By combining

employee feedback with hotel operation goals, management teams may find creative ways for

applying mobile technology to the workplace. This type of support to the front line employee

shows a commitment to both the employee and the guest, feeding the service profit chain.

On the job and conference training.

Service profit chain principles can be reinforced through the use of on the job training

and conferencing. An important component of this reinforcement is the use of positive feedback

and support. On the job training has the double-edged opportunity of providing real time

practice, but at the cost of performing in actual service encounters that leave little room for error.

Additionally, on the job training typically occurs under the watchful eye of the trainer, manager

or fellow employee. In each case, the potential for critical judgment in front of guests is always

a possibility. These are the situations that need to be managed closely when trying to instill

service profit chain concepts in an on the job training exercise. A poorly executed on the job

exercise can leave the trainee with a tarnished view of both the job and their fellow employees.

On the job training should be administered in manageable doses and at strategic times. Off peak

check in and check out times are good opportunities for front desk training. On the job training

for guest requests should not be administered until the trainee has shown fluency with the

necessary tools for administering guest support. On the job training for the booking process

should always be accompanied with dual headset type equipment so that the trainer can quickly

support the employee with behind the scene prompts. By following these guidelines, on the job

training exercises become less threatening to the trainee, while allowing for the real time

experience of service encounters.

No matter how many new training methods are developed, verbal communication will

remain an important of a front office employees training program (Knight & Salter, 1985).

Conference training is an excellent oral training method, particularly for front office employees

who must utilize oral skills throughout their daily job duties. In order to impart service profit

chain concepts, conference training must be conducted as a respectful, two-way conversation.

Conference training is a fundamental factor of a hospitality-training program (Bigger & Bigger,

2006). It provides a forum for discussion between the trainer and trainee, allowing both

transmission of knowledge and reception of feedback. When the reception of feedback is stifled,

conference training can quickly change into a lecture, which is many times mistaken for

conference training. There is a greater tendency for conference training to digress into a lecture

during new hire training. In these instances, trainers may feel the need to deliver large amounts

of information and not see any purpose in obtaining feedback from a new hire that is perceived

to have nothing to offer, except to sit there and absorb information. The best way to protect

against this digression is to maintain a formal information flow that has built in moments for

soliciting employee feedback. This can take the form of review questions that force employee

feedback or opinion questions that require the employee to describe their perception of the topic

being discussed. The trainer then needs to ensure that they acknowledge the thoughts of the

employee prior to moving on to the next discussion point. By building in specific opportunities

for employee feedback and providing appropriate responses, the conference method can deliver

required information while teaching and imparting the principles of the service profit chain.

Well-executed conference training is most important when conducting training with

experienced employees. Even though the training may feature a new procedure, the experienced

employee will look for signs that indicate recognition of their inherent job knowledge. By

providing opportunities for this knowledge and opinion to surface, the conference training

maintains its integrity while engaging the experienced employee. Additionally, the experienced

employee may provide insight that may have been previously overlooked. These insights can

then be incorporated into the training process, resulting in employee ownership of the new procedure.

Humor.

Humor is an effective tool for encouraging both learning and engagement in the adult training process as it relaxes the trainee and provides a more comfortable work environment (Petrini, 1993). As learning and engagement increase, so does the service profit chain effect. The workplace environment for front office employees becomes more enjoyable for both guest and employee when appropriate humor is infused into the service encounter. This also applies to the front office employee-training environment. Training programs that build in elements of fun improve the responsiveness and dedication of the employee (Berta, 2001).

There are a number of ways to incorporate humor into the training process. One way that is most effective in building the service profit chain is to solicit humorous service encounter stories from the employees. Another way is to incorporate humor into role-play scenarios by utilizing caricature types of guests and employees to emphasize a service point. The Internet provides a resource for obtaining workplace humor comics that can be used in training manuals or presentations to add levity to lessons. Emphasis should be placed on making any infusion of humor directly related to the particular hotel's work environment.   Using humor is an effective method for getting building employee responsiveness while assisting them with service point retention (Bigger & Bigger, 2006). Trainers and management must also use discretion when using humor for workplace training as personal sensitivities can vary within a particular group of trainees.

Needs assessment.

The development of a good training program starts with a thorough needs assessment,

which is defined as the gap between desired performance and actual performance (Breiter & Woods, 1997). A needs assessment can be a most powerful proponent for building the service profit chain when employee input is solicited within the process. Employee input is a valuable source for identifying and finding the right solutions to each hotel's customer service challenges. Front line employees are the best people to fix customer service problems because they are the most closely involved in the process (Slack, 1993). The utilization of both employee and guest survey information helps to map out the needs assessment process. The information derived from these surveys should be analyzed in light of company objectives to determine the precise training goals. In some instances, the needs of the employee or guest may not be in line with the capabilities or goals of a particular hotel company. Nevertheless, the power of employee and guest participation is not in saying yes to every item, but in taking the time to solicit and evaluate the needs that are presented.

The service profit chain concept is taught and reinforced through the step of surveying employees and incorporating these observations into the training initiative. When an observation cannot be incorporated, management should take the time to explain why it could not be used. This closes the loop on the suggestion as well as provides employees with a feeling that their suggestions were heard. Another way in which a needs assessment teaches and incorporates service profit chain concepts is to make the particular training initiative more focused ion the issues at hand. This increases training efficiency and the trainees who participate will be more engaged when they see that the training program focuses on job necessities.

Testing, evaluation, and follow-up.

Testing and evaluation of service profit chain concepts are best accomplished through employee surveys. Surveys are an excellent method for measuring the effectiveness of training

programs. Surveys and measurement before and after the training process help to identify and quantify the training gap that will lead to a service gap (Berta, 2001; Christou et al., 2009).

Follow-up events with employees can also be accomplished through the survey process. The timing of a post training survey can also help improve the employee feedback. Post training surveys should be taken after a couple of weeks have passed so that the employee has a chance to show what they have learned (Berta, 2001). The information retrieved from trainee feedback can also provide detail into what training processes worked best.

Management role.

Management role in service profit chain implementation focuses upon recognition and support of the training process. Participation within the actual training process, along with follow-up discussions with employees are excellent ways to create tangible support while building up the service profit chain. Another key way to show support is to be responsive to the needs of the trainer and trainee in making the training process as productive and effective as it can be. This may include provisions for materials, technology, and scheduling.

Teaching Customer Defined Service Standards

Workplace Integration

General.

Studies have shown that the importance of soft skills such as verbal communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills outweigh technological skills in front line service employees (Baum & Devine, 2007). An excellent medium for building these skills is the incorporation of specific service standards. Although the four customer interaction points of booking, arrival, guest request, and departure all have their unique requirements, service standards can be applied to each interaction. Core values such as using the guest name, smiling, providing assisting, and

thanking the guest are excellent service training topics (DiGiulio, 2009). The following sections will discuss how these types of service standards can apply to the four main customer interaction points of booking, arrival, guest request, and departure.

Using the guest name.

When guests are addressed by their name, a more personalized service is created. This is the key reason for taking the time to use the guest name during an interaction. A key training component of using the guest name is to train employees how to obtain the name early in the interaction. Once the guest name has been identified, it should be used as early as possible and then repeated as often as is appropriate for the type of conversation. Front office employees are fortunate in that they have numerous opportunities for discerning the guest name. The booking process requires the guest name in order to make the reservation. During guest requests, either the name or room number is typically provided in order to accomplish the transaction. If the room number is given, then the name can be referenced. Arrival and departure interactions usually take place with the property management guest information screen in view of the employee. Other ways of obtaining the guest name are methods of payment and paying careful attention to how a group of guests may address themselves in front of the employee. When all else fails, employees should be taught to simply ask the guest their name in a friendly and courteous manner.

Smile.

The booking process typically occurs over the telephone; therefore the smile is transmitted through the language and tone of voice of the employee. When the phone is answered with friendly and inviting language and tone, the guest perceives that the employee is happy and content, creating the impression of the smile. This concept can be applied to guest

requests made from a room to the front desk. During arrival and departure, the traditional smile exhibited face to face can be a powerful service tool. A friendly smile is welcome at the front desk and underestimating this will cost many hospitality firms repeat business (Feiertag, 2001).

Providing quick and efficient service.

The service standard that integrates the most with operational skills is quick and efficient service. Front office customer interactions such as booking, arrival and departure include property management system processing, making technical proficiency a must for delivering this service standard. In addition to operational efficiency, quick and efficient service requires an attitude of guest prioritization and empathy. Employees must be taught to see the needs of the guest as more important than their own schedule or their own convenience. Employees may have to deviate from predetermined booking and arrival scripts in order to meet a guest need in a quick and efficient manner.

Another method for imparting the perception of quick and efficient service is the use of the eyes. This applies to situations where customers may be waiting in line such as arrival and departure. Eye contact creates a tangible connection between the employee and the guest. When the guest perceives that they are being recognized while in line, then their perception of the length of the wait is shortened. Employees must be taught the important of this subtle service tool. Periodic scanning of the queuing line while processing the current customer is a challenge that should be practiced during training. Eye contact is an important customer interaction skill. The use of the eyes is not easy and most employees can use all the training they can get to learn how to accomplish this type of service standard. When executed well, eye contact is a powerful weapon for building guest satisfaction. Recognition of the guest through eye contact adds respect and increases the value of the interaction (Feiertag, 2001).

Offering assistance.

A more complex service standard involves the acquisition and dissemination of property knowledge to the guest. This is an excellent way to offer assistance to the guest. In many instances, the guest requires assistance in understanding property amenities, locations, and hours of operation. Providing property information to the guest is a big piece of front office operations (Baum & Devine, 2007). During the booking process, the front office employee may be faced with questions such as check in times, restaurant choices and package offerings. Arriving guests may need to understand where a meeting is to be held or the location of the casino entrance. The range of assistance that an employee may have to respond to during a guest request can range from a simple telephone transfer to a complicated dissertation of menu offerings for the restaurant. During departure, many guest s may ask for directions or assistance with baggage or valet. A thorough understanding of property knowledge, coupled with a desire to meet the guest needs create an empowered employee who is able to offer assistance and create guest satisfaction. When front line staff is cognizant of the products of the hotel, they become more empowered to offer assistance to the guest (Shailer, 2011).

Thanking the guest.

Any interaction that a guest may have can be the one that leaves the greatest impression. Training programs must teach employees the importance of closing each interaction with an expression of gratitude for the guest's patronage. Booking and departure conversations can be closed with friendly thanks for choosing the hotel for their event. Guest requests can be closed with words that express appreciation such as " a pleasure to serve you". The arrival process can end with a quick thank you and please call us if you need any assistance during your stay. In each way, these types of closings create the perception of gratitude for the guest's patronage.

For some hotel operations, it may be possible to standardize these responses for a given interaction, assisting the employee in delivering the thank you message. This in turn, adds value to the guest experience as they feel a sense of appreciation from the front line employee who becomes the tangible representatives of the hotel and its ownership.

Training Methods and Best Practices

Role-play.

Role-play training exercises for teaching service standards should include specific opportunities for service standard implementation. The role play script should not tell the employee what service standard to use, but should flow in such a way that the context of the interaction allows an opportunity for the service standard to be implemented. In this way, the trainee must exercise their ability to recognize service standard opportunities as well as act out that opportunity. An example could be a guest who calls for a reservation and states their name during the introduction. A metric for this role-play could be how long does it take the trainee to use the guest name after it has been delivered. In an arrival scenario, the script could call for the guest to imply that they were very hungry after their long trip. The trainee would then be measured on their ability to recognize the opportunity for offering assistance in the form of restaurant information and reservations. No matter which interaction is chosen to role-play service standards, the trainer should have a master grid that outlines each recognition opportunity within the script. Trainees should be evaluated on their ability to recognize the opportunity and execute the standard.

Technology.

Technology is an excellent service standard tool for offering assistance and providing quick and efficient service. Large hotel properties may have numerous amenities or a variety of

events that may change on a daily basis. Technological tools can assist front office employees with quick and efficient information retrieval so that they can offer assistance to the guest. In some applications, mobile learning provides an excellent support medium for ongoing training.

Internet based information that can be accessed by multiple workstations allow all workstations to have the same information. Mobile devices allow for instant updates and immediate access by the employee. Portability of mobile learning devices allow for remote access to vital information and it can be utilized to provide short bursts of information that is easier to remember and immediate to apply (Stone, 2010). Training programs must teach the employee how to utilize all of the technological tools that are available at a given property. The trainer should provide a list of these tools and instruct the trainee on how each tool can be used to service the guest. Although each hotel may have different forms of technological tools, they all possess a property management system. The trainer must conduct a thorough review of PMS capabilities related to servicing the guest and ensure that these capabilities are included within the employee training process.

Case study.

The case study method of learning provides another tool for imparting service standard training. The case study can depict guest interactions that went wrong due to lack of service standards. The trainee would be instructed to read the case study and identify opportunities where the implementation of service standards could have changed or improved the outcome of the interaction. The case study method offers an opportunity for the trainee to read the scenario in a story format, then review and ponder the information at their own pace. Stories present a powerful and motivational device for learning on the job behavior (Horey, 2009).

The case study evaluation grid should have a list of opportunities that could be

implemented to improve the outcome. These opportunities are then compared with what is presented by the employee. The case study process should conclude with a discussion of both the predetermined service standards and the ones proposed by the trainee. An excellent method for tying in service profit chain concepts is to incorporate the trainee's ideas into future case studies when appropriate. Positive outcome case studies can also be presented. In these scenarios, the trainee is asked to identify the service standards used and how they led to guest satisfaction.

On the job and conference training.

On the job training provides real time opportunities for practicing service standards. An important consideration for this type of training is to ensure that timely conferencing regarding the trainee's use of service standards is presented. When possible, this conferencing should occur after no more than two or three interactions. The trainer reviews the interactions with the trainee and identifies the service standards executed and those that were missed. This prevents the trainee from digressing into a false assessment of their on the job experience. An example of this can be appreciated with guest arrival. The process can be performed with a number of missing service standards, yet the guest still checks in, gets their keys, and moves on to their room. The trainee may feel a sense of success from the process just because the tangible component of the interaction was completed. Unfortunately, a smile may not have been present, the name may never have been used and property amenity information may never have been offered. Timely intervention by the trainer is most important so that the trainee can amend their performance and avoid bad habits. Additionally, positive reinforcement of service standards used is just as important as corrective comments.

Conferencing is a vital part of service standard training as it allows the trainer to clearly

explain the nuances of delivering service standard concepts as well as provide a forum for answering trainee questions. Conformances to service standards are more likely to be met if they are communicated and understood properly by the employee (Chen & Ro, 2011).

Testing, evaluation, and follow-up.

Employees must be evaluated on their willingness to embrace customer service standards as well as their technical proficiency (Davis, 2005). Testing can include identification of service standards and how to apply each standard to a particular guest interaction such as booking, arrival, guest request and departure.

Follow-up on service standards should include observation of the employee during customer interactions. In the case of bookings, audio recordings of the reservation process are an excellent tool for evaluation and follow-up discussion. Observations should be documented and this information can then be used within the context of an employee conference. Positive reinforcement and corrective instruction should be provided. A final report should be filed that documents the meeting, acknowledges things done well, and identifies action plans for items that need to be improved. A copy should also be provided to the employee. This document can then be used as a start point for the next follow-up discussion.

Management role.

Management must walk the walk and talk the talk when it comes to service standards. Each manager should be thoroughly familiar with the standards and how they apply to booking, arrival, guest request, and departure. Keeping an eye out for employees who execute the service standards is important. Showing appreciation and rewards for well-executed service standards is another way for management to reinforce the importance of service standards. A review of customer comment cards, secret shopper surveys, or other guest feedback devices are an

excellent way for management to identify employees who are either executing or failing to execute service standards.

The Service Product, Value Creation, and Customer Relationships

Workplace Integration

Developing a long-term relationship.

One of the most difficult marketing services concepts to teach employees is maintaining focus on the long-term relationship between the hotel and guest. The booking process seems to be focused on a single event that will occur at a particular point in time. The arrival seems to be all about getting the guest to the correct room, while the departure concentrates on proper billing and payment. It is very easy for an employee to see the value of correctly delivering an item in response to a guest request. Looking beyond each of these immediate interactions and understanding the value of making each of these interactions a fortifying link in a long term relationship is the challenge for training front office employees.

Understanding what drives long-term profitability from the customer is necessary if front line employees are to know how to service the guest. The principle of the value proposition is for the customer to come back because there is personal and professional value in doing so (Cooperman, 2010). It is up to the front line employee to deliver that value through a high level of customer service. When the employee maintains focus upon the long-term relationship, the guest interaction is more likely to contain elements of service marketing concepts.

Word choice and empathy skills.

The four customer interactions that front office employees have with guest are each dominated by oral communication. These conversations become the most tangible sign of service that the guest can perceive. Front office employees are in a position to both

communicate and sell the service product to the guest, placing great importance on the service quality of this position (Baum & Devine, 2007). A big part of this service quality depends upon the choice of words that an employee uses. The choice of words should take into consideration both the hotel business model and the customer demographic. Elaborate use of vocabulary will not bode well for an unsophisticated customer base, while casino related lingo would not be appropriate in a business hotel environment. Additionally, each of the four customer interactions may require the employee to understand vocabulary that the customer demographic may use. A casino hotel guest may utilize a number of gaming related terms when booking their reservation, while a business customer may use a number of words associated with business centers, meetings, and conference registrations. In either case, the employee must be fluent in both understanding and delivering vocabulary that meets the guest's needs. An even more dramatic example of the importance of oral communication can be seen when considering nationality demographics. Many hotel properties cater to specific nationalities. In this instance, the communication needs move beyond work choice and enter into multiple language fluency.

Empathy skills are another intangible component of guest interactions. Whether it is a booking, arrival, guest request, or departure, the employee must stay tuned to the needs and moods of the guest. Empathy skills assist the employee in recognizing the context of the guest's situation. A booking for an anniversary party requires a different approach than a booking for a business event. A check in with a family of six has an entirely different flavor than a check in with a couple. During guest requests, certain situations may require a more dramatic response than others depending upon the circumstances of the request. An overflowing toilet should not be treated with the casual response associated with directions to the pool. A departing guest who is upset with room charges requires a different tact than another guest who was satisfied with

their stay. In all of these instances, guest empathy skills help to direct the front office employee to the appropriate type of response.

The service product difference.

The purchase decision for hospitality services such as a hotel stay differs dramatically from the many other purchase decisions that consumers make. One of the factors associated with this difference is the inseparability of the production and consumption of the service. Unlike a car, which is produced and refined months or years before the purchase consumption, many parts of the hotel experience is being produced by the employee and consumed by the guest at the same time. Inseparability of production and consumption places enormous importance upon the interaction between the employee and the guest (Christou et al., 2009). The employee who is engaged in a customer interaction such as guest arrival needs to appreciate the fact that the interaction is all part of the service that the guest had purchased. It is not just about renting a physical bed to sleep in.

Another differentiator for hotel hospitality service products is the concept of intangibility. Intangibility refers to the fact that services can only be experienced, not owned (Christou et al., 2009). The booking, arrival, guest request, and departure interactions dominate the overall hotel stay experience of the guest and will typically determine whether or not guest satisfaction is achieved from the hotel stay. When front office employees understand the concepts of inseparability and intangibility, they are more aware of the importance of their performance during booking, arrival, guest request, and departure.

Training Methods and Best Practices

Role-play.

Role-play training helps teach employees how to communicate during guest interactions

(Dieckmann et al., 2005). One way to assist with vocabulary training is to present the trainee with key words to be used during the role-play interaction. It is then up to the trainee to utilize the words within the context of the role-play.

Marketing services concepts can be intangible, making these concepts difficult to execute in the workplace. Role-play exercises provide the employee with opportunities to apply the intangible concepts in a workplace context, helping then to solidify the intangible into tangible actions. Theories and guidelines can be learned, but they need to be exercised in an actual encounter (Swink, 1993).

Role-play can assist employees with making property amenities tangible to the guest. The front office staff must be trained to ask questions that refine the guest needs and allow for the property amenities to be applied in a customized fashion, creating value to the guest (McCann, 2001). Role-play exercises can be developed that creates opportunities for the trainee to ask questions that allow for customized responses. An example of this is a guest request for a place to eat on a property with multiple restaurant choices. Rather than simply providing the names of all three restaurants, the trainee should ask the guest what type of food and beverage experience they are looking for. This helps the trainee to then narrow the restaurant recommendation to the one most appropriate and customized to the guest needs.

Empathy skills can also be developed and practiced with a strategically administered role-play exercise. In this instance, the trainee plays the part of the guest who experiences poor service from the employee. The role-play should then be followed up with a discussion that probes the way the trainee felt after being treated in a less than worthy fashion. When employees are placed in the role of the customer, they have an opportunity to experience how the other half-lives and this can help build empathy skills (Dieckmann et al., 2005).

Technology.

The hotel property management system will always be the most widely used technological tool for front office employees. The PMS may have a training module that mirrors the actual system, creating a mock training environment with which employees can practice their duties. When PMS training modules are available, they can be used to assist the employee in practicing functions that may not be utilized for normal guest processing, but can be a valuable tool in certain situations. Computer training environments help employees learn how the technology can assist them in meeting the needs of the guest (Bigger & Bigger, 2006). An example of this can be the guest history screen. This application tracks both the previous and future stays of the guest. By becoming knowledgeable with this application, the employee can experience the long-term value of the guest as measured in folio summaries. Additionally, the employee can earn to customize future guest stays based upon previous history.

Another use of technology that assists in making the intangible tangible is the use of digital picture frames. These devices can help front office employees see the actual hotel amenities such as a suite room, amenity choices, and food offerings. Visual knowledge of the hotel products helps the employee to remember and better describe these items to the guest. The digital picture frame concept can also be enacted with workstation computers and shared picture files.

Case study.

Case studies provide an effective means for helping the trainee appreciate the intangible aspects of the hotel experience. The written story format, as well as the ability to read and absorb at a customized pace, create a better learning environment for complicated concepts such as intangibility and inseparability. Complex case study scenarios help the employee focus on the

most important priorities (Prewitt, 2009). By presenting the case study through the lens of the guest's perceptions, the employee can also learn to empathize with guest concerns and realize the intangible aspects of even the slightest mistake in employee behavior. Case studies that incorporate emotion can assist employees with guest empathy skills (Prewitt, 2009). The post hotel stay feelings of the guest, the follow-up comments to their friends, and the purchase decisions made for the future can be highlighted within the case study. This helps the employee to understand the long-term ramifications of each customer interaction within a particular stay.

Case studies should be developed from actual work related problems, using context and content that conform to the job position (Prewitt, 2009). The context and content will vary for a given hotel property and it is critical to develop the case study from hotel experiences that are property specific. This adds credibility to the lesson and also provides for a more customized learning experience for the employee.

Case studies can also be used to emphasize the power of the spoken word in making the intangible a tangible reality to the guest. A positive customer interaction can be written that includes the use of key descriptive words of property amenities. This provides the employee with both context and content with which to envision their own use of the key words. Studies have shown that when employees are trained in word usage, their ability to convey value and service to the guest in tangible ways improves (Durett, 2006).

Rewards.

The training experience itself is a service product that has many intangible aspects. The utilization of rewards within the training program helps to create a tangible sign to the trainee of this intangible experience. As with customer interactions, creating tangible signs helps the trainee to appreciate the training experience. Rewards are a powerful influence on employee

behavior and training programs must have a solid motivational element such as pay, rewards and recognition that serves to motivate and engage the employee (Chen & Ro, 2011; Knight & Salter, 1985).

Testing, evaluation, and follow-up.

The testing evaluation and follow-up of intangibles and customer relationships is difficult. The measurement and determination of training effectiveness is not entirely straightforward especially in the hospitality workplace setting, which features a complicated mixture of service and technical proficiency (Almanza et al., 2010).

One way to evaluate the understanding of long-term customer relationships is to have the employee define how to rate the value of a guest to the hotel operation. A correct assessment will include the value of word of mouth and repeat purchase decisions, not just one-time folio values. Questions on how to create customer satisfaction during a hotel stay can help determine the employees understanding of the value of intangible features of customer service. Correct answers will contain references to quality interactions and not just low room rates or package specials.

Follow-up discussions should include an opportunity for the employee to share interaction experiences where they were able to assist the guest in making an intangible experience more tangible. Additionally, a small role-play can be utilized where the trainer acts as the upset guest and evaluates how well the employee practices empathy skills during the interaction.

Management role.

Management role in the training of customer relationships and intangibles starts with the way they treat their staff. The same principles that govern the employee guest interaction also

apply to the interactions between the manager and the front office staff. Managers should look for ways to make their requests tangible in value to the employee so that they can buy-in to the job task. Recognition of the long-term value of an employee is also an excellent way to communicate the principle of long-term value of the customer to the employee. When they are treated within the context of a long-term relationship, rather than simply the immediate needs of a particular task request, the employee feels appreciated and valued rather than being used and manipulated.

Conclusion

A Flexible and Customizable Training Solution

The front office training guideline for service marketing initiatives was structured to place emphasis on teaching the marketing service concepts within the context of front office job duties. The guideline was designed for adaption to any type of hotel business model. The emphasis is placed upon the marketing service initiative and how it relates to and can be applied to customer interactions that occur at all hotel properties, regardless of the business model. The guideline also includes direction for customizing the training process to fit the needs of a particular hotel. In the extremely competitive hospitality environment, training needs to be focused on creating that unique customer service experience that differentiates the firm from the competition and makes the customer feel like returning (Davey, 2009).

Prioritizing the Service Concept

By outlining the training guideline by service concepts, rather than job duties, the customer service aspect of the training becomes the tangible goal of each training section. The various job duties of the employee can then be perceived as simply the mechanism for delivering customer service as outlined by marketing service standards. For each of the service training

sections, a number of learning methods and best practices were identified that can be used to improve service training effectiveness. Mixing a variety of training methods helps to maintain the attention of the employee and the opportunity for a successful training experience (Bigger & Bigger, 2006). The incorporation of standards and guides into the training process creates consistency of delivery and improves the overall delivery of training knowledge (Cooperman, 2010).

Training to Make Every Interaction Count

By utilizing this training guideline, front office employees can be taught the intricacies of marketing service concepts and how they can be applied to the customer interactions associated with booking, arrival, guest request, and departure. Hotel employee training programs which incorporate service marketing concepts, teaching methods and best practices lead to improved employee performance, customer satisfaction and hotel profitability. Superior training is the key to developing superior hospitality skills (Lavra, 1997).

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Recommendations

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Competitive Advantage

The hospitality industry is a highly guest service oriented business where encounters between employees and guests determine the success of the business. Training opportunities must increase in order to meet the competitive demand within the hospitality marketplace. Learning is trending toward the user and the moment of need. As technological advances become more prevalent in the hospitality workplace, the need for emphasizing customer touch points becomes more important (Baum & Devine, 2007; Bigger & Bigger, 2006; Choi & Dickson, 2010; Ketter & Ellis, 2010).

From Expense to Investment

Investing in the service training of employees can create the differentiation that a hotel company wishes to achieve. Training expense is an investment in the employee that can lead to competitive advantage within the service industry (Baum & Devine, 2007). By looking at training as an investment rather than an expense, a hotel company maintains the proper perspective of this most powerful service tool.

Human Resources Insight

Another consideration of the value of a service oriented training program is the light it may shed on the overall management and administration of employees. A service oriented training program not only empowers employees, but it can also be useful to the hospitality industry in gaining insight into human resources management (Baum & Devine, 2007). Additionally, an effective service-training program has been shown to have a positive affect on employee retention. Studies have shown that training, job enrichment, and rewards are key practices for retaining the best employees (Choi & Dickson, 2010).

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