

Impact of Service Quality on Customer Loyalty in the Hotel Industry: An Empirical Study from Ghana

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Abstract

The hotel industry contributes significantly to Ghana's development. However, they face the challenge of meeting and exceeding their customers' expectations through high quality service delivery in order to ensure customer loyalty which is the bedrock of any business. The study investigates how service quality impacts customer loyalty in Golden Tulip, a 4-star hotel; Miklin Hotel, a 3-star hotel and Lizzie's Hotel, a 2-star hotel in Kumasi, a leading city in Ghana. 50 customers seeking lodging and boarding services were randomly selected and 5 staff members were purposively selected from each hotel for the study. By use of the SERVQUAL model through survey questionnaire and interviews, the study reveals that customer satisfaction is not based solely on the rankings/classification of the hotels but on service quality that gives value for money which in turn produces customer loyalty. Miklin Hotel produced most satisfied and loyal customers, followed by Golden Tulip Hotel and then Lizzie's Hotel contrary to the classification order. In addition to "responsiveness" service quality variable for Miklin, "empathy" and "assurance" variables made significant impact on customer loyalty for guests from Miklin and Golden Tulip hotels, while "reliability" accounts for the loyalty of guests from Lizzie's Hotel. This confirms the direct relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty. "Tangibility" does not play any significant role in developing customer loyalty for all the hotels because the guests were least satisfied with it and are likely to take it for granted in their quest for change. The study recommends that hotel classification should not be based mainly on the tangible factors alone but rather on comprehensive service that provide value for money and impact on customer loyalty.

Key words: SERVQUAL, Satisfaction, Hotel, Loyalty and Tangibility.

Introduction

The hotel Industry, a service provider, plays an immense role in the development of Ghana. Apart from its contribution to GDP, it also serves as a source of employment for many people such as cleaners, cooks, receptionists, security guards, etc. Lovelock, C. and Wirtz, J. (2010) report that most new employment is provided by the service industry and this serves as the strongest growth area for marketing. For example, in 2010, the service industry contributed 51.4% to GDP in Ghana. This was followed by agriculture and manufacturing which contributed 29.9% and 18.6%, respectively (United States Central Intelligence Agency Report, 2012).

Furthermore, the recent discovery of oil in commercial quantities on the west coast of Ghana comes along with a huge influx of people requiring some form of service to be provided by the hotel industry. This brings in its wake issues of quality of service to meet diverse customer or guest expectations. Most hotels are now faced with the challenge of meeting and exceeding these customer expectations to ensure repeat patronage, which is the bedrock of any business (Caruana, A. Money, A.H. and Berthon, P.R., 2000). Loyalty comes about as a result of satisfaction of the customers to the quality of services they receive in the hotels they patronize. A loyal customer does not only engage in repeat patronage but also provides positive word-of-mouth to other people, thereby increasing the revenue of the hotel. The implication of this is that a customer's change of patronage would have an impact in the long term revenue of the hotel. Thus, how service quality impacts customer loyalty is therefore the focus of this paper.

Literature Review

Service Quality

A service is an economic activity that creates value and provides benefits for customers at specific times and places by bringing about a desired change in or on behalf of the recipient of the service. Although the process may be tied to a physical product, the performance is transitory, often intangible in nature and does not normally result in ownership of any of the factors of production (Lovelock, C. and Wirtz, J. 2004). However, being able to satisfy given needs reflects the value (or quality) of the product or service to the customer, including the economic value, safety, reliability, and maintainability (Garvin, D.A., 1989). Therefore, a customer's evaluation of service quality and the resulting level of satisfaction are perceived to affect bottom line measures of business success (Lacobucci, D., Grayson, K. A., and Omstrom, A. L. 1994). To some, service quality can also be defined as the difference between customers' expectations for the service encounter and the perceptions of the service received (Zeithaml, V. A., and Bitner J. M., (2003); Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. and Berry, L. L (1988); Munusamy, J., Chiellah S. and Mun, H. W. (2010). According to Suman M. and Garg, R. (2012), Oliver, (1980) said it is thus predicted that customers will judge quality as 'low' if performance does not meet their expectations and quality as 'high' when performance exceeds expectations. This study adopted the five dimensions (SERVQUAL model) employed by Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. and Berry, L. L. (1988) to measure service quality. They are assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence), reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), tangibility (physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel), empathy (caring, individualized attention) and responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service).

Customer Loyalty

The term customer loyalty is used to describe the behavior of repeat customers, as well as those that offer good ratings, reviews, or testimonials (Kumar, R. S., and Advani, J.Y. 2009). It is not only about customers doing a particular company a great service by offering favorable word of mouth publicity regarding a product/service, telling friends and family, but also, it is a process, a program, or a group of programs geared toward keeping a guest happy so he or she will provide more business. According to Iddrisu, A. M. (2011), Teich (1997) mentioned that loyalty is developed over a period of time from a consistent record of meeting, and sometimes even exceeding customer expectations. Customer loyalty can therefore be achieved in some cases by offering a quality product with a firm guarantee or through free offers, coupons, low interest rates on financing, high value trade-ins, extended warranties, rebates, and other rewards and incentive programs. The ultimate goal of these is to develop happy customers who will return to purchase again and persuade others to use that company's products or services. This equates to great cost savings and profitability to the company through the keeping of current customers as against attracting new ones (Kotler, P. and Gertner, D. 1996) as well as making stakeholders happy (Mukherjee, P. 2009). Loyal customers are those who are not easily swayed by price inducement from competitors, and they usually purchase more than those less loyal customers. However, there are many factors for such manner of customers to remain loyal.

Geronikolas (2012) reports that the five factors in the hotel industry that are most likely to drive customers away include untrained and perceived rude staff; lack of cleanliness around the premises, in hotel rooms or within its restaurants; the guest's desire to experience new places ("need for change"); price, affordability, and value for money. Overall, hotel food and beverage standards appear as the most important in hotel tangibles and seem to be becoming increasingly significant in creating both a loyal base of satisfied customers and driving dissatisfied customers away. Other factors that appear frequently as elements driving business away are the actual hotel room (state, comfort, air condition or heating facilities, etc.), bad service, issues concerning the hotel's reliability (delivering promised services, accurately and consistently), managerial behavior towards special needs and situations that may occur, problems occurring with other guests (the general ambience the hotel's other customers create) and noise within the hotel or surroundings.

Relationship Between Service Quality and Customer Loyalty

Various studies have examined the relationship between service quality and customer preference loyalty. For example in focusing on repurchase intentions as a measure of loyalty, Cronin, J. Jr., and Taylor, S. A. (1994) observed that service quality does not have a significant (positive) effect on repurchase intentions (in contrast to the significant positive impact of satisfaction on repurchase intention). However, Boulding, W., Kalra, A., Staelin, R. and Zeithaml, V.A. (1993), focusing on the elements of repurchasing as well as the willingness to recommend as measures of customer loyalty, found positive relationships between service quality and repurchase intentions and willingness to recommend (Akbar, M. M. and Parvez, N. 2009). Nevertheless, some customers may remain loyal due to high switching barriers or the lack of real substitutes, while others will continue to be loyal because they are satisfied with the services provided (Lam, R. and Burton, S. 2006).

Service providers must avoid being complacent since retained customers may not always be the satisfied ones and similarly not all satisfied customers may always be retained. Research has pointed out that perceived service quality has a positive impact on customer loyalty (Wong, C. B., 2005). This is because service quality has been found to relate to behavioral outcomes, especially in the form of word-of-mouth, complaint, recommendation and switching (Al-Rousan, Ramzi, M. and Mohamed, B., 2010).

Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

Customers are said to be satisfied because they have positive feelings which result from a process of evaluating what has been received against what was expected, including the purchase decision itself and the needs and wants associated with the purchase (Armstrong, G. and Kotler, P. 1996; Wiele, T. V., Boselie P., and Hesselink, M. 2002); Akbar, M. M. and Parvez, N., 2009). Ehigie (2006) quoted Choi and Chou (2001) saying that there is a significant positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. This relationship is further strengthened as customers get "tremendously satisfied" or "delighted" (Oliver, R.L., Rust, R.T., and Varki, S. 1997); Lam, Y. S., Shankar, M. K. E., and Murthy B. (2009). Wong, C.B. (2005) cited Clarke (2001) as mentioning that customer satisfaction, which has become nothing more than the price of entry to a category is therefore the starting point to build customer loyalty. However, customer satisfaction in itself does not guarantee loyalty because in some cases 65% to 85% percent of customers who defect to competitors' brands say they are either satisfied or very satisfied with the product or service they left (Reichheld, F.F. and Sasser, W.E. Jr., 1990; Storbacka, K. and Lehtinen, J., 2001; Sivadas, E. and Baker-Prewitt, J. L. 2000). Therefore, in order to ensure that customers do not defect, Bowen, T. A. and Brown, S. W. (2001) are correct to say that customers must be extremely satisfied. Nevertheless, customers may change providers because of price, or because the competitor is offering new opportunities, or simply because they want some variation (Storbacka, K. and Lehtinen, J., 2001). That notwithstanding, for satisfaction to be effective, it must be able to create loyalty amongst customers because building customer loyalty is not a choice any longer with businesses, it is the only way of building sustainable competitive advantage (Bansal, S. and Gupta, G. 2001). Yet not all loyal customers are necessarily satisfied customers, the level of service quality plays a role (Akbar, M.M. and Parvez, N. 2009).

Hotel Classification in Ghana

According to the Ghana Standards Board, there are five classes of hotels, resorts and motels namely one star (4th class); two star (3rd class); three star (2nd class); four star (1st class) and five star (luxury). Ghana has fused Economic Community of West African States Standard with its own standards and it has resulted in the set of standards prescribed for the industry (Ghana Tourist Board, 2005). Majority of the elements that make up the respective classes are based on tangibles such as furnishings and flooring. Others include bathrooms and water closets, electrical gadgets such as telephone, television, radio and lights, bed, dining hall, meals and staff, as well as firefighting equipment, electrical installations and other safety measures in accordance with safety laws. Alternate power supply or a standby generator, maintenance of hygienic conditions and pest control measures as well as access roads are all inclusive (Ghana Standards Board, 2005).

Research Methodology

This study was conducted on three selected hotels in Ghana with different classifications as provided by the Ghana Tourist Board (Ghana Tourist Board, 2005). They are Lizzie's Hotel, a 2-star Hotel; Miklin Hotel, a 3-star Hotel; and Golden Tulip, a 4-star Hotel. Since all the hotels offered boarding and lodging which is a common feature, the study selected fifty guests from each of the hotels for investigation.

A survey questionnaire was used to gather data on customer expectations, perceptions and satisfaction with respect to the service quality of the hotels using the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V.A. and Berry, L.L. 1988). In addition, 5 staff members per hotel were purposively selected and interviewed. Descriptive characteristics of the respondents and the weighted averages of their responses were summarized using tables, frequencies and graphs (Kerlinger, F. N. 1973).

In addition, gap analysis was used in comparing means between expectation score and perception score of the respondents. Assessing the impact of service quality on customer loyalty was measured using a simple probit regression model and analysed by SPSS. Probability values were estimated using the software Stata v10. All the service quality elements were obtained using proxies and measured using a five-point likert scale. However, responses were transformed to dummies where all responses with a mean of 4.0 or above belonged to the '1= satisfactory' category, whilst responses with averages less than 4.0 belonged to the '0= unsatisfactory' category. Thus, all guests who had visited their respective hotels twice or more (repeat guests) were deemed loyal and otherwise deemed not loyal). The empirical model used was of this form:

$$Y = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Tan + \alpha_2 Rel + \alpha_3 Res + \alpha_4 Ass + \alpha_5 Emp + \epsilon \quad (\text{Aurora and Orden, 2010}).$$

where: Y_1 = customer loyalty status, 1 if loyal, 0 if otherwise. α_0 = intercept;

α_i = coefficients of individual service quality variables; Tan = Tangibility;

Rel = Reliability; Res = Responsiveness; Ass = Assurance; Emp = Empathy; ϵ = error term.

Results and Discussions

The overall response rate for the study was 65%. The study revealed that in spite of the varying customer responses with respect to satisfaction levels of the service quality variables of all the forms of services provided by the hotels, guests of Miklin Hotel were generally most satisfied (weighted average of 4.59), followed closely by guests of Golden Tulip Hotel (weighted average of 4.58), and lastly, guests of Lizzie's Hotel (weighted average of 3.95). However, tangibility and empathy variables recorded unsatisfactory levels for guests of Lizzie's hotel (Table 1).

Table 1. Ranking of Service Quality Factors for Selected Hotels with respect to Customer Satisfaction (N = 97)

SERVQUAL Factors	Satisfaction Means					
	Golden Tulip	Rank	Miklin	Rank	Lizzie's	Rank
Tangibles	4.52	5 th	4.53	5 th	3.71	4 th
Assurance	4.66	1 st	4.60	3 rd	4.02	3 rd
Reliability	4.59	3 rd	4.54	4 th	4.17	1 st
Responsiveness	4.61	2 nd	4.65	1 st	4.12	2 nd
Empathy	4.54	4 th	4.62	2 nd	3.71	4 th
Weighted Average	4.58		4.59		3.95	

Source: Researchers' field data.

Further, the satisfaction levels of guests from Lizzie's Hotel, a 2-star hotel, were relatively low. Also, in all the hotels, the guests were least satisfied with the tangibility factor of their service quality. This may be because tangibility is a factor that accounts for physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel (Parasuraman et al., 1990), it is easily discerned and the impression may last for a short time because of the general desire of guests to experience new places and new things all the time (Geronikolas, N. 2012).

Services

According to the guests of all the three hotels, the kinds of services offered that have attracted them to the hotels include standard accommodation, neat bathroom facilities and well-stocked bars for guests or customers as confirmed by Geronikolas, N. (2012). However, facilities such as a well-maintained swimming pool and live music for the guests' relaxation as well as a functional internet facility, together with other special services and loyalty packages (as shown in table 2) are only available at Golden Tulip and Miklin Hotels. It is not surprising that guests of these hotels have higher satisfaction levels of service quality because according to Geronikolas, N. (2012), they influence guests' satisfaction and patronage.

Table 2. Special Services and Loyalty Packages by Hotels

Golden Tulip	Miklin	Lizzie's
Special Services		
Conference Hall	Conference Hall	Conference Hall
Restaurant	Restaurant	Restaurant
Gym	Gym	
Supermarket	Car rentals	
Swimming pool	Swimming pool	
Tennis court	Salon	
Nightclub		
Tennis court		
Continental buffet		
Car rentals		
Live band music		
Loyalty Packages		
Free air ticket	Discount on room and food	Discount on room and food
Credit basis	Free breakfast	

Source: Researchers' field data.

With all these different services offered by the different classes of hotel with resultant varied satisfaction levels, the question that arises is, “Which aspects of the quality of the services being offered actually motivate guests to become loyal?”

Customer Loyalty

The weighted averages of hotel guests’ responses regarding the loyalty indicators are all very positive as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Levels of Customer Loyalty of Hotel Guests (N = 97)

Item	Response	Responses by Percentages		
		Golden Tulip	Miklin	Lizzie
Stay/visit in the hotel again	Strongly agree	67.4	90.5	30.3
	Agree	30.2	4.8	21.2
	Neutral	2.3	4.8	48.5
	Disagree	0	0	0
	Strongly disagree	0	0	0
Weighted Average		4.67	4.86	4.00
Recommend hotel to others	Strongly agree	60.5	76.2	57.6
	Agree	39.5	19	24.2
	Neutral	0	4.8	18.2
	Disagree	0	0	0
	Strongly disagree	0	0	0
Weighted Average		4.60	4.71	4.39
Tell/inform others of hotel’s quality	Strongly agree	67.4	76.2	51.5
	Agree	32.6	19	27.3
	Neutral	0	4.8	21.2
	Disagree	0	0	0
	Strongly disagree	0	0	0
Weighted Average		4.67	4.71	4.30

Source: Researchers’ field data.

From table 3, guests of Golden Tulip, Miklin and Lizzie’s Hotels in Kumasi are loyal to their respective hotels. However, the loyalty level of guests was highest for Miklin Hotel, followed by Golden Tulip and then Lizzie’s Hotel. This corresponds to the guests, satisfaction levels of service quality in table 1 above where guests of Miklin Hotel were most satisfied, followed by guests of Golden Tulip Hotel and those of Lizzie’s Hotel. This confirms the assertion that there is a direct relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Miklin Hotel appears to be doing something right which is attracting loyal customers to itself. The study revealed that one of the things Miklin Hotel is using as competitive advantage is its pricing.

From table 4 below, Miklin Hotel appears to be attracting the lower income earners of less than approximately \$250 a month (which forms the majority of its customer base) with its superior and competitive service quality which matches that of Golden Tulip Hotel, a 4-star hotel as shown in table 1 above. Thus, it is clear that Miklin is giving its customers, value for their money, which is a key component for keeping customers loyal (Lovelock, C. and Wirtz J., 2004). It is further established from table 4, that people who earn high incomes have the taste for high class hotels such as Golden Tulip, since they can afford to stay in them, while those whose earnings are lower also settle for lower class hotels but will definitely look for value for their money.

Table 4. Monthly Earnings of Hotel Guests (N = 97)

Earnings	\$	Golden Tulip	Miklin	Lizzie's
		(% guests)	(% guests)	(% guests)
	Below 250	2.4	44.4	12.5
	250 -500	11.9	11.1	40.6
	500 -750	4.8	0	12.5
	750 – 1,000	9.5	11.1	6.2
	1,000 -1,500	7.1	11.1	28.1
	Above 1,500	64.3	22.2	0

Source: Researchers' field data.

Impact of Service Quality on Customer Loyalty

Al-Rousan, Ramzi, M. and Mohamed, B. (2010) said Wong and Soha (2000) conducted a study that revealed that the quality of service offered by hotels influences positively on the tendency for guest to keep patronizing the hotels.

The Probit Regression Estimates for the selected hotels are shown in table 5 below where the elements of service quality as against customer loyalty status were fit into a regression model in order to assess their effects and relationships.

Table 5. Probit Regression Estimates for Selected Hotels

	Tangibility	Empathy	Assurance	Responsiveness	Reliability
Miklin Hotel	-0.0843	6.086*	5.4195*	11.421*	0.8416
Golden Tulip Hotel	0.8310	1.3831*	1.3912*	-0.4269	0.5377
Lizzie's Hotel	0.3734	0.2574	-0.2876	-0.3249	0.8430*

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Source: Researchers' field data.

From the table above, even though Golden Tulip Hotel is of higher class (4-star) than Miklin Hotel (3-star), table 5 reveals that they both have their guests' loyalty being influenced by "empathy" and "assurance" but with greater impact on the guests of Miklin Hotel. This means that the customers perceive that their loyalty to the hotels is greatly influenced by the fact that the staff of these hotels are caring, and provide individualised attention as well as exhibit knowledge, courtesy, trust and confidence (Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V. A. and Berry, L. L. 1988). In addition, guests of Miklin Hotel indicated that the hotel staff demonstrated a willingness to help customers and provide prompt service ("responsiveness" variable). This is a clear example of superior service offer, even though the hotel is of a lower class than Golden Tulip Hotel. However, Lizzie's Hotel, a 2-star hotel, revealed that "reliability" was the service quality variable that significantly and positively impacted on customer loyalty, but with the least impact. It is therefore clear from the study that the provision of comprehensive service that gives value for money makes a greater impact on the loyalty of customers than the class of the hotel which is predominantly based on tangible variables as demonstrated by Miklin Hotel. Some of these unique superior services were confirmed by the staff of Miklin Hotel that the hotel also possesses a serene environment and compound, high quality staff, flexibility in their rates and a timely service, even when not booked beforehand. Golden Tulip on the other hand, aside high quality staff, also indicated that buffet and night club were contributory factors to their customers' loyalty. In the case of Lizzie's Hotel, a 2-star hotel, "reliability" was the service quality variable that impacted significantly and positively on its guests' loyalty. This suggests that customers perceive the staff of the hotel as being able to perform the promised service dependably and accurately (Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V.A. and Berry, L.L. 1988). The staff of the hotel confirmed this during interviews.

The tangibility variable of service quality (such as physical facilities, equipment appearance of personnel, etc.) showed no significant impact on customer loyalty for all the guests of the respective hotels. This is not surprising since tangibility was the service quality variable that enjoyed the least satisfaction by the guests of each hotel (see table 1). This confirms the direct relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Penang, B. and Keng, L. L., 2006). In addition, because this variable is most obvious to guests at their initial contact with the hotel, the insatiable appetite for guests to seek change could motivate them to expect more, hence the tendency to take that for granted and unable to remain loyal based on that factor. This explanation sits well with the report of Storbacka, K. and Lehtinen, J. (2001) that customers search for change and variety affects their satisfaction and hence patronage in the hotel industry.

Conclusion

This paper relies on responses from randomly selected guests seeking boarding and lodging services in three different classes of hotel in Ghana: a 4-star, 3-star and a 2- star. The study shows that the satisfaction levels of guests are not based solely on the classification of the hotels which are generally based on the tangibility variable (Ghana Standards Board, 2005). Thus, from the study, guests of Miklin Hotel, a 3-star hotel were more satisfied than guests of Golden Tulip hotel, a 4-star Hotel, followed by guests of Lizzie's Hotel, a 2-star hotel. It is believed that the quality of service which provides value for money is critical to the satisfaction of guests to these hotels (Lovelock, C. and Wirtz, J. 2004). Additionally, this satisfaction trend also translates unto the loyalty levels of guests; where guests of Miklin Hotel were impacted greatly by the service quality variables, followed by Golden Tulip Hotel and Lizzie's Hotel, respectively as shown in tables 3 above.

The relationships and impact of the service quality variables are further buttressed by the results of a simple Probit Regression Model where the elements of service quality as against customer loyalty status are fit into a regression model. Here, in addition to the "responsiveness" variable for the 3-star hotel, "empathy" and "assurance" variables play significant roles in generating customer loyalty for the 4-star and 3-star hotels, while "reliability" generates loyalty for Lizzie's hotel, a 2-star hotel. Guest however, were least satisfied with the "tangibility" variable which does not also make any significant impact on their loyalty to the respective hotels. A key policy message is for the framers of the classification measures of hotels in Ghana is to consider service quality variables that impact on customer loyalty and not focus on just the tangibles since that variable can be taken for granted by hotel guests who are generally characterized as looking for different environments all the time.

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