

Unexpected Wedding Present

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Abstract

A happy couple is having their wedding at a beach resort on an island near the coast of Venezuela. After the wedding party, the customers take their things from their rooms and ask for the key to the honeymoon suite they have reserved. The receptionist tells them that they have no reservation for the room and that it is not available. The groom asks for a different suite at the resort's expense since someone failed to make their reservation correctly. How should the resort management handle the issue?

Key words: compensation; service failure; reservation

The Story

The groom and his new wife asked the concierge to pick up their bags from their respective hotel rooms and take them to the honeymoon suite. Upon asking the receptionist for the key to the room, the receptionist told him with a perplexed look, "There must be a mistake because the honeymoon suite is not reserved under your name and in fact it's not even available." The groom reaffirmed that he made the reservation for the suite at the same time that he booked over 30 rooms for extended family almost ten months ago. On top of that, he had asked to include a special honeymoon package consisting of champagne, flowers, and spa services. The receptionist looked into their files to confirm the initial reservation. He told the groom initially, "Yes, you had reserved the suite along with all the other rooms, but the reservation for the suite was cancelled when all the excess rooms were cancelled." The groom replied, "How can that be if I never personally cancelled my reservation?" Because the customer was making reservations for rooms that his family members would pay on their own, the deposits for the rooms were not going

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to be charged on his card. However, for some reason instead of charging the deposit for the suite immediately when the reservation was made, it was left on standby along with the other rooms. Since by the deadline the hotel had given them, the honeymoon suite booking had apparently not been confirmed, the room was unreserved with the rest of the unoccupied rooms and offered again to the public on the website.

The groom insisted that there was a misunderstanding on the part of the receptionist who initially worked with him months ago and that he had clearly explained the difference between the transactions. Because there was no way to give him what he initially asked for, the groom asked for another suite to be paid for by the hotel. The receptionist, who seemed a bit inexperienced and uncomfortable, asked the groom to please wait. The receptionist left the groom waiting at the counter for almost ten minutes while the customer could overhear the receptionist talking to a superior in the office. The receptionist came out with his superior who told the groom, "I apologize for this unfortunate misunderstanding but because you were never charged for the suite, the hotel won't take the responsibility of paying for a different one entirely, but we can offer you a 10% discount along with completely covering the spa services". The groom at this point was already very frustrated and only wanted to escape from an uncomfortable situation. He mumbled about how awful the service was and quickly took the card for the new room without thanking them.

Possible Solutions

- A) The receptionist should have been direct with the groom and told him that the hotel could unfortunately not make amends, but that if the groom chose to take another room, he was welcome to do so.
- B) The receptionist should have apologized sincerely but said that unfortunately there was nothing that could be done since the customer should have noticed that when the spare rooms were cancelled, so was the honeymoon suite that had not been paid for. He could offer a free breakfast if they chose to take a different room.
- C) The receptionist should have apologized and offered a 30% discount for the alternative room, along with covering all the extra services (flowers and champagne, spa, massages, hairstylist for the bride in the morning) and providing a gourmet breakfast in the morning.
- D) The receptionist should have apologized, offered the alternative room at no cost, but explained that the extra requirements would have to be covered by the groom.
- E) The receptionist should have apologized and offered him a different room at the hotel's expense with the included services desired, as well as a free breakfast the next morning to make up for the downgrade.

Assessments

Surface Assessment

Is there a standard procedure for conflicts like this that doesn't result in losing a customer in the future? Because of the magnitude of the business given to the hotel as well as the number of potential future customers or non-customers that could arise from hosting the wedding (depending whether the bride, groom, and wedding guests leave impressed or disappointed, they may return, provide good word of mouth, or do quite the opposite), it is in the hotel's best interest to satisfy its customers regarding the suite issue.

Deep Assessment

The bride and groom both have their large extended families staying for the weekend at the resort, giving the hotel a lot of business during a time of extreme economic turmoil. Several formal meals and receptions, as well as the actual wedding party, took place at the hotel over the course of the weekend. However, the service was often poor. Often, family members waited over an hour for their food at the pool, and when many people ate together, the number of servers did not increase proportionally, causing excessive waiting times. Furthermore, during the wedding party, the dinner was an array of small appetizers, but many people were left unable to try a number of them because the servers did a poor job in distributing food evenly. However, to attendees, it seemed as if there wasn't enough food (making the father of the bride very anxious and embarrassed). Overall, the accumulated experience throughout the weekend was definitely not in the resort's favour. The Honeymoon Suite incident was the final straw. Aside from that, for the newlyweds, the suite and spa services would give them their first time alone after many months of stressful wedding preparations and was a special gift from the groom to his new wife to allow her to finally relax and enjoy herself without having to worry about anything or anyone else. The gift to his wife was supposed to be a private celebration and a token of the groom's gratitude, honour, and pleasure – a way to thank his wife for taking him as her husband and for all that she had done to make the wedding possible and him happy. The absence of this gift made the groom very sad about not being able to give his wife all that she deserved on the first night of their marriage.

When it comes to such a clearly special and important event, the seller needs to give top priority to assure that everything is confirmed and in order because the customer's disappointment if that is not the case will be serious and will reflect very badly on the business's overall service. The resort should take clear steps, including both verbal apologies and amendments, to express their sincere apology and shame for not having made the event the best it could have been for the couple. At a time where there might be uncertainty as to who made the mistake – a confused receptionist making the reservations or maybe a distracted, busy groom – the customer's testimony should always be taken as the final word because the first goal of any service is to satisfy the customer, and an unsatisfied or unhappy customer will take their business elsewhere. "Poor service cannot be recalled, repaired, or

replaced because there is no tangible product, only an experience which the customer can recall.”

Solution Points Awards for Multiple Choice Section

- A) The receptionist should have been direct with the groom and said that unfortunately, the hotel could not make amends, but that if the groom chose to take another room, he was welcome to do so. 0 points. This solution will undoubtedly result in great frustration on the customer’s behalf and reflect very badly on the resort for all the guests who saw what happened.
- B) The receptionist should have apologized sincerely but said that unfortunately there was nothing that could be done since when the spare rooms were cancelled, so was the honeymoon suite that had not been paid for. He could offer a free breakfast if they chose to take a different room. 0 points. The apology will not seem sincere if no measures are taken to repair the damage.
- C) The receptionist should have apologized and offered a 30% discount for the alternative room, along with covering all the extra services (flowers and champagne, spa, massages, hairstylist for the bride in the morning), and provided a gourmet breakfast in the morning. 7 points. From the hotel’s point of view, this solution allows a balance between costs incurred to compensate the customer and to maintain the hotel’s profits and reputation. The hotel will have to cover the costs of the luxury services and only receive a discounted price for a much cheaper room but does this bearing in mind the pleasant experience that the hotel can leave the couple with if they receive the luxury services for free. After it is all over, they will probably remember enjoying the services more than the room they were in, and will hopefully only share stories about the quality of the luxury services to others (this is in the hotel’s interest because that is where they make the most money – people prefer to invest more in luxury services than in nicer rooms).
- D) The receptionist should have apologized, offered the alternative room at no cost, but explained that the extra requirements would have to be covered by the customer. 1 point. This solution at least gives an apology and the room at no cost, but the inevitable downgrade in rooms will be more noticeable without the luxury services to distract the couple.
- E) The receptionist should have apologized and offered the groom a different room at the hotel’s expense with the included services desired, as well as a free breakfast the next morning to make up for the downgrade. 2 points. This would obviously be the ideal solution for the couple; however, it would involve greater costs than necessary for the hotel.

Editorial Commentary

This case shows how important training in services is and explores the expectation theory in practice when a consumer reaches a hotel in a “special consumption moment” (Anderson, 1973), such as a wedding weekend. The case under discussion shows a moment in which the relationship between the hotel and its customers can change significantly for better or for worse. There has been a problem in the reservation process of a honeymoon suite, and it is up to the hotel to keep its clients satisfied or, in sharp contrast, make them feel miserable on their wedding day and thus lose them as clients forever. Moreover, the hotel could get bad references affecting other potential customers who might have done business with the hotel otherwise.

This case shows a so-called “moment of truth”, an interaction, often related to a problem (such as a lost credit card or a cancelled flight) where customers invest a high amount of emotional energy in the outcome (Beaujean et al., 2006). Such moments of truth are an opportunity for companies to earn customer trust and loyalty (or distrust and dissatisfaction) if handled correctly (or incorrectly).

Companies should train their employees in customer service skills to ensure superb handling of those moments of truth. By supporting and developing frontline employees’ emotional intelligence or ability to show empathy, a company can ensure that more of those moments have a positive outcome (Beaujean et al., 2006). Empathy, or the ability to step into another person’s shoes, is the single most important customer service skill (Markidan, 2015). Patience would be another of those skills, because working face to face with clients will necessarily imply having to deal with difficult clients and complicated (somewhat ambiguous) situations, Patience is key to handling these situations, given that, contrary to what is often said, the client is not always right. In the current case, the newlyweds are right to complain, although that does not make them eligible to enjoy a completely free room and services. If they had behaved stubbornly on this issue, it would have taken a good deal of patience on the receptionist’s part to convince them they had no right to make that demand, and to convince them to not only buy into an alternative but to be happy with the alternative offered by the hotel.

Customer service quality is always important, as it has the potential to increase a company’s income, and the hospitality sector is no exception to this rule. In fact, research has shown that a direct positive effect exists between service quality and both return per room and market share, driven by client loyalty and an increase in sales. As the results of a survey by American Express (2014) show, “in order to provide consumers with an excellent customer service experience, representatives must be able to ‘provide a satisfactory answer to their question (86%)’ or be able to ‘connect them with someone who is knowledgeable (78%)’”. In this case, the receptionist was not able to give a solution to the couple’s problem, but he knew who could and went to find his superior.

The same survey shows that, “according to consumers, the most important attribute of a successful customer service professional is efficiency – the ability to answer questions or handle transactions quickly (33%)”. The perception of speed (quickness) might depend on the specific case (sometimes it might be OK to wait a

week for a solution; in other cases, waiting for an hour might be too long). In the current case, it takes almost ten minutes for the receptionist to return with the person in charge, even though the clients were hearing them talking in an office near reception. Even though ten minutes is not very long, it would have been wiser to go out to the reception immediately (after getting a short 1 or 2-minute explanation from the receptionist), as those ten minutes only served to make the clients feel more negative and distressed.

As for the answer options, option E (provide by the customer) gets a mere 2 points, because the costs involved for the hotel is unnecessarily high. Exceeding customer expectations only makes them marginally more loyal than just meeting their expectations and therefore, excess compensations only lead to expensive giveaways that have no return for the company (Dixon et al., 2010).

On the contrary, option C gets 7 points, because although this option also implies a high cost to the hotel, the hotel still gets some return on the costs. In this case, earnings from a customer and the cost of the compensation should be balanced. The hotel has earned a lot of money thanks to the couple celebrating their wedding at the hotel; the cost of the compensation is merely a small percentage of those earnings. Moreover, ensuring that the couple enjoys the experience will secure the newlyweds' positive word of mouth. Further, it is quite likely newlyweds are likely to share special moments (good and bad) related to their honeymoon with far more people, far more often, and over a far longer time into the future, than most other experiences in their life, as weddings are special moments in people's lives.

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