

Hotel Shuttle Service Fails to Get the Customer to the Airport on Time

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Abstract

I booked the hotel shuttle service to take me to the airport, but a massive gridlock caused the flight to be missed. The driver was not empowered to deal with my grievance, and the hotel did not reach out proactively. I called to complain about the service failure when I got home, but all the hotel offered me was 20% off when I visited the hotel again within the same year.

Key words: customer grievances; enabled staff; responsibilities; service consistency; quality control

The Story

It was a sunny summer's day in Manila in April 2015. I was up early and scuffling around my hotel room preparing for my trip back home to Chiang Mai. After an exhausting three-day conference, I was more than happy to go back to some familiar surroundings. The flight was set to depart at 12:55 p.m., and so I had plenty of time to get my affairs in order. The previous night, I booked the hotel's shuttle service to take me to the airport. It takes just shy of one hour from the hotel to the airport, and so the receptionist had arranged for me to leave on the 10:00 a.m. shuttle service - a sedan just for me. This VIP-like service is quite costly, but after a long day of work, I felt it appropriate to spoil myself.

At 9:50 a.m., I checked out of my room and proceeded to the counter that offers the shuttle service. The receptionist was not the same person who helped me to book for the service, but she checked the computer and happily acknowledged my reservation. She told me to wait and the driver would be there shortly. She would fetch me when the shuttle arrived. As I still had time to spare, I sat down on a sofa and started to check my email with my smartphone via the hotel's Wi-Fi. Before I realized it, it was around 10:10 a.m. and the receptionist had not come. I went back to the counter to confer with her. She apologized and told me that the shuttle was

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held up due to traffic. I was slightly worried about this new traffic development, but the lady assured me that the driver was experienced enough to navigate around the traffic. Thus, I waited.

The shuttle finally arrived at almost 11.00 a.m. I was behind schedule, but should have been able to catch my flight. I boarded the shuttle, but soon we hit major congestion. That is where everything began to crumble. Before my eyes was a street filled with countless vehicles stretched across a vista without any end. What I thought to be mild traffic had turned out to be a massive gridlock that completely immobilizes this part of the city. When I eventually got to the airport, it is already 12:45 p.m. I had missed my flight. I expressed my frustration to the driver, but he had no authority to offer me any compensation. Fortunately, or at least considering the circumstances, I was able to book another flight at 5:00 p.m.

Due to the traffic, the hotel shuttle service failed to get me to the airport on time. Cognitively, I knew I probably should not blame the hotel's shuttle service, but emotionally, I thought that something better could have been done. After all, traffic is quite common in Manila. They should know from drivers or other sources what is going on and should have enough experience to factor in the traffic, so that almost invariably people can get to the airport with time to spare in order to catch their flight.

I do not believe the service empowered the driver enough to deal with airport late-arrival customer grievances. It would be unrealistic for me to go back to the hotel and complain to the receptionist about the late arrival at the airport or to mention the fear of traffic that still looms over me. Even if I wanted to hold the hotel accountable before departing, I would need to take a cab and endure another trip through the gridlock. As such, I would then be asking for compensation covering three trips. I did place a call to the hotel complaining about my situation, but it is very difficult to strong-arm them. They did promise 20% off for my next stay with them, which in my opinion is not much, because the offer was only valid within a year, and I had no plans to be there within that time. When I go back to Manila, I will not be staying in the same hotel. I hung up the phone after 5 minutes of not achieving anything.

Solutions

Select (circle) one of the following alternative solutions:

- A. Before offering the shuttle service, the hotel should suggest that the customer be prepared to leave the hotel at least 3 hours before flight departure, so that the customer has 2 hours of "slack" before the flight departure time.
- B. When getting a call about this consumer complaint, the hotel should immediately refund the hotel shuttle service fee.
- C. When getting a call about this consumer complaint, the hotel should offer a discount or even a free hotel room voucher valid within a year for the customer.

- D. When getting a call about this consumer complaint, the hotel should immediately and directly refund the hotel shuttle service fee and give a discount or even a free hotel room voucher valid within a year for the customer.
- E. Traffic is not something the hotel can control, and so the customer should not hold this against the hotel.

Assessments

Surface Assessment

The best solution for the circumstances is D. Solution D will definitely make the customer comfortable and build up customer loyalty. Actually, the hotel will receive very positive WOM (Word of Mouth) marketing and may not lose anything, because the customer may not have a plan to come back to Manila again within a year. In the future, Solution A could be the hotel's SOP (Standard Operation Procedure) for its shuttle service. No service recovery is better than the correct service, which provides quality service and avoids a potential consumer complaint.

Deep Assessment

From an effective operational point of view, communication between the driver and the hotel is very important. Therefore, the hotel should have strong communication between the drivers and relevant hotel desk with a SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) for dealing with late arrivals at the airport. The hotel might not be able to do anything about the traffic or get the customer to airport on time, but can make sure the customer has little reason to harbor any resentment against the hotel. The SOP must cover information about passengers that can be used for the hotel to empower the driver to better handle a situation.

The hotel also needs to realize that customers utilize what they take to be the hotel's shuttle service, and not just some random cab, because they expect to get to the airport on time even under exceptional circumstances. When the shuttle fails to deliver the customer to the airport on time, the hotel's accountability becomes involved. The hotel should employ solution D with the cost of a refund built in and a system operative that means a refund is almost never needed.

The solutions correspond to different costs to the hotel. Some solutions cost a refund, but the hotel needs to get procedures operative, so that refunds are almost never needed. Regarding free or reduced-price future visits, the hotel may not lose anything, because the customer may not have a plan to come back to Manila again within a year. Regardless, most hotels are not running at 100% bookings, and so a loss is minimal. Solution D need not be costly with good management of the shuttle service, and the marketing benefit is high. The cost of Solution E is bad, because the hotel will lose its reputation without handling consumer complaints well.

Solution Point Awards for Multiple Choice Selection

Select (circle) one of the following alternative solutions.

- A. Before offering the shuttle service, the hotel should suggest that the customer be prepared to leave the hotel at least 3 hours before flight departure, so that the customer has 2 hours of “slack” before the flight departure time. 1 point; just as airline companies ask passengers to check in at least e.g. 1 hour before departure time, the hotel should tell customers that they may be called to take the shuttle up 3 hours before departure due to traffic. This solution really needs to be tied to effective management of the shuttle. It would be fine, if most of the time the departure is 2 hours ahead of a flight.
- B. When getting a call about this consumer complaint, the hotel should immediately refund the hotel shuttle service fee. 3 points; the hotel shows its sincerity to the customer by an apology and will make the customer comfortable, because this service failure is originally caused from the hotel shuttle.
- C. When getting a call about this consumer complaint, the hotel should offer a discount or even a free hotel room voucher valid within a year for the customer. 2 points; the hotel shows its sincerity to the customer by apology and stands on the customer’s side. Actually, the hotel may not lose anything, because the customer may not have a plan to come back to Manila again within a year.
- D. When getting a call about this consumer complaint, the hotel should immediately and directly refund the hotel shuttle service fee and give a discount or even a free hotel room voucher valid within a year for the customer. 4 points; this is a quick solution that definitely makes the customer comfortable and builds up customer loyalty. As mentioned for solution C, the hotel will incur positive WOM (Word of Mouth) marketing and may not lose anything, because the customer may not have a plan to come back to Manila again within a year.
- E. Traffic is not something the hotel can control, and so the customer should not hold this against the hotel. 0 points; the hotel may be able to save some money and trouble, but losing a customer and generating negative word-of-mouth are causes for concern.

Your point score for this case study: _____

Editorial Commentary

This story is a very interesting case of service recovery in many ways. First, traffic jams are common these days, especially in big international cities (Kurniawan et al., 2015). One can only do so much to avoid the possibility of a traffic jam. This means that a contingency plan for service recovery related to a traffic jam is necessary for the tourism industry. Second, the attempt for service recovery is less effective when face-to-face interaction is not possible (Van der Heijden et al., 2013).

Third, under usual circumstances, the hotel's obligation to a customer ends when a customer checks out. In this story, however, it is very difficult to determine how responsible the hotel was or even if it was at fault. These factors blur the boundary of responsibility.

A good service recovery includes three components. First, the service supplier needs to offer compensation to restore equity to the customer-firm relationship after a service failure (Grewal et al., 2008). Second, redeeming a failed service is done through good interaction. Finally, it is important to plan ahead so that front-line employees know how to handle a service recovery situation without extensive directions from the management level (Chen et al., 2014). It is clear that the hotel in this story failed in this respect.

From the story's context, we get the feeling that the shuttle service is closely linked to the hotel. However, the story seems to make it clear that there is a shuttle desk and an operations area, which is separate from the hotel desk. I really doubt that the hotel operates a private car shuttle. I am guessing that the hotel has an agreement with a shuttle service that has desks at a number of hotels. The shuttle service presumably has a lot of cars on the road and may have vehicles that run pickup routes carrying multiple passengers. The point is that I see two businesses intimately involved with the person of the story getting to the airport.

The solutions address not getting to the airport, as if one company is involved, and address solving the problem in a somewhat limited way. The hotel has an option that takes it out of the solution picture. If the shuttle is a separate company that operates from the hotel due to the hotel renting out its space, then the hotel can make it clear to someone that stays there that the shuttle is not their service. Most of us who have travelled have taken a hotel's shuttle service from or to a hotel located near an airport. When we take that service to the airport, the hotel has advised us what shuttle to take to make our flight and takes the responsibility if we do not get to the airport for our flight. In the example, I suspect that the traveler was referred to the "shuttle desk" by hotel employees. The hotel employees should not, and hopefully did not, give any advice on the time to take the shuttle.

As the story makes clear, if a hotel has a shuttle service located in the lobby, then a person staying at the hotel may unfortunately assume that the shuttle service and hotel are closely linked. The closeness of the link may only be that the hotel allows one shuttle to be in the lobby and competitors bid for the spot. The "rub" for the hotel is that providing a spot for a single shuttle implicates them in the service. If the hotel lets a shuttle be in the lobby, particularly a single shuttle company, then there is an implicit endorsement of that service. If the hotel does not have a "quality of service" clause in the contract for providing service from the lobby, then the hotel is asking for trouble.

I think that the story makes clear that the hotel did not have a quality of service clause in its contract with the shuttle service. If there was a contract, then there should have been a SOP that linked the shuttle company and the hotel in dealing with service failure. Moreover, the hotel should have had a service failure reporting as part of what the shuttle service was required to do.

The point herein is that as I see it, the hotel's major failure was not having a proper arrangement with the shuttle service. The business of getting somebody to the airport on time was the business of the shuttle, and if there were regular failures due to traffic jams, then the hotel should have known and the shuttle service should have solved the service failure problem. With many vehicles on the street and, presumably, other sources of information about evolving traffic problems, the shuttle company should be able to deal with most situations *if they make provisions to notify people of early pickup when that is necessary*. We know from the story that an experienced driver could typically get to the airport in a certain amount of time with some congestion.

The focus of the story is a trip on which no driver would have made it on time when having left at the same time. If you get on a road that you cannot get off of and there is an accident, then you are stuck. However, the issue is not whether some driver with enough information could have made it. The story's writer is concerned with his trip and the solutions he sees in relation to it. He has legitimate concerns about what happened. He paid a lot for a private car to get him to the airport on time, and he did not get there on time. Why did the driver not wave the fee for the trip? Perhaps he did not, because if he had done so, he would lose part or all of that money. If the hotel's agreement with the shuttle had specified something about what happens when somebody in a special service ride does not make it to the flight, then the driver would have done something at the airport, given he was properly trained by the shuttle service. The shuttle service could, in fact, have a guarantee that it advertises as part of the premium service. The shuttle firm could say that under a late arrival, the fee is waived.

I am avoiding addressing the solutions in the story, because the service failure may have been a rare event. Regardless of getting to the airport late or using an expensive personal service is rare or uncommon, both the hotel and the shuttle service need to have an SOP to address the situation. If the hotel wants to get into providing a free or reduced rate accommodation at a future date, then the value of that needs to be studied. At best, such an offer needs to be an alternative since, as with the story, the offer can be meaningless if the customer is not likely to be back in a time frame in which the offer is valid. As I see it, the hotel really needs to see that a shuttle that "represents" the hotel should have an SOP that keeps hotel visitors happy for those who use it. A contract with the shuttle should provide for the reporting of service failures and specify the SOP for dealing with such failures.

I do not see this as the place for providing details for hotel contracts or shuttle service operating procedures. Instead, I suggest that the shuttle service be able to advise a person who has purchased passage to the airport that the departure time may be made earlier if traffic requires that. How the shuttle company helps facilitate drivers to avoid failure due to congestion is a matter for discussion of operating such a service successfully. Regardless, a shuttle service should have a SOP for service failure, if for no other reason so that when it bids for space at a hotel, it can tell that hotel how guests will be kept happy when they use the service. Finally, given the shuttle service is independent, the story shows that the hotel's failure was in dealing

with making sure that the shuttle, which their visitors associate with the hotel, will keep the visitors happy when a service failure occurs. Hotel management needs to have a proper contractual arrangement with the shuttle service that includes reporting of problems with trips and action taken to make shuttle users from their hotel satisfied. With such monitoring, the hotel and shuttle service management can work together to see that both businesses have happy clients.

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