A Customer-Employee Encounter: A Review of Customer Quality Control on Restaurant Food Service

Simon Were Okwachi*

Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Food service involves customer quality control in helping to create a meal experience and service value. However, this is not the case as service failures are more often experienced due to challenges faced in the management of hospitality's restaurant food service. The variability nature of services has compromised food service quality in addition to a myriad of both internal and external glitches. The purpose of this paper was therefore to provide a literature review in to customer quality control on restaurant food and beverage service, with the objective of identifying customer quality control factors. The Resourceful Evaluation Maximizers Model (REMM) as well as the Pain Avoidance Model (PAM) was applied in explaining the customer quality control function in hospitality's restaurant business. In view of the literature review on this study, the motivating factors in the customer quality control include: tipping, on-the-spot customer complaints feedback as well as customer satisfaction surveys. The study explores these three factors in relation to their contribution to food service quality control mechanisms within the hospitality's restaurant business. However, the study recommends both research surveys as well as experiments to back up this review.

Keywords: Tipping; On-the-spot customer complaints; Customer satisfaction surveys; Food Service; Service Failure

INTRODUCTION

Customer service quality control is a behavioral concept which emphasizes that the customer plays an active role either directly on product and/or service quality control or indirectly through product and/or service quality control. Precisely evaluating what hospitality restaurant clientele think about their restaurant food and beverage sales and service experience is a difficult challenge for hospitality practitioners striving to achieve service quality. Nevertheless, it must be done with an emphasis of Phillip Crosby's zero defects, and thus increasing hospitality's customer loyalty through repeat business. According to Namasivayam and Hinkin research indicates that offering goods and service is not enough, thus customers must be provided with experience, which sometimes calls for the role of customers in ensuring quality goods and service [1-3].

Hospitality's food and beverage service involves customer quality control in helping to create a restaurant meal experience and the ultimate food and beverage service value. According to Namasivayam and Hinkin, "one common theme from research is the importance of the actual customer-employee encounter", with the focus on the behaviors of the hospitality's restaurant food and beverage service staff. However, the extent and type of participation and the effect on restaurant food and beverage service quality varies. Nevertheless, Vasile is in agreement with the findings that hospitality guests impose a quality control function on the products and services offered within the hotel set-up.

A number of scholarly arguments do support this view, on the basis of the changing dynamics within the global hospitality business environment which has modified the traditional roles of hospitality's restaurant food and beverage service customers making them active players not only in the creation of value but also enabling restaurant customers meal experience and therefore customer satisfaction and eventually retention [4-7].

Prahalad and Ramaswamy acknowledge the fact that customers possess experience in knowledge and skills of restaurant hospitality operations, and thus they tend to engage themselves in an active relationship with employees of hospitality's food and beverage services. Nonetheless, Namasivayam et. al., corroborates that hospitality's restaurant customers' sense of quality control in service encounter is essential, thus food and beverage customer ability in hospitality's services is an essential issue. In fact, Lugosi focuses on hospitality guests' roles as sources of income for an organization, or on the other hand as surrogate marketing agents for the hospitality's food and beverage service operations [8].

On the contrary however, Langnick-Hall focuses on customers' roles from a customer-firm affiliation perspective and explains roles of customers on the basis of a resource, worker or co-producer, buyer, beneficiary, and a collection of transformation activities, which involves different degrees of participation in the control of quality of both hospitality's restaurant products and services. Nonetheless, Bitner as well suggest that hospitality guests may contribute to quality service experiences in three ways: as productive agencies, as contributors to quality satisfaction and value and lastly as competitors. In view of the above arguments in relation to the customers role on food and beverage service quality in the hospitality industry, this review paper focused on customer quality control function on food and beverage service within the larger hospitality's restaurant business [9,10].

QUALITY CONTROL

Researchers have defined service quality relative to the concept of consumer-perceived quality as the action of the customer that stimulates the responses of the hospitality's restaurant food and beverage service staffs to act appropriately towards the customers' achieving a suitable meal experience. In reality, customers in food and beverage sections of the hospitality establishments examine service quality (and as such, they are prompted to institute quality control measures depending on the individual customer service satisfaction level, (Rauch, Collins, hence an important factor for consideration in the context of increased profitability as a result of repeat business, profitability and loyalty [11-17].

In fact Stephen, Kevia and Mike as well as Kandapully and Suhartanto, emphasize the fact that every hotel has to pay the importance on making satisfaction to their customers by developing staffs' attitude and service potential. Although various philosophies such as Kaizen, Total Quality Management, Six Sigma or usage of dynamic models in improving service quality has been emphasized by researchers, customers are prioritized in the service quality control on food and beverage as they are in a better position to identify and correct specific service failures in the food and beverage service cycle within hospitality's restaurant food and beverage service. The following is a review of the strategies applied by hospitality's restaurant clients in the customer quality control function within the hospitality's food and beverage section [18,19].

Theoretical underpinning of customer quality control

The Resourceful Evaluation Maximizers Model (REMM) as well as the Pain Avoidance Model (PAM) may be applied in explaining the customer quality control function in hospitality's restaurant business. According to REMM, the solutions suggested by the food and beverage patrons (psychological and psychiatric professions) are best interpreted as helping food and beverage service staff learn to correct their "mistakes" in order to behave in more REMM like ways. The PAM compliments REMM by capturing the non-rational component of human behavior that beset all humans. Recognizing these self–control problems leads to an explanation of the agency theory, since they are a second major source of agency costs in addition to the costs generated by conflicts of interest between people [20].

The agency theory

The agency theory, which was proposed by Jensen and Meckling postulates that "because people are, in the end self-interested, they will have conflict of interest over at least some issues any time they attempt to engage in cooperative endeavors". This cooperation includes not only business transactions through contracts but also interactions in families and other social organizations, including food and beverage service quality control in restaurants. The conflict of interest causes problems and losses to the parties involved; hence they develop strong motivation to minimize the "agency costs" through monitoring and rewarding quality service. In summary therefore, customer service quality control takes the form of tipping, on-the-spot customer complaints feedbacks as well as customer satisfaction surveys feedbacks [21,22].

TIPPING

Tipping is an interesting economic behavior within the entire service industry, having attracted economists for some time. This is not only on the basis of the importance and widespread nature of the tipping phenomenon, but also as a restaurant customer quality control mechanism that food and beverage clients are free to practice. In fact, several studies attempting to explain the theory of tipping have appeared in psychology, economics and a few in hospitality management literatures, but with a modest focus on hospitality's restaurant food and beverage service. A number of scholars have tried to utilize these theories, models and principles by carrying out studies on variables that affect tipping and various interactions between these variables and food service quality in hospitality's restaurant operations. Thus, three justifications are proposed on why hospitality's food and beverage service recipients tip in an attempt to control service quality including; incentives/reward for outstanding or superior service, attempts to buy improved/enhanced future service as well as a social norm [23-25]

Incentive/Reward: The economic explanation of tipping is based on the grounds that it is an effective means of monitoring and rewarding hospitality's restaurant food and beverage service staff. Lynn et al. found out that the act of tipping is related to restaurant's consumer evaluation of the dining experience, hence anticipated to foster quality food and beverage service. Nonetheless, the highly personalized and intangible nature of services means that customers are in a much better position than managers to evaluate and reward food and beverage service, even though, there is no clarity on what basis the customer evaluates service quality and how s(he) is supposed to rate the same for rewarding purposes and therefore the need for further investigations on this topic [26].

Bigler and Hoaas [7], Charity and Kazembe [12] and Lynn et al. [27] asserts that monetary benefits in terms of tips affect worker motivation, and therefore endorses previous findings that tips do increase with customers' perception of service quality and therefore one of the active and effective measures used by restaurant food service clientele to control quality. However, tipping has not been accepted in countries such as New Zealand and Britain and thus casting doubts on the quality control function of tipping within the hospitality's food and beverage operations sections. And yet, service quality is difficult to measure, as quality may mean differently to different people and therefore a function of the hospitality organizations management to define the term quality based on the company's strategic objectives, mission, and vision as well as core values [27-30].

ENHANCED FUTURE SERVICE

Investigators on this topic have employed reciprocity theory to

clarify the reasoning behind tipping as attempts to buy enhanced or improved future service. According to this theory, reciprocity is a behavioral response between the participants to perceived kindness. Folk and Fishbacher established proof of a universal reciprocity norm necessitating people to pay the favors others do for them. In association to tipping, it is related to the tit-for-tat strategy which suggests that the association between service quality and tipping should be robust for regular than non-regular customers. This strategy has extensively been used by scholars to explain tipping as an attempt to buy enhanced future service within the hospitality's food and beverage service operations [31-33].

However, due to increased competition, many hospitality organizations are facing challenges in building and maintaining brand loyalty, although Carev cements the argument that by raising restaurant services quality, hotel's food and beverage sections gradually raises guest expectation levels, which may contribute to customer loyalty and make it more difficult and costly to please them, thus brand switching. As a result therefore, this could be an elimination of brand switchers as hospitality's restaurant businesses focus on developing solid brand loyalty among the food and beverage service clients. However, given the seasonal nature of the hospitality industry, overdependence on tips and service charges is recorded with the variability nature of food and beverage service except tipping as an act of buying enhanced future service since the chances of not only meeting but also being given the same quality of service is insignificant [34-37].

Social norm

According to Milos, Youngsoo and Matt, social norm is an explicit or implicit rules specifying what behaviors are acceptable within a society. Wang records that tipping started as a sign of gratitude and status, became an incentive, and finally a norm. Today, the acceptable norm in the United States dictates that tipping should be 15%-20% of the actual bill. In relation to psychology research, individuals do not want to risk social disapproval and as a result will opt to fulfill the norm of tipping [38-40].

Nimer, et al. [1] as well as Mohd et al. accounts that the custom of tipping varies across countries in development, nonetheless is evolving rapidly to a lesser extent in; Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden and hardly ever practiced in Australia, China, Denmark, Japan and Iceland. As noted by Mohd et al. tipping growth in many countries of the world may be attributed to; increasing numbers of travelers from countries where tipping is the norm, bringing back the custom by the local travelers overseas, and the rapid expansion of the global hospitality industry which is increasingly internationalized. However, there is no literature within our knowledge on the quality control function of tipping as a norm in the hospitality's food and beverage service [41].

ON-THE-SPOT CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS FEEDBACK

Hospitality's food and beverage service staff are ultimately responsible for the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of restaurant customers. According to Ford and Heaton, hospitality managers spend time to supervise, train, motivate, and reward employees to produce excellent guest experiences through quality service. However, guests in a hotel are very often in contact with service employees, talking to them and seeing their job performance. So,

they have the best opportunity to control the employees` activity and react when they experience service failures Many hospitality's restaurant customers therefore do have the willingness and the necessary competence to signal nonconformance to quality standard in the activity of frontline staff and more than that, they can take corrective actions through negative comments, and compliments [42,44].

Hospitality's restaurant services have a great tendency to fail due to their intangible and pragmatic nature or the instantaneous production, sales, service and consumption. The high level of human interaction between the food and beverage service staff and customers give rise to variability in restaurant service quality while on the other side, today`s restaurant guests are more demanding, widely travelled, exposed to international hospitality service experience and therefore highly educated, so it is more difficult to meet their expectations According to Chung and Hoffman there are three categories of service failures; failures in implicit or explicit customer request, unprompted and unsolicited employee actions and service system failures [43].

Unprompted and unsolicited employee actions

They include events and employee behaviors that are truly unexpected from the customers' point of view Satisfactory incidents represent very pleasant surprises or special attention, while dissatisfactory incidents comprise negative and unacceptable employee behavior such as; wrong order delivery, incorrect charges, and to the extreme, rude behavior of employees, discrimination, ignoring the customers, and stealing from customers. These incidents represent truly unexpected and unrequested employee behaviors that either enhance or detract from the delivery of core quality service (Chung et al. 1998). However, such negative employee actions are normally moderated by hospitality's restaurant clientele by either being specific on the staff to offer them service, or bringing such acts from staff to the attention of managers who thereafter have a responsibility of reprimanding the staff through disciplinary action [44].

Service system failure

When the restaurant's food and beverage service delivery system fails, frontline food service employees are required to respond to the complaints or dissatisfaction from restaurant customers. These incidents are related directly to failures to the core food and beverage services such as the dining room, restaurant meal service, or the food and beverage production models, and inevitable food service system failures occur for even the best of hospitality restaurants. In the restaurants food and beverage service, service system failures may include; cold food, slow service, insect problems, dirty silverware and crockery. However, hospitality's restaurant clientele bring to the attention of both the food service staff and management of such restaurant service system failures. For purposes of satisfying the customer, hospitality professionals more oftenly carry out service recovery with the aim of maintaining their customer base, hence not only focusing on customer satisfaction but also customer retention [45].

Failures in implicit or explicit customer requests

These are incidents that contain an explicit or inferred request for customized service and may include; food not cooked to order or lost reservation. These may be as a result of customer requests in reference to customer preferences, special needs or even disruption from other customers in the service areas [45].

Customer satisfaction survey feedbacks

According to Conie, Sparks and Kandapully customer surveys have become a widely used barometer of business performance over the past decade. In fact, Parasuraman, et a0, used surveys to develop the SERVQUAL model, which is a dominant service quality survey instrument. However, surveys are often reported in the aggregate, and yet averaging customer preferences and perceived performance hence the value of surveys is limited since they do not represent the customer viewpoint in a useful manner Further, these researchers conclude that customer satisfaction surveys should be replaced by methods that better identify the perspectives of individual customers. Indeed this is paramount as customers demand more customization of products and services to meet their ever changing needs, and includes [46].

Employee generated guest feedback

It involves a structured interview or survey technique through which employees gather customers perceptions of the service delivery, which allows recovery from service failures. Hotels know that recovering from service failures yields greater customer loyalty and repeat visits, while employees know that management places greater credibility on service recovery feedback obtained directly from guests.

Comment cards

Comment cards rely on voluntary customer participation. Guests rate the quality of the service experience by responding to a few simple questions on a conveniently available form and deposit the form in a box, return it to the service provider, or mail it to the corporate office. Their comments may be interesting and helpful to management in understanding the service experience. However, typically only five percent of customers return comment cards, either the delighted or the dissatisfied; the other ninety-five percent say nothing.

Personal interviews or surveys with guests

Face-to-face interviews can uncover previously unknown problems or a new twist in a known problem which cannot be addressed in a pre-printed questionnaire. However, personal interviews are costly because of the expense of employing trained interviewers, the custom designed interview instrument, and the inconvenience to guests.

Telephone surveys with guests

In hospitality industry, some organizations telephone customers to obtain feedback about a recent vacation, hotel room or food and beverage experience. Although telephone interviews eliminate the inconvenience of gathering information while guests are still at the hotel, they present other challenges. This technique also relies on retrospective information which can be blurred by more recent experiences. In addition, guests regard telephone surveys as intrusions on their time and violations of their privacy.

Use of mystery shoppers

Mystery shoppers provide management with an objective snapshot of the service experience within the hospitality's restaurant sections of the hotel set-up. While posing as guests, these trained observers methodically sample both the service product and its delivery and compile a detailed report of their service encounters, which generally include numerical ratings of their observations so that the quality of the service experience can be compared over time [47].

CONCLUSION

Following a literature survey, various scholars in the field of psychology and economics have attempted carrying out studies in relation to customer quality control and have explained quality control function phenomenon by use of several economic theories, models and speculations, which is laid on the foundations of the Resourceful Evaluation Maximizers Model (REMM) as well as the Pain Avoidance Model (PAM). Consequently, several researchers have carried out considerable studies related to customer quality control including; Amorim, Rosa & Santos, Ford & Heaton, Bitner M, Chen, Raab & Tanfood, Claycomb, C, Rajatis & Nikseresht F and Staus, Robbert & Roth. According to Vasile there have been no studies that measure the effects of perceived control in the actual exchange between service employee and a customer. Therefore the limited scholarly literature on this topic has identified various divergent customer control functions including: tipping, on-the-spot customer complaints and customer satisfaction surveys aimed at controlling food service quality within the hospitality's restaurant business. However, confirmatory surveys should be carried out to confirm the position of this study reviews.

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