

Hotel Guest Service Technology

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For any hotel guest reception technology is an important factor in the quality service process, financial-economic efficiency, and management of the hotel industry. The service process in the same type hotel is standard, meanwhile the service process technology undergoes certain alterations according to the hotel's size, structure, category, and market segment orientation. Hotel customer service technology is characterized by cycling phases—consistent repeat of the service process before the departure of the guest from the hotel. The article discusses the four-phase cycle of guest reception, related to the hotel services and transactions. Each phase of the cycle consists of standard transactions/phases, which are carried out between hotel clients and the hotel itself.

Keywords: guest service technology, phase cycle, property management system, remote check-in, pre-key/key pack, individual call-in reservation, rooming list reservations, guest-directed computer check-out

Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries. It is an important economic activity worldwide. It provides a structure for economy improvement, employment, and tax revenue growth. In tourism industry a special place is designed to hotel facilities in order to provide sleeping accommodations for visitors for a certain period of time. Development of the hotel industry has great importance for the country's socio-economic development in general.

Recently, Georgia is distinguished by series of success indicators in hotel services. High increase in hotels' total room number, as well as the level of quality service is noted. Important initiatives announced by the government are in the long run. According to the Georgian National Tourism Administration (2016) the number of international arrivals reached a record number of 6,360,503 representing an annual growth of 7.8%. GNTA is now putting an emphasis on quality over quantity in the years to come. It is certainly encouraging that the GNTA and the Georgian government have established the first official tourism strategy. The country has a long way to go in developing a service culture that is on par with other more developed tourist destinations. The hotel sector, together with tourism, is further helped by supportive programs and financing from the Georgian Government. The number of accommodation units registered in 2016 equaled 1,765, with a total 24,297 rooms.

Developing tourism is a top government priority. By 2025 the government expects Georgia to be well

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known as a premier, year-round, high-quality tourism destination, centered on its cultural and natural heritage, high-class customer service, and tradition of hospitality.

In the hotel industry of Georgia the share of small hotel facilities is quite important. Consequently, the enhancement of this segment can bring positive results for tourism development (Akhalaia & Vasadze, 2016).

Therefore, it is of vital importance to concentrate attention on accommodation industry, staff training programs in Guest reception Technology in particular as the number of hotels in Georgia is increasing rapidly.

Literature Review and Conceptual Analysis

Pre-arrival

Ismail (2002) suggests that analysis of the registration process begins with a look at the arrival chronology. Arrival chronology is the term used to categorize the stages a transient or group guest go through upon arrival to a hotel. This arrival chronology allows for analysis of the front office departments that come into contact with the hotel guest. It should be noted that the arrival chronology begins upon arrival to the hotel. It does not describe the initial contact with a guest. Often, that first contact is with the reservations department.

The first phase of hotel guest reception cycle implies the first communication of potential customer and the hotel personnel, before the arrival. Relationships are carried out by means of telecommunication facilities and are connected with the advance booking of hotel services.

Information about room availability can be obtained from different sources. Reservation sources can be permanent or periodic. A permanent source of hotel booking is as follows: travel agencies, companies, firms, exhibitions, conferences, seminars, and a GDS-booking system. There are also episodic sources of booking as needed: Individuals or companies accommodate their guests at the hotel using Individual (pre-paid/non guaranteed) Reservations or Group (rooming list) Reservations. During the first contact process, a potential customer receives information from the hotel staff about location, hotel type, service diversity, and price. The pre-arrival stage ends by submitting customer application into the registration journal. The first phase is connected with the final preparations of the hotel facility for the visitor arrival. It is associated with: a) Guest arrival confirmation before the reception of the guest (for example, arrival date/transfer time change or change of hotel service); b) The final hotel room preparation for the guest arrival date, according to Baker, Bradley, and Huyton (1995).

According to Woods, Ninemeier, Hayes, and Austin (2007) managing guest reservations means offering Individual Reservations (Pre-paid/Non-guaranteed), Group Reservations (Group Folios/Master Bill, Room block Management, Individual Call-in Reservation, Rooming List Reservations), and Reservation Cancellations.

Arrival

The second phase of guest reception cycle is related to the arrival of guest at the hotel/railway or bus station/the airport, hotel transfer, the client's greeting, registration, and accommodation. During the transfer process it is important to provide customers with the information about the location of the hotel, city sights, and infrastructure. This stage of guest reception cycle starts with the customer registration in the hotel and ends with the accommodation in their rooms. This phase includes pre payment for staying in the hotel and also provides guests with preliminary information about the accompanying services of the hotel such as: issuing key card, baggage handling.

Thus, this phase contains important information and carries out both adaptive and communicative function.

The notion was developed by Baker et al. (1995).

The registration process is arguably the most important part of the hotel experience for a guest. It is during this time that lasting impressions are made. It has been said that 75 percent of a guest's total satisfaction with a hotel is determined during this process. A successful hotel must do whatever it can to ensure that the guest is satisfied with every aspect of registration offered (Ismail, 2002).

According to Woods et al. (2007) the two most common group arrival procedures are a remote check-in and pre-key/key pack measures:

(a) A remote check-in can be thought of as an extension of the front desk. Using signage to identify the group, a separate table is set up to accommodate the arrivals.

(b) A pre-key/key pack system begins the check-in process before guests arrive. To pre-key is to pre-assign guests a room and issue a key. The actual "key pack" is simply a document to hold the key. There are three common methods of payment for groups:

1. Sign All Charge (SAC). This billing arrangement allows for each member of the group to "sign" all their charges to the group. Groups using the SAC billing method can be issued key packs directly, never having to visit the front desk or remote check-in location.

2. Sign Room and Tax (SRT). This arrangement allows for the group to pay the room and tax charges for the attendees, although a method of payment from each individual is still needed.

3. Each Pays Own (EPO). This payment method stipulates that the group attendees must pay all their own charges. Hotels avoid allowing the pre-key/key pack option here because all guests must present some form of payment before being allowed into a room.

The pre-key/key pack system can be available to certain transient guests as well as groups. If guests make a reservation using a credit card, and the front desk (prior to arrival) meets their predetermined room preferences, they can be checked into a room.

Other operational issues that arise with the arrival of groups are associated with luggage. A solution used by many hotels is to implement what is referred to as bag deliveries and bag pulls.

A bag delivery service is used to deliver luggage with proper guest identification tags to the assigned guest rooms. Accordingly, a bag pull service is used for group departure luggage storage.

Guest Accommodation

According to Ismail (2002), hotels that create a warm and inviting atmosphere around the front office area ensure that the registration process goes smoothly i.e. checking guests entails processing individual reservations, assigning the proper guest rooms by ensuring that room preferences are maintained, and obtaining a method of payment.

The third phase of the guest reception cycle is related to customer service at the hotel during their stay. Alongside with the functional characteristics any hotel enterprise must set a main goal—get closer to home conditions during the whole period of the guest's stay in the hotel, create appropriate conditions for working, leisure, and entertainment (Rutherford & O'Fallon, 2007). Additional and accompanying services are also important for increasing hotel revenues. The revenue from additional services should amount to 30% as in Baker et al. (1995).

Each day, based on the arrivals report that is generated, the front desk knows how many guests are due to check in. Each individual reservation is known in advance, so the front desk should be able to manage what

rooms are available. Coordinating the available rooms with each guest's room preferences is an important task.

Woods et al. (2007) offer tactics to ensure a positive first impression expressed by:

- (a) Providing a genuine welcome;
- (b) Designing registration process to be fast and accurate;
- (c) Ensuring that no "few things" create aggravation;
- (d) Not telling the guests what to do;
- (e) Pledging assistance to meet the guests' needs during their visit.

Departure

The fourth phase of the guest reception cycle is related to the final billing. The final account is required to verify the accuracy of the account, the correctness of which must be confirmed by the client's signature. In some hotels, the final stage includes bill statement, baggage handling and, in most cases, an additional service—guests transfer service. In the hotel business the introduction of such service is encouraged by guests, i.e. the hotel is able to buy client's loyalty by individual approach, comfort offered, and additional services provided as in Baker et al. (1995).

The front desk employee would conclude this process by thanking the guest for choosing their hotel asking him/her to return again in the future. The front desk employee would offer to make a reservation for any guest who indicates a possible return to the area. That proactive gesture also builds guest loyalty as in Woods et al. (2007).

It is important to mention that guest reception cycle can involve only one phase if reservation cancellation takes place. Accordingly, guest reception cycle might involve only three phases. This is the case when there is no "pre-arrival" phase in the given cycle.

The checkout process is generally less involved than the check-in process. Assuming that all the pertinent information was gathered during the check-in phase, the checkout should be smooth and fast. The checkout phase is the last opportunity to affect guest satisfaction on property. Concluding a guest's stay with a lasting positive memory contributes greatly to the possibility of a return visit. This memory helps lay the foundation for the brand loyalty.

There are three primary ways a guest (individual/group) can check out of a hotel: at the front desk itself; via a guest-directed computer checkout system; or via an automated system. Each achieves the same result, but there are specific characteristics involved with each offered by Ismail (2002).

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine hotel guest reception technology in hotels of Georgia.

In order to do this, Project Action Plan was worked out, personal interviews were conducted with hotel managers and front office staff. Furthermore, short questionnaires for hotel customers were distributed, gathered, and analyzed. Data were gathered and processed from December 2014 to October 2015 in small and medium-size hotels in various regions of Georgia.

During the research period 530 hotels were interviewed. In total, 480 completed cards (161 in electronic format, and 319 personally gathered) were introduced, 50 interviews (39 personally gathered and 13 electronic) were conducted.

In accordance with the Project Action Plan, two groups of analysts were approved, one of which worked

on designing, completing, and analyzing the questionnaires, and the other one—on the preparation of interviews.

The study reveals that effective systems (technologies) tailored for each organizational environment, have common characteristics (Holt, 1990). Data assessing required specialized skills for spotting problems and directing corrective actions. Furthermore, corrective actions led to revised information or revised standards that, in some cases, influenced future plans, which brought hotel full cycle to the stage of preplanning.

Results

Customer service technology cycle consists of uniform standard phase service, which is offered in a certain sequence to the customer during his stay at the hotel. Implementation of the service is performed in a sequence determined by each stage.

Hotel guest reception technology cycle algorithm is divided into four stages:

- (1) Pre-arrival, which includes reservation of the hotel;
- (2) Arrival—doorman and porters, registration, room assignment, issuing of keys, and baggage handling;
- (3) Accommodation—transportation/transfers, telephone calls, mail and information, maintaining guest accounts, safe deposits, currency exchange;
- (4) Departure—check-out, bill settlement, baggage handling, transportation.

The results showed that only 100 out of 530 interviewed hotels use Property Management System (a well-organized electronic management system that conducts hotel operations and also has a systematic mechanism to coordinate services and customers) including Fidelio (27), Opera (13), and FINA (10). Besides, 21 hotels use their own specially designed PMS programs.

Furthermore, the front desk, because it is the traditional guest focal point, provides some value-added guest services beyond check-in and checkout transactions. The scope of these services varies from hotel to hotel. Two important value-added guest services are safe-deposit boxes and mail/document delivery. Most of the hotels cater for group reservations, and some of them cater for customers with no advance reservation i.e. the walk-in guests with no-reservation are allowed. Besides, in some small hotels safe deposits, currency exchange transactions, and even baggage handling transaction are excluded from arrival, guest accommodation/transportation and departure—check-out cycles. In small hotels relatively few people are engaged in accommodation services and each person employed performs a wide variety of duties, while in the larger hotels the number of people involved in the same service/department is greater with narrower scope.

Conclusions

The research has revealed that the operations conducted in the front office can be quite varied. An overview of the front office staff responsibilities in terms of operations is best shown by analysis of sample job descriptions. In most cases job description lists the processes and procedures a typical front office staff would need to know in order to perform the job efficiently.

In number of hotels reviewed the automatic booking service makes possible to provide users with free updates about the constantly updated hotel information. This excludes mistakes caused by double booking or extra booking which seriously damages the hotel's image. Furthermore, check-in and check-out PMS programs processing invoices and receipts reduce the cost of the expenses and the probability of errors, while in most hotels without automatic programs communication with front office becomes of utmost importance. The most fundamental communication is needed for making staff aware of occupancy levels and projected

arrivals/departures.

Due to the fact that hotel front desks operate on a 24-hour basis, a need exists to communicate with other managers and staff who may work other shifts. Guest information that requires in-depth explanation or other hotel issues that impact the front office have to be communicated via the pass on log.

Communication with other departments is important as well. The relationship between the front office and housekeeping is vital to successfully maximizing room revenue. The arrival and departure reports generated by the front desk are often reviewed by the housekeeping staff to ensure that room status reconciliation is error-free.

Most hotels have no areas behind the front desk that serve as a central gathering place for employees and managers. These areas can serve as facilities for front office staff to discuss issues of the day, and take breaks.

The scheduling of each shift and the number of employees needed per shift largely depend on seasonality and rooms forecasts. Room forecast informs the hotel of upcoming occupancy levels.

Because the front desk is such a vital department, it requires strong oversight by managers. The scope of responsibilities of the manager depends in large part on the size of the hotel, its location type, and its product type. The specific duties vary widely based on these factors, but the most universal functions are communication, staffing, and operations administration.

Finally, it can be said that the above four phases are the cycle of guest reception, each of which is associated with certain standard transactions between the guest and the hotel. The study reveals that due to the seasonality in most hotels the hotel staff and management training should be conducted periodically covering the most important issues of hotel guest service and reception technology process. The study allows setting guest reception standard procedure technology that concerns with evaluating front office staff skills working in accommodation industry. Furthermore, hotels can develop effective control system approach that states the following important points about guest reception standards. They must be: understandable, justified coordinated, accurate, timely, realistic, and acceptable.

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