Improving service quality in small communities: The Bahamas as a model

Kera Lonise Carey

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IMPROVING SERVICE QUALITY IN SMALL COMMUNITIES:
THE BAHAMAS AS A MODEL

by

Kera Lonise Carey
Bachelor of Business Administration
Howard University, Washington, D.C.
2000

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Science in Hotel Administration
William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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The Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

July 30, 2003

The Thesis prepared by

Kera Lonise Carey

Entitled

Improving Service Quality In Small Communities: The Bahamas As A Model

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science In Hotel Administration

[Signatures]

Examination Committee Chair
Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

Improving Service Quality in Small Communities: The Bahamas as a Model

by

Kera Lonise Carey

Dr. Wanda Costen, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Hotel Management
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Service quality is a topic that permeates every facet of the tourism industry. In small communities such as The Bahamas, where tourism is the driving factor for economic stability, service quality is paramount. In 2001, the Bahamian Ministry of Tourism set customer satisfaction goals for the country and is continually striving to improve the country’s visitor satisfaction ratings through market research.

This qualitative exploratory study investigates service quality in Bahamian hotels and was inspired by Ministry of Tourism customer service research. The project was tailored to identify service quality gaps within the Bahamian hotel industry by applying the Conceptual Gap Model. In-depth face-to-face interviews with customer contact staff at two leisure hotels in The Bahamas revealed service quality gaps that stemmed from limited job enrichment and job rotation for customer contact employees, inaccurate marketing communications, and inadequate resources. Suggestions for closing these gaps are also provided.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Completing this paper would not have been possible without the support of my family. I am truly blessed to have you all in my life.
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CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Introduction

Tourism is the backbone of the Bahamian economy, contributing half of the country’s gross domestic product and employing approximately 50 percent of the nation’s citizens (Bahamas Handbook, 2002). In the year 2000, The Bahamas welcomed 4,204,180 visitors, which was comprised of approximately 1.6 million stopover visitors, and 2.5 million cruise ship visitors (Lomer, 2002, p. 268). It is one of the world’s most visited cruise ship destinations, and in 1995 The Bahamas received 1.5 million cruise passengers — this was more than any other country in the Caribbean region (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 1997). Based on its growing capacity to create jobs, earn foreign exchange, and generate income, tourism is expected to remain the dominant industry of The Bahamas for the foreseeable future. Yet, there are many threats to the stability of tourism in The Bahamas. Competition has steadily increased with neighboring countries, such as Cuba, that have built a reputation for outstanding customer service and are increasing their market share in Caribbean tourism with more than 1.7 million stopover visitors in 2001 (Bahamas Exit Study Report, 2001). According to Macaulay (1994, p.16), “Cuba’s government has recognized that tourism is virtually its only means of securing hard currency rapidly.”
Many Caribbean countries are gaining a competitive edge through training and education because these nations realize that education and training programs for tourism that fail to provide hospitality staff with the appropriate skills and service standards, can be detrimental to the future development of tourism (World Tourism Organization, 1994). “The practice of tourism is becoming increasingly sophisticated: marketers today must concern themselves with a skillful balance between quantity and quality, while developers and providers of tourist products must concern themselves with conservation as well as the quality of the experience” (Bodlender and Lickorish, 1991, p.3).

“Moreover, the growing economic importance of service industries in many countries has seen increases in centrally-driven, quality-based initiatives, including the European Foundation for Quality Management, the British Quality Foundation, the International Organization for Standardization ISO9000 Series, the Australian Quality Council, and the Quality Assurance Institute of America” (Kandampully, Mok, Sparks, 2001; Ross, 2001, p. 85).

Statement of the Problem

Although there is an abundance of research on service quality and employee training, few studies explore the impact of customer service training programs on service quality. Furthermore, there is limited research on training and service quality, which relates specifically to The Bahamas. In 2001, government officials set a service goal for the Nation in stating, “We have to ensure that we provide good service. All of our exit surveys have shown that that’s a key component. We’re getting better – we’re currently at about 86 percent approval ratings from our visitors. We want to get about 96 percent”
The impact of such approval ratings is substantial because profitability increases proportionally with the number of loyal customers, and up to 60 percent of sales to new customers can be attributed to word-of-mouth referrals (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990).

The customer satisfaction surveys from two leisure properties in The Bahamas for January and February 2001 found that 85 percent of guests would recommend The Bahamas to friends or relatives. These statistics are fairly positive, but there is room for improvement. The area of improvement may be within performance gaps (i.e., differences between the actual state and the desired state) in the service encounters of guests. The intention of this study is to identify service quality gaps through a performance analysis and offer solutions to close the gaps.

In order to distinguish one’s company from those selling similar products, organizations advertise “service with a smile”, which is thought to contribute to customers’ perceptions of quality service, satisfaction, loyalty, and their overall impression of the organization (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985). Advertisements for The Bahamas tout the slogan “It just keeps getting better”, which promotes a unique travel experience and improvements in service quality. Critiques, on the other hand, have targeted the tourism destination with criticism regarding customer service. For example, Frommer’s Bahamas wrote:

Although tourism is bouncing back [in the Bahamas], many problems remain for this archipelago nation. Some Bahamians are among the friendliest and most hospitable people in the world; but others, including some in the tourist industry, can be [unfriendly], an attitude observed by writers for many publications. To counter this, the government is trying to train its citizens to be more helpful, courteous, and efficient. Sometimes this training has taken root; at other times it has fallen on barren ground. Service with a smile is not assured in The Bahamas (2003, p. 6).
In light of such publications, the primary goal of this study is to identify if training has “taken root” by analyzing guest surveys and employee interviews. However, in order to grasp an understanding of service quality, a wide range of smaller issues needs to be researched. The availability of skilled and specialized labor is just one of the issues for small communities (i.e., countries or locations with a total population of 500,000 or less, where movement/dispersal of inhabitants is limited by geographic location). At the Bahamas Business Outlook 2003 conference, Bahamian Director General of Tourism, Mr. Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace stated, “We have to make sure that our training and development programs are second to none anywhere in the world because we don’t have the luxury of filtration and selection.” In essence, people who may not be ideal candidates for tourism jobs are hired due to a shortage of qualified applicants. These circumstances require training and education programs, which are vital for the development of the country’s labor pool.

In another major tourist destination, Las Vegas, the researcher found a stark contrast to the hiring dilemma that many small communities are facing. Prior to the opening of Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, there were 84,000 applicants for 9,600 positions (Breen, 2001). In the capital city of Nassau, Bahamas, there is an estimated 175,000 inhabitants who occupy jobs in medicine, law, banking and many other fields. Hypothetically, if there are 9,000 job openings at a property in Nassau, Bahamas, there may only be 11,000 applicants. As a result, many small islands have to utilize the available citizens and provide intense training, because they do not have the luxury of a large labor supply.
Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to identify if customer contact employees in the Bahamian hotel industry need customer service training through gap analysis. To do so, this study also explores the needs and expectations of guests versus their perception of service received, which is the service quality gap. Serving as a catalyst to offer more than the attributes of sand and sea through increased service quality, a performance analysis of two major resorts is conducted. It is the intention of the researcher that this analysis will also enhance training and educational research completed by the Bahamian Ministry of Tourism.

Justification

“In the early 1980s, the Bahamian government identified four major conditions that influenced the government’s decision to make technical and vocational education a priority. These included: projections of continued youth unemployment and the social problems associated with it; the leveling off of tourism-related jobs and the need to diversify; high migration from the Family Islands to Nassau and Grand Bahama due to lack of economic activities on the outer islands; and finally, the severe shortage of well-trained Bahamians” (Rolle, 1993, p.7).

In 1978, the Ministry of Tourism introduced the Bahamahost program, a self-improvement training program that would upgrade service quality in the hospitality industry in The Bahamas. Participants are familiarized with the country’s history, geography, civics, culture, economics, and places of interest and also receive training in attitudes and customer service. In August 2002, the Bahamahost Visitor Survey revealed
that 53 percent of the frontline managers felt their customer contact employees needed further training (Lowe, Brooks, and Rolle, 2002). Hence, this study analyzes feedback from both guests and front desk employees at two major resorts in the northwest region of The Bahamas to further explore service quality gaps and whether customer service training is needed to narrow these gaps.

Summary

This chapter discussed the importance of identifying the service quality gaps in The Bahamas and reasons why this research is a necessity. In Chapter 2, a review of the relevant literature on needs analysis, service quality, and training is discussed. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, which was developed as a result of the literature review. The qualitative data analysis, which predominantly explores employee and guest comments, is discussed in Chapter 4. Lastly, Chapter 5 integrates the results of the study with existing theory and research, and discusses recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter presents a review of literature that serves as the basis for this study. The first section addresses needs analysis, the process used in this study to research service quality gaps. Next, the relevance of service quality in the hospitality industry, dimensions of service quality, and the Gaps Model are discussed. This is followed by relevant training literature and related Bahamian research findings. Finally, the chapter is summarized with an overview of the theoretical concepts.

The Needs Analysis Process

A need is the value judgment that a group has a problem that can be solved (McKillip, 1987). Needs analysis is a tool that involves the identification and evaluation of needs, while need identification is a process of unfolding problems and solutions of a target population (McKillip, 1987). This procedure was chosen for this study because it serves as the starting point for corrective training programs. Moreover, the systematic analysis reduces uncertainty and determines the nature of any existing service quality gaps, unveiling new and future performance needs. McKillip (1987) proposed that need
analysis is problems analysis and if services are not adequate, but specific actions will correct the perceived inadequacy, one should follow the five-step process below:

1. **Identify the users and uses.** “Neglect at this step leads to unused and unread reports. The users of the analysis are those who will act on the basis of the report. Audiences, who may be affected by the report, but will not act on it also should be included” (McKillip 1987, p.8). Hoteliers, as well as government officials in The Bahamas, have repeatedly expressed the need for service quality and training research, to improve service quality. Consequently, the users for this study are hotel employees, hotel guests, The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, and small communities that face parallel service issues.

   Understanding the use of the analysis is a key element in prescribing a solution to any problems that exist. For example, knowing that the analysis of this study will enhance training research conducted by The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, as well as form the basis for customer service improvements in Bahamian hotels, imposes the needs that can be identified. However, need identification cannot be determined until the target population and service environment are selected.

2. **Describe the target population and the service environment.** The target population should be divided into two groups, the service providers and the service receivers. Service environments assessed should be alike, offering similar amenities and catering to comparable market segments. Geographic areas, demographic characteristics, and resource inventories should also be considered in this phase. Demographics may include age, gender, ethnicity, education, and
income. The resource inventory will consist of services offered to guests and training provided to employees. Oftentimes, an inventory will detect service areas or resources for employees that are underutilized, in turn, identifying gaps in the service process.

3. Identify needs. The identification process is the revelation of problems and solutions that affect the target population. For instance, negative guest comments and declining satisfaction ratings may expose problem areas, while the solution may be related to factors such as improved attitude or promptness of service delivery. Deciding which problem or solution is most relevant is the next step.

4. Assess the importance of the needs. Once the problems and solutions are recognized, the need is appraised against unequivocal and suitable standards. The three models for customer service assessment are the Marketing, Decision-Making, and Discrepancy models. The Marketing model, developed by Kotler (1982), bases the need analysis solely on marketing principles, focusing primarily on the needs and wants of the customer. The marketing model measures two dimensions: the willingness of a customer to pay for a product or service, and the cost of providing the services. Attention is not given to the role of the employee, which means that this model is only useful for identifying the marketing communications gap, which is the difference between service delivery and external communication to the customer (e.g., when promises communicated through advertising or salespersons are different from the actual service provided).
The Decision-Making model explores the decision dimensions of performance expectancies, actual performance, solution cost, solution impact, and solution feasibility (McKillip, 1987). The model is best suited when quantitative data is available, because the three stages of the model are problem modeling, quantification, and synthesis ("a need index calculated by multiplying weights and utilities, and summing the products across attributes," McKillip, 1987, p. 27). The complexity of this model is an inconvenience for many researchers.

This study applied the most straightforward and widely-used model – the Discrepancy Model. This model, which is also referred to as the Gap Model for needs analysis, seeks to evaluate the discrepancy or gap between the expectations and the outcome of a service encounter. The three stages in this model are goal setting (identifying what ought to be), performance measurement (determining what is), and discrepancy identification (ordering differences between what ought to be and what is) (McKillip, 1987).

Goal setting is the selection of performance expectations for service quality. For example, in 2001, the national goal of the Bahamian government was to increase guest satisfaction/approval ratings from 86 percent to 96 percent. Hence, customer service standards between the private and public sector were kept consistent by measuring the results of guest satisfaction surveys at both properties against the 96 percent satisfaction goal set by the government. The second phase, performance measurement, is assessed by data collection from guest satisfaction survey results at both resorts. Lastly, discrepancy identification,
which is a result of research methodology, detects gaps in the service process, which are then communicated to the appropriate audience.

5. Communicate the results. This step involves written, graphic, and oral presentation of the problems and recommended solutions. Communication is the final and vital step in need analysis because it links the research findings and motivates decision makers to implement changes that narrow the service quality gaps.

Service Quality Concepts

“Service organizations exist as a function of their customers; service quality then, is the primary survival strategy” (Schneider and Chung, 1993, p.124). Service quality is the result of a comparison between the expectations of a customer and the actual service received. Service quality is a powerful force that reshapes attitudes and actions toward creating customer satisfaction and loyalty, and thus, sustainable competitive advantage in a turbulent environment of vigorous global competition (Scheuing and Christopher, 1993). With proper preparation prior to the service encounter, good quality may be achieved (Scheuing and Christopher, 1993). Three main goals pursued by all organizations are:

1) Maintain product and service quality;
2) Preserve total compliance; and,
3) Reduce quality-related costs to satisfy customer needs, ensure things are done right the first time and remain competitive (Bigelow 2002).
The roadmap for “getting it right the first time” begins with an understanding of what service quality entails. “Identifying the underlying dimensions of the service quality construct and the relative importance of these dimensions in consumer evaluation of specific service situations is the first step in the definition – and hence provision – of service quality” (Akan, 1995). Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (1990) refined a questionnaire instrument called the SERVQUAL Scale, which measures customers’ expectations and perceptions of quality dimensions. After statistical analyses of SERVQUAL, 97 constructs were narrowed down to five dimensions for evaluating service quality, as shown in Exhibit 2.1. “The five SERVQUAL dimensions, by virtue of being derived from systematic analysis of customers’ ratings from hundreds of interviews in several service sectors, are a concise representation of the core criteria that customers employ in evaluating service quality” (Ziethaml et al. 1990, p. 26). The theoretical foundation of SERVQUAL is used as the foundation for numerous guest satisfaction research projects. Recently, Baker and Fesenmaier (1997) used SERVQUAL to analyze service quality among guests, employees, and managers in the tourism sector. Similarly, for this study, the five major SERVQUAL dimensions are examined in personal interviews with employees and managers as well as in the results of guest comment cards. Feedback from employees and guests will help identify the service quality gaps at both properties.
Exhibit 2.1. SERVQUAL Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>Appearance of facilities, personnel, &amp; communication materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>Confidence, knowledge, courtesy, &amp; security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ziethaml et al, 1990

The Service Quality Gaps Model

The Gaps model, first introduced by Gronroos (1983) and further developed by Ziethaml et al. (1990), is a model that explains the components of service quality. Between each component is a possible weakness within the organization, otherwise referred to as a gap. According to Brown and Swartz (1989, p.97), “gap analysis is a straightforward and appropriate way to identify inconsistencies between provider and client perceptions of service performance. Addressing these gaps seems to be a logical basis for formulating strategies and tactics to ensure consistent expectations and experiences, thus increasing the likelihood of satisfaction and a positive quality evaluation.” In the conceptual model of service quality (the Gap Model) shown in Exhibit 2.2, there are five gaps, which influence the customer satisfaction. Gap 5 is considered the most important gap and is used as the overall definition of service quality by Ziethaml et al (1990).
Exhibit 2.2. Conceptual Model of Service Quality

The five service quality gaps are explained in detail below.

**Gap 1: The Management Perceptions Gap.** Senior managers’ inaccurate understanding of customer’s needs and desires leads to service-delivery performance that is below customer expectations. Exploratory research with management and guests may detect the discrepancy between expectations and perceptions. Nevertheless, front-line employees play an optimal role in the service process and have direct contact with the customer. Front-line employees know when, how, and why the hotel has succeeded or failed to meet guest expectations. However, if managers do not request this information from front line employees on a regular basis, they become unaware of what really matters to a guest and develop false perceptions.

**Gap 2: The Service Quality Specifications Gap.** In this case, management is aware of the customer’s needs, but fail to translate the customer’s needs into the appropriate service standards. Ideally, a company’s attitude toward service quality should be communicated in the vision or mission statement as well as the strategic plan, which includes strategies to achieve the service quality vision. However, in practice, companies omit this step and experience inconsistencies in service quality specifications.

**Gap 3: The Service Delivery Gap.** Gap 3 is also known as the service performance gap and occurs when employees are unable and/or unwilling to perform according to the service specifications. To improve service performance, companies must help employees understand why change is necessary, communicate what new attitudes are required, and train them in the requisite skills (Troy and Schein, 1993).

**Gap 4: The Marketing Communications Gap.** This gap occurs when promises communicated through advertising or salespersons are different from the actual service
provided. Oftentimes this discrepancy is a result of inaccurate planning or communication between marketing and hotel operations. “Marketing, especially the traditional parts of the marketing mix such as advertising and selling, is to a large extent, a matter of expectations management. Advertising and selling partly determine the level of customer expectations. If expectations are raised too high because of an advertising campaign, for example – the quality of a given service may be disappointing, if only because the customers had unrealistic expectations” (Gronroos, 1993, p.21).

Gap 5: The Service Quality Gap. Gap 5 is the difference between the expected and perceived quality of services from a customer’s standpoint. This gap may arise because of one or more of the previous four gaps. Ziethaml et al. (1990) suggest that to close the all-important service quality gap, the four other gaps need to be closed.

In this study, the first gap - not knowing what customers expect - is identified by an analysis of more than 1,000 guest comments and exit surveys, which will shed light on the views of visitors to the Bahamas. This study utilized personal face-to-face interviews with front desk managers to determine employee perceptions of service quality.

The quality of service increases as the gaps become smaller. To improve service quality in Bahamian hotels, the needs analysis will serve as a tool to narrow gap 3 and ultimately, gap 5. This research focuses on Gaps 1, 3, and 5 because Gap 1 identifies whether or not managers know what customer want, while Gap 3 identifies whether or not employees possess the training and personal desire to perform to increase service quality. Gap 3 is also common in service businesses (Ziethaml et al, 1990). This research will also explore Gap 5, because it is the result of all gaps and is considered as
the most important gap. However, while researching Gaps 1 and 3, other gaps were identified even though they were not the focal point of this study.

This data analysis may lead to the development of the following components (McKillip, 1987):

- Define the customer service training needs:
  - Before starting a training program, there must be evidence of a performance deficiency that requires training (Craig, 1996). This section will explore the service gaps between ideal and actual performance at two major resorts in the capital city of Nassau/Paradise Island, Bahamas.

- Establish a customer service training policy:
  - A customer service training policy is a general guideline for decision-making or a statement of specific action that must be taken in a given situation. From this guideline, training standards are formed. Standards signal to customer contact personnel what management priorities are and which types of performance really count.

- Plan the Training:
  - This component includes analyzing the job of a front line hotel employee; setting broad training goals; selecting the trainees; setting specific learning objectives; designing the training program; selecting the training media and methods; planning the evaluation; and preparing a training budget.

These components cannot be developed without the opinions of the customer and the employee. Therefore, the qualitative methodology for this paper will include secondary and primary data collection involving both parties. Customers and employees will help
shape the learning objectives and formal goals of the program. In order to achieve service quality, all levels of the organization need to be trained with a service focus.

Training

Hoteliers often place great emphasis on the details of the physical attributes of their properties and fail to enhance the attributes of their staff. When traveling to the Caribbean, visitors expect sunshine, powdered sands and turquoise waters, but they also anticipate the charm and vigor of the cheerful hosts that are advertised on television. When a hotel employee does not possess the personality or social skills that guests anticipate, a discrepancy between such marketing communications and the actual service delivery leads to gap 4 problems. The fact that services are intangible means that unlike a product, a service cannot be returned if it is defective. Therefore, the emphasis of “getting it right the first time” is increased. Simply put, training cannot wait until “the manager gets around to it” or “when time permits” (Zaccherelli, 1988). The impact of training is emphasized by the World Tourism Organization (1994, p.31):

A shrinking labor pool and continuing technological change will impose ever more stringent requirements for training on a broad range of jobs that were hitherto unskilled or semi-skilled. Training is essential to increase productivity and to reduce the number of persons required to provide the same level of service. It is a joint responsibility of industry and the public sector to ensure that this training is available.

The purpose of training is twofold. Poisant’s (2002) perspective is that there is a cultural facet, which instills corporate values, traditions, and behaviors in addition to the technical aspect that teaches specific, job-related skills. Yet, technical training takes precedence in the hotel industry, while acculturation (the process of assimilating new ideas into an existing cognitive structure), is often disregarded. Technical training, also
referred to as on-the-job training, is a four-step process of preparation, presentation, demonstration, and follow-up. This process prepares front line employees for service performance. If on-the-job training is weak, Gap 3, the service delivery gap will occur. Therefore, when conducting a need analysis and researching service quality gaps, training is an area that should be analyzed, because training undoubtedly has a significant impact on service quality.

The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism recognized the need for training research, and promoted research in the areas of training and guest satisfaction in an effort to establish service goals. In August 2002, the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism conducted a survey, which focused primarily on training. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate guest perceptions and the usefulness of the Bahamahost training program in an effort to detect service quality gaps. Similarly, training was a key element in personal interviews for this study because of the intricate role it plays in narrowing service quality gaps. Service employees have to be equipped with the necessary level of professional qualifications to face challenges and training is the fundamental strategy to overcome them.

Summary

In an increasingly competitive hospitality industry, the level of performance and service quality can be the major differentiator in the customer choice process. The need analysis process was first described because it outlines all the steps followed for this study. Next, service quality concepts, which were used to create the foundation of the research methodology was discussed. Narrowing gaps 3 and 5 was the initial focus of this study. Therefore, training was subsequently discussed because it has the most significant
impact on closing gap 3. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology that was
developed as a result of the theoretical framework.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The previous chapters identified the research problem and described supportive theoretical concepts. This chapter explains the methodology that was used to determine the relationship between these concepts. Quantitative research allows “the chips to fall where they may,” while qualitative research entails searching for the chips (Chacko and Nebel, 1990). Metaphorically, the sections of this chapter describe the tasks that were used to discover “where the chips fell and why they fell”.

This chapter delves into the qualitative methodology employed to collect primary data, and offers details about the quantitative data obtained from existing hotel records. The first section of the chapter is a broad description of the research process. Next, sampling procedures and processes for data collection are explained. Following that, details of the research instruments, which were hotel employee interview schedules and guest satisfaction surveys, are conveyed. The conclusion of the chapter is a summary of the processes and procedures used to explore the research objectives.
The Research Process

This qualitative research project analyzed primary and secondary data to identify the service quality gaps, which led to a discrepancy between guest expectations and guest perceptions. Primary data was collected from two of the top ten leisure hotels in the northwest region of The Bahamas. Overall, 20 in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted at both hotels in The Bahamas during the month of March 2003. Interviewees included front desk agents, front desk managers, training managers, and general managers. General managers and front desk managers were interviewed to identify Gap 1, the management perceptions gap. Training managers were included in the sample to identify Gap 2, the service quality specifications gap, as well as Gap 3, the service delivery gap. Front desk managers and agents detected Gap 3 as well as Gap 4, the marketing communications gap. Together, the interviewees exposed the reason for the most important weakness - Gap 5, the difference between customer expectations and perceptions. As explained in the literature review, in order to close Gap 5, one must gain an understanding of guest perceptions. Hence, guest satisfaction comments and ratings during the months of January and February 2003 were collected from both properties. Ratings at both properties were specific to each department in the hotel. This allowed the researcher to focus on the front desk, a department in the hotel, which has the most contact with the guest.

Secondary data from The 2001 Bahamas Ministry of Tourism Exit Study Report was analyzed to identify a broader perspective on service quality. Since the early 1970’s, the Bahamian Ministry of Tourism has conducted an Exit Study, which is a survey of stopover visitors leaving The Bahamas. The sample consists of non-residents who visit
The Bahamas and stay overnight in land-based accommodations and/or pleasure crafts other than cruise ships, also known as stopover visitors. The selection of the sample for the Exit Study was a two-staged Systematic Probability Sampling. In this case, every 5th person in the sampling frame was selected. “Interviews of stopover visitors exiting The Bahamas are conducted on a year round basis at major airports and marinas throughout the country. Questionnaires are collected on a quarterly basis and are aggregated at the end of the year” (Bahamas Exit Study Report, 2001, p.7). Family Islands included in the survey were Abaco, Andros, Bimini, Eleuthera, Exuma, and San Salvador. During 2001, 9,760 questionnaires were collected from stopover visitors. The results from these questionnaires include trip characteristics, prior travel experience, likelihood of return/likelihood to recommend to friends and relatives, expenditure, product satisfaction ratings and demographics.

The Hotel Industry

For more than 50 years, the tourism industry has been regarded as the lifeline of the Bahamian economy. In 1998 The Bahamas was ranked as the 9th among the top twenty tourism earners in the Americas (World Tourism Organization, 1999). Stopover visitors have higher expenditures, as they spend more time and pay for accommodations on the island. For this reason, the hotel industry and its stopover visitors were chosen as the sample for this research.

Furthermore, the hotel is the traditional form of tourist accommodation and the activities connected with operating a hotel are those of a service industry, which is labor-intensive (Vellas and Becherel, 1995). Stopover visitors predominantly seek
accommodations in resorts in the northwest region of The Bahamas. Therefore, two
leisure hotels in this region were chosen. Both properties were chosen based on market
segment, total number of rooms, total number of employees, location, and willingness to
participate in the study. Leisure hotels were selected so that the results of the study could
be utilized by the majority of hotels in small island economies, which typically cater to
the leisure traveler. Hotel A has more than 600 rooms and is a beach/waterfront leisure
property with a 2:1 ratio of employees to guests. Hotel B is also a beach/waterfront
leisure property with more than 600 rooms with an employee to guest ratio similar to that
of hotel A. Hotels A and B are both full-service properties and are among the top ten
leisure hotels in the Bahamas. Both properties also have comparable occupancy rates of
85 percent or higher, during the months of January and February. These facets play an
important role in need analysis and are all part of what McKillip (1987) called the service
environment. The target population of the service environment is comprised of the
service providers and the service receivers. From this population, a sample of
participants was selected.

Sampling Procedures

The front desk at a hotel is considered to be the nucleus of the operation. In many
hotels, the front desk agents partake in a high level of contact with guests and also
receive the majority of guest complaints. Hotel guests register, request information and
services, relate complaints, settle their accounts, and check-out at the front desk
(Kasavana, 2001). Hence, service provided by front desk agents during a guests stay
plays an intricate role in shaping guests first and last impressions. The survey population was divided into two groups: hotel guests and hotel employees.

The sample for this study includes front desk agents, the front desk manager, the general manager, and the training manager at both resorts. Convenience sampling was used to select interviewees due to limited money and time, as well as the availability of the respondents. Twenty participants from a combination of the morning, afternoon, and night shifts were interviewed to get a representative sample of employees. Seven agents, one front desk manager, one training manager, and one general manager at each property were interviewed.

First, the general managers at both properties were contacted for permission to conduct the interviews. The general manager then referred the researcher to the manager assigned to training front desk staff. The front desk manager at each property chose seven agents as interviewees. Managers were interviewed in an executive boardroom at both properties, while agents were interviewed in a front desk office during their shifts.

According to the need analysis literature, demographics may include age, gender, ethnicity, education, and income. Due to the invasive nature of questions regarding age and income, they were not included in the interview schedule. Nonetheless, demographics such as nationality, gender, and level of education were noted and are displayed in Table 3.1.
Table 3.1  **Hotel Employee Demographics (for Hotel A and B Sample)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Bahamian</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>College (4 yr. degree)</th>
<th>Post-Graduate Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desk Manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agents</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection and Analysis**

There were separate interview schedules (Appendix A) for each position, ensuring that volunteers were asked questions that pertained to their job responsibilities.

Questions addressed employee training, service barriers, service recovery, current training, and desired training. The combined topics were necessary to pinpoint service deficiencies. To measure the effectiveness of the research instrument, the interview schedule was pre-tested at a leisure hotel in the southwestern region of the United States. All participants in the research signed University of Nevada, Las Vegas Human Subjects Protocol forms, which allowed the researcher to conduct the interviews.

The pretest identified the amount of time needed to complete the personal interviews, whether or not the questions were easy to comprehend, and whether the questions were useful for locating service gaps. To uphold confidentiality agreements, a coding system was used to identify respondents. All interviews were tape-recorded for accuracy, but field notes were also taken to record sighs, body language, shifts in attention span, and nervousness of respondents due to specific questions.
After collecting and transcribing the interviews, the data was coded with the QSR NUD*IST Vivo (NVivo) Qualitative Analysis software program. Two systems were used to analyze interview responses, categories, and values. First, all documents and nodes were characterized with values (e.g., gender, education). Then, links were created to connect related documents, categories, and values. Next, documents were coded by nodes, which categorized service quality topics.

Each category or node was a topic that led to the identification of gaps. Each subcategory stored and linked comments made by participants that were related to service barriers. For example, one category was service barriers, which had subcategories of structural, equipment, education, training, policies, and procedures. The structural category is also a SERVQUAL attribute, tangibles, which is defined as the appearance of the hotel facilities. Education and training categories impacted the SERVQUAL attribute assurance, which is the knowledge, courtesy, and ability of employees to convey trust and confidence to guests (Ziethaml et al, 1990). A deficiency of such attributes was an indication that service quality gaps were present.

This is just one example of 137 categories and values, which explored patterns of data and ideas leading to service quality gaps at both properties. Detecting patterns was a method identifying the most significant service quality discrepancies at each property, which are discussed in Chapter 4. Another approach was the analysis of customer satisfaction surveys from both hotels, which explained the guest’s expectations and perceptions.
Hotel Guests

A key aspect to analyzing any process is being able to compare service quality levels with customer satisfaction ratings (Bowen & Schneider, 1992, p.42). With this in mind, guest satisfaction ratings and comments from both properties were analyzed. The only guest demographic data made available to the researcher by both hotels is described in figures 3.1 and 3.2. Both pie charts illustrate the market segments for guests that were surveyed at the hotel after check out. Each chart illustrates the percentage of stopover visitors who stayed at either resort for the purpose of gaming, business, meetings, or pleasure. At both properties, leisure guests are the dominant market segment, representing 80 percent and 91 percent of the market respectively.

Figure 3.1. Demographics for Hotel Guests at Property A
Hotel B: Purpose of Visit

Figure 3.2. Demographics for Hotel Guests at Property B

The Guest Survey

Hotel A used a simple attitude scale to survey their guests. The Likert scale asked guests to rate each department separately on a scale of 1 to 5, with one being the lowest level of satisfaction and five being the highest level of satisfaction. Written comments, as well as comments solicited via telephone, were included in Hotel A's survey results. On the other hand, Hotel B received dichotomous responses, because binomial random variables were used. In other words, the survey included yes/no response categories as opposed to a scale that measured the level of the satisfaction or complaint. This type of mathematical analysis is limited with only two possible outcomes, which means that fine distinctions in attitudes cannot be determined. To counteract this, detailed guest satisfaction comments were solicited by Hotel B. The hotel used a random sampling.
database to select 15% of the guests surveyed each month. Included were any guests who requested that the hotel contact them. At the end of each month a company subcontracted by Hotel B would contact the selected guests via telephone and ask them to give elaborate details about their service experience at hotel B.

Summary

Employees and guests are the primary users of this need analysis, so they will be most affected by the outcome. Hence, to find gaps in the service process, employees and guests were surveyed. Supplemental research from the Ministry of Tourism was included to get a broader response base and a better understanding of customer expectations and perceptions. Overall, this chapter discussed the sample design, demographics, and interview schedule used for need identification. The following chapter describes these findings, the importance of the service gaps, which leads to closing Gap 5, the difference between guest expectations and perceptions.
CHAPTER 4

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Introduction

The Bahamas' tourism marketing slogan, "It Just Keeps Getting Better...," embraces the ideology that the country’s tourism product is always improving. From as early as 1978, The Bahamian government has realized the significance of service quality and the importance of maintaining it through training. As a result, The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism developed and implemented a national program, Bahamahost, to train and educate Bahamians about service quality and the tourism product. The success of Bahamahost has led other Caribbean countries to implement similar programs.

Hence, when Frommer’s Bahamas (2003) claimed that service with a smile was not guaranteed in the Bahamas, the researcher wanted to know why. In the researcher’s quest, the researcher found that service with a smile, in essence, cannot be guaranteed in any service business. This concept was also apparent to The Bahamian government, which was far ahead of the ball game when they chose a marketing slogan that took the service quality emphasis off of perfection and placed it on effort. This is critical because many researchers (e.g., Eiglier and Langeard, 1975; Lovelock, 1991; Ziethaml, 1981) have noted that services are heterogeneous, which means that every service encounter will be different and every evaluation of the service encounter is subjective. Therefore, the attitudes of employees and the perceptions of guests may change based upon many
factors, including the mood of the employee or guest on any given day. What does this mean for service professionals? What first comes to my mind is the old saying that “practice makes perfect”. If researchers translate this term into service jargon, it means that “customer service training contributes to service quality”.

Therefore, the primary goal of this research was to identify whether or not customer contact employees in the Bahamian hotels needed customer service training. The question was addressed through using a process called needs analysis. Heymann (1992) recommended that businesses should solicit feedback from customers as well as from front line employees because they have regular contact with the guests. Accordingly, an in-depth qualitative investigation analyzing responses from employees and guests was conducted. Perspectives of both groups unveiled the reasons why, in some instances, service quality was difficult to attain. However, due to the nature of these service discrepancies, closing the service quality gaps may be the most complicated task of all.

Finding the Gaps

The reason for discrepancies in service quality is related to the five essential components of service quality (the SERVQUAL dimensions), which are tangibles (the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials), empathy (the caring, individualized attention the hotel provides to its customer), reliability (the ability to perform the service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), and assurance (the knowledge, courtesy, and ability of employees to convey trust and confidence to guests) (Ziethaml, et al 1990). At hotel A, service quality discrepancies were identified through
guest satisfaction surveys. During the winter month of March 2003, the results 244 guest surveys from hotel A were analyzed. There were 36 comments regarding a need for service improvement, and 208 positive comments pertaining to service quality at hotel A. Fewer responses were retrieved from Hotel B, because management limited the availability of guest comments to 40 for confidentiality purposes. Overall, 17.5 percent of guest responses at hotel B were negative, while only 3 percent of guests at hotel A made negative comments regarding service quality. Even with limited responses from Hotel B, service gaps were still evident. Through application of the Gap Model, 43 negative guest satisfaction responses from hotels A and B were combined with 20 in-depth customer contact employee interviews to identify the service Gaps 1 through 4. To uncover Gap 5, 43 the negative guest comments were analyzed. As a result, the number of respondents for Gaps 1 through 4 was 63, while Gap 5 was comprised of 43 comments. The classification of the service gaps unveiled is illustrated in Table 4.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gap</th>
<th># Responses</th>
<th>Percentage of Comments Related To Each Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors that contribute to Gap 1 include, “insufficient marketing research, inadequate use of market research findings, lack of interaction between management and customers, insufficient upward communication from contact employees to managers, and too many managerial levels between contact personnel and top management” (Ziethaml et al, 1990, p. 68). Table 4.1 shows that out of all 5 gaps only 2 percent of comments were related to Gap 1, which means the managers at both hotels were aware of what their hotel guests expected.

These figures were supported by interviews with general managers and front desk managers at hotel A and B, which revealed that managers familiarized themselves with guest expectations by “reading guest satisfaction cards on a daily basis and by soliciting guest feedback by telephone” (front desk manager, hotel B). The general manager at Hotel B stated, “I read every comment card and so does the Human Resources department.”

At hotel A, the front desk manager specifically explained that guests at hotel B expected “to see smiling faces, happy people, and courteous employees. They want speedy but error-proof service and comfortable accommodations.” Out of 208 positive guest comments from hotel A, 190 responses echoed similar perceptions. Guests commented, “I can’t remember seeing an employee without a smile on their face”, “everyone was polite and courteous”, “employees were very prompt”, and “the facilities are super”. The hotel A front desk manager was accurate in his statement because the guest comments at his property were aligned with his perceptions.
Yet, even though managers knew what customers wanted, oftentimes, they did not provide employees with the resources to meet customer expectations. This is a symptom of the service quality specifications gap (Gap 2).

Gap 2: The Service Quality Specifications Gap

The Service Quality Specifications Gap accounted for 22 percent of the responses, which revealed that inadequate management commitment to service quality was the major contributing factor for this gap, particularly at hotel B. When the researcher compared the comments of managers and front desk agents at hotel B it was clear that agents lacked the tools to deliver service quality.

Hotel B’s general manager discussed the importance of providing staff with adequate resources by stating, “We’re in a crunch with dollars, but we still don’t hold back on the stuff that the staff needs to work with.” According to the front desk manager at hotel B, “In this hotel, [service barriers] are a no-no because the front desk is the first impression for the guest. There should not be anything that we don’t have on that desk to assist our guests. So we don’t want to hear that ‘oh, the machine is broken, or we don’t have basic material the guest needs’ to check the guest in.”

On the other hand, 5 out of 7 front desk agents at hotel B had a different perspective. These agents complained that a lack of basic supplies contributed to slower customer service and increased the service delivery gap (Gap 3). One front desk agent at hotel B vented, “You have guests checking in and I find that they run out of maps and all these informative things you need to put in packets for guests”. A fellow agent agreed, “It could be the simplest little thing like staple pins or there are not enough adding machines …that can be a problem.”

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Beyond a lack of supplies, there were minimal human resource tools in place to increase job satisfaction for employees at Hotel B. Front desk agents at hotel B expressed the need for more fulfilling jobs, as well as a desire for promotion within the company. A training manager at hotel B thought that “sometimes people get bored in what they’re doing.” This boredom was shared by five out of seven agents at hotel B who mentioned that they were taking college courses to increase their chances of getting a promotion or a job in another industry. One hotel B agent stated, “I’m taking business classes because I don’t want to just be an agent. I can’t do this for the rest of my life. I can do more, much more.” Another agent at hotel B had similar aspirations and commented, “I am educated and I should be given a shot at management. I think I know my stuff so I’m just waiting for my turn.”

Unfortunately, waiting for your turn can be a long and arduous process in Bahamian hotels because turnover is extremely low. This phenomenon is surprising because typically, service organizations are plagued by extraordinarily high front-line service employee turnover. Turnover “rates of 200% for entry-level jobs and 50% for unit management positions are not uncommon in some industries” (Schlesigner and Hallowell, 1993, p. 207). A front desk manager at hotel B best describes this phenomenon:

In the Bahamas you don’t have that high turnover. If somebody gets a job, they have a job for life. Take for instance the operators. I started here in ’83 and do you know those same operators are still doing the same job? Some of our supervisors have been here for seventeen years. We have agents who have been out there for five years and beyond! When someone has been doing the same thing day in, day out, how do you motivate them?

Hotel B employees felt that job enrichment (i.e., more interesting job responsibilities that give employees autonomy, as well as the opportunity to voice their opinions),

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promotions, and job rotation (i.e., allowing front desk employees to fulfill a variety of
tasks) would motivate them to increase service quality. Interviews at hotel B revealed
that front desk employees felt as though their job performances were not being rewarded.
Above all, this combination of insufficient supplies and human resource tools impacted
the level of service at hotel B and widened the service delivery gap (Gap 3).

**Gap 3: The Service Delivery Gap**

The service delivery gap was the widest gap at both hotels. The study revealed that
57 percent of responses from guests and employees were related to the service delivery
gap. This gap was widened by role conflict at both hotels. Role conflict is the extent to
which employees perceive that they cannot satisfy all the demands of all the individuals
they must serve (Ziethaml et al, 1990). These demands can lead to a build-up of stress
and ultimately, burnout. Seventeen out of 20 interviewees mentioned that working at the
front desk can be physically and mentally strenuous. Researchers have discovered that
servicing guests requires a high level of maturity and self-esteem that enables an
employee to prevent their personal feelings and problems from influencing the quality of
service. Zemke and Schaff (1989, p.64-65) explained:

> [Front-line service employees, particularly front desk agents], must be able to
> “stand up” – sometimes literally – to a high level of customer contact. Not all of
> it will be pleasant. Dealing with customer’s calls for a level of maturity and self­
> esteem that allows one to put personal feelings and problems aside to focus on
> customers and their wants and problems. Service workers need social skills and
> an understanding of the normal rules of social behavior.

According to a front desk agent at hotel A, “If the guest ever has problems, we always
hear about it. Sometimes it can be stressful and a lot to handle.” An agent from hotel B
claims, “the demand on the front desk becomes so overwhelming that at one point in time
you will fall down.” Another agent discussed the daily challenges and commented, “On a daily basis you just meet so many different persons. Some situations become so heavy, in terms of trying to meet customer demands, that it more or less dampens my spirit.” Managers are also aware of the stress as shared by the front desk manager at hotel B, “You have to deal with so many employees and you have to deal with the guests. You feel like somebody is just hammering on you.” The constant interaction can be physically draining. A front desk agent at hotel A stated, “You get tired and you need a break from all the different people and attitudes you get in one day, every day.” An agent from hotel B indicated that this stress can weigh on an individual and “by human nature sometimes it gets the better of you.” These participants felt that the mental and physical stress of working at the front desk had a negative impact on their service performance.

Researchers have found that service employees often become emotionally exhausted from their ongoing attempts to provide care and support for needy people (Maslach, 1982). To conquer this problem, agents are trained how to act or pretend that they feel a certain emotion when they do not, in order to provide quality service. Acting may include altering one’s facial expressions, tone of voice, or body gestures to fit a certain situation. Hochschild (1983, p.7) calls this “emotional labour” and defines this as, “induc[ing] or suppress[ing] feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” However, if an employee is tired of acting or has excessive contact with customers, the employee can become emotionally drained and distant towards guests. Hochschild (1983) pointed out that emotional labour can undermine personal well-being through emotive dissonance (the sense of strain caused by portraying feelings that are not felt) and self-alienation (the loss of one’s sense of
authentic self). Additionally, if employees are not given the necessary resources to perform their duties, the issue of emotional labour is mounted by problems that create a stressful work environment.

Out of the 20 participants, 16 employees thought that job enrichment and training were needed in order for service quality to be improved. The respondents specifically addressed a need for year-round training, which would address how to handle customer complaints and motivate them to provide better service. According to the training managers interviewed at both properties, year-round customer service training was not provided for front desk agents. The training manager at hotel A further explained, “with the exception of orientation, training is optional and usually done during the slow months, particularly September.” Customer service training was typically allotted a two hour segment in orientation classes at both hotels. According to the front desk manager and agents at hotel B, customer service training was only offered to employees if service complaints were on the rise. Therefore, the training was meant to remove a service problem as opposed to preventing the problem. These service problems often stemmed from inaccurate marketing communications by advertisers, travel agents, and wholesalers.

Gap 4: The Marketing Communications Gap

The marketing communications gap was the third largest gap, with 19 percent of responses contributing to service problems, which resulted from promises that did not match delivery. According to Ziethaml et al (1990), a key-contributing factor to the marketing communications gap is inadequate communication between advertising and operations and the propensity to over-promise. The propensity to over-promise is defined
by Ziethaml et al (1990) as the extent to which a company’s external communications do not accurately reflect what customers receive in the service encounter. The propensity to over-promise was evident at hotel B, where 5 out of 7 agents complained about inconsistent marketing. One hotel B agent explained, “Guests are not seeing what they expect to see. What our hotel advertises on the brochures – they’re not seeing.” Another agent stated, “Whether it’s by travel agent or Internet. [Advertisers] don’t update their information.”

A third agent emphasized that wholesalers are also responsible for dispersing inaccurate information about the property. The agent said, “When you book through a wholesaler they’re gonna tell guests that they’re gonna get this and they’re gonna get that. So when guests come, they expect that all the rooms in the hotel are ocean view. That in itself is a lie because of the fact that all of our rooms are not ocean category rooms so they’re already disappointed.” The front desk manager at hotel B was aware of the problem and agreed, “Sometimes [guests are] misinformed by their agents that if you book a standard room if they have a deluxe they will upgrade you and guests will tell you that when they are checking in. They come in with the expectation that even though they book a standard room they’re going to get a deluxe.” Therefore, upon arrival, guests are disappointed because advertisements do not match the services and products delivered. This can lead to an increase in the service quality gap, which is the difference between customer expectations and perceptions.

Gap 5: The Service Quality Gap

This gap was a combination of the problems discussed in the preceding four gaps. At both hotels, negative customer responses were 15 percent. However, 85 percent of guests
were pleased with the service quality. For the purpose of this research, focus was placed primarily on negative responses to identify service gaps. The gap analysis process discovered that 57 percent of the responses were related to the service delivery gap.

At hotel B, the service quality gap was mainly widened by a long wait for check-in. This was the experience of a guest at hotel B who stated, “The line to check-out was not too long at all, but it literally took forever for the staff to check us in. They had two or three representatives checking in people and they needed twice that many. We waited in line 20 minutes and we only had about 6 or 7 people in front of us.” The analysis of 43 guest complaints disclosed that inconsistencies in service delivery were mostly related to employee attitudes. Guest comments from hotel A included that the staff was “not customer focused”, and the “attitude of staff varied greatly, some were friendly and others rude.” This assessment was echoed by a guest at hotel B who commented that sometimes the staff “did not appear to be concerned with guest problems,” but at other times they were “courteous and friendly”.

Despite customer complaints, 85% of customers were satisfied with the service provided by the staff at both leisure properties. A guest at hotel A explained:

“We’ve been to Bahamas many times over 10 years ago. We found 100 percent wonderful attitude by every employee, even in just passing by! What a pleasure! Every staff we encountered was friendly and courteous no matter what the need.”

Guest satisfaction was also achieved by hotel employees who went above and beyond for guests regardless of service barriers, as evident in the two excerpts shown below:

A guest was getting married and there were some problems. She had brought her dress and there seemed to be a problem with her dress. It got torn. But I pretty much took care of the situation [because I previously worked in that department]. I came up here on a particular day I was off and her wedding was in four hours. I took her with her gown to a dressmaker of mine, had them fix that gown, I brought
her back, took her for lunch, got her calmed down, and she was quite pleased with it (front desk agent, hotel B).

When I was a front desk manager, we were oversold at a particular point and I had written up the walk slip for a couple and they were really concerned about being relocated to another hotel. I got them a cab to the hotel and got into the cab with them. I took them over to the hotel and made sure that their room was comfortable, that their check-in process with the hotel went very well. In addition to that I made sure that when they came back to stay with us I had an upgraded room for them. I sat with them at a certain point and had lunch with them. We’re still friends today. This was about ten years ago (training manager, hotel A).

For many of the participants, it seemed as though their efforts to exceed guest expectations happened on a regular basis. However, dealing with conflicting personalities and supplementary service issues became a constant challenge for employees. As explained by a front desk agent at hotel B, people think “you just have to smile pretty…but it takes a lot more than that to give quality service.” Employees continually faced service barriers, which impeded their pursuit to exceed guest expectations. As soon as hotels begin to close these service gaps, the level of service quality will increase.

Summary

The service gap analysis revealed that managers were aware of what customers wanted but employees were lacking the resources to provide the highest level of service quality. This gap, which stemmed from limited resources accounted for 22% of guest responses. These resources included technical equipment such as adding machines and human resource tools, including job enrichment and job rotation. The absence of these resources caused the pace of service delivery to be slower, widening the service delivery gap.
The challenge of working with limited resources was mounted with high levels of stressful encounters with guests, which were combined with additional service barriers to create a stressful work environment. Employees became emotionally exhausted from attempting to fulfill the demands of too many customers. This exhaustion contributed to an increase in the largest service quality gap (Gap 3), which accounted for 57% of service discrepancies at both properties. However, employees and managers also exposed the issue of marketing communications flaws, which increased the level of customer complaints as soon as the customer arrived. These complaints accounted for 19% of responses regarding the service gap quality gap. The research found that even though the service quality gap was only 15%, there is room to improve service quality at both hotels. These improvements are discussed in chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5

CLOSING THE GAPS

Introduction

The purpose of the study was solidified by the impact of the tourism industry on the Bahamian economy and the importance of service quality for this small community. The Conceptual Model of Service Quality set the theoretical foundation for this project. Through application of the Conceptual Model of Service Quality, this study uncovered service gaps that may have been previously overlooked by the two leisure hotels surveyed in the project. The gap analysis conducted at both leisure hotels identified these service discrepancies, but future research would be necessary to adequately close these gaps. Therefore, the following sections of this chapter not only discuss the gaps identified at both properties, but also explain the limitations of the study and provide suggestions for future research.

Discussion of Findings

The needs analysis unveiled that multiple issues impeded an employee’s pursuit of service quality in these two Bahamian hotels. However, the qualitative analysis showed that out of all the service problems identified, the service delivery gap (Gap 3) was the largest, accounting for 57% of guest complaints. However resource limitations resulting from the service specifications gap (Gap 2) showed that front line employees were not
providing consistent service quality because they were not satisfied with their jobs. This dissatisfaction came from a lack of job enrichment and job rotation, high levels of stress from customer interaction, and inadequate customer service training. There were patterns in 17 out of 20 interviews, which link these three factors as the most critical. To close the service delivery gap, both properties have to tackle each service issue separately. After all, “satisfied and fulfilled employees provide better service, which then better satisfies customers” (Schlesinger and Hallowell, 1993, p.205).

How can both hotels satisfy their employees as well as guests? This is a difficult task because in The Bahamas turnover is in the single digits, which is extremely low. This low turnover implies that there is little movement within an organization. Therefore, people who have been in management positions may keep the same position for many years. This leaves little room for the advancement of front desk agents. Employees need to feel as if their job, which may sometimes be routine, has purpose. Therefore, it is recommended that job enrichment and job rotation be implemented to motivate agents and prepare them for advancement within the company.

The major service delivery gap (Gap 3), found at both hotels stemmed from job burnout. According to 17 out of 20 employees interviewed, achieving service quality was difficult at the front desk due to increased physical and mental stress. Tomlinson (2002) indicated that, “the stress of service work can also be attributed to workers having high demands and low control in their jobs, which can lead to health problems including chronic pain, coronary problems, and depression.” These problems can often be prevented if the appropriate training tools are in place. The high levels of stress that customer contact employees complained about can be prevented by allowing agents to
“go offstage” if they feel as though they need a break from a stressful encounter. For example, in theme parks like Disney’s, frontline people have the option of “going offstage” when the pressure gets too high, and can do so without fear of recrimination” (Zemke and Schaaf, p.65), which means that employees will not be judged by management under such circumstances.

Both training managers interviewed stated that orientation and systems training are the only types of training that employees are required to attend. However, researchers have found that “organizations are beginning to train their frontline people in stress management and “emotional self-defense” strategies. Therefore, it is recommended that both properties implement training programs for employees to reduce the tension created from service interactions.

Above all, to increase customer satisfaction ratings, customer contact employees must possess personalities and characteristics that are parallel with the five dimensions of service quality. According to a front desk agent at hotel B, “if we can build better characters and personalities within the staff, then we can improve customer service.” Building these characters and personalities begins with customer service training. Therefore, it is recommended that both hotels provide a training program geared towards customer service for front-line employees on a seasonal basis. Productivity in the hotel industry for some small communities can be judged by the season. For instance, in the winter season, small communities with warmer climates such as the Bahamas will be busier than in late summer months of a hurricane season. Conducting the training every season would provide adequate refresher classes for customer contact employees, by giving them an opportunity to prepare themselves for changes in occupancy levels. The
programs should focus on improving employee morale, service quality, guest feedback, and employee feedback. In each training session, trainers should share guest feedback for the season and solicit feedback from employees. This will give both properties an opportunity to continually improve service quality.

Limitations of the Study

Although service gaps were identified, there were limitations of the study that prevent the data from being as useful or representative as it could have been. For instance, due to confidentiality reasons, access to hotel records was limited to the months of January and February, which are busy months in the winter season. Due to the limited access to hotel records, the year round service quality was not taken into consideration and guests were probably most critical during this month. Hotel B only disclosed 40 guest comments for the month of February. Even though these comments provided insight about guest perceptions, they were pre-selected by a senior manager, which means that negative responses may have been censored or concealed.

Additionally, the sample of hotel employees was a convenience sample and front desk employees at each property were selected by the front desk manager. Therefore, the sample may not have been representative of front desk agents, because managers may have chosen their best employees for the interview process.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study focused on leisure hotels, which means that the results may not be applicable to hotels that cater to specific market segments such as business, gaming, and
conventions. It is suggested that this study be conducted on a cross-section of hotels to gain a more accurate viewpoint of the reasons for service quality gaps in each market segment. Also, a larger number of hotel employees, randomly selected from a cross-section of departments should be interviewed to gather a more representative sample of hotel employees in general. A representative sample would also detect communication flaws between departments, which lead to Gap 3, the service performance gap. It is also suggested that a company independent of the prospective hotel survey guests. These customer surveys may increase the response rate and improve the reliability and validity of the survey results. Finally, year round or seasonal research should be conducted to gather more accurate feedback from guests and employees.
APPENDIX

HOTEL EMPLOYEE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
Improving Service Quality in Small Communities through Training: The Bahamas as a Model

FRONT DESK AGENT - Interview Schedule

1) What is your title?

2) What position do you report to?

3) How long have you worked in the hospitality industry?
   3a. How long have you worked at the front desk at [name of hotel]?
   3b. What hotels have you previously worked in?

4) How long have you worked at [name of hotel]?
   4a. What types of positions have you had with [name of hotel]?

5) What type of prior experience have you had in front desk operations?

6) What kind of customer service training were you provided with?
   6a. For how long (hours, days, weeks)?
   6b. How often? What types of refresher courses are offered?

7) What is the number of required training sessions per year that you are required to fulfill?
   7a. What types of training are you required to attend?

8) In your opinion, what types of behavior would represent outstanding customer service?

9) Describe a time when you went above and beyond to serve a customer?

10) What are the barriers to providing outstanding customer service at [name of hotel]?

11) What happens if someone complains about customer service?

12) In your opinion, does the service provided by [name of hotel] meet the expectations of your guests?
   12a. [If no] How can this be improved?
   12b. [If yes] Why do you think [name of hotel] meets guests' expectations?

13) What type of training do you think you need at the front desk?

14) Where have you lived the majority of your life?

15) What level of education have you completed?
   15a. [If college] What did you major in?
   15b. Is hospitality an area that you studied in school?
Improving Service Quality in Small Communities through Training: The Bahamas as a Model

FRONT DESK MANAGER - Interview Schedule

1) What is your title?

2) What positions report to you?

3) How long have you worked in the hospitality industry?
   3a. How long have you worked at the front desk at [name of hotel]?
   3b. What hotels have you previously worked in?

4) How long have you been with [name of hotel]?
   4a. What types of positions have you had with [name of hotel]?

5) What is the hiring criterion for your front desk agents?

6) What kind of customer service training is provided for newly selected front desk agents?
   6a. For how long (hours, days, weeks)?
   6b. How often? What types of refresher courses are offered?

7) What is the number of required training sessions per year that front desk agents are required to fulfill?
   7a. What types of training are front desk agents required to take?

8) In your opinion, what types of behavior would represent outstanding customer service?

9) Describe a time when you went above and beyond to serve a customer?

10) What are the barriers to providing outstanding customer service at [name of hotel]?

11) Do you outsource training?

12) How are front desk agents evaluated once they have attended training?

13) What is the turnover rate of front desk agents?

14) In your opinion, does the service provided by your property meet the expectations of your guests?
   14a. [If no] How can this be improved?
   14b. [If yes] Why do you think your hotel meets guests’ expectations?

15) If the Ministry of Tourism were to create a training program for your front desk agents, what kind of program would you want them to implement?
16) What level of education have you completed?
   [If college] What did you major in?
   Is hospitality an area that you studied in school?

17) Where have you lived the majority of your life?

18) Do you use information from customer service questionnaires and the Ministry of Tourism’s exit surveys to determine the traits you would like your customer contact employees to have?
   18a. [If no] Why not?
   18b. [If yes] To what degree is it useful?
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The Bahamas as a Model

VICE PRESIDENT OF FRONT OPERATIONS - Interview Schedule

1) What is your title?

2) What areas report to you?

3) How long have you worked in the hospitality industry?
   3a. How long have you worked in the front desk department [name of hotel]?
   3b. What hotels have you previously worked in?

4) How long have you worked at [name of hotel]?
   4a. What types of positions have you had with [name of hotel]?

5) What is the hiring criterion for your front desk agents?

6) What kind of customer service training is provided for newly selected front desk agents?
   6a. For how long (hours, days, weeks)?
   6b. How often? What types of refresher courses are offered?

7) What is the number of required training hours per year that your front desk agents are required to take?
   7a. What types of training are front desk agents required to take?

8) In your opinion, what types of behavior would represent outstanding customer service?

9) Describe a time when you went above and beyond to serve a customer?

10) What are the barriers to providing outstanding customer service at [name of hotel]?

11) Do you outsource training?

12) How are front desk agents evaluated once they’ve attended training?

13) What is the turnover rate at your property/department?
   13a. Which customer contact departments in your hotel have the highest turnover and why?

14) In your opinion, does the service provided by your property meet the expectations of your guests?
   14a. [If no] How can this be improved?
   14b. [If yes] Why do you think your hotel meets guests’ expectations?
15) If the Ministry of Tourism were to create a training program for your front desk agents, what kind of program would you want them to implement?

16) What level of education have you completed?
   16a. [If college] What did you major in?
   16b. Is hospitality an area that you studied in school?

17) Where have you lived the majority of your life?

18) Do you use information from customer service questionnaires and the Ministry of Tourism’s exit surveys to determine the traits you would like your customer contact employees to have?
   18a. [If no] Why not?
   18b. [If yes] To what degree is it useful?
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TRAINING MANAGER - Interview Schedule

1) What is your title?

2) What departments do you train?

3) How long have you worked in the hospitality industry?
   3a. How long have you worked in the training department at [name of hotel]?
   3b. What hotels have you previously worked in?

4) How long have you been with [name of hotel]?
   4a. What types of positions have you had with [name of hotel]?

5) What kind of customer service training is provided for newly selected front desk agents?
   5a. For how long (hours, days, weeks)?
   5b. How often? What types of refresher courses are offered?

6) What is the number of required training sessions that front desk employees are required to take?
   6a. What types of training are front desk agents required to attend?

7) In your opinion, what types of behavior would represent outstanding customer service?

8) What are the barriers to providing outstanding customer service?

9) Describe a time when you went above and beyond to serve a customer?

10) Do you outsource training?

11) How are front desk agents evaluated once they’ve attended training?

12) What is the turnover rate in the training department?

13) In your opinion, does the service provided by your property meet the expectations of your guests?
   13a. [If no] How can this be improved?
   13b. [If yes] Why do you think your hotel meets guests’ expectations?

14) If the Ministry of Tourism were to create a training program for your front desk agents, what kind of program would you want them to implement?
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GENERAL MANAGER - Interview Schedule

1) What is your title?

2) What areas report to you?

3) How long have you worked in the hospitality industry?  
3a. What hotels have you previously worked in?

4) How long have you been the General Manager at [name of hotel]?
4a. What types of positions have you had with the company?

5) What is the hiring criterion for your front desk agents?

6) What kind of customer service training is provided for newly selected front desk agents?  
6a. For how long (hours, days, weeks)?  
6b. How often? What types of refresher courses are offered?

7) What is the number of required training sessions per year that front desk agents are required to take?  
7a. What types of training are front desk agents required to take?

8) In your opinion, what types of behavior would represent outstanding customer service?

9) Describe a time when you went above and beyond to serve a customer?

10) What are the barriers to providing outstanding customer service at [name of hotel]?

11) How do you select the trainers for your training sessions?

12) How is the effectiveness of the program measured?

13) How are front desk agents evaluated once they have attended training?

14) What is the turnover rate at your property/department?  
14a. Which customer contact departments in your hotel have the highest turnover and why?

15) In your opinion, does the service provided by your property meet the expectations of your guests?  
15a. [If no] How can this be improved?
15b. [If yes] Why do you think your hotel meets guests’ expectations?

16) If the Ministry of Tourism were to create a training program for your front desk agents, what kind of program would you want them to implement?

17) What level of education have you completed?
   17a. [If college] What did you major in?
   17b. Is hospitality an area that you studied in school?

18) Where have you lived the majority of your life?

19) Do you use information from customer service questionnaires and the Ministry of Tourism’s exit surveys to determine the traits you would like your customer contact employees to have?
   19a. [If no] Why not?
   19b. [If yes] To what degree is it useful?
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VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Kera Lonise Carey

Local Address:
3269 East Flamingo Road, #3269
Las Vegas, Nevada 89121

Home Address:
Bay View Drive, #7
Nassau, Bahamas

Degrees:
Bachelor of Business Administration, Marketing, 2000

Special Honors and Awards:
Lyford Cay Scholar 1996-2000

Thesis Title: Improving Service Quality In Small Communities: The Bahamas as a Model

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Wanda Costen, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Karl Mayer, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Gail Sammons, Ph.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Cecilia Maldonado, Ph.D.