

QUALITY OF CUSTOMER SERVICE: PERCEPTIONS FROM GUESTS IN ALL-INCLUSIVE RESORTS IN JAMAICA

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Abstract.—With data collected from guests in all-inclusive resorts in Jamaica, West Indies, the purposes of this study were to: (1) delineate unique dimensions of customer service perceptions among guests and (2) report the finding of a study that measured guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service in all-inclusive resorts. The study asked the following research question: Are there statistically significant differences in guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service based on gender, educational level, experience traveling to Jamaica, international travel experience, country of residence and age? The results delineated six factors with relatively high coefficients. These factors were used in further analyses using t-tests and ANOVAs that revealed statistically significant differences in guests' perceptions of various service dimensions based on the socio-demographic variables (1) level of education, (2) experience traveling to Jamaica, (3) experience with international travel, (4) country of residence, and (5) age.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the nineteenth century, the concept of customer service has expressed the desire of retail stores, hotels, and restaurants to develop loyal customers who would provide repeat business and encourage their friends and colleagues to shop, sleep, or eat at the popular establishment. Attention to customers, and the services they want and receive, gained increased prominence with the marketing research of Parasuraman et al. (1988), who identified the elements most important to customers (reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness) and developed them into a schema called SERVQUAL (Hernon et al. 1999). Parasuraman et al. (1988) defined service quality as the degree of discrepancy between customers' normative expectations for the service and their perceptions of the service performance. Numerous organizations have started venturing into multifarious approaches to improve the quality of their services (Sureshchandar et al. 2001). Most emphasize the value of excellent customer service, but a large number only

pay lip service to that value (Becer & Wellins 1990). Tourism managers strive to improve quality and levels of visitor satisfaction in the belief that this will create loyal visitors who are pleased they selected a destination, who will return to it, and who will recommend it to others (Tian-Cole & Crompton 2003). Research shows that the typical dissatisfied customer tells at least ten other people about poor service when encountered; many tell up to 20 people. The primary implication is that the business loses a customer who probably drives away.

The gradual migration towards service standardization by hotels, airlines, tourism attractions, and restaurants in an attempt to reduce variability of service outcomes has frequently produced sound service marketing strategies (Appiah-Adu et al. 2000). Customers' evaluations of service quality and their expressions of satisfaction are critical inputs to the development of these marketing strategies (Ofir & Simonson 2001). Customer satisfaction undeniably has come to be an important cornerstone of customer-oriented business practices for firms that operate in diverse industries and global markets (Szymanski & Henard 2001). Thus, customer satisfaction is a complex issue, experienced subjectively and containing quantitative and qualitative aspects, of which several are intangibles. Organizations should attempt to work within customers' framework, to gain insight into their subjective understanding of their experiences regarding customer satisfaction (Pothas et al. 2001).

Perceived service quality has proved among the most important, yet debatable, constructs in recent marketing literature. It has shown to be an input to both customer satisfaction and value (Oliver 1996). This in turn has had a direct impact on customer loyalty to the organization (Zeithalm et al. 1996). Customers who have salient expectations are likely to perceive deviations from their recollections with respect to the particular service episode. Simply stated, perceived service quality reflects how well the service delivery matches or exceeds a customer's expectations (Laroche et al. 2004). It is evident that the service revolution has become a

global phenomenon with developing countries joining the revolution in recent years. Businesses depend on customers; in fact, customers are the very livelihood of an organization (Oliver 1996). In this context, one could conclude that service quality is critical for any economy, but it is even more critical in the economies of developing countries, which are typically characterized by limited diversity of economic activities and an abundance of natural resources that are ideal for the development of tourist attractions.

Throughout the Caribbean, tourism has attracted increased numbers of visitors from North America, Europe, and other locations (Gmelch 2003). Many governments view tourism as the key to their economic development and began to welcome visitors with open arms in the 1950s. Some organizations touted tourism as having almost limitless growth potential in attracting foreign currency (Gmelch 2003). In Jamaica, for example, tourism is projected to be the primary source of foreign revenue and in 2006 was expected to generate more than \$3.9 billion of economic activity (Total Demand). Travel and Tourism Economy (direct and indirect impact) in 2005 was expected to account for 36.2 percent of GDP and 394,189 jobs (31.9% of total employment). The industry was expected to grow 10.0 percent in 2005 and by 2.7 percent per annum, in real terms, between 2006 and 2015 (World Travel & Tourism Council 2005). While the importance of tourism to the country's economy is undeniable, the response to the changing nature of the industry has not kept pace as a national priority. In recent years, concern for quality reached unprecedented levels, fueled by exacerbated competition in all types of industries (Simon & Lam 1997). Despite its importance to the Jamaican economy, tourism research is primarily focused on defining new markets to boost the economy. However, as noted by Sureshchandaret al. (2001), service companies are beginning to grasp the verities behind what their manufacturing counterparts learned in the last few decades: quality does not improve unless it is measured. It is generally accepted that the quality of customer service in Jamaica's tourism industry is good, as indicated by traditional guest comment cards. However, there is a paucity of empirical research that examines perception of quality customer service by guests, in general.

Jamaica has natural resources, primarily bauxite, and an ideal climate conducive to agriculture and tourism. Jamaican government economic policies encourage foreign investment in areas that earn or save foreign exchange, generate employment, and use local raw materials. The government provides a wide range of incentives to investors, including remittance facilities to assist them in repatriating funds to the country of origin; tax holidays, which defer taxes for a period of years; and duty-free access for machinery and raw materials imported for approved enterprises. The government of Jamaica hopes to encourage economic activity through a combination of privatization, financial sector restructuring, and reduced interest rates, and by boosting tourism and related productive activities (Jamaica 2006). The Jamaican economy is heavily dependent on services, which now account for 60 percent of GDP. The global economic slowdown, particularly after the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11 2001, stunted economic growth; the economy rebounded moderately in 2003-2004, with brisk tourist seasons. Attempts at deficit control were derailed by Hurricane Ivan in September 2004, which required substantial government spending to repair the damage. Despite the hurricane, tourism looks set to enjoy solid growth for the foreseeable future (Jamaican Economy 2006).

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The purposes of this study were to (1) present an overview of the relative importance of the tourism industry to the Jamaican economy; (2) delineate unique dimensions of customer service perceptions among guests; and (3) report the finding of a study that measures guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service in all-inclusive resorts by answering the following research question: Are there statistically significant differences in guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service based on gender, educational level, experience traveling to Jamaica, international travel experience, country of residence, and age?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The instrument for this study was developed based on a review of the literature and information gathered over eight years, during which the researcher conducted seminars in Caribbean tourism resorts, in the areas of

recreation programming, leadership, customer service, and cultural diversity. An initial pool of 80 questions on a seven-point Likert-type scale was reduced to 47 questions following a pilot test with 129 subjects using factor analysis. The decision was made to develop an instrument rather than using an existing instrument because of the limited amount of existing empirical research in the geographic location of this study. Face validity and content validity reviews were conducted by a panel of experts in the tourism profession and statistics and research specialists. These yielded sub-scales that were used to conduct ANOVA test of significant difference in guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service based on gender, education level, country of residence, experience traveling to Jamaica, international travel experience, and age. The purpose was to reduce the information in many variables into a set of weighted linear combinations of those variables (Fabrigar et al. 1999). The researcher obtained from the hotels a list of rooms with departure dates. Rooms were selected at random and questionnaires were left in each selected room the day prior to departure. Questionnaires were returned to a drop box at the checkout counter. Results were analyzed using SPSS as follows: (1) descriptive statistics; and (2) factor analysis resulting in 8 scales (1 = response to requests, 2 = response to feedback, 3 = courtesy to customers, 4 = communicating with customers, 5 = priority to customers, 6 = need for supervision, 7 = feeling about work hours, 8 = positive attitude) with eigenvalues greater than 1.00, t-tests and one-way ANOVAs. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each sub-scale. Factors 7 and 8 were eliminated because of the low alpha coefficients and the limited number of items that loaded onto these factors. Factors 1 through 6 were retained and used for further analyses.

4.0 RESULTS

Of the 500 questionnaires distributed, 329 usable guest questionnaires were returned, for a 66 percent response rate. The socio-demographic profile of the study participants was as follows: Forty-four percent were males and 56 percent females, 21.2 percent non-college educated and 78.2 percent college educated, 9.6 percent Americans, 65.2 percent repeat visitors to Jamaica and 91

percent having previous international travel experience. The predominant age group was 25-34 years.

A principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed to test the factor structure of the scale. As shown in Table 1, eight factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1 were extracted. These factors accounted for 68 percent of the variance and were defined as follows: 1 = response to requests, 2 = response to feedback, 3 = courtesy to customers, 4 = communicating with customers, 5 = priority to customers, 6 = need for supervision, 7 = feeling about work hours, 8 = positive attitude. The Cronbach alpha for the total scale was .939. Additional Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each dimension. Six of the eight dimensions had satisfactory alpha values, ranging from .698 to .981 as shown in Table 2. Thus, these six factors were retained.

A series of t-tests and ANOVAs were computed to determine if there were statistically significant differences in guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service for each dimension based on the socio-demographic variables. There was no statistically significant difference between males and females on the perceptions of the quality of customer service. However, as shown in Table 2, t-test results showed statistically significant differences at the .05 level between college educated and non-college educated guests in terms of their perceptions of the staff's delivery of customer service on the following dimensions: (1) response to questions, (2) response to feedback, (3) courtesy to customers, (4) communicating with customers, and (5) need for supervision.

As shown in Table 3, t-test results showed statistically significant differences at the .05 level between first-time visitors to Jamaica and repeat visitors to Jamaica in terms of their perceptions of the staff's delivery of customer service on the following dimensions: (1) staff's response to questions, (2) response to feedback, and (3) courtesy to customers.

As shown in Table 4, t-test results showed statistically significant differences at the .05 level between first-time international travelers and repeat international travelers in terms of their perceptions of the staff's delivery of

Table 1.—Principal component factor analysis of guests' perceptions of quality of customer service

| Dimensions | Cronbach's Alpha | | Variables |
|--|--|------|---|
| Factor 1: Response to questions | .945 | .725 | -Approaches unpleasant customers' requests diligently |
| | | .691 | -Provides service based the set schedule |
| | | .661 | -Encourages customers to come back for more assistance |
| | | .655 | -Helps customers to understand the culture of the country |
| | | .651 | -Is willing to give me individual attention |
| | | .648 | -Gives accurate answers to customers' questions |
| | | .647 | -Is willing to leave their work station to help a customer |
| | | .639 | -Delivers customer service promptly |
| | | .627 | -Is able to anticipate problems and take corrective action |
| | | .626 | -Treats all customers fairly |
| | | .606 | -Treats all customers equally |
| | | .603 | -Is always available when a customer needs them |
| | | .569 | -Is treated with respect and dignity by customers |
| | | .551 | -Is pleasant to customers who are unpleasant to them |
| | | .519 | -Handles multiple customers with a calm demeanor |
| .479 | -Always goes through the chain of command | | |
| Factor 2: Response to feedback | .802 | .649 | -Dependable handling customer service problems and issues |
| | | .645 | -Takes action when a problem occurs |
| | | .633 | -Are good listeners to customer complaints |
| | | .624 | -Apologizes to customers when necessary |
| | | .556 | -Accepts customer feedback or criticism very well |
| | | .535 | -Handles customer complaints with professionalism |
| | | .513 | -Takes customer complaints personally |
| | | .512 | -Works well as a team to ensure customers' needs are met |
| | | .504 | -Performs service right the first time |
| .478 | -Follows up with customers to ensure all their needs are met | | |
| Factor 3: Courtesy to customers | .887 | .806 | -Body language portrays a positive image to customers |
| | | .736 | -Always remembers to thank the customer |
| | | .713 | -Is courteous to customers |
| | | .639 | -Is approachable by customers |
| | | .552 | -Sounds happy and cheerful when talking on the phone |
| Factor 4: Communicating with customers | .878 | .736 | -Knowledgeable of company and ability to educate customers |
| | | .702 | -Communicates using terms customers understand |
| | | .633 | -Makes customers feel comfortable when communicating |
| | | .627 | -Deals with several customers at the same time without getting flustered |
| | | .551 | -Empowered to make decisions about delivering service |
| | | .508 | -Does not overwhelm customers with too much information |
| | | .479 | -Meets and exceeds customers' expectations |
| | | .420 | -Demonstrates a positive attitude to all customers |
| .394 | -Plan work day to ensure efficient customer service | | |
| Factor 5: Priority to customers | .981 | .965 | -Prioritizes customer requests |
| | | .964 | -Follows up all promises to customers |
| Factor 6: Need for supervision | .698 | .797 | -Monitored to ensure that they are following company rules |
| | | .789 | -Should be reprimanded if they are only a few minutes late |
| Factor 7: Feelings about work hours | .248 | .550 | -Seeks creative ways to make customers feel happy |
| | | .409 | -I feel a sense of guilt because the staff has to work on weekends and holidays |
| Factor 8: Positive attitude | | .707 | -Positive attitude to all customers |

Table 2.—T-test results based on level of education

| Dimension | Variable | N | Mean | t | df | Sig. (2 tailed) |
|--|----------------|-----|--------|--------|---------|-----------------|
| Factor 1: Response to questions | No College Ed. | 69 | 5.2594 | 2.388 | 324 | .018 |
| | College Ed | 257 | 5.0132 | 2.619 | 123.161 | .010 |
| Factor 2: Response to feedback | No College Ed. | 69 | 5.2368 | 2.964 | 324 | .003 |
| | College Ed | 257 | 4.9049 | 3.379 | 131.723 | .001 |
| Factor 3: Courtesy to customers | No College Ed. | 69 | 5.5913 | 2.829 | 324 | .005 |
| | College Ed | 257 | 5.3078 | 3.354 | 141.829 | .001 |
| Factor 4: Communicating with customers | No College Ed. | 69 | 5.3271 | 2.960 | 324 | .003 |
| | College Ed | 257 | 5.0526 | 3.466 | 138.438 | .001 |
| Factor 5: Priority to customers | No College Ed. | 69 | 5.1377 | .242 | 323 | .809 |
| | College Ed | 257 | 5.0215 | .431 | 317.192 | .667 |
| Factor 6: Need for supervision | No College Ed. | 69 | 3.2059 | -2.090 | 321 | .037 |
| | College Ed | 257 | 3.6275 | -2.028 | 101.572 | .045 |

Table 3.—T-test results based on experience traveling to Jamaica

| Dimension | Variable | N | Mean | t | df | Sig. (2 tailed) |
|--|--------------------|-----|--------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| Factor 1: Response to questions | First Time Visitor | 208 | 5.1343 | 2.839 | 317 | .005 |
| | Repeat Visitor | 111 | 4.8842 | 2.682 | 191.519 | .008 |
| Factor 2: Response to feedback | First Time Visitor | 208 | 5.0448 | 2.487 | 317 | .013 |
| | Repeat Visitor | 111 | 4.8033 | 2.338 | 189.176 | .020 |
| Factor 3: Courtesy to customers | First Time Visitor | 208 | 5.4288 | 2.119 | 317 | .035 |
| | Repeat Visitor | 111 | 5.2423 | 2.017 | 195.736 | .045 |
| Factor 4: Communicating with customers | First Time Visitor | 208 | 5.1701 | 1.928 | 317 | .055 |
| | Repeat Visitor | 111 | 5.0145 | 1.875 | 207.661 | .062 |
| Factor 5: Priority to customers | First Time Visitor | 208 | 5.2633 | 1.562 | 316 | .119 |
| | Repeat Visitor | 111 | 4.6081 | 2.050 | 252.007 | .041 |
| Factor 6: Need for supervision | First Time Visitor | 208 | 3.5413 | .531 | 314 | .596 |
| | Repeat Visitor | 111 | 3.4500 | .538 | 230.954 | .591 |

customer service on the following dimensions: (1) staff's response to questions, (2) response to feedback, (3) courtesy to customers, and (4) communicating with customers.

ANOVA results showed a statistically significant difference at the .05 level between the various countries of residence on the dimensions of (1) priority to customer. These results also showed a statistically significant difference at the .05 level between the various age groups of guests on the dimensions of (1) response to questions, (2) response to feedback, (3) communicating with customers, and (4) need for supervision.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The objectives of the study were to (1) present an overview of the relative importance of the tourism industry to the Jamaican economy, (2) delineate unique dimensions of customer service perceptions among guests and (3) report the finding of a study that measured guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service in all-inclusive resorts. Factor analysis, t-test and ANOVA were the statistical analyses used to answer the research questions. Guests also rate the quality of customer service consistently high, as evidenced by the mean scores derived from the statistical analyses.

Table 4.—T-test based on international travel experience

| Dimension | Variable | N | Mean | t | df | Sig. (2 tailed) |
|--|---------------------|-----|--------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| Factor 1: Response to questions | First Time Traveler | 28 | 5.5491 | 3.756 | 308 | <u>.000</u> |
| | Repeat Traveler | 282 | 4.9988 | 5.671 | 43.848 | <u>.000</u> |
| Factor 2: Response to feedback | First Time Traveler | 28 | 5.5339 | 3.946 | 308 | <u>.000</u> |
| | Repeat Traveler | 282 | 4.8969 | 6.127 | 45.311 | <u>.000</u> |
| Factor 3: Courtesy to customers | First Time Traveler | 28 | 5.7857 | 3.159 | 308 | <u>.002</u> |
| | Repeat Traveler | 282 | 5.3273 | 6.220 | 67.382 | <u>.000</u> |
| Factor 4: Communicating with customers | First Time Traveler | 28 | 5.5913 | 3.938 | 308 | <u>.000</u> |
| | Repeat Traveler | 282 | 5.0697 | 6.840 | 52.985 | <u>.000</u> |
| Factor 5: Priority to customers | First Time Traveler | 28 | 5.6071 | .861 | 307 | .390 |
| | Repeat Traveler | 282 | 4.9893 | 2.496 | 285.445 | .301 |
| Factor 6: Need for supervision | First Time Traveler | 28 | 3.4423 | -.258 | 305 | .797 |
| | Repeat Traveler | 282 | 3.5196 | -.231 | 28.683 | .819 |

The principal component analysis yielded six factors that revealed clearly defined dimensions of guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service. All dimensions featured elements of communication; however, each factor had unique features that distinguish it from the others. The "response to questions" dimension focuses on those situations that require staff to respond to some form of inquiry by the guests. Dimension two, "response to feedback," refers to guests' perceptions of the staff's receptiveness to criticism of their performance as service delivery agents. Dimension three, "courtesy to customers," refers to the perceived elements of respect or politeness the staff displayed to guests. Dimension four, "communicating with customers," focuses on solicited and unsolicited verbal and non-verbal interactions with guests. Dimension five, "Priority to customers," deals with the concept of putting customers first. Dimension six focuses on "need for supervision," where guests express their perceptions of the level of empowerment among the staff and the extent to which this impacts the timely delivery of customer service. Since the pioneering work of Parasuraman et al. (1985) in developing SERVQUAL, there have been numerous studies that extract dimensions of customer service in many companies, including the service industry. Most of the six factors extracted in this study approximated a combination of Becker & Wellins' (1990) 17-factor scale.

In terms of the demographic variables and their influence on guests' perception of the quality of customer service,

there were no statistically significant differences between males and females on their perceptions of the quality of customer service. This was contradictory to the finding of Theodorakis et al. (2004), who found a statistically significant difference between males and females on their perceptions of customer satisfaction in health club settings. Further, the similarities in gender response may be influenced by the fact that the research sites were couples-only, all-inclusive resorts: these couples may have had similar experiences during their vacation. There were statistically significant differences on four dimensions based on educational level, with guests with no college education rating the quality of customer service higher than college educated guests on their perceptions of staff's (1) response to questions, (2) response to feedback, and (3) courtesy to customers. One could surmise that more educated guests are aware of the standards of expected quality service, have more international travel experience, and have a point of reference from which to make judgment about the quality of customer service. There were statistically significant differences between first-time visitors to Jamaica and repeat visitors to Jamaica on their perceptions of the quality of customer service on the following dimensions: (1) response to questions, (2) response to feedback, and (3) courtesy to customers. The same was true for first-time international travelers and repeat international travelers. However, the additional dimension "communicating with customers" was statistically significant for the latter. In all cases first-time guests rated the quality of customer service higher

than repeat guests. Again, the theory that guests with more travel experience have higher expectations of staff is evident. On the country-of-residence variable, only the dimension (1) "priority to customers" showed a statistical significance, with U.S. and Canadian guests rating the quality of customer service lower than guests from Europe and other countries. It must be noted that the largest number of guests to Jamaican all-inclusive resorts are from North America. With the age variable there were statistically significant differences for dimensions (1) "response to questions," (2) "response to feedback," (3) "communicating with customers," and (4) "need for supervision." The lowest rating for the quality of customer service was by the 45-54 age group.

These results should add to the body of knowledge on customer service research in Jamaica because tourism research is primarily focused on defining new markets as a means of economic growth despite the importance of tourism to the Jamaican economy. However, there is a paucity of empirical research that examines perception of quality customer service by guests. The above results suggest that there is relative consistency in guests' perceptions of the quality of customer service delivery in all-inclusive resorts in Jamaica, and that the service culture is taking hold in the tourism industry. Customer service workers in the tourism industry in Jamaica must guard against apathy, where the community takes the presence of tourists for granted and contact with the visitor becomes impersonal. Before the actual consumption experience, it is posited that consumers hold a set of expectations, based on previous or similar experiences primarily by communications, including word of mouth and advertising; this serves as a benchmark for quality interpretation of the service (Loroche et al. 2004). Customer service providers must take measures to ensure that these expectations are met consistently even when there are discrepancies between the guests and the hosts in terms of customs and service delivery standards. As stated by Johns et al. (2003), cultural values influence service predisposition of service providers through specific job attitudes. Respondents in their study perceived humbleness, loyalty to supervisors and tolerance of others to have the greatest positive effect on their job attitude. With Jamaica

being an underdeveloped country, with employees delivering service to guests who are primarily from developed countries, the cultural gap is apparent and is recommended as an area of further exploration. It should also be pointed out that there were limitations to the study, such as the small number of respondents for some socio-demographic variables, and since the research sites cater to couples only, these couples may have influenced each other's responses to the research questions. Nonetheless, as observed by Becker & Wellins (1990), it is critical that organizations monitor and evaluate the perceptions customers have of their customer-contact people. They also noted the job skills of customer service people most likely need to be enhanced through training.

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