

The importance of the human touch in the luxury accommodation sector

Tracy Harkison

School of Hospitality and Tourism, Faculty of Culture and Society, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

Email: tracy.harkison@aut.ac.nz

It could be said that all luxury properties offer their guests the same facilities and amenities; therefore, there has to be some other point of difference – their staff. This research paper focuses on staff and their importance for luxury properties. Luxury accommodation is certainly not a new concept as luxury has been closely associated with hospitality since ancient Greek and Roman times, but what guests now want from luxury properties is new – memorable luxury experiences. And it is up to the management and owners to make sure this happens. To date, there has been a lack of research conducted on the importance of staff in the luxury accommodation sector; this paper outlines their significance.

Keywords: luxury, hotel, lodge, managers, employees

Introduction

The guest experience is becoming highly significant within the accommodation industry, and research has shown that the involvement of frontline employees is becoming more and more important to the guest experience (Lashley, 2008; Onsøyen et al., 2009). In fact, it has been suggested that employees are not only critical but are central to the guest experience (Lashley, 2008; Onsøyen et al., 2009). It has also been suggested that there may be differences between what tourism and hospitality managers believe are important to customers' experiences, compared to what guests actually report; thus, identifying any discrepancies between these two perspectives may prove useful for a holistic understanding of the guest experience (Walls et al., 2011).

When hospitality academics are deciding on a focus for their research, it has been proposed that they should concentrate on specific segments within the hospitality industry – for example, the hotel industry – as well as on the diversity within the segments – for example, luxury hotels within the hotel industry (Ottenbacher et al., 2009). Cetin and Dincer (2014) suggested that luxury hotels can give researchers more insight into guest experiences due to their demanding and experienced clientele, as well as to the importance that is given in these establishments to service and the product. Luxury hotels are service intensive and maintain a high ratio of staff to guests to ensure high interpersonal guest contact within an opulent environment (Brien et al., 2012). Luxury hotels are part of the "experience economy" in which an experience is delivered by the staff as part of their relationships with each other and the guest (Johnston, 1999; Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Tosti, 2009). But creating an experience requires engagement from, and some type of emotional – not only functional – involvement of, the guest. This emotional engagement in experience creation relies on encounters (Snel, 2013) between the guest and the companies, which co-create experiences through two-way interactions (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). A number of hotels are

channelling their efforts to provide holistic experiential service offerings that connect with guests individually on an emotional and personal level to create memorable experiences (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013). In the process of co-creating these unique memorable experiences for hospitality guests, it has been suggested that it is important to train and develop hospitality professionals in order to be able to better anticipate and cater for the requirements and wants of the guest (Morgan, 2004, 2006). Lusch, Vargo and O'Brien (2007) suggest that using frontline employees as operant resources to co-create customer experiences will enable companies to gain a competitive advantage.

Literature review

Staff

As the lodging industry necessitates a high degree of interaction between guests and employees, guests' emotions are often influenced by the services and actions of frontline employees (Mattila & Enz, 2002; Lewis & McCann, 2004; Han & Back, 2007). Essentially, the hospitality industry is a people-orientated business – it needs people to serve people – and it is very difficult to create satisfaction and revisit intention in every episode that takes place. Hospitality has an inseparability characteristic (guests and staff must be present in the same place at the same time), and it is this simultaneous production and inseparability of service that can increase the visibility of failures to the guest (Colgate & Norris, 2001). Dawson, Abbott and Shoemaker (2011) suggested the "manner" in which the service is provided by the hospitality employee to the customer is critical, because the overall enjoyment of the customer's "experience" being purchased can be easily influenced by the employee's manner.

Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) suggested that, when developing and training hospitality professionals, it is important that they understand "situation-appropriate" (p. 832) social behaviour and be capable of catering to the requirements and wants a guest may have. Previously, Baum

(2006) recommended that service staff within luxury hotels be required to have the ability to converse with their guests about music, sport, politics, and any other relevant topic with an international understanding. But this requirement does rely on a degree of international exposure and a level of prior education in service staff, and a commitment from them to remain current in these areas (Baum, 2006).

It has also been suggested that luxury hotels need to maintain a high staff-to-guest ratio to ensure that they can continue a high degree of interpersonal customer contact in what is seen as an opulent environment (Brien et al., 2012). Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) suggested that it is this human interaction component within the hospitality industry that is an essential dimension influencing the experiences of guests. The emotions guests experience at a hotel can be triggered by an encounter (that may be negative or positive) with another guest or an employee (Barsky & Nash, 2002). Other encounters such as a disorganised check-in or check-out, a poorly-attired member of staff, or a lack of cleanliness may make guests feel unhappy about their stay (Barsky & Nash, 2002).

Hemmington (2007) suggested that hospitality businesses should design their guest experience like good restaurants do, by introducing lots of little surprises, and in order to achieve this, businesses need to look towards their staff to use their creativity and ideas to excite and stimulate their guests over the time of their experience. Walls et al. (2011) took this suggestion further by suggesting that in attempting to connect with customers, business entities choreograph or create experiences via human interaction dimensions (e.g. the appearance, professional behaviour, proactive service and attitude of the staff, and the demeanour, behaviour, appearance and socialisation of the guest) and/or physical environment dimensions (e.g. the multisensory, function, symbols, ambience, space, signs, and artefacts). The guests, themselves, want employees to have a good attitude, professional behaviour and nice appearance, and to be proactive in service (Walls et al., 2011).

Service and experience

In service industries such as the hospitality industry, product quality has been replaced by service quality, and this is seen as a strategy through which hospitality establishments can differentiate themselves and add value to the experiences of their guests (Knutson et al., 2010). Service quality can be seen as good service or personalised service, and an example of this would be a hotel knowing its guests' names or personal information, which in turn makes the guests feel special and that the hotel staff are treating them as important people (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012). Personalising the service can be facilitated through the interaction between the customers and frontline employees, as the host-guest relationship is a core activity in the guest experience (Lashley, 2008; Onsøyen et al., 2009). In the eyes of the guests, the employees in a service organisation are the service and the brand (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Creating a memorable experience relies on staff being able to engage the customer by involving them on a sensory level (cognitively, emotionally, relationally and behaviourally), instead of merely on a functional level (Schmitt, 1999; Oh et al., 2007; Lashley, 2008).

Scott, Laws and Boksberger (2009) took this point further by suggesting that the interaction between the producer

and customer is more important than the product itself, that customer-staff interaction is becoming more and more important, and that there should be an emphasis on creating an experience in which the customer actively participates rather than merely being a submissive observer. Santos-Vijande, Álvarez and Rodríguez (2012) echoed this, stating that frontline staff are critical to the facilitation of co-creation activities, due to the amount of interaction they have with the customer. In the process of co-creating unique, memorable experiences for hospitality guests, it has been suggested that it is important to train and develop hospitality professionals to be better able to anticipate and cater for guests' requirements and wants (Morgan, 2004, 2006).

Methodology

This paper uses qualitative data that are drawn from a larger study (Harkison, 2016) which was framed by an interpretivist paradigm using a multiple case-study approach. The larger study that the data were taken from sought to gain a variety of perspectives on the luxury accommodation experience. Three luxury hotels and three luxury lodges within New Zealand took part in the study. Purposive sampling was used by the researcher in order to select the properties, and this was done on the basis of specific characteristic(s) that they possess (that they were included in the Qualmark categories of "Five-Star Hotel" or "New Zealand Luxury Lodge"), and because they could also purposefully inform an understanding of the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007; Brotherton, 2008).

Qualitative data are usually in a text format (although they can also be in the format of observation notes and images or photographs, which can be converted into text by the researcher), and can provide a richer and more in-depth representation of participants' attitudes, beliefs and experiences (Patton, 1991; Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008). Case-study research is seen as a valuable way to explore an issue in depth within a specific context (Brotherton, 2008).

Research methods

Yin (2003) and Woodside (2010) both recommend that in order to make research as robust as possible, the researcher should gather as many sources of evidence as possible. This evidence can be in the form of observation, interview or document analysis (Woodside, 2010). Yin (2003) also suggests that physical artefacts can be useful, and that observation can be undertaken directly by the researcher but also conducted by participants. The researcher gathered five types of evidence – documentation, archival records, physical artefacts, direct observation and interviews. However, qualitative interviewing was the key source of data for this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as they helped to provide rich and deep data, and offered the researcher a more relaxed and less structured framework in which to interview the participants (Creswell, 2007; Brotherton, 2008).

Data collection and analysis

Six luxury properties took part in the study, and, in total, 81 participants were interviewed. After the interviews were fully transcribed by the researcher, analysis of the data began. Both computer-aided qualitative data analysis software and manual analysis were used to take full advantage of both methods

of analysis. The goal of the qualitative data analysis was to provide a detailed description of each case and the themes within each case – this being within-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). This was followed by a thematic analysis across the cases: a cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). After all the in-case and cross-case analyses were completed, the next stage in processing the data took place – thematic analysis – which enabled the researcher to identify patterns or recurring themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was repeated twice: the first set of themes was drawn from each participant group for each property, producing 18 matrices; and the second set of themes was drawn from each participant group by type of property, producing six matrices. Within these matrices several themes emerged, but one of the strongest themes that was found was the actors' (the staff) performance.

Findings

Regardless of whether the property was a hotel or lodge, there was consensus among managers, employees, and guests that the creation of the luxury hotel and lodge experience relies upon the actors' performance at the hotels and lodges. The actors' performance was seen as being how the managers and employees (the staff) function in the hotels and lodges. Managers, employees and guests all saw how important the staff are at the hotels and lodges, and that they play an important part in the creation of the luxury hotel and lodge experience.

Managers

Hotel managers explained that their staff play an important role in the luxury hotel experience, and that they feel that they have a great local team (staff that are from the surrounding community) who focus on delivering personalised services to the guest. They also saw having communication with the guests before, during, and after their stay as a way that their staff can interact with the guests to enhance their "being in the moment" during their stay. This is illustrated by the following comment from Hotel Manager M:

Every single team member's interaction is important for a guest, and even if they don't interact directly – for example, if the room needs to be cleaned, they might not see the housekeeper, but if the room is not clean when they walk in, that could ruin the entire experience – everyone contributes to the experience for the guests (Hotel Manager M).

Hotel managers saw everyone as being involved in the guest's experience, and that it is not an individual effort but a team one. They explained that they are very aware that if one member of the team does something negative, that it will have an adverse impact on the guest's experience. As explained by Hotel Manager J:

It's not an individual effort, no one's got to stand out and be the best person. They've all got to be, "we're all equal", and that's right down to the maintenance and the housekeeper. We all have to work together to give that final experience (Hotel Manager J).

Hotel managers saw their employees as all having an equal share in the experience, and that there is not anyone who is more important than anyone else. Managers explained that there is a lot of training involved in having great teams

delivering outstanding service. This was illustrated by Hotel Manager X:

It's all down to constant training, which can be hard at times, but it is something you need to do. And having the right people in the right roles, the right person to run that outlet or that operation or front office or guest relations. So they have to be in the right place, and we all have to have the right skills to do the job (Hotel Manager X).

Lodge managers saw their employees and themselves as an essential aspect of the delivery of the luxury lodge experience. They saw their employees and themselves as working as a team, and managers explained that it is their job to find, train and retain great teams of people to look after the guests in the lodges. As highlighted by Lodge Manager F:

People, people, people. People who are kind, who are thoughtful, who understand what they [guests] are looking for, and who know how to respond to their requests and to exceed their expectations. There is nothing as important as people (Lodge Manager F).

Lodge managers stated that they depend on their teams to provide the guests with an outstanding experience, and that the guests' feedback to the lodge managers supports this belief. As stated by Lodge Manager A:

At the moment guests are saying it's the staff who are making it. You know the experience they are getting is good, the food is good, and everything that they are getting at the moment is living up to their expectations and up to the money that they are paying for it (Lodge Manager A).

Employees

Employees knew that it is "people" (employees and managers) that is the important factor in the guests' experiences, and they realised that it is they themselves who make the difference. As explained by Hotel Employee N:

It's the staff and how they treat the guest, from the moment they walk through the door until they leave, and everything that happens in the middle (Hotel Employee N).

Hotel employees saw that it is their energy, their culture, and their positivity that is the driving force in creating the guests' experiences. This was illustrated by Hotel Employee Q:

I think every staff member creates that experience, as well as the property. So the property is amazing, but the experience is only going to be as good as the people inside of the property. So all that energy, all the culture, that's what fuels the experience (Hotel Employee Q).

They saw the managers and themselves working together as a team, and that everyone is as important as everyone else. They realised that everyone depends on each other to do their job and that there is no room for any errors. As explained by Lodge Employee D:

Staff, location, pretty much all the staff. Everyone is as important as everyone else. There is no one more important than any other. Everyone has a finger in the pie of making sure that the guests' stay is perfect, from the dishwashers, to the housekeepers, to the receptionists, it's everyone (Lodge Employee D).

Lodge employees also talked about the lodge's high staff-to-guest ratio and how this makes it easier to give the guests more personalised attention. As illustrated by Lodge Employee S:

I think it's a lot to do with the staff, you know, guests have a great time while they are here. They're just pampered and pandered to and well looked after. It isn't a chore, because we have a lot of staff and only a few rooms (Lodge Employee S).

Guests

The performance of the managers and employees was seen on many levels by guests, and they highlighted the importance of service from staff. They were also of the view that it was not always the frontline staff that made the biggest impression on them. As explained by Hotel Guest X:

Again, a five-star hotel should excel in all areas – the rooms, the dining, the gym, the pool, have good internet connections. But in this very small market of five-star hotels, staff and service is more important than anything else (Hotel Guest X).

Hotel guests suggested that hotel managers and employees have to be friendly and helpful, and show that nothing is too much trouble to sort out. As stated by Hotel Guest Q:

The who? – would have to be the staff. They have been really friendly and helpful, nothing seemed to be too much of a problem. So I think that they create the experience by doing what they are doing (Hotel Guest Q).

One of the most talked-about subjects by lodge guests was staff. They saw staff as having one of the biggest influences on their lodge experience. As stated by Lodge Guest D:

You gotta have the staff. Without the staff there is no luxury experience, period. They can even make or break it (Lodge Guest D).

They felt that the staff that they encountered during their stay were knowledgeable, accommodating, hospitable and passionate. As explained by Lodge Guest I:

All interactions with staff are fabulous. We were made to feel so welcome and spoilt by such a wonderful group of staff who are all very knowledgeable and passionate about what they are doing. Everyone is outstanding with their service (Lodge Guest I).

Discussion

The actors' performance – staff

The actors' performance pertains to the service personnel within the hotels and lodges. Baum (2006) suggests that service personnel within the context of luxury hotels need to be able to have informative conversations with their guests about sport, music, politics and any other conceivable topic, often from an international perspective. This requirement presumes that service personnel will have a certain level of cultural exposure and prior education, as well as a commitment to remaining up to date in these areas (Baum, 2006). All participants from both hotels and lodges highlight that service personnel play an important part in how the guest experience is created. Lodge managers and employees also explain that they feel closer to their guests because, in general, guests stay at the lodges and dine there three times a day; managers often dine with the guests in their capacity as hosts, enabling them to build relationships with the guests by engaging in

conversation with them during these times. Lodge managers and employees state that, because of the small number of service personnel, they need to work more closely together to deliver the service to the guest, and they feel that, as they have a high guest-to-staff ratio compared with hotels, they can offer a more personalised service to their guests. In contrast, hotel managers and employees explain that there is a clearer division of labour between their roles, but they still see themselves as working in a team to create the guest's experience.

The hospitality industry is a "people business" – people are serving people – and this creates additional challenges in creating customer satisfaction. The "inseparability" or simultaneous production and consumption of services (i.e. hotel guests and staff must be present at the same time in the same place) also increases the opportunities for failure (Colgate & Norris, 2001; Ekiz et al., 2012). Managers and employees realise that they depend on each other, and that team-work is relied upon to produce an experience for their guests. All managers and employees know how important all contact is with their guests, and that it takes only one negative interaction to adversely affect a guest's experience.

How staff deliver service within the hospitality industry is important and makes the hospitality industry different from any other. Dawson et al. (2011) suggest that it is the manner in which the hospitality employees provide service, as opposed to the actual service itself, that matters (Ekiz et al., 2012). Walls et al. (2011) point out that the four important factors that can affect the guests' stay are the employees' attitude, proactive service, professional behaviour and appearance. All managers and employees state that it is important that they are well groomed and presented, as this reflects on the property. They also state that good staff recruitment and training is essential, as this maintains the service that the properties provide the guests.

Participants in research conducted by Walls et al. (2011) suggested that human interaction is a crucial ingredient in the luxury hotel experience, but they made a distinction between the human interactions of guests with other guests staying at the hotel, and that of guests with the hotel employees. Human interactions are important to guest experiences because they demonstrate caring through genuine problem-solving, working to understand guest needs, providing individual attention to each guest, and genuinely caring about hotel guests (Walls et al., 2011; Walls, 2013). Guests suggest that staff members are one of the most important aspects of both hotels and lodges, and can have a very positive or a very negative impact on their experience.

Brien et al. (2012) advocate that luxury hotels are service intensive and maintain a high ratio of staff to guests to ensure high interpersonal guest contact within an opulent environment. Kucukusta, Heung and Hui (2014) expand on this further by stating that having well-trained staff is an indication that a hotel is of a high standard. Lodge employees agree by suggesting that the luxury aspect of the lodge requires having a different calibre of staff who are able to provide highly personalised service.

Service and experience

Hotel managers see guests wanting the hotels to display an attention to detail, and they feel that guests expect to receive personalised service and have all of their needs and wants

attended to. They also recognise that guests have certain desires and expectations as to what the luxury hotel experience will be, including that any problems that appear will be dealt with quickly with a positive outcome. Personalised service is highly valued in the judgement of luxury hotels, and there are differences in the service that guests expect due to their nationality and culture (Mattila, 1999; Prayag & Dookhony-Ramphul, 2006; Radder & Wang, 2006). Managers feel that the personalised service that guests receive should always take into account the guest's nationality and culture, and some of the hotels in this research promote their own staff members' nationalities by incorporating their country's flag on their name badge.

Sandström, Edvardsson, Kristensson and Magnusson (2008) suggest that in service, where the service encounter is important to how the customer experiences the service being offered, the employee has the potential to influence the value-creating experience by interacting with the customer. Hotel employees see themselves as working closely with the guests, and believe that it is important that they are able to read or anticipate guests' needs and wants during their stay. Employees feel that guests want friendly staff who will do as much as possible for them to ensure they have an enjoyable luxury hotel experience. Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz (2014) suggest that because of the intangibility characteristic of the industry, provisions and tangible cues play an important role in enhancing the overall guest experience. Hotel guests are very clear as to what they expect from a luxury hotel – they feel that they are paying for a service that should be personalised, and that staff should be able to realise what they want and need during their stay. Walls (2013) explains that human interactions are significant to the guest experience because they demonstrate attentiveness and caring, and, through sincere problem-solving, they work towards understanding guest needs.

Conclusion

The human touch in luxury accommodation is very important because it can be a luxury property's point of difference. Guests now want to have memorable luxury experiences, and it is seen as the staff's responsibility to create these experiences. Lodge and hotel managers see guidance as the way in which they are able to manage their staff in order to create the luxury hotel and lodge experience for the guests during their stay. Guidance is seen as how managers manage their staff, and this involves them explaining to their staff what is expected of them, and creating an environment that enables them to execute a luxury hotel or lodge experience.

Guests see service and the "right" staff as a way to create the luxury hotel and lodge experience: guests described service in many ways, including prompt service, best of service, high standard of service, efficiency in the service, generous service, and personalised service. There were many examples of personalised service, including staff having a personal touch, staff giving special attention to guests, guests being taken care of, guests being looked after, and guests having their needs and wants taken care of. Guests see the "right" staff as friendly, professional, skilled, having a "can do" attitude, and being interactive, but not pretentious.

One of the main recommendations the wider study had for luxury properties was to have dedicated staff members

interacting with guests throughout their stay, which helps to ensure engagement between guests and staff, which in turn will enable them to create a memorable luxury hotel or lodge experience. Finally, it could be said that a limitation of this paper is that only six luxury properties took part in the study, but it gives scope for more research to be conducted on the topic.

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