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Fall 2013

# An Investigation of Key Factors Impacting Front-Line Service Providers' Efforts to Deliver a Quality Customer Experience

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AN INVESTIGATION OF KEY FACTORS IMPACTING FRONT-LINE SERVICE

PROVIDERS' EFFORTS TO DELIVER A QUALITY CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

By

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A Professional Project submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master in Leadership Studies

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

December 2013

ABSTRACT
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The relevance of competitive differentiation for any business that strives to achieve success is undeniable. An awareness of how to best satisfy the customer is instrumental in helping a company to distinguish itself from the competition. Service firms in particular realize that the customer's perception of service quality can prove to be a valuable asset in the quest for customer satisfaction and retention. In the customer's eyes, evaluation of the service experience as satisfying or less than satisfying is largely dependent upon the treatment extended by front-line employees during the face-to-face service encounter. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate the important factors that may potentially impact delivery of a high-quality customer experience by the contact personnel who are charged with representing the company's services.

This research employs instrumental case study methodology. Subjects were recruited via nonprobability, purposive expert sampling and included managers or supervisors of front-line customer-contact employees representing hotel properties as well as a private, four-year university. All organizations are located within the metropolitan Milwaukee area. Data were collected from nine informants using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The gathered information was then transcribed and analyzed to identify significant themes. Recurring themes that surfaced in the scholarly literature review aligned closely with the current study's findings. Findings suggest that attention directed at workplace climate, hiring qualifications, service training, job satisfaction, and reward/recognition programs on the part of management can likely produce employees that are better prepared and more motivated to carry out the responsibilities of their critical front-line service role, thus leading to customer satisfaction.

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**Introduction**

The high level of uncertainty that continues to characterize the current marketplace and economic outlook means consumers must deal with increasingly tighter budgets and less expendable income. They are evaluating the choices available to them far more closely before deciding where to spend their hard-earned money. For a business to remain viable and lucrative in such a challenging environment, maintaining a competitive edge is more important than ever. To achieve a position of advantage, a firm must be able to fulfill the needs and expectations of the consuming public in a way that sets the organization apart and alleviates the tendency for consumers to search out more appealing options. Based on the realization that customer satisfaction is largely dependent on the ability of a company to deliver a high level of service, the need to excel in this area takes on greater significance in a company's business strategy. Service quality can be one of the most important factors in helping a company to attain a position of differentiation among like businesses.

In many instances, the evaluation of a service experience as satisfying or dissatisfying is contingent on the treatment extended by the service provider to the customer. As options are considered in the decision-making process, the aspect of service quality in the customer transaction carries more weight than ever. Service-based industries, particularly those within the hospitality sector, realize that service quality can prove to be a valuable asset. A company's ability to deliver a level of service that ultimately leads to a favorable customer interaction could mean the difference between retaining and losing a customer to the competition. Being able to

recognize and anticipate what the customer needs while striving to satisfy those expectations must then be considered a priority.

In my position as the director of a conference services operation that welcomes a variety of patrons into residential campus accommodations for nightly and extended stays while also using in-hall dining, meeting space, and other guest services, the need to gain a greater understanding of what constitutes a satisfying customer outcome has taken on heightened importance. Of particular interest is the service-oriented performance that must be portrayed by the front-line personnel. The staff members who hold these important positions are often the first and only in-person contact a customer will have with the organization they have chosen to support. These employees serve as the "face" of the firm with the potential to influence positively or negatively how the customer perceives and gauges the organization's overall level of service quality. This makes service delivery by the front-line employee essential to a satisfying customer experience.

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the factors that may potentially impact a more satisfying, service-oriented encounter between the front-line provider who is in the position to deliver service and the customer on the receiving end of that service. Several peer-reviewed articles were examined in an effort to delve further into the topic of service, service quality and its critical contribution to customer satisfaction with a particular emphasis on the front-line service provider's role in the employee-customer transaction. The following literature review offers a brief summation of what was uncovered during the search with highlights organized under the category headings of workplace climate, service training, job satisfaction, and recognition/reward.

## Literature Review

### Service, Service Quality and Satisfaction

In reviewing the literature, there were many studies that sought to examine the idea of service, service quality and service satisfaction. From the customer's viewpoint, the most immediate evidence of service occurs in the service encounter or the "moment of truth" when the customer interacts with a firm, leaving an indelible impression. The term service encounter refers to the face-to-face-interaction between a customer and service provider in a service setting (Lloyd and Luk, 2011). It is during the service encounter that customers estimate the service quality provided by service providers and compare perceived service qualities with their estimations (Li et al., 2006). Service quality is defined as the overall evaluation of a specific service firm that results from comparing that firm's performance with the customer's general expectations of how other similar firms *should* perform (Bitner et al, 1990). Additionally, service quality is a customer's perception of how well a service meets or exceeds expectations (Czepiel, 1990), and is considered a key factor for enhancing customer satisfaction (Geetika, 2010).

The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) as a means of measuring service quality, centers on the five primary dimensions of responsiveness, the willingness to help and offer prompt service; reliability, the dependable and accurate performance of promised service; assurance, the courteous, knowledgeable actions of employees that inspire trust and confidence; tangibles, which focus on the appearance of a property's physical facilities, equipment and personnel; and empathy, the caring, individualized attention extended to customers. The model suggests that customers measure service quality based on their perception of whether the service received achieves or exceeds expectations (Li and Krit, 2012). Farrell et al. (2001) argue that customer perceptions of service quality are based almost entirely

on the behaviors of employees. In a service organization, the behaviors exhibited by employees are the customers' connection to the organization and are thus a critical factor in developing a working relationship with customers (Kattara et al, 2008).

Since front-line staff is ultimately responsible for what transpires during the customer-contact interface, they are the vital link to ensuring what is deemed by the customer to be service satisfaction. Consumers´ perceptions of their experience play a major role in determining customer satisfaction and future purchase decisions (Kandampully, 2001). Several scholars developed models to explain satisfaction in relation to tourism service. The American Consumer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) model is a measure instrument of service quality and perceived value that shows customer satisfaction as comprised of customer expectations and modified by perceived quality and perceived value (Sanchez-Gutierrez, 2011). Observations by Dube et al. (1994) reveal that although a satisfied customer does not guarantee repeat business, it is almost certain that an unsatisfied customer will not return.

In recent years, service quality has gained increasing recognition as a strategic tool to strengthen a company's competitive position and improve its profitability (Reicheld, 1990). It follows that working toward the pursuit of a flawless performance, or a 100 percent satisfying performance from the customer's point of view, becomes a central goal. The cost of not achieving flawless performance is the "cost of quality" (Bitner et al, 1994, p. 95). Dominici and Guzzo (2010) share that an ability to provide and sustain customer satisfaction is one of the biggest challenges facing managers in the hospitality industry and also a key factor to obtaining a competitive advantage. To achieve customer satisfaction, service-based organizations must demonstrate greater commitment toward enacting service-oriented business practices that will

assist front-line employees during their one-on-one interaction with the customer to meet, and whenever possible exceed, consumer expectations.

## Workplace Climate

For service employees to display behaviors that are customer-oriented, the organization must establish a climate for service that supports, encourages and motivates employees to better serve their customers. Employees are more willing to offer excellent service when the organization provides them with the resources as well as an atmosphere or general environmental tone that is seriously committed to a "climate for service" on a routine basis. Researchers Lam et al (2008) contend that a work climate based on managerial trust, employee empowerment, self-efficacy and higher self-esteem will result in higher levels of customer satisfaction. When employees sense their organization is not truly customer-focused, a less than positive experience results for employees and customers alike (Mechinda and Patterson, 2011).

The empirical findings of a study conducted by Beatson et al (2008) suggest that businesses can enhance their performance by adopting organizational strategies and practices that will strengthen the service-oriented attitudes and behaviors of front-line service staff. Acculturation into this service-oriented climate influences the attitudes that employees hold and directs the way they then treat customers. When the organization recognizes the importance of customer service and emphasizes the delivery of that service by its employees, employees' attitudes toward service provision and satisfying customers' needs becomes more positive (Beatson et al, 2008).  Additionally, Ram et al (2011) maintain that management must find out what the customer expects in terms of customer service, then analyze and disseminate this information to the boundary employees. This would help to create a work environment that is better equipped to deliver expected service quality to the customer.

According to Lam and Lau (2008), a work environment with a strong service orientation can induce more service-focused employee behaviors and result in greater customer satisfaction. If there is a shared perception among members of an organization that policies, procedures and practices focus on service, it encourages employees to engage in service behaviors. An organization must create a climate that supports, encourages and motivates service employees to better serve their customers through inspirational leadership, commitment to a customer centric outlook as well as the provision of appropriate training, tools and technology (Mechinda and Patterson, 2011).

Paswan et al ( 2005) offer that the employee's perception of work environment is based on internal communication, access to intelligence, participation in organizational processes, open communication with and feedback from management, which  ultimately impacts employee motivation and the provision of service quality. Furthermore, organizational commitment promotes relationships between superiors and subordinates and consequently affects the pro-social behavior of service providers (Lee et al, 2005). According to Wang (2009), organizational climate can affect the relationship between employee-organization quality and work outcomes since climate is the employee's perception of the environment where the work behavior occurs. Furthermore, it is speculated by Paswan et al (2005) that employees' perception of managerial sincerity and trust is likely to instill motivation.

Recent research by Wang (2009) additionally proposed that "contact employees" will reciprocate felt obligations of high-quality employment relationships or what is termed "perceived organizational support." As explained by Wang (2009), through attributing organizational behaviors, employees evaluate the degree to which they believe the organization supports them, values their contributions, and cares for their well-being and then broadens their

contributions beyond what is expected behavior. Within a strong service-oriented work environment, customer-focused performance is valued more strongly and thus implemented more readily by service staff. In their research, Ram et al (2011) offer that service climate is built on a foundation of caring for both internal and external customers. It is the message conveyed to employees about the importance of service in their organization with regard to policies, procedures and practices that are supported and rewarded.

**Service Training**

Service training is important for managers in the service sector to consider in their development of organizational-level practices affecting employee attitudes and behaviors. Beatson et al (2008) contend that without the skills that are needed to understand the service delivery systems of the organization and gain confidence in managing the numerous interactions involved in the service encounter, staff may display weak commitment to service behavior. Kattara et al. (2008) point out that hospitality managers could benefit from adopting strategies that engage and retain highly effective, devoted and satisfied staff. The researchers maintain that the more managers allocate resources towards employee development, in a similar fashion as they do with customers, the higher the probability of success the organization will have.

Gonzales et al. (1999) are of the position that an effective training program has a significant effect on customer satisfaction, while Schlesinger and Heskett (1991) assert that leading service firms should invest in people, especially providing for skill training in order to enhance service providers' abilities that meet complex customers' service requests. According to Lloyd and Luk (2011) front-line employee training should focus on the behaviors that make customers feel relaxed, and perceive the dedication and passion of service employees in serving them. Furthermore, training is viewed as a key factor to improve service quality (Pfeiffer, 1995).

According to Bitner et al. (1990), giving employees control empowers them to fix problems and respond more effectively, thus training programs should be designed to develop a broad range of knowledge and to allow employees practice in selecting from possible responses based on varying customer encounters.

Additional research conducted by Lee et al (2006), examines the extent to which job satisfaction and organizational commitment mediate the effect of service training on customer-oriented pro-social behavior. Service training provides a means of communicating new organizational strategies, new values, new tools, and new ways of performing the work that is to be accomplished (as cited in Kassicieh and Yourstone, 1998). Benoy (1996) further supports the need for service training, in asserting that a well-trained and dedicated staff can enhance a customer's service experience and contribute significantly to an organization's reputation for responsive service (Lee et al, 2006). Two other important ways that effective training activities influence organizational performance include the improvement of skills and abilities relevant to service providers' tasks and development, and increasing employees' job and workplace satisfaction levels (Lee et al, 2006).

**Job Satisfaction**

According to Li et al. (2006) job satisfaction is defined as the general emotional evaluations of service providers for their job situation and job experiences. Increasing job satisfaction among service providers has the potential for generating a higher level of customer satisfaction (Rogers et al, 1994). The stance argued by Hoffman and Ingram (1992) that business must first satisfy the needs of its employees in order to satisfy the needs of customers, supports this thinking. Similarly, Lancaster (1999) holds that if organizations treat their employees well, they in turn will treat customers well. In the same way, Greene et al. (1994) share that satisfied

employees are more motivated and will work harder than dissatisfied employees. Mechinda and

Patterson (2011) additionally offer that satisfied employees are more likely to "go the extra mile"

(p. 107).

Moreover, Zairi (2000) suggests that internal satisfaction is the source of excellent

quality because if the organization satisfies the needs of its internal customers, it is enabling

internal customers to perform their tasks and more likely work effectively to achieve customer

satisfaction. The level of satisfaction that front-line staff sense towards their work environment is

likely to have an impact on their attitude to serve (Lytle and Timmerman, 2006). Beatson et al.

(2008) further emphasize this notion pointing out that employees who enjoy their jobs want to

ensure that the firm's customers are happy with the service they receive. It is also important to

note that employees who are unhappy or disgruntled about some aspect of their job, can find it

very difficult to serve customers well (Mechinda and Patterson, 2011). Overall, there is much

empirical evidence linking employee job satisfaction with the service quality exhibited by

employees and satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced by the customer.

**Recognition/Reward**

It also important to note that service-related service providers' behavior can be influenced

by clear and specific reward programs. The rewarding and recognizing of excellent service

profoundly affects service providers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Drawing a

connection to the rewarding or recognition of staff for their superior service performance can

lead to customer satisfaction through service quality (Lee et al, 2006). Echoing this same

viewpoint, Mechinda and Patterson (2011) emphasize that if an organization is seriously

committed to delivering excellent customer service than it must establish practices that

encourage and reward such service. For service employees to display customer-oriented

behavior, the researchers maintain that an organization must motivate and retain the right

employees through rewards systems and treatment that mirrors how the organization wants its

customers treated.

Effective management of the service encounter entails understanding the often complex

behaviors of employees that can decipher a satisfactory from a dissatisfactory service encounter

and then training, motivating, and rewarding employees to exhibit those behaviors (Bitner et al.,

1990).  Along with the provision of training, Kaufman (1992) adds that rewards associated with

excellence increase service providers' productivity and reduce absenteeism. Gonzalez and

Garazo (2005) further contend that organizations aiming to deliver excellent service must ensure

that the behaviors they want the personnel to deliver are rewarded since behavior-based rewards

can serve as positive reinforcement. Several researchers also hold that an organization should

empower employees with information and rewards based on company performance, and extend

the authority to independent decisions. Empowerment makes employees more customer-focused,

responsive, and responsible, and improves morale and self-image (Lee et al, 2006). In fact,

empowerment can be vital since it affords contact employees the flexibility that is required to

make in-the-moment decisions to completely satisfy customers (Lee et al, 2006).

There is increasing support for the viewpoint that service quality ultimately leads to

customer satisfaction and retention. In the face of mounting competition in the marketplace and

greater expectations on the part of consumers for services rendered, organizations operating

within the hospitality sector must be particularly sensitive to making customer assessments of

service quality a top priority. In an industry that relies heavily on guest perceptions of

satisfaction, the greatest chance for competitive differentiation to be realized appears to be

through service quality. The reality is that the performance exhibited by employees representing

the firm at the front-line position could be the organization's only opportunity to make a positive impression on the customer.

With this in mind management must be more consciously concerned with ensuring that customer-contact employees are prepared and motivated to carry out the critical role they play in the service interaction process. To gain more insight into the social phenomenon of service quality and customer satisfaction, the research question that will be examined more closely through this research is, *What key factors impact front-line employees' efforts to deliver a quality customer service experience?*

## Methodology

### Design

With a particular focus directed at the hospitality industry, this qualitative, descriptive research will employ instrumental case study methodology with data to be collected through semi-structured interviews. Stake (as cited in Klenke, 2008, p. 59) defined case study as the exploration of a "bounded, integrated system" over time through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and rich context. In a similar fashion, Hartley distinguishes case study as a means of conducting qualitative inquiry through a "detailed investigation" that involves the collection of data from one or multiple organizations over a stretch of time "with a view to providing an analysis of context and processes involved in the phenomenon under investigation" (as cited in Klenke, p. 60). More specifically, an *instrumental* case study focuses on "the dynamics of the issue(s) and the need for a general understanding of…more than what is obvious to the observer," shares Klenke (p. 59). Paradigmatically, this methodology aligns well with the ontological and epistemological assumptions that are associated with a combined constructivist-pragmatic approach.

Klenke (2008) points out that constructivists seek to understand a phenomena "in all its complexities and within its particular environment" while also placing "considerable emphasis on situational and structural facets of the context" (p. 21). Constructivism views knowledge as consisting of "mental constructions about which there is relative consensus" and reality as "socially and experientially based" (p. 20). Additionally, constructivism uses inductive analysis to "emphasize the world of experience as it is lived and assessed by social actors" (p. 22). In a similar fashion, "pragmatism presents a very practical and applied research philosophy that is oriented toward action" (p. 27). It places great emphasis on "the intrinsic value of practical knowing," and as Wicks and Freeman (1998) point out, "reminds people that they can see different interpretations as having more or less value based on their ability to serve given purposes and…accomplish relevant goals" (as cited in Klenke, 2008, p. 27).

**Sampling Method**

This is a nonexperimental design as the study's informants were selected via nonprobability, purposive expert sampling. Trochim and Donnelly (2008) explain that purposive sampling methods most often approach the sampling problem "with a specific plan in mind" (p. 48), while *expert* sampling entails gathering a sample of respondents "with known or demonstrable experience and expertise in some area" (p. 49). The intent of this multiple case study was to investigate key factors that may impact front-line service employees' efforts to provide a quality customer experience. For this reason a sample of individuals with particular expertise in managing or supervising employees who must interact on a continual, face-to-face basis with customers was sought for the study. Since these managers and supervisors are responsible for establishing a workplace environment along with implementing practices and strategies that can ultimately affect the employee-customer interface, they are believed to possess

valuable expertise and insight pertaining to the topic that is being investigated. Their extensive

first-hand knowledge on the phenomenon of customer service weighed heavily in the subject

recruitment decision.

Of the eleven subjects approached as potential recruits, nine agreed to take part in the

study. The study consists of five female and four male participants ranging from 23 to 46 years

of age, all of whom are employed at organizations located within the greater Milwaukee area.

Education level completed by the study participants ranged from part-college to a double masters

degree. One participant manages a team of information specialists, who are stationed at four,

high-traffic desk locations on a private, four-year university campus. The other eight study

participants manage or supervise the front desk operation of a hotel property. More specifically

the types of hotel properties framing the participants' experience include managed full-service,

franchised full-service, franchised limited-service, managed extended-stay, managed boutique,

privately-owned boutique, and a managed guesthouse. Additionally, the hotels comprising the

sample feature 29 guest rooms at the smallest property to 729 rooms at the largest. The principal

investigator believed that broadening the selection of study participants to include the

perspective of a front desk manager within a university setting, where the provision of good

customer service is also a business priority, would present an interesting comparison to the

viewpoints expressed by those overseeing the desk operation of a hotel property.

For confidentiality purposes, names of the participants and their respective organizations

are not revealed. The nine individuals participating in the study are therefore identified as

follows:

Table 1

*Snapshot of Study Participants*

|   | Age | Sex | Education | Position held | Organization/Hotel type | Front Desk Employees |
|---|-----|-----|-----------|---------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | 31 | M | Part college | Guest Service Manager | Managed, full-service | 9 |
| 2 | 34 | F | Bachelor's | Front Office Supervisor | Managed, extended stay | 5 |
| 3 | 46 | M | Associate's | General Manager | Franchised, limited-service | 7 |
| 4 | 27 | M | Bachelor's | Director - Front Office | Franchised, full-service | 13 |
| 5 | 36 | F | Bachelor's | Guest Service Manager | Franchised, limited-service | 7 |
| 6 | 30 | M | Associate's | Front Desk Supervisor | Privately-owned, boutique | 8 |
| 7 | 28 | F | Bachelor's | General Manager | Privately-owned, boutique | 12 |
| 8 | 23 | F | Bachelor's | Front Desk Manager | Managed, Guesthouse | 7 |
| 9 | 39 | F | Post-graduate | Associate Director | Four-year, private college | 30 |

**Data Collection**

Potential participants were contacted initially by phone, given a brief explanation of the

purpose for the research and then invited to participate voluntarily in the study. A written

invitation consisting of a more detailed description of the research-based project as well as the

IRB-approved Agreement of Consent Form was then sent to the recruit. After reviewing the

information and consent form, and agreeing willingly to take part in the study, an appointment

was scheduled for one 30-minute, face-to-face interview at a time and place that was most

convenient to the informant. In all cases the interview took place at the participants' work site

and was conducted in a private environment conducive to audio-recording, such as a small

meeting room, secluded corner of a restaurant at the property or the individual's private office.

A conscious effort was made throughout the study to maintain the confidentiality of the

informants. Immediately preceding the in-person interview, each research subject was reminded

that their participation was voluntary, that passing on any question perceived to be uncomfortable was acceptable, and that all collected date would remain anonymous. There was also an opportunity to ask the principal investigator any questions about the project prior to the start of the interview.

**Semi-structured Interviews**

A semi-structured interview technique was used consisting of seven initial, open-ended questions intended to guide the interview process, but also allowing for some flexibility during the course of the one-on-one discussion. As the conversation evolved between the principal investigator and the study's co-researchers, questions were sometimes rephrased or added to the verbal exchange in order to clarify what was said or uncover more detailed information. Klenke (2008) explains that in-depth qualitative interviewing "implies an egalitarian relationship between the interviewer and interviewee" as opposed to the imbalance of power that typifies the structured interviewing process (p. 127). "Rather than focusing on the researcher's perspective as the valid view, it is the informant's account which is being sought and highly valued," states Klenke (p. 127). It is an attempt by the interviewer to capture what is meaningful or important to those being interviewed through their own words and natural expressions.

The main interview questions were developed by the researcher with a conscious intent to retrieve information specific to the common themes that surfaced in the review of existing scholarly literature about service quality and its potential impact on customer satisfaction. These themes covered the categorical aspects of workplace climate, service training, job satisfaction, and recognition/reward. The questions used in the current study also focused on the research question that is being examined, *What key factors impact front-line employees' efforts to deliver a quality customer service experience?* In addition to the initial open-ended questions, a number

of probing questions were also prepared by the principal investigator to encourage more specific

responses from the interviewees, if necessary. The nine in-person interviews were conducted

over a span of two weeks. Average length of time spent conversing with each interviewee was 35

minutes. In some cases the subjects were contacted after the scheduled appointment to gather

additional information not fully touched upon during the interview session or to further verify

what was conveyed by a particular informant.

**Interview Questions**

Based on the categorical themes of workplace climate, service training, job satisfaction,

and recognition/reward that surfaced in the literature review, the following questions were posed

to the study participants by the principal investigator. In each case, the responses were audio-

recorded, and at times handwritten, to capture statements that would make transcribing an easier

task to accomplish.

1. *Are there specific practices or procedures in place at your organization to ensure the customer receives a quality service experience?* (workplace climate)

2. *What qualities does your organization look for when hiring someone for the front-line service position?* (workplace climate and job satisfaction)

3. *What type of training does a newly hired front-line service employee receive before interacting with customers?* (service training*)*

   *3a. Beyond this initial training, is ongoing service training provided?* (service training)

4. *What guidelines or procedures are in place to assist front-line service employees who may encounter a dissatisfied customer?* (service training and workplace climate)

5.  *What on-the-spot decisions are front-line employees able to make?* (job satisfaction and workplace climate)

6.  *Are there incentives in place to recognize or reward front-line service employees for providing a quality customer service experience?* (recognition/reward and job satisfaction)

7.  *How does your organization monitor (or review) the performance of front-line service employees?* (workplace climate and service training)

**Data Analysis**

A qualitative analysis was conducted using a thematic coding process whereby meaning drawn from the empirical data collected from managerial staff participating in the interviews was first transcribed and then coded. The principal investigator made a concerted effort to listen and re-listen to the recorded content of the interview while making note of what was shared by the research subjects. The transcribed notes were then reviewed carefully to identify important words, phrases, statements and categorical themes observed as influencing the provision of service quality by front-line staff during the employee-customer interaction, and therefore potentially impacting the customer's assessment of a satisfying service experience.

Stake terms this analysis technique *categorical aggregation*, a process during which "the researcher seeks a collection of incidents from the data from which he or she expects relevant issues to emerge" (as cited in Klenke, 2008, p. 67). Klenke (2008) further points out, "Codes add information to the text…through the process of interpretation that simultaneously breaks down the text into meaningful chunks or segments" (p. 92).  The intent is "to translate responses of participants into increasingly higher levels of abstraction to develop broad constructs that reflect

common themes and patterns…" (p. 69).

In this study, the information gathered during the conversational exchange between the

nine interviewees and the interviewer was examined for replication of similar findings across the

multiple cases as well as particular instances of contrast or conflict. The common themes or

factors that emerged were then compared to the recurring themes found in the review of existing

scholarly literature on the phenomenon of customer service. A follow-up phone call or email

communication with the respondents was used to further validate the interpreted meaning

extracted by the principal investigator as a result of the data collection and theme detection

processes. This "member checking" technique was undertaken to increase the credibility of

conclusions drawn from the collected data.

According to Klenke (2008), member checking "involves returning to research

participants after data analysis to verify interpretations," and essentially "means that the

researcher is accountable to those sharing their words, lives and experiences" (p. 43). Trochim

and Donnelly (2008) refer to this important post-study examination of the data collection and

analysis procedures as a process that leads to *confirmability* (p. 149).  One of four criteria

proposed by Guba and Lincoln for judging research quality from a qualitative perspective,

confirmabillty pertains to "the degree to which others can confirm or corroborate" the results of a

study (as cited in Trochim and Donnelly, p. 149).

**Findings**

The data that surfaced during the course of the semi-structured interviews with the

study's nine participants aligned very closely with what was revealed in the literature review.

Moreover, the discussions that took place while interviewing the various participants, regardless

of whether the viewpoint of a manager from one of the hotel properties or the university setting

was taken into consideration, revealed far more similarities than differences across the various

organizations. This outcome suggests a parallel between the two types of business operations,

both of which place a heavy emphasis on the provision of service excellence and an outcome that

will be perceived as fulfilling their particular customers' needs and expectations for a satisfying

experience. Relevant findings that emerged in this empirical qualitative research are summarized

in the following paragraphs.

When asked whether specific practices or procedures are in place at their respective

organization to help ensure a quality service experience for the customer, there was a resounding

positive response from each of the participants. However, while a majority of the properties used

similar procedural guidelines the structural degree of these policies as well as how they were

communicated, implemented and tracked varied greatly among the various organizations. Some

were highly regimented based on corporate or brand-initiated mandates requiring employee

participation in an "online university," as one manager pointed out, along with the completion of

tests, certification paperwork or even undercover site inspections that occur on a sporadic basis

to verify that procedures are in fact being followed. A noticeable difference was detected at the

smallest property, the guesthouse operation, where the front desk supervisor remarked that a

"more casual" situation existed. In all instances it became clear that a proactive approach is

emphasized in helping to prepare contact employees so they are ready to welcome guests and do

their best at providing a service-oriented customer experience. Table two provides a sampling of

comments that was shared by each of the respondents with regard to workplace climate.

Table 2

*Relevant Participant Responses to Question 1*

| Participants | *Are there specific practices or procedures in place at your organization to ensure the customer receives a quality service experience?* |
|---|---|
| 1 | "Yes, some are corporate-mandated customer service cards. Trip Advisor has become a really big tool that we use to gauge our customer service, and we also just talk to people. We're routinely in the lobby asking, *How is everything going?* or *Is there anything we can do?* If someone is checking out tomorrow, we will call them the evening prior to ask*, Could we have done anything better?* or *Is there something we could do now to make up for any lack of service you received?"* |
| 2 | "Definitely, we have a lot of standards…whether it is everyday practices or…guidelines to help the staff…provide the best service possible. For instance, we have what is called the LEARN Model where L stands for listen, E stands for empathy, A stands for apologize, R is reacts and N is notify, and all those steps are to be followed when a problem occurs. It needs to be memorized…it needs to be second nature." |
| 3 | "Our management company has guidelines, policies, procedures, and that backs up our brand standards. There is an online university that all of our staff has to go through. Twice a year we have an inspector that comes in to make sure all the standards are being adhered to…and that's so the guest can get a consistent experience. There are going to be no surprises…so they are pretty strict with training…." |
| 4 | "There certainly are! One is that we do random room inspections…and random shoppers, who are consultants in the field of hospitality, that come through…to basically get a clear cut view of how customers perceive our service. And every day we have a management meeting to go over service scores and Trip Advisor comments…as a way to combat…the challenges our guests have brought to our attention." |
| 5 | "In their first days all of our team members go through what's called service culture training…kind of getting at the why and the how of how to best take care of the guest. We also have our brand standards set up so there are levels for the quality of both physical and non-physical items, such as service." |
| 6 | "Absolutely! We have a call log, so when a guest checks in…within about 15 or 30 minutes we always try to call the room…to see how their stay is so far. This way we catch little issues right away…so we can correct it and accommodate |

| | |
|---|---|
| | them to the best of our ability. The customer's feedback is extremely important. They are the ones experiencing the hotel first-hand…so it is always important to follow up on what is said, especially if it is negative. That's how you continue to improve the property." |
| 7 | "Each of our shifts has a checklist that they use as a guide. They've all been trained to the point of being able to respond off the top of their head...so we can prepare…ahead of time. Amenities are a big thing here. We'll double check with our various departments…to ensure the specific amenities a guest requested are in place. That way we're not caught off guard. The more structure, framework you can give…just allows the day to go more smoothly, the actual operation to happen." |
| 8 | "It's sort of just making sure you're speaking and interacting with the customer. Especially here at the front desk, you're the concierge…the reservationist…guest services…you're sort of everything." |
| 9 | "We have a handbook…that outlines everything from dress code to respect in the workplace to our basic rules and policies, which are all in place to make sure we are providing a professional and consistent and inviting atmosphere for the guests…We are in the business to provide service so that means we are being proactive…going out of our way to help people and be accommodating…." |

The second question, *What qualities does your organization look for when hiring someone for the front-line position?,* revealed that seven of nine participants believed "personality" or being characterized as "personable," "friendly" or "hospitable" were important qualities for a person to possess. The ability to "multi-task" was also expressed as a key characteristic by more than half of the managers and supervisors. Other statements included finding someone who is "sharp on their feet," able to "think outside of the box," and flexible enough to "respond to whatever comes up," or "adjust to changing priorities." It also became evident while conversing with the interviewees that good communication is a highly valued skill. Table three highlights comments that were shared by the nine participants.

Table 3

*Relevant Participant Responses to Question 2*

| Participants | *What qualities does your organization look for when hiring someone for the front-line position?* |
|---|---|
| 1 | "I look for someone to lead the interview…It's if they ask questions, if they seem interested. I look for personality and people that aren't afraid to talk to people…" |
| 2 | "You have to have a good personality…be a people person. Multi-tasking is a huge quality…and to work well with others. Team work is essential. You are definitely the main hub so you have to relay everything to all other departments." |
| 3 | "You want them to engage with the guest…be friendly, customer-service oriented… knowledgeable about the area…and to have a lot of energy. You want them to be very personable…the warm, welcoming personality has got to be there." |
| 4 | "One of the biggest things is…someone who is hospitable…caring, genuine and motivated… ability to multi-task is always important…and a big thing is also common sense. You want to find someone who is sharp on their feet; who can look through a problem and come up with a resolution before the guest is done speaking." |
| 5 | "One of the key things I look for is someone who can multi-task. Everything pretty much happens at the desk so you have to be able to juggle all of that. A lot of times you're just looking for that person who is approachable...personable and friendly. I look for someone who can think outside of the box. You really have to be able to think on your feet…and beyond the list of rules. Just drawing from what would I want if I were in the other person's shoes." |
| 6 | "…that they're friendly, courteous, well-mannered…and that they have a record of being responsible, and also well-groomed. That they are willing to adapt to changes…willing to respond to guidance. I want them to be good listeners." |
| 7 | "Someone who's outgoing because you definitely need to be comfortable talking with guests. You also need to be able to multi-task, be organized, prioritize your responsibilities because what you are doing that you think is important could change in an instant. And then you need this fabulous personality and a willingness to go above and beyond…." |

| 8 | "Someone who can be very organized because there's a lot of multi-tasking…jumping between different jobs. You have to be able to respond to whatever comes up. Communication is so important…you have to respond with the right information as customers are coming in and out…you need to be aware of what's happening, basically keep everyone informed." |
|---|---|
| 9 | "The questions we ask are catered to various categories like customer service, time management, teamwork…that will give us an idea for their ability to do the job well. We also pay attention to the clarity through which they answer each question. In their role, they are going to be asked many diverse questions…and it is the expectation they are understanding that the customer's needs might be more than just the question that is being asked." |

In response to the third question, *What type of training does a newly hired front-line service employee receive before interacting with customers?,* the majority of informants stressed that online computer training covering the various operating systems along with other service-related job expectations was a required initial step. For many of the organizations, the completion of various tests and certifications was also expected within a designated period of time. Examples of the additional training front desk service providers undergo prior to interacting on their own with any customer includes participation in interactive role-playing scenarios, shadowing an experienced employee or supervisor and then being observed while performing what was learned.

As one study participant pointed out, "There is just a lot to learn and we want to make sure that they're comfortable in what they're doing." Four of the nine informants also touched on the importance of touring the facility as a way for new employees to learn about the property's historic significance and become familiar with different areas of the building, from guest rooms and functional space to the view a guest will have from the window of their room. Being knowledgeable about these areas is "a big part of the guest experience," stated one participant. A

brief summary of what was shared by the study's nine respondents with regard to service training

is shown in Table four.

Table 4

*Relevant Participant Responses to Question 3*

| Participants | *What type of training does a newly hired front-line service employee receive before interacting with customers?* |
|---|---|
| 1 | "Very extensive…we have a brand-based computer training program that you must complete within 30 days of your hiring and before you have any guest contact. Then you're scheduled at the front desk, working with me or my assistant manager exclusively… we basically make the person our shadow and explain what we're doing…It's not just because that's the way it's done. I think people learn better when they understand *why* they need to do something rather than just going through the motions." |
| 2 | "We have three days of computer work…as well as other certifications…and then they are training with someone right away in front of the customers for about a month. They are obviously going to come across things they don't know, but we've found four weeks is a good length of time where they feel comfortable …on their own. They're watching you do what you do, hearing you explain it and then they're doing it." |
| 3 | "First thing is the online training and that's about 40 hours. Then there is another day or two where they are spending time with their supervisor. There are also other things we go through relating to our company, the brand…all offer better insight as to what the expectations are." |
| 4 | "The great thing is that we offer a number of different training tools. We've taken the brand training and modified it, turning it into a two-week program that can be absorbed in more impactful chunks. After that…for the front desk you focus on how to solve a challenge, credit card policies, cash handling…There's also four hours of service training, after that you're shadowing for another two weeks and then you are shadowed for two weeks… In all it's about a month and a half of pure training before you're on your own." |
| 5 | "They go through service culture training first – mostly at the computer. Then we have an I-pod tour that takes you through the entire building, pointing out things that make our property unique." |

| | |
|---|---|
| 6 | "The first thing I do is go over front desk policies and procedures. Then we show them the computer systems…make sure they know how to book reservations, check guests in and out…We also make sure they have a thorough knowledge of our hotel and then phone training as well. The employee handbook has everything in it." |
| 7 | "They go through a full-day orientation with HR. When they get to the desk…they have to start practicing in order for it to sink in. Talking through it only goes so far with memory retention. It may seem like we just push them out there, but it's really the only way for it to sink in. One person will oversee the entire training and do a 30-day checklist to make sure they are covering the A to Z of everything we want them to know." |
| 8 | "I would say the interview process starts the training…they are sort of getting introduced to working in this environment. Initially, people will just come in and observe what goes on at the front desk. I'll explain what's expected…it's a matter of going over the day-to-day. Then we'll trade spots so they get to answer the calls, go through the various processes, constantly ask questions….You don't have to know everything, you just have to know where to find it." |
| 9 | "Every new hire has to attend an orientation…and that includes a complete overview of our employee handbook as well as a tour of the building. Specifically with the information center, every new hire has to work 10 training hours before they are allowed to work a shift. They are shadowing and being trained on the different protocols. The minute you are working in that position, you are constantly quizzed and tested on your knowledge…want to make sure they feel comfortable and know where to look if they don't have the answer…or how to use different tools to gain information." |

A follow-up question asking participants whether additional training was provided beyond what is conveyed during the early stages of employment indicated there is always some level of training made available to the front-line employees. This ongoing instruction can entail the completion of formal online courses and retraining certifications, one-on-one meetings with a supervisor, or topic-specific review sessions, as well as the roll-out of new initiatives or processes that are soon to be enacted. While the informant who oversees the front office of the largest hotel participating in the study commented repeatedly that training courses at his property are "never-ending," and monitored routinely by the company's quality assurance inspector, the

supervisor at the guesthouse takes a less formal approach. She revealed that an error will often be

caught while reviewing the message log that is kept at the front desk for all to see, and the staff is

then informed verbally or in a written note that "you should be doing it this way rather than that

way."

Another front desk supervisor shared that he advises front-line employees to come up

with sample scenarios that can be used when responding to guests. "I can't be there 24 hours a

day, so my guidance to them is to think of…three answers to any question and three answers to

any problem, and then use your common sense and pick the best one." Table five includes

excerpts of what was conveyed by the study participants when queried about the provision of

ongoing training.

Table 5

*Relevant Participant Responses to Question 3a*

| Participants | *Beyond this initial training, is ongoing training provided?* |
|---|---|
| 1 | "Paperwork has to be filled out for a yearly retraining certificate, but that's really about the end of the formal training. There is really always training at the front desk…something that comes up that just doesn't happen often, and when it does, you just gather the team and verbally explain this is what you do and hopefully they remember." |
| 2 | "I would say there is always some type of training that is going on…random things that just come up that need to be touched on or reviewed. We also have department meetings once a month… it's an opportunity to ask questions, express concerns. There's a lot of team work and communication going back and forth…it can be very different from shift to shift. Things I may not be aware of can be brought to my attention." |
| 3 | "Our company does monthly topics that are covered in training sessions, touch points that we have to follow so it's consistent. We try to get regular meetings in with all departments…to review things that might be current issues, problems…or things that have changed…" |

| 4 | "The 30-, 60- and 90-day review gives us an opportunity to sit down with somebody one-on-one, focus on them, let them know how they're doing…be blunt and honest, and at the same time, get feedback on how they are perceiving the job, which is huge. Our training courses are never-ending. We get new courses, probably three or four a month. And our quality assurance inspector goes through to make sure each employee has completed all of them. So there are checks and balances for everything. The training really is never-ending." |
|---|---|
| 5 | "We have monthly all-talent meetings where we share results of surveys that guests have completed. We usually have some sort of focus on what we need to improve on…Our check-in process just changed to a more conversational approach so we had a class with all of the front-line team going over practice scenarios. I've always thought that training is ongoing so whenever I'm at the front desk, I'm listening to interactions. I'm always thinking how could we have done better? If things go wrong, we always talk about how we could have avoided this." |
| 6 | "We try to have a meeting almost every month. Continuous training is definitely provided. One thing we are working on right now is service recovery…how to bring a customer from a low point to a high point in a minute or two, from a bad situation to a better situation. Another thing is to make sure we are helping them with their weaknesses…improving their weak points into strengths, just continuing to help them grow." |
| 7 | "We do monthly meetings…touching on new initiatives or processes that are about to be introduced. Or there will be retraining in an area where they may seem to be slipping. If something needs to be addressed sooner as a whole, we'll circulate a flyer for all to see or follow-up with a particular associate who may need individual counseling or coaching, whether formal or informal. It's an opportunity to make a quick correction." |
| 8 | "Generally, I set up my schedule so at all times I'm overlapping with all of the employees. I pretty much see everyone weekly and can talk to them about what's going on. When we have more time together, I'll update them on other aspects…questions they might have, things they don't understand. Or I'll catch something when I'm reviewing things and then talk with them about it later, or just pass along a simple note to let them know you should be doing it this way rather than that way." |
| 9 | "We'll do weekly topical training. We also do a semester-training for everyone…and different staff trainings throughout the year. Some tend to be more on the social end…touring other facilities to see how they're set up, how they manage a front desk. Or we'll have Admissions give us a tour so people are prepared to talk consistently on the message that is being shared. It's a lot of sporadic outreach, more scattered throughout the year." |

When the informants were asked, *What guidelines or procedures are in place to assist front-line service employees who may encounter a dissatisfied customer?*, all talked about preparing their staff in some way for dealing with a guest who is not content. Once again, differences existed in approach as well as rigidity of the procedures to be followed based on the organization's size and management structure. Three of the nine participants referred specifically to service recovery guidelines already in place, or as being a current area of training focus for their front desk operation. Nearly half of the sample shared that employees are encouraged to work with the customer to resolve a problematic situation by "looking for avenues to assist," exploring what other "solutions" or "alternatives" might be possible, or simply asking, "What can we do to make things right" or "make you happy?"

Being "proactive" and "timely" in following up with the customer after a complaint has surfaced, or as a precautionary step to prevent a negative initial impression from spiraling into a larger issue, was also stressed by three of the participants. One supervisor shared a story about contacting a guest to make sure a maintenance worker had, in fact, stopped by to fix the room's burned out light bulb. It's "a safety measure…to make sure things haven't fallen through the cracks," she stated. At two properties the guest is phoned within 15 or 30 minutes of settling into his/her room to capture feedback on how things are going. In this way, problems or annoyances can be "caught early on," with a chance "to accommodate the guest to the best of our ability." Highlights of what was shared by the nine informants regarding service recovery training are depicted in Table six.

Table 6

*Relevant Participant Responses to Question 4*

| Participants | What guidelines or procedures are in place to assist front-line service employees who may encounter a dissatisfied customer? |
|---|---|
| 1 | "We really don't have guidelines as such. It's really more of as long as it's not immoral, give what the customer asks. It's all about trying to make the customer happy at that point of contact because telling them, *I can't do anything, you have to wait until my manager comes in*, just isn't good customer service." |
| 2 | "We have what's called Service Recovery Module…to tell to what extent you are dealing with a guest. Is it a red carpet, a fix it, a hero or empathy?  We also have a 10-minute log…where we make sure we follow-up within 10 minutes of a guest reporting the problem to make sure the issue has been resolved. So much can happen… you just need to make sure things aren't falling through the cracks. If it's taken care of fast, it's not going to be a big deal." |
| 3 | "Yes and our biggest tool is the 100 percent satisfaction guarantee! It is unconditional. If they're not satisfied, for whatever reason, their room is free. That's why there are so many people who are loyal to the brand. We stand behind our guarantee." |
| 4 | "Our recovery guidelines…we call it our toolbox…and so a customer service agent has everything in there from Starbucks vouchers to appetizers to complimentary one night certificates. Basically, there's no end to what they can do. Empowerment is huge. As long as they can give me an explanation as to why we've done something, there are no questions asked." |
| 5 | "Empowerment is a key thing…to know you can take care of the guest. We don't really put any limitations on it. We can comp the room, give a certificate or give you points to use anywhere… and everyone at the desk feels comfortable, I think, using that kind of approach." |
| 6 | "One of the things we are working on right now is service recovery…knowing how to bring a customer from a low point to a high point. We have the one, two, three of complaints. That's 1) to listen without interruption, 2) to show sympathy and apologize, and 3) to investigate and resolve or compensate accordingly. And we offer 100 percent satisfaction! No matter what the issue is, if the guest is unhappy, we will issue a refund." |

| 7 | "Whatever is going to satisfy the guest…so our staff is empowered to do what they think is right. The new hires are taught how to handle different situations…delivering empathy, providing solutions…we really try to fix the problem before we get to the compensation stage…always remembering that each guest is different. You are basically continuing to learn from each guest you encounter." |
|---|---|
| 8 | "We will provide gift certificates or discounting on the room or comping the room entirely. We also follow up and write a letter apologizing for whoever and whatever it was that caused the discontent. It's just speaking calmly, asking, *what can we do to make things better?*…let the guest do the talking. When someone isn't happy, you just have to deal with it." |
| 9 | "Sometimes it's about being prepared. You can't just always apologize…that's not an action. You should be thinking okay this person has a problem, they're not getting an outcome that's desired so now what other solutions are available. It's making sure you're aware of alternatives…the customers might be looking for A or B, but maybe C or D will prove satisfactory. At the same time realizing for some people, there is nothing that is going to make them happy." |

With regard to the fifth question, *What on-the-spot decisions are front-line employees able to make?,* the nine participants agreed unanimously that employees who are placed in a direct contact role with customers should be allowed to make in-the-moment decisions. The word "empowerment," or "feeling empowered," or other phrases holding similar meaning, such as giving them "full authority" or "free reign" or the ability to "handle it on their own," were expressed when answering the question. One informant illustrated the significance of being able to react quickly, stating "if somebody has to wait for a manager…to provide them with resolution to the problem, then you've already lost that guest."

Taking into account the employee's perspective, another participant remarked, "There is nothing worse than having to say I need to get my manager…and he's not in right now." It is important to note, however, that while some organization's leave the door wide open as far as compensating a guest with their unconditional 100 percent satisfaction guarantee, a boundary

line or hesitancy was also detected in the responses given by some interviewees. One informant

stated, "when huge problems occur, the front desk is not going to take care of it…the manager

needs to be made aware…to take care of it," while another shared, "…to comp a night, that

needs to go higher up."  Table seven presents a review of answers that were revealed by the

informants.

Table 7

*Relevant Participant Responses to Question 5*

| Participants | *What on-the-spot decisions are front-line employees able to make?* |
|---|---|
| 1 | "We try and give them full authority…power at the front desk to make decisions. My guidance to them is to think of three scenarios, three answers to any problem and use your common sense to pick the best one. You're not going to get fired for making a bad decision because I'm glad action was taken, but we will counsel them afterward to retrain and make sure they make the right decision for the future." |
| 2 | "We always like to make our staff feel empowered to make decisions. There is nothing worse than having to say, *I need to get a manager.* But for huge problems the manager needs to be aware of it…they need to take care of it, we also need to investigate so we can explain to the guest what happened." |
| 3 | "They are all able to offer the 100 percent guarantee where guests do not pay for the room if they are not satisfied! It's not just the general manager or the front desk manager; any employee can do it." |
| 4 | "We make mistakes, things are going to happen, but it's how we recover from them…and if somebody has to wait for a manager to provide resolution to the problem, then you've already lost that guest. But it is about knowing how to read the guest. It's important to probe a little deeper…to find out if there is something there that is bothering the guest…to ask, *What can I do to make things right for you?"* |
| 5 | "I always say to my front-line associates, go with what you feel is right for the situation…right for the guest as long as it doesn't hurt anyone or put our company in jeopardy. As long as they are using their best judgment…we're not going to say you're in trouble." |

| 6 | "They are empowered to make a decision…and if they make a bad decision, we won't punish them for it, but we will go over it as a team and evaluate the situation, and look at other options that could have been offered to the guest. It's good for them to make those decisions on their own, and if they do make a mistake, then they can learn from it. They know they have management's support." |
|---|---|
| 7 | "We don't want it that they have to go and get the manager, so we let them have free reign. If there needs to be a conversation afterward, to help them see perhaps this wasn't the best way to have handled it because of this reason, we have that opportunity; that way things will go better next time. It's all a pass it forward type of learning." |
| 8 | "Yes, especially at the front desk. There is a lot of responsibility put on you to be able to think on your feet, to not say, *first I have to talk to my manager*. We will go above and beyond to say, *how can we make this better for you?*" |
| 9 | "A lot…very simply we depend on them. We don't necessarily want them to respond, *well do you want me to get my manager?,* when someone is discontent. We want them to feel empowered to handle it on their own. At the same time, they will sometimes make bad judgment calls; that's part of the learning process." |

When asked the sixth question, *Are there incentives in place to recognize or reward front-line service employees for providing a quality customer service experience?*, it was apparent that accolades of some sort were viewed as important by all of the study's participants. However, as noted in Table eight, the gestures of appreciation varied widely among the various organizations.

Table 8

*Relevant Participant Responses to Question 6*

| Participants | *Are there incentives in place to recognize or reward front-line service employees for providing a quality customer service experience?* |
|---|---|
| 1 | "Absolutely! One thing is our comment cards, which get circulated to the entire management team and our owners. We also have a program called Catch Me at My Best where anyone, an employee or a guest, can catch someone…going above and beyond. We do monthly incentive programs, focusing on an area that needs some work…people earn points and at the end of the month the winner gets a $50 payout. We also have Employee of the Week, Employee of the Month and Employee of the Year…in which they get anything from lunch to a $250 check. I try to say thank you every day, but it's also nice to add, and here's 10 bucks for making the guest feel at home." |
| 2 | "Definitely, in a broader sense we do Associate Appreciation Week where the entire week is filled with fun activities and prizes. Personally, I like to do little things…cards given randomly if they help with something they didn't have to do. We also have Employee of the Month…and that means a chance to go into the drawing for Employee of the Quarter where you can win money. They also have Employee of the Year for each hotel…and then a drawing with all the other hotels with a chance to win a big all expenses covered trip!" |
| 3 | "Our company has an incentive program with bonuses four times a year…where we need to meet our budgeted numbers, customer service scores. If our SALT surveys – our satisfaction and loyalty tracking – come back good, it helps our employees earn bonuses…and we have different levels – yellow means meeting expectations, green means above expectations, blue means exceeding. You can get five, ten or fifteen percent of your earnings so it can really pay off. It's a great incentive for them!" |
| 4 | "There are and we get real creative with this…corporate has a program called Catch Me at My Best. The hotel also does a Big Fish competition. So every department has one big fish, and that big fish at the end of three months gets a $50 gift card, and then the hotel has the top three big fish for anything from a big screen TV to an X-box. Another thing we do this time of year…is the Hospitality Football League…and what that does is pit different hospitality departments against each other based on our SALT scores. So it's just ways to get them to be competitive. Competition drives service scores quite a bit, I've found." |

| 5 | "We actually have one this month because we've been getting more surveys that aren't as positive as we are used to getting. So now we have an incentive to earn points…enough for them to earn a free stay, if the team as a whole has less than three comments of, you know…the desk is not friendly, not helpful. Hotel-wide we do something called A Go-go Above and Beyond…any talent member or talent coach can put someone's name up on a board for doing something good…and then that mention gets put into a drawing. It just encourages friendly competition." |
|---|---|
| 6 | "We are about to start an Employee of the Month program. From what we've brainstormed, if someone receives an EOM award, we will either offer them a gift certificate or complimentary parking for a month, just little things like that to reward or incentivize them. Both management and our guests will be able to recognize the guest service representatives and then we'll take a vote on it." |
| 7 | "We're doing an upsell incentive right now. So basically if the property earns more revenue, they'll get a cut. We do recognize our associates by doing comment cards that we as managers, or really anyone else who sees someone doing something, can fill out…it gets turned into HR, it gets posted. Then there is a drawing once a week for like 20 bucks or a gift card or something. Of course, we also have Associate of the Month. Incentives are really giving things away for what your job is, but the truth is it helps sweeten the deal when there is something in it for you. The hotel performs better when we have those things in place." |
| 8 | "Generally, it's not monetary. Comment cards get shared showing who received different praise and for what reason. If we get an email or a letter from a customer saying how great a time they had, and it mentions a certain employee by name, it gets printed out and posted for everyone to see. It's easy to tell this person got this number of good reviews, that one this many. Sometimes the front desk staff will receive small gifts from a guest, or they will tell you how much they enjoyed their stay, or will want to talk to your manager. And that in itself is a good feeling. So rather than any formal incentive, it's just public acknowledgment to reinforce behavior." |
| 9 | "We have something called the High 5 program…one High 5 goes to the employee and a second one goes on a huge bulletin board by the time clock so everyone can see who's getting recognized…how they went out of their way to serve the customer. We also do a student Employee of the Month…and at the end of the school year we have a Student Employee of the Year reception. Having that appreciation and reward concept connected to going above and beyond…is helpful." |

In answering the final question, *How does your organization monitor (or review) the performance of its front-line service employees?,* the annual review was cited unanimously as a mechanism for determining how well employees are performing at their job responsibilities. Aside from that, it is commonplace to schedule a 30-, 60- or 90-day review for new hires as an opportunity to applaud progress that's been made, point out areas for continued growth, or devise a plan for improvement. Six of the nine participants stated that monitoring how employees are doing actually occurs on a "day-to-day" basis. "I'm not big on the yearly reviews because I think every day you should kind of know how you're doing," one participant stated. If there is an area of concern, an individual may receive one-on-one coaching or it could be addressed with the entire staff to get things back on track quickly. Guest surveys and monitoring comments on Trip Advisor were also cited by half of the informants as key ways to track the performance of service employees. Table nine highlights some of the thoughts that were shared by the nine participants.

Table 9

*Relevant Participant Responses to Question 7*

| Participants | *How does your organization monitor (or review) the performance of its front-line service employees?* |
|---|---|
| 1 | "Really again, it's just being there. I don't have an office…when I'm here I'm generally up at the front desk doing my work, but also just kind of overseeing things. So it's more just by watching people and then by counseling, if we notice they're doing something wrong. We do 90-day reviews for new hires and yearly reviews after that for which they do a self review and then we do a review and talk about it." |
| 2 | "Every year they have a review and it's really like the day-to-day operation. If there is an area of concern, you're going to see it the next day. It's the department head constantly monitoring their staff. Other managers are watching out for each other, telling me things I may not see when I'm not on site. We have |

| | |
|---|---|
| | write-ups and warnings and verbals for anything serious…positive things as well. It really varies by situation. Sometimes it's dealt with one-on-one, other times it's shared with the group so more don't start doing it." |
| 3 | "Through the SALT survey scores. They're looked at very closely. I can think one thing, but we have to listen to what the guests are telling us. And you can really get a pretty good idea of what reality is. We also look at Trip Advisor. I don't always believe everything I read…but it can give you a good pulse of what's going on. It really depends on their interactions, their expectations." |
| 4 | "Performance is reviewed in a couple of different ways. Our service scores, how corporate judges us is the SALT surveys. For more off-the-cuff reviews, we go to Trip Advisor. There's also a program in the hospitality industry called Revonate that we subscribe to. It looks at all social media mentions…basically it gives me a good dashboard, a good read every morning, of how we're doing out there. Employees go through the 90-day and before that the 30- and 60-day performance review. Also, we have yearly reviews which I'm not big on. I think every day you should kind of know how you're doing. If I'm leading right, managing right, the employee should be aware of how they are doing so there are no surprises at review time." |
| 5 | "The key way is through the surveys we receive from our guests. We call them the Guest Experience Index. That's the primary tool we use. With regard to individual employees, October is when we give annual reviews for all talent members. They're rated on seven categories…on a scale of zero to five. If they get threes – meeting expectations – they're eligible for raises after being here 90 days or more. If they score two or lower, they're put on an action plan for how to improve within 30 days." |
| 6 | "We offer 90-day reviews. After that, we offer an annual performance review. And then just continuously supervising on a daily basis…to make sure they are performing up to standards. The customer's feedback is an extremely important gauge, too." |
| 7 | "When an associate is hired, they have the 30-day checklist. It's a guide to make sure they are being trained properly so eventual performance reviews will be favorable. There's a 90-day review and then the annual review. Anything between is likely because they're not performing and it is obvious we need to sit down with them before that time." |
| 8 | "There is a review process after six months. With us being so small, it is very informal. As the front desk supervisor, I'll talk it over with the general manager and we'll decide you're going to get this as a raise because we want to keep you here, we really do value you." |

| 9 | "We give formal performance reviews each semester. There are 12 standard questions…all are evaluated on certain skills. Then there are department-specific questions…really honing into what's needed for those areas. We don't have any type of probationary period. The main feedback comes during the initial 10 hours of shadow training and then the performance review period." |
|---|---|

## Conclusion

This qualitative descriptive research sought to gain further insight into the social phenomenon of service quality and customer satisfaction. More specifically, factors were examined that could potentially impact a satisfying or less than satisfying service encounter between the employee who is extending that service and the customer who is experiencing and evaluating it. Through semi-structured interviews with nine managers or supervisors, all of whom are charged with overseeing the front desk operation of a service-based organization, the principal investigator was able to glean valuable insight on the research topic. It is evident that the major categorical themes identified in the literature review as impacting the performance of front-line staff during the essential employee-customer transaction are supported in the findings of the current research. There were also a few unexpected things that surfaced during the course of the interviews.

Collectively, there was a strong sense among the study participants that competition is fierce right now and people have higher expectations. Customers are willing to pay for better service and will gravitate toward a business that is focused on delivering it. As organizations that are in business to provide service, all seemed to understand that the big difference can rest in the way people are treated, particularly by the front-line staff. There is an obvious awareness for putting the customer first and always being attentive to how the organization is being judged from a service perspective.

The huge emphasis that must be placed on continuously monitoring customer comments that show up on Trip Advisor and other social media sites was also eye-opening. This contemporary digital communications tool is considered to be a valuable word-of-mouth referral device for consumers. Since what is posted for all to see can greatly impact a business' bottom line, a service organization must be conscious of what the customer is thinking or feeling about their experience as well as how an issue of concern will be handled. Although several of the study participants mentioned systems that are in place to check online postings and diffuse negative comments on a daily basis, they also know it is far better to prepare and empower staff to resolve a problem when it occurs so it doesn't reach the point of a negative reaction in the mind of a customer. Key learnings extracted from this multiple case study are summarized as follows.

An important first step toward ensuring the customer has a quality service experience is to hire individuals who are a proper fit for the demands and intricacies of working with customers at the front-line position. A clearly defined service culture with policies, procedures and strategies that demonstrates to employees the high value the organization places on providing each customer with the best service experience possible should also be a goal. Because a knowledgeable staff is better able to understand what the firm they are representing stands for as well as what is expected of them as service providers, a clear and open line of communication across the organization should not be overlooked. While an initial training program can help to lay the groundwork for carrying out basic job responsibilities more competently, ongoing training that is offered on a continuous basis can provide a forum for questions to be answered, areas of concern to be addressed and new policies or procedures to be introduced as the need arises.

Employee empowerment is another effective tool that can be used to combat what the customer might otherwise perceive as inadequate service. By entrusting a front-line staff member, who is closest to the problem, to make an in-the-moment decision on how to best respond in a given situation, management instills a sense of ownership in the organization which can impact employee job satisfaction and in turn customer satisfaction. In a similar fashion, making a conscious effort to recognize or reward staff members for a job well done, whether monetarily or with a simple "thank you," as well as providing opportunities for professional growth and development to those who show interest in and potential for advancing beyond their current roles, can also have a positive impact on employee self-esteem, motivation and job satisfaction. If the front-line employees who are most directly responsible for providing customers with a quality service experience are to be successful in accomplishing that outcome, it follows that management must be genuinely concerned with creating a workplace environment that will be conducive to fulfilling those expectations.

**Research Limitations**

One limitation of the present study is that a relatively small number of participants, the majority of whom are concentrated in the hotel segment of the service industry, were interviewed. While the sample size of nine is sufficient to develop a full description of the issue being examined, a larger sample representing different business entities as well as a broader scope of service-based organizational contexts would increase validity and transferability. Recruitment should again rely on a nonprobability, purposive sampling strategy, but include businesses such as casual and upscale restaurants, museums or other visitor attractions, where the level of service quality extended by customer-contact employees also impacts the perception of a satisfying guest experience.

The inclusion of only one university setting in the study has also merely cracked the door to another service-based organizational context that could be examined in greater depth. In numerous functional areas across campus front-line personnel are asked to provide a service-focused experience to current students, potential recruits, faculty, administrators, parents, alumni and other customers who seek answers to their questions and fulfillment of offered services. Further replication of this study seeking insight from additional managers or supervisors, who are similarly responsible for implementing guidelines and practices that can ultimately affect the work that is carried out by front-line service staff, would enrich understanding of the customer service phenomenon.

Another major limitation of the study is that the front-line providers' perspective has not been considered. Investigating the customer service phenomenon through interviews or surveys directed specifically at these customer-contact employees, who are integral to the service interaction process, would be extremely valuable. Gathering this additional data would help to distinguish how the perceptions of management differ from those who are being managed. It also follows that customers, who are on the receiving end of the service transaction, are another source that should be probed for further insight on this topic. A third limitation of the present study concerns geographic focus in that the sample was recruited from only the metropolitan Milwaukee area. Expanding the sample across a wider geographic scope, as time and financial resources allow, is recommended to again strengthen validity and transferability.

It is also important to recognize that data for this study was retrieved during a face-to-face interview lasting about 35 minutes, and all nine interviews were completed over a span of two weeks. While a conscious effort was made when scheduling the interviews to request only 30 minutes out of the informants' undoubtedly busy day, this may have inhibited the sharing of

more detailed information by some interviewees. In fact, three of the nine supervisors or

managers were busy assisting guests at the front desk when the principal investigator arrived for

the interview appointment, thus these informants may have felt rushed in answering the

questions. Lastly, the principal investigator was solely responsible for coding and sifting through

the gathered information in an effort to decipher commonalities and contrasting viewpoints

expressed by the nine informants, as well as whether the larger themes tied back to the themes

uncovered in the scholarly literature review. The added perspective of multiple researchers

would help to increase the interpretive rigor of the research findings.

**Future Recommendations**

Based on the limitations of the current study, several avenues of future research could be

pursued. To extend the present findings, the scope of the research should be broadened to include

a larger sample of hotel properties and college campuses, as well as other organizational contexts

that comprise the service industry. Future research should also take into account more diversity

as far as geographic locations in which the study is conducted. It would also be highly beneficial

to investigate factors that may potentially influence the employee-customer interface by

considering not only the managerial stance, but the first-hand perspectives of front-line service

providers and customers as well.

Another aspect of the service encounter mentioned by many of the current study's

participants as deserving of attention, particularly in light of the current emphasis on social

media, is the online component of the service transaction. Customer comments and rankings that

are posted on user-generated review sites such as Trip Advisor can have a huge impact on the

bottom line of a business. Future studies should delve further into this modern-day

communication tool that is being used more frequently by customers to voice their satisfaction or

dissatisfaction with a service experience, and consequently influencing positively or negatively the impression others form about a particular company.

Results of the present study also point to a need to further assess the impact that empowerment might have on the face-to-face service transaction. Several managers believed strongly that empowering contact employees to respond personally to guest concerns as they surface is vital to the delivery of effective customer service, while other managers expressed a level of hesitancy with regard to giving front-line staff too much decision-making power. It would be interesting to examine how the attitude and behavior of employees are affected when management creates a workplace environment that encourages autonomy and shared ownership in the company's success.

Information obtained in the current study as well as through suggested future research could help managers to focus on new business strategies and human resource guidelines that may positively influence service quality during the employee-customer transaction. The gathered data could also shed new light on how to better prepare and motivate front-line employees to deliver the type of service that will directly impact a more satisfying guest experience, leading to repeat and referral business.

**Concluding Remarks**

The uncertainties which continue to permeate the current economic landscape present challenges that any organization aiming to build business and remain secure cannot afford to ignore. As competition among firms who are vying for consumer dollars intensifies, particularly within the customer-driven service sector of the marketplace, an awareness of what influences a customer to deem an experience satisfying or less than satisfying, deserving of a repeat visit, and worthy of recommendation to others is of utmost importance. The data collected and analyzed in

this empirical research points to a need for management to develop and implement more effective service-delivery procedures, practices and strategies. The findings also call for measures that will help to ensure the existence of a service climate that will positively impact the customer-oriented attitude and behavior of frontline service providers.

After all, it is the treatment delivered by these contact personnel during the customer service exchange that is most often the means by which customers perceive and evaluate the organization's overall service quality, leading to satisfaction. Simply put, a team of employees that is content in their service role and also properly equipped to carry out the responsibilities of their front-line job is more apt to do their best at pleasing the customers they must interact with. Particularly with service-oriented business operations, where a satisfied customer can directly impact an organization's competitive positioning in the marketplace and ultimately its bottom-line results, attention must focus on striving to better prepare and motivate front-line service providers to work with customers to resolve their concerns and make them happy. The end goal in the employee-customer interaction should be to meet, and whenever possible, exceed guest expectations. Additional in-depth research is encouraged to extend the findings of the present study and what is currently published in the scholarly literature on this highly relevant topic.

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**Appendix A: Participant Consent Form**

Protocol Number: HR-2610

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY
AGREEMENT OF CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

An investigation of key factors impacting front-line employees' efforts to deliver a quality customer service experience

Donna Wells, Principal Investigator

College of Professional Studies, Marquette University

You have been invited to participate in this research study. Before you agree to participate, it is important that you read and understand the following information. Participation is completely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate. Whether or not you choose to participate in this study will have no impact on your employment or student standing at Marquette University.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of the key factors that impact front-line service providers in their delivery of a quality customer service experience. You will be one of approximately five participants in this research study.

**PROCEDURES:** You will be asked a series of questions pertaining to the intent of the research study, which is to gain a better understanding of the key factors that impact front-line service providers in their efforts to deliver a quality customer experience. Your responses during the interview portion of the study will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy. The tapes will later be transcribed and destroyed after transcription. For confidentiality purposes, your name will not be recorded.

**DURATION:** Your participation will consist of one 30-minute interview and a possible follow-up interview lasting no more than 15 minutes. The interview will be conducted at a time that is convenient with your schedule.

**RISKS:** The risks associated with participation in this study are minimal and are no greater than what you would encounter in everyday life.

**BENEFITS:** There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. However, participation may help to provide a better understanding of the topic being researched, which is to determine key factors that may affect the delivery of a quality customer service experience by front-line service providers.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All information you reveal in this study will be kept confidential. All your data will be assigned a code number rather than using your name or other information that could identify you as an individual. When the results of the study are published, you will not be identified by name. The data will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files three years after the completion of the study. Audio recordings will be transcribed and the audio recordings will be destroyed immediately. Transcriptions will be kept on a password protected computer or in a locked file cabinet and destroyed three years after completion of the study.

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Protocol Number: HR-2610

While specific quotes may be used in the published material to emphasize a particular point, names of participants or organizations will not be referenced. There is a possibility that someone may identify you from a direct quote that is used. The data collected during this study may be used for future research purposes.

Please note that research records may be inspected by the Marquette University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowable by law) state and federal agencies.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you choose to withdraw from this study during the interview the data collected from you will be destroyed. After all follow-up interviews and data checks are complete, it may not be possible to remove a particular person's data from the research dataset as the study will be in process and there will be no way to determine which information you provided.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact Donna Wells at 262-896-1990 or donna.wells@marquette.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Marquette University's Office of Research Compliance at (414) 288-7570.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT.

_____        _____
Participant's Signature                                                    Date

_____
Participant's Name

_____        _____
Researcher's Signature                                                    Date

**Appendix B: Email Correspondence Requesting Participants**


To: Front Desk Manager

Subject: Marquette University College of Professional Studies Research Project

Project Title: An investigation of key factors impacting front-line service providers' efforts to deliver a quality customer experience

Good afternoon,

My name is Donna Wells and I am pursuing my Masters of Leadership Studies through Marquette University's College of Professional Studies. In order to finish my program and graduate successfully, I must complete a research-based Professional Project. Based on my strong interest in the topic of customer service, I am examining the key factors that impact front-line service providers' efforts to deliver a quality customer experience.

I need your help with the research portion of my project, which will involve approximately six participants. My intent is to conduct a face-to-face interview with you that will take about thirty minutes. During the interview you will be asked a series of questions pertaining to your role as a manager of front-line service providers. Your responses during the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy. The names of all interview informants will remain confidential. Additionally, the information you share will be assigned a code number to ensure protection of your identity.

Please take a few minutes to review the attached Agreement of Consent Form. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have about this research project.  If you agree to take part in the study, I will then work with you to determine a convenient time for the 30-minute interview.

While there are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study, the data that is gathered may help to provide a better understanding of key factors that may impact service quality in the employee-customer interaction.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request. I look forward to the possibility of meeting with you to discuss your expertise.

Regards,


Donna Wells
Graduate student
Marquette University College of Professional Studies

**Appendix C: Interview Questions**

1. Are there specific practices or procedures in place at your organization to ensure the customer receives a quality service experience?

2. What qualities does your organization look for when hiring someone for the front-line service position?

3. What type of training does a newly hired front-line service employee receive before interacting with customers?

   3a. Beyond this initial training, is ongoing service training provided?

4. What guidelines or procedures are in place to assist front-line service employees who may encounter a dissatisfied customer?

5. What on-the-spot decisions are front-line employees able to make?

6. Are there incentives in place to recognize or reward front-line service employees for providing a quality customer service experience?

7. How does your organization monitor (or review) the performance of front-line service employees?