

To Be or Not to Be (the Manager), That is the Question!

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Abstract

On a business trip to Macau, a news media reporter encountered an unpleasant experience, due to the hotel management's inability to or avoiding to deal with a service failure at a five-star hotel. The service failure was not only due to the overcrowded restaurant during breakfast hours, but also resulted in a long waiting time because of the inefficient seating of guests. To avoid taking responsibility for handling the complaints and dealing with the issues, the manager on duty pretended he was a lower-level employee. Furious guests reported the situation to the hotel. What should the hotel management do?

Key words: breakfast; hotel; manager; overcrowding; restaurant

The Story

During a September 2015 business trip, I spent several days at a newly-opened five-star hotel, the Nouveau Hotel (name disguised) in a metropolitan city. Prior to meeting with our clients, my team and I agreed to meet the night before to put the finishing touches on our presentation. Although no one expected the session to run into the early hours of the next morning, my team and I stuck it out and agreed to get what little sleep we could, before meeting for breakfast in just a few hours. As the restaurant stopped serving breakfast at 10:00 am, we agreed to meet at the restaurant at 9:30 am – which we felt was plenty of time to rest, eat and look presentable before meeting our clients later that morning.

As agreed, the team met at the restaurant at 9:30am. As we got into line, we noticed with dismay that others in front of us were complaining about the long wait. In addition, we noticed an occasional guest would simply bypass the line and find a place to sit. Not only was this clearly rude, but it added to the wait for those of us who were following the rules. As we waited, one of my team mates pointed out

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several servers who seemed to be idly chatting and laughing among themselves. This definitely gave the appearance of lacking concern for their guests. After patiently waiting 20 minutes in line, we decided to voice a complaint.

This is the dialogue that followed:

Guest: *Excuse me. We've been waiting over 20 minutes now, while several guests simply walked right past us and were seated immediately. Why were so many guests seated without waiting in line as requested by your welcome sign?*

Waiter: *Sorry sir. I didn't notice people not waiting their turn. We apologize for keeping you waiting. It won't be much longer.*

Although not totally happy with the waiter's response, we were soon seated. As we hurriedly ate breakfast in a feeble attempt to recover the time wasted in line, we began to realize we were running out of time. Despite our best efforts, the unexpected wait delayed our planned departure – forcing us to call our clients to apologize and request a rescheduled meeting.

Even though the cancelled meeting was our decision, we felt it necessary to bring this to the hotel's attention, as the poorly managed and overcrowded restaurant contributed to missing our meeting. Sensing that our waiter wouldn't be very helpful, we chose to complain to a manager.

Guest: *Excuse me. We have a complaint. We waited in line for nearly 30 minutes while other guests simply ignored the "Wait to be seated" sign and walked right in and were seated immediately.*

Supervisor: *Sorry sir. We have several large groups staying with us right now, and that exceeded our normal service ability.*

Guest: *I understand, but it really looks like no one is managing this situation. As a five-star hotel, you should do better. May we talk to your manager, please?*

Supervisor: *Sorry, our manager isn't in yet. There may be a traffic jam. He should be in later.*

Guest: *OK, we'll try to meet with him later. Your name is Jim, right?*

Supervisor: *Yes sir, my name is Jim. I will let him know about the situation as soon as he gets in.*

As we had already cancelled our meeting, we had no reason to hurry and casually ate while waiting for the absent manager to arrive. Despite taking our time, the manager still didn't arrive, prompting us to follow-up with the supervisor.

Guest: *Jim, we're almost done with breakfast. Is your manager here?*

Supervisor: *Sorry sir. I think I made a mistake earlier. I think the manager may have taken a vacation day and won't be in today after all.*

Guest: *Really? Is there another manager we could speak to?*

Supervisor: *Let me check. I will find somebody.*

After 10 minutes, the supervisor returned.

Supervisor: *Sorry sir. There is a government security check today. I'm afraid that all of the high-level managers are busy offering their support to the check.*

Guest: *Does that mean we can't make a complaint now?*

Supervisor: *Yes sir. That is the case.*

Guest: *That's unacceptable. I'm going to keep looking for someone in a*

management position to complain to.

Supervisor: *As you please.*

Later that day, we met the Reservation Department Manager on duty and complained about the breakfast arrangement. We expressed our dissatisfaction and let them know our business was in Macau to conduct a news report for a major television station. The Reservation Department Manager conveyed his understanding and apologized for our negative experience.

We found out from the Reservation Department Manager that Jim was the restaurant manager and apparently had not been forthright about his position as the manager. The worst thing about our interaction with Jim was that he chose rather to lie, than to admit his lack of control over the situation and to simply apologize.

The next morning, the restaurant arranged a reserved seating for my team in the breakfast restaurant. After thanking the Reservation Department Manager for making this special arrangement, we had a relaxed breakfast which afforded enough time to complete our interview with the local officials, as planned.

Possible Solutions

- A. The restaurant manager informs the hotel guests that the restaurant is overcrowded and asks them to continue to wait until seats become available.
- B. The restaurant manager should have immediately apologized for allowing others to be seated without waiting in line. In addition, the manager should have offered discount dinner coupons to those guests who had been waiting in line.
- C. The restaurant manager should have arranged for additional seating in the other in-house hotel restaurants. In addition, the manager could have offered guests who experienced excessive wait times the option to expedite their orders by selecting items from an à la carte menu.
- D. The restaurant manager should have immediately apologized for allowing others to be seated without waiting in line, and directed them to additional seating areas in the other in-house restaurants. Afterwards, the hotel's General Manager could have personally signed letters delivered to the guest rooms requesting suggestions to improve service quality.
- E. For those guests staying another day, the General Manager should reserve special tables as a means to compensate for the previous day's experience.

Assessments

Surface Assessment

The hotel restaurant manager's lack of insight, unwillingness to accept responsibility, failure to address complaints, and lying to guests resulted in a massive service failure. Perhaps it was the manager's view that he could ignore guest complaints, as most guests typically stay only for one night, and check out

either before or soon after breakfast. Although not a practice that would be condoned by true five-star hotels, it could be that avoidance has not significantly harmed this hotel. Over time, perhaps guests staying at this hotel learned to accept diminished services as they got closer to check out time. If management doesn't address this attitude, it could eventually impact the hotel's reputation and long-term revenues.

Deep Assessment

Service recovery involves a series of steps (Tschohl, 2005). The first, and arguably most important, step is to apologize to guests for service failures. Service employees must be able to recognize and acknowledge what went wrong during the course of the service encounter – i.e., they must identify what made the guest unhappy, uncomfortable, or resulted in feelings of unjustified, or unfair treatment. The employee dealing with the guest complaint must also be willing and able to take responsibility for resolving the problem. Although conceptually quite easy, it is often neglected.

The second step in service recovery is taking action to solve the problem. Once made aware of the situation, the employee must do whatever is necessary to solve the problem and correct the mistake(s) made.

The third step is to provide compensation commensurate with the severity of the service failure. According to Tschohl (2005), "To simply say you're sorry is nice, but it's not very powerful," ... "You must give the customer something that has value in his eyes. Every company has something of value it can give to a customer who has experienced a problem. It can cost the company from nothing to a few dollars but, as long as it has value in the customer's eyes, it will be effective." In this case, no restaurant employee was willing to apologize and solve the problem in the first place. The reservation manager's proactively arranging a special section for our breakfast impressed me. It is a service recovery.

It is likely that, if the restaurant manager had apologized and explained the difficulties to us, we would have moved on and forgot about the incident. However, listen to this...Roughly one year later, a friend checked into the same hotel. I was surprised to learn my friend experienced the same situation while waiting for breakfast. It seems the hotel hasn't learned anything about service, or service recovery.

References

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Appendix: Multiple Choice Solution Points Awarded

- A. The restaurant manager informs the hotel guests that the restaurant is overcrowded and asks them to continue to wait until seats are available. 0 points; this solution will result in severe guest dissatisfaction.
- B. The restaurant manager should have immediately apologized for allowing others to be seated without waiting in line. In addition, the manager should have offered discount dinner coupons to those guests who had been waiting in line. 1 point; this is an acceptable solution as it is in line with the view "You must apologize and take responsibility for the error," (Tschohl, 2005). For service recovery to work, it must begin with the first person informed of the problem by the customer.
- C. The restaurant manager should have arranged for additional seating in the other in-house hotel restaurants. In addition, the manager could have offered guests who experienced excessive wait times the option to expedite their orders by selecting items from an à la carte menu. 2 points; this solution resolves the problem of excessive guest wait times. In addition, by providing special menu services, the guests may feel special and appreciated. If the à la carte menu offers the same items offered in the breakfast buffet, no additional food costs are incurred.
- D. The restaurant manager should have immediately apologized for allowing others to be seated without waiting in line, and directed them to additional seating areas in the other in-house restaurants. Afterwards, the hotel General Manager could have personally signed letters delivered to the guest rooms requesting suggestions to improve service quality. 3 points; Apologizing to the guest is the first step of Service Recovery. Providing an additional seating area would have solved the customer wait time problem.
- E. For those guests staying another day, the General Manager should reserve special tables as a means to compensate for the previous day's experience. 4 points; Data showing that effective service recovery requires service staff to respond within 60 seconds of a guest complaint.

Points received for the answer circled: _____

Editorial Commentary

In this case, both the waiter and the restaurant manager were unwilling to apologize to the guests for the long wait and being passed over by other guests unwilling to follow the hotel's own instructions to wait in line.

The three main steps of service recovery are (Reimann et al., 2008): 1) apologize, 2) solve the problem, and 3) offer compensation. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the higher a guest complaint is elevated, the greater the

compensation needed to resolve the issue. After knowing the situation, the restaurant manager should have opened the dining room for breakfast to accommodate the extra guests and show that guest suggestions are acted on.

The author suggested several options in responding to this service failure. For option B, the restaurant manager should have immediately apologized for allowing others to be seated without waiting in line. In addition, the manager should have offered discount dinner coupons to those guests who had been waiting in line. Not only does this solution meet these criteria, but it also potentially benefits the hotel by providing additional revenue if the customer takes advantage of the discount dinner offers. For option D, a letter from the general manager demonstrates the hotel's sincerity when correcting the mistake and provides guests with the feeling their complaint positively affected hotel service. In return, the hotel may receive positive word-of-mouth endorsements.

Furthermore, the hotel breakfast restaurant manager who lied should have received disciplinary action – with that follow-up information provided to the guests that were lied to. There may be cultural reasons why the restaurant employees didn't act. It could be that fear of getting involved in a service failure situation drove the employees to avoid rather than engage. It could be the management culture within the Macau service industry to discipline employees for admitting mistakes. If such a culture does exist, employees understandably may go to great lengths to avoid admitting that they, their co-workers, or their company, were at fault. In such an environment, lying may seem like the lesser of two evils. Unfortunately, avoidance and lying are the worst ways of handling guest complaints (Reimann et al., 2008). Without a change of culture, step one in service recovery simply can't happen, and attempts to apply steps two and three are not likely to result in satisfactory problem resolution or guest satisfaction.

To paraphrase William Shakespeare: Whether 'tis nobler to suffer the slings and arrows of accepting blame, or to take action against the source of guest troubles, to be effective, or not to be, that is the question. To be effective, or not, is always the choice employees from entry level to company manager make daily. Different choices result in different endings. A lack of action seldom results in change.