

EVALUATION OF SERVICE RECOVERY STRATEGIES IN SOME HOTELS IN LAGOS METROPOLIS, LAGOS, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the service recovery strategies in the front office of some hotels in Lagos metropolis. The data were collected through self-administered questionnaire and interview. Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) - version 18.0 was used for data processing and analysis. Descriptive statistics and frequency tables were used mainly to process the data collected. A total number of 108 people were sampled. The specific objectives included the following: to identify the common causes of service failures in hotels, investigate the approaches taken by service providers when offering recovery for service failure, and to ascertain if there is any association between service recovery strategy and customer satisfaction, and service recovery time. Chi-square was used to test the hypotheses. The results revealed that there was no association between service recovery time and customer satisfaction and loyalty, and service recovery strategy and customer satisfaction. Also the results showed that service failure comes mostly from the receptionists. The three major causes of service failure manner of response to customers' needs and wants, inadequate support of services with technology and lack of staff's knowledge of organizational products and services. It was observed that frontline employees are not adequately trained and empowered to handle service failure recovery. Analysis revealed that every hotel experiences service failure and about 90% of the guests leave with their complaints. Based on the findings, we conclude that service failure recovery has not been given adequate treatment. We therefore, recommend that that every hotel should have some sort of service recovery strategies. The study presents some specific causes of service failure and service recovery elements.

Keywords: *Empowerment; recovery element; service failure; service recovery.*

Introduction:

The purpose of handling service failure is to maintain or to improve guests' loyalty. Besides, successful service recovery affects customer outcomes such as customer satisfaction, re-purchase intention and positive word-of-mouth (Tax and Brown, 1998). Effectiveness in achieving this goal would be very vital to the service provider.

When discussing about service recovery, literature focuses at customers' point of view to measure their level of satisfaction (Hui, 2007; Kuenzel and Katsacis, 2009). Service recovery is an imperative when it comes to hospitality-based services. Hospitality-based services have stronger personal and emotional characteristics embedded in them and service failure

tends to draw greater customer ire (Beldona and Presad, 2001).

Satisfying a customer, however, is a difficult task, especially when it comes to services, since studies have shown that consumer's level of satisfaction is generally lower for services than products (Andreasen and Best, 1977). Particularly in hotels, where there is a high degree of personal interaction with many departments and services (Lewis & MacCann, 2004), service failure is sometimes difficult to avoid. Thus, service recovery is a valuable marketing tool which constitutes a second chance for the hotel to satisfy the customer. Studies have shown that the outcome of service recovery, whether it is positive or negative will strongly influence the customer's image of the hotel (Cranage, 2004;

Hoffman & Kelly, 2000; Levesque & McDougall, 2000; Lewis & McCann, 2004).

Despite persistent efforts to deliver exceptional service, zero-defect is an unrealistic goal in service delivery (Collie, Sparks, & Bradley, 2000; Mc Collongh 2000). Intangibility (Collie et al, 2000; Paliner, Beggs, & Keown - Mc Mullan, 2000), simultaneous production and consumption (Kotler, Bowne and Makens, 2010), and high human involvement (Boshoff, 1997) are characteristics of service that make it difficult to achieve zero defection. Services are highly variable. Their quality depends on who provides them and when and where they are provided (Kotler et al, 2010). Reichheld and Sasser (1990) reported that service industries could increase their profits up to 85% by reducing the customer defection rate by 5%.

As competition has resulted in an increased variety in demand as well as supply, the customer service provided has become a major source of competitive strength. Hence, the consequences of this development are less predictable of customer wants and needs, increased requirements to fulfill those needs on behalf of the service provider and a greater demand on employees in the service sector to interpret these wants and needs (Lashley, 1999). This has resulted in the development of strategies tailored to assist the employees in confronting, compensating and ultimately retaining customers who do not perceive their needs to be satisfied (Lashley, 1999).

Oliver (1997) states that in the hospitality industry, customer satisfaction should remain a central tenet of all relationship management efforts. Hospitality organizations typically strive to make customer satisfaction a focal point of their core values, visions and missions. However, in consideration of steady growth and expansion, global competition, and the influx of seasoned travelers, organizations face cumbersome obstacles in delivering quality service.

Consumers move through a series of encounters during the hotel experience. The obvious service encounters are those that involve the consumer interacting with an employee face-to-face on a firm's premises. Some encounters are of greater importance than others and these may be considered as critical incidents' or 'moment of truth'. Critical incidents are also less memorably defined as 'specific interactions between a consumer and service firm employee that are especially satisfying or dissatisfying (Bitner, Booms and Tetrealt 1995: 135). It is the 'moments of truth' that stay in the consumer's mind and signifies quality and satisfaction.

A negative or dissatisfying, critical incident necessitates an attempt at service recovery by the service provider and this is better conducted at the time of the incident, rather than afterwards. Turning round a negative incident supports both consumer retention and positive recommendation; failure to do

so may generate substantial adverse word-of-mouth and probable customer defection to competitors (Middleton, 2001)

Although hospitality organizations strive to provide excellent service in the first place, the characteristic nature of the environment makes imperfections unavoidable. Also, the myriad of factors which affect seamless, delivery of services are such that not all of them can be absolutely guaranteed and as such the risk of service failure is almost always present. 'Zero defects' are near to impossible in human interaction-based service delivery and the negative impact of service failures on customer satisfaction, re-patronage intentions and customer advocacy are a matter of concern for most firms. (Beldona and Presad, 2001).

Nowadays, many hotels are focusing on knowing the guests needs and wants in order to deliver quality services that are up to guests' expectation. Delivering quality services is essential to all hotels in today's highly competitive market. Many companies including hotels spend capital and time on customer service initiative to woo customers, but many end up losing regular customers over little details. Customer relationships are broken when something goes wrong. If the hotel does not have well-developed service recovery techniques in place, the hotel will lose the guests to its competitors. Therefore, the fundamental challenges for service providers is not how to avoid failure as it were, but how to embark on service recovery if and when it occurs. Hotels in Lagos metropolis are not exempted from above challenges. Lagos is the busiest commercial centre in Nigeria. It is also where most of the country's commercial banks and financial institutions and major corporations have their headquarters. This has contributed to the influx of travellers and tourists in large numbers who need hotel accommodation.

Objectives of the Study:

The main objective of this study was to evaluate service recovery strategies in some hotels in Lagos metropolis with a view to determining the importance attached to service recovery by hotel operators.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine if there is any association between service recovery strategy and customer loyalty
2. Examine if there is association between service recovery time and customer satisfaction.
3. Find out if customer perception of the hotel is independent of their service recovery strategy.
4. Find out if there are systematic approaches taken by hotels when offering recovery for service failure.

Research Questions:

This study examined service recovery strategies in selected hotels in Lagos metropolis. It investigated

and sought answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there any association between service recovery strategy and customer loyalty?
2. Is there any association between service recovery time and customer satisfaction?
3. Is customer perception of the hotel independent of their service recovery strategy?
4. Are there systematic approaches taken by hotels when offering recovery for service failure?

Statement of Hypotheses:

The following hypotheses stated in null were formulated as a guide to the study;

1. There is no association between service recovery strategy and customer loyalty.
2. There is no association between service recovery time and customer satisfaction.
3. Customer perception of the hotel is not dependent on their service recovery strategy
4. There are no systematic approaches taken by hotels when offering recovery for service failure?

Brief Review of Related Literature:

This sub-section of this paper deals with the review of related literature.

Services Failure:

To create and maintain satisfied customers, the primary goal of a service organization in the hospitality industry should be to operate to a standard of quality and excellence; this means doing a thing right the first time. However, it only stands to reason that the intangible nature creates an environment where things can and frequently do go wrong; thus, service failure can occur. When a service failure occurs, the service organization runs the risk of jeopardizing the relationship between the organization and customer.

Kandampully (2002) cautions "of all the challenges facing hospitality establishments today including intense competition, globalization and technological innovation, the single most pervasive and pressing challenge is the ever-increasing demand of customers for quality service". Colgate and Noris (2001) recognize that while a considerable volume of research has focused on the one best way to define measure and operationalize the service quality construct, an increasing body of research is now being targeted at the issue of service failure, complain, management and the service recovery process. They add that hospitality professionals now recognize service failure as a major factor that affects a customer.

The concept of dissatisfaction in service has been researched extensively. Dissatisfactory experiences have been labeled as negative incidents (Bitner,

Booms and Morh, 1994, Bitner & Treteault 1990), or unsuccessful processes that trigger failed encounters (Coulter & Ligas, 2005; Bolton & Wagner 1999) which in turn, cause the customers to realize that the service has not met their expectations (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman 1993, Oliver 1997). Bell and Zemke (1987) state that a service failure occurs when the service delivery falls short of the customers' expectations; which in turn, necessitates the service provider's response with recovery efforts.

Mattila (2001) recognizes that in the service industry, especially the hospitality sector, there is a high degree of contact, thus, service failures are an inevitable element to service. Although service failures are viewed as a defect or problem area within the organization, Zemke and Bell (1990) believe that the true test of an organizations commitment to service quality is the way the organization responds to the service failure. To enhance that concept, Mittal, Ross and Baldasare (1998) revealed that negative performance has greater influence on satisfaction and purchase intension compared to positive performance. Zemke (1993) continued that the object of a service recovery effort is to move a customer from a state of dissatisfaction to a state of satisfaction in an effort to engender loyalty and influence the customer's behavioural intentions.

It is suggested that a majority of dissatisfied customers experience two different forms of service encounters. The first is described as a core service failure, which encompasses all actions that are involved in a failed delivery of service (Bitner, Booms & Teteault, 1990) the second form of service failure includes negative and improper behaviours by the service providers or a lack of personalized service (Roos & Strandrik, 1997). In the event of a service failure, measures and standards must be established for the service provider to take immediate action to recover the failed service attempt; thus, the need for a quality systematic approach to service recovery is vital to preserving the service provider - customer relationship.

Service Recovery:

Service recovery is defined as "the actions of a service provider to mitigate and/or repair the damage to a customer that results from the provider's failure to deliver a superior service that meets customer expectation (Johnston & Hewa, 1997). In response to service defects or failures, service providers take actions and implement activities to return aggrieved customers" to a state of satisfaction (Zemke & Bell, 1990). Service recovery may not always make up for service failures, but it can lessen its harmful impact.

The concept of service recovery includes all the actions, strategies and tactics a service provider undertakes as a response to a service failure and a customer complaint. Whether a service failure is corrected effectively or not has a very strong impact

on a customer's satisfaction with a service. This leads to a recovery paradox stating that customers are actually more satisfied with an excellent service recovery than if there had been no mistake at all. Hence, a good service recovery strategy has several positive impacts, such as establishing a more loyal and satisfied customer-base that potentially could provide the service provider with positive word - of - mouth (Zeithaml et al; 2008).

Researchers have demonstrated strong links between effective service recovery and not only customer satisfaction but also repurchase intentions, customer trust and commitment, and long-term relationships (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999; Andreessen 2000). Moreover, it is more expensive for a service organization to acquire new customers than to retain those that are already established customers. Hence, service recovery should be a part of a service company's strategy and customer satisfaction should be the primary goal for business (Hart et al, 1990).

Researchers suggest (Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1991, Singh 1991), that to some degree, overall satisfaction in a service failure situation is determined by two factors:

1. The outcome of the original service encounter based on specific service attributes, and
2. Attributes associated with the service recovery process.

Although, service organizations strive to offer quality service and get things right at the first time, Mattila and Patterson (2004) explain that the hospitality industry is a high human contact industry, thus, failures are inevitable. According to Reichheld (1966) the most effective way to building a financially successful organization is to make effort to retain current customers as opposed to continuously obtaining new customers. In an effort to retain current customers, it appears that service organizations now recognize that long-term relationships do not just happen; they are grounded in the organization's delivery of excellent service, value in the first instance, and complemented by an effective service-recovery system when things do go wrong.

The Main Elements of Service Recovery:

As previously mentioned, it is essential to remember that the situation specific nature of service and the delivery process of such require a rapid and efficient reaction to service failures. This characteristic contributes to the importance of providing effective training to all employees that interact with customers (Eccles et al, 1998). This is crucial since these are the employees who are most often the first to come into contact with customers who have experienced a service failure. It is therefore, essential for the management to include staff training when designing service recovery strategies to be implemented (Bateson, & Hoffman, 1999).

Another strategy is to empower the employees to solve the issue at hand (Eccles et al, 1998). That is, enable the relevant employee to instantly react to customer needs by providing them with a greater amount of authority. This element allows the employees to react in a quick manner, thereby rectifying the failure or issue and avoiding any further distress or inconvenience to the customer (Lashley, 1999). In relation to service recovery empowerment can be a vital tool. Keeping in mind the simultaneous production and consumption of services and the difficulty in interpreting and predicting customer wants and needs, failures are an inevitable part of services (Hart et al, 1990). Empowerment helps to achieve a timely response before the customer leaves the service providers' premises. Once a customer leaves a service establishment, the likelihood of a successful recovery falls dramatically. The speed with which service provider responds to service failure is often as critical as what the final resolution becomes. One other element in the process of putting a service recovery strategy into practice is that of success recognition. This tactic implies placing attention on those employees who not only successfully seek and correct but also anticipate mistakes and service failures. That is, not only reactive but also proactive actions are highly emphasized (Heung et al, 2003).

The Field Work:

The population of this study includes the management staff, customer-contact employees and all the clients of the 4star and five-star hotels located within Lagos metropolis. Non probability sampling method was adopted. Purposively 11 hotels were selected for the study. By applying sample size determination formula given by Taro Yamane reported by Alugbuo (2005), a total of 110 respondents, comprised of 66 customer-contact employees and 44 managers were selected for this study. From the available customers, 50 were sampled.

Research Instrument:

The research instrument used was a structured questionnaire. To generate questions and validate the instrument, the researchers interviewed hotel managers, employees and customers. The reliability of the instrument was tested using the Cronbach's alpha at 5% level of significance. The alpha value was 0.83. Face to face interview was also conducted. The respondents attitudes and body language was also observed in the course of the interview to assess the sincerity in their responses.

Data Analysis and Results:

Descriptive statistics of the responses were obtained besides using frequency distributions and graphical presentations. The hypotheses in this study were done

using the chi-square (χ^2) and Pearson product moment correlation method. Out of the 50 customers sampled, only 36 properly completed, and 34 and 22 questionnaires from hotel managers and frontline staff respectively were used in our analysis.

Table 4.1 Service failure reported by customers

Service failure reported by customers	Frequency	Percent	Cum Percent
1. Yes	36	72%	72%
2. No	14	28%	100.0%
Total	50	100.0%	100.0%

Survey data 2013

Table 4.2 Major cause of service failure

S/n	Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Improper screening, training and compensation of staff	2 (5.5)	34 (94.4)
2	Cross functionality of service failures	10 (27.7)	26 (72.2)
3	Lack of staff knowledge of organizational products/services	8(22.2)	28 (77.80)
4	Response to customer needs and requests	22 (61.1)	14 (38.9)
5	Inadequate technological support system such as computer, POS, telephone, etc.	14 (38.9)	22 (61.1)
6	Lack of good communication skill by staff of Hotel	10 (27.8)	26 (72.2)
7	Language barrier between customers and frontline staff	6 (16.7)	30 (83.3)
8	Unprompted and unsolicited employee actions	8 (22.2)	28 (77.8)
9	Customer's failure to use product/service as informed	14 (38.90)	22 (61.1)

Survey data 2013

Table 4.3: Recovery approaches used by hotels

S/n	Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Apologies	28 (82.4)	6 (17.6)
2	Respond to complaints	32 (94.1)	2 (5.9)
3	Replacement	18 (52.9)	16 (47.1)
4	Anticipate the need for recovery	11 (64.7)	12 (35.3)
5	Compensation	18 (52.9)	16 (47.1)
6	Train employees	18 (52.9)	16 (47.1)
7	Conduct cost/benefit analysis	6 (17.6)	28 (82.4)
8	Empower the frontline employees	20 (58.8)	14 (41.2)

Survey data 2013

Table 4.4: Effectiveness of recovery efforts as per Customers view

Evaluating effectiveness of Recovery Efforts	Frequency	Percent	Cum Percent
1. Very effective	9	25.0%	25.0%
2. Effective	9	25.0%	50.0%
3. Ineffective	18	50.0%	100.0%
Total	36	100.0%	100.0%

Survey data 2013

Table 4.5: Most used approaches by frontline staff to satisfy guest's complaints

Most important tool for front office staff / receptionist to satisfy guest's complaint	Freq.	Percent	Cum Percent
1. Acknowledge the complaint	15	68.2%	68.2%
2. Provide explanation	3	13.6%	81.8%
4. Training and empowering staff in recovery strategies	8	18.2%	100.0%
Total	22	100.0%	100.0%

Survey data 2013

Table 4.6: Most outcomes of failure recovery strategies

Most outcome of failure recovery strategies	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
1. Re-patronage intentions	2	9.5%	9.5%
11. All positives	3	14.3%	23.8%
3. Satisfied customer	5	23.8%	47.6%
4. Loyal customer	1	4.8%	52.4%
5. Quality perceptions	3	14.3%	66.7%
6. Negative word of mouth	6	28.6%	95.2%
7. Change hotel or service provider	1	4.8%	100.0%
Total	21	100.0%	100.0%

Survey data 2013

Testing of Hypotheses:

Table 4.7: Chi-Square Table

S/n	Item	df	Chi-value	p	Remark
1	Most important tool for front office staff / receptionist to satisfy guest's complaint	4	2.703	0.609	NS
2	Opinion about effectiveness of current strategies of service recovery	3	3.853	0.278	NS
3	Most outcome of failure recovery strategies	18	28.700	0.052	NS
4	Motivations in carrying out hotel's service recovery strategy	4	2.625	0.622	NS
5	Opinion about effectiveness of current strategies of service recovery	3	8.639	0.035	S

Survey data 2013

HYPOTHESIS 1:

Ho: There is no association between service recovery strategy and customer loyalty

The χ^2 value is 8.64 at 3 df with $p = 0.035 < 0.05$, hence Ho is rejected implying that there is association between service recovery strategy and customer satisfaction

HYPOTHESIS 2:

Ho: There is no association between service recovery time and customers satisfaction

The χ^2 value is 1.43 at 1 df with $p = 0.327 > 0.05$, hence Ho is not rejected implying that there is no association between service recovery time and customers satisfaction

HYPOTHESIS 3:

Ho: Perception of the hotel is independent of the hotel's service recovery strategy

The χ^2 value is 12.78 at 12 df with $p = 0.386 > 0.05$, hence it is not significant and Ho is not rejected implying that perception of service failure is independent of an establishments service recovery strategy.

HYPOTHESIS 4:

Ho: There is no systematic approach taken to recover failed service.

The χ^2 value is 28.70 at 18 df with $p = 0.052 > 0.05$, hence it is not significant and Ho is not rejected implying that there is no systematic approach put in place for recovering failed services.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

Table 4.1 shows that 72.0% of the customers admitted that they have at one time or the other experienced service failure in a hotel though, the magnitude of failure was not ascertained. The management staff agreed that the category of staff that service failure comes from mostly is the receptionists followed by cashiers, the waiters and the chambermaids. Table 4.2 shows that the major causes of services failures are manner of response to customer needs and requests, inadequate technological support, customers failure to use products/services as informed, and lack of good communication skill by staff of the hotels. Every hotel has a strategy to handle service failure; most common approaches include: responding to complaints (94.1%), apologies (82.4%) and empowerment of the frontline employees (58.8%).

The front office staff agreed that the most important strategy to recover a failed service is to acknowledge the complaint (68.2%), followed by training and empowerment (48.2%). 63.6% of the front office employee said that not all of the tools for service recovery were provided. 88.9% reported that for

company policy (on empowerment) they would have gone extra mile to satisfy customer complaints. Hotels prefer corrective response to compensatory response because of its cost implication. The hotels have practiced a good approach in terms of documents for service failure and recovery efforts and how the guests feel about their services. One of the hotels uses e-Guest survey while some others use survey cards to get feedback from their guests before and after they have left.

Conclusion:

Based on the findings we conclude that service failure recovery has not been given adequate attention in the hotels, hotel workers are not adequately trained and empowered to handle service recovery. These suggest that majority of the hotels are not cognizance of the realities and implications of not resolving customers complaints as quickly as they occur.

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