A Perspectives Comparison: The Importance and Features of Service Attitude between International Hotel Employees and Guests

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ABSTRACT

Using the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) model, this paper explores the import and major features of exemplary service attitudes in the international hospitality industry. The 500 customers’ and 200 employees’ survey questionnaires were distributed to participants in the international tourist hotels in Taiwan. The results show that hotel employees’ perceptions of the ideal service attitude often contrast significantly with those of their guests. Awareness of this perceptual disjunction may impel human resource managers to better specify customer preferences, thus improving the efficiency and efficacy of employee training. Further, recognition of the needs, desires, and expectations of different guest demographics will equip hoteliers to develop competitive marketing strategies and accommodate wider and more varied clienteles.

Keywords: service attitude, employees’ perspective, customers’ perspective, Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA)

INTRODUCTION

Success in business demands an understanding of the importance and performance requirements customers place on a given product or service (Chu & Choi, 2000). The necessity to ‘be competitive’ and offer a ‘competitive advantage’ has been recognized throughout various business sectors for some years. In the hotel environment, where competition dominates, hoteliers must study the strengths and weaknesses of their products and services and accurately gauge which features will effect optimum guest satisfaction. Kim (2008) suggested that in the hotel industry, organizations expect service employees to display cheerful and friendly emotions when interacting with customers. The significance of the interaction process may explain why much service research finds that customers gauge their service experience primarily based on employee attitude and behaviors, such as personal attention, employee friendliness, and service promptness (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Homburg et al., 2009; Mittal and Lassar, 1996). Numerous studies indicate that customer satisfaction is largely dependent upon employees’ service attitudes, and that various guests served by the international hospitality industry require distinct customer service emphases (Kriegl, 2000; McColl-Kennedy and White, 1997; Mayo and Collegian, 1997; Bach and Milman, 1996). In 2004, Kuo determined five elements crucial to guests’ perceptions of professional competency among hotel workers: industry knowledge, professional skills, communication ability, management ability, and an exemplary service attitude; of these five elements, Kuo found service attitude to be critically important (Kuo, 2004).
In this study however, Kuo also finds that opinions regarding what constitutes an exemplary service attitude differ greatly between international hotel employees and their guests. The recognition of differing perspectives is highly relevant to Total Quality Management (TQM) programs (Tornow & Wiley, 1991). When the different perspectives of employees and customers are not considered, organizations lack vital information for discerning the service quality flows (Gowan et al., 2001).

The purpose of this study

Using the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) model, this paper explores the import and major features of exemplary service attitudes in the hospitality industry. Awareness of this perceptual disjunction may impel human resource managers to better specify customer preferences, thus improving the efficiency and efficacy of employee training. Further, recognition of the needs, desires, and expectations of different guest demographics will equip hoteliers to develop competitive marketing strategies and accommodate wider and more varied clienteles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service attitude and customer satisfaction

Hoteliers recognize that customer satisfaction plays a key role in a successful business strategy. From a marketing perspective, customer satisfaction is achieved when the customer’s needs and wants are fulfilled (Lam and Zhang, 1999). Numerous studies on the hospitality industry have discussed the evident link between service quality and customer satisfaction (González et al., 2007; Allan Yen-Lun Su, 2004; Miguel, et al., 2004; Heskett et al. 2003; Kriegl, 2000; McColl- Kennedy and White, 1997; Greathouse et al., 1996, Larsen and Bastiansen, 1991). It is generally agreed that service employees are often the primary representatives of their service firms and are therefore pivotal to shaping customers’ perceptions of service (Rachel et al., 2008; Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Parasuraman et al., 1985). The importance of service employees in improving service quality by taking into account two key factors is service employees as an organization–customer link and service employees as an active role of the service (Esther et al., 2010).

Guests’ overall perception of service quality can be greatly improved by enhancing the behaviors and attitudes of staff; employees’ willing responsiveness and ability to adapt to clients’ demands are at least as important as the goods and services they provide (Richard and Gill, 2003; Gronroos, C., 1983). Service attitude is an essential competency for frontline employees in service industry (Jui-Min Li et al., 2009). Put simply, positive attitudes among employees make favorable impressions on customers and negative attitudes make unfavorable impressions; a quality service attitude is both vital to organizational success in general and to customer satisfaction in particular (Doucet, 2004; Pugh, 2001; Catherine and Daus, 2001; Snipes 1999; Hofmeyr, 1997; Schneider and Bowen, 1985). For this reason, employees’ service behavior is essential to improve future service relationships and to create customer service loyalty (Dimitriades, 2007). Additionally, when employee units self-perceive their units as highly competent, customers’ evaluations of levels of service quality are higher. In this regard, the results obtained here are in agreement with the literature that highlights the active key role of service employees to enhance service quality (Ashforth et al., 2008; Giardini & Frese, 2008).

The majority of customer satisfaction studies has only considered employee perceptions of external outcomes, or has overlooked employees’ viewpoints entirely (Voss et al., 1996; Zeithaml et al., 1988; Mohr and Bitner, 1995). The relatively few studies investigating the relationship between employees’
perceptions and their service performance have revealed that programs seeking employee feedback have often failed to live up to initial expectations (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002; Hartline et al., 2000; Eskildson, 1994). Schneider was one of the first researchers to attempt to relate internal employee perceptions to external customer perceptions; as a result, more customer service research has included the employee as a critical stakeholder (Atkins, Dykes, Hagerty and Hoye, 2000; Bowden, 2000; Schneider et al., 1996; Schneider and Bowen, 1985; Schneider, 1980). Kuo (2009) pointed out that four dimensions are friendliness, empathy, enthusiasm, and problem solving and 28 attributes in the study. Based on the above, this study adopted Kuo’s investigated of 2009 and summarized the attributes for evaluating service quality and satisfaction from reviewing the previous studies to developed the questionnaires.

Importance–performance analysis (IPA)

Martilla and James (1997) first introduced Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) to identify marketing strengths and weaknesses as perceived by customers. Since then, numerous practitioners and researchers have used IPA to develop customer satisfaction surveys for products and services (Enright and Newton, 2004; Zhang and Chow, 2004; Matzler, Bailom et al., 2004). Importance-Performance Analysis is a simple, effective way to gauge customer-service priorities, progress, and improvement opportunities, to guide policy and marketing strategies, and to rate various firms’ competitive statuses (Myers, 2001). In IPA, “Importance” is typically a measure of customer expectations prior to an actual transaction, while “Performance” is measured after a transaction is completed. Results are typically presented on a two-dimensional grid consisting of a vertical “Importance” axis and a horizontal “Performance” axis, scaling the mean values of both scores (Byeong-Yong and Oh, 2002).

**METHODOLOGY**

**Hypotheses**

Having considered differing employee-guest perspectives and examined the literature discussed above, the researcher posited the following two hypotheses:

**H1:** International hotel employees often differ significantly with their guests in terms of the importance they place on service attitude.

**H2:** Those employees and guests who differ regarding the importance of service attitude often have conflicting perspectives as to what constitutes satisfactory service.

**The research structure**

In order to test the above hypotheses, the researcher embarked on a study entailing three distinct phases. Firstly, the researcher developed a questionnaire on service attributes based on 10 experts interviews and literature and research reviews. Secondly, the questionnaire was administered to both employees and customers using convenient sampling. Finally, data was collected and analyzed using Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA).

**Sampling method**

The sample size was determined by formula 1.

\[
n = \frac{z^2 \sigma^2}{e^2}
\]

Through pilot study, it was found that \(\sigma^2=0.75\) for customers; 0.43 for employees. Assuming \(z=1.96\); \(e^2=0.01\), the needed sample size was 288 for customers; and for employees, 135. The population
samples collected far outnumbered the samples needed as determined by formula 1. The valid samples were 448 for customers; for employees, 144 in this study. Testing for non-response bias was therefore unnecessary; a sample adequacy test was performed instead. Two-part questionnaire: 1) collected demographic data, including age, sex, education, nationality, and (for guests) the nature of their trip to Taiwan; 2) consisted of 28 service attributes to be rated on a 1-5 Likert scale in terms of importance and satisfaction level. To ensure accurate and relevant responses, only guests with actual experience of hotel accommodations in international tourist hotels in Taiwan were surveyed.

Survey instrument
The instrument adopted Kuo’s questionnaire (2009), there are 4 dimensions as friendliness, empathy, enthusiasm, and problem solving, 28 items and also consult the managers of international hotel. Content analysis and pretesting of the instrument were used in this setting given the nature of the sample that would be completing the survey. The pretest sample consisted of 30 guests and 30 employees.

Employee
The employees surveyed were staff members of international hotel in Taiwan. The 200 employees were given a sealed envelope personally addressed to each of them. This envelope contained a note which described the nature of the questionnaire and the importance of responding to the survey. When the employees return envelope was anonymity. Employees were asked to return their completed questionnaires to a secured box located in employees’ restaurant. Of the 200 employees, 155 returned questionnaires and usable 11questionaires for valid samples was 144 and response rate of 95%

Customers
To avoid customers disturbing, the manager rejected our survey conducted in indoor of international hotel because the most of hotels also did the customers satisfaction survey during customers stayed at their hotels. Therefore, The customers’ surveys were conducted at Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport in northern Taiwan, and Kaohsiung International Airport in southern Taiwan in this study. This study was administered by 4 trained mater students who could communicate with foreigners who were customers need to actually experience at international hotel in Taiwan over 3 weeks. Of the 500 employees, 480 returned questionnaires and usable 32 questionnaires for valid samples was 448 and response rate of 90%. To improve customers response willing, given the little gift to each respondent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The importance of service attitude employees versus their guests
As previously discussed, “Importance” is typically a measure of customer expectations prior to an actual transaction. As Table 1 shows, the hotel employees surveyed listed the five most important features of service attitude as follows: employees always have a smile, employees greet customer courteously, employees are prompt and adept at problem resolution, employees are alert to guest dissatisfaction and apologetic when appropriate, and employees are affirmative servers. Guest respondents differed from their servers somewhat, indicating the importance of constant smiles, a neat, well-groomed appearance, unwavering patience, prompt and careful attendance to guests’ concerns, and apologetic alertness to guest dissatisfaction. Both employees and their guests rated a smiling countenance and problem-solving skills to be of utmost importance.
Satisfaction with service attitude: employees versus their guests

Employees’ “Performance” was assessed after the international hotel guests surveyed had completed their lodging. As data reveals, employees rated affirmative service, courteous greetings, a neat and well-groomed appearance, constant smiles and alertness to dissatisfaction among their top five strengths. By contrast, guests were satisfied with employees’ neat, well-groomed appearance, enthusiasm, smiling countenance, courteous greetings, and immediate attendance to guests’ concerns. Survey results indicate that most both employees and guests are satisfied with expressions of friendliness (items 1-4); except, affirmative service to employees; guests are also impressed by more substantive attributes such as appearance and timely responsiveness. Discrepancies in emphases and satisfaction levels between employees and their guests are worthy of note for hoteliers seeking to improve service quality.

Importance-performance analysis: employees versus their guests

Using Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) to organize her findings, the researcher divided the featured survey results into four quadrants, entitled “Keep Up the Good Work,” “Concentrate Here,” “Low Priority,” and “Possible Overkill,” respectively. Guests rated twelve items in Quadrant I (“Keep up the Good Work”), including those items related to appearance and good grooming, enthusiasm, constant smiles, and immediate responsiveness to guests’ demands. Five guest-rated items: employees are alert to guest dissatisfaction and apologetic when appropriate, employees assuage guests’ concerns with care and speed, employees are affirmative servers, employees are alert to all possible incidents and accidents, and employees make guests their first priority, merit inclusion in Quadrant II (“Concentrate Here”). In Quadrant III (“Low Priority”), nine items of lesser emphasis include orderly problem solution, consideration of nonverbal clues, and proper indication of available services and equipment. Finally, guest respondents rated exaggerated courtesy and manners to be areas of “Possible Overkill” (Quadrant IV) (see Figure1).

Applying the aforementioned Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) to employees’ survey responses, Quadrant I (“Keep up the Good Work”) includes eleven items such as employees always have a smile, courteous greetings, neat appearance, constant smiles, and alert and apologetic responses to guests’ concerns. Two items, employees offer services properly, and employees solve problems in an orderly manner, appear in Quadrant II (“Concentrate Here”). Employees rated ten items as “Low Priority” (Quadrant III), including consideration, manners, follow-up on guest complaints, and timely attendance to demands and non-verbal cues. According to employees surveyed, five items of “Possible Overkill” (Quadrant IV) are enthusiasm, safeguarding guests’ security and privacy, equal treatment regardless of guests’ attire, constant attendance to guests’ needs, and constant friendliness.

Importance and satisfaction of service attitude: Difference between employees and guests

The results revealed that employee-guest differences over the importance of friendliness (t=3.62, \(p<0.001\)), empathy (t=5.15, \(p<0.001\)), enthusiasm (t=4.40, \(p<0.001\)), and problem solving (t=2.22, \(p<0.001\)) are statistically significant (see table 2). A second paired sample t-test found that employees also differ significantly from their guests in terms of the constituent features of satisfactory service. The divergence in ratings of overall satisfaction between employees and guests (friendliness (t=7.11, \(p<0.001\)), empathy (t=5.71, \(p<0.001\)), enthusiasm (t=7.35, \(p<0.001\)), and problem solving (t=4.58, \(p<0.001\)) is also statistically significant (see table 3).
CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

The survey addressed 28 service attitude attributes divided among four major categories: friendliness, empathy, enthusiasm, and problem solving. Importance-Performance Analysis shows that, among survey respondents, hotel employees and their guests have significantly different perceptions regarding the importance and satisfactory expression of service attitude. IPA grids divided into priorities quadrants illustrate this perceptual disjunction: under Quadrant I (“Concentrate Here”), guests listed twelve features in need of improvement, while employees listed only eleven; under Quadrant II (“Keep up the Good Work”), guests rated five features satisfactory, compared to employees’ two. Employees deemed ten features of service attitude “Low Priority” (Quadrant III), while guests relegated only nine to the same quadrant; and finally, whereas employees found five features of service attitude to represent “Possible Overkill” (Quadrant IV), guests found that only two features fit in that category. The study’s t-test results confirm that differing perspectives between employees and their guests greatly impact overall customer satisfaction.

Intensified competition is not unique to the Taiwanese hotel industry; the manner in which international hotels differentiate themselves from competitors is critical to their success across the globe. By better communicating guests’ needs and expectations to the employees who serve them, hoteliers will be empowered to enhance the efficiency and efficacy of training programs, prioritize tasks, allocate resources, and develop tailor-made marketing strategies for their target demographics (Hsu et al., 1997). Hoteliers who anticipate and cater to guests’ preferences are far more likely to succeed than hoteliers who merely react to dissatisfaction (Oberoi & Hales, 1990). By evaluating and adjusting service attitudes according to their clients’ points of view, hotels stand to increase customer loyalty; the impact of repeat business and positive word-of-mouth publicity can hardly be overstated (Fornell, 1992). Active communication between hoteliers and their guests is mutually beneficial; when guests’ perceptions of services and facilities are validated, they are satisfied; when guests are satisfied, hoteliers attain a competitive advantage, improve their corporate image, keep existing customers, and attract new ones (Lewis, 1993).

Managerial implication of service attitude by IPA quadrant

1. Marketing Strategy (Keep up the Good Work), In Quadrant I, guests and employees agreed on ten items meriting high importance/high satisfaction ratings. These items, as well as guest- emphasized items C20 and C27, refer to attributes hoteliers would do well to highlight in commercial campaigns.
2. Human training (Concentrate Here): In Quadrant II, clients were dissatisfied with five items of service attitude they consider highly important, while employees found only one attribute lacking. Employees’ ignorance of clients’ priorities, especially in the area of complaint resolution, requires immediate attention.
3. Different attributes between clients and employees (Low Priority): In Quadrant III, although six items were rated of low importance/low satisfaction by both guests and employees, they disagreed regarding the remaining items. Although this quadrant refers to items of lesser priority, attention to even comparatively minor details stands to benefit employee-guest relations.
4. Different attributes between clients and employees (Possible Overkill): In Quadrant IV, clients rated only two items as unimportant but satisfactory, as compared to employees’ four. Again, the results indicate that clients tend to prioritize more features of service attitude than do employees; on very few occasions do clients consider employees’ efforts to constitute “Possible Overkill.” It is thus advisable for employees to err on the side of vigilance than of laxity.
LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, the data were from a convenient sample. Thus, generality of the results should be inferred carefully. Second, in order to compare to both clients and employees’ difference, therefore, only based on the customers’ perspectives to develop the four dimensions of service attitude in this study. Further studies are suggested to extend the research in other periods to obtain a larger sample size.

REFERENCES


### Table 1: Importance of Service Attitude: Employees versus Clients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Items of service attitude</th>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Customer</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Priority</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S.D. (Rank)</td>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Employees always have a smile</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Employees greet guests courteously</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Employees have a neat, well-groomed appearance</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Employees show enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Employees properly indicate available hotel services and equipment</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Employees inform guests of hotel promotional programs</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Employees make every effort to attend to guests’ demands</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Employees are well-mannered</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Employees are friendly</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Employees are affirmative servers</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Employees treat guests equally regardless of their attire</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Employees respond to guests’ demands immediately</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Employees serve promptly and effectively</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Employees willingly help guests solve problems</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Employees are prompt and adept at problem resolution</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Employees are alert to guest dissatisfaction and apologetic when appropriate</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Employees assuage guests’ concerns with care and speed</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Employees show unwavering patience</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Employees offer services properly</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Employees solve problems in an orderly manner</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Employees follow-up to ensure that guests’ requests have been met</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Employees are attentive to nonverbal cues such as guests’ body language</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Employees are alert to all possible incidents and accidents.</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: T-test of Dimensions of Service Attitude by Importance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>t- value</th>
<th>p- value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 1- Friendliness</td>
<td>3.617</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 2- Empathy</td>
<td>5.151</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 3- Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.404</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 4- Problem Solving</td>
<td>2.215</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance level: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 3: T-test of Dimensions of Service Attitude by Satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>t- value</th>
<th>p&lt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 1- Friendliness</td>
<td>7.110</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 2- Empathy</td>
<td>5.708</td>
<td>.000***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dimension 3- Enthusiasm</td>
<td>7.352</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 4- Problem Solving</td>
<td>4.577</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance level: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Figure 1: The importance of, and satisfaction with, employees’ service attitude according to clients (CXX) and employees (EXX)