Accessing Hotel Responsiveness Towards Guest's Email Query: Cases in Malaysia

[1]Jazira Anuar, [2]Kamaruzaman Jusoff, [1]Faliza Mahamed Ali,
[1]Sairah Saien, [1]Zetty Madina Md. Zaini, [1]Khazainah Khalid and [1]Mushaireen Musa

[1]Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 23000 Dungun, Malaysia
[2]Faculty of Forestry, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: Information Technology (IT) has given tremendous positive effects in hospitality industry. It's the most powerful weapon for hoteliers in order to stay competitive nowadays. One of the examples of technology that hit the hospitality world is e-mail. This study focused on three to five star hotels listed by the Ministry of Culture, Arts & Tourism of Malaysia that provide e-mail as a medium of communication and internet activity for its online patrons. Actual e-mail was sent to hotels asking for room availability, special room rate and facilities at the hotel. The implementation of technology in relation to customer service which is guest's e-mail queries still remains unknown although technology initiation can be considered successful among hotels in Malaysia. As hoteliers, do they answer the guest's e-mail queries promptly, politely and professionally?

Key words: E-mails · Information Technology · Hotels · Customer service

INTRODUCTION

Information Technology (IT) has mitigated tremendous positive efficacy in the hospitality industry. Government's support can be seen in some administrations and promotions such as the launching of online 'work from home'. Accordingly, broadband are teenagers' best buddy nowadays. Many hotels adopt Information Technology (IT) in their daily operations[1]. E-mail is one example of Information Technology (IT) adoptions and most popular internet activities [2]. This study focused on all 3 to 5 star hotels listed by the Ministry of Culture, Arts & Tourism of Malaysia that provide e-mail as a medium of communication for its online patrons. Despite the successful technology initiation among hotels in Malaysia, the implementation of technology in relation to customer service still remains unknown [1]. As hoteliers, do they answer e-mail promptly, politely and professionally? Researchers encountered problems and situation of not getting answers from hotels. Another question arise was whether the quality of the e-mail responses are being influenced by organizational factors such as hotel ratings, sizes and location. The researchers hope by carrying out this study, the level of e-mail quality response practices among three to five star hotels in Malaysian industry are improved. Subsequently, it will also determine whether the organizational factors such as hotel ratings, sizes and location influence the quality of e-mail responses. It acts as providing guidance on a suitable approach in encouraging hotels to help improve their online customer service. In conjunction with that, it gives new branding and increases the hotels' revenue. This is achievable through beneficial collaboration between the university and organizations. This study suggests that hotels can gain an immediate competitive advantage by implementing basic e-mail procedures.

Information Technology (IT) enables the hotels to provide a good customer service [3]. Cho and Olsen [4] stressed that IT can transform the nature of products, processes, companies, industries and competitions in the hospitality industry. Frew [5] emphasized that technology will bring about a major revolution in the hospitality industry. According to Watkins [6], IT starts and ends with customers in a hotel. The investment in IT thus benefits the hotel if it enables customers to have a better experience and the hotel staff to work more efficiently to better assist customers [7]. Law & Lau [8] stated that hoteliers need to utilize hospitality information to enhance operational efficiency, provide personalized guest service and control costs & provide performance indicators such as profit margins & financial condition. Chacko, [9] commented that today's hotel guests are better traveled than previous generations and have clearer notions of the meaning of good service. Hotels have incorporated websites and other technologies that improve employee

Corresponding Author: Jazira Anuar, Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, Univerisiti Teknologi MARA,
23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia, E-mail: jazir904@tganu.uitm.edu.my.

productivity and enhance revenue, yet failed to prioritize technologies which improve guest services. Information-intensive industries are and will remain inviting candidates for Internet transformation [10]. The Internet is a customer-controlled pull approach: users participate in the communication [11]. A soaring electronic marketplace and a distribution mindset drove many 'click and mortar' hospitality firms initially to stress online sales [12]. Exploring the responsiveness and quality of e-mail replies, takes a small step towards investigating hoteliers online service quality [13].

Large and small organizations alike can improve customer service and enhance relationships by addressing queries promptly, politely and personally. Management and staff must appreciate that e-mail is an important as a telephone call, fax or letter. Standards that apply to offline business communication should be transposed online [13]. Age, both of the hotel and hotel employees, could influence adoption. As adopters of new communication technologies are more upscale, better educated and younger than non-adopters [14] management and staff's attitude towards e-mail may play an important role in Malaysian's hotel industry electronic customer service. Email is the key to customer service [15]. E-mail can be defined as an ext-based, a synchronous medium offering inexpensive and rapid exchange and forwarding of messages on a one-to-one or one-to-many basis [16]. This study focused on the quality of the e-mail response because poor e-mail customer service in organizations was detected.

Hypothesis for this study are:

H1 : The quality of the e-mail response will be higher or better for higher rated hotels based on hotel rating. Pine & Phillips, 2005 states that the higher the star rating, the better the performance will be.

H2 : The quality of the e-mail response will be higher or better for higher rated hotels based on the size of the hotel. Larger and higher rated hotels adopt more technology [13], hence they answer the e-mail queries more often than the smaller organizations do [2].

H3 : The quality of the e-mail response will differ based on hotel location. Small and medium-sized hospitality organization is often located in peripheral regions, where IT revolution has not always been as fast and profound as in the urban centers [17].

Methodology: This study used actual e-mails that were sent to various three to five star hotels in Malaysia and it was an adaptation of the research carried by Frey *et al*. [13] in Swiss hotel industry. The population of study is hotels ranging from three to five star hotels which possess e-mail addresses. The researchers used stratified random sampling at 200 hotels all over Malaysia. This is the only sampling design that would allow assessing e-mail responsiveness in a meaningful way targeted at the right groups. It would stratify the sample into 3 distinct categories that are three stars, four stars and five stars hotel. It's the most efficient and appropriate choice of methods when differentiated information is needed regarding various strata within the population.

The e-mails sent to the hotels generally requested for room availability, special room rate during peak season (Chinese New Year) and facilities at the hotel. The query used English to assure uniform responses. The 200 e-mails were sent on Friday, 15th January 2010 between 9am to 10am via e-mail. If the e-mails failed to arrive due to problems such as servers down, mails were resent individually later the next day. The funneling technique of the questions asked ranged from broad to narrow themes. The language and wording of the question are also taken into consideration. This method is the most useful data collection method since researchers can obtain information fairly easily and the questions are easily coded. The purpose of this fundamental research is to generate a body of knowledge by trying to comprehend how certain problems that occur in organizations can be solved.

Responsiveness was assessed as 'met' or 'not met' on four items: 'responded', 'did they reply', 'day response', did they reply in less than 24 hours; 'answer the room availability question' and 'answer special rates question', were follow-up e-mails necessary? A hotel should respond within 24 hours but although a hotel responded, some electronic reservationists may not answer the customer's questions about room availability or special room rates during Chinese New Year.

The quality of the e-mail reply was assessed using the variables suggested by Frey *et al*. [13]. The variables are as follows:

- Address guest with the title 'dear'
- Using formal expression
- Address guest by customer name
- Thank the guest
- Identified the sender of the e-mail
- Identified the hotel through introduction
- Using attachment for the rate query question

In order to test the hypotheses, Pearson's chi-square test was used for nominal data which is hotel location. It is divided into three categories consist of Category One (West coast Malaysia), Category Two (East coast Malaysia) and Category Three (East Malaysia). The chi-square test (Kruskal Wallis test) was used to test the hypotheses for ordinal data which are hotel rating and sizes (Razalli *et al*. 2005). The sizes are categorized into Category One (31-50 rooms) and Category Two (> 50 rooms), while for ratings it consists of Category One (3 star), Category Two (4 star) and Category Three (5 star).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the findings, in terms of the response rate results showed that 102 out of 200 hotels equivalent to 51% don't replied guest queries/ email at all. However, 98 hotels equivalent to 49% answered the e-mails questioned to them. 12 hotels equivalent to 12.2% replied e-mails in less than an hour, 35 hotels (35.7%) replied between 1 to 24 hours and 55 hotels equivalent to 56.1%) replied in more than one day.

In terms of quality reply, generally 44% of the hotels replied thanked the guest, 46.1% used the expression 'dear', 44% addressed the guest by his name, 36.7% hotels identified the hotel identity and 55% provided the sender's name. However, there were only 35.7% hotels that identified both the hotel's identity and the sender's name. The used of informal expression was only 11.2%. Finally, only 3.1% of the hotels used the attachments in responding to the e-mail. Overall, the chance of the guest receiving a quality reply was only at 12 out of 200 hotels which is equivalent to 6%. Figure 1 will examined the findings.

Table 1: Analysis of quality variables

|	Used 'dear' (a)	Used informal expression (b)	Addressed by guest name (c)	Thank the guest (d)	Identified sender (e)	Identified hotel (f)	Used attachment (g)
Rating							
3 stars							
% within rating	58.1%	37.7%	59.1%	72.4%	87.7%	59.1%	16.3%
% within variables 1 -7	19.0%	47.5%	20.6%	25.3%	24.2%	24.2%	68.7%
4 stars							
% within rating	94.3%	0%	86.6%	69.2%	100%	55.8%	0%
% within variables 1 -7	27.5%	0%	27.6%	22.9%	26.1%	21.4%	0%
5 stars							
% within rating	96.4%	18.7%	85.3%	74.2%	100%	85.3%	6.6%
% within variables 1-7	38.2%	29.3%	36.9%	32.2%	35.3%	43.7%	35.3%
Chi-square(Kruskal-Wallis)	9.185	4.821	4.477	2.448	4.490	8.140	3.813
P	0.059	0.320	0.350	0.712	0.346	0.146	0.481
Sizes							
31-50 rooms							
% within sizes	77.0%	27.0%	77.0%	77.0%	100%	52.0%	0%
% within variables 1 -7	6.8%	10.1%	8.0%	8.0%	7.6%	5.8%	0%
>50 rooms							
% within sizes	86.4%	20.2%	78.9%	76.2%	96.2%	65.5%	6.0%
% within variables 1-7	95.6%	92.9%	95.0%	92.7%	92.7%	92.7%	100%
Chi-square(Kruskal-Wallis)	5.122	0.312	3.279	0.346	0.312	0.888	0.312
P	0.095	0.881	0.235	0.870	0.881	0.668	0.881
Location							
West Coast Malaysia							
% within location	82.0%	14.5%	74.5%	77.0%	97%	64.5%	7.0%
% within variables 1 -7	70.1%	47.5%	69.4%	70.1%	72.4%	70.4%	68.7%
East Coast Malaysia							
% within location	85.3%	0%	68.7%	85.3%	100%	68.7%	0%
% within variables 1 -7	12.6%	0%	9.5%	13.6%	13.1%	13.1%	0%
East Malaysia							
% within location	92.9%	56.5%	92.9%	72.9%	92.9%	65.6%	9.3%
% within variables 1-7	23.3%	56.5%	25.3%	20.6%	20.5%	20.4%	35.3%
Pearson Chi-square	0.733	11.908	1.876	0.450	0.682	0.060	0.682
P	0.700	0.020	0..397	0.885	0.738	0.982	0.728
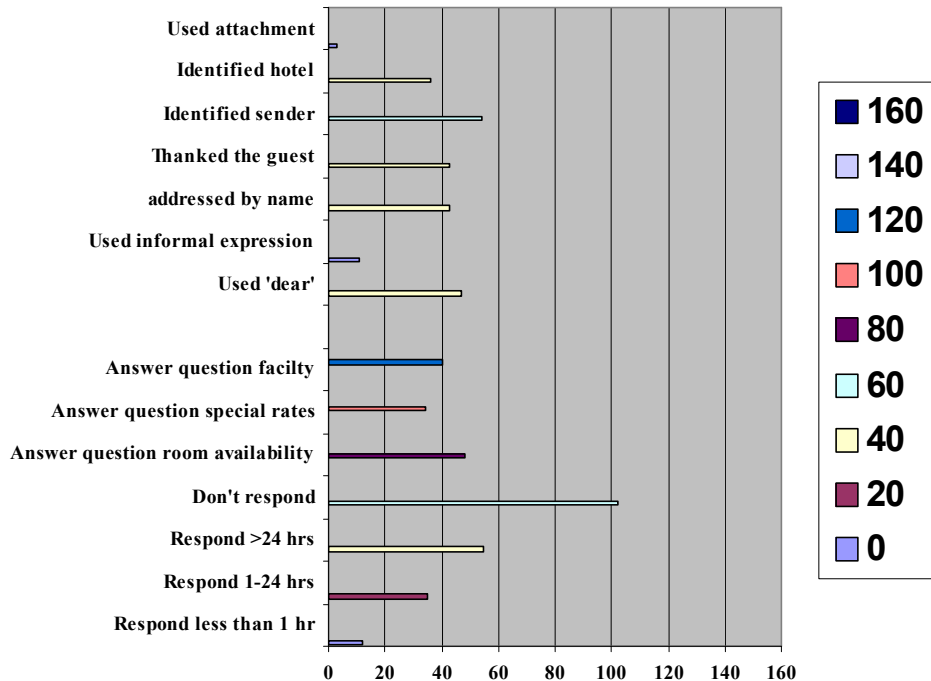
Fig. 1: Analysis of responsive variables

The analysis of the quality variables and their relationship with factors such as star rating, sizes and location was examined in Table 1. The results showed that the first hypothesis was not supported at 95% confidence level. Hence, higher rated hotels would not necessarily have better e-mail quality than the lower rated hotels. Second hypothesis which is quality of response differ by sizes was also not supported in this study at 95% confidence level. Finally, the third findings also showed that there was no significance difference between location and most of the quality variables except used informal expression. The use of informal expression was found to be significantly related to the location of the hotels.

CONCLUSION

Overall findings showed that the response rate of hotels answering e-mail queries was still poor comparing to the advancement of Information Technology that we encounter nowadays. This study is not a replication of any study but extension of the research made. From the practical contribution point of views, findings suggest that hotels should first answer the e-mail from its online customers. It helps hoteliers improving their online customer service which is e-mail responsiveness to the guest. It's a good collaboration between industry and university that can be made and both parties encountered win-win situation. Subsequently, it helps the hotel in rebranding their image since fast and efficient replying of e-mails can provide excellent impression to the guests. Hotels should be consistently answering e-mails through applying all the variables as suggested earlier in this paper. In exploring few aspects of customer service, replies can include the hotel's postal address, telephone, fax numbers and website addresses to hotel's name. Even if there are no rooms available, hotels should suggest alternative dates, partner hotels or etc. This extra deed helps boost and strengthen the customer service. Unfavorable retaliations such as 'sorry no rooms available during these festive seasons and hotels are fully booked' should be avoided. The low reply rates and times may suggest that non-qualified staffs are in charge of electronic customer service and affecting few internal procedures. Future research can be carried out in investigating how online Relationship Marketing tools such as virtual guest books, viral marketing and opt-in-e-mail relate to hotel RM and customer service [13]. The best aspect to study on is the financial cost of these tools. Websites can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to build, not to mention maintain. Perhaps the study on what are the associated costs and benefits of various online tools that contributes can be carried out.

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