FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF THE FRONT OFFICE STAFF W.R.T. LUXURY HOTELS IN MUMBAI – A MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The world is becoming smaller and ‘flatter’ in many ways due to Globalization. Still Multiculturalism remains a challenge to be faced by individuals and organizations. Managers recognize that due to cultural diversity people from different cultures behave differently and those differences affect the organizational functioning especially the hospitality industry hub of multi-cultural entities. Foreign language proficiency plays a key role in overcoming many problems which could occur due to cross-cultural misunderstanding especially in the case of front office staff in the hospitality sector. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities for the front office staff in the luxury hotel segment in India.

KEYWORDS: Foreign Language Proficiency, Front Office Staff, Hospitality Sector, Luxury Hotels

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of handling and managing multiculturalism accompanied by a multi-lingual dimension is experienced invariably in all sectors of service industry including hospitality. Hotels and other sectors of hospitality have to duly engage in effective management of cultural disparities deeply rooted in the multicultural contexts.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the growth in the hospitality industry is pegged at 15% every year, and with 2, 00,000 rooms (both luxury and budget) needed in the country, the segment is poised for a stupendous growth. According to an estimate of the Economic Survey of India and Technopak, in 2000, India hosted about 2.6 million international visitors. By 2009, the figure had already increased to 5.13 million arrivals. With more international players and their sophisticated services, competition amongst the luxury hotels is growing increasingly fierce thus leading to a higher degree of professionalism in the industry, and with the spread of established hospitality brands, guests are increasing their demands and expectations on the whole industry, thus creating an environment conducive to innovation.

The leading Indian hotel chains, such as The Taj Group of Hotels, Oberoi Hotels & Resorts, and ITC Welcome group, and the government-run ITDC dominated the Indian hotel market for decades, when only a handful of international brands had a token presence in India. Of the major international hotel chains Sheraton, Hilton, Hyatt, Radisson, Marriott, and Le Meridien are already firmly established in the Indian markets and steadily expanding. With China and India as leading engines of growth in the global hospitality industry, few of the globally operating companies want to be left out. Considering the immense scope of opportunity in India, more and more international brands follow their footsteps. By now, about 50 international hotel chains have entered the Indian marketplace.

High influx of foreign tourists has ensured huge footfalls for the hospitality sector over the years, internal tourism too has, off late, begun offering great potential. With travelers taking new interests in the country, players in the hospitality sector have had to offer the best of services, at affordable prices. Also, with the USD 23 billion software services sector
pushing the Indian economy skywards, more and more IT professionals are flocking to Indian metro cities, thus signaling a boom time for the hotel and hospitality segment. Several other factors such as Commonwealth Games in Delhi are fueling the need further.

A **luxury hotel** is a hotel that is upscale and typically costs more than the average accommodation. The luxury hotel is not only cost more but also provides a lot of different type of accommodation too. But there are no set standards for "luxury hotels," and both four-star and five-star hotels generally describe themselves as "luxury."

**REVIEW OF RESEARCH**

The functional area of front office, with its roles of reception and marketing as well as acting as the centre for liaison and communication within the operating business, plays the role of the “brain” in the hotel. Employees working in front office undertake an important task in building up a hotel’s image and reputation. Therefore, skills and quality of staff are among the most important factors in underpinning the competitive success of the hotel (Kong Hai-yan, Tom Baum, 2005).

Vallen and Vallen (2004) define front office in terms of its role as the main contact point for guests within the hotel, irrespective of hotel type. Generally, front office can be taken to include those areas of activity which centre on the reception desk and its allied areas where the main focus is on “meeting and greeting” guests, providing information during their stay and processing their departure, including payment. It can also involve the concierge or portering function, along with back office activities in some smaller properties such as reservations and accounts.

Baum and Odgers (2001) report a study across eight European countries into the nature of work in hotel front office. They identified the central role of front office in the organization of hotels, both in terms of the flow of management information and in relation to how the guest experiences the range of products and services on offer with the establishment. Baum (2005) undertook an international comparative study to look at the social construction of skills in hospitality and suggested that there was evidence to support the contention that hotel work, especially in front office, was socially constructed and work by multinational companies and international agencies that ignored such divergence was ill-advised.

Woods (2003) conducted a study on the training of hotel employees and concluded that there was under-investment and neglect by many operators in this regard. Angelo and Vladimir (2004) analyzed the responsibility of staffs in front office, conducting a research study of how to choosesh suitable professions and proposed ways to support training and development within operations. Johnson (2004) undertook a comprehensive analysis on the development of personal ability in this area of work. These examples support the contention that there is increasing international interest in the development of skills as a major factor in enhancing business success within the hospitality sector.

In China, scholars have undertaken considerable work into the study of skills and skills development in relation to hotel work generally (Zhang et al., 2005) and the context of front office employees specifically. Liu (2002) suggests that people working in front office should be quick-witted, amiable, be good at foreign language and communication. Guo (2004) noted attributes with regard to the skills of employees. In order to improve the satisfaction of guests, first of all, all staff in front office should understand guests, then be familiar with the hotel product and further be proficient at marketing.

In addition, employees should also exhibit skills of communication and emotion control. Lou (2003) analyzed the structure of allocation of hotel manager and worked out appropriate measures. Xv and He (2005) undertook a study that proposed strategies to improve work quality in hotel front office. Lin and Dai (2005) made a study on the control of the hotel employees turnover based on psychological contract theory.
OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore the generic skills required by the front-office staff in luxury hotels.
- To highlight the managerial perspective regarding the significance of foreign language as an additional proficiency w.r.t. the front office staff.
- To comprehend the issues and challenges encountered by the front-office staff to attain foreign language proficiency.
- To examine the steps undertaken by the management of luxury hotels to develop this expertise.

GENERIC SKILLS REQUIRED BY THE FRONT-OFFICE STAFF

As per the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (August 2005), the generic skills required by the front office staff can be categorized as follows:

Social Interaction

The front line staff has to greet guests in a friendly and approachable manner as they enter the hotel, thank guest for the stay and invite them to return, give guests any messages being held, acknowledge concern, apologize for inconvenience, interact with customers to resolve service problems, respond to medical emergencies, e.g. reassure guest, empathize, answer phones to make reservations, transfer calls, read incoming faxes/e-mails from clients to make reservations, ensure that all the required information is provided.

Instructions

The front line staff has to know how to operate in-room safe: answer guest’s questions about use of safe, inform guests about safety measures and procedures, describe how to use portable fire extinguishers, determine operating guidelines [to operate office equipment]: attend training sessions; obtain assistance from supervisor or coworkers, review safety guidelines of property, for example: participate in fire drills and training sessions.

Suasion

The front line staff has to inform guest of hotel foreign currency exchange rate, inform other departments of early and late check-outs, e.g. guest services, housekeeping, contact trained personnel through emergency number, call security department or police if security problems or concerns arise, suggest events and attractions that meet guest’s needs, if authorization [for credit card] is declined: inform guest [and] arrange for alternate form of payment, deal with disgruntled guests who were not told in advance that they would be charged for any mini bar items used. Then explain the policy, and, if necessary, offer a good will gesture such as a discount, to make amends, notify maintenance of potential hazards, for example: frayed electric cords, loose flooring, faulty alarms, inform guests about safety measures and procedures: ask guest to use double locks on room doors; encourage guest to ask questions, e.g. ask to see employee’s identification.

Information

The front line staff has to be familiar with specific events and attractions around property and area, describe main features, for example, hours and days of operation, costs, provide necessary information to group leader or entire group, for example: directions to facilities and rooms; luggage handling procedures; location of information board; guest restrictions, e.g. use of telephones, orient new employees, assign routine tasks to other workers, liaise with other departments, for example: ask sales department about upcoming promotions and events; ask food and beverage outlets about special
promotions, e.g. daily specials, participate in staff meetings to discuss hotel policies and offer suggestions to improve guest services, participate in formal discussions about work processes or product improvement.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

International travel is a rapidly growing activity entailing cross-cultural communication between hosts and guests from different linguistic backgrounds. There is therefore a growing worldwide need for front-line staff (as hosts) in the hospitality industry that is able to communicate effectively with guests. As regards the luxury hotel segment, foreign language is a part of the larger issue of cross-cultural literacy since many problems could occur due to cross-cultural misunderstanding since most of the customers are international ones.

**Customer Satisfaction**

Foreign language proficiency helps in welcoming an international guest through a greeting and salutation in his own language. This makes the guest feel comfortable and at ease thereby leading to greater customer satisfaction. It also helps in anticipating the special needs and demands of the customer and effectively fulfilling them.

**Service Attentiveness**

Addressing foreign guests queries in their own language leads to speedier redressal of grievances. Foreign language proficiency also helps in effectively responding to the international customer’s medical emergencies. Also empathizing with the international customer and resolving service related problems enhances effectiveness.

**Revenue Contribution**

Informing the international guests about the possibility of upgrading the rooms for e.g. luxury suites, Presidential suites through suggestive selling techniques leads to higher revenue generation. Also informing the guests about the special packages and discounts and also about the variety of cuisine and food specialties leads to higher revenue generation.

**Job Satisfaction**

Foreign language proficiency leads gives the front office employee a chance to interact with the guest who is culturally different from him and being able to resolve his issue successfully creates a professionally conducive and satisfactory job environment for the employee.

**Career Growth**

Multi-lingual ability gives an added advantage to the front office employee and also an edge over the other employees. It also improves his chances of getting promoted to a higher grade within the organization or move to an international property. Thus it enhances his career to greater heights.

**Brand Image**

Multi-lingual ability helps in generating goodwill and customer loyalty. It helps in spreading a positive word of mouth and attracting repeat customers resulting in higher revenue generation. Foreign language proficiency helps in getting and edge over its competitors.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted through a questionnaire survey. The sample was taken from the front office staff of 10 luxury hotels across Mumbai. The sample comprised 105 employees from the front office staff of the hotels. The
respondents were from managerial levels ranging from junior (less than four years work experience) to top management (more than 20 years of work experience). They were all well-educated (that is, Bachelor's degree or more). The reason for choosing different respondents is to ascertain the competencies across a broader spectrum of managers. The sample was drawn using Judgment and Convenience Sampling.

The questionnaire had 16 items under five constructs. The constructs had emerged from the literature review undertaken in the beginning to understand the relevance of foreign language proficiency of employees of star hotels.

- Service attentiveness (4 statements)
- Customer Satisfaction (3 statements)
- Revenue Contribution through suggestive selling (4 statements)
- Career Progression and Job satisfaction (3 statements)
- Brand Image (2 statements)

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Service attentiveness has the highest mean of 4.27 (Table 1). This factor consisted of four dimensions – Redressal of grievances, Safety and Security, Medical emergencies and Empathy. The four dimensions on the questionnaire converging on this factor were rated using a five-point Likert-type response format anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). Each of the dimensions in the factor was analyzed as per the percentage of responses under four headings – strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree. Out of these four dimensions Redressal of Grievances is ranked highest reflected through its highest mean of 4.35. Redressal of Grievances is needed in the dynamic and customer driven luxury hotel segment in the presently existing competitive Indian market. Customer satisfaction is the factor that is ranked second with a mean of 4.22 (Table 1). This includes the three dimensions of Greetings and Salutation, Creating a comfort zone, Anticipating Special needs. Out of these Creating a comfort zone is ranked highest reflected through its highest mean of 4.44. Creating a Comfort Zone goes a long way in putting the international guests at ease.

Career Planning and Job Satisfaction which consists of the dimensions of Enjoyable Work Profile, Promotion (Domestic Property) and Promotion (International Property) is ranked third with a mean of 4.09. Enjoyable Work Profile is given more importance with mean of 4.23. The respondents felt that interaction with culturally different international customers makes their job more enjoyable. Revenue Contribution which consists of the dimensions of Possibility of Upgradation of rooms increased usage of in-house recreational amenities, Encouraging guests to order variety of cuisines, Special packages and Discounts is ranked fourth with a mean of 4.02. Out of these Possibility of Upgradation of rooms is ranked highest with a mean of 4.15. Communicating with International customers in their own language enhances the possibility of upgrading the rooms (for e.g. moving from luxury suites to Presidential suites) thereby increasing revenue contribution. This is also helpful in attracting the customers through special packages and discounts (3.99). Brand Image as a factor has been ranked fifth with a mean of 4.01 and includes the dimensions of – Edge over competitors and Goodwill. The first dimension i.e. Edge over Competitors is ranked highest by the respondents with a mean of 4.04. Foreign language proficiency helps the organization in getting an edge over its competitors thereby strengthening the brand image.

Issues and Challenges Encountered by the Front-Office Staff to Attain Foreign Language Proficiency

Some of the issues identified as per this study are –
• Demanding job profile
• Lengthy work hours
• Time constraints
• Lack of motivation
• Cost constraints

As per the managerial perspective there are lot many challenges in making the front office staff proficient in a number of foreign languages. First of all the staff is not sufficiently motivated mainly due to the highly demanding job profile and lack of time. Also it is very expensive to hire competent trainers to impart efficient training to the front office staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Providing foreign language proficiency to the front office staff requires a strong managerial will in terms of providing the appropriate support system and channelizing a fair proportion of the revenues for training. Some of the recommendations in this context are as follows –

• Training for working knowledge of a few foreign languages should be incorporated as part of the basic training provided to front office staff.
• Language laboratories can be instituted within the premises and front office staff can be encouraged to make maximum use of the same.
• A study of the customer profile can be conducted to identify the countries from where the majority of international customers are being entertained. This can help in prioritizing and identifying a few crucial foreign languages in which training must be imparted to the front office staff.
• Provision should be made for providing advanced training in foreign languages during the work hours.
• Employees who excel in foreign language proficiency could be given some special incentives and rewards.
• Also excelling employees could stand a better chance during promotions and career progression.

Table 1: Foreign Language Proficiency of the Front Office Staff- Factors and Dimensions
REFERENCES
