

„MYSTERY SHOPPER” IN ANALYSING SERVICE QUALITY LEVEL AND SERVICE PROVISION PROCESSES IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IN POLAND

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Abstract

The article presents the usefulness of an audit Mystery Shopper tool in analyzing the level of hospitality service quality in the hotel industry. The authors also demonstrate the validity and need to verify the quality of service processes using the aforementioned tools in the context of increasing competition, escalating customer expectations and challenges of the job market. The article also describes the results of conducted studies using an audit method, which emphasizes its importance and credibility as the tool for measuring service quality.

Keywords: *audit, competition, mystery shopper, service quality, hospitality, service provision process, hotel staff.*

1. Introduction

Hospitality services are directly related to the hotel staff responsible for providing them. Moreover, they create a service oriented process spread over time (it primarily refers to the facilities offering recreation and accommodation services, where residents spend a dozen or so days staying on average approx. six days). Even in the case of a basic accommodation service, i.e. the typical Bed & Breakfast one many people are involved in the service delivery process: starting from a receptionist, through housekeeping, technical staff, waiters, and cooks. The opportunities for becoming distinguished and achieving competitive advantage should be predominantly sought in the way of approaching and treating a visitor, the quality of provided services and mainly in the level of relationships between hotel staff and guests established as a result of services provision. Therefore we have to learn how to handle customers properly.

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The purpose of the article is to indicate the usefulness and the need in applying a Mystery Shopper as the tool for measuring service quality, service oriented attitude of staff and thus for identifying the quality defects in service oriented processes occurring in the hotel industry.

2. The specification of hospitality services

Running a hotel is directly linked to the skill of rendering hospitality services at a high and professional level, in the context of the highest possible satisfaction achieved by customers from the discussed hospitality service provision. Regardless of a given facility type, intense competition imposes the need of presenting the highest, versatile, substantive, interpersonal and conceptual competencies by hoteliers, including high strictly professional qualifications.

Service oriented hospitality, characteristic for the hotel industry, represents a far broader term than just service itself. The provision of hospitality services is associated with establishing unique relations, typical for a particular geographical, cultural and social sphere between a guest and a host. Thus rendering a hospitality oriented service remains a personal commitment undertaken by the host to ascertain both quality and the broadly approached comfort to be enjoyed by the visitors during their stay. The nature of such relations is crucial in this respect, since on the one hand, hospitality implies selfless, emotional focus on guests' needs, along with due respect, affection, and true involvement. However, on the other, these relations are also based on economic factors, because a hotel guest is not understood as a close friend hosted by another friend, but a customer participating in a specific contractual, economic relationship (Lashley, 2008).

Hospitality service represents an overriding idea on which professional hospitality business should be based on. It is a set of characteristic behaviors focused on meeting not only basic needs of sleep, hunger, thirst or safety, but also the higher rank expectations. In addition, hospitality service means a consistent set of behaviors towards guests, thus determining a given facility reputation (Kosmarzewska, 2012). In other words, it is also a complex process aimed at attracting and maintaining a customer through personal care about him/her, service quality or ensuring visitor's satisfaction from staying in a particular facility. As a result, hospitality service also stands for the style of care and attention offered to guests, which has a direct impact on the given hotel economic performance.

Therefore the difference between hotels known for good or worse reputation results from the concept of hospitality approached differently by the hotel staff, rather than just the type and standard of offered equipment, interior design or additional services included in the price.

The importance of service quality is the priority in hotels focused on longer, several days lasting stay of their guests. Usually, these hotels have an extended offer covering e.g. beauty treatment, physiotherapy, Spa & Wellness or other rejuvenation sessions, which is reflected in the intensity and versatility of relations with customers, who usually spend approx. 6 or more days in such facilities.

In these hotels, the following factors are of particular significance and importance: the atmosphere, holistic contact with guests, the discussed services, hospitality and the sense of comfort. Hotel staff apart from presenting high professional skills and qualifications should perform their job with utmost involvement, in a natural way, with detectable passion and satisfaction. The revealed enthusiasm facilitates establishing positive and desirable service oriented relations, manifested in the quality of provided services.

In terms of hospitality services, the problems of quality become the prevalent aspect in seeking competitive advantage, since the price in the times of increasing competition, as well as mature market and a conscious buyer ceased to function as the sufficient or effective tool in constructing the discussed advantage. This hypothesis is confirmed by the results of numerous studies. In one of the questionnaire surveys 67.3% respondents confirmed that the service ensuring the sense of approaching each guest individually remains the crucial factor in increasing the given hotel attractiveness, to be followed by Spa & Wellness services ranked at 23.1% and conference facilities – 9.6%. (as cited in Hotelarz, 2008).

It is also confirmed by Tokarz, who claims that “the number and qualifications of the employed staff represent the fundamental determinant of the service supply and quality level”. The author also observes that “human resources, due to their intellectual and moral values as well as engagement in work, carry out the objectives of a tourist enterprise and, beyond doubt, decide about its success and future” (Tokarz, 2008).

The difficulty in service quality management consists not only in defining the specific expectations of particular customer groups but also in preparing the type of service responding to these expectations and continuous monitoring of customer satisfaction level. The level of meeting such needs and expectations is of decisive importance from the perspective of the offered services quality in a hotel. The assessment of service quality depends on the extent of service delivery, i.e. the degree of its compliance with the level of customer expectations. Therefore it can be adopted that the human factor is of key importance in the described relationships.

3. Quality challenges in hospitality services and their determinants

The problems of delivered services receive much coverage and diagnosis in the subject literature. The following factors determine the level of service quality:

- workmanship level and technical condition of the facility,
- quantity, quality, and modernity of equipment,
- selection, professional preparation and the specific characteristics, skills and involvement of employees,
- functional and organizational solutions (Witkowski & Kachniewska, 2005).

The above-listed factors can be supplemented by other determinants:

- company organizational culture,
- the set of rules, regulations, procedures, and job descriptions,
- the level of staff education and vocational preparation,
- individual, personal predispositions presented by employees,
- formal standardization requirements referring to hospitality facilities,
- non-formal factors – i.e. individual efforts undertaken by the facility owners.

On the one hand, the level of services offered by a hotel is determined by the service provider, i.e. a person delivering it, along with all his/her psychophysical features supported by knowledge and qualifications. But, on the other hand, by a customer as the arbiter of the rendered service, whose judgment results directly from the level of satisfaction achieved as a result of the received service. A hotel guest evaluates the experienced service quality based on two components:

- staff qualifications, material means for services provision, e.g. equipment available in a room, a restaurant, multipurpose halls, treatment rooms, etc., i.e. WHAT is offered by the hotel,
- employees' behavior, attitude, skills, communicativeness, i.e. HOW the customer is served (Witkowski & Kachniewska, 2005).

The level and quality of equipment are relatively easy to implement. The availability of goods at the existing market is extensive and depends solely on the amount of financial means to be invested, therefore the material factors for service provision can be achieved practically without major problems. Moreover, the Act dated 29th August 1997 on tourist services with later amendments, specifies precisely the minimum requirements for accommodation facilities, which use or aspire to operate under the name of a hotel, motel or a guesthouse and thus rated based on the standards marked as stars (from one to five stars). Nevertheless, it neither defines the attitudes nor behaviors, nor even the service standards. Chain hotels (foreign ones) have the written down service standards meeting which is verified two, three times

per year through mystery shopper audits. Independent facilities (private ones in most cases) do not have such standards and the delivered service rules and methods are both customary and declarative. The only distinguishing factor, offering such hotels the possibility to be recognized among the competition is their staff. In consequence, the success in the hotel industry is primarily dependent on the competencies presented by staff.

The statement functioning among hoteliers: “We all have a lobby. We all have comfortable bathrooms, and we all offer shampoos. It is the perception of value that makes us different”. (Retrieved from <http://www.hotelinfo24.pl/index.php?id=cytat>) emphasizes the importance of hotel employees, who in cooperation with the owners and managers perceive and put into practice these values which reflect respect and kindness in approaching a guest and a customer. In the opinion of S. Marcus, the President of Marcus Hotels Corporation: “the walls put up either 50 years ago, or yesterday, have a relatively small share in the success of the best hotels worldwide. Usually, the most important factor enhancing sales in the hotel industry is the quality of provided services” (Marcus, 2007).

Due to the specific characteristics of hospitality services, their provision process is generally taking place in their customer’s presence and participation, whereas its effect is measured by this customer satisfaction. A modern client expects to experience professional service standards, and if he/she decides that the competitive offer is better in this respect, he/she does not hesitate to change the service provider. In the opinion of Morawski, “no customer shall put up with the lack of competencies having an unlimited selection of possibilities to compare specific offers or solutions and standards applied by others” (Morawski, 2009). Without professional staff working at adequate positions no company can construct lasting competitive advantage and achieve above average results. It is emphasized by Morawski, who indicates that in order to achieve satisfactory cooperation results with clients a company needs a highly motivated, involved and competent employees, whose engagement and enthusiasm are based on reliable and substantive preparation (Morawski, 2009).

It is worth quoting similar standpoints expressed by the hospitality business managers. In the opinion of former Management Board President of Orbis S.A. Grelowski, (as cited in Hospitality, 2007) the hotel industry suffers from the absence of qualified senior management personnel, besides one of the major reasons among economic and occupational migration factors is the so-called: ownership type of despotism, as an irresistible sense of one’s own success. According to the author it results from the so-called: “partisan type of management, which occurs as a result of a confrontation between a smart businessman and a professional hotelier, however, its most frequent effect is

a failure”. In turn, Grzesiak, (as cited in Hospitality, 2006) an experienced hotel manager and the former President of HP Project company claims that the predominant mistake made by hotel owners is the fact that they do not recognize the importance of properly selected, qualified and aware of their goals staff. Until the “savings” are made on employees, many hospitality facilities will have much fewer guests and less money (Grelowski, as cited in Hospitality, 2007). Both attitudes and behaviors presented by staff have to be developed based on proper work environment, including adequate motivation system. Such system should result from an inner incentive and involvement in customer service. “Using the proverbial carrot and stick nearly anyone can be forced to do almost everything, except for one thing – become to like anything and in particular his/her job” (Blikle, 2014). It is also explained by Stor in one of the assessment methods for human resources management (HRM), who claims that when costs are maintained at a low level along with the absence of services expected by internal customers (stakeholders), then such HRM shall remain efficient, however, ineffective (Stor, 2012).

Therefore the role of personnel is to create e.g. proper attitudes and behaviors in the course of service provision, to deliver them at the level expected by guests and offer them added value in the context of broadly understood comfort (hygienic, thermal, acoustic, technical and mental) as well as satisfaction from staying in a particular hotel.

Having considered the opinions expressed by theoreticians and practitioners about the quality and level of customer service and also their own experiences as managers and experts, the authors of the presented publication have adopted that the key characteristics influencing hospitality at the highest level are as follows:

- approaching guests with due cordiality and interest,
- impeccable cleanliness and hygiene,
- high level of food and beverage services,
- kindness and integrity,
- ensuring the expected value.

4. Mystery Shopper audit as an effective tool for measuring quality and quality management of hospitality services

Mystery Shopper stands for a secret quality measurement tool for the context of customer service quality and the provided service standards. “Mystery shopping” audit offers the possibility for collecting complex information by means of passive observation – an auditor observes how customers are served, as well as active observation – when an auditor plays the role of a potential client presenting particular characteristics and acts as a purchaser him/herself.

The external audit – Mystery Shopper – represents one of the most effective methods verifying customer service standards in all hotel operational areas. In Western Europe, it has been known and applied since the 40s of the 20th century. Initially, such audit was functioning in the financial sector, and its main task was to observe bankers, diagnose frauds and irregularities in financial transactions. Modern, Mystery Shopper type of audits are performed practically in any area of economic activity. It is a standard procedure to carry them out periodically in the chains of stores, banks, hotels, petrol stations, telecommunication companies, car showrooms. It is increasingly often used in the state administration offices and territorial government units.

Beyond doubt, the crucial advantage of this method is its objectivism, independence and the fact that the audit is carried out in real time. An auditor does not collect declarative opinions of customers, but states the facts, hence the results are always valid. An audit combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. Auditors' work is based on observations and audit questionnaires, which include several hundreds of points subject to audit. An audit in a particular facility usually takes from two to four days, which allows thorough checking of the offered services quality and standards. An audit is carried out at all stages of customer service and at every position (starting from the moment of the first booking call or e-mail and finishing with check-out and leaving the facility) in all hotel units having contact with guests. It allows checking the quality of delivered services in detail, along with the attitude and behavior presented by staff.

On finalizing the audit its results are reported in adequate questionnaires to be followed by a detailed report from the entire visit. An audit provides information about:

- the hotel product and service offer,
- misconduct and negligence in customer service,
- skills in developing proper relations with customers,
- sales oriented skills,
- potential threats in the area of cost policy,
- opportunities for income improvement.

In general, an audit report has 70-120 pages, depending on the extent, number and types of hotel service areas. Apart from stating and in detail describing facts, it also presents post-audit recommendations, defines the areas of operational risk, spots requiring particular attention as well as scopes and directions of the necessary changes. The post-audit report encloses the specification and description of both, the particular places in a hotel and work positions where certain quality defects and shortcomings were encountered in terms of customer service, as well as technical and organizational problems, directly and indirectly, affecting customer satisfaction.

For managers, it is a valuable source of information about the attitude and work quality of their subordinate staff. It allows identifying the desirable behaviors, as an added value for the service process and finally for the client. The post-audit report also allows collecting valuable training materials for the hotel staff. They receive a highly valuable feedback about their work being, at the same time, aware of their advantages and areas in need of improvement. An overall analysis of the report resulting from the Mystery Shopper audit focused on detecting threats occurring in an organization allows for developing solutions and recommendations for the actions aimed at the improvement of provided services level, higher customer satisfaction and enhanced operational efficiency.

5. Mystery Shopper audit

The carried out research project focused on analyzing the actual level of services offered in hospitality facilities on the territory of Poland, however, with particular emphasis on the areas recognized as attractive for tourist traffic. The audits were held in the years 2013-2015, mainly in coastal regions and in southern Poland. The study covered thirty-eight accommodation facilities of various types and categories, which included as follows:

- one 5-star hotel,
- six 4-star hotels,
- two 3-star hotels,
- one 3-star guesthouse,
- four 2-star hotels,
- twenty-two uncategorized objects (including one awaiting 4-star categorization),
- one facility using 3-star rating illegally (contrary to the Act).

These objects were characterized by a longer stay as the dominating one and typical for weekend and holiday visits. The audits were partly requested by the facility management and partly by the contractors, who filed complaints about the offered standard and service quality. The purpose of the study was to identify the level of services, which predominantly constitute the basic service offer of a given facility:

- accommodation services (hotel's residential part and its environment),
- food and beverage services (offered meals),
- Spa & Wellness facilities (sauna zone, swimming pool, treatment rooms, etc.).

The study was performed by visiting and auditing the selected facilities, in the course of which the auditor was staying as a potential client and using the offered services. The auditor was a professionally experienced person, with extensive experience in the hotel industry, which allowed thorough data

collection and in-depth analysis of the observed results. The study was carried out in accordance with the defined and repetitive scenario, whereas the results were gathered and reported in the questionnaire prepared specifically for this purpose. Due to the fact that in each audited object one measurement was performed a uniform scenario model was applied, which differed depending on the region and the facility type, however, in order to maintain a real life situation the auditor’s individual preferences were taken into account in the course of the discussed visits.

As a result of conducted audits the sets of partial results from the particular analyzed service areas were obtained, which were later analyzed to give the below-presented results. Having taken into account that in case of audits carried out in hotel chains and performed in accordance with ISO 9001 standard a three- or four-level scale of evaluation results is applied, a four level one was used in this case, which in the author’s opinion happens to be more appropriate in the context of audited objects, especially the uncategorized ones. Therefore the conducted audit results were subject to a four-level scale of evaluation:

- 0 – 49% compliance – poor results indicating gross incompliance,
- 50 – 69% compliance – poor result, to be corrected,
- 70 – 89% compliance – good, acceptable result,
- 90 – 100% compliance – very good, desirable result.

The distribution of final evaluations from all conducted audits was from 31.50% up to 81.55% of the level service correctness, with median value reaching 63.25%.

The figure 1 below presents the detailed observation results.

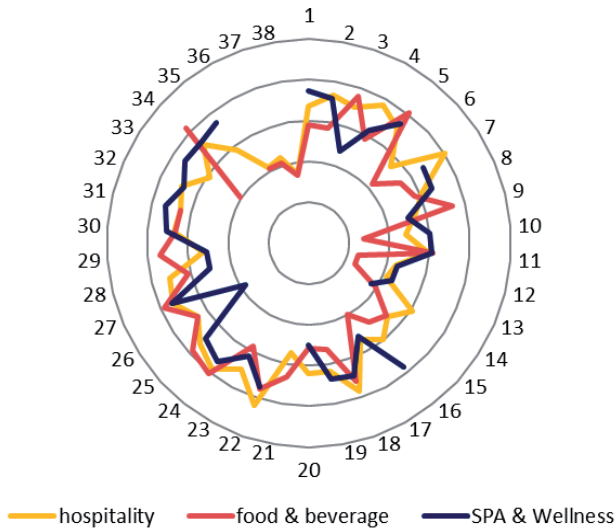


Figure 1. Distribution of observation results in particular hotel facilities

Due to the fact that the audit assumption was to measure the provided services in three selected areas:

- accommodation services (hotel’s residential part and its environment),
- food and beverage services (offered meals),
- Spa & Wellness facilities (sauna zone, swimming pool, treatment rooms, etc.), the focus was on the analysis of the relevant data.

Based on the nature and specificity of the study in presenting its results, the authors used quartiles as the most frequently applied trend measures in illustrating data concentration around the analyzed feature.

Table 1. The analysis of results in particular service areas

Services	median	highest value	lowest value	first quartile Q1	second quartile Q2	third quartile Q3
hospitality	63.73%	83.88%	34.25%	54.13%	63.73%	71.23%
food and beverage	57.63%	82.76%	25.00%	42.32%	57.63%	72.13%
Spa & Wellness	67.44%	76.91%	36.70%	50.82%	67.44%	73.44%

Table 2. The analysis of final audit results

Evaluation	median	highest value	lowest value	first quartile Q1	second quartile Q2	third quartile Q3
final audit evaluation	63.25%	81.55%	31.50%	54.59%	63.25%	70.86%

The value of the third quartile amounts to 70.86%, calculated for the final audit results. It can be concluded that 75% of the audited objects achieved a good, acceptable result. Only 25% of the audited hospitality facilities presented the level of 70.87%, however, having taken into account that the highest value reached 81.55%, the respective facility is ranked as: acceptable.

The median of results at the level of 63.25% compliance shows clearly that the quality of service processes has to be definitely improved.

The obtained evaluation results indicate as follows:

- higher evaluation in the area of hospitality services mainly results from the general impression made by the facility and its lobby and primarily their functionality, aesthetics and equipment standard,
- the facilities presenting modern interior design and newly furnished are simultaneously insufficiently clean and neglected,
- the most significant quality shortcomings refer to the level of maintaining room or common areas (including toilets) cleanliness and permanent technical defects,
- the absence of standards and work procedures or lack of compliance and supervision over them,

- in the area of food and beverage services the standards and rules of waitressing service area are not observed,
- significant negligence in terms of maintaining cleanliness level of tableware and table linen as well as accessories and equipment,
- commonly encountered a lack of disinfection and hygiene in the area of wellness services,
- no sense of privacy during Spa & Wellness treatment,
- shortening the duration of Spa & Wellness sessions.

The conducted audits illustrated that all service provision areas need corrective measures to be undertaken – especially in:

- work technique and service standards improvement,
- implementation of fundamental customer service rules,
- observing hygiene and maintaining cleanliness standards,
- moreover, so their implementation should start as soon as possible.

6. Final remarks and conclusions

The functioning of hospitality facilities is based on market orientation, i.e. the desire to serve the largest number of guests at the highest possible price. The increasing competitiveness forces the provision of services at the highest possible level. The audited facilities face the challenge of the rendered services improvement, predominantly in these areas which are crucial for the hotel success, i.e. cleanliness, service quality and staff attitude, especially that these particular areas received the worst evaluations. Furthermore, the conducted research illustrated that the number of stars does not guarantee high service level. The aforementioned Act on tourist services, based on which standardization is performed, imposes minimum requirements only and primarily in terms of equipment, technical standards and the range of services. It, however, does not define the standards of service oriented processes as well as attitudes and behaviors presented by employees, which remain the crucial factors facilitating recognition on the hospitality market earned owing to the high quality of provided services.

The research results show that 4-star hotels received assessments ranging from 81.55% down to 57.58%. On the other hand, the highest assessment among the uncatagorized facilities amounts to 77.13%. The lowest result (31.50%) was achieved by the standardized 3-star guesthouse. Thus, it is not the standardization expressed by the number of stars, but the standardization of service procedures and predominantly the attitude and behavior of staff, as the non-material service oriented factors, determine the overall quality.

Given the above, the implementation of corrective processes focused on changing the level of provided services should be initiated and begin with:

- organizing professional trainings (to upgrade staff qualifications), e.g.: for **housekeeping** employees: techniques and rules in cleaning rooms and common areas, work standards, guests service, for **food and beverage** and also **front desk staff**: professional service provided to an individual and group guest, effective sale of food and beverage services, communication and cooperation with an external client,
- introducing work standards and management standards based on codified procedures and analytical tools,
- implementing work standards and procedures increasing the quality of services and their delivery,
- developing and implementing effective tools and systems for work quality control,
- developing and implementing effective motivation systems in all departments, e.g.: based on quantity factors (sales volume, average invoice value) and quality factors (team cooperation, upgrading vocational qualifications),
- creating proper organizational culture and HRM standards.

The implementation of the above-listed activities should result in better work quality and improve the existing situation in the audited facilities. Moreover, it will not only result in a better future evaluation of the audited areas up to the desirable minimum of 90% compliance but primarily improve the effectiveness of operational activities, enhance hotel competitiveness and in terms of hospitality service result in higher customer satisfaction and thus their loyalty.

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