

Front Office Operation in Hotel Industry: A Catalyst towards Tourist Patronage. (Case Study of Larema Hotel)

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Abstract

Hospitality industry is one of the fragile and sensitive establishments which cater for people's wants, needs and desire when they are away from their usual domicile. The industry is people – service – oriented which requires hospitality industry ethical standard and professionalism in bid a treat guest comfortably and feel at home by a receptionist; However, poor service delivery and low patronage has in recent time undermine the profitability and sustainability of hospitality business in the state due to unqualified and trained staff. Poor remuneration, terms and condition of employment has also incapacitate most employee's productivity. This paper examines the role of front office operation as the nerve centre in the hotel industry. Secondary and observation method were used in gathering cogent and relevant information for this research work. The paper concludes and recommends workable ideas that will promote ethical standard and professionalism that can boost tourist patronage to hotel industry in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: Hotel, Ethics, Standard, Patronage.

Introduction

Hospitality is the relationship between guest and host, or the act or practice of being hospitable. Hospitality is also known as the act of generously providing care and kindness to whoever is in need. According to Dictionary.com hospitality means 'the friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers'. Specifically, this includes the welcome, reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers in a warm, friendly and generous way. The word hospitality is derived from the Latin word *hospes*, meaning "guest, visitor, or one who provides lodging for a guest or visitor." In India, hospitality is based on the principle *Atithi Devo Bhava*, meaning "the guest is God." Regardless of the class or type of the hotel, front office is the most visible and essential focal point of a hotel. The focal point of activity within the front office is the reception desk, which is located in the front lobby of a hotel and dispenses all front-of-the-house activities of the hotel. It is the communication centre of the hotel with great amount of guest contact. Guests interact with the hotel for the first time by interacting with the staff of the front office,

and they form the first impression about the hotel based on the efficiency, competency and behaviour of the front office staff.

The reception (Receptionist) desk performs the functions like the sale of rooms, guest registration, room assignments, handling of guest requests, maintenance of the guest accounts, cashiering along with handling mail and providing information.

In this Unit, my audience will be familiarised with all these aspects of the front office management. The trend of world markets has changed noticeably from agricultural to service oriented industry (Asian Development Outlook, 2007). All of the people-service-oriented establishments like the Larema Hotel are trying their best to improve their service quality in order to make customers satisfied while away from their usual domicile. Hotel operators now focus more on the quality standards in order to meet the basic needs and expectations of the customers to call for patronage. Once customers & requirements are clearly identified and

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understood, hotel operators are more likely to anticipate and fulfill their customers' needs and wants (Juwaheer & Ross, 2003). The more satisfied the customers are, the more likely they are to return or prolong their hotel stay (Choi & Chu, 2001).

Understanding the Qualities of Front Office Staffs

As front office is a critical department in a hotel in view of its revenue generating capacity and influence in image-building, the staffs working in this department assume a special importance. Great care is taken in the selection of front office staffs as they play certain key roles as –

Ensure salesmanship: They motivate the guest to spend more on various hotel facilities.

As a problem solver: Guest invariably approaches the front office for the help. In case they have a problem or complaint, the staffs have to be diplomatic and resourceful to solve the problem at the shortest possible time.

A reference point: Guest, who wants information or wants to pass information, uses front office staff for these purposes. The front office staff should have the excellent intra-communication skills to provide best possible reference point for the guests.

As a coordinator: Since they are reference point, the front office staffs are required to coordinate with other departments, airlines, travel agencies and city tour officers to give the guests personalized services.

As an image builder: As an extension to their salesman's role, front office staff can certainly generate a good image for the establishment in their manner of dress, communication, personal conduct and efficiency.

In view of the important role they play the front office staff must have the following essential attributes

A high sense of personal grooming: Uniforms must be clean and neatly pressed. Hair should be groomed well. It is preferable for ladies to tie their hair up in a bun. Nails should be manicured. Soft cologne is preferable to heavy perfumes. Jewelry should be restricted to one ring and a necklace for ladies. In short, the front office staff must be seen at their best at all times.

Personal hygiene: This is imperative to front office personnel. As they are constantly exposed to hotel guests, a clean appearance helps to project a good image not only of them but of the establishment as well.

Self Confidence: This is necessary as front office personnel meet guests of different countries, statuses and cultures. These guests should be comfortable and feel at ease in dealing with these people.

Correct and clear communicator: It is preferable that front office staff know more than one language. It helps in communicating with guests who cannot speak English or the local language

Diplomacy: Diplomacy is the greatest attribute required. Very often there are situations, where a guest is irate over something; a diplomatic dealing helps in diffusing the explosive moments. It is quite common for a busy hotel to have no rooms to offer a guest who has come with a confirmed booking. A diplomatic approach is the only way by which the guest can be pacified.

Calmness: Front office staff should have high degree of the nature of calmness to take the busy demands of a front office's operations. Being the never center of the hotel, the front office is constantly in touch with guests and therefore invariably comes under tremendous pressure. The guests always expect personalized, priority treatment and pressure of demand never ceases. Coupled with this are difficult guests who can unnerve a person. The front office staff should thus have a high degree of tolerance for pressure of work and be calm and composed at all times.

Strong memory: Front office staff should have ability to remember names and faces. This single attribute distinguishes the good from the average amongst the front office staff. Every individual has an ego and his/her name is most precious and personal to him/her. If the front office staff can call most guests by their names, this immediately flatters them and personalizes the guest experience. The guest begins to feel he/she is welcome to people recognize him/her by name.

Best mannerism: As hotel is a meeting place of social elites all the grace and etiquette associated with good society comes into play. Guests of all statuses come to stay in the hotel and they are used to good manners and politeness. Wishing a guest the time of the day and saying "thank you" are basic etiquettes shown.

Smiley face: This is very becoming to front office operations. Guests like to be handled by a cheerful staff at the desk. Their smile exudes cheer to the guests and put them at ease.

Physical ability: Front office operations required the staff to stand for long hours at a stretch. The staff must be sturdy, agile and active.

Quick decision making ability: Guests often approach the front desk with problems and requests. Front office staff must be able to decide quickly a course of action that satisfies the guest, at the same time keeping the interests of the organization alive.

Methodology

This study is an exploratory research work aimed at finding out the significance of front office operation a catalyst towards visitors/tourists patronage to Larema Hotel in Bauchi State. A survey design was employed in conducting this study as it requires the opinion of individuals involved in handling customer service which include accommodation, restaurant, recreation services and information services. This approach is in line with the opinion of Kumar (2005) who suggested that survey is an adequate instrument for exploratory study. Structured, closed-ended questionnaire was adopted for obtaining the primary information. The choice of the questionnaire was to allow the respondents to respond at their convenient time and give cogent answer.

The questionnaire was divided into two segments, A and B. Section A allows the respondent to provide background information such as qualification, department, length of service, status and job placement; and Section B contained questions which provide data about quality service delivery, room occupancy, customer satisfaction level and visitors inflow to the hotel. In addition, interviews were

conducted with two of the management staff of the Larema Hotel.

Also depending on responses received, probing questions were asked to further elicit cogent and relevant information in line with topic under review and some questions were rephrased to get clearer responses. The population of the study comprised 15 members of staff of the Larema Hotel, Bauchi who provides services such as accommodation, Restaurant and Bar, Laundry services to tourists/visitors when away from their abode. The study adopted a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative analysis. Snedecor and Cochran's (1989) descriptive model of frequency distribution and mean deviation were performed to determine the relationship between outcome and observation.

Result and Discussion

In justifying the significance of the front office operation as a driver of tourist's patronage to the Larema Hotel, Bauchi questions were asked and analysis presented. The result indicates that 46 respondents (57.5%) were of the opinion that the establishment most often experience low patronage, while 25 respondents (31.5%) agreed that the hotel visitors/tourist patronage is not encouraging. This implies that the staff of Larema Hotel is strongly aware of the low inflows of guest to the establishment. In addition, 71 respondents (88.75%) acknowledged that the low guest inflows to the Hotel are linked to poor remuneration, lack of guest motivation. It can be deduced that the hotel management play more emphasis on employing unqualified and unprofessional workers to mount the front office operation. This eventually brings about poor service delivery and unpleasant circumstances experienced by the guests.

Conclusion

The study established the evidence of low tourist visitor's patronage to the Hotel. It was also established that poor service delivery, erratic electricity and lack of Professionalism further contributed to the low influx of guest patronage to the establishment thereby affecting profit and productivity of the organization.

Recommendations

The role of hospitality industry like hotel establishment can never be over emphasized due to its economic significance in terms of job creation, revenue generation, income generation and foreign exchange earnings. In light of the above, it is recommended that the hotel organization should employ competent personnel that will help promote good image of the establishment. Reasonable take home pay and

remuneration should be paid to employee to enhance productivity. Training and re-training of employ should be adhered to promote quality service delivery and customer satisfaction.

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