

Don't Bug Me!
Service Recovery for Cockroach Sighting in Hotel Food Services

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Abstract

A chef was on a vacation with her husband to celebrate their wedding anniversary. They anticipated having a special weekend at the destination to celebrate their special day. The couple was pleased to receive a handmade box of chocolates from the hotel. The surprise was that a cockroach ran out of the box when she opened it. The sighting of the cockroach made the guest wonder if their money was well spent. The couple called the manager on duty to inform him of this incident. What can the hotel do?

*Brands and names are disguised to protect individuals and corporate brands.

Key words: brand image; crisis management; hotel security and safety; pest infestation, service recovery; satisfaction

The Story

One weekend, my husband and I made a reservation to stay at an internationally-renowned resort hotel in Macau. Upon arriving at the front desk to check in, with high expectations we told the front desk agent we were there for our wedding anniversary. The front desk agent congratulated us verbally. When we checked in to the hotel room, we were impressed with the layout of the room, and were happy. When returning to the room after dinner, we were pleasantly surprised by a box of handmade chocolates on the writing desk. We were very excited and opened the chocolate box immediately. Shockingly, a cockroach ran out of the chocolate box and hid somewhere in the room! We were shocked and did not know how to react. We did not expect to see any bugs, and certainly not a cockroach in

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this five-star hotel. At first, I could simply not accept that this five-star hotel did an unacceptable job of keeping cockroaches away from the kitchen. My very next thought was to forgive, since even five-star hotels must inevitably find it tough to keep bugs away in a semi-tropical location. We wondered out loud if it isn't perhaps a common sighting in Macau, a sub-tropical fishing village. We were tired and could not think our response or planned action through. We didn't report the incident to the hotel's guest service immediately, but decided to let the issue rest and leave the decision to take action to the next day.

The next morning, the more time I spent thinking about it, the more I came to believe that the hotel should know about the incident in order to keep up to the high standard of service and cleanliness for a five-star hotel. My reasoning was that if one cockroach is sighted, there must be ten or even a hundred more nearby. It can be a health and food safety concern. We did not even want to go to the restaurant that evening! So, we decided to inform the front desk regarding the cockroach incident of the previous evening. One manager came to us nervously and insisted that we change our room, because the hotel wanted to inspect the room and find out where the cockroach was hiding and if there were any other bugs around. The manager asked us to go back to our room, to pack our luggage, and move to another hotel room. However, although we weren't interested in repacking our luggage, after the manager took the time to convince us, we returned to our room and repacked our luggage. Finally, the manager led us to a new room in person – the same room – but just on a higher floor in the hotel.

The manager apologized deeply and profusely when we checked out of the hotel. He asked us if there was anything he could do for us and expressed his hope that we had a good stay at the five-star hotel.

Possible Solution Options

Select (circle) one of the following alternative solutions:

- A.** The hotel manager should apologize for the incident. Following this incident, housekeeping should not place a chocolate box in a guest room. The hotel should offer non-food related items such as a hotel souvenir to avoid a repetition of this type of situation.
- B.** The front desk should apologize, but should not offer compensation since the couple did not provide any evidence of a cockroach either in the chocolate box or in the hotel room.
- C.** The hotel manager should apologize for the incident and offer a gift voucher immediately. This should be followed with a letter from the General Manager, inviting the couple to return to the hotel, at a discounted rate (voucher given). The letter is to communicate with the couple that the hotel has processes and periodical sanitation procedures in place, including pest control to ensure the overall cleanliness of the hotel.
- D.** The manager on duty could offer some complimentary service or a special treat, such as a free day tour or other entertainment, to compensate the couple.

E. The manager could offer a complimentary meal at the hotel.

Assessments

Surface Assessment

Did the manager respond with the best service recovery tactics to ensure the couple's customer satisfaction and loyalty? Solution C is the best choice in this scenario. A bad impression had been created by the hotel – despite their best intention to excite and delight the couple. The manager should investigate the situation to find out why a cockroach appeared in the chocolate box, and share the information of his planned action with the couple. Some resonance could result from offering the couple a tour to inspect the kitchen – knowing that one of the visitors is a chef. Asking the couple to change their room, without much of an explanation, is not appropriate and will in most cases cause additional upset or negative feelings.

Deep Assessment

The manager on duty in a hotel cannot possibly control or anticipate all problems and situations related to customer experiences in the hotel. However, managers should be enabled by the hotel's Standard Operation Procedure (SOP), when handling guest complaints, to appease customers and solve guests' problems to the satisfaction of the guest, in order to retain business and their standard as a five-star hotel. Since the Macau Star* Holiday Resort is a luxury hotel and casino, it should try to the best of its ability to protect its brand's reputation against bad word-of-mouth. Molina et al. (2013) confirmed that the tourists' satisfaction is likely to positively affect their word-of-mouth recommendation. On the other hand, the incident may lead to negative word-of-mouth that would impact negatively on the resort's reputation. Furthermore, Swanson and Hsu (2011) report that although hotel managers do not have control over all incidents at their hotels, service failures and negative experiences are likely to result in bad impressions and/or poor experiences. It is especially disappointing when customers pay a premium for staying in a five-star resort hotel – since the higher price leads to higher expectations.

From the chef's point of view, it is important to determine from which service area (e.g., the kitchen, room service, or front desk) the cockroach entered the chocolate box. As a trained chef, the customer is aware that the chef's concern is "where there is one cockroach, there are more than ten cockroaches hiding in the dark corners of the kitchen". Customers are likely to exaggerate the problem and judge the entire health and safety protocols of the establishment as inadequate or totally unacceptable. The cleanliness of other areas, including the pool, the bathroom and even the sheets, are likely to come under scrutiny by disenfranchised customers. It is thus important for management to deal with the issue with empathy and sensitivity.

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Appendix: Multiple Choice Solution Points Awarded

A. The hotel manager should apologize for the incident. Following this incident, housekeeping should not place another chocolate box in the guest room. The hotel should offer non-food-related items, such as a resort or island souvenir to avoid a repeat of the situation. 3 points. The hotel is to offer some additional compensation valued by the couple to avoid a repeat of the situation.

B. The front desk should apologize but not offer any compensation to the couple, since the couple could not provide any evidence of the presence of a cockroach. 0 points. Even though there is no hard evidence to show that the cockroach was really in the box, the hotel should try to do more so as not to offer some additional compensation to the couple.

C. The hotel manager should apologize for the incident and immediately offer a gift voucher. This should be followed up with a letter from the General Manager inviting the guests to return to the resort (including a discount voucher). 4 points. When the manager offers free accommodation to the couple for a future visit, it gives the hotel an opportunity to earn the guests' satisfaction and loyalty back. The hotel manager needs to send a letter to the couple as a follow-up, explaining what safety and sanitation actions have been taken to ensure a five-star cleanliness rating. By doing so, the manager gains another opportunity to regain the hotel's reputation.

D. The manager on duty could offer some complimentary service or a special treat, such as a free day tour or other entertainment to compensate the couple. 2 points. Since the couple's purpose in visiting Macau is to celebrate their wedding anniversary, the hotel should offer something they see as of value to *the customers*. Thus, a bottle of champagne, or a romantic tour along the canal or other entertainment would be meaningful.

E. The manager could offer a complimentary meal at the hotel. 1 point. The

cockroach found in the box of chocolates indicates a health and safety or sanitation problem. Offering anything related to food services in the hotel may be acceptable, but is unlikely to be an acceptable or effective solution to the customers.

Editorial Commentary

This case study is related to how the hotel management handled the situation which goes far deeper than one cockroach found in the guest room. In this case, the box of chocolates is a token from the hotel to express that it values the couple who were at the hotel for their anniversary. This is especially damaging to the hotel's brand when they place emphasis on the fact that the box of chocolates is specially made by the hotel for its guests.

The guest, whose occupation is that of a chef, and is in the restaurant management line of business, did not react immediately. Even though the guest tried to rationalize that it was inevitable for a cockroach to be spotted in a semi-tropical destination, i.e., Macau, a harbor city, the image of the luxury hotel can be impacted negatively. Her next reaction is associated directly with her perception of the resort hotel's substandard food and beverage operating procedures, as well as the quality of products (the box of chocolates) prepared in the kitchen. For a five-star hotel, with the concomitant premium price tag, the management should ensure that every guest's experience is one of quality, involving high-standard guest room accommodation and premium quality food and beverages offered anywhere and at any time on the premises. Incidents like the one that this case describes can be devastating to the couple's overall image of the resort. In this case, the hotel was aware that the couple was there to celebrate their wedding anniversary. The degree of involvement is high. If the hotel management did not take action to repair these two guests' impression of the quality of the resort's offerings, the couple may have formed a very negative image of the resort hotel. That is, the hotel management needs to abundantly and noticeably show that it is willing and able to control and rectify the issue. This single attribute of service failure, especially when they paid a premium price for their reservation with this hotel, can significantly influence their overall satisfaction judgment (Swanson and Hsu, 2011), and not only in relation to the hotel, but also the destination, Macau. Therefore, Option A is the best solution for the hotel to not only intend to ensure guest satisfaction on site but also to regain their loyalty by following up with the guests regarding necessary actions taken at the property.

Cockroach infestation can be a health hazard to hotel guests and employees. This can result in significant negative publicity. In this case, a crisis management procedure should be considered. According to Pearson and Mitroff (1993), there are five phases of crisis management. They are (1) Signal detection, (2) Preparation/prevention; (3) Containment/damage limitation; (4) Recovery; and (5) Learning.

In this case, the incident's being reported by the couple is Step One, the *Signal Detection*. It is not only a hotel brand image crisis but also a pest infestation crisis. It

signifies that the hygiene of the property is not up to a luxury brand hotel's standard. Cockroaches carry disease-related bacteria which can lead to sickness and food poisoning. Without adequate control, the cockroach infestation can directly lead to food safety and infection issues for hotel guests and employees.

The hotel management is to take action in relation to Step Two, *Prevention*, to ensure that the resort hotel implements a thorough inspection sanitation program periodically so that efforts to control infestation are reinforced. By seeing that a cockroach that entered a box of chocolates made in the hotel's pastry kitchen ended up hiding in a guest room, the management needs to consider that there may be an even worse infestation situation encompassing the entire property. The sanitation procedures implemented by the management are called into question.

Step Three, *Containment/Damage Limitation*, should be taken to ensure inspection of all areas. In this case, the resort hotel has food services and restaurants on site. That is, the sighting of a cockroach shows that the areas of pest infestation could include guest rooms, restaurants, employee dining rooms, kitchens, dumpsters or waste management areas. Employees should be trained to ensure that the food serving area and aforementioned areas are constantly cleaned and sanitized, and that food debris is removed.

The hotel's general manager should invite and hire a professional pest control organization to have an expert assessment in order to ensure that the property is keeping up to the standard that can be classified as Step Four, *Recovery*. In this case, it is recommended that the General Manager obtain a professional assessment report and/or related certificates. The general manager should refer to the results of such an inspection in a letter to convince the guest that the hotel intends to ensure the high quality of its lodging products and that it values the customer's business.

Option A, which states that the hotel manager should apologize for the incident and that, following this incident, housekeeping should not place a box of chocolates in its guest rooms, but that it should instead offer non-food related items such as a hotel souvenir to avoid a repeat of the situation, relates to Step Five, *Learning*. The resort hotel management can learn from this incident that possible service and product failure can occur. Strategies can be considered to prevent situations like that in this case study from repeating themselves, in addition to reinforcing sanitization and ensuring the property is under a high standard of pest control. For example, it is highly recommended that the housekeeping department replace food items, especially chocolate containing large amounts of sugar, with non-food items that are left in the guest rooms for guests.

The sighting of a cockroach in the box of chocolates made in the hotel's pastry kitchen caused the guest to believe that the five-star resort hotel was over-rated, that her money was not well spent, and her concerns over food safety were raised. Will they come back to the resort hotel again? Will they tell their friends and family members about the cockroach found in the hotel's box of chocolates? Therefore, there can be some reassurance that the general managers are taking action to prevent these negative effects from being felt again and to ensure that the couple are satisfied with the resort hotel and the overall destination. By learning from this

incident, the resort hotel can avoid a publicity crisis.