

The Customers' Perception on Luxury Hotel: A Case of Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa

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ABSTRACT: The Malaysian hotel industry is experiencing growth due to the increase of new hotels and hospitality-related service through inbound of business travelers and tourists to Malaysia. The influx of tourist is expected to increase and luxury hotels are beginning to be more popular. The interest of studying customer perception toward tourism facilities, especially in luxury hotels has also witnessed an increase. In this study, a qualitative approach on how customers perceive luxury hotels was conducted. This study covered customer satisfaction and service quality perceived by customers toward Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa. Ten individuals were involved in data collection, and data were analyzed thematically. Findings were themed based on positive and negative responses provided by both international and local customers.

Keywords: luxury hotel, customers' perception, resort, spa

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's hotel industry is currently experiencing healthy growth due to the increase of new opening hotels and hospitality-related service through the inbound of business travelers and tourists for MICE (Meeting, Incentives, Conventions, Exhibitions) activities in Malaysia. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia reported there were a total of 28 million tourists in the year of 2014 and an estimated number of tourists arriving in 2015 are expected to be 29.4 million[1]. The growth of international tourism is supported by the effort of Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism on the Visit Malaysia event in 2015, which is known as the Year of Festivals 2015. It is expected to attract approximately 29 million tourists to Malaysia. This has led to the interest of studying customer perceptions toward tourism facilities, specifically luxury hotels as the purpose of this research. Malaysia's

Ministry of Tourism has categorized four-star hotels and five-star hotels into Luxury Hotels. Therefore, five-star hotels in this research will show that it is categorized as luxury hotels[2].

The purpose of this study is to explore the customer perception and expectation toward luxury hotels based in Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa. The study also explores on how customer perception and expectation influence the customer satisfaction during their stay in the hotel. The following research questions are highlighted:

- What is your perception of service quality of Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa?
- What is your satisfaction level of Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa?
- What is your overall perception toward Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa?

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Perception in Hospitality

Customer perception can be generally defined as customer's awareness, consciousness and impression toward a company or its offers. Customer perception can be easily affected by promotional event, media and personal experiences[3,4]. For instance, the advertising or reviews of a hotel can influence the customer perception toward the quality and service of the hotel. There would be high tendency of positive customer perception if the hotel has good brand image, therefore, the key driver of success in hospitality industry is to build and manage strong branding[5]. Positive emotions are expected to occur when an advertisement or review portrayed to the customer is a familiar brand to the customer[6]. The communication between customer would probably influence the consumer decision making[7]. The communication between customers simply means the review or comments of the product and services made by consumers.

Luxury Hotel

Luxury is everywhere now since most companies want their products to be luxurious, and the concept of luxury is to be fashionable and attractive[8]. Luxury hotels are generally described as four-star or five-star hotels and guest are paying higher rates to expect higher standards of service, rooms, dining and everything that are offered by the hotels. There are some expectations toward luxury hotels, such as easy, fast, high quality features, intelligent, respectful planning, outstanding dining, well facilitated, complementary and enlightened services[9,10].

The generation nowadays are enjoying more materialistic comfort than ever. It has result in a change of trend, culture and fulfilment through experience [11]. This has significantly pictured the demand of luxury product, increasing especially in the new generation. Luxury hotel guests are found that they have greater positive emotional satisfaction and experiences in luxury hotels, compared to midscale and lower scale hotels[12]. Therefore, it has shown that luxury hotels are getting more and more popular in the market and most of the people enjoyed the product and services during their stay in luxury ho-

tels would give them greater positive emotional experience and satisfaction.

Service Quality in Luxury Hotel

Service quality can be evaluated based on the five dimension of customer perception[13]. Existing works have stated that the meeting of customer expectations is used to measure the quality of the service delivered by service business[14]. Customer's presence in the delivering process is expected throughout the service as the nature of service is inseparable with customers. For instance, a hotel can provide services to guests when the guests are present at the hotel; otherwise the service could not be delivered if the guest is not physically present. It has been confirmed that, the most important concern in providing quality service is to meet the customer expectation[15].

Service quality is the concept of meeting or exceeding the customers' expectation. When the customers' expectations are met or exceeded, the service can be considered as inferior or extraordinary[16]. Customer expectations are mostly based on their past experiences, advertising, and word of mouth [17]. Perceived service can be set in line with the expected service as when they compare, customers would compare the expected service with the perceived service[18]. Service quality can be explained by guests' perceptions and their perceptions do influence their satisfaction throughout the stay in a hotel[19].

METHOD

Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa (SRHS) is used as the setting of the research. The reason why SRHS is chosen as the main focus of this research paper is that it is a five-star Luxury Hotel that is worth to conduct more in-depth study as it has been voted as the Travelers' Choice 2015 on TripAdvisor (2015). Participants that fulfil the requirement of the study were purposefully interviewed, whereby each participant was required to meet the requirement of: (1) having experience of the services and facilities in SRHS and (2) must be an adult which is older than 18 years old. The interview participants involved 10 qualified individuals. The data was collected from

August to October 2015. The data collection included interviews and demographic surveys. For this research, the use of semi-structured interview is more suitable in order to suite the criteria of the study. The interviewer guided the participants to answer the research questions regarding to the factors discussed in literature review, which is the service quality, customer's perception and customer satisfaction on luxury hotels.

RESULTS

The findings have combined the responses of the previous customers from both international and local respondents from Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa (SRHS). Face-to-face interviews (for all locals and internationals) have been done.

Positive Responses by International Customers

Most of the international customers has high expectation toward SRHS due to its five-star element, they expected SRHS to have high class services and facilities, personalized services and relaxing environments. As a reference, one of the participant mentioned that:

I was very much anticipating the visit then and held high expectations for the hotel. Being known as an integrated resort city, I had expected both services and facilities rivals that of a 5-star hotel.

Another participant has also expressed her opinion toward the expectation on SRHS, where she said that:

Since it is a five-star hotel, I expect high quality of service and personalized service. I also expect them to serve me well and fulfil my needs throughout my stay in Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa.

Positive perceptions of the respondents toward the service staff are mostly related to the helpfulness and friendliness of the staff. Most of the respondents has good perceptions toward the attentiveness of the service staff where they are prompt and polite, neat and tidy, has courtesies, and frontline service staff are knowledgeable. For instance, a participant stated that:

The quality of service is exceptional. The staffs are friendly and extremely helpful. They took the initiative to check if I have everything I needed and gave me useful suggestions on how to go about tourist attraction spots.

The perception toward the overall quality, facilities and services is, SRHS are well facilitated whereby most of the facilities needed for family or business travelers are provided, such as the leisure facilities for family and executive level specially designed for business man. Pleasant ambience and environment are also one of the positive comments given by the international customers. Lastly is the perceived added value service and facilities by SRHS whereby the international customers agreed that the service is good as the staffs often go beyond their call of duty to provide assistance throughout the stay.

Positive Responses by Local Customers

For the local customers, they expected SRHS to be luxurious, high-class services and at reasonable prices. It has been observed that, the local are less hunger for personalized services than the international customers. Some of the local even have neutral expectations toward SRHS.

The positive services experienced by the local are the customer care provided by the service staff and the encouragements of feedback to improve performance. One of the respondents stated that:

Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa provided very good service quality as they care about their guest by providing complementary cake during my birthday. I have good perception on their service quality. They have encouraged feedback from us to implement changes.

For local customers' overall perceptions, there are minimal of positive perceptions toward SRHS. However, some of the local have commented that SRHS has value added facilities and environment as it is located in an integrated city. SRHS has emphasized on their quality of service and experience. As a summary, it is still considered as a comfortable stay.

Negative Responses by International Customers

On the elements of service quality, the international customers have faced communication issues with service staff. A participant faced harsh time staying in SRHS as she was unable to communicate her needs with the service staff. She stated that:

Some people says that the staff in Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa are friendly and helpful. But unfortunately, the service is unfavorable due to communication issues during my stay.

Other than that, some respondents have also commented on the weak professionalism of SRHS staff. One of the reasons is the issue of communication. It is expected that the staff in five-star hotels should be able to speak fluent English in order to serve their guests better. However, SRHS has ineffectively recruited staff who speak English fluently to assist their guests. The frontline staff, especially the front office staff have left a negative image to guests as they have presented to be very shy and the room is not cleaned as expected. It is stated that:

I feel that the service is not up to standard due to the lack of professionalism. Front Office staffs seems to be very shy and the room is not too clean.

For the overall perception for the price, some international respondents who came from wealthy countries such as Macau has perceived it as reasonable, compared to other countries. However, some also commented that, it is slightly expensive as the experience throughout the stay is not up to the value paid. Other than price, negative comments on the cleanliness of the room are also mentioned by the customers. As stated above, respondents commented on the uncleaned rooms, and another respondent has also stated that:

I would say it will be a better experience if Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa could improve their room cleanliness. The floor carpet of the rooms are quite odorful. If they could change it from time to time or upgrade it to laminated wood floor, it will definitely be better. The size of the room can be enlarged to enhance guest comfort-

ability.

The size of the room seems to be an issue for both international and local guests as it does not give a pleasant and comfortable space for the guests to relax throughout their stay in SRHS. There are also minor issues on the entrance where misleads guests who would access from Sunway Pyramid, which is the shopping mall located right next to SRHS.

Negative Responses by Local Customers

The local customers have negative experience with SRHS service quality as most of them experienced delayed services with low quality. This experience was gained in SRHS restaurant where the food serving is slow and the food quality is not as expected. The respondent has stated that:

Overall, the service quality is bad. They took too long to serve the food. The quality of the food is also not up to standard, it is cold and lack of taste.

Other than that, the lack of value added service is also one of the negative comments from the customers. However, in the previous discussion, it has stated that the service has added value as birthday cakes are provided for guests' birthdays. In this circumstance, it illustrated that SRHS has not performed added value services to all of their guests and resulted in the perception of a lack of added value services.

Overall, the local respondents have less positive comments and perceptions toward SRHS. The facilities of SRHS have given negative perception of outdated and small spaces. The respondent has expressed her negative comment on SRHS, where she said that:

I am deeply disappointed with the condition of the room. It gives off an old musty smell. The interior furnishings are depressing and the furnishings are beat up and it seems like the carpet should have been replaced a year ago.

In terms of price, the local are mostly unsatisfied on the price of the room in SRHS. Most respondents have the same perceptions whereby they have con-

stantly agreed that the room rate exceeded the value provided by the hotel. The respondent has stated that:

I think the ambience of the hotel is good, however the room is too small and it is at an expensive rate. Therefore, I think there is room for improvement.

CONCLUSION

This study carried the purpose to explore customers' perceptions and expectations toward a luxury hotel, specifically SRHS. The understanding of how customer perception and expectation influences customer satisfaction during their stay was also examined. And the results have shown that customers' satisfaction and expectation toward SRHS were above average amongst 5 international customers and 5 local customers.

The results have showed that the respondents mostly commented on service and environment of the hotel. Customers' satisfaction and expectation were mostly based on the quality of service and the comfort and spacious of the hotel. The result has varied from each respondent according to his/her personal experience at SRHS. SRHS could utilize the result for future improvement regardless of its service or environment. Although satisfaction level can be varied according to different guests, the hotel can improve the level of guests' satisfaction by adding personalized services, hence providing added valued services to meet customers' needs and wants.

The satisfaction level of customers toward SRHS was above average. More than half of the respondents were pleased by the service and quality provided by SRHS. The result was reasonable as different cultures and values will cause differences in individuals and perceptions[20]. In order to improve guests' satisfaction level for SRHS, the management should look into the service quality, standard of service providers, and also their added value services. Other than services, SRHS should also relook into the physical outlook of the hotel, a renovation plan may be good to improve its reputation and customers' satisfaction.

In terms of implications, this study provided an

outlook for SRHS to make suitable adjustments based on customers' positive and negative responses. Since the nature of the service industry is intangible, inseparable, heterogenic and perishable[21], it is impossible for the service industry to practice consistency in the service. SRHS should understand customers' needs and wants better in order to offer more personalized service experience. SRHS should commit in quality of service, this could be done by giving out trainings to their staff especially frontline staff who would have lots of interactions with guests. Added value services should be emphasized in order to increase the perception of value by the customers toward SRHS. People management is also essential in order to achieve better organizational commitment, actions such as training, compensations, performance management and effective hiring can be done by SRHS[22]. Other than that, training and development are also the essential ways that SRHS should undertake to provide excellent service. Therefore, all of the components should work in tandem in order to achieve excellent services and achieve better results based on customer's satisfaction.

The study was limited to the research toward only one luxury hotel which is Sunway Resort Hotel and Spa. Thus, future studies could explore on two or more hotels in order to draw comparisons between one luxury hotels to another. This study also concentrated on only 10 respondents' experiences and opinions. Hence, future studies are recommended to conduct in quantitatively in larger sample numbers in hopes for better investigation on customers' satisfaction level.

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