Towards Closing the Service Delivery Gaps in the Hospitality Industry for National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract: *The hospitality industry in Nigeria holds high prospects for the country yet it has not achieved much in terms of contribution to national development. This could largely be attributed to service delivery gaps that exist in the sector. It is in this consideration that this paper assesses various service delivery gaps traceable to service delivery in Nigeria's hospitality industry. The study adopted the exploratory research design, which is a qualitative research method. Specifically, a focus group interview made of twelve (12) participants, who were selected from the three senatorial districts in Akwa Ibom State. The comprised the hospitality service operators and customers. The paper reports from analysis of the focus group discussion that the major setbacks of the country's hospitality sector are related to service providers who do not offer basically customer-centric and problem solving sensitive services. It is therefore suggested in the paper that hotels could involve expert management and this could be done by establishing a strategic partnership between expert hospitality institutions and the hotels, as the industry had the potential of enhancing our national image and development.*

Keywords: *Hospitality, Service delivery, Service gaps, National Development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Successive governments in Nigeria have attempted to move the country away from being an oil mono-economic nation, by looking into how other sectors could be developed. One of the sectors of our economy yet to be fully harnessed is the hospitality industry,this sector has the potential of contributing to national development. The United Nations World Tourism organization (UNWTO) confirms that between 70% and 75% of international tourists' expenditure goes to hospitality services on annual basis (UNWTO, 2006).The hospitality industry is a major sector in the economy and is one of the most rapidly expanding fields in the service industry. In recent times, it has brought tremendous growth to the global economy by providing services such as accommodations to the tourism industry (Oyibo, 2013). The term hospitality conveys the image that reflects the traditions of service and the ways service providers in the industry would like their businesses to be perceived. This forms the basis of this study to assess how service delivery in the hospitality industry can impact on national development.

Although, this study is carried out in Akwa Ibom State, the researchers believe that this research is insightful to all hospitality services in Nigeria, in terms of understanding the practical gaps occurring in service delivery and ways of improving on such deliveries in the hospitality industry for meaningful contributions to national development, taking into consideration views from service providers and users. National development involves all attempts to improve the conditions of human existence in every society (Lawal and Oluwatoyin, 2011). In Nigeria's 55 years of independence the country is often being hunted by the specifics of development. This has projected the country's development history to focus more on development strategies and models, making it more of experimental than a realistic notion. Assertions have been made on how the contributions of major service sectors, especially the hospitality industry can boost national development, but this assertion have lived only in blue prints, as a result of performances 0f this sector. The hospitality service providers in the country are yet to find a balance between what customers' expectations are, what they providers offer and customers actual service experience or encounter. They are yet to find a means of managing service variability and responses from customers after service encounter. Thus, there is need to look closely at service delivery gaps in the hospitality industry. The big question still remains,

does services rendered in the hospitality businesses in Nigeria meet or exceed service expectations, enough to contribute to national development? This forms the focus of the study; to bring up suggestions for reducing the service gaps in the hospitality industry in Nigeria, there by contributing to national development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Concept of Hospitality

The hospitality industry can be set within the context of travel and tourism industry, which contains numerous subsectors such as tour operations, travels agents and airlines (Babalola and Oluwatoyin, 2014). It also includes hotel and restaurant services, and other wide range of businesses like guest houses, bars, fast food outlets, cafes, resorts, ranches and so on (Baker, Huyton and Bradley, 2001; Babalola and Oluwatoyin, 2014). The word hospitality is derived from *"hospic"*, a medieval word for house of rest for travellers (Latin, 1985; Ofobruku, 2012).Lashley (2000) states that, 'hospitality is essentially a relationship based onhosts and guests' and it is the host-guest relationship that is the keydistinguishing characteristic of hospitality from which several other dimensionsemerge, such as; what is the nature of the service offering? Who is it for? who delivers it? How is it managed? What is the timing? What is the economic function? And so on (Hemmington, 2007).

According to Langhorn (2004) in hospitality,the service provider is "part of the product itself". For guests tobe satisfied, they not only must believe that they have received a valuableservice for their dollar, but also feel valued and respected by the workersproviding the service (Kernbach & Schutte, 2005; Langhorn, 2004; Varca,2004; Winsted, 2000). Thus, hospitality requiresthe guest to feel that the host is being hospitable through feelings ofgenerosity, a desire to please and a genuine regard for the guest as anindividual (Lashley, 2000).

Although The physical products of hospitality, e.g. food and drink in arestaurant or the actual hotel room, are products that are sold at a price to the guests orcustomers and are often regarded as the tangible aspects of hospitality.The qualities of staff and the way they deliver the service areoften more important than the tangible products in making a hospitality experiencesatisfactory or unsatisfactory and these are the intangible aspects of hospitality (Sheila, Scott-Halsell, Shane and Huffman, 2008). Hospitality studies thus share a number of key concerns as regards the ways of relating between host and guests (Bell, 2009).

2.2. Service Delivery

Services are intangible and heterogeneous, at the same time being judged by the performance and the experience of those who use them, with the possibility of interpretation and different judgments, according to the provider and the user in question (Pena, Da-Silva, Tronchin and Melleiro, 2013).Notable scholars have argued that the main aim of a service delivery system is to bridge the gap between customer expectations and customer experience (Lovelock, 1984; Armistead, 1990; Lovelock and Witz, 2011; Kostopoulos, Lodorfos, and Kaminakis, 2015).

In order to assess the effectiveness of service delivery, most researchers measure specific outputs of the system such as the times required for task execution, costs or use proxy variables to assess the effectiveness of its most important determinants. (Haynes and Duvall, 1992; Mandel, 1991; Kostopoulos, Lodorfos and Kaminakis, 2015;Ponsignon, Smart and Maull, 2011). Krostopoulos, Lodorfos&Kaminakis (2015), asserts that the key determinants of service delivery effectiveness are the front-line employee's role performance, their ability to adapt to individual customers' needs, the effectiveness of their coordination and the effectiveness of the process control. Adetulu, (2010) in an article "courtesy and the Nigerian hospitality industry argue that customers are not placed at the core of service provision, as there are cases where a customer walks into a hotel and the receptionist promptly asks "yes what do you want?" or can I help you?", in a very patronizing yet rude tone. Thus, suggesting the customer is there at the wrong time. Akparata (2011) puts it that some receptionists who are often the first contact to hospitality service providers; do not show decorum in the way they speak to customers. According to Lovelock and Wirtz (2011) hospitality related services should ideally reflect pleasure at meeting new and old customers by extending warm receptive greetings when they come or when the old ones return. Courtesy and consideration for customers need apply to both face to face encounters and telephone interactions, although finds its fullest expression in face-to

face encounters (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011). In many situations employees, customers and even others in the service environment interact to produce the ultimate service outcome. Customer participation at some level is inevitable in service delivery, this is because they are indispensable to the production process of service organizations and they can actually control or contribute to their own satisfaction (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). Customer perceptions can change toward the same service delivery in the light of previous experiences because the new expectations can be created for the same service (Oh, 1999). Unfortunately some hospitality service providers attempt to manage service variability by standardizing service behavior (Kotler, Bowen and Marken (2010).

2.3. Service Delivery Gaps

In assessing service delivery and performance one should consider the service delivery Gap which according to Lovelock and Wirtz (2011) highlight that the service provider should ensure that performance meets standards. According to Zethaml and Bitner (2003), the key service gaps are:

Gap1 –The knowledge Gap: This is not knowing what customers expect. It is the difference between customer expectations of service and the provider understands of these expectations. A key factor associated with the provider of the hospitality service in Gap 1 is lack of service recovery. Another deficiency attributed to this gap is the lack of the hospitality service provider to strategize ways to retain customers and strengthen relationships with them. If relationships are strengthened with customers, this gap is less likely to occur or persist.

Gap 2 – The Policy or the Design Gap: This is not selecting the right service design and standard. Some hospitality service providers find it difficult to translate customers' expectations into service specified for delivery. This gap can occur when those responsible for setting the goals and standard of service delivery believe that the customers' expectations are unrealistic and too rigid to meet.

Gap 3 – The Delivery Gap: This is not delivering to service standards. This gap is often a result of disparity between customers driven standards that are established by the provider service performed (Nargunde, 2016). This GAP occurs when standards are not backed by appropriate resources like people, systems and technology. Thus, it is often referred to as the service performance Gap.

Gap 4 – The Communication Gap: This gap is the difference between what the hospitality service provider communicates and promises to offer either explicitly or implicitly and what it actually delivers to customers. According to Zeithaml &Bitner (2003) broken promises can occur for many reasons like over promising in advertising or personal selling, inadequate coordination between operations and marketing and differences in policies and procedures across service outlets.

Gap 5: It is important to note that there are 4 generally accepted service gaps, but Parasuraman (2010); Lovelock and Wirtz (2011) suggests the gap known as the service perception and quality gap. Parasuraman (2010) asserts that, gap 1 – 4 creates gap 5. Gap 5 is centered on the customers perception of the services rendered and it is the foundation on which the service quality is measured and service quality (SERQUAL) model evolved.

According to Kotler, Bowen and Markens (2010), there are 3 phases of involvement of consumers in the delivery of most hospitality products or services. These phases are: the joining, consumption and detachment stage.

The Joining Phase: This is when the customer makes the initial inquiry contact. When designing products, we must make it easy for people to learn about the new product.

The Consumption Phase: takes place when the service is consumed. Designers of hospitality products must understand how guests will interact with the product. The employees, customers and physical facilities are all part of the product. Physical features, layout and suffrage can also be used to help customers interact with the product.

The detachment phase: is when the customer is through using a product and departs. This stage is characterized by moving out of the service environment with their luggage, settling bills, booking transportation and so on.

2.4. National Development

The tremendous growth and economic contributions of the service sector have drawn increasing attention to the issues and problems of service industries worldwide (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). A

country is classified as developed if it is able to provide qualitative life for her citizenry (Ekundayo, 2015). The earliest approach to development was monolithic and economically biased, however the social dynamics of the society as they affect socio-cultural, economic, political and technological wellbeing of people, was brought into for the deficiencies of the monolithic economic approach (Adeyeye, 2002). Many developing countries have turned to tourism and hospitality industry as a body to acquire resources for national development and enhanced economic status (Hall, 2008; Yukosav & Curcic, 2013). Development as a concept is a victim of definitional pluralism (Lawal & Oluwatoyin, 2011). However, an attempt to define the term is by Gboyega (2003) who describes development as an idea that embodies all attempts to improve the conditions of human existence in all ramifications. Chrisman (1984) defines development as a process of societal advancement, where improvement in the wellbeing of the people are generated through strong partnership between all sectors, corporate bodies and other groups in the society. The definition by Chrisman (1984) embraces the point that development is not economy based only, but it involves all players that make up the socio-economic system where the hospitality industry is a unit.

National development can be defined as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political and technological advancement of a country or nation (Ekundayo, 2015). Lawal &Oluwatoyin (2011) in their study on the issues, challenges and prospects of National development in Nigeria, suggests that one of the factors that can militate against the influence of hospitality industry on national development is the mono-economic base of the country. The country largely depends on crude oil for her survival to the detriment of other resources and other sectors of the economy (Lawal & Oluwatoyin, 2011).They recommend that there is a need for attitudinal change. Nigerians must as a matter of fact change their pessimistic attitude towards development. The researchers assert that real development is achieved through internal activities rather than from external influence. The hospitality industry has the ability to not only source revenue from customers within the country but also attract outside patronage and investments to enhance national development. The center focus thus remains customers' perception of service delivery. Hence, to access the expected effects of service delivery on national development, an assessment of the hospitality industry has to be looked at qualitatively.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study draws its theoretical evidence from the Service Performance Model (SERVPERF) created by Cronin J.J. and Taylor, S.A. in 1994, in their study SERVPERF versus SERVQUAL; reconciling performance based and perceptions minus expectations measurement of service quality. The model was created on the basis of critique of the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Model by Parasuraman, Zeithaml in 1988. They emphasis is that SERVQUAL Model which tried to evaluate the relations between expected and experienced quality was not a proper approach to quality assessment. Thus, the SERVPERF model illustrates that the quality of service being rendered is a form of consumer attitude, emphasizing that the measurement of service quality is majorly performance based only. Numerous literatures have previously adopted the SERVPERF Model to explain service quality gaps based on performance in different sectors over the years (Babakus and Boller, 1992; Brown, Churchill and Peter, 1993; Lam, 1995; Quester and Romaniuk, 1997; Jain and Gupta, 2004; Adil, 2012; Adil, 2013). Marketing literature has supported the SERVPERF Model as a performance-based measure of service quality (Adil, Fatah, Ghaswyneh and Albkour, 2013). It is on this premise that this study gains its support owing to the fact that in hospitality businesses, customers' perception and satisfaction of service quality is judged on its performance outcome.

3. METHODOLOGY

Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria was used as the study area. It is an area with a high hospitality and tourism prospect. The study adopts the exploratory research design, which is a qualitative research method. A focus group interview made up of 12 participants who were contacted from three senatorial districts in the State were used to collect information on the subject of service delivery in the Nigerian hospitality industry and its impact on national development. The participants were seven (7) stakeholders of the hospitality industry in Akwa Ibom State, most of who were hotel owners and hospitality consultants, five (5) were customers who regularly patronized hospitality services both in and out of Akwa Ibom State and had a fair knowledge of the nature of hospitality services as well as customer expectations in service delivery.

The focus group interview questions were inductive and naturalistic thus, issues discussed were categorized into six (6) related areas to include: customer patronage of hospitality businesses in Nigeria, kinds of services rendered, customers complains and feedbacks on service delivered, approaches in correcting failed services, the prospect of the Nigerian hospitality industry and suggestions to better the industry. The series of questions were intended for participants to express both negative and positive views on the subject, as well as allow them express vintage points that could better the industry. To increase participants confidence level. They were asked to introduce themselves at the beginning and it was stated that respondents were free to leave at anytime. Discussions were recorded by the moderator on a note pad and on a recording device. Triangulation of responses showed significant similarities among participants view, thus findings were presented in themes.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The twelve participants of the focus group showed good knowledge of the six questions under discussion. However, their views were expressed from different angles and a considerable amount of different ideas were generated and contributions according to the specific themes highlighted for discussion were extracted. Content analysis, techniques as prescribed by Krippendorf, 1980; and Webber, 1990; Krueger and Casey (2000) was applied to examine the data collected from the focus group discussion by studying the statements made by the participants based on pattern identification.

4.1. Customer Patronage of Hospitality Business in Nigeria

The participants all acknowledged their patronage of hospitality businesses within and outside the states. They added that they patronized a place that would satisfy not just their accommodation needs but security as well. The participants who were customers expressed that their hospitality experience isn't just about the lounging, but visiting a place like a five-star hotel that offered a full pack of service offering.

4.2. Kinds of Services Rendered

As regards the kinds of services rendered, participants were of the notion that most hospitality businesses in the country had similar service offerings. All participants agreed that hotels were major players in the Nigerian hospitality industry, but in various classes; from the five stars to the three stars hotels, including guest houses, inns and motels. As a whole, there was a consensus among participants that accommodation, restaurant, clubs / lounges, laundry, bar and internet services were major offerings of the hotels. To further augment guest comfort, resort and sports facilities apart from the listed were available.

4.3. Customer Complaints and Feedbacks of Service Delivered

Participants who were customers shared the same view based on complains related to check in time. The emphasized that on numerous occasions they had experienced prolonged stay at the reception before being attended to or checked in. They were of the view that 'reception' begins at the gate when guests walk into the hotel premises, although 5-star hotels and most 4-stars hotels offered good receptions from the gate, as there were available parking spaces, portals were on ground to assist in conveying guest luggage, and staff projected friendliness and customer centric attitude in relating with guests. This was not the same experience in most 3-stars hotels, 2-star and 1-star hotels, guest were said to be often received in a tone that showed "inconvenience than a warm welcome, especially when they arrived at late hours.

All participants expressed their concerns regarding customer complain avenues and treatment of customer complains. Hotel owners indicated that provisions for customer complaints were made in the forms of suggestion boxes and customer care lines, which were reviewed periodically. Customers among the participants were inquisitive on how often these complains were treated without repetition within a short term.

4.4. Approaches in Correcting Failed Services

Participants who were hotel owners emphasize that in running hospitality businesses they put a lot of plans to offer their services right from the beginning. While most hotels encourage their customers to complain, in order to better their services, some hotels still find customer complains offensive and

don't do much in taking responsibility and correcting the faults. Customers among the participants added that there were instances where their rooms had to be changed due to faults dictated in the use of a hotel facility, to a better one, but there were also instances where their complains were not acted on quickly or they were told to manage such services. On this, participants agreed it was not encouraging, as this could influence customer dissatisfaction and escalate, giving the business a negative light among customers and prospective customers.

4.5. The prospect of the Nigeria Hospitality Industry

All participants expressed a positive opinion on the future of the hospitality industry in Nigeria. This they highlighted was evident when a close consideration of the peak periods within the year was done. Within this peak period, hotels were fully booked in most cities in the country as a result of festivities and tourism related activities, often within the last quarter of every year. Hotel owners among the participants also added that, from the time hotels were built to the time of operations, persons were employed thus enhancing the well- being of the people. The sector is also said to be an income / revenue generator, and the service sector is a major contributor to GDP.

4.6. Suggestions to Better the Industry

Participants emphasized that some of the treatments given to customers by hotel staff are as a result of directives from the hotel owners. Hence employee and owners training were suggested. Participants suggested that where necessary, especially four (4) and five (5) star hotels, can move from owner management to expert management, this could be done by establishing a strategic partnership between expert hospitality institutions and the hotels. Hotel management could also consult out-sourcing firms for recruitment, as this would allow them employ specialized staff only.

All participants agreed that it was necessary for most hotels below the five-star status in the country to employ and train the right front-line personnel as they were often the first contacts with customers. The hotel facilities were said to add to guest experiences, thus participants recommended that flexible equipment, system design and service support process be placed as a priority is boosting guest experiences.

5. CONCLUSION

The study provides an opportunity to closely look at the service delivery gaps in the hospitality industry which could militate against its contribution to national development. The inclusion of both hotel owners and customers in the group discussion provided a unique two-way understanding of the issues faced in the industry. A focus group approach also systematically allowed us gather unbiased responses from the participants on the subject. It appeared to have been an effective method to employ in the study because participants of the focus group who were made or owners and customers had a fair experience of the services offered by the hospitality industry. Most participants cited that restaurants, bars, clubs, sports and games facilities in addition to accommodations were basic units of the hospitality business, but employee interaction with guests was a vital role that added to guess experience. One thing that is visible in all opinion was the fact that employees should be placed at different duties based on employee job-fit.

From the result of the focus, group discussion, it appears that addressing the service delivery gaps in the Nigerian hospitality industry was an important predictor, if it aims at contributing to national development. Customer feed backs and service experience forms the source of information that the industry operators could work with to better the industry. Thus, avenues for customer complaints must be made available for them to freely express satisfactions, dissatisfaction and suggestions to better services being rendered.

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