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The hotel guest questionnaire: an assessment of its role as a service encounter interface

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**THE HOTEL GUEST QUESTIONNAIRE:
AN ASSESSMENT OF ITS ROLE AS A
SERVICE ENCOUNTER INTERFACE**

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MSc. Training and Human Resource Management
B.S. Hotel and Restaurant Management
Diploma in Hotel Management**

**This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Faculty of Business and Law
Edith Cowan University**

February 2008

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study on hotel stakeholder behaviour uses a 'service innovation' approach to investigate how the hotel guest questionnaire can function in a way not previously considered in the hospitality management literature, viz as a remote service encounter interface between the hotel management and guest. The paper-based guest questionnaire, also commonly known as comment card, is an old hotel tradition that is the most widely used method of guest feedback elicitation by hotels. Primarily a method of measuring guest satisfaction, studies show that its inherent limitations as a survey instrument result in inaccurate and ungeneralisable data. The trend for e-based questionnaires as a complement to, or even a replacement of, the paper questionnaire provides timely impetus for re-evaluation of its role in contemporary hotel management.

Applying predominantly qualitative methodology, a five-stage research design involving the main stakeholders in the hotel business (Guest, Hotelier and Industry) in the Asia Pacific context was utilised (Perth, Penang and Singapore). This tripartite relationship formed the foundation for the conceptual framework of the study. The first stage consisted of two parts: 1) applied content analysis of a sample of 71 blank hotel questionnaires and 2) quasi Q-sort of a sub-set of those questionnaires. The objective was to derive data on the characteristics of questionnaires and how guests interacted with them. This served to provide a collective perception held in the community of the hotel industry. The content analysis was performed separately by a panel of six experienced hotel guests and the researcher.

The second stage involved focus group interviews of hotel guests to obtain views on questionnaire usage and guest-hotelier interaction. This was followed by the third stage which consisted of interviews with hoteliers to derive an evaluation of questionnaire utilisation and hotelier-guest interaction.

The fourth stage consisted of triangulation of the data and resulted in the development of the Hotelier Interface (HI) letter – proposed by the researcher as an alternative to the typical questionnaire, a hybrid of open and closed questions. This letter is underpinned by the notion that remote service encounters can play an important role in determining

customer satisfaction and commitment. This letter was reviewed and discussed in 10 hotelier interviews in the fifth and final stage.

A consistent divergence in preferences for guest questionnaire formatting and administration across stakeholder groups became apparent. Guests perceived the purpose of the questionnaire differently based on its appearance and content, and their actual previous experience of its usage. Preference for the type of questionnaire varied; however, the hybrid-type questionnaire is characterised as the de facto industry standard due to its prevailing popularity. Guest-hotelier interaction was found to be idiosyncratic. However, a consensus that a favourable service encounter between hotelier and guest can be advantageous is observed. Hoteliers report the importance of hotelier-guest interaction and remote interfacing while acknowledging the shortcomings of existing questionnaire formats.

More research is needed to fully validate the proposed HI letter but the responses of hoteliers confirmed that it is a viable means to create a service encounter between hotelier and guest. The letter offers an added 'touchpoint' that potentially leads to enhanced guest experience, service recovery outcomes and consequent guest commitment. This study has practical applicability and implications for customer communication in the hotel industry and the wider services industry. It extends the service encounter literature with its examination of the hotelier-guest dyad and impacts on future research on the interaction between hotelier and guest.

Keywords: hotel guest questionnaire, service encounter, remote service encounter, hotelier-guest dyad, customer communication, interface

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver, and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand, in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her, those who lay hold of her will be blessed." (Proverbs 3:13-18)

I dedicate this thesis to my wife and children. Thanks Lucia, Megan and Caleb for bearing with me during this tumultuous odyssey. I also dedicate it to my parents. Mum and Dad, thanks for being behind me all the way and believing in me. Wendy and Jeanne, thank you for always upholding me in prayer and for sisterly love. You all buoyed me as I navigated choppy waters in search of the refuge of the safety bay which is my new found spirituality and communion with my Lord and Saviour. I wish to acknowledge my supervisors, Professor Nadine Henley and Associate Professor Sybe Jongeling, who were instrumental in instilling perseverance in me and allowing me to tell my story! My appreciation also goes out to Dr. Mario Arnaldo, Eric Watson, Michelle Rowe, Dr. Patricia Berwick, Dr. Abel Alonso, Dr. Elaine Leong and my fellow doctoral cohorts for their camaraderie and invaluable input. Lastly, I would also like to acknowledge my industry partners without whom this project would not have been possible. It is the enthusiasm and congeniality of enlightened hoteliers that permits advancement in hotel management research and perpetuates vital industry-academia symbiosis.

PUBLICATIONS GENERATED FROM THIS STUDY

- Ogle, A. (Accepted for publication, 2008). Morphology of a hotel tradition: the guest questionnaire. In A. G. Woodside (Ed.), *Advances in Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* (Vol. 2). Oxford: JAI Press.
- Ogle, A. & Gharavi, H. (2004, May). Hotel guest questionnaire form and function: A study of Perth hotels. *Proceedings of the second Asia-Pacific Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education (ApacCHRIE) & The Sixth Biennial Conference on Tourism in Asia*, Phuket, Thailand.
- Ogle, A., Nosaka, K. & Pettigrew, S. (2005, December). An exploratory study on the role of management tone in hotel guest questionnaires. *Proceedings of the Australian & New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC) 2005 Conference*, Fremantle, Australia.
- Ogle, A., Rowe, M., Henley, N. & Jongeling, S. (Submitted for consideration). Hotel guest e-questionnaires: implications for feedback and relationships, the 6th Asia-Pacific CHRIE Conference and THE-ICE (International Centre of Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality Education) International Panel of Experts Forum 2008 (May), Perth, Australia.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Research Underpinnings

This thesis reports the results of a four-pronged empirical study testing the viability of the hotel guest questionnaire acting as a service encounter interface between hotelier and guest. The term hotelier is commonly defined as the manager or owner of a hotel (Dictionary of Hotels, Tourism and Catering Management, 1994). In this study, it specifically refers to the hotel General Manager or the most senior person in charge of the day-to-day running of the property.

This study was prompted by two questions: first, why does the ubiquitous hotel guest questionnaire provoke highly divergent stakeholder opinions vis-à-vis its form and function; and second, how does this printed guestroom collateral relate to the service encounter which is the bedrock of the hospitality and tourism industry (Chapman & Lovell, 2006).

The contemporary hotelier is availed of a wide variety of questionnaires (commonly called 'comment cards' in the industry) distinguishable not only by outward physical attributes but also less evidently by content. Ostensibly, the questionnaire is an invitation extended by the hotelier to the guest to proffer invaluable feedback. The literature, on the one hand, portrays it as being a simple low-cost method that: 1) alerts the management of product and service anomalies (Desombre & Eccles, 1998), 2) measures guest satisfaction and management performance (Jones, 1999), 3) facilitates performance benchmarking (Prasad, 2003) and employee recognition programmes, and 4) gathers marketing data which generates service and product innovation (Sampson,

1998). Questionnaire proponents continue to rely heavily on questionnaires for feedback solicitation (Geller, 1984) and since they are found virtually in every hotel guestroom (Ford & Bowen, 2003; Lewis & Pizam, 1981; Shea & Roberts, 1998; Su, 2004; Trice & Layman, 1984), the continued use of these questionnaires underscores the pervasive familiarity both guests and hoteliers have with it. However, the traditional questionnaire has been criticised for its failure to elicit the deeper understanding of consumer research, emphasizing a reliance on the scientific paradigm with predetermined response categories. In addition, the questionnaire format most frequently favoured by practitioners does not capture the personal experience of guests as expressed in their own words (Zou & Lee, 2007).

Consequently, the questionnaire has been shown in the literature to be inherently flawed as a reliable survey instrument and is often disparaged for poor design, implementation, and data analysis (Lewis & Pizam, 1981). Response rates tend to be low (Trice & Layman, 1984) resulting in it being underutilised (Kwortnik, 2003). Many hotels appear to have questionnaires that were “poorly conceived and haphazardly developed” (Kraft & Martin, 1997, p. 162) which can derive data that is open to multiple interpretation due to arbitrary categorisation by both provider and recipient of the data (Losekoot, van Wezel, & Wood, 2001). Faulty questionnaire may be relegated to function merely as a ‘witch-hunt’ tool (Wisner & Corney, 1999; Yearwood, 2000). The questionnaire is a passive, non-intrusive format which records extremes (Sampson, 1996) in guest opinions. This makes for a low-quality sample, severely reducing the questionnaire’s effectiveness to generate data representative of the general population of hotel guests (Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998).

Nevertheless, despite its flaws, it continues to be used extensively in the hotel industry as an important avenue for guests to voice their complaints as well as their compliments. Therefore, in essence, the questionnaire is a communication interface between guest and hotelier. Further, given that customer-service provider communication and the service encounter are inextricably linked (Brownell, 2003; Nikolich & Sparks, 1995), the guest questionnaire is in effect a service encounter. However, this linkage has not been explored in a hotelier-guest context even though the service encounter is particularly relevant in hospitality services (Butcher, 2005), leading

to the coinage of the term 'hospitality encounter' (Bowie & Buttle, 2004; Brotherton & Wood, 2000; Inui, 1999; Riley, 2007; Sheringham & Daruwalla, 2006). Therefore, this research study examines the way the guest questionnaire is used (currently below its potential), with the aim of making recommendations that could result in maximising its potential as a remote service encounter.

Communication in hotels occurs before the stay (for example, room booking), during the stay (in-house), and sometimes after the stay (for example, a billing enquiry). With each instance shaping the guest experience and consequently satisfaction, the critical importance of customer communication in service encounters (Brownell, 2003) is underscored by the increased frequency of possible guest contact with hotel service staff. Each incidence of contact, widely termed as 'moments of truth' in the hospitality industry (Carlzon, 1987; Dittman, 1996; Harris, Bojanic, & Cannon, 2003), represents a guest service encounter (Nikolich & Sparks, 1995; Winer, 2001). From a guest perspective, hotel communication primarily involves guest-to-hotel interaction. The service encounter is frequently characterised as "the service from the customer's point of view" (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990, p. 71). It is seen as a customer-initiated interaction with a service provider (Namasivayam & Hinkin, 2003) that directly reflects the level of service provided to the customer (Bitner, 1990). Thus it is indicative of the importance that the "social side" of the service exchange plays (Butcher, 2005, p. 125) and gives credibility to that guest-centric perspective.

It is posited in this study that the hotelier-guest dyadic dimension of guest external communication has not previously been fully explored. The potential for the questionnaire to play a hotelier-guest interface function is viable and may be able to assume a greater importance with little incremental effort in the design, administration and data analysis (Trice & Layman, 1984). Kandampully (1998, p. 434) describes a 'service innovation' as the transformation of a dormant asset "into something of substantially greater value to both the customer and the organization". Thus the guest questionnaire can potentially be a service innovation for the hotel industry. In this case, the questionnaire would factor into a holistic feedback system, incorporating a combination of channels each used where it can be most effective (Carnell, 2003).

1.2 Service Encounter

As a full review of the literature on service encounter is beyond the scope of this thesis, a brief introduction and an overview of the literature related to 'dyadic encounters' (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985) is presented relating to guest communication, in general, and the hotel guest questionnaire, in particular. This review serves to establish that the existing literature fails to consider the hotelier-guest dyad specifically in relation to the general manager-guest dyad. In addition, the possibility of initiating a 'service innovation' to bring about a linkage between the service encounter and the guest questionnaire is suggested. This linkage is exemplified by guest communication within the hotelier-to-guest dyad.

Good customer relationships depend greatly on satisfactory service encounters (Mattsson & den Haring, 1998). The service encounter plays a critical role in determining customer satisfaction and repatronage (Brown, Fisk & Bitner, 1994), and is a key strategic tool for service organisations (Solnet, 2006). Soteriou and Chase (2000) assert that high quality service delivery during the service encounter is central to competitive advantage in service organisations, and relationship quality is a consequence of service encounters (Bolton, 1998; Czepiel, 1990). This study explores the service encounter as the core hotel activity. Chase and Dasu (2006, p. 1) cogently posit that "the heart of a service is the encounter between server and the customer". As such, the service encounter can be depicted as being the essence of the hospitality industry. Along those lines, the ubiquitous service encounter-centricity could be justly considered as a main distinguishing feature of the hotel industry.

The service encounter, however, is widely characterised in the literature as a physical manifestation of the service and product delivery provision. It is also depicted as an activity that occurs between front-line customer contact employees, specifically at the front line front-of-house level but also within a Sales and Marketing capacity such as those designated Account or Sales Manager, and guest. Gutek, Bhappu, Liao-Troth and Cherry (1999) note that customers have a preference for repeat interactions with the same service provider. However, the industry is reliant on casual employees; this invariably prevents hoteliers from fully meeting that preference. As a consequence, the probability of a guest being serviced by different staff at each stay, and even during the

same stay and the resultant variability in service behaviour, has serious perceptual implications (Harris, Bojanic, & Cannon, 2003) as well as providing challenges for quality control of service delivery.

As hotel operations are increasingly streamlined and automated, employee-guest interactions become less frequent, increasing the importance of the role that 'remote service encounters' (for example, booking online, automated self check-in/check-out) play in hotel-guest interfacing. Although Schijns (2003) found that customers preferred physical service encounters over remote ones, the remote service encounter complements the physical service encounter as part of a multi-channelling approach (Aaker, Kumar, & Day, 1995; Vargo & Lusch, 2004b). The industry remains a people industry in which the locus of satisfaction resides between service provider and customer (Lazer & Layton, 1999; Noe & Uysal, 2003), and hoteliers acknowledge the constraints time has on their ability to have face-to-face encounters with their guests. Consequently the hotelier of the 1990s was perceived to be more back-of-house (Gilbert & Guerrier, 1997). The use of the term 'service encounter' is adopted by the researcher to apply to hotelier-guest although it is typically characterised in the literature as involving line staff (Svensson, 2006). The rationale for this adoption in the study is that the hotelier plays a key role in 'service encountering' which is integral in what Nankervis (2000) refers to as the 'service loop'. This loop involves actively seeking guest feedback. Inadequate direct contact could not only impinge on the ability of the hotelier to be 'in touch' with guests but also to be perceived as being inaccessible and aloof.

Figure 1.1 has been constructed by the researcher to depict the hospitality service encounter as being influenced by different disciplines and traditions. This hallmark genre of service encounter is manifested in different forms and is represented in a continuum ranging from the traditional face-to-face encounter to a virtual interaction. While this variety is widely acknowledged in the literature, the characterisation of the interaction appears to be restricted to the line staff, and those primarily in direct dealing with guests, and hence would be on a staff-guest dyad. The hotelier-guest dyad has not been explicitly mentioned in the literature and therefore represents a gap that warrants

expedient address due to the significant role that the hotelier plays in the hotel guest interface.

The interaction between hotelier and guest, the 'connection' that transpires in the hotel context as such, is typically referred to by both stakeholders as a 'relationship'. The appropriateness of the common usage of 'relationship' by both hospitality professional and customers/guests is questionable. The appositeness of the enhanced service encounter is however apparent as implied to by Lashley (2000, p. 4) who claims that "hospitality primarily involves mutuality and exchange, and thereby feelings of altruism and beneficence".

Notwithstanding the incongruity, it best embodies the remote service encounter which can be viably delivered via a 'service innovation' vehicle to optimise guest communication. The preference of terminology perhaps reflects the sentiment of Taylor (2000, p. xii) who points out in a somewhat pejorative fashion the "dangers of the hospitality industry drawing too freely upon domestic metaphors" of which the banal 'home away from home' adage is a prime example. Therefore, the use of 'relationship' as a metaphor in the hotel context, in the same way that 'home' is used in the above example, can be argued to have the same 'dangers' and thus should be avoided.

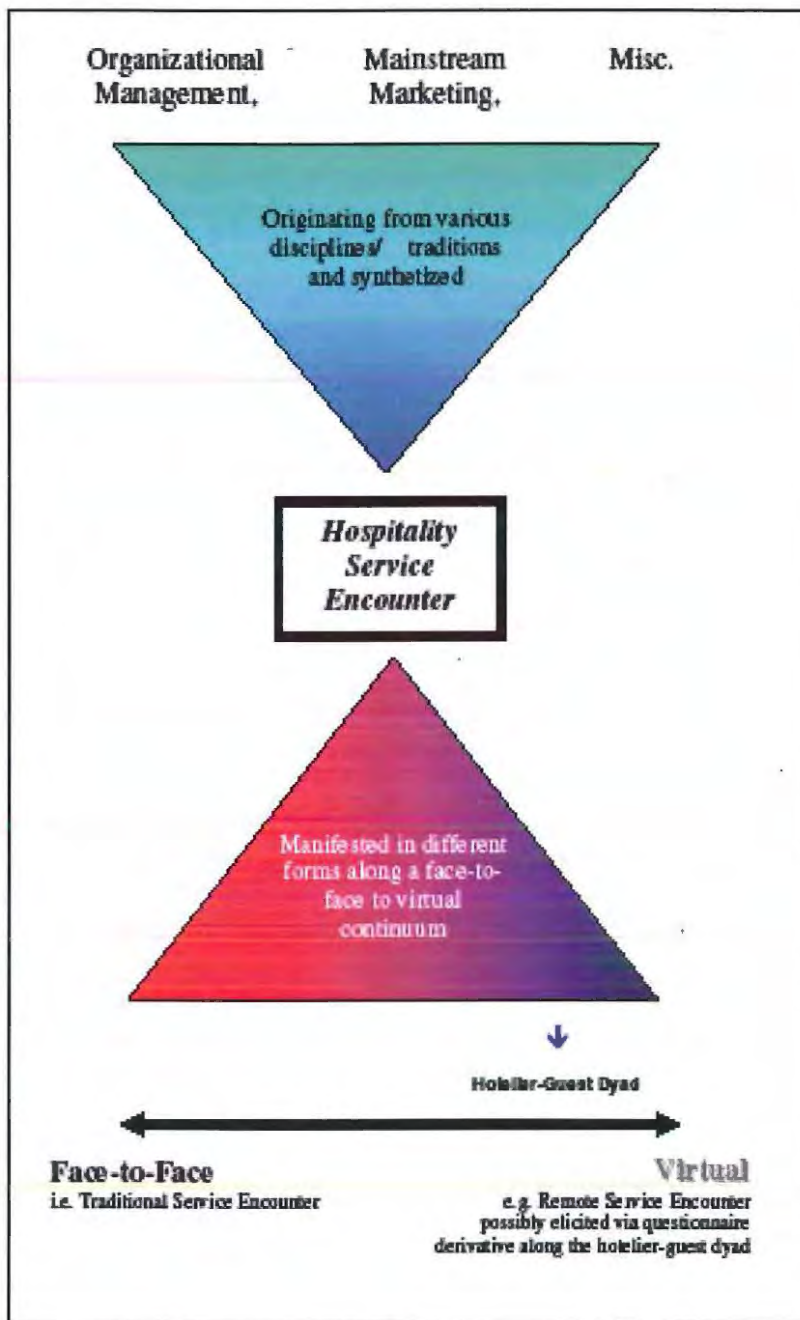


Figure 1.1. Hospitality service encounter dyadic paradigm.

Remote Service Encounter

The questionnaire provides busy hoteliers with the opportunity to effect a remote service encounter which allows them to ‘share their existence’ (Haring & Mattsson, 1999) with their guests. This allows hoteliers to fulfil their traditional role performance (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985) as ‘innkeepers’, and accommodating listeners

(Noe & Uysal, 2003) by mimicking the personal encounter (Ogle, Nosaka, & Pettigrew, 2005). This dyadic function extends beyond the notion that service encounters essentially “relate to “high-touch” (traditional face-to-face interaction) and “high-tech” (those encounters that take place over a long distance via a technology interface)” (Kandampully, 2002, p. 18). In addition, the hotelier engages in proactive service whereby the hotelier establishes dialogue with the guest before the guest is able to engage in complaining behaviour (Winer, 2001). This action is especially pertinent when the hotelier is a key personality at the hotel, what Weiner (1980) refers to as ‘locus’. In other words, the hotel is a setting in which a discernible interaction between manager and customer occurs. This linkage can be referred to as the hotelier-guest dyad. Given that a hotelier could have a superiority complex because of self-confidence (Nebel III, 1991) or the status as a result of the position, reinforced by gender (Watt, 2007), proactive engagement can dismiss this perception and give the guest a sense of control. This control moderates negative feelings when there is a service failure (Chase & Dasu, 2001).

Therefore such an encounter, while mitigating guest dissatisfaction from escalating into a formal complaint, is able to identify latent or potential complaints. In addition, encounters provide the opportunity to tease out the feelings that guests had experienced during the stay which may be “so subtle they probably couldn’t be put into words” (Chase & Dasu, 2001, p. 80) and encourage guests to articulate constructive suggestions or feedback. Such information is what makes customer interactions powerful (Wells et al., 1999), even more so when it is attainable without entailing high expenditure (Ford & Bowen, 2003). A service encounter engendering interface could function as a prelude to initiating a face-to-face meeting between the hotelier and the guest. Such direct interaction allows hoteliers to obtain information as rich as that obtainable from the in-depth interview (Kwortnik, 2003). Going beyond the proactive aspect of remote service encounters, the questionnaire would also serve a reactive function in that the hotelier can accelerate the recovery process. In this respect, Smith and Bolton (1998) argue that as many as twelve positive experiences with a service provider are needed to assuage the negative effects of a single bad experience.

The questionnaire encounter can benefit the hotelier in more subtle ways. Firstly, the hotelier possesses tacit knowledge that comes from operational experience. Hedlund (1994, p. 75) describes tacit knowledge as “nonverbalized, or even nonverbalizable, intuitive, unarticulated”. A hotelier could use tacit knowledge as a critical knowledge resource for sustainable competitive advantage (Schultze & Stabell, 2004) or may choose to keep it confidential for personal career leverage. Tacit knowledge is derived from frequent encounters with guests and honed through discriminating assessment of explicit or implicit guest comments that come not only from face-to-face contact but via written feedback such as guest letters and questionnaires. Tantawy and Losekoot (2001) suggest that complaining feedback can crystallize latent tacit knowledge by highlighting obscure actual and perceived mistakes, and resulting in appropriate service recovery or remedial actions.

The questionnaire hence plays an important facilitating function in this process providing that it represents the qualities and values that are salient to respondents and accurately reflects ‘guest speak’ (Rising, 1999; Fallis & Chewitt, 1997). As a consequence, the questionnaire provides the hotelier an additional means to detect the clues that make up either a positive or a negative guest experience, and in turn, enables effective manipulation of the product being offered to take into account what is learned from these clues. By inference, this supports the contemporary view that new services emerge from considered formal development strategy (Martin & Horne, 1993) rather than, as was previously thought, being serendipitous (Rathmell, 1974) or a result of luck, flair and intuition (Langeard, Reffait & Eigler, 1986).

Secondly, the personalized letter serves as a ‘humanic clue’ (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006; Carbone & Haeckel, 1994) via a remote interface to elicit an emotional perception of service quality and value. This would allow a busy hotelier to effect another dimension of ‘clue management’ (Berry et al., 2006). This approach would overcome the ‘pseudo-relationship’ (Guttek, 1997) that the typical non-personalised ‘management’ welcome letter attempts to achieve. Furthermore the letter serves to establish the initial encounter that could be then nurtured into a relationship between hotelier and guest, and, by association, between hotel and guest, given the short hotelier tenure cycles (Birdir, 2002; Timo & Davidson, 2005).

Given that rapport cultivation between line employees and customers in service encounters can generate positive benefits (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000), the possibility of reaping incremental benefits by extending the rapport between top management and guest is conceivable. This additional layer of service encounters at the hotel management echelon sets the organisational benchmark and can positively impact on the relational quality demonstrated by line staff (King & Garey, 1997).

Remote service encounter application would boost 'touch point' frequency and the profit from incremental guest data gathering opportunity (Horzewski, 2001). This spin-off effect serves to promote the propagation of an 'enhanced encounter' as opposed to a 'pseudo-relationship'. This higher level bond, such as the social bond (Holmlund & Kock, 1996), could conceivably encourage guests to foster 'social exchange relationship' (Bagozzi, 1995). The consequence of a social exchange relationship, Bettencourt (1997, p. 384) argues, is 'customer voluntary performance' (CVP) which means "helpful, discretionary behaviours of customers that support the ability of a firm to deliver service quality".

Guest feedback in hotel management has been shown to be important; understanding the ways and means of soliciting that feedback is fundamental to actualizing that importance. Thus the purpose of this study is to assess the hotel guest questionnaire from both guest and hotelier perspectives in relation to the dyadic 'relationship' between the two stakeholders.

1.3 Justification for the Research

The hospitality industry is considered to be the second largest industry in the world in terms of revenue generation (Stutts, 1999), and contributes significantly to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of tourism-dependent nations (Chan & Lam, 2000). It is one of the largest employers in many developed and developing countries (Wood, 1997). The commercial lodging sector is a key feature of the hospitality industry and services both tourists and local communities (Litteljohn, 2003; Reisinger, 2001). Transient accommodation, nowadays most commonly in the form of the ubiquitous hotel, can be found wherever movement of people away from home or work occurs (McIntosh, Goeldner, & Ritchie, 1995). This movement makes such enterprises an integral part of

every urban community and its economy. The industry seeks to establish guest loyalty as it is highly dependant on returnee guest patronage (Haktanir & Harris, 2005) and word-of-mouth communications (Siguaw & Enz, 1999). Guest satisfaction directly impacts revenues and profits (Schall, 2003) and is the basis of a hotel's business viability (Abdullah, 1998). Davidow (2000) claims that the hospitality field, together with tourism, has a relatively low percentage of repeat customers. Thus there appears to be a great opportunity to build loyalty, especially when long-term relationships typically lead to higher profitability (Bowen & Shoemaker, 1998; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990) and bring in more new customers (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990)

Guest questionnaires can impact on how hoteliers understand guest needs and expectations, and can enable guest satisfaction and consumption trends to be gauged effectively. It is therefore important that the use of the questionnaire is maximized so that sufficient data are obtained to permit reliable analysis that can result in 'useful' information (Trice & Layman, 1984) "to assist with quality improvement and decision making" (O'Neill & Palmer, 2001, p. 189). More importantly, identification of the elements of an effective questionnaire for mainstream hotels in the Asia Pacific region would provide a template for future questionnaire design issues, particularly of form and function. A more effective instrument would enable hoteliers to better understand their guests' hotel experience. The resultant information can then be fed into management systems aimed at optimizing guest satisfaction and repatronage.

Effective internal and external communication is the key to efficient day-to-day operations and has long-term management implications (Garrett & Meyers, 1996; Susskind, 2001). To this end, the hotel guest questionnaire could conceivably play a major facilitating role in hotel external communication if it is designed and administered correctly. An enhanced communication tool would elicit more feedback. Increased rates of return can affect the content of the responses (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1969). This enhanced information would assist hoteliers to be more attuned to their guests' needs and expectations, and thus enable them to protect guest loyalty. A user-friendly questionnaire could be viewed by guests as a mechanism by which they can effect change thereby 'empowering' them and encouraging a flow of constructive feedback. Bettencourt (1997) argues that the willingness of a customer to communicate problems

and suggestions for service improvement is predicated upon conviction that the request for feedback is genuine, evidenced by formal acknowledgement by the service provider. Hence design and modus operandi aspects will determine to a considerable extent its user-friendliness.

Given the cost effectiveness of the paper questionnaire and the affinity guests and hoteliers still have with it, it would benefit industry practitioners to explore ways to retain the paper interface and enhance its functionality. As most of the published research relates to questionnaires applied in the North American and European contexts (for a notable exception see Su, 2004, which applies to Taiwan), research investigating usage and practical design changes in hotel questionnaires in the Asia Pacific region is warranted. Whilst the area of questionnaire design is a mature discipline in contemporary marketing, Jenkins and Dillman (1997) contend that questionnaire designers typically overly rely on convention and 'common sense'. In this regard, Lilien, Rangaswamy, van Bruggen and Wierenga (2002) lament that for many senior managers marketing is intrinsically informed by art and experience, and they would therefore be unlikely to value the principles of self-administered questionnaire construction. A senior marketing academic echoes this sentiment in saying that "the very basics of marketing and quality are compromised by the attitude of senior people to the uses and usefulness of guest questionnaires at the point of consumption" (David Gilbert, Professor of Marketing, University of Surrey, personal communication, 21 October 2007).

This study applies qualitative and quantitative techniques to obtain an understanding of the role and effectiveness of the hotel questionnaire in order to provide useful outcomes for practitioners. It also deals with the hotelier-guest relationship which is otherwise neglected in the hospitality service encounter literature. One exception is Radder and Wang's (2006) study of guesthouse managers and guests which found that the interaction was not of any importance. This study will augment the existing literature and possibly lead to further investigation into hospitality industry consumer research.

1.4 Research Objectives

Given the potential of the guest questionnaire to facilitate valuable guest service encounters, the aims of this study were to:

- (A) Assess the perceptions and usage of the paper questionnaire by the hoteliers who use it and the guest to whom it is directed,
- (B) Explore the influence of the service encounter between hotelier and guest, and
- (C) Test the viability/applicability of a service encounter-based hotelier-guest interface.

The objectives are framed in the following research questions:

- 1) What are the different types of questionnaire used in the hotel industry and what is their primary purpose?
- 2) What relationships exist between motive, response rates (propensity of usage), question format, and size/length?
- 3) How do guests view and use the questionnaire?
- 4) What is the expectation of the guest in terms of a service encounter with the top management, primarily the General Manager, during a stay?
- 5) What do hotel General Managers perceive the purpose of the guest questionnaire to be?
- 6) Is guest interaction important to a General Manager?
- 7) How can the questionnaire, or a derivative, be optimised as a viable remote service encounter interface?

1.5 Methodology

A pragmatic research philosophy underlies the research process undertaken. Pragmatic research advocates that behaviours are dictated more by practical consequences than by theory or principles and views science as a process of learning how to learn by reflecting on processes. This approach helps us understand social issues (Mintz, 2004).

This study employed a multi-method approach using qualitative and quantitative techniques, an approach Brownell (2003, p. 42) surmises is appropriate to best conduct research on “timely and relevant hospitality-management concerns”. In keeping within the philosophy of pragmatism, an exploratory perspective primarily using qualitative methodology was used for this research in order to formulate the research questions. A four-pronged approach in data collection and analysis was adopted. The data collection entailed four steps:

1. Collection of pre-existing blank guest questionnaires used by mid to high-end rated hotels in the target cities including that used by the industry collaborators for content analysis using a panel of reviewers, researcher observations and quasi Q-sort analysis
2. Focus group interviews with hotel guests;
3. Semi-structured personal interviews with hotel General Managers (GMs); and
4. Development of a model which was discussed with hotel General Managers via confirmatory interviews.

Three locations, Perth, Penang and Singapore, were selected on the basis of research suitability and viability as elaborated below.

Suitability of Locations for Research

Business and tourism linkages exist whereby:

(a) Perth is the gateway for Malaysian visitors to Australia, and Malaysians were the fourth largest group of visitors to Western Australia in 2002 (Western Australian Tourism Commission, 2003). In turn, Australians constituted the sixth largest foreign tourist segment in Penang in 2002 (DCT Consultancy, 2003);

(b) Perth is also the gateway for Singaporean visitors to Australia. Singaporeans were the second largest group of visitors to Western Australia in 2003 (Western Australian Tourism Commission, 2003) and Australians constituted the fifth largest foreign tourist segment in Singapore in 2002 and 2003 (Singapore Tourism Board, 2004); and

(c) the legalized casino industries in Malaysia and Australia make both countries competitor destinations for Asian gaming enthusiasts. Singapore’s impending gaming

industry launched in 2009 (Adnan, 2005; Montlake, 2005; Singapore approves casino plan, 2005; Smale, 2004) will include it in the group.

The hotel industry in each of these locations is mature, providing a large pool of suitable respondents.

Viability of Location for Research

The researcher had ready access to financial and logistical resources to undertake questionnaire sample collection at the target locations. The research is worthwhile and appropriately focused as defined by the following delimitations.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study seeks to scrutinize the contemporary hotel guest questionnaire from two stakeholder perspectives, namely guests and hoteliers. A marked absence of recent work conducted on hotel questionnaire innovation and its implications is noticed and this study is timely. This industry legacy faces the prospect of being marginalized with the growing popularity of e-questionnaires and other technologically driven initiatives. Therefore this study is pertinent in an increasingly competitive marketplace in which guest loyalty and customization is of the essence. This study is significant because the hotel and catering industry, being the largest employer in many nations (Wood, 1997), is ubiquitous and therefore any improvement in hotelier-guest interfacing could afford favourable outcomes.

Original Contribution of the Study

This is an exploratory study aiming to reassess an industry tradition in order to effect a transformation in terms of form and function. The study offers real-world application possibilities while adding to the existing body of knowledge by:

- 1) Proposing for the first time that the relationship between hotelier and guest is a critical service encounter;

- 2) Proposing that is relationship can be cultivated by the guest questionnaire as a remote hotelier-guest service encounter strategy;
- 3) Synthesising the literature and proposing a typology of hotel guest questionnaires
- 4) Conducting a content analysis of guest questionnaires in the Asia Pacific context;
- 5) Collecting and analysing guest and hotelier perceptions relating to the guest questionnaire; and.
- 6) On the basis of the empirical data, designing an optimal reformulation of the quest questionnaire in the format of a letter from the hotelier inviting feedback, and soliciting feedback on it from hoteliers.

1.7 Delimitations of the Study

The study focuses on three cities in the Australasian region which experience high international traffic and encompass a wide range of hotels and industry personalities. It seeks to obtain an overarching perspective of both the hotelier and the guest in the mainstream mid-to-high star rating range. This study does not set out to generate findings that can be generalized to all hotels in terms of category (size, rating, and genre) and guests (nationality and ethnicity, language proficiency and purpose/length of stay) but seeks to provide a framework in which practice is enlightened by theory and applied research.

The conceptual framework orientation is shaped by the responses obtained from guests being representative of their subjective feelings or opinions about the hotel and hence are not based on any objective, absolute or universal benchmark. Cultural and gender differences will possibly influence guests' attitudes. However, in the present study, the assumption has been made that the sampling is adequate to represent mainstream hotel guest opinion irrespective of localities. In any case, this study has not attempted to derive recommendations for guest questionnaires based on cultural or gender influences as it would be impractical to implement such recommendations.

The growing popularity of e-questionnaires suggests the need for supplementary feedback techniques necessitated by questionnaire design inadequacies, and bodes the real threat of being completely phased out. While a comparison between the two formats would be in order, this study seeks to re-evaluate the paper questionnaire to ascertain if the questionnaire continues to remain a low-cost, albeit ineffective, hotel-guest communication interface, or can it be transformed into a valuable passive guest service encounter opportunity via a back-to-basics paradigm?

The questionnaire evolution includes the shifting from a paper format to an e-format. Other service industries such as the airlines influence the shift to an electronic format (Dandapani, 2006) and the proliferation of online e-comment card services suppliers targeting the hotel industry is evident. Yelkur and Da Costa (2001) find that hotels commonly provide guest feedback links on their websites. The paper questionnaire, however, still remains the model for other industries such as hospitals (see Desombre & Eccles, 1998) and group package tour agencies (see Wang, Guo, Chou, & Lin, 2003).

Lastly, the length of stay of the guests interviewed was presumed to be short to medium, thereby excluding idiosyncrasy of long/extended stay guests.

1.8 Organisation of the Thesis

This chapter outlined the need for research in hotel guest communication that focuses on the hotelier-guest dyad, and in particular, extending the service encounter landscape via 'service innovation', the innovative process of improving existing processes, products and services, and improvement and developing new ones. The research methodology, contribution to existing knowledge, and the study's objectives were presented.

Chapter 2 provides a discursive review of the literature. It focuses on the hotel guest questionnaire, providing a historical background and highlighting the fragmentation in terms of form and function. This discourse provides justification for the study by establishing the gaps to be addressed. It provides a compass to a possible resolution and a re-conceptualization of hotelier-guest communication via a service encounter, thereby

preserving a hotel tradition by reinventing it. The research conceptual framework is introduced and discussed.

A comprehensive content analysis of existing guest questionnaires is presented in Chapter 3. The method of content analysis is discussed, the objectives are listed and the methodology of content analysis is explained. The results of this analysis are described in terms of management tone, instrument size, print quality, question format and incentives. The chapter concludes with the findings of a Quasi Q-sort, a commonly used social research method to reveal situational subjectivity, which facilitated the identification of categories along aesthetic and content considerations.

Chapter 4 presents the second phase of the study which involved hotel guests as focus group participants. The purpose of focus group interviews, its objectives and methodology are described. The results of the focus group interviews are discussed in terms of antecedents and consequences of questionnaire usage, and hotelier-guest interaction.

Chapter 5 presents the third phase of the study involving in-depth interviewing of hoteliers. The results of the interviews are discussed in terms of feedback response modus operandi, guest feedback utility and hotelier-guest interaction.

Informed by the findings of phases 1, 2 and 3, a test instrument was developed and this process is presented in Chapter 6. This chapter also presents the final phase of the study which involved follow-up interviews with hoteliers involved in the third phase. The results of the interviews are discussed in terms of the viability of the model and the implications of its usage.

Chapter 7 presents discussion of the major research findings emerging from the research and draws on the literature review in trying to explain the emergent findings. Limitations of the research and ramifications are put forth. The chapter concludes with implications of the research findings for hospitality practitioners and academics, and suggestions for future research.

Definition of Terms

Comment Card: essentially a short customer survey questionnaire (Weaver, 2005) which generally is in the form of a 'tent card' like that found in restaurants, which are primarily short with only a few questions/items.

Communication, External: communication that occurs between employees and non-employees such as guests, intermediaries and suppliers. External communications directed at customers flow from formal and informal sources, with the former including public relations and advertising, and the latter including customer feedback and word-of-mouth (Herstein, Mitki & Jaffe, 2007)

Communication, Internal: communication that occurs between employees in an organisation and includes lateral, upward and downward communication within a hierarchy (see Employers' Organisation, 2004).

Guestroom Collateral: (hotel industry term) an article, typically a printed item, placed in the guestroom as part of the physical setup for purposes of enhancing the guestroom experience.

Hotel: a commercial establishment providing lodging, meals, and other guest services.

Hotelier: commonly defined as the manager or owner of a hotel (Dictionary of Hotels, Tourism and Catering Management, 1994). In this study, hotelier either specifically refers to a hotel's General Manager who "is the chief executive officer of its business" (Nebel III, 1991, p. xvii), a term typically used in acronym form (GM); or in reference to the most senior person in charge of the day-to-day running of the property. The latter includes group general manager, executive director, corporate vice president of operations (senior level) and (property) manager, executive assistant manager (EAM) or resident manager (RM).

Hotel Guest Questionnaire: a feedback mechanism in printed (paper) and electronic format, also commonly referred to as a guest comment card (GCC) or survey.

NVivo: a computer programme produced by QSR International for qualitative data coding and modelling applications. NVivo calls codes 'nodes' and used primarily as a clustering/segregation function in this research. A node is usually created as a 'free node' which essentially is a basic clustering tool; 'tree nodes' are constructed with free nodes and resemble a node hierarchy.

Property: the physical/tangible part of the hotel product/service mix. This encompasses the so-called 'hard' aspects, "principally facilities and amenities, consisting largely of physical infrastructure, plant and customer-service technologies" (Losekoot, van Wezel, & Wood, 2001, p. 298). Hotel printed collateral could be considered part of the property. Hotel facilities, although increasingly seen as being less important relative to intangibles (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a), are still regarded as vital for customer satisfaction (Losekoot, van Wezel, & Wood, 2001).

Remote Service Encounter: this encounter "occurs without any direct human contact" (Botschen, 2000, p. 285) consists of an interaction between hotel employee and guest which occurs without a face-to-face scenario. Many service encounters take place entirely through remote means (Payne, Christopher, Clark, & Peck, 1998, p. 191), for example, electronically such as via automated services.

Service Innovation: the innovation processes that are directed at the development of new services (Vermeulen & van der Aa, 2003) which are configurable to different environments and not necessarily constrained by 'best practice' (Tidd & Hull, 2003). Kandampully (1998, p. 434) describes a service innovation as the transformation of a dormant asset "into something of substantially greater value to both the customer and the organization".

Service Quality: the quality of service is a customer's perception of that particular service relative to past experiences of service performances (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985).

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents a review of the literature and the conceptual framework on which the research is based.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into two major sections and structured as follows:

2.1 Hotel Communication: a discourse on communication in a hotel context provides a background on which the rationale and focus of the study is justified. This is followed by an overview of guest feedback elicitation (guest-to-hotelier dyad) methods.

The main method of feedback elicitation used by mainstream hotels is the hotel guest questionnaire which is the focus of the second section.

2.2 Hotel Guest Questionnaire: an in-depth examination is reported in three sub-sections, namely:

- a) *Chronological study of the hotel guest questionnaire*: an exploration of its early and evolutionary development. The origins and metamorphosis are emphasised as they are key to the research underpinnings and formation of genre categorization;
- b) *Questionnaire genre typology*: this proposed typology illustrates divergence in form and function thereby shedding illumination onto the

possible underlying cause(s) for the disparate stakeholder perceptions;
and

- c) *Questionnaire form and function*: this discourse is on questionnaire morphology and how the relationship between form and function impacts on guest utilization and future design implications.

2.1 Hotel Communication

It is widely acknowledged that communication is vital to the hotel industry which is characterised by its high people-centricity (Thompson & Abbott, 1990; Schneider & Bowen, 1993, cited in Cheng & Brown, 1998; Lewis & Chambers, 1989). Effective internal and external communications are the key to efficient day-to-day operations and have long-term managerial implications (Garrett & Meyers, 1996; Susskind, 2001).

2.1.1 Internal and External Communication

Internal communication, referred to as horizontal communication by Daft and Steers (1985), occurs between employees of the hotel while external communication refers to interaction between employee and non-employee such as guests, intermediaries and suppliers. There has been a clear imbalance in the relative importance of the two types of communication in favour of external communication (Jones, Lockwood, & Bowen, 2004). This legacy is being challenged with both scholars (for example, Brownell, 2003; Cai & Hobson, 2004; Fletcher, 1999; Paraskevas, 2001; Solnet, 2006) and industry practitioners (Erstad, 2001; Herstein, Mitki & Jaffe, 2007) discussing the emergent realisation of the importance of internal communication to enhancing organisational cohesiveness (Haslam, Postmes, & Ellemers, 2003), job satisfaction (Mount & Back, 1999) and new product development (Lewis, 1989). Despite this realisation, resources allocation to internal and external communication in the hotel industry remains disproportional.

2.1.2 Disparity in Perception

Given the importance that communication has in hotels, it is surprising that internal communication and external communication are referred to in relative terms, as if one

has relatively less importance to the other. The disproportion in resources allocation to internal and external communication in the hotel industry may be, to a lesser extent, be perpetuated by ambiguity in terminology. For example, the usage of the term communication in itself is inexact given that 'good communication' could mean "different things to different people in different situations" compounded by definitional differences that exists between communication scholars and the layman (Dainton & Zelle, 2005, p. 2).

Guest communication in a hotel context can refer to (a) in-house guests' connectivity externally (for examples, see Zhang & Wu, 2004), (b) formal communication such as information transmittal (Dainton & Zelle, 2005) from the hotel to its guests (such as marketing communications, see Gilbert, Powell-Perry, & Widijoso, 1999; Gillespie & Morrison, 2001), or (c) the interaction that occurs between hotel employees and guests. The first aspect of guest communication which is the ways by which a guest can connect with contacts from the hotel guestroom (Fields, 2006), while neither internal nor external communication per se, is often a valuable revenue stream. Communications technology such as IP (Internet Protocol) telephony and Wi-Fi (Wireless Fidelity), are highly valued by hotel guests (J. D. Powers and Associates, 2006) and seamless connectivity is considered an important determinant of competitive advantage (Siguaw, Enz, & Namasivayam, 2000). Internal and external communication may be enhanced as a consequence of sophisticated telecommunication hardware utilization; however technology does not precipitate communication. This ambiguity may lead some hoteliers to erroneously shift more importance to external communication on the internal/external continuum.

Formal hotel-to-guest communication and employee-guest interaction directly constitute external communication. The hotel-guest communication can be extrapolated to the communication dimension of relationship marketing orientation (RMO) (Sin et al., 2005) which has been found to be positively and significantly associated with business (for example financial and marketing) performance of a hotel (Sin, Tse, Chan, Heung, & Yim, 2006). Seth and Parvatiyar (1995) attribute the rise of relationship marketing to the growth of the service economy, of which hospitality is a major player (Reisinger, 2001). Kim, Han and Lee (2001) found that greater communication as part of hotel relationship

marketing strategies results in higher relationship quality which, in turn, garners repatronage and positive word-of-mouth. Despite the enhanced efficacy of marketing communication with the advent of IT that allows the dissemination of more customised and updated material than the traditional mail outs, the most effective channel of customer communication remains the interaction between hotel employee and guest, be it via technology enabled interactive customer interfaces such as converged communication (data + voice + network) or the traditional face-to-face service encounter.

As communication in hotels, a high contact service setting (Bitran & Hoech, 1990), not only occurs when a guest is in-house, it can also be affected pre and post-stay (for example, at the point of room booking, billing enquiry). With each instance shaping the guest experience and consequently satisfaction, the critical importance of customer communication in service encounters (Brownell, 2003) is underscored by the increased frequency of possible guest contact with hotel service staff with each incidence of contact representing a guest service encounter (Nikolich & Sparks, 1995; Winer, 2001). From a guest perspective, hotel communication primarily involves guest-to-hotel interaction. There is a view that “the service encounter frequently is the service from the customer’s point of view” (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990, p. 71) and it is the “interaction initiated by a customer between that customer and a service provider” (Namasivayam & Hinkin, 2003, p. 26). This is indicative of “the importance of the social side to the service exchange” (Butcher, 2005, p. 125) and gives credibility to that guest-centric perspective. This guest to hotel dyad perspective may also cause the misperception that external communication may be relatively more important compared to internal communication.

It is acknowledged that a balance should ideally exist between internal and external communication and be mutually interdependent as put forth in Johnson and Chang’s (2000, p. 255) view that “new organizational forms depend on external communication for dealing with ever more complex interorganizational relationships”. Notwithstanding the disproportionate attention given to such external communication (Paraskevas, 2001) (such as marketing, service recovery, service staff-guest interaction), the focus of this study is on an aspect of external communication which has not been examined: the role

that the hotel guest questionnaire has as a remote service encounter interface between the top management and the guest. Losekoot, van Wezel and Wood (2001, p. 297) use the term “customer-client interface” in reference to the ‘soft’ skills aspect of the services industry. That term could be equally appropriate with regards to ‘hard’ aspects such as printed guestroom collaterals.

A key part of guest external communication is the hotel guest questionnaire which is customarily used by hoteliers to elicit guest feedback, and would be part of a comprehensive Customer Relationship Management (CRM) programme (Winer, 2001). Guest feedback is a part of external communication specifically on the guest-hotelier dyad and is referred to as “by-the-customer” information (Park & Kim, 2003, p. 654) in the context of the requirements of a knowledge-based CRM in hospitality (Sigala, 2005). It is widely accepted that effective capture of guest feedback is a vital managerial function which affects repatronage and improved profitability (Andreassen, 2001; Tax & Brown, 1998). According to Park and Kim (2003), customers’ direct complaints, needs and suggestions are valuable in new product development and critical business processes improvement. While other guest feedback mechanisms such as ad hoc surveys may be administered to guests during their stay (Lipton, 2000; Wisner & Corney, 1999), the questionnaire offers the widest sampling opportunity because it is in effect available at all times, either in-room or on demand at the hotel Front Desk, and also offers a convenient way of documenting data as service encounter feedback is usually verbal.

2.2 Hotel Guest Questionnaire

The guest questionnaire, which is also commonly known in the industry as a comment card (for example, see Cook, 2004), is a hotel tradition (Barsky & Nash, 2001). Various questionnaire variants are in use ranging from all open questions to all closed questions. The most favoured variant is the one which combines closed multiple-choice questions (MCQs) with some open questions and therefore has become the de facto standard and is referred to henceforth as the ‘hybrid-type’ questionnaire.

Guest questionnaires, together with other printed collaterals, are placed in the guestroom (Lewis, 1983; Losekoot et al., 2001; Poria, 2004; Trice & Layman, 1984) to be used by the guest on demand. This passive method of eliciting and recording guest feedback is

the primary one used by mainstream hotels (Barsky & Huxley, 1992; Geller, 1984) and may be the sole feedback mechanism used. This prevailing popularity, despite other methods being available to hoteliers, is probably attributable to its ubiquity and familiarity to both guests and hoteliers.

While the questionnaire has been criticized for deficiencies, namely reliability (Yesawich, 1978) and low response rate (Hagel & Rayport, 1997), there appears to be a paucity in academic studies on how the guest perceives the paper questionnaire. Likewise there have been no studies specifically on its efficacy and utility from a hotelier perspective, although data from hotel questionnaires have been utilized extensively in contemporary research.

Early landmark studies relating to hotel guest questionnaire design (Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998; Kraft & Martin, 1997; Lewis & Pizam, 1981; Trice & Dolan, 1985) grapple with fundamental operant issues. However, with few ensuing studies the impetus from those studies appeared to dissipate, imparting negligible impact on practitioners as reflected in the undistinguished design of the average hotel guest questionnaire in current use (Professor David Gilbert, University of Surrey, personal communication, 2007; Professor Frederic Kraft, Grand Valley State University, personal communication, 2007; Professor Ashton Trice, James Madison University, personal communication, 2004). Subsequent research is highly isolated and contextual in nature. For example, Su (2004) assesses guest questionnaire design in Taiwan while Schall (2003) proposes best practice based on consultancy work with clients in the Americas and Europe. No previous study has been based on the Asia Pacific hotel context.

Although there is a shift to e-format in some service industries, including some hotels, the paper format is still commonly used in hospitality and, it is the researcher's opinion that this paper format has potential to be honed in its present role of data collection and to have an extended role as a service encounter avenue.

2.2.1 Questionnaires and Surveys

A distinction between the guest questionnaire and guest satisfaction survey exists in the literature. According to Prasad (2003), the questionnaire and survey are not substitutes

for one another and have different objectives. A questionnaire serves as a “tactical information tool for immediate problem solving and for monitoring service quality delivery” while a sample survey is strategic and “provides many insights resulting from rigorous quantitative analysis of data, competitive benchmarking and trend analysis” (Prasad, 2003). These terms, however, appear to be used interchangeably: the guest questionnaire is often described as a guest satisfaction survey (for example, Su, 2004). Weaver (2006, p. 394) describes a comment card as being “essentially a questionnaire survey”.

2.2.2 Guest Feedback Elicitation

Communication between service providers and their customers in the service delivery process is crucial (Garrett & Meyers, 1996), and is especially critical in the hospitality industry (Berwick, 2003; Mount & Back, 1999). Traditionally hoteliers interacted extensively with in-house guests, thereby deriving firsthand feedback which is considered a key guest satisfaction indicator (Haktanir & Harris, 2005). Pitta, Franzak and Laric (2003) notice that for several industries, the traditional face-to-face interactions between service provider and customer have all but disappeared. As such interactions are commonplace in hotels; the hotel industry would therefore appear to be one of the exceptions. However, due to the larger scale of operations of contemporary hotels (Tantawy & Losekoot, 2001) featuring flatter hierarchies (Gilbert & Guerrier, 1997) and greater back office administrative demands (Weinstein, 2001), such extensive personal interactions are often no longer feasible (Palmer, McMahan-Beattie & Beggs 2000). Hotel managers typically delegate the task of direct survey to line managers and frontline staff (Pfitscher, 1992), who typically use technology imbedded formal structures and processes such as the Property Management System (PMS) guest history function and CRM software to streamline and consolidate the feedback process and the resultant knowledge management function (Abrahamson, 1991; Palmer et al., 2000; Sigala, 2005).

In this regard, delegation could be construed as prioritizing transactional service quality over the ‘deep’ relationships as experienced in the corporate banking arena (see Tyler & Stanley, 2001). Given Czepiel’s (1990) observation that service organisations expect their front line staff to establish, maintain and build relationships with customers in

addition to interacting and servicing them, this delegation can be argued to constitute abdication in the context of the traditional style of operations in the hospitality industry (Ladkin, 1999). Nonetheless, knowledge is critical in the hotel industry. The utilisation of knowledge which involves the “process of collecting and identifying useful information (i.e. knowledge acquisition), exploiting and usefully applying knowledge (i.e. knowledge leverage) and disseminating it through the whole organization (i.e. knowledge transfer” (Yang, 2004, p. 421), is highly necessary in the hotel industry. Indeed, this desire for “good customer information to foster innovative guest service” was found by Enz (2001, p. 39) to be a key issue of concern for lodging managers.

Another application of technology in eliciting guest feedback is the utilization of electronic data collection formats. Hendrie (2005) exhorts hoteliers to embrace online guest evaluation while discounting the paper questionnaire as being outdated and irrelevant. While web-based questionnaires, either in the form of a *mailto* link or a HTML form (see Sampson, 1998), have become prevalent (see Figure 1 for example), their effectiveness is unknown at present due to a reluctance of hotels to disclose their online response rates and limited study in this area (for examples see Lee & Hu, 2004; Sampson, 1998). E-mail or e-mail attachment questionnaires are similar to a paper questionnaire in that they have to be collected or physically returned by the respondent (Gartner Group, 2001). This similarity is also apparent in Murphy, Forrest, Wotring and Brymer’s (1996, p. 77) assessment that e-feedback was a “perfect example of a simple, effective use of the WWW that is a mid-1990s version of the decades-old in-room comment card”. Therefore the e-questionnaire does not appear to offer much differentiation from the paper questionnaire but presents itself as an option despite there being no available information on its efficacy. Therefore as a data collection methodology, these methods may not prove to be effective at the present, especially when all hotel guests may not necessarily have access to internet. Despite growing optimism of growth potential in e-enabled feedback solicitation (Wolff, cited in Adams, 2003; Johnston, 2006), the considerable inconsistencies in levels of e-mail customer service quality (Schegg, Murphy, & Leuenberger, 2003) evidenced in a recent industry survey of 49 companies taken from the the list of ‘most respected companies’ compiled by the *Financial Times* (Half of customer e-mails, 2007) pose a major obstacle to fully realizing latent potential. Another obstacle is a possible link between internet usage and

complainers' higher income level (Lee & Hu, 2004), thereby presenting a possible bias in data obtained from web-derived feedback. This assertion appears to be supported by Heung's (2003) findings that show that both higher education levels and annual household income positively influences online purchases of travel products.


Two major international chains, however, now use online questionnaires, effectively replacing the paper questionnaire entirely (Alexander, 2006). One chain's decision to also eliminate mail-out surveys altogether further demonstrates a confidence in the new online method. Another chain, while readily embracing the new technology such as the 'electronic guest card system', was cognisant of danger of inundating guests with e-questionnaires and therefore limiting one request to each guest per quarter (Brophy, 2005).

An industry pundit, however, is unconvinced and states that the hotel industry "can never (and never will be) a virtual industry" and, following that line of argument, it "cannot afford to take the impersonal approach that emails perforce entail" (Dandapani, 2006). Moore (2006b) identifies another factor that undermines e-mail as a channel of communication: if an e-mail manages to pass firewalls, SPAM filters and blockers, and does eventually reach its intended recipient, there is no obligation on the part of the recipient to open it. As it just requires a single keystroke to delete an e-mail, the effectiveness of such a method of communicating with guests may be somewhat precarious. This method therefore may not offer an advantage over the paper questionnaire in terms of yielding higher responses.

With regards to security, one of the chains referred to above has on their website the advisory "Information Regarding Internet Scams" (Hilton Hotels Corporation, 2006). This post alerts customers that 'phishing', the attempt to send "an e-mail to a user while falsely claiming to be an established legitimate enterprise in an attempt to scam the user into surrendering private information that will be used for identity theft" (webopedia.com, 2006), had targeted its frequent guest programme members and advises vigilance.

Finally innovative products showcasing technology, such as the UniFocus' GUESTScope pod, allow guests to record their opinions electronically at check-out. On


a similar note, Pertlink's handheld HOTELINMYHAND™ features an e-questionnaire. The concept of obtaining data in real-time was introduced by Cadotte (1979) in the 1970s but even with newly available technology, the uptake of such new products is low possibly due to cost and guest acceptance issues. Another product, albeit less sophisticated, reported by Berkley and Gupta (1995) is a PC-based checkout game used by a hotel chain brand. The game obtained a 50 per cent guest feedback rate compared to the sub-five per cent response rate of the traditional chain-wide standard questionnaire. Notwithstanding the remarkable results reported, such software applications including television would also appear to have had only limited uptake. An example of an e-questionnaire is shown in Figure 2.1.



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Customer Support

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Web Standards

Contact Us

Please fill out the form below so that we may better serve you.

* Required fields

Guest Information

Confirmation Number:

HHonors Number:

*First Name:

*Last Name:

*Guest Address:

*City:

*State:

*Country:

*Zip Code:

Phone Number:

*Email:

*What method of contact do you prefer: Phone Email

Hotel Information

*Hotel Brand:

*Hotel State:

*Hotel City:

Hotel Property:

Date(s) of stay: Arrival Date:

*Issue of Category:

*Stay Comments:

You have 2000 remaining characters.

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Figure 2.1. Hilton Hotels Corporation’s online guest questionnaire. (Source: http://www.hilton.com/en/hi/feedback/guest_assistance.jhtml;jsessionid=00EQQSXQQ4RVCCSGBIVMVCQKIYFC3UUC)

Figure 2.1 is an example of a web based HTML form hotel guest questionnaire. It mimics the format of a hybrid-type paper questionnaire while *mailto* (e-mail) links are unstructured, resembling the open-ended questionnaire. Typical of a guest questionnaire used by hotel chains, locating it requires a certain amount of web navigation. This specimen gathers identifying data and guests' comments but not demographic information except for contact details. Demographic data is elicited using mandatory fields with a forced-response mechanism. In contrast, a minority of e-questionnaires give respondents the option of sharing data which they may consider to be private (Hagel & Rayport, 1997) by allowing the respondent to skip certain fields.

Guest satisfaction market surveys provide statistically sound data and are the backbone of mainstream market and customer satisfaction research. However, there has been a concern that on-site research could antagonize customers (Swan, Trawick, & Carroll, 1981). Guests staying at a hotel are rarely surveyed when in-house as hoteliers are reluctant to inconvenience guests who may be time constrained or wish to be undisturbed (Caroline Cheah, Group Director of Rooms, Shangri-la Hotels & Resorts, personal communication, 2004). Some hotel chains, however, invite a random sample of in-house guests according to set daily or weekly quotas to complete a guest questionnaire which is sent directly to the corporate office thereby bypassing the hotel general manager.

While resembling a randomised survey in terms of administration, the survey instrument is basically a guestroom guest questionnaire in terms of appearance and content. Syndicated and proprietary third-party surveys by various market research companies such as J.D. Powers and Associates and UniFocus are invaluable to hoteliers (Worchester, 1999) and can commonly gather data to steer management decision-making (for examples see Breiter, Tyink, & Cory-Tuckwell, 1995), providing industry benchmarks. However, given that in-house guests appear to resent the imposition on their time, the data would therefore mostly be derived from surveys conducted post-stay such as via e-mail, direct mail and telephone (Whitford, 2001). Even though these techniques appear to be only capturing retrospective viewpoints, which Swan, Trawick and Carroll (1981, p. 356) refer to as "after-the-fact data on recall of intentions and expectations", and are hence less accurate (Finkelstein, 1989), the data may be useful

nonetheless such as for trend analysis. Such methods, however, cannot provide the hotelier with real-time feedback.

Online feedback mechanisms such as customer and complaint blogs are in their infancy but appear to be growing in influence (Gelb & Sundaram, 2002; Gilbertson, 2006). However, they would only be pertinent to guests who have ready computer access and are willing to share their views in the virtual domain. Sites such as TripAdvisor, Activehotels.com, Travelblog.com and Holiday uncovered.com are becoming increasingly popular due to customers' disillusionment with hotel and travel agency marketing. Moore (2006a, p. 11) reports that Sheraton allows visitor uploading access to their website, making it "the first hotel industry website to embrace social media and feature user-generated content" (see Figure 2.2).

[Home](#)
[Reservations](#)
[Special Offers](#)
[Vacation Ideas](#)
[Starwood Preferred Guest](#)

Sheraton
 HOTELS & RESORTS

Belong
 Hello and welcome to Our Global Neighborhood!
[Sign In](#)

Need Help?
 1 800 073 535
[Help Options](#)

[Language](#)

[Navigate the Globe](#)
[Map](#) | [List](#)
 Asia

[See More Stories](#)
Guest Story
Sheraton Perth Hotel
 Perth, Australia

As part of the Sales Team at the Sheraton Perth Hotel, I was very excited to participate in the City to Surf fundraising event in August.
[More Hotel Details](#)

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[Australia](#)
[New Zealand](#)

Europe

Find Rooms & Rates

In a city
 Near an address (U.S. only)

City:

State/Province:

Country:

Check in:

Check out:

Room(s): Adults per Room:

[Advanced Search >](#)

[Our Best Rate Guarantee](#)

Figure 2.2. The Sheraton Hotels & Resorts' home page. (Source: http://www.starwoodhotels.com/sheraton/index.html?PS=GWS_aa_GoogleInternational_sheraton_122505).

This possibly signals a shift in how hotel chains use their internet relationship with guests: from simply providing information (Luck & Lancaster, 2003) to extracting it online. Affinia Hotels provides a link on its homepage to the TripAdvisor webpage containing reviews of its hotels, thereby indicating the acceptance of the blogs' impartiality and demonstrating that online feedback is credible. Blogs, however, are not exempt from unscrupulous manipulation (Hudson, 2005) and biases or exaggeration (Stieghorst, 2004). Therefore both potential guests and hoteliers alike have to be wary of posted information. An interesting development is getting guest interaction on a company website as seen in Figure 2.2.

The Sheraton website incorporates a guest blog. It is interesting to note that the blog site also had employee entries, which indicates that it can serve as a marketing tool. The graphic-rich and engaging format appears to attract guest participation which, in turn, attracts other guests to take part.

Other methods of gaining feedback from visitors such as focus groups are difficult to organize and conduct. The author used this method at hotels in three countries and found resistance from both hoteliers and in-house guests to participate in focus groups. Focus groups nonetheless can be very effective as an ad hoc means of gaining an insight into guests' perspectives.

The deficiencies inherent in these alternate methods of obtaining visitor feedback may suggest that the guestroom questionnaire, despite its shortcoming, is probably the only single standalone instrument which could play a practical role in facilitating the vital guest-to-company communication in hotels.

The ability to effectively evaluate guests' satisfaction and manage that information allows a hotelier to have a potential competitive advantage in differentiating the hotel's products, building a loyal guest profile and attracting new clientele (Crompton & Love, 1995; Gundersen, Heide, & Olsson, 1996; Oh & Parks, 1997). Fundin and Bergman (2003, p. 57) suggest that "in trying to achieve increased customer satisfaction, looking at a product from the customer's point of view can be very advantageous" and therefore it is not surprising that the common method in usage by hospitality industry enterprises to seek guests' evaluations is the survey, both in the form of the standard paper

questionnaire and ad hoc sample surveys (Barsky & Nash, 2001; Prasad, 2003; Pullman & Cleveland, 2004). Berwick's (2003) observation that both hoteliers and academic researchers have yet to find the most effective way to gather information from guests suggests that the industry may be lacking crucial information. Hayes (1997, cited in Pizam & Ellis, 1999) surmises that the knowledge of customer expectations and requirements is essential as it firstly provides a customer-defined perspective of quality, and secondly facilitates the design of the appropriate customer satisfaction questionnaires.

While a U.S. survey on hotel executives in 1981 indicates that a large majority of the respondents used guest surveys on a permanent or ad hoc basis (Beggs & Lewis, 1981 cited in Lewis & Pizam, 1981), a 1996 study by Arthur Andersen and New York University (cited in Rampey, 1998), concludes that hotels lag behind other industries in tracking customer satisfaction - an important factor in making a firm competitive (Buckley, 1996). Lewis and Morris (1987, p. 15) state that hoteliers are reluctant to "conduct serious ongoing consumer research". Hoteliers should strive to regularly monitor guest perceptions of the physical environment accurately in order to identify maintenance, renovation, or relocation needs (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999), which in turn would enable them to respond appropriately to retain guest loyalty and Return On Investment (ROI). Guilding, Kennedy and McManus (2001, p. 187) assert that "it is to be expected that periodically conducting customer evaluation exercises will provide a counter to the potential of treating valuable customer relationships in a complacent manner". According to Richard and Sundaram (1993), guest feedback provides hoteliers with an understanding of what attributes influence the way guests select hotels and the impact of those attributes on guest satisfaction. Therefore it is imperative for hoteliers to obtain quality usable guest feedback.

Communication is especially critical in the hospitality industry (Berwick, 2003; Brownell, 2003; Mount & Back, 1999). The nature of the communication may range from compliments to complaints, with complaints being recognized by service providers as an important gauge of operational performance from the consumer's point of view (Susskind, 2002). Ross and Oliver (1984) identify two primary channels of consumer communications as 'firm initiated' (formal consumer research activities) and 'consumer

initiated' but note that the latter is the means in which companies generally receive feedback. The questionnaire, which is a firm initiated communication, appears to function more as a means to measure how hotel operations are perceived to be running rather than as a measurement of guest satisfaction (Lewis & Pizam, 1981). Singh (1988) identifies three ways whereby a guest may communicate dissatisfaction: voice responses, private responses, and third party responses. When the customer seeks redress directly from the vendor, a voice response occurs.

In a hotel context, a voice response would denote a face-to-face communication between the guest and management in which the guest verbally voices dissatisfaction. The voice response could also include written communication from the guest to management such as that contained in a paper questionnaire and complaint letter. When the guest articulates the dissatisfaction to someone other than the vendor, a private response occurs. However, when the guest engages a third party, for example a lawyer, newspaper or consumer protection agency to redress the dissatisfaction, a third party response occurs. It would be in the hoteliers' interest to avoid private and third party responses and to be able to respond to dissatisfaction directly with the guest. As people dislike complaining in person (Lewis & Morris, 1987), that is face-to-face voice response, hoteliers should therefore encourage written voice responses.

Davidow (2000, p. 232) proposes that "facilitation", which he defines as "the policies, procedures, and structure that a company has in place to support customers engaging in complaints and communications", is a component of the organisational response dimension. He suggests that "facilitation is the one response dimension that can be anticipated and prepared before the complaint" (Davidow, 2003, p. 236). Therefore, a guest feedback system would not only be reactive, that is the handling of a complaint or suggestion, but also proactive, that is providing an interface that facilitates feedback. The guestroom questionnaire could arguably be a part of this facilitation that decreases the chances of negative word-of-mouth (WOM) activity (Blodgett, Granbois, & Walters, 1993; Blodgett, Wakefield, & Barnes, 1995; Bolting, 1989). The questionnaire could serve as the interface for guests to express their feelings and views which could lead to increased levels of satisfaction (Nyer, 2000). Service loyalty by the hotel engenders guest delight and encourages their "honest participation (customer voice)"

(Kandampully, 1998, p. 439). Hence, hoteliers should aim to provide guests with a climate conducive to dialogue. Thus, in terms of Bettencourt's (1997, p. 385) Customer Voluntary Performance (CVP) model, the guest becomes a valuable "organizational consultant" for the hotel.

Boroumand (2006) notes that the percentage of customers willing to voice their complaints to a service provider is indicative of the extent to which they have been encouraged to engage in the behaviour. To that end, apart from verbal solicitation, hoteliers can conspicuously utilize signage in public areas and printed collateral (Rust, Subramanian, & Wells, 1992).

Heung and Lam (2003) conclude, from their study on customer complaint behaviour in the hotel restaurant service context in Hong Kong, that professionally produced comment cards should be made available as a means of encouraging dissatisfied customers to provide some feedback. Thus an attractive questionnaire, as an integral part of the hotel Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), can play a key role in eliciting guests' 'honest participation' which manifests in different ways. Lewis' (1983) study of the effects of hotels' complaint-handling systems reveals that comment cards can serve to voice complaints and compliments, and also to make routine comments. Interestingly, his study shows that compliments were voiced a mean of 32% of the time compared to complaints and routine comments (29% and 22% respectively).

The voice response "is likely to yield a direct remedy to a service failure" (Singh, 1990 as cited in Susskind, 2001, p. 4). A study on the 'fair process' effect in a hospitality service recovery context reveals that customers' perceptions should ideally be observed during guest-service provider interaction in order that appropriate recovery can be initiated (Collie, Sparks & Bradley, 2000). Haktanir and Harris' (2005, p. 43) observation that "verbal communications between guest-relations staff and the customer is the main system of responding simultaneously to customer requirements" lends support to Collie et al's (2000) recommendation. However, given that accurate observation may neither always be feasible nor achievable, a means of articulating perceptions of fairness and levels of satisfaction post-consumption must be made available to the guest. The critical-incident technique (for more information on this method, see Roos, 2002) requires qualitative feedback in order to be a valuable

management tool but typically involves ad hoc guest sampling (for example see Chung & Hoffman, 1998). The questionnaire allows guests the opportunity to share written feedback which is qualitative in nature, and which would allow hoteliers to understand subjective issues which may be hindered by the MCQ platform (Kwortnik, 2003). This is particularly pertinent to abstract concepts such as quality, because defining them is complicated due to subjectivity in meaning (Gordon & Corr, 1990).

Lewis and Morris' (1987) study shows that hotel guests complain in different ways according to the nature of the complaint. It would appear that when the complaint involves tangible factors, guests are slightly more likely to complain in person while complaints involving intangible problems are made in writing (Lewis & Morris, 1987). Garrett, Meyers and Carney (1991) surmise that most of the knowledge on complaints is based on complaint letters which, as found in a research study by Schoefer (2002), record only a small percentage of service complaints made by customers.

According to Frone and Major (1988), communication, which is possibly the most central process in organisations, is a two-way interaction. This would certainly be pertinent to hotel management given the people-centric nature of the hotel business (Butcher, 2005; Thompson & Abbott, 1990; Schneider & Bowen, 1993, cited in Cheng & Brown, 1998; Lewis & Chambers, 1989). However, interestingly research on communication between consumers and companies in relation to complaints interaction focuses primarily on communication occurring in the company to customer direction (Garrett & Meyers, 1996). In a business enterprise, from a positivist accounting perspective, turnover determines performance. With the rise of the Japanese business model and post-Fordist business paradigm of the late 1970s and mid-80s, business performance became a function of relationships and repatronage (Clegg, 1990), thereby resulting in a dual measurement of performance and the acknowledgement of the customer-company dyad. That development was perceived to be innovative at that time but the wider business community apparently ignored the fact that the bottom line, together with customer relations, had been utilized by the hotel industry all along due to its high reliance on repeat stays for business sustainability. However, notwithstanding the promise that innovative approaches to customer accounting could improve hotel

management decision making and control (Guilding, Kennedy & McManus, 2001), the conventional dimension of hotel accounting, which is accounting by function, persists.

Despite the importance of open two-way communication between guests and management, hotels' policies and procedures typically place emphasis on back office communication. While the accounting and finance processes of the back office are well established, there appears to be a discrepancy in the attention given to gauging the post-consumption behaviour of guests (Thomas, 1997). The Property Management System (PMS) guest history application, for example, does provide for a channel of communication from guest to hotel providing that the hotel can fully utilize its computer software. Not all PMS-equipped hotels use the guest history capability, while there are hotels that still apply manual Front Office systems. Research needs to be conducted on both company communication, commonly referred to as internal communication, and consumer communication which is known as external communication (Garrett & Meyers, 1996), in order that hoteliers may be able to better adapt their operations to cater to their guests.

Part of this exploration involves taking a closer look at the philosophy of the guest questionnaire which has been, and remains, a key factor in external communication. This criticality in turn impacts on internal communication.

2.2.3 Questionnaire Evolution

This section explores the genesis of the hotel guest questionnaire and provides a narrative of how it has changed over time. This chronological account provides the basis for the premise that the guest questionnaire morphology is evolving with, borrowing from evolutionary terminology, 'speciation' outcomes, that is a new distinct form.

Early Questionnaire Adoption

The paper-based guest questionnaire in its current form appears to supersede the hotel guestbook that, in the past, was typically placed at the front desk for guests to make unprompted and unstructured remarks on their stay. A search of hotel industry archives (for example, Conrad N. Hilton College Library & Hospitality Archives, Nestlé Library, School of Hotel Administration Cornell University, Kemmons Wilson School of

Hospitality & Resort Management University of Memphis) and formal enquiries to major international hotel chains fails to provide an example of the early versions of the questionnaire, thereby requiring a degree of conjecture as to what it looked like and what it would have contained.

The researcher posits that due to operational reasons, the questionnaire was first introduced by large independent hotels and chain hotels to replace the hotel visitor/guestbook (see Figure 2.3a) which served the same purpose although in a more rudimentary form (Hinds, 2006). Typically the data collected via guestbook were guest comments and details such as room number, dates of stay and correspondence address. The guestbook is still used in smaller properties such as Bed and Breakfast (B&B) establishments, and resort properties or those that have long-stay guests (for a discussion on guest comment logbooks, see Shea & Roberts, 1998). It is interesting to note that some B&B operators place a dedicated guestbook in each room in order to allow guests to complete the comments at their leisure and in the privacy of their room, replicating the convenience of the in-room questionnaire.

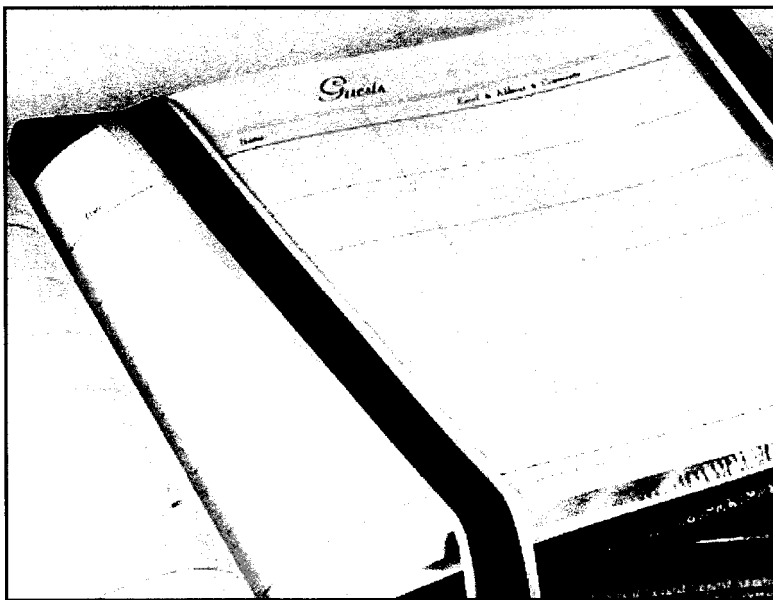


Figure 2.3a. A traditional hotel guestbook.

The traditional hotel guestbook typically gathers information such as guest name, contact details, entry date and comments. While the book may also be used to elicit guest stay details such as dates of stay and room number, online guestbooks such as that

shown in Figure 2.3b can provide interactive prompts that could enhance the quality and quantity of data provided.

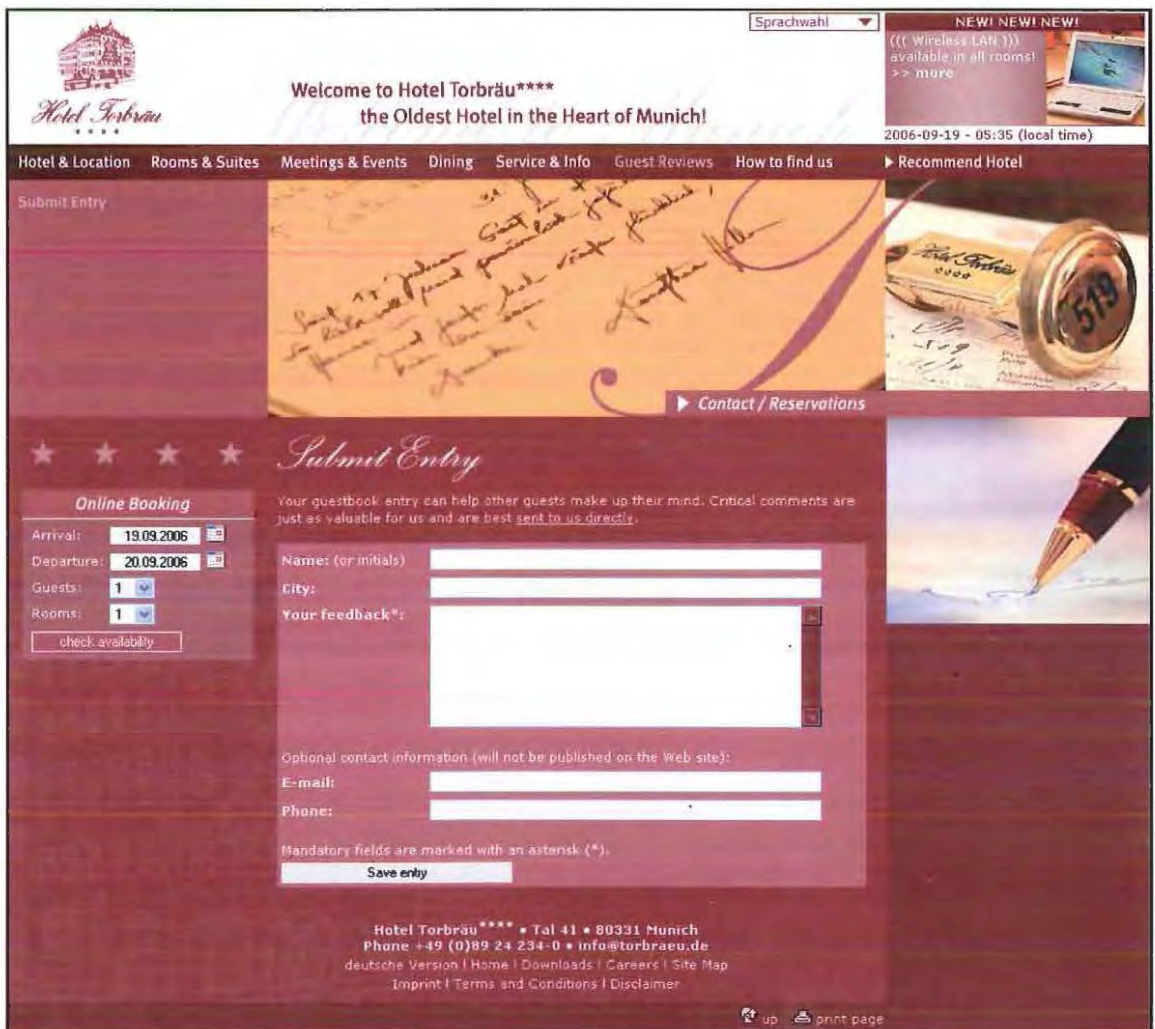


Figure 2.3b. Hotel Torbräu's online guestbook. (Source: <http://www.torbraeu.de/en/71heinta.php>)

Figure 2.3b is an example of an E-hotel guestbook entry screen in a hotel website. It is interesting to note in this specimen the instruction to send “critical comments” directly to the management via e-mail. While stating that such negative comments are “just as valuable” to the hotel as positive ones, it does suggest that adverse feedback should not be discussed on the website. In this example, the e-guestbook is being used in lieu of an e-questionnaire and it can be inferred that some hoteliers may have a preference for particular formats.

The questionnaire appears to debut in the first half of the 1900s. The basis of this supposition is two-fold: (i) the growth in size of hotels, and (ii) the founding of hotel chains. The likelihood of growth in the size of hotels, objectively categorised by guestroom inventory (Peacock, 1993), was a necessary outcome as the lodging business attained recognition as an industry in its own right. The American Hotel Protective Association was founded in 1910 to be later renamed as the American Hotel Association of the United States and Canada (American Hotel & Lodging Association, 2006). Secondly the founding of hotel chains Sheraton, Westin, Best Western, Hilton occurred in the 1930s & 1940s; and Holiday Inn Hotels and Resorts in 1952. Typically hotel chains would have established chain standards including a formalized guest questionnaire. As discussed, early versions of the guest questionnaire would probably have been a means to obtain qualitative subjective data measurement by means of simple open-ended questions. The simple and unpretentious guest questionnaire seemed to fulfil its role as an alternate means of guest feedback elicitation for more than half a decade until its format and size would be markedly altered.

A Shift in Questionnaire Paradigm

Kraft and Martin (1997) observed that the questionnaire had gained widespread popularity among service businesses in the early 1980s. The simple guest book-derived qualitative questionnaire appears to have undergone a transformation in the 1980s. These changes relate to its appearance, namely the presentation of questions (such as question format, length, and purpose). Some of the possible reasons for this shift are:

- a) The widespread recognition of the importance of service quality measurement (Holmlund & Kock, 1996; Sweeney & Soutar, 1995) and the introduction of the quality assurance movement to the hotel sector in the 1980s (Hall, 1990; Paraskevas, 2001). According to Gilbert and Horsnell (1998, p. 450), the literature prior to the mid-1980s, had not reflected the importance of service quality to the service sector which at the time was undergoing “phenomenal growth”. The subsequent awareness resulted in an appreciable increase in research in the area involving quantitative data surveys;
- b) With the introduction of the Japanese business model and post-Fordist business paradigm of the late 1970s and mid-1980s, business performance became a

function of relationships and repatronage (Clegg, 1990), and hence hotel loyalty programmes became commonplace;

- c) Transformation in industry practitioners' perception of marketing resulting from deregulation of the service industries during the first half of the 1980s. Recognition of the importance of marketing encouraged collaboration between services managers and marketing academics, and goods-based marketing research methodology (empirical studies) was widely adopted in services marketing research. The shift to a more empirically based methodology is evident in journal publications (Brown, Fisk & Bitner, 1994).
- d) The widespread application of statistical analysis and benchmarking practices;
- e) Availability of computing power and statistical analysis software;
- f) The adoption of the market segmentation concept by Choice Hotels in 1984; and rapid advances in marketing research methods in the 1980s (Ding, Geschke, & Lewis, 1991);
- g) The introduction of extended stay segments with the launch of Marriott's Residence Inns and Holiday Corporation's Homewood Suites in 1988;
- h) The onset of global recession that precipitated a 'value for money' mentality amongst hotel guests. Generally in the hotel industry, the accountant plays both an accounting and statistician role. The bottom line performance and cost cutting initiatives appeared to be linked to statistics and was embraced as a key factor in executive decision making.

The first notable change was the length of the enquiry. The Quality Assurance Evaluation questionnaire used by Hilton International in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, was a lengthy 12-page questionnaire. More than half of the questionnaire consisted of summaries of the chain 'standard of service' standards in four areas, namely the condition and appearance of the hotel public areas, the Front Office operations, recreational facilities, and the Food and Beverage (F&B) function. The rest of the questionnaire contained blank spaces for guest comments in the first three areas and a rating table utilizing a three-point scale for a meal experience. The Quality Assurance Evaluation questionnaire illustrates an expanded role of the questionnaire whereby it sought to establish a benchmarking mechanism for the chain while 'educating' the customer on what they could expect with regards to their hotel stays. One major factor, therefore, for the uptake of quantitative data collection was the

marketing function. This is evident in the following anecdotal recollection of a veteran hotelier as reported by a distinguished hospitality academic (Professor Robert O'Halloran, Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management, personal communication, 2006):

“In the old Holiday Inn Innkeeper days I don't remember having guest comment cards. It wasn't until the marketing department asked “how are we doing” and the only answer was “fine”, did we begin comment cards in the 80's. That's also when we started the “Inner Circle” program better known today as Priority Club to get to know more about our more frequent guests.”

The pervasive adoption of this new format could be described as a paradigm shift, and the following four questions are posed: (a) what exactly would the questionnaires be measuring; (b) what kinds of questions should be posed in order to achieve this; (c) how are these questions to be structured; and (d) how would the data derived from the questionnaire be interpreted? The premise of this line of questioning is that the hotelier has the capability and the willingness for adaptation and uptake of the format. It also suggests that a guest feedback is framed by the hotelier enquiry. However the assumption is that the hotelier has clarity on what is to be enquired and how it is to be put forth. Browning (1999, para. 11), however points out that “paradoxically it is customers who often do most to teach companies new tricks” which implies that hoteliers do not necessarily have such clarity. The implication, therefore, is that to ensure that all bases are covered, perhaps hoteliers should instead encourage guests to offer spontaneous or ad hoc feedback such as that provided by guests on questionnaires.

This lack of practitioner clarity could possibly be due to deficiencies in hospitality management research. Nadiri and Hussain (2005, p. 274) assert that “hospitality research has not, on the whole, developed any substantive theories” due to a certain extent on “method-driven research traditions of the past”. As a guiding theory and conceptual clarity are required to know what questions to ask and how to ask them (Kwortnik, 2003), the absence of substantive theories would conceivably be reflected in question formation and framing competency.

Barsky and Nash (2001) suggest that anecdotal feedback is not a sufficient basis for making decisions relating to employee bonuses and capital improvements assessment. These decisions require statistically valid data. The expanded format therefore incorporates quantitative questions in view of providing objective measurements.

Statistics derived from hotel questionnaires (both the standard in-room collateral and ad hoc survey) are used by hotels to promote their products and services. Suitable statistical data provide for simple and sophisticated analysis. Simple compilation of data lends for more accurate month-to-date and year-to-date comparison thereby avoiding total reliance on 'gut feelings' (Quinn, 1990). More sophisticated analysis made possible by conjoint measurement, for example, provides hotel marketers the ability to rank the importance of each component of a multi-attribute product while also being able to determine the trade-offs that guests make in their booking decisions (Ding, Geschke & Lewis, 1991). Customer satisfaction scores can act as the customer-related scorecard indicator for the Balanced-Scorecard System that applies to hotels (Denton & White, 2000). Such data would presumably be derived from quantitative guest questionnaires. Denton and White (2000, p. 101) reports that such data was part of "the vast amount of score-card data that franchise companies track and process". Statistical data, also potentially available from guest questionnaires, can be analysed by hotel companies to improve their brands' market efficiency using data envelopment analysis (DEA) (Brown & Ragsdale, 2002).

Industry indexes such as the Market Metric Hospitality Index (MMHI) are informed by statistical data collected via guest questionnaires and are hospitality industry yardsticks on product and service quality. Quantitative data serves as a performance indicator platform used by hotel chains, (e.g. Shangri-la's 'Performance Monitor', an independent survey system which provides each property with a 'Overall Stay Experience' rating (C.V. Healy, General Manager, Shangri-la Hotel Penang, personal communication, 2005); Swissôtel's 'Guest Comment Card' (GCC) score which together with an independently conducted telephone survey (Customer Service Management) score and evaluation of a mystery shopper programme (also conducted independently), determines individual employee performance and also organisational performance (Ronald Loges, Executive Assistant Manager, Swissôtel The Stamford Singapore, personal

communication, 2005). From interviews with hotel general managers, the researcher perceives inconsistencies in their views on linkage between guest feedback scores, and remuneration packages and bonuses. Factors such as hotel ownership, chain policies or reluctance by some interviewees to discuss their personal financial matters have contributed to this perception. Nevertheless, typically hoteliers are rewarded based solely on hotel revenues. Increasingly guest complaints and willingness-to-return factor into the equation highlighting the influence of guest opinion (see Payne, 2005). Tantawy and Losekoot (2001), however, note that while many forms collect statistics on customer complaints, very few conduct analysis and utilise the data in strategic planning. The widespread usage of the quantitative enquiry, despite having been possibly reflective of the “statistical ritual” (Mainland, 1984, p. 841), that is the established and overarching methodology, prevalent since the 1980s, caused it to become the industry de facto standard (also see Gherardi & Turner, 2002).

Customer-satisfaction report

Thank you for staying with us!

Help us to serve you better. Please answer this short questionnaire.
Circle the number that represents your feelings.

Did we meet your expectations?

<u>BELOW</u>		<u>ABOVE</u>			<u>NOT</u>		<u>IMPORTANT</u>	
<u>EXPECTATIONS</u>		<u>EXPECTATIONS</u>			<u>IMPORTANT</u>		<u>IMPORTANT</u>	
1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4
				Location				
				Parking				
				Reception				
				Room				
				Services Provided				
				Food and Beverage				
				Employee Attitudes				
				Hotel Facilities				
				Price				

How may we serve you better?

Would you return to this hotel? Yes No

Purpose of your visit? Business Pleasure Both

Have you stayed at this hotel before? Yes No

Did you consider other hotel(s) for this trip? Yes No

Other hotel(s) considered:

Why did you select this hotel?

Name and Address: _____

Company: _____

Room Number: _____ Dates of Stay: _____

Please turn in at the front desk.

Figure 2.4a. A hybrid format guest questionnaire underpinned by academic research and the practices and preferences of the U.S. lodging industry in the early 1990s. (Taken from Barsky and Huxley, 1992, p.20)

Based on the research in the early 1990s and industry practice, Barsky and Huxley (1992) derived a state-of-the-art specimen incorporating the 'disconfirmation paradigm'

Customer-satisfaction report

Thank you for staying with us!

Help us to serve you better. Please answer this short questionnaire.
Circle the number that represents your feelings.

Did we meet your expectations?

<u>BELOW</u>		<u>ABOVE</u>			<u>NOT</u>		<u>IMPORTANT</u>	
<u>EXPECTATIONS</u>		<u>EXPECTATIONS</u>			<u>IMPORTANT</u>		<u>IMPORTANT</u>	
1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Location	1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Parking	1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Reception	1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Room	1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Services Provided	1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Food and Beverage	1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Employee Attitudes	1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Hotel Facilities	1	2	3	4
1	2	3	4	Price	1	2	3	4

How may we serve you better?

Would you return to this hotel? Yes No

Purpose of your visit? Business Pleasure Both

Have you stayed at this hotel before? Yes No

Did you consider other hotel(s) for this trip? Yes No

Other hotel(s) considered:

Why did you select this hotel?

Name and Address: _____

Company: _____

Room Number: _____ Dates of Stay: _____

Please turn in at the front desk.

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Based on the research in the early 1990s and industry practice, Barsky and Huxley (1992) derived a state-of-the-art specimen incorporating the 'disconfirmation paradigm'

OVERALL SATISFACTION

What have we done to make your stay truly enjoyable?

Four horizontal lines for text input.

What could we have done better?

Four horizontal lines for text input.

5 = Very Satisfied 1 = Not At All Satisfied

Please rate your overall experience with us 5 4 3 2 1

PLEASE TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF

Are you a member of our Priority Club Rewards program? Yes No

If yes, please state membership type Club Gold Platinum

If yes, did our program privileges meet your expectations? Yes No

If No, would you like us to enroll you in our Priority Club Rewards program? Yes No

The purpose of your visit: Meeting / Conference Business Pleasure/Relaxation Air Crew

Your Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

Email: _____

Tel: _____

Room No.: _____ Date of Stay: _____



relax we will take care of the rest



Let Us Serve You Better

Dear Guest,

Welcome to the [Hotel name]. We value your visit and will do our utmost to make your stay comfortable.

Our aim is to ensure that every Holiday Inn hotel and resort throughout the world offers consistently high standards of service and facilities.

We would appreciate your views regarding your stay with us, because only you can tell us if we are meeting your needs and expectations.

Please take a few minutes to complete this form. You may leave it at Reception or with any member of our staff.

Thank you for choosing to stay with us.

Yours sincerely,

A. Patrick Imbardelli

A. Patrick Imbardelli
Chief Executive
InterContinental Hotels Group
Asia Pacific

[Name GM]
[Hotel Name]

and 'expectancy-value' theory (Figure 2.4a). In contrast, the contemporary hybrid guest questionnaire (Figure 2.4b) is more extended and elaborate.

The hybrid-type format typically combines Multiple Choice Questions with lined spaces for guest comments and also includes demographic queries. The amount of space, however, varies widely which can be seen when Figure 2.4a is compared to Figure 2.4b.

A Proposed Questionnaire Genre Typology

The hotel industry uses a number of different contemporary questionnaire design approaches. Figure 2.5 is a typology of questionnaire genre which graphically shows the characteristics and relative relationships of the five different questionnaire types. A discussion on the different types follows.

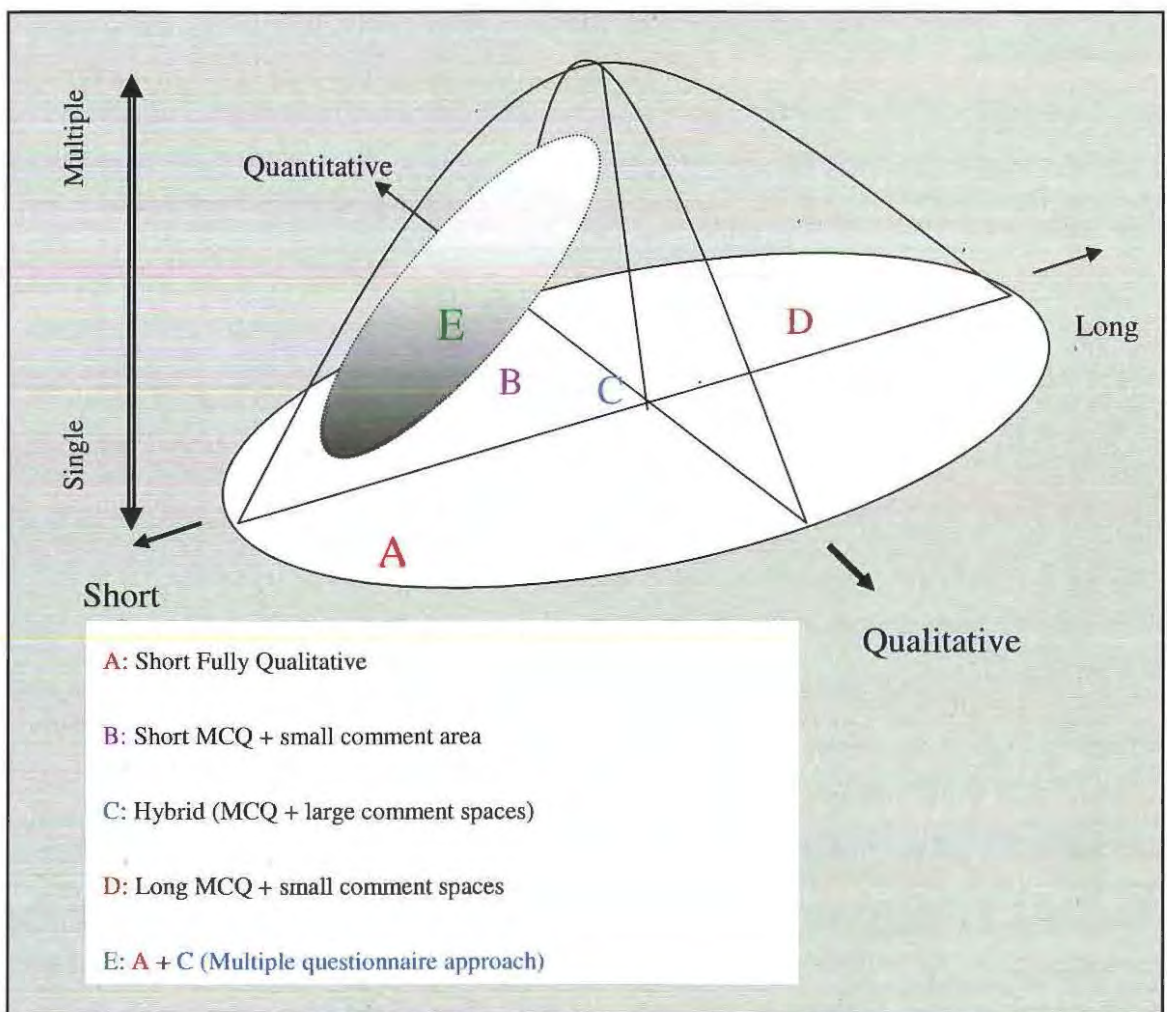


Figure 2.5. Guest questionnaire genre typology based on three factors (questionnaire format, questionnaire length & single/multiple application).

The left-right diagonal axis of Figure 2.5 represents the questionnaire length continuum (short to long); the top-bottom diagonal axis represents the questionnaire format continuum (qualitative to quantitative); the vertical axis indicates whether one or more (single/multiple) questionnaires are used.

A) Short, Fully Qualitative: A Back-to-basics Approach

Some hoteliers are going full cycle by adopting simple questionnaires featuring an open-ended request to guests to share their stay experience and to suggest ways the hotel could improve (see Figure 2.6a) or slightly longer multi-question versions that encourage more focused feedback while providing more detailed data to managers (see Figure 2.6b). This qualitative approach simulates an enquiry that would naturally occur if a manager were to encounter guests during their stay.

pillow talk...

Before you leave please share any aspect of your stay, or any ideas you have on how we could have improved your stay with us. Simply jot down any comments you would like us to know about our staff, service, hotel facilities or your stay generally. We certainly care, and look forward to welcoming you back to fits or any other Mirvac hotel or resort soon.

Optional

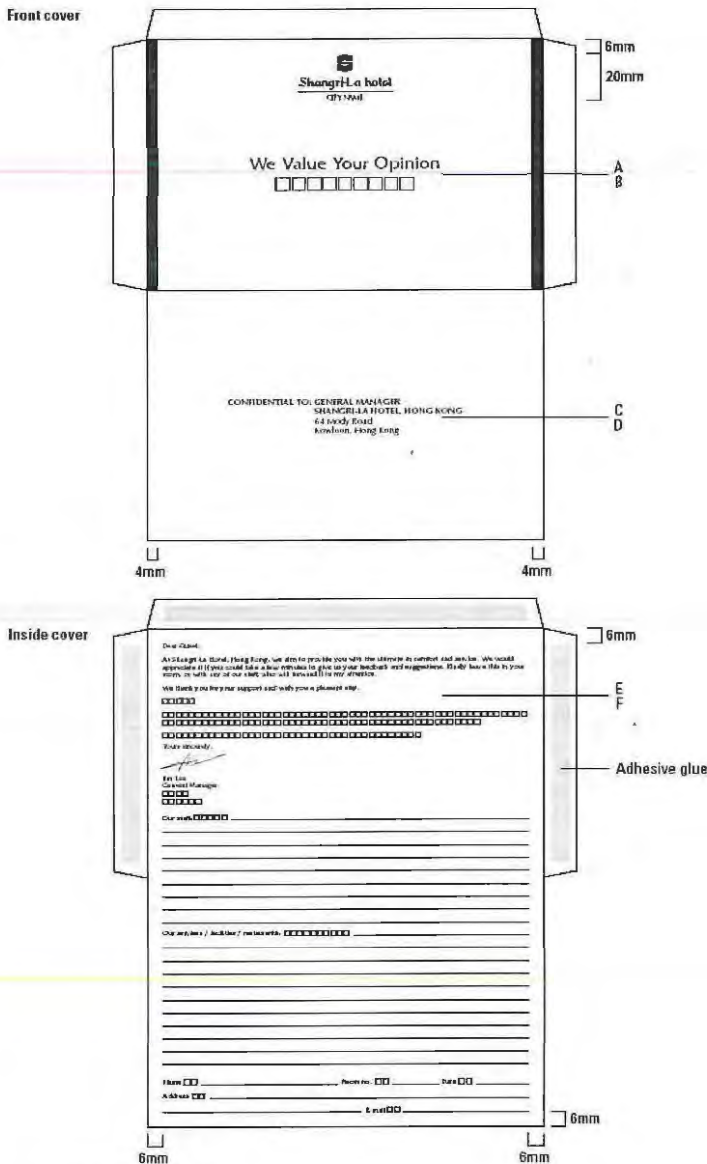
Name _____ Stay/Room No _____ Date _____

Please hand this form to our hotel reception staff. Thank you.



Figure 2.6a. A fully qualitative questionnaire with a single open-ended enquiry. (Reproduced with permission from Mirvac Hotels and Resorts)

**Typical Guestroom
Guest Questionnaire - A**



Size
154mm X 106mm (folded)
154mm X 212mm (flat)

Typography
A : 21/25pt Friz Quadrata, U/L case
B : 18/25pt SungMedium
C : 10/11.5pt Optima Bold, all caps
D : 10/11.5pt Optima, U/L case
E : 8/9.5pt Friz Quadrata, U/L case
F : 8/9.5pt Sung
Other bilingual typefaces must be visually proportionate to Chinese characters

Stroke weight
0.6pt: horizontal lines

Colour
1 PMSu: Vertical stripe, Hotel signature, horizontal lines and other type*

Paper stock*
Rooms (E): See page 2.6.1

Remarks
The height of bilingual signature is 23.5mm.

*Note: The selected PMSu colour and paper must match the room's environment and be approved by Corporate Marketing.

All illustrations reduced to 45%

6.4.10

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01-2005

Figure 2.6b. A bilingual multiple query qualitative questionnaire. (Reproduced with permission from Shangri-la Hotels and Resorts)

This trend may be underpinned by disillusionment hoteliers have with the quality and amount of useable data derived from the standard hybrid format. Other contributory

factors could be respondents' concerns about data security (Ivey, 2003) and customers being weary of encountering long enquiries (Adamson, 1994; Shreve, 2003) notwithstanding that qualitative data are relatively harder to analyse.

Calls are made for more exploratory and qualitative research in tourism and hospitality (Hobson, 2003). Kwortnik (2003) advocates the use of qualitative research to answer 'fuzzy' questions such as those pertaining to guest decision making and other customer behaviour. Whether or not this exhortation has had an influence on industry practitioners is unclear. However, a veteran hotelier with more than thirty years of international experience, when asked by the researcher as to his preference of questionnaire question format when redesigning his hotel guest questionnaire, said that he would prefer an open-ended question format with lots of space for guest comments (Albert Teh, General Manager, Boulevard Hotel Sydney, personal communication, 2006). Another possible reason for this shift is the limitations that statistical data may have to the average hotelier. Pullman, McGuire and Cleveland (2005) underscore the importance of qualitative data which quantitative questions do not provide by emphasizing the need for customers' comments analysis. This resonates with Kwortnik's (2003, p. 128) views that "managers are apt to turn to qualitative data – say, the criticisms and suggestions guests provide on comment cards – for meaningful information". In order that 'worthwhile comment' can be proffered, sufficient amount of space needs to be provided (Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998).

The respondent identifier information is optional in the example (Figure 2.6a). This suggests that that chain considers anonymous feedback as legitimate. Similar to the traditional guestbook, this format is well suited for gathering emotive information and therefore complements and enriches more formal data collection methods (Shea & Roberts, 1998).

Figure 2.6b is a bilingual questionnaire that is used in conjunction with a third party administered hybrid-type questionnaire. It allows for the use of a second language as dictated by the geographic location of the property (Caroline Cheah, Group Director of Rooms Shangri-la Hotels & Resorts, personal communication, 2006).

As seen in Figure 2.6b, the separate sections prompt guests to comment on specific functional areas in the hotel. This grouping approach appears to be prevalent in the hospitality industry.

Personality Hotels uses a novel questionnaire with a qualitative bend called the Picasso Comment Card. Beyond providing guests 'white space' for written comments, it allows the guest to express their thoughts in creative ways thereby applying 'picture completion' in a guest questionnaire. Kotler, Bowen and Makens (2003, p. 179) identify the variants of open-ended questions as 'completely unstructured', 'word association', 'sentence completion', 'story completion', 'picture completion' and 'thematic apperception tests (TATs)'. The 'Personality Profile' (Figure 2.7) incorporates most, if not all, to a certain degree, of those approaches.

Personality Hotels
OF UNIFORMS

PERSONALITY PROFILE

How did you hear about us? _____

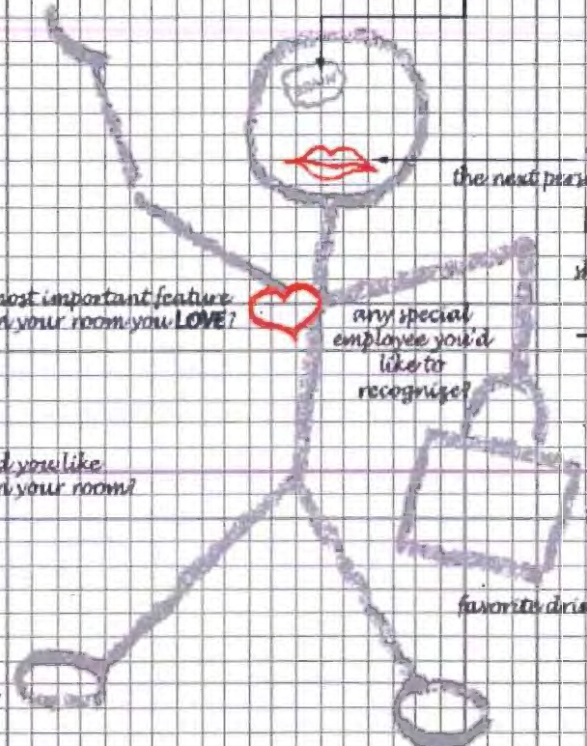
what do you like most about your room? _____

How important is high speed internet access in your room? _____

what was your reason for choosing our hotel? _____

will you please tell the next person to stay with us?
 YES NO

should we contact them?
_____ (THEIR NAME)

most important feature in your room you LOVE? 

any special employee you'd like to recognize? _____

favorite snack? _____

favorite drink? _____

what would you like changed in your room? _____

shoe size? _____

Thanks for taking the time to fill out this form, you'll be entered in a drawing for a FREE stay!

YOUR NAME	YOUR PERSONALITY HOTEL:	YOUR ROOM #
YOUR EMAIL	<input type="checkbox"/> Hotel Diva <input type="checkbox"/> Hotel Mirapoint	DATE OF STAY
YOUR ADDRESS, CITY & ZIP CODE	<input type="checkbox"/> Kensington Park <input type="checkbox"/> Hotel Union Square	

Figure 2.7. A novel visually rich qualitative-based questionnaire. (Reproduced with permission from Personality Hotels)

The novelty of the 'Personality Profile' is that, in lieu of the staid lined area or white space, a 'canvas' for feedback in the form of words and drawing is provided. This approach may be target market-directed such as in the case of Personality Hotels which are downtown boutique hotels located in San Francisco. Except for the insertion of a

Yes/No response to the question “Will you please tell the next person to stay with us?”, the questionnaire is qualitative.

B) Short Multiple-Choice Question-based Questionnaires

Closed-ended questions can be framed with ‘dichotomous’, ‘multiple choice’, Likert-type scale, ‘semantic differential’, ‘importance scale’, ‘rating scale’, and ‘intention-to-buy scale’ (Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 2003, p. 178). The type of scale used impacts on how the questionnaire is visually perceived.

A possible contributory factor for the low questionnaire response rate, apart from lengthy questionnaires being perceived as time-consuming, is the confusion that may result from visual clutter. Some industry practitioners therefore opt for a shorter quantitative questionnaire (see Figure 2.8). The Meritus Mandarin Singapore has a 3-part questionnaire that simply asks “Did you enjoy your stay with us?” to which the guest has an option of answering Yes or No. This question is followed by a request to rate the extent of the enjoyment on a 10-point Likert-scale. The third part is space for comments.

Lawton (2002, p. 411) describes a three MCQ-based (four-point scaled) comment card with a brief comment area he had received with his bill at a fine dining restaurant as having been obviously designed for “hurried folks like me”. This ‘handy’ variant would typically feature spaces for the guest to write comments.

Thus, a short MCQ-based questionnaire may be a very useful instrument in obtaining immediate feedback on specific concerns as identified by the guests (Figure 2.8) or specific items in a restaurant (Lawton, 2002). However its data collection is limited and does not allow for in-depth analysis. Thus a combination of MCQ and open-ended items may be a better proposal – hence the standard hybrid questionnaire.

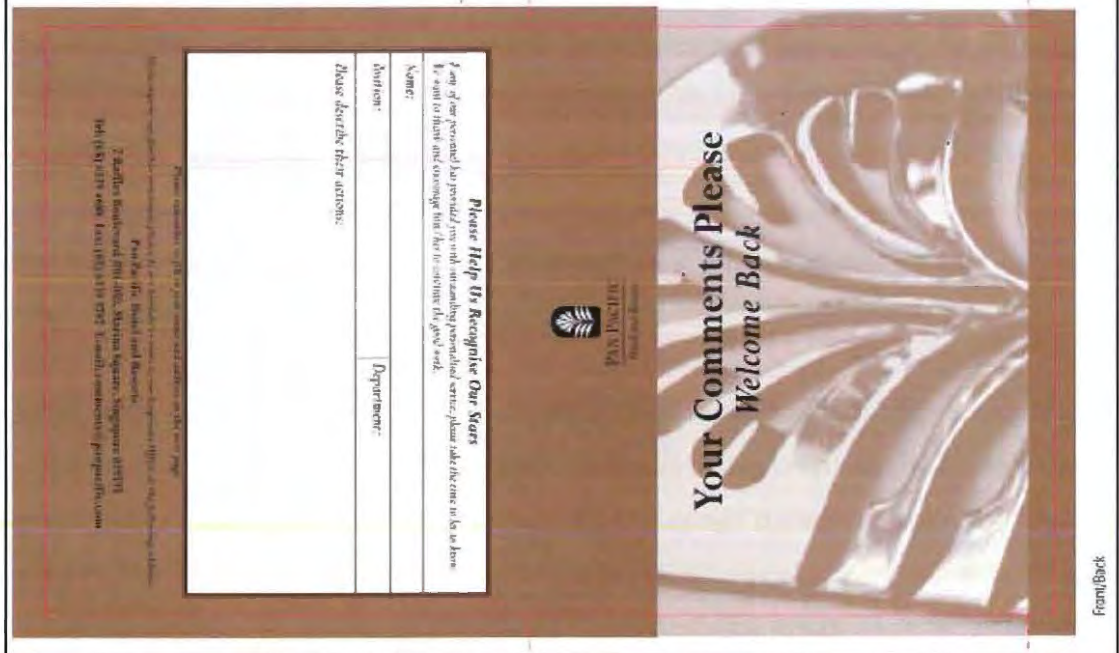


Figure 2.8. A short MCQ based questionnaire (Reproduced with permission from Pan Pacific Hotels and Resorts)

C) The Standard Hybrid

Many hoteliers may choose to maintain the status quo and retain the more than one multiple choice questionnaires for a number of reasons: the need for continuity in terms of data, adherence to a chain-mandated format, a perception that the hybrid-type is what

a guest expects to find in the guestroom, familiarity with a statistical survey-based method which preceded qualitative methods such as focus groups or simply a subjective personal preference. Interestingly a veteran hotelier with extensive experience as general manager with a major international hotel chain had adopted a fully qualitative questionnaire with the heading 'Guest Comments' when he was the manager responsible for readying the hotel for its opening (George Mathoi, Joondalup City Hotel, personal interview, 2006). He discovered, however, that his guests appeared to prefer the hybrid-type questionnaire which he attributes to pointed questions acting as a stimulus and possibly because the format is what the typical guest is used to filling in. He noted that the guestbook that he places at the Front Desk proves to be popular amongst his guests.

Pullman and Robson (2006) find that even when guests fill out quantitative questionnaires, their comments is subject to subjective interpretation. This could possibly be the reason that quantitative questions are supplemented by qualitative questions. In fact, a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions is recommended by Desombre and Eccles (1998) and this position is also taken by Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (1999; 2000) who argue that both quantitative and qualitative criteria inform service quality.

While many hybrid-type questionnaires simply provide space for guest comments either as a section in itself or as a part of a segment, some feature open-ended questions. Such questioning allows for responses not to be limited by closed questions (Dolnicar, 2002) and provides the opportunity for the respondent to "express a concern or comment more precisely" (Wisner & Corney, 1999, p. 112). Open-ended comment areas can also generate aspects of feedback not addressable in the Likert-scale areas (Pullman & Cleveland, 2004). Given the utility of open guest comments, many questionnaires offer insufficient space (Tordjman, 2004).

It is surmised that hotel chains generally favour the standard hybrid format primarily for consistency across properties and as part of a benchmark or indexing scheme.

D) Extended MCQ Dominated Questionnaires

Some hoteliers may have the guestroom questionnaire as a primary, if not sole, market research tool and therefore seek to obtain optimum data via numerous questions. In a volatile business environment, information is vital to attain and maintain competitive advantage. Hence market-oriented hotel companies may update and augment their guest questionnaires with questions that may provide additional information to stay ahead of the competition. In a large organisation many different facets in operations occur and the management may wish to evaluate the operations in minute detail. This monitoring entails adding supplementary questions which result in an extended questionnaire. The requirement of substantial data is pertinent to independent hoteliers. King (2004) points out that independent hoteliers need to be very familiar with their target market, that is, they need to know what their guests need in order to cater to them well, and a cost-effective way of obtaining such information is via an extended questionnaire.

Users of extended questionnaires should be aware that the audience may be highly heterogeneous, as is generally the case with contemporary hotels that commonly have diversified target markets. A common practice for hotels is to use the same questionnaire irrespective of the market segment it caters to, or whether the guest was staying in the hotel or only patronizing the restaurant (Ogle & Gharavi, 2004). Hotel questionnaires also typically address multiple aspects of a hotel product such as accommodation and Food & Beverage, and managers may target a single overall score by averaging all guest responses (Schall, 2003). This, however, violates the unidimensionality of the questions thereby undermining the validity of the survey and this suggests that the questionnaire should have a particular focus and not seek to address too many aspects of the hotel. If large amounts of data are desired, then each information category should undergo separate analysis.

E) Multiple Questionnaire Approach

Some companies may have the resources and scale of operations to administer more than one type of guestroom questionnaire. There are some international and regional chains that use both a fully qualitative questionnaire and a hybrid-type questionnaire presumably to cater to both the guests who prefer the freedom of an open-ended format

and the familiarity of the hybrid format respectively. In some cases, one of the questionnaires is administered by an independent third party in order to ensure impartiality. While there is no available data on the relative response rates of the different types of questionnaire, the manager of an Australian chain hotel observes that the response rate of the fully qualitative questionnaire was higher than that of the hybrid-type questionnaire (Jeffrey Branch, Hotel Manager, Siebel Hotel Perth, personal communication, 2004).

Pan Pacific Hotels and Resorts takes a novel approach to multiple questionnaires: it has three different variants each for specific usage. One questionnaire is designed for the guest who has just checked-in for the first time, another for a returnee guest and one for departing guests. By taking this tack, the questionnaire size is reduced as the questions target different phases of the guests' stay. This 'customization' of questionnaires may reduce guest avoidance due to length and criticism of question pertinence. For example, a guest who has just checked-in would not encounter questions about the checkout which he or she would be unable to answer.

Hoteliers may consider moving beyond the paper questionnaire. E-questionnaires are becoming commonplace and used in conjunction with a paper questionnaire. Pan Pacific Hotels and Resorts is launching a new online initiative – the Electronic Guest Comment Card (eGCC) is sent as a personalized e-mail to in-house guests during their stay containing an invitation to participate in an online-based survey which the hotel management can monitor in real-time. This strategy would appear to be an attempt to overcome the completion timeframe limitations of website-linked and post-departure e-questionnaires, and to emulate the flexibility of paper questionnaires that can be completed during or after the stay.

Web-based booking agencies such as hotelclub.com send clients e-mail invitations to complete an online survey on the hotel at which they had stayed and this “helps other users when selecting where to stay, especially when travelling somewhere for the first time” (hotelclub.com, 2005). Here, in the event of dissatisfactory feedback, a voice response occurs with the booking agency while constituting a private response with the hotel. There is no indication that individual hotel managers are privy to this information therefore suggesting the failure to elicit negative voice responses and to take the

necessary action to effect recovery can lead to a compounding detrimental effect. The advent of traveller blogs and the growing popularity of online hotel reviews amongst both frequent travellers and holiday makers prompt hoteliers to monitor blog sites to identify problems that may not have been raised in their hotel questionnaires (Stieghorst, 2004). The real-time nature of the internet allows operators to identify customer dissatisfaction in a timely fashion and to initiate damage control if necessary as adverse comments posting on the internet may have considerable negative impact.

A multiple approach to data collection is not a new phenomenon in the hotel industry. Many progressive hoteliers apply a variety of survey methods to obtain a wider and more comprehensive perspective of their operations (Shea & Roberts, 1998). Mystery shopping, for example, is a proven method of providing hoteliers with an accurate gauge of hotel performance (Jones, 1999). Nonetheless, in so far as providing inexpensive ongoing data, the guestroom questionnaire appears to remain the mainstay of formal guest feedback capture.

The TripAdvisor website (see Figure 2.9) is an example of a traveller blog hosted on a commercial website. Hotels are rated using a five-point scale which is underpinned by qualitative guest evaluation.

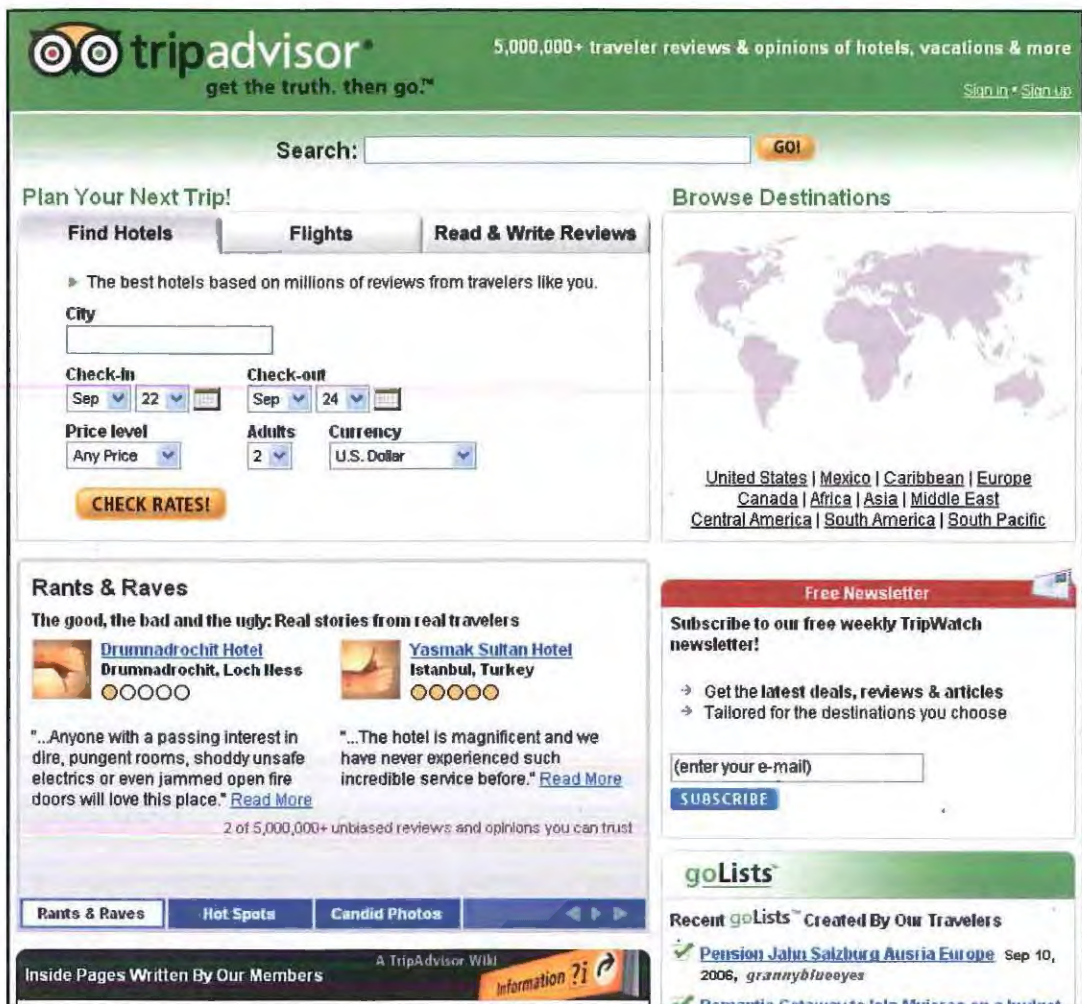


Figure 2.9. The TripAdvisor website. (Source: <http://www.tripadvisor.com>)

Thus, the discussion on the different types of questionnaires demonstrates that questionnaire design is on the one hand, cyclical as demonstrated by the return to the original format while on the other hand, transformational.

Questionnaire Form and Function

The foregoing section suggests that there is divergence in hotelier attitude towards the guestroom questionnaire. Views on form and function issues, such as when feedback is to be provided (in situ, post-consumption), questionnaire design (physical elements and design philosophy), content (what should be asked) and the main objectives determine which variant is chosen. Despite being an industry tradition, the paper guestroom questionnaire faces the threat of being labelled a 'white elephant' and forsaken. It is,

therefore, timely that the hotel industry scrutinizes the questionnaire in order to evaluate its relevancy and practicability in today's marketplace. To gain a deeper understanding of the relevance and practicality of the feedback questionnaire it is essential to focus on:

(a) The relationship between questionnaire form and function. Form should ideally follow function. Therefore logically this section starts with a discussion on questionnaire function. In the real world, the two are interdependent and partly determined by unique circumstances underpinning the questionnaire design. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this chapter, examination of questionnaire form will precede function; and

(b) What hoteliers are willing to do in order to get useful guest feedback? The latter covers issues such as enhancing response rates via incentive schemes and innovative approaches.

Function

The guest questionnaire appears to be multi-functional with distinctive differences, a phenomenon which can be attributed to management mindset. This variance occurs in both chain and independent hotels, and interestingly variations exist within the same chain, and even in the same hotel. Arguably the academic and industry literature, and indeed industry practitioner opinion of the guest questionnaire appear to be a reflective view of its functions. There is a sense that the more recent literature reports the flaws of the 'instrument', thereby precipitating a retrospective evaluation of questionnaire function. Discussion on the two main flaws follows below.

As with other methods of systematically recording customer compliments and complaints, the paper guest questionnaire frequently suffers from low response rates (Dillman, 2000; Gabbie & O'Neill, 1996; Gundersen, Heide & Olsson, 1996; Lewis & Chambers, 1989). According to a study by Trice and Layman (1984), the response rate for questionnaires passively placed in the guestroom is lower than 2%, although Sampson (1996) found a relatively high response rate of 8.6%. Personal communication with industry practitioners supports the prevalence of low questionnaire response rates with rates ranging from below 1% to 10%. One hotelier explains that due to a very

minimal response rate, records are not kept (Hubert Sossna, General Manager Pousada de São Tiago, Macao, 2004). A further support of this phenomenon is provided by Moore (2005) based on his interviews with hoteliers in Hong Kong. This low questionnaire response rate could be attributed to the reluctance of guests in general to participate in surveys, inconvenience and unavailability of time, privacy issues (Pitta, Franzak & Laric, 2003), and perhaps a suspicion that the purpose of the questionnaire is more about obtaining marketing information than measuring satisfaction (Cochran, 2001; Dillman, 2000; Homans, 1961) or quality improvement (Sampson, 1998). It is interesting therefore to note that a study by Lewis and Morris (1987) investigating guest complaint behaviour at six hotels reports that almost half of the respondents said they would complain via guest questionnaire. That finding may suggest that while there was a willingness by guests to use the questionnaire, it may not translate into actual usage given the low usage reported in the literature and a general consensus amongst hoteliers.

Questionnaires yield information that often cannot provide actionable feedback for managers (Barsky & Nash, 2001; Gundersen, Heide & Olsson, 1996; Jones & Ioannou, 1993). Self-report instruments such as hotel questionnaires and comment cards generally define either the outrageously dissatisfied or the exceptionally well-pleased guest (Barsky & Nash, 2001; Heymann & Schall, 2002; Lewis & Pizam, 1981; Meyer & Westerbarkey, 1996), and yet do very little in defining the 'grey area' of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction which refers to the average customer's point of view. Based on Harrison-Walker's (2001) study of e-complaining, dissatisfied customers provide insights into service failures which serves to counter the notion that negative feedback is not useful information. Apart from the extremes in satisfaction mentioned above, the questionnaire would also capture the views of guests who are extremely bored or those who have requests such as for extra guestroom amenities. Consequently, there are four broad functional categories.

A) Communication Interface

On the surface, the questionnaire is typically a communication interface primarily between the guest and hotelier. Extensive usage occurs in this capacity (Lewis & Morris, 1987; Lewis & Pizam, 1981; Lipton, 2000) to obtain feedback from guests and to evaluate hotel performance (Geller, 1984; Moskowitz & Krieger, 2002; Trice &

Layman, 1984). It also can provide valuable qualitative data of guest expectations and behaviour as seen in Sherman's (2002) study on guests' perception of luxury hotels. Although typically representing the extremes in customer views, the questionnaire allows management not only to be aware of the range of their product and service provision quality, but also to initiate communication with each of the guests that make comments, thereby assuring them that the management values both positive and negative feedback (FERENCE, 2005). Furthermore Sampson (1998, p. 71) points out that feedback derived from 'passive solicitation', which is the essence of the guest questionnaire, is "particularly useful in monitoring and controlling quality in the day-to-day operations of the business, and in identifying ideas for quality improvements". Although data derived from passive solicitation would be inherently biased and thereby deficient in estimating general market consensus, its extreme-response bias would effectively identify quality deficiencies (Sampson, 1996).

Less obvious is the role such data plays in communicating hotelier ethos and attitudes to guests. The design and presentation of the questionnaire may reflect, as would any other aspect of the hotel product, the attitude of management toward the guest.

B) Window Dressing

The ubiquitous nature of the questionnaire belies the negative attitude that some hoteliers have towards it as a guest-hotelier interface. Poria's (2004) study on guest questionnaire distribution by hotel employee shows that employees' intervention can undermine data integrity and suggests that some hoteliers have a laissez faire attitude in the administration of guest questionnaires.

Apart from low response rates and management utility, the "archaic and uninformative" questionnaire (Lewis & Morris, 1987, p.15) is criticized as being unrepresentative (Hall, 1990; Paxson, 1995; Trice & Layman, 1984), un-user-friendly (Schall, 2003) and lacking reliability (Lewis & Pizam, 1981; Prasad, 2003). Despite being undermined in its function as a feedback channel, the guest questionnaire is still widely used. The possible reasons for its longevity in terms of continued usage are:

- Guests expect to find this printed collateral in their guestrooms (Chipkin, 1999) although they may seldom use it. This could be an manifestation of the ritualism that Chase and Dasu (2001) purport gives customers comfort, order and meaning;
- The questionnaire offers franchisers simplicity in terms of its administration and adherence to chain corporate identity (CI). Franchisees are commonly required to utilize the chain-mandated questionnaire with minimal or no modifications to content;
- Questionnaires offer convenience and low cost (Wisner & Corney, 1999) whereas alternative methods such as exit interviews, rap sessions, mystery shopping, focus groups, follow-up interviews, competition analysis (Lipton, 2000; Withiam, 1995) and newer technology-based data elicitation are available to hoteliers but at much higher cost;
- “The hotel industry is used to and depends on the guest-comment card as an important market research tool” (Barsky & Labagh, 1992, p. 40); and
- Hoteliers have an idiosyncratic liking for paper documents (Hendrie, 2005) and the questionnaire, being a guestroom printed collateral, may act as outward display of management empathy. This behaviour links with the observation made by Rowe and Ogle (2007) that hoteliers have different propensities to technology, for example a paperless environment, based on personal factors such as age, length of tenure, level of entrepreneurship and background.

C) Marketing Research

The questionnaire provides an opportunity for marketing data to be collected from hotel guests. When there is a preponderance of marketing-type questions, the function of the questionnaire may be primarily a marketing research tool rather than a communication interface. There is a major flaw in the questionnaire usage in this manner especially in the context of some large chain hotels. The typical utilization of a generic questionnaire within chains, for example, suggests that the instrument targets all guests notwithstanding different consumer and geographical markets. While some chains allow for customized questionnaires, Tordjman (2004) observes that hotel questionnaire themes are typically not differentiable according to the continent or country of origin. This observation suggests the use of a voluntary homogenization of questionnaire

enquiry by the hotel industry. As the geographic context in which data is collected (Berwick, Ogle, & Wright, 2003) and cultural filters (Pizam, Pine, & Shin, 1997) may influence the responses of guests, the reliability of the data then is called into question.

While marketing data obtained from guest questionnaires are proprietary and meant for internal use, there is the possibility of unethical use of the data such as the sale of databases to third parties. Customers may perceive such actions as a violation of their privacy and hence, refrain from volunteering information of a personal nature thereby further undermining this industry tradition

D) Management Tool

The literature contains numerous affirmations of the virtues of the guest questionnaire as a management tool. According to Pullman and Cleveland (2004, p. 4), the questionnaire has “the advantages of small size, easy distribution, and simplicity” over the more extensive marketing survey. Lewis and Pizam (1981, p. 43) describe a well designed hotel questionnaire as an instrument that has the following virtues: “easily completed by guests, and responses are easily tabulated and analyzed by management”. It provides real-time information from guests about the product and service provided and their expectations while keeping managers better informed about unit operations (Desombre & Eccles, 1998). Questionnaires provide permanent records (Webster & Hung, 1994), functioning as part of a long-term management strategy as questionnaire utilization offers a hotel “longitudinal records that can be relatively easily analysed” (Losekoot, van Wezel & Wood, 2001, p. 299). Haktanir and Harris (2005) note that guest questionnaires provide periodic indicators of performance which warrant verbal confirmation. A prevailing confidence exists in the guest questionnaire as the literature shows that managers take the feedback from questionnaires seriously and use it, at least as a simple first means to identify problems (Jones, 1999). However, there is a fear that the questionnaire may be used as a witch-hunting tool or affect a “disciplinary Foucauldian ‘guest gaze’” (Watt, 2007, p. 50) with the resultant phenomenon of ‘filtering’ of questionnaires by line employees, thereby further diminishing the utility of the questionnaire to management (Poria, 2004).

In the area of human resources strategy, Australian hoteliers place importance on the analysis of guest comment cards when determining training needs (Cheng & Brown, 1998). However, Cheng and Brown (1998) state that there may be cultural differences in the importance placed on data derived from guest comment cards.

Guest questionnaires act as a good barometer of hotel performance or service quality improvement initiatives as highlighted by Enz and Siguaw (2000a) in a hotel which empowers its line staff. In that case study, guest comment cards reflected the positive outcome of that initiative which was tangible feedback to management.

Gabbie and O'Neill (1996) in their study of two hotels in Northern Ireland found that the management of one had based its renovation of its food and beverage facility specifically on feedback generated from guest questionnaires. That indicates the confidence the management places on the validity of questionnaire feedback. The study also shows that the reliability of information presented on questionnaires can be questionable due to incidences of staff exploitation and deceitful manipulation of the instrument. Nevertheless, this can be effectively overcome with appropriate control measures and therefore adequate supervision is required to ensure reliability.

Management performance can, in many cases, be based on ratings derived from guest questionnaire data. This data may also be used together with financial performance statistics to establish industry benchmarks. People wanting to conduct further research into hotel management also rely on data generated by guest questionnaires. Banker, Potter and Srinivasan (2005) use guests' questionnaire information, namely the 'likelihood to return', as one non-financial measure, the other being the level of complaints, in a test of a management-incentive programme of a hotel chain which shows that non-financial measures influence the financial performance of a hotel chain.

A discussion of guest questionnaire operationalization issues follows. Hotel managers are cognisant of the need for timely feedback and the guest questionnaire is a way to ask guests to respond when they are still physically on the property, hence negating the time delay factor (Schall, 2003). According to Schall (2003), the longer the time lag between the actual consumption of the service or goods and the evaluation, the less accurate the measurement of some critical guest attitudes becomes. Similarly Shea and Roberts

(1998, p. 68) note that retrospective recollection of an experience by customers and the need to “recall particular feelings when they are in a different environment” undermines accuracy and hence its meaning. Therefore “it becomes critical that managers measure guest attitudes during or immediately after their stay” (Schall, 2003, p. 61).

Pizam and Ellis (1999, p. 334) are of the opinion that the questionnaire should be administered to the guests only at the end of their experience, and that “under no circumstances should the questionnaire be left on the table before the meal was completed, or in the hotel guestroom before check-out”. Therefore it is common practice for hotels to seek guest comments about their stay when they check-out (Lewis, 1983) but this may be perceived as a cursory gesture conducted by a line employee, thereby undermining its efficacy as a method of obtaining accurate guest feedback. O’Neill and Palmer’s (2001) study on survey timing questions the credibility of the traditional exit survey approach in service quality assessment as it only measures perceptions post-consumption. They acknowledge that guests “may become tiresome or distressed as a result of being asked to complete both surveys”, referring to pre-consumption and post-consumption measurements (O’Neill & Palmer, 2001, p. 189).

Despite the questionnaire being partially underpinned by the exit survey approach, it has the potential to be highly representative of the hotel population unlike other surveys that are distributed to a relatively smaller sample. According to Schall (2003), every guest is a potential respondent and given the use of proper survey techniques, could render guest questionnaire data representative of a hotel’s guest segments (Barsky & Labagh, 1992). Pitta, Franzak and Laric (2003) propose that targeting the most attractive customers via the traditional one-to-one marketing approach avoids privacy-related problems. Such an approach would mean surveying a smaller population, thereby negating the need for a large sample size to prove reliability, and rendering the guest questionnaire a suitable research apparatus.

Notwithstanding the divergence in opinion about questionnaire administration, guest questionnaires are accessible to all in-house guests at hotels offering them. However, the effects that ‘exposure’ availed by different methods of guest questionnaire

administration such as in-room placement, incentives and medium have on the propensity of guest usage is unknown and warrants further research.

Questionnaire Form

The questionnaire genre typology (Figure 6) shows the different types of questionnaires being utilized in the hotel industry. Its construct is primarily underpinned by variables representing aspects of the physical form which shapes questionnaire appearance and presentation (typography and layout). These aspects are: (a) length, which is the main determinant of questionnaire 'size'; and (b) question format. This section examines the salient characteristics of each of these aspects. This section also highlights variations within each aspect and seeks to examine the implications questionnaire form-related considerations have on respondents.

Form-related Questionnaire Aspects

Guest questionnaires differ in terms of form in various ways: size, complexity in communicating the enquiry, instrument size, the way the questions are formatted or constructed, and the type of scaling utilized. The following is a discussion of these different aspects.

Size

Questionnaire size is quantified in this chapter as the number of questions, and can be broadly categorised ranging from short to long. While questionnaire size is diverse, the literature appears to suggest that a short questionnaire would be most appropriate for the hotel industry.

A "shorter and straightforward" line of questioning, according to Yüksel and Yüksel (2001, p. 125), reduces 'respondent fatigue' associated with long questionnaires thereby supporting the view that the number of questions should be kept to the minimum (Lipton, 2000; Paxson, 1995). Similarly Trice and Layman (1984) are of the opinion that a ten-item questionnaire would be of an optimal size to attract respondents. This is further supported by the observation of O'Neill and Palmer (2001, p. 189) that "respondents are less likely to complete long surveys than they are to complete shorter

ones” which suggests that shorter questionnaires would be more attractive to guests. Schall (2003) implies that longer surveys might contain unnecessary questions thereby resulting in decreased respondent response rates. A contributory factor for the attractiveness of a short questionnaire was identified by Webster and Hung (1994) when they found that a ten-item questionnaire would take very little time to complete.

Losekoot, van Wezel and Wood (2001) observe that two-page questionnaires had a tendency to be incomplete as guests did not notice the second page and therefore inadvertently failed to finish the questionnaire, perhaps an indication that a single-paged questionnaire is preferable. The smaller size, in terms of not only the number of questions but also its physicality, therefore could arguably impinge on the nature of the enquiry and have an influence on question formatting.

A short questionnaire might at first glance appear limited in terms of the amount of data that it can collect. This would be an erroneous impression as despite its apparent simplicity, it can actually gather substantial and varied information. A case in point is Yüksel and Yüksel’s (2001, p. 126) adaptation for hotel application of Kreck’s (1998) small-scaled respondent-centred hybridized questionnaire (Figure 2.10). Despite having a small footprint, the expanded questionnaire not only facilitates the identification of hotel attributes of most importance to guests but also provides an environmental scan of both internal service quality assurance and external competitor strengths and weaknesses (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001). This questionnaire characteristic is described as format simplicity which is expanded upon below.

Q1.^a Based on your experience as a user of hotels, what are the three most important service attributes that come to your mind immediately when using lodging facilities?

Most important attribute: _____
 Second important attribute: _____
 Third important attribute: _____

Q2.^a Based on your current visit, how would you rate the hotel's efforts in which you stayed on the three service attributes that are important to you?

	Poor						Excellent
First attribute:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Second attribute:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Third attribute:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q3. Think about the best hotel stay you have experienced. Based on your best stay experience, how would you rate this hotel in comparison to service characteristics that are important to you?

	Better						Worse
First attribute:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Second attribute:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Third attribute:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Other comments:

Please state the name of the hotel where you have had your best stay experience:

[Demographic detail question]

[Behavioral intention questions]

a. Developed from Kreck (1998).

Figure 2.10. Survey Instrument. (taken from Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001, p. 126)

Format Simplicity

Format simplicity is a determinant of size and encompasses two aspects, the nature and type of enquiry. A 'simple' enquiry would only target critical information which Nobles (1998) identified as whether: (a) there were any problems during a guest stay, (b) the guest would return to stay, and (c) the guest would recommend the hotel to friends and business associates. It could be deduced from a study in the early 1980s by Lewis and Pizam (1981, p. 39) that major U.S. hotel questionnaires did not contain the key question which is "overall, is the guest satisfied or dissatisfied (and will the guest return)?" Over the ensuing two decades, there has been little apparent change as

business hotels typically do not address what Lawton (2002, p. 411) considers to be the “most important priority of every business traveller when staying overnight: getting a good night’s sleep” in their questionnaires. There may be possible linkage between this shortcoming and questionnaire development in the 1980s.

A simple line of questioning makes for a shorter questionnaire. A short questionnaire can yield the most reliable and valid measure of satisfaction (Yüksel & Rimmington, 1998). The findings of Kivela and Chu (2001) that the critical-incidence technique gives restaurant managers a simple way to analyse critical service encounters suggests that only a few pointed qualitative questions would suffice to inform quality assurance, thereby permitting the questionnaire to be simply and compactly packaged. The use of appropriate and critical questions allows management to focus “on what is essential” (Schall, 2003, p. 55). It is therefore interesting that Tordjman (2004) reports that many questions that guests consider important are not found in the majority of guest questionnaires sampled in his study. This discrepancy suggests that some hoteliers are not attuned to their guests’ mindset and perhaps need to revisit the motivation for and design of their guest questionnaire enquiry.

Size Variations

While a shorter questionnaire might have advocates, a big proportion of the industry is in favour of a longer questionnaire as evidenced by the widespread adoption of the industry de facto standard hybrid-type questionnaire (see Figure 5b). This may be driven by the desire to collect data required for activities such as marketing budgeting and managerial performance evaluation deemed essential in the highly competitive and fast evolving hotel industry. In order to keep abreast with trends, marketers need to “watch for the gaps in info” (Blythe in Withiam, 1995) in order to tailor questionnaires to fill those gaps. This may suggest that new and additional data is necessary, and this would have an effect on questionnaire size. Based on communication with hotel practitioners, the author surmises that many hoteliers feel overwhelmed by the volume of questionnaire-derived data, a view not dissimilar to that of Brown and McDonnell (1995) and in accord with the findings of a project conducted by Reuters (1996) called “Dying for Information” which surveyed 1300 managers in five countries and found that half of those managers were unable to cope with the influx of information. Lilien,

Rangaswamy, van Bruggen and Wierenga (2002) contend that gathering additional information can be counter-productive as more information can obscure rather than enlighten. This may suggest that large amounts of quantitative data may not be as relevant to the manager at property level, who may wish to have a real-time barometer of their operation, as opposed to managers at the corporate level, who use the data for strategic planning and benchmarking exercises.

An issue that some hoteliers have with the copious amounts of information they receive is the accuracy of that data (Enz, 2001). Wright and Geroy (1991), however, note from their scan of the literature that there is a higher likelihood for managers, for purposes of planning, to act on data which has been gathered and presented in a way they can understand. They found that 'judgmental techniques' were preferred over quantitative planning processes by small business owners/managers in Canada which affirms other findings that show statistical models do not often suit the small business paradigm.

With new industry trends, additional demographic data is desirable, for example the mode of air transportation of guests staying at hotels. In an article on the spin-off effects of low-cost carriers (LCC) in Singapore, Coloma (2006) reports that while there was speculation that hotel room revenue and occupancy increases from 2004 to 2005 could be attributed to the increase in visitor arrivals linked to the arrival of low-cost carriers there are no available statistics to support this assumption. She notes that most hotels in Singapore did not ask their guests how they had travelled to their destination and hence a correlation between hotel occupancy and LCC passenger volume cannot be made. Such analysis could only be made if the relevant data is solicited via the hotel registration procedure or the guest questionnaire. This additional query could further lengthen existing instruments and exacerbate questionnaire fatigue (Aaker, Kumar & Day, 1995) and guest annoyance (Webster & Hung, 1994).

Anecdotal data derived from communication the author had with hotel guests shows that the standard hybrid format is what the typical guest is most familiar with and therefore likely to be most comfortable with. This familiarity, while able to influence the propensity of usage, may be foremost in informing hoteliers' decision to use the standard hybrid-type questionnaire.

Question Format

Question format refers to presentation style of a question: qualitative (open-ended) or quantitative (closed-ended/MCQs). As the typology demonstrates, questionnaires can range from being fully qualitative to having varying combinations of qualitative and quantitative questions to being fully quantitative although this is rare. Qualitative questionnaires feature 'white spaces' for guests to provide comments. Quantitative questions are direct questions for which the respondent typically is able to select an answer from a set of provided alternatives. Some MCQ questions may offer an 'other' alternative with a space for the respondent to fill in, thereby incorporating a 'qualitative' characteristic. The main differentiation in the type of quantitative questions is the way the question is answered which is either using an ordinal or nominal scaling.

Quantitative Scales

MCQs either utilize an ordinal scale which, while allowing the measurement of degrees of difference, does not indicate the specific amount of difference (e.g. Likert-type scale), or a nominal scale which assigns numbers for the purpose of categorizing events, attributes or characteristics. According to Schall (2003), the optimum scale for hospitality industry questionnaires is a seven-point scale. While such a scale would provide for a mid-point or neutral point in the scale, Frary (1996) discourages its use, possibly to avoid fence-sitting. From casual observation, there appears to be a wide variance in terms of scale ranges with some hotels utilizing scales from as few as three to as many as eleven points.

Questionnaire scales have wide utilization (Adamson, 1994; Schall, 2003). Scale order from positive to negative beginning from the left hand side of the scale may have varying impact on the respondent (Babakus & Boller, 1992) as typically people scan a page from left to right although Danaher and Haddrell's study (1996) does not indicate a noticeable difference in effect. Some questionnaires only offer positive scales: 'Excellent, Good, Average, Satisfactory' (Lawton, 2002) thereby rendering them biased as a respondent would not have the ability to give 'dissatisfied' as an answer. Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins (1987) assert that semantic differential or Likert-type scales commonly use anchor words that have an evaluative connotation. Anchor words such as

good/bad, fast/slow, friendly/unfriendly imply a standard and hence confound the measure of norms/expectations, brand performance beliefs, and disconfirmation (Cadotte et al., 1987). They recommend objective scales measuring true beliefs rather than evaluations would be more appropriate.

While some scales are balanced with equal points on either side of neutral, a high incidence, as with most customer satisfaction ratings, of skewed distributions (Peterson & Wilson, 1992) would appear to favour the positive. In addition the semantics of the terms applied would have clear ramifications, for example the use of ambiguous words such as 'average' and 'fair'. The use of symbols such as 'smiley', a caricature of either smiling, inexpressive or pouting face, have been adopted by some hotels in line with academic research (for example, see Danaher & Haddrell, 1996).

Irrespective of scaling, a questionnaire should not be difficult to score and interpret because "if the 'collecting data' and 'analysis' phases are time-consuming and difficult, people will be reluctant to use the instrument" (Webster & Hung, 1994, p. 51). Furthermore vague questions and the ambiguous words may confuse the respondents and result in erroneous responses (Zikmund, 1997).

Gap Measurement

The literature includes an extensive use of the gap measurement based on the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Paradigm (EDP) (Oliver, 1980) in questionnaire scaling thereby confirming the observation by Yüksel and Yüksel (2001, p. 109) that researchers "have assumed that the EDP is a valid and reliable framework that can be confidently used to determine customer satisfaction with hospitality and tourism services". It would appear that this confidence has been widely embraced by the hotel industry. The researcher suggests that this application of the 'direct approach' of confirmation/disconfirmation (Meyer & Westerbarkey, 1996) is used based on the assumption that the average respondent has an adequate familiarity with the standards of hotel product and service provision. This may prove to be difficult as ratings and accreditation standards in the industry are not uniform. Furthermore guest expectation is dynamic and highly situational, and can be falsely influenced by measurement-induced judgments made because of questions posed in other surveys (Dholakia & Morwitz,

2002). Therefore the premise of such evaluation may prove to be questionable. Expectation is a personal concept and therefore is highly subjective. If this is indeed the case, then a quantitative questionnaire obtains data which may prove to be as subjective as that from a qualitative one. Perhaps a set of pointed open-ended questions could 'steer' the respondent thereby alleviating the drawback of the qualitative approach, which is paucity of data points.

Table 2.1 summarizes the characteristics of the differing approaches. This represents the characteristics of fully qualitative or fully quantitative questionnaires. However, a fully quantitative questionnaire is rare, if not non-existent; most quantitative dominant questionnaires would incorporate a qualitative component of varying proportion. Third party administered or off-the-shelf questionnaires would typically be quantitative

Table 2.1 <i>Table of Questionnaire Characteristics.</i>	
Qualitative-centric Approach	Quantitative-centric Approach
❖ Tactical application/implication	❖ Strategic application/implication
❖ Subjective	❖ Objective ('scientific')
❖ Open-ended	❖ Closed-ended
❖ Records the extreme views and requests	❖ Considered representative of the general population of hotel guests
❖ Spontaneous/unrestricted feedback	❖ Scaled responses
❖ Unstructured/semi-structured query	❖ Structured query ('the norm')
❖ Comments need to be read	❖ Ease of administration/tabulation
❖ Ease of use (preferred by some guests)	❖ Ease of use (preferred by majority of guests)
❖ Harder to analyse	

Increasing Response Rates

A relevant aspect of questionnaire administration impinging on both form and function is the application of incentives to guests to boost completion rates. While the issue of incentives has been dealt with in the literature (James & Bolstein, 1990, 1992; Meyer & Westerbarkey, 1996; Nichols, 1988; Sampson & Weiss, 1993), hoteliers appear to hold disparate opinions on the influence of questionnaire participation incentive schemes. Some hotels routinely offer a form of reward, for example entry in a draw for prizes such as complementary room nights, or freebies/giveaways. The prime motivation would be to boost response rates. On the other hand, others appear to shun the practice

claiming that it will artificially inflate the response rate and create false data. This possibly suggests divergent outcomes experienced by hoteliers, perhaps because of the nature of the inducement (Schewe & Courmoyer, 1976), cultural factors of target markets, geographical location of the hotel, and owner/management mentality. Nonetheless, Hagel and Rayport (1997) note the declining efficacy of incentive, both in cash or in kind, in garnering feedback via guest questionnaire has prompted companies to adopt on-the-spot compensation. This is germane to decision making: such compensation serves to not only placate guests but, arguably more importantly, “gain the trust and information necessary to customize services” (Hagel & Rayport, 1997, para. 16).

Some hotels introduce guests to the questionnaire at check-in and invite them to provide their feedback via the questionnaire. The guest could also be prompted with a courtesy call during a stay or at check-out to complete a questionnaire. Another way hoteliers entice guests to engage with the questionnaire is to make it highly visible in the guestroom. This can be done by making the questionnaire visually appealing and conspicuous, and placement with maximum impact (such as placement on the bed at turndown). Albeit an apparently trivial issue, it is quite a contentious one amongst hoteliers; some hoteliers avoid clutter and prefer that guestroom printed collateral be inconspicuous while others desire maximum visual impact.

Another method used to facilitate guests completing the questionnaire is to provide postage-paid return (Lewis, 1983). This will allow guests to fill in the questionnaire after leaving the hotel and post it at their convenience. In addition, this allows the guest to reflect on their comments in a ‘non-threatening’ setting, one in which facing possible retaliatory behaviour by hotel staff is diminished, and largely eliminates the phenomenon of socially desirable answers associated with in-house feedback collection (Dillman, 2000). This feature is a small detail but could potentially have a large impact on guest perception of management sincerity in soliciting enthusiastic feedback.

Form and Function Relationship

Given the foregoing discussion with its clear demarcation between form and function, it would be interesting to examine the relationship between these two factors.

It would appear that, on the one hand, form does follow function when the questionnaire is well conceptualized and operationalized. A case in point is when the questionnaire is designed and administered in order to fulfil a specific function such as to gather particular data or trigger service recovery. Therefore this would apply to all the different questionnaire variants irrespective of their length and question format.

When the objective of a questionnaire informs its design, there could conceivably be an impact upon response quality. Losekoot, van Wezel and Wood (2001) suggest that purpose-designed questionnaires could obtain more coherent data. However, there is a caveat to ad hoc questionnaire design: even if a questionnaire is designed with the intention of eliciting a particular type of data, Ding, Geschke and Lewis (1991, p. 2) assert that “abuse and misuse is easily practiced unwittingly” unless the practitioner is conversant with the principles and limitations of statistical methods. Barsky and Nash (2001) also note that hoteliers tend to pose questions that are related to their property strengths thereby increasing the probability for favourable responses. Notwithstanding the chance of data corruption, the ‘form follows function’ concept applies. On the other hand, when a hotel questionnaire is a legacy, generic or chain-mandated printed collateral, its form would dictate its function. A non-user-defined questionnaire could have a propensity to gather irrelevant information.

However, in the real world, the relationship between form and function is not linear. The famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright asserts that “form follows function has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union”. This would hold true in the context of hotel guest questionnaires for the following reasons:

- a) There is no one-size-fits-all solution as hotel clientele are heterogeneous and the needs and requirements of hotels, even intra-chain, could be diverse;

- b) The questionnaire is utilized logically with a clear agenda (function) and in order to fulfil it, the type of enquiry and the manner in which the questions are posed (form) has to facilitate meeting that goal. Therefore the choice of a qualitative or quantitative approach, or a combination of both would be dependent on the function of the questionnaire.
- c) When different forms (questionnaire variants) are used concurrently, the questionnaire format (form) would influence the data collected (function) and therefore the forms are synergistic in fulfilling both qualitative and quantitative data (function) effectively. Mixed mode application effectively solves the mismatch in function associated with the use of a single questionnaire at a property.

Management Tone via Questionnaire Preamble

Social interaction is intrinsic to, and a defining feature of, the hospitality industry. Noe and Uysal (2003, p. 7) assert that the “locus of satisfaction (in the hospitality and tourism industry) resides between the service provider and customer”. Traditionally hoteliers had interacted extensively with in-house guests in order to establish a rapport with them. Hotel general managers were typically highly visible and directly involved in customer relations, lending glamour and verve to the guest experience. While guests encounter line and supervisory staff at various points during their stay at a contemporary mainstream hotel, a meeting with the general manager may now be only very occasional as hoteliers are now unable to allocate the same proportion of time to social interaction. Weinstein (2001) cites Peter Burwash’s observation that the amount of time spent with customers is much less than the time allocated to budgets. While most hoteliers continue to allocate time to interact with guests, for example during GM cocktails and as ‘lobby lizards’, the opportunity to interact with guests has greatly diminished, leaving the majority of social interaction to subordinates (Bitner, 1990; Schneider & Bowen, 1993). It can be argued that social interaction is not restricted to face-to-face interface, and can be manifested in indirect communication. Figure 2.11 shows the relationship between hotel employee action and expected guest reaction which extends the face-to-face relationship described by Noe and Uysal (2003). The diagram shows indirect interactions between the hotel employee and guest and vice-versa in the hotel context.

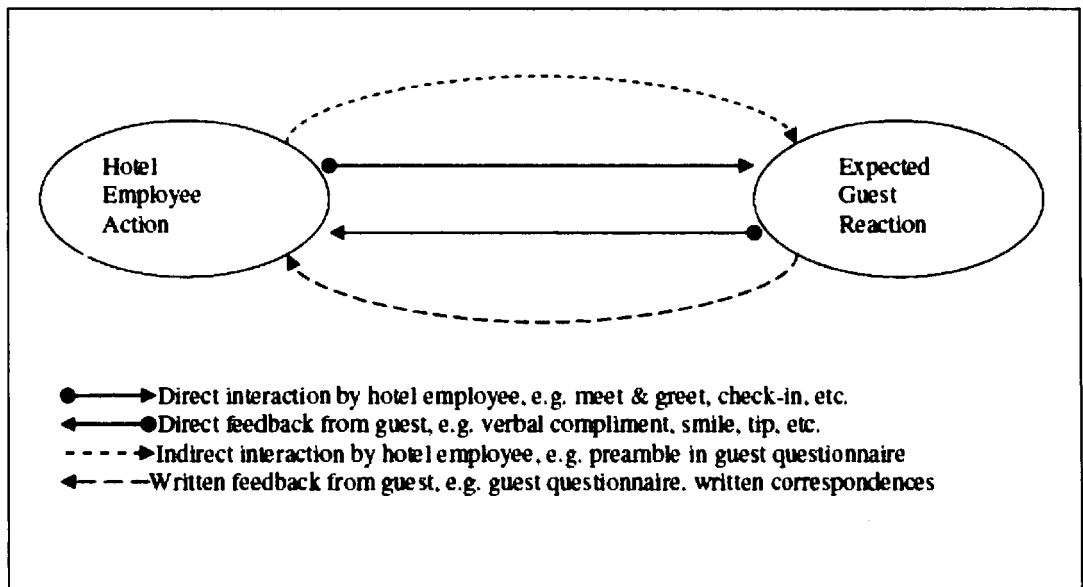


Figure 2.11. Hotel employee action and expected guest reaction. Adapted from Noe & Uysal, 2003. "Service Provider Action and Expected Customer Reaction".

Ogle, Nosaka and Pettigrew (2005) propose that the questionnaire could be considered an opportunity for an alternative means of facilitating a service encounter with the top management of a hotel. In the hotel context a service encounter is "a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service" (Shostack, 1985, p. 243). The view that service "encompasses all aspects of the service firm with which the consumer may interact - including its personnel, its physical facilities, and other tangible elements - during a given period of time" (Bitner, 1990, p. 70) strengthens their case. The guestroom questionnaire, being one of the tangible elements in the hotel operation, therefore can be interpreted as a service encounter in which the general manager may engage, albeit passively, with every guest who is in-house. The hotelier still has direct interaction in the sense that the communication is not via a third party. This argument is in line with Winer's (2001, p. 99) position that "in a general sense, any contact or "touch points" that a customer has with a firm is a customer service encounter".

Positive questionnaire-engendered service encounters are advantageous to the hotel. Woodside and Moore's (1987) study on the influence of word-of-mouth communication on consumers' booking behaviour of resort hotel accommodation shows a positive association between word-of-mouth and (a) guest retention by resorts, and (b) new guest

materialization. Furthermore, if the service encounter was to prompt guests to evaluate their stay in a favourable yet objective manner for the first or subsequent time, there could be a possibility of them engaging in positive word-of-mouth communication with family and friends (Woodside & Moore, 1987).

Figure 2.12 illustrates the questionnaire functioning as a conduit, in the form of the printed guestroom collateral, between top management and the room guest thereby engendering a service encounter and extends to the dynamic shown in Figure 2.11. The implications of this additional service encounter not only relate to the room guest but also the city guest as the latter could have interactions with room guests precipitating a favourable effect via word-of-mouth.

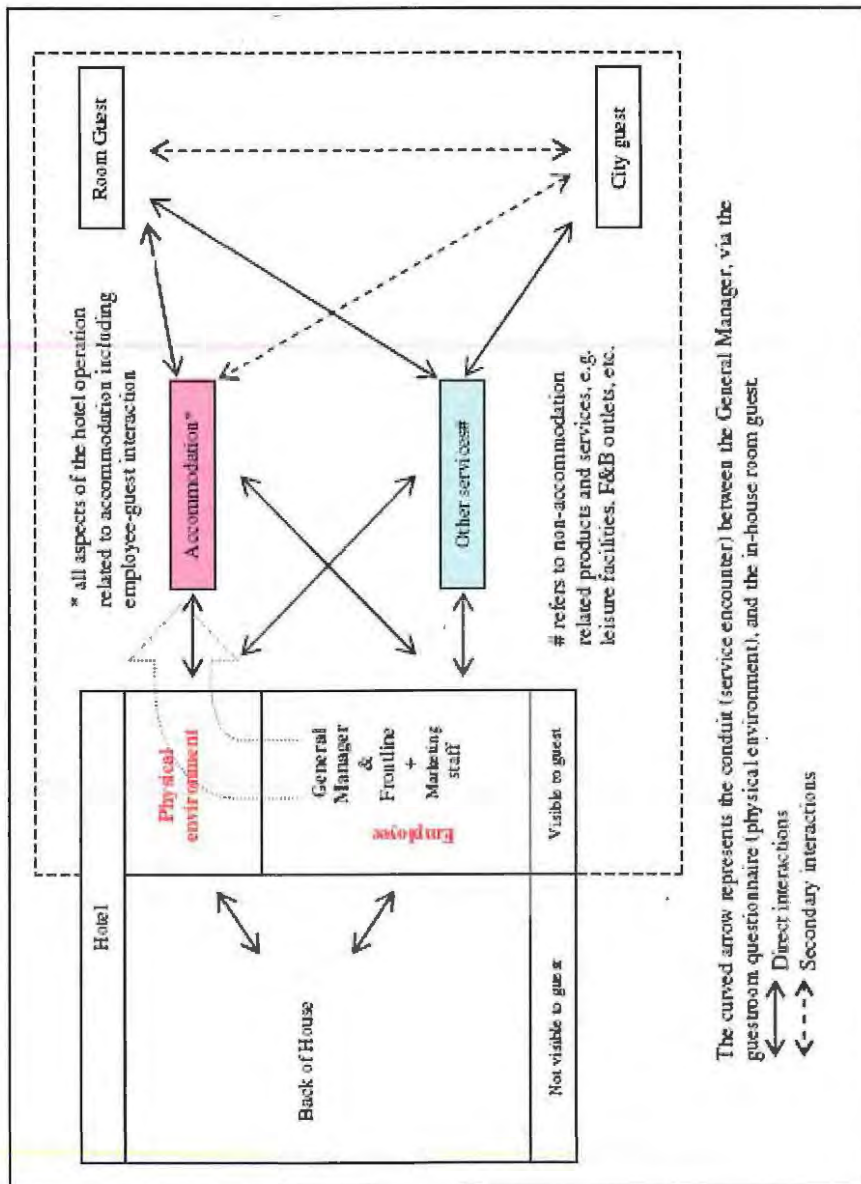


Figure 2.12. Elements of a hotel service encounter. Adapted from Kotler, (1991). "Elements in a Service Encounter"

The Elements of a hotel service encounter diagram illustrates the interactions between hotel product and service elements, and guests within a hotel context. The guest questionnaire is part of the physical environment but, with appropriate modification in form and execution, can lead to a service encounter that simulates a direct interaction between hotelier and guest, thereby augmenting the general manager's 'presence' on property.

Service encounters generate customer emotions (Liljander & Strandvik, 1997; Mattila & Enz, 2002; Price, Arnould, & Deibler, 1995), and such emotions influence customers' perceptions of the services provided (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990; Cronin, 2003; Oliver, 1997). Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer (1999, p. 184) define emotion as "a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events or thoughts". In the service sector, positive customer emotion is likely to result in more positive service evaluations, whereas negative emotion elicits negative customer perceptions (Edvardsson, 2005; Sweeney, Soutar, & Johnson, 1996).

Wetlaufer (2001, p. 12) reflects on the need for sincerity and authenticity in contemporary internal communication in the following quote.

"The wrong words, the wrong tone, the wrong expression – out of such everyday miscues come many of the world's problems, both small and large. In the world of business, the results of miscommunication are plain and painful: organizational strife, management paralysis, missed chances."

The management tone is an aspect of the guest questionnaire and denotes how the management is perceived by the guest in terms of posture and attitude towards management-guest communication through the language used in the questionnaire. This encompasses the preamble which typically frames an appeal "from company executives or... pertaining to company objectives" (Sampson, 1998, p. 80), wording and phrasing of the questions, nature of the query, and who the spokesperson is. The tone may create an impression which varies from a sincere invitation to engage with the guest to impersonal formality (Ogle & Gharavi, 2004). It implies the motivation of management in administering the questionnaire and establishes the relationship between management and guest.

Attitudes of service providers influence customer evaluation of services (Holbrook & Gardner, 2000; Liljander & Mattsson, 2002; Mattila, 1999; Winsted, 2000). Price, Arnold and Tierney (1995) demonstrate that favourable attitudes of service providers arouse customers' positive emotions that consequently bring about customer satisfaction; hence the management tone has far-reaching implications in hotel management. According to Dholakia and Morwitz (2002, p. 3), satisfaction surveys

“appeal to customers’ desire to be coddled, reinforcing positive feelings they may already have about the surveying organization”. A brief personal interaction in the form of a ten-minute telephone customer satisfaction survey may have a long-term positive effect on customer behaviour (Dholakia & Morwitz, 2002). Interpersonal interaction, irrespective of the way it is manifested, therefore is important. The guest questionnaire could conceivably be one of such manifestations.

The researcher posits that the effect of management tone has typically been neglected by hoteliers as evidenced by the appearance of banal and disingenuous messages even though it is an important component of questionnaire quality (Ogle & Gharavi, 2004). Ogle, Nosaka and Pettigrew (2005) in an exploratory study demonstrate that management tone can stimulate customers’ emotional response which then indirectly influences the propensity for questionnaire usage. This response would correspond to the ‘expected guest reaction’ represented by the dashed right to left line at the bottom of Figure 12. It should be noted that the response, that is guest feedback, must precipitate a direct interaction (solid left to right line) in the form of a personal reply from the hotel general manager or a senior representative. Unless the guest perceives that the information given is taken seriously, the process will most probably terminate and cause loss of goodwill. This is particularly pertinent to complaints as guests have a preference to convey complaints in writing to the top management (Lewis & Morris, 1987). From anecdotal research conducted on perceptions of both hoteliers and guests toward questionnaire usage, it becomes apparent that there is a divergence between the two groups regarding management response to submitted guest questionnaires. While the majority of hoteliers interviewed claim to read and respond to each and every questionnaire received, none of the guests recalled having received any response to the questionnaires they had completed and submitted.

Conclusions of Literature Review

The purpose of the hotel guest questionnaire is to obtain feedback from guests. If the questionnaire is completed and returned to management, it could provide valuable data which will allow hoteliers to better serve their guests. The traditional guest

questionnaire, however, has been derided for being outdated and ineffective, even being written off by major players in the hotel industry.

“I don’t think it’s ever going to be passed its use by (date). I think we will always be needing to get some level of guest feedback. I think perhaps the way forward would be to introduce some form of electronic response...” (Matthew Holyday, General Manager, Pacific Suites Perth, personal communication, 2005).

The rapid adoption of technology in guest feedback may be applauded by certain hoteliers and their guests. However, in the hospitality industry there is a real danger of degradation of the ‘high touch’ aspect of guest feedback solicitation which is a hallmark of hotel-keeping. Perhaps hoteliers discounting the utility of paper questionnaire should reassess the role of paper questionnaire as a key component of a holistic data collection strategy, one that takes into account that “evaluating human experiences is an inexact science and is probably best served by using a variety of approaches” (Chappelow, 2004, p. 23). Such a strategy could and should be an integral part of a comprehensive customer relationship marketing (CRM) (Winer, 2001) approach and an adaptive customer feedback system (Carnell, 2003). This integrated approach is also recommended by Schijns (2003, p. 7) who asserts that:

“Every service encounter should be used as an integral part of a business’s overall strategy and, as a channel, managed in conjunction with all other channels that a business uses”.

While the nature and quantity of data required for sophisticated statistical analysis may require tweaking of the paper questionnaire, hoteliers should be aware that extended questionnaires risk further aggravating survey fatigue which in turn will diminish response rates thereby making the effort counterproductive. Perhaps it would be feasible to consider deconstructing the questionnaire to rediscover the service encounter opportunities that it can generate.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

This section introduces the conceptual framework on which the present research is grounded. First, the framework conception is addressed followed by its development and operationalization.

2.3.1 Framework Conception

The basic building block of the conceptual framework is the core stakeholders in the hotel industry. The hotel industry is characterised by Medlik and Ingram (2000) as being made up of three principal parties: customers, employees and owners as depicted in Figure 2.13. This tripartite relationship forms the base foundation on which the research conceptual framework is built.

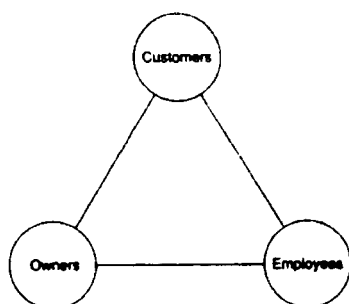


Figure 2.13. Principal parties in the hotel business. (Medlik & Ingram, 2000, p. 27)

This basic model has been adapted and extended to fit the pragmatic research approach agenda set out in the present study. The key modification is the redefinition of the stakeholders.

2.3.1a Owners

Hotel owners are subject to various guidelines and legislature at every stage of property development and operations, and in most cases engage career hoteliers to manage their properties. Typically, the industry, which is fragmented, is represented by one or more of the following bodies: professional association, licensing agency, accreditation body, franchise/chain/management group. All the different actors in hotel equity and stewardship contribute to the collective perception held in the community of the hotel industry, hence, owners can be subsumed into a wider industry grouping. Consequently

the owner component of the Medlik and Ingram's (2000) model is adapted to represent the hotel industry and labelled as I (Industry) in Figure 2.14.

2.3.1b Employees

A career hotelier, being employed to manage a property, is an employee albeit at the top of the managerial hierarchy. Consequently the employee component is renamed as hotelier and is relabelled as H (Hotelier) (see Figure 2.14).

2.3.1c Customers

The term guest as defined by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary as “a person who pays for the services of an establishment (as a hotel or restaurant)” and, as it best describes the characteristic of a hotel consumer, has been used to replace the customer label. The customer component therefore is relabelled as G (Guest) in Figure 2.14.

This modified model is therefore anchored by the three principal stakeholders being I (Industry), H (Hotelier) and G (Guest).

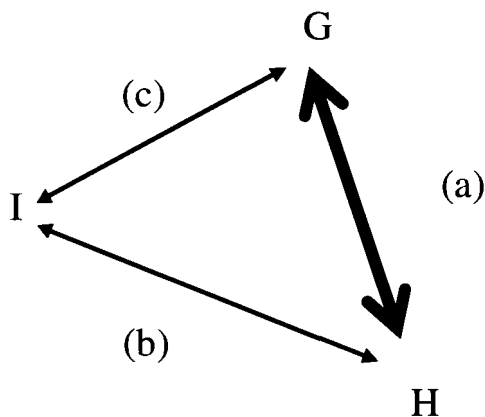


Figure 2.14. Foundation of research conceptual framework.

Figure 2.14 shows the linkages between the three stakeholders. These two-way linkages are depicted as Guest-Hotelier, Industry-Hotelier, and Industry-Guest.

The Guest-Hotelier interaction (linkage a) is commonly referred to as the service encounter. This dynamic interaction is varied but primarily, and more often, occurs in

the hotelier-to-guest direction in the form of marketing communications and service encounters between front-of-house staff and guests.

The Industry-Hotelier interaction (linkage b) is mutually beneficial. Many hoteliers belong to the hotel association (local, regional, national or international) which typically acts as the industry mouthpiece and prima facie is seen as representing hoteliers collectively as a homogeneous group. Hoteliers, on the contrary, are highly heterogeneous and while they may work collaboratively for the mutual benefit and the collective good, they are individualistic and competitive. Industry bodies adopt standards in terms of modus operandi and protocols to which hotels have to abide by, and hence can have a direct influence on the characteristics of the hotelier. At the same time, the revolving door between hotel management and industry caretakers allows practitioners to influence industry standards and best practice.

The Guest-Industry interaction (linkage c) is also two-way in that 1) the industry creates impressions on which guests form opinions and 2) guests influence the industry through consumer clout and consumption behaviour. This relationship is based mainly on preconceived ideas of what the hotel industry consists of, and who the hotelier is and what s/he does. The industry projects in image to impress on the guest the product, service and experience virtues by relying heavily on marketing to build favourable impressions. Therefore, the perception the typical guest may have of the industry could be inaccurate.

2.3.2 Conceptual Framework Development

The essence of the framework is therefore the 'interactional dynamic' that occurs between two or more stakeholders which is manifested in the hospitality service encounter. Encounters, according to the Avenues of Service Encountering Model (Figure 2.12, p. 85), are between Hotelier and Guest both as a direct interaction and also as an indirect one such as via policy statements by industry bodies or advertising. It serves to illustrate the importance of the commitment aspect of the Hotelier-Guest 'relationship'.

The next stage in the framework development is based on Svensson's (2006, p. 250) service encounter research approach of using the perspectives of the service provider,

service receiver and “individuals who are not directly involved in the service encounter” for a more sophisticated examination of bilateral service encounters. Here, data from the three stakeholders identified are elicited. Triangulation of the resultant data underpins the Hotelier Interface (HI) (Figure 2.15).

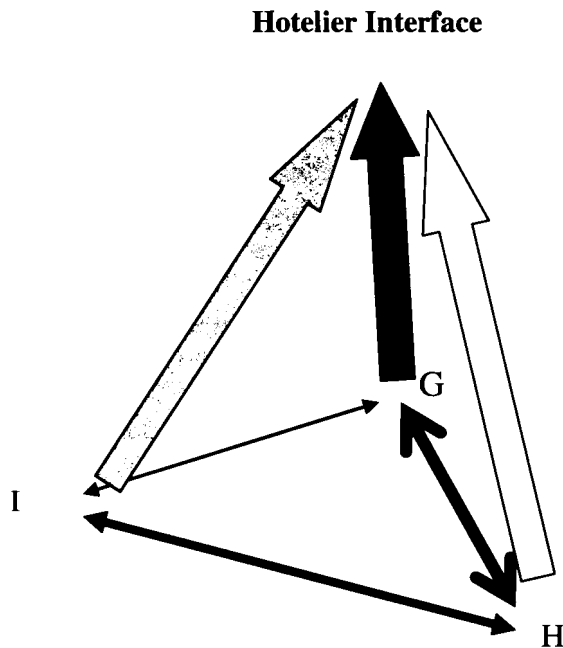


Figure 2.15. Hotelier Interface (HI) conceptual framework.

In Figure 2.15, these three perspectives which are the relationships among guests, hotelier and the hotel industry are depicted as arrows projecting upward from the base and intersecting at the apex of a three-sided pyramid. This tetrahedral pyramid constitutes the structure of the research conceptual framework and guides the data collection phases of the study.

The industry perspective is derived from the content analysis of hotel guest questionnaires as reported in Chapter 3. The literature shows that hotels make extensive use of the questionnaire, and hence existing questionnaires could be considered as representative of how industry perceives its form and function.

The guest perspective is derived from the guest focus group interviews reported in Chapter 4. The hotelier perspective is derived from the in-depth interviews with hoteliers reported in Chapter 5.

As explained in the preceding section, the Hotelier Interface framework is based on a foundation formed by all three elements: guests, hotelier and hotel industry. As discussed previously, the service encounter was investigated in published research by focusing on the interaction between line and sales employees, with guests. Very little research has been done on the direct interaction between the hotel management, viz the hotelier, and guests. To fully understand the hotel service encounter, the mutual interaction among all three elements of the framework is necessary to provide a holistic view. Previous research focused mainly on the individual contribution of the hotel industry or the staff or the guests on the success or failure of a service encounter. This was reported in terms of what the industry itself sees appropriate for a unique service encounter, or what the guests think a service encounter entails or even the individual supervisor's idiosyncratic ideas of what constitutes a 'good' service encounter. However, a major influence on service encounter is the dyadic relationships between staff and guests; in particular the relationship between top management and guests. This was the focus of the present research which investigated how guests and hoteliers used and viewed the adequacy of the current measure of interaction, represented by the guest questionnaire or guest comment card.

This chapter presented a review of questionnaire types and showed a wide variety of designs currently in use by the hotel industry. A discussion of questionnaire function and form raised various factors which influence the design and subsequent use in providing an improved customer-hotel service encounter. The efficacy of the paper questionnaire, in all its forms, as a service encounter vehicle is examined in the next chapter which focuses on the content analysis of a range of existing questionnaires.

Chapter 3: GUEST QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

This chapter details the first phase of data collection using content analysis. It explains the development in the methodology employed. The results of the questionnaire analysis are then reported in three major sections:

- 1) Content Analysis of 71 questionnaires achieved through evaluation by a panel of respondents representing a cross section of hotel guests;
- 2) Quasi Q-Sort: a supplementary and confirmatory secondary data set achieved through a different panel; and
- 3) Typology of hotel guest questionnaires: constructed based on the findings of the content analysis and Quasi Q-sort.

3.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis is defined by Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, and Oppenheim (2002, p. 799) as “the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of a communication.” Typically content analysis has been used in research on written or recorded communication in a wide range of fields (Busch et al., 2005). The term ‘text’ is used to describe these communications which “can be broadly defined as books, book chapters, essays, interviews, discussions, newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theatre, informal conversation, or really any occurrence of communicative language” (Busch et al., 2005. para. 1).

According to Krippendorff (2004), the conceptual foundation of content analysis was strictly the text but it has since evolved to encompass the context. Berelson (1952) suggests the suitability of content analysis under the following heading: “to disclose international differences in communication content” (p. 35); “to identify the intentions and other characteristics of the communicators” (p. 72), “to reveal the focus of attention” (p.98); “to describe attitudinal and behavioral responses to communications” (p. 105), and “to determine psychological state of persons and groups” (p. 75).

The flexibility afforded by this research method, as seen by its application to the form and content analysis of greeting cards in the United States (see Kaur-Kasior, 1987), made it appropriate for application in this study on hotel guest questionnaires. This questionnaire is posited to be a form of communication from hotel management to hotel guests and vice versa (Ogle, Nosaka & Pettigrew, 2005). The application of content analysis in hospitality and tourism research has typically been on texts which were the record of a communication such as customer complaints (see Lee & Hu, 2004; Susskind, 2001). There have however also been studies on embedded textual communication in line with the application in this study (see Clow, Roy, Hershey, & Baack, 2001 for service advertisements; see Ham, 2004 for hotel websites; see Kemp & Dwyer, 2003 for airline mission statements).

Content analysis has also been previously used in the evaluation of blank guest questionnaires (Kraft & Martin, 1997; Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998). Kraft and Martin (1997) studied 312 customer comment cards from various service industries, of which there were 74 hotel questionnaires, to investigate scope and ‘technical quality’. Gilbert and Horsnell (1998) applied content analysis to compare and record findings based on a 32-point checklist of “best practice” derived from previous research done on questionnaire design and application. Their research was a means to establish a guest questionnaire checklist criterion, which hotels could use to assess their questionnaire design and policy against the “basic rules of good GCC design”, (Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998, p. 460) by external appraisal. Using a sample of 45 hotel questionnaires obtained by mail request, they ascertained that conformity to questionnaire best practice was patchy which presented undesirable implications:

- The creation of a biased sample

- Operational decisions made on the basis of management information about customer dissatisfaction with specific service attributes when the importance of these as contributors to the customer's overall level of dissatisfaction has not been established
- Management information that indicates that customers are dissatisfied without sufficient supporting detail to enable focused remedial action to be taken

(Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998, p. 461)

Gilbert and Horsnell's (1998) study provided an extensive review of questionnaire attributes which impinged on customer satisfaction measurement and their applied content analysis approach was adopted by Su (2004) in his study of hotel questionnaire practice in Taiwan hotels. The present study, in contrast, while using a similar applied content analysis approach, is geared toward examining the relationship between questionnaire attributes and its usage, and its resultant impact on guest-hotelier relations.

3.1.1 Objectives

There were three objectives for the content analysis. The first objective was to explore customer perceptions of in-room hotel guest questionnaires through assessment of various aspects of the questionnaire. This exercise revealed guests' attitudes towards the questionnaire and provided an indication of the factors influencing propensity for usage.

The second objective was to examine the panel's perception of hotelier attitudes towards the questionnaire. The panel was instructed to assume that the hotel general manager had been involved in the design of the questionnaire in order that the questionnaire could be directly attributable to a party which guests would be familiar with and could easily relate to. This was done to circumvent the depersonalization that may be caused by the usage of a chain-mandated questionnaire administered by a 'faceless' corporate bureaucracy. The hotelier perspective therefore was of the property management and was based on: 1) the management tone, a reflection of the sincerity of the hotel in its appeal to the guest to engage in the feedback process, and 2) the questionnaire form and function attributes. Further, by examining the line of questioning

used in the questionnaires, the researcher could deduce how hoteliers prioritized operational functions and product offering. From this data, it could be deduced what was the prime motivation for questionnaire utilization and the type of questionnaire selected. Together with the customer perception, the content analysis was one of the components in triangulating data.

The third objective was to construct a typology of hotel guest questionnaires. The questionnaires were scrutinized in order to identify their building blocks. These form and function attributes were then categorised and a typology describing the varying combinations of attributes constructed.

3.1.2 Methodology

3.1.2.1 Sample

A purposive sampling of existing hotel guest questionnaires was undertaken in Perth, Penang and Singapore. Selection criteria included a) hotel category which was high to mid-range in accordance to the World Tourism Organisation model of minimum hotel standards (cited in Lawson, 1995); b) target respondents (guests staying in the hotel); c) placement of questionnaire (in-room: situated anywhere within the confines of the guestroom); c) method of administration (unsolicited by hotel staff and self-administered by guest); and d) principal language (English). The researcher made 'cold calls' at hotels and requested from the Front Desk personnel an in-room guest questionnaire, that is the questionnaire provided to guests who are registered and staying at the hotel. If a hotel placed more than one questionnaire in the guestroom and the items were not duplicates, both questionnaires were included in the sample. Food and beverage outlet questionnaires intended for diners were not collected. A useable sample of 71 questionnaires was obtained which represented both chain (50) and non-chain (21) hotels. As the sampling was not random, the findings should be interpreted as representing a broad range of guest questionnaires rather than all questionnaires per se.

3.1.2.2 Process

The process incorporated two phases: the first was content analysis that was conducted by a panel of reviewers consisting of experienced hotel guests, followed by further

analysis by the researcher. Each phase is explained below and the results are reported in section 3.1.3.

Content Analysis by Panel

The first of two content analysis exercises was conducted by a panel consisting of six academic staff and postgraduate students of a Western Australian university. Convenience sampling was used and the criteria for panel selection were: 1) possession of tertiary education; 2) extensive international travel experience; and 3) wide hotel accommodation experience. Questionnaire evaluation was based on criteria (Churchill, 1995; Malhotra, Hall, Shaw & Oppenheim, 2002; Zikmund, 2000) that have been derived from the literature (for examples see Kraft & Martin, 1997; Schall, 2003; Webster & Hung, 1994) and personal experience, and was incorporated on a scoring sheet used by the panel (Appendix 3.1). The questionnaires were rated on the following points:

- Management tone – reflects on the sincerity of the hotel in its appeal to the guest to engage in the feedback process and has an impact on respondent willingness to participate;
- Instrument size – is likely to have an impact on ‘ease-of-use’ evaluation, attractiveness, and response rate;
- Print quality/legibility – has an impact on comprehension and ‘ease-of-use’;
- Question format – has an impact on what type of responses are given (qualitative versus quantitative) and perception of ‘ease-of-use’;
- Visual quality – layout and graphic design are likely to stimulate interest and influence usage;
- Recording of purpose of visit – has an impact on ability of hotel to track visitor trends;
- Recording of demographic information – provides demographic data for the back office and influences how guests perceive management’s intent;
- Departmental/functionality focus – has an impact on how hoteliers view their business;
- Ease-of-use – simplicity and user-friendliness are likely to have an impact on response rates and respondent fatigue;

- Overall quality of questionnaire – encompassing visual, tactile, spatial and content dimensions, has an impact of communicating the image of the hotel to the respondent; and
- Probability that guest would complete the questionnaire.

The review was conducted individually by panel members in order to assure independence in assessment. Each questionnaire was evaluated by no less than three reviewers and the average number of questionnaires reviewed by each reviewer was forty-two. A total of 253 reviews was obtained. The reviewers were provided a scoring sheet which had spaces for reviewer comments. The scoring was according to scales which constituted the following:

- a) Management Tone: (1=insincere to 5=sincere);
- b) Instrument Size: (1=small, 2=medium, 3=large);
- c) Print Quality/Legibility (1=poor to 5=good);
- d) Question Format (1=MCQ only, 2=MCQ and some open-ended, 3=open-ended only, 4=open-ended and some MCQ);
- e) Visual Quality (1=poor to 5=good);
- f) Was 'Purpose of Visit' probed? (1=yes, 2=no);
- g) Demographic/Marketing Data Mining? (1=yes, 2=no);
- h) Departmental/Functionality Focus (1=overall/general, 2=Food & Beverage, 3=Accommodation, 4=others);
- i) Ease-of-use (1=difficult to 5=easy);
- j) Overall Quality (1=poor to 5=excellent);
- k) Would you use this questionnaire? (1=low probability to 5=high probability).

The data was analysed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative analysis consisted of content analysis while quantitative treatments were descriptive statistics, cluster analysis, correlation and regression. Pearson's correlation was used to establish association between variables and regression was applied to build a construct of questionnaire variables. Cluster analysis was undertaken aimed at identifying groups that were least similar within themselves but most dissimilar between themselves thereby contributing to the formation of a questionnaire typology. Hierarchical

clustering was used as it is more appropriate for smaller samples which typically are less than 250.

According to Berelson (1952, p. 17), the overarching quantification requirement characteristic of content analysis “does not necessarily demand the assignment of *numerical* values to the analytic categories”. He goes on to qualify that statement by saying that “sometimes it takes the form of quantitative words like “more”, or “always” or increases” or “often”” (Berelson, 1952, p. 17). Hence, both description of the content in quantitative terms and qualitative terms is made throughout the chapter to facilitate what Berelson (1952, p. 123) refers to as the ““*reflection*” of “*deeper phenomena*.””

Content Analysis by Researcher

The sample was subsequently scrutinized by the researcher on aspects not addressed in the panel member assessment. Two items, hotel affiliation and returnability, were not incorporated in the panel content analysis as they could be determined solely by the researcher. These items had been previously examined by Ogle and Gharavi (2004) in a study of thirty hotel guest questionnaires used by three- to five-star rated hotels in Perth, Australia conducted in March, 2004. Other aspects emerged from the panel content analysis data and the ongoing literature review. The items examined were:

- instrument scaling – type of scaling utilized, choice of words used in the scales
- questionnaire preamble
- length (number of questions)
- incentive schemes

Descriptive statistics were employed and the data from the panel analysis underpinned the assessment of the subsequent data set.

The content analysis results are presented in two sections: results of content analysis by panel, and content analysis by the researcher.

3.1.3 Results of Content Analysis by Panel

The results of content analysis by panel are presented according to the sequence of questions in the scoring sheet (see Appendix 3.1). Each sub-section consists of an

introductory paragraph and a results paragraph. The results of content analysis by the researcher are reported according to the following sequence: instrument scaling, length, incentive schemes, and questionnaire preamble. Table 3.1 presents the results of the content analysis panel and shows the correlation between management tone, print quality/legibility, visual quality, ease-of-use, overall quality and the probability of usage. The variable is first defined and findings reported.

Table 3.1. <i>Pearson's Correlation Among Hotel Guest Questionnaire Variables.</i>					
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Management tone	-				
2. Print quality/legibility	.352**	-			
3. Visual quality	.424**	.562**	-		
4. Ease of use	-.076	.127*	.366**	-	
5. Overall quality	.325**	.478**	.690**	.505**	-
6. Probability of usage	.111	.088	.428**	.507**	.677**
**p<.01 *p<.05					

3.1.3.1 Management Tone

The management tone denotes how the management is perceived by the guest in terms of posture and attitude towards management-guest communication through the language used in the questionnaire. This encompasses the preamble, wording and phrasing of the questions, nature of the query, and from whom the message appears to come (spokesperson of the hotel management). The tone may conjure an impression from an impersonal formality to an apparently sincere invitation to the guest to participate (Ogle & Gharavi, 2004). It implies the motivation of management in administering the questionnaire, and may possibly establish the relationship between management and guests. Ogle, Nosaka and Pettigrew (2005) posit that management tone affects the perception of overall quality which in turn influences a guest to complete the instrument. This suggests that cursory attention paid to this aspect of questionnaire design may reduce the efficacy of the questionnaire as a channel of feedback and may even negatively impact on the guest's opinion of the hotel.

The data indicated that 37.9% of the questionnaires were perceived as being sincere in tone (rating of >3). Correlation analysis of the data (Table 3.1) showed the following:

a) The higher the visual quality, the more positively the management tone was viewed ($r=.424$, $p<.01$);

b) The higher the overall quality, the more positively the management tone was perceived ($r=.325$, $p<.01$);

c) The higher the print and legibility quality, the more positively the management tone was perceived ($r=.352$, $p<.01$); and

d) The management tone did not have any apparent influence on the probability that the guest would complete the questionnaire. However, although there was no direct correlation between management tone and probability of usage, there was a strong correlation between overall perceived quality and probability of usage ($r=.677$, $p<.01$).

3.1.3.2 Instrument Size

Instrument size is defined as the physical dimensions of the questionnaire as it would be presented to the guest in the guestroom. The rationale behind this definition is that the questionnaire, in its folded state, is presented in the form the hotel management would have intended the guest to perceive it, and that this perception would be the basis for how the guest would relate to it.

More than half (58.3%) of the sample were perceived to be of medium size. Visual inspection of those questionnaires revealed that most were of the A5 or DL (dimensional lengthwise) dimension. There were questionnaires that were considered large (7.1%) which were of the A4 size, some of which were of double and triple fold when opened, and others small (34.5%) mostly in the postcard-sized format. It would therefore appear that while a medium sized questionnaire is favoured by industry, there is still a clear divergence amongst industry practitioners as to what would be the optimal size. It is interesting to note that all the largest questionnaires (Mean >2.25) and all but one of the smallest questionnaires (Mean = 1.0) were from chain hotels. There does not appear to be a particular preference shown by the industry in regards to questionnaire size as there was clear heterogeneity although there appeared to be a tendency toward the de facto industry standard which is the DL fold with flap format. This may possibly be due to the desire to mimic the standard letter size envelope and to provide the illusion

of a short survey. A comparison between size and probability of usage, however, revealed no clear linkage between the two variables.

It was interesting to note that the fourth largest chain worldwide which is headquartered in France (MKG Consulting, 2003) had adopted a postcard-sized questionnaire in the Australia/New Zealand region. It was noted that this format was used by all the chain's properties with the exception of Sofitel, but completely different formats were used in its hotel in South-East Asia. Its property in Singapore had a bi-lingual (English and French) A5-triple fold format while another property in Malaysia had an irregular dimension (23.5cm × 16.5cm, bi-fold with flap) in English only. According to its regional headquarters in Sydney, each Accor brand (for example Sofitel, Mercure, etc. has its own variant questionnaire). In contrast, two large chains (Holiday Inn & Grand Plaza Parkroyal) had strictly adhered to their corporate identity irrespective of country although the questionnaire was tailored to each property by the inclusion of its name, location and General Manager, and variations in colour and illustration. Holiday Inn is part of the Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG) which allows each of its regional headquarters to design and administer a regional variant (Soo Hin Yeoh, Quality & Continuous Improvement Consultant, Intercontinental Hotels Group Asia Pacific, personal interview, 2006). The Shangri-La Hotel and Resorts questionnaires provide provision for a second language to be used depending on the location of its hotels.

This provision for questionnaire design and presentation modification points to a recognition that a questionnaire should suit the market or country in which it is utilised. Therefore it can be surmised that the cultural background of the target markets is taken into consideration by the chain.

3.1.3.3 Print Quality

Print quality denotes the quality of the typesetting and production, two factors that contribute to the clarity and sharpness of the texts. These attributes impact on text legibility. Higher print quality typically requires higher printing costs.

Print quality appeared generally to be of high quality with 81.4% of the sample being rated three and above. However, one out of five questionnaires sampled was perceived to be of lesser quality. Low print quality may be interpreted to reflect the attitude of the

management towards the questionnaire. There were three occasions during data collection that comments regarding legibility were made by respondents which pertained to the contrast between the words and background. The issue of contrast may be attributed to design and would not necessarily be a print deficiency per se.

Criticism of the text being too small was observed eighteen times in the content analysis data. Again, while this may be a design issue, it suggests that pitch size, font type and colour contrast are factors that determine legibility. Correlation analysis showed that the higher the print quality, the better the questionnaires were regarded (correlation of print quality with - management tone $r=.352$, $p<.01$; visual quality: $r=.562$, $p<.01$; overall quality: $r=.478$, $p<.01$). However, there was a weak relationship between the print quality and ease-of-use ($r=.127$, $p<.05$). Hence, print quality did not appear to influence usage directly although it had an effect on the determination of overall quality.

3.1.3.4 Question Format

Question format refers to the way in which the questions are presented. Questions may be posed in the form of an open-ended or closed-ended question, and with or without prompts. Hotel questionnaires typically consist of multichotomous and dichotomous closed-ended questions, commonly referred to as multiple-choice questions (MCQ), open-ended questions or a combination of both (Pullman & Cleveland, 2004).

Kotler, Bowen and Makens' (2003) list of closed-ended questions variants highlights a industry-peculiar preference. While it is commonplace to find more than one type of closed-ended question format used in a single hotel guest questionnaire, open-ended questions are almost always completely unstructured. This presumably occurs as more of a mere formality and appears a facsimile of the guestbook as suggested in Chapter 2.

A notable example of an unconventional questionnaire is the Picasso Comment Card of Personality Hotels, San Francisco (Figure 2.7) which allows guests to express themselves both in words and drawing. Such questionnaire innovation is rare, as evidenced by a commonly accepted mainstream hotel guest questionnaire design which suggests an apparent reticence amongst hoteliers to innovate. For purposes of this study, blank or lined spaces provided for comments or remarks, either explicitly labelled as such or preceded with a prompt, are construed as a form of an open-ended question

although it is not a question per se as it in essence is inviting the respondent to volunteer information that may be outside the closed question.

The vast majority (82.1%) of the questionnaires contained mostly multiple-choice questions supplemented by some open-ended questions. Some questionnaires only contained multiple-choice questions (7.5%) while others had only open-ended questions (6.7%). A small number (3.6%) primarily featured open-ended questions but also included a few supplementary multiple-choice questions. It would appear from the data that a multiple-choice question-dominant format is favoured by industry.

The findings indicate that two Australian chains had adopted questionnaires that featured a single open-ended question. That decision would be underpinned by the idea that open-ended questioning allows for responses not limited by closed questions and provides the opportunity for the respondent to “express a concern or comment more precisely” (Wisner & Corney, 1999, p. 112). Open-ended comment areas can also generate aspects of feedback not addressed in the Likert-type scale areas (Pullman & Cleveland, 2004).

It could be surmised from the findings that the multiple-choice questions and supplementary open-ended questions with blank spaces for comments would be the de facto industry standard. Whether this is also preferred by the respondents will be discussed in Chapter 4.

3.1.3.5 Visual Quality

Visual quality refers to the graphical design and layout of the questionnaire. The visual aspect of the questionnaire includes the motif, the use of colours, and illustrations and pictures. Visual quality had a very strong correlation with overall quality ($r=.690$, $p<.01$) and this was reflected in the quasi Q-sort data (see discussion on quasi Q-sort below). This suggests that hotel guests are sight dominant and supports the view that humans live a visually oriented world where the vast majority of our attention is focused on what we can see (Suzuki, 2002).

The sample ranged from ‘Poor’ to ‘Good’ visual quality with proportionately more questionnaires being rated as ‘Poor’ (6%) compared to ‘Good’ (2.8%). The majority of questionnaires were rated in the 3-4 range. Regression analysis as shown in Figure 3.1

below indicated that in addition to management tone ($p < .05$), print quality and legibility, visual quality, and ease-of-use ($p < .01$) had a significant effect on the overall quality. Standardised coefficients were 0.15 for print quality and legibility, 0.44 for visual quality, and 0.33 ease-of-use.

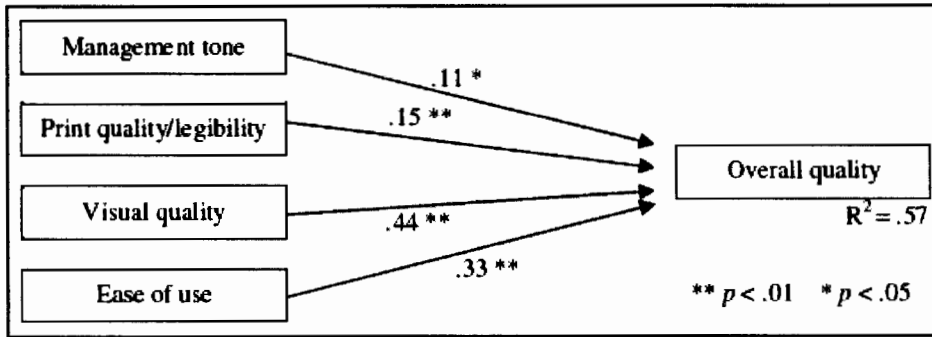


Figure 3.1. Regression analysis results for visual quality.

Cluster analysis further indicated the linkage between visual and overall quality. The visual aspects of a questionnaire, its aesthetic quality, are closely clustered with overall quality as shown by the lowest distance cluster. A dendrogram (Figure 3.2) which is “a branching diagram representing a hierarchy of categories based on degree of similarity or numbers of shared characteristics” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2008) graphically shows the results of the cluster analysis.

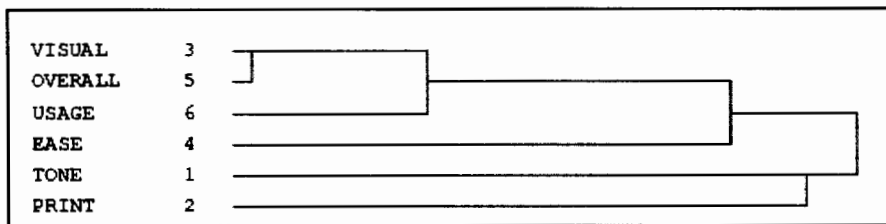


Figure 3.2. Cluster relationship among six questionnaire attributes: Visual Quality (VISUAL), Overall Quality (OVERALL), Propensity of Usage (USAGE), Ease-of-use (EASE), Preamble Tone (TONE), Print Quality (PRINT).

The aesthetics of a questionnaire (VISUAL), that is graphic design and colour, according to the dendrogram, is closely linked to questionnaire overall quality (OVERALL). This linkage indicates that the appearance of the questionnaire plays an important role in establishing the perception of its quality. There also was a close

relationship between questionnaire 'quality' and the propensity of usage (USAGE). This propensity for usage is stronger than that attributed to the ease-of-use of the questionnaire (EASE) which indicates that, in this case, form exerts more influence on the guests than function. The results, however, shows that print quality (PRINT), that is font type and pitch of the print, appears to have little relationship with OVERALL. This contradicts the view held by Rohrer (2007) that typefaces can play an affective role and are chosen to subliminally complement advertising and corporate communications.

A review of those questionnaires that had an overall quality mean scores of 3.5 and above (≥ 3.5) revealed that all had been professionally produced. Conversely there were questionnaires that attained a low score that had apparently been produced in-house because they were amateurish in presentation and appeared to have been photocopied on plain paper. This mirrors the findings of Wisner and Corney's (1999) study of restaurant comment cards that card attractiveness varied considerably between establishments. All of them except for five, applied three or more tones and/or colours. There appears to be a similarity between aesthetic qualities as explained above with the propensity for the questionnaire to be used, a notion that appears to be supported by the Quasi Q-sort exercise elaborated on later in this chapter. A point to be noted is that ease-of-use may be evaluated after the questionnaire has been used, and may not have a large impact on whether a guest actually engages with the questionnaire.

3.1.3.6 Ease-of-use

A majority of the questionnaires (70%) that were highly rated in terms of propensity of usage ($n = 20, >3.0$) (see Table 3.2) were rated equal or more than 4.0 (≥ 4.0) in terms of ease-of-use. Eleven of the fourteen belonged to chain hotels, seven were international chains and four were domestic chains. Further discussion on hotel affiliation will be made in the miscellaneous section below. Correlation analysis showed that there is a correlation between ease-of-use and overall quality ($r=.505, p<.01$) and this is reflected in this sub-sample where all but one of the questionnaires received an evaluation of >3.0 in overall quality. Furthermore regression analysis (see Figure 3.1 above) indicated that visual quality and print quality/legibility were, apart from management tone and ease-of-use, antecedents of overall quality. Ease-of-use emerged as a recurring theme from the quasi Q-sort and is detailed in the discussion on quasi Q-sort below.

3.1.3.7 Overall Quality

Overall quality was the second last assessment in the scoring sheet which sought to holistically evaluate questionnaire quality. A dependant variable, it was informed by certain independent variables constituting various physical attributes, namely visual quality (presentation/visual attractiveness), paper type (texture and weight) and size (dimension). It represents a subjective overall assessment of the questionnaire. The mean scores ranged from 1.5 to 4.0. Almost half of the sample (47.6%) was rated 3.0 with 28.2% at 4.0 and 2.0% falling into the 'Excellent' (4.0) category.

3.1.3.8 Usage

Usage refers to the probability that the guest would complete and return the questionnaire. Table 3.2 shows the attributes of the questionnaires that were scored highly in terms of propensity of usage (>3.0).

Table 3.2.

Questionnaires Rated High on Propensity To Use (>3.0, n = 20)

Hotel Code	Propensity to use	Affiliation	Excellent	Fair	Average	Poor	Improve	Satisfaction	Expectation	N/A, Did Not Use	Ascending/Descending	Shuffled Scale	3-point scale	4-point scale	5-point scale	>5-point scale	Ease of Use	Overall Quality
5	3.25	LCi							✓		D	✓	✓				4.5	3.5
11	3.25	LCi	✓			✓	✓				D		✓				4.0	3.5
14	3.25	SCd							✓		A	✓	✓				4.0	3.25
E	3.25	I	✓		✓	✓					D	✓	✓				3.5	3.25
M	3.25	MCi							✓	✓	D	✓	✓				4.25	3.67
VII	3.25	I							✓	✓	D	✓	✓				4.25	3.5
3	3.33	I	✓			✓					D	✓	✓				4.0	3.67
12	3.33	LCi									D				10		3.37	3.33
28	3.33	LCi						✓			D			✓			4.33	3.67
30	3.33	LCi	✓			✓		✓			D		✓				4.0	3.5
P	3.33	SCi						✓		✓	A				6		4.0	3.33
S	3.33	LCi						✓			D			✓			3.67	2.67
2	3.5	I	✓		✓	✓					D	✓	✓				4.25	3.0
13	3.5	SCd	✓			✓					D			✓			3.75	3.5
41	3.5	SCd	✓	✓		✓					D	✓	✓				4.25	3.5
J	3.5	MCi	✓	✓		✓					D	✓	✓				3.5	3.75
T	3.5	LCi	✓			✓				✓	D				10		3.75	3.75
19	3.67	LCi	✓				✓				D	✓	✓				4.0	3.67
39	3.75	SCd	✓		✓	✓					D	✓		✓			4.0	3.75
35	4.0	SCd	✓				✓				D	✓	✓				4.33	4.0

This was the final question on the content analysis scoresheet and the answer therefore could likely be influenced by the preceding evaluation of questionnaire attributes. Usage is therefore posited to be a dependant variable informed by independent variables such

as user friendliness or in other words 'ease-of-use', management tone and incentives. This proposition is supported by correlation that shows usage is significantly and positively correlated with ease-of-use ($r=.507$, $p<.01$) and overall quality ($r=.677$, $p<.01$). The observations are based on questionnaires that were scored as having a favourable (above average) probability of being completed (Mean >3.25) totalling 20 specimens, 28.17% of the total sample. This approach has been taken in order to facilitate isolation of factors attributing to this phenomenon by means of descriptive statistics.

Although a Likert-type scale was utilised, it may be argued that usage is a dichotomous phenomenon in that the guest would either use it or not use it. Nevertheless, the researcher adopted the ordinal scale to measure the usage propensity.

3.1.3.9 Purpose of Visit

Market and guest segmentation is a part of mainstream hotel management as hoteliers use this information to position their product and conduct their marketing activities. The questionnaire provides an opportunity for hoteliers to obtain segmentation data from their guests in order to determine their guest mix. Questions of this nature lengthen the questionnaire and should such questions be perceived to be irrelevant by the guest, this may negatively impact on how the guest perceives the questionnaire (Schall, 2003).

The content analysis participants however appeared to be ambivalent about questions probing the purpose of visit but did not provide any indication whether they would readily answer a question of that nature.

3.1.3.10 Demographic/Marketing Data Mining

Apart from the segmentation data as discussed above, hoteliers undertake to better understand their guests in order to react appropriately to changing demographics or marketing trends. Questions that pertained to guest demographics, effectiveness of advertising, and evaluation of frequent stayer programmes amongst other areas of enquiry were found in a majority of the questionnaires sampled.

In general, the respondents did not view such questions adversely. One content analysis panel member however indicated that she would not answer questions that were data-mining in nature. Six out of the seven reviewers were not adversely affected by the

inclusion of such questions; this appears to refute Dillman's (2000) suggestion that demographic questions could be considered inappropriate by guests and may disinterest or discourage potential respondents.

3.1.3.11 Departmental/Functionality Focus

The majority (82.0%) of the questionnaires contained questions pertaining to all areas of the hotel operation. Medium to high-end hotels provide a wide range of products and services and it would be natural that hoteliers would be interested to obtain a macro view of their operations. Some hotels focused on specific aspects of their operation such as food and beverage outlets and made the questionnaire available to patrons of the outlets including city guests (patrons who do not stay in the hotel). These would be in addition to the questionnaires in the sample which were placed in the guestrooms and therefore directed at in-house guests who would have also patronised the outlets. Of the sample, 10.4% was considered to be primarily focused on accommodation compared to 4.0% which primarily probed food and beverage aspects.

The questionnaires conformed to the element grouping espoused by Pizam and Ellis (1999) by including questions pertaining to the material product, the environment, and the behaviour and attitude of the employees. Accordingly the questionnaire should be proportionately focused on the various elements and not over emphasize soft services. Solomon and Kopelman (1984) identified three ways of formatting questionnaire item groupings: grouping items that comprise scale, grouping items and labelling scales, and randomly distributing items. Of the three formats, grouping with scale proves to be most effective and seems to be the prevalent approach taken by hotels.

Some panel members were disenchanted with those questionnaires that appeared to have a diffused focus. In addition, one member commented that not enough attention had been placed on the accommodation while remarking that some of the questionnaires with an overall focus appeared to concentrate too much on food and beverage (F&B). This seems to contradict the opinion held that randomisation of items throughout a questionnaire is the conventional practice (Solomon & Kopelman, 1984), which, by inference, would appear to be the most effective. Randomisation could possibly impede questionnaire usage by guests, a view provided credence by Aaker, Kumar and Day's (1995) observation that the logical flow of questions in a questionnaire affects response

and accuracy. Using a similar line of reasoning, as non-randomised groupings are commonplace in hotel guest questionnaires, using this format would therefore appear to attract wide appeal among hotel guests. One panel member made a dissenting comment by claiming that multi-faceted queries similar to the item grouping discussed proved too convoluted and hence discouraged participation. Therein lies a dichotomy: the hotelier has to appear to be faced with either obtaining more albeit less reliable quantitative data or gathering lesser but more reliable qualitative data. In reality, however, the choices are not simply a black or white option; rather a combination of the two is viable.

3.1.4 Results of Content Analysis by Researcher

The results of the analysis by the researcher are reported in this section.

3.1.4.1 Instrument Scaling

The scales applied in questionnaires containing multiple choice questions can reasonably be expected to accurately indicate guest evaluation and provide an appropriate guide for the respondent to answer the questions. However, overall the scaling adopted presented the shortcomings that had been identified by Lewis and Pizam (1981). Those aspects were: (a) the use of what appears to be an ordinal scale but in actuality employs a gross rating system; (b) a YES/NO nominal scale; and (c) an interval-level scale.

The majority of questionnaires contained ordinal and nominal scales of varying nomenclature. Four questionnaires consisted entirely of open-ended questions and therefore did not apply any scaling. Twenty-one questionnaires (29.58%) contained 3-point scales in addition to 2-point scales. All appeared to be skewed to the positive and used varying descriptors although there was frequent usage of 'Excellent' (eight times). 'Poor' was only used three times and the negative terms were moderated with the use of euphemisms such as 'Unsatisfactory' (3) and 'Disappointed' (1), and terms incorporating the word improvement (2).

Danaher and Haddrell (1996) found that large variety of scales was commonly used in consumer research. These included "rank order, constant sum, graphical, Likert, semantic differential, paired comparison and stapel scales" (Danaher & Haddrell, 1996, p. 6). According to Devlin, Dong & Brown (1993) and Haddrell (1994) satisfaction

measurement scales fall into three broad categories: 1) performance scales ranging from 'Poor' to 'Excellent'; 2) satisfaction scales with 'Very Dissatisfied' to 'Very Satisfied' as anchor points; and 3) disconfirmation scales such as 'Worse than expected' to 'Better than expected'. The guest questionnaires sampled appear to apply these scales in equal measure.

Of particular interest was one scale that consisted entirely of positive categories (Satisfactory, Good, Excellent), suggesting that management was not serious about obtaining useful feedback and violating the principle of mutual exclusivity of responses choices espoused by Dillon, Madden and Firtle (1994). In his editorial of the *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Withiam (1997, p. 96) characterises the industry as being "damned with faint praise" as a result of the culture of eschewing negativity in personnel appraisals.

A total of twenty-three questionnaires (32.39%) applied multiple scales including the 4-point scale. Again, the 4-point scaling appeared to be disproportionately skewed to the positive. The usage of the words 'average' (7) and 'fair' (6) was indicative of an auto-suggestive intention in the scale and perhaps also indicative of organisational myopia. According to Webster and Hung (1994), people tend to be egocentric and hence service providers would generally see things from their own perspective. They advocate a "decentring" approach, a term derived from the area of child development (1984, p. 12), whereby a hotelier should adopt a customer viewpoint and therefore use terms that the customer would use. A scan of mainstream dictionaries showed that 'average' meant typical, normal, or ordinary while 'fair' referred to reasonable, adequate, fine, good or quite good. This suggests that there may be a mismatch in the understanding of the language and that the questionnaire design had not taken this into account. Adamson (1994) proposed that the descriptive labels used in response scaling may corrupt the data. He surmised that the scale 'excellent, good, fair or poor' is misleading as the middle ratings did not necessarily accurately indicate satisfaction levels that could translate to repatronage behaviour. Hence, the data would not be useful to the hotelier. A content analysis panel reviewer queried the use of the word average five times in her assessment. Alternately, the usage of ambiguous terms may be intended to manipulate the assessment favourably.

Among the international chain hotels, three properties located in Australia had a balanced scale (Excellent, Good, Needs Improvement, Poor) while interestingly a hotel belonging to the same chain but located in Singapore used a completely different format and applied a YES/NO nominal scale. Another unrelated hotel, also a chain hotel, applied a balanced performance scale (Excellent, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory, Poor). This hotel however used a completely different scaling from its sister hotels in Perth. A number of questionnaires (4), although providing a 4-point scale, had effectively a 3-point scale because one of the options was either N/A (Not Applicable) or 'Did Not Use'.

In a group of thirteen questionnaires containing a 5-point scale, three sets of hotels belonging to the same chain were identified, and therefore the scaling was identical although one set had a difference in the presentation of the scale with one using boxes and the other the standard Likert-type scale. The 5-point scale appeared to avoid bias in most regards in terms of word usage with all but three providing a balanced scale.

Three hotels utilised a 6-point scaling among other smaller scales. These appeared to be balanced despite one of them having a N/A option thereby effectively reducing it to a 5-point scale and a 'disproportionate' end point.

Some large international chain hotels (5) used wider scales, and three in this sample belonged to the largest chain in the world (MKG Consulting, 2003). The researcher gathered from conversations with industry practitioners (the procedure and findings of interviews conducted with hoteliers is presented in Chapter 5) that the wider scale was intended to gather statistical data for benchmarking purposes. Pullman and Cleveland (2004) observed that there is a strong industry preference for figures and hence the prevalence of quantitative orientated scaling. One chain, of which there were three hotels in the sample, used a 10-point Likert-type scale. Another, with two hotels sampled, used an 11-point scale (Outstanding...Unacceptable, N/A). The third applied a 10-point Likert-type scale (Excellent...Poor, N/A). The latter two chains applied many other different scaling within their questionnaires resulting in a visual confusion that may adversely affect the respondents' ease-of-use. Respondents may not be sufficiently

motivated to make meaningful discriminations when confronted by a large number of response alternatives (Alwin, 1992).

The findings showed an absence of questionnaires that applied a 7-point scale which Schall (2003) advocates in part because of the provision of a mid-point. It is interesting to note that this view may be peculiar to the hospitality industry as Frary (1996) differs and discourages the use of a mid-point and the neutral response in contemporary questionnaires. Furthermore, Coelho and Esteves (2007, para. 48) found that the 5-point scale tended to attract mid-point responses and hence concluded that an odd scale could be used by respondents to “reduce the response effort” in answering the question. They assert that a scale with even number of points is not problematic for respondents and therefore the use of scales with a neutral category should not be mandatory (Coelho & Esteves, 2007). There were, however, a number of questionnaires that had applied the 5-point scale that does offer that mid-point feature albeit on a reduced scale. It is interesting to note that despite the prevalent use of numerical scales, few questionnaires had provided standard numbered Likert-type scales.

The final part of the researcher-conducted analysis was scrutinise the characteristics of the questionnaire most likely to be used by the respondents (refer to Table 3.2). In summary, it was found that the sample of high usage propensity questionnaires analysed included a wide range of scale types. It may be concluded that:

- a) All 20 questionnaires incorporated scaling of one type or the other.
- b) All but two, which belonged to small hotel chains, had descending scales, i.e., the response categories were arranged from ‘Very positive’ to ‘Very negative’. According to Babakus and Boller (1992), the way a scale is ordered may produce different results. This, however, was not evidenced in a study conducted by Danaher and Haddrell (1996).
- c) The majority (12) had skewed scales. This mirrors the observation of Peterson and Wilson (1992) that satisfaction ratings are commonly skewed to influence respondent ratings.
- d) A larger proportion of the questionnaires applied four-point scaling (8). Five used 3-point scales, four had 5-point scales and three had scales larger than five.

This suggests that while respondents are willing to engage with different scales, there might be a bias towards 4-point scales which as already noted appeared to be skewed to the positive.

- e) Twelve questionnaires used 'Excellent' at one end of their scales and all, including one questionnaire that provided for a 'N/A' (not applicable) option, but two of those had 'Poor' at the other end. The two exceptions used 'Needs Improvement' and 'Could Improve' as end scales..
- f) There were only five questionnaires that utilised the terms 'fair' and 'average', possibly implying that the use of colloquialism or words that have ambiguous meaning may not be preferred thereby impacting on usage rates. A content analysis panel member remarked that the use of the word 'good' is inappropriate "*as it is value laden and difficult to measure*".

It is interesting to note that one content analysis panellist commented that she liked the use of symbols, smiley faces (☺), in one of the questionnaires. However this symbol was not found to have been used extensively in the hotel industry although it has been adopted in academic research (for example see Danaher & Haddrell, 1996).

3.1.4.2 The Preamble

Wisner and Corney (1999) describe a preamble as a personal note from a senior manager which tends to impress on the guest the importance of the enquiry to the organisation. Preambles of varying length were found in all but four of the sample questionnaires. Pizam and Ellis (1999, p. 333) note that customers who had their views solicited gained "a sense of importance and recognition". This ability to arouse customers' esteem suggests that besides providing the opportunity for guests to voice their opinions, the way in which their opinion is solicited may have a positive impact. In hotels, a staff member may personally invite a guest to fill in a questionnaire thereby encouraging the guest to comply. However, the questionnaire is typically placed passively in the guestroom and therefore an appealing preamble could provide a similarly encouraging effect.

The findings showed that thirty-one questionnaires were attributed to a spokesperson, ranging from Managing Director to general manager, whereby at least one person was identified by name. However, of these, twenty-one displayed a facsimile of the spokesperson's signature. From this finding, a deduction that whilst a majority of hotels

placed importance in breaking the ice via a preamble, the necessity for personalization of such a message varied from hotel to hotel. The degree of personalization ranged from an attempt to simulate a personal signed message to no indication of the sender of the message. It was noted that two hotels had signed off their message with 'The Staff' in what appeared to be an attempt to project a collective team effort or empowerment to the staff but could also be construed as an abdication by senior management.

The appeal to complete the questionnaire varied from a single sentence to a lengthy paragraph. This request ranged from a mechanical and impersonal script to a personal appeal from the top management. Generally the longer appeal appeared to elicit a more favourable reaction from the reviewers compared to the shorter variety although there were notable exceptions in the latter category. The four questionnaires without preamble consistently rated poorly in management tone (Mean = 1.73), indicating that a preamble is an important aspect.

Based on the findings, a facsimile of a personal letter containing a signature may, in certain cases, positively contribute to the visual appeal. Of the 21 questionnaires that featured a signature(s), all but one were consistently rated as being sincere (Mean = 3.895) suggesting that a 'signed' questionnaire, despite it being only a facsimile, connotes sincerity. Print quality and legibility also had positive correlation with management tone ($r = .352$) thus implying that attention to detail in terms of font type and pitch size could reflect on perceived sincerity of management. This resonates with a report by Rohrer (2007) that a type font can have subtle influence on the reader as it can set the tone of a message.

Comments from a content analysis panel member provide support for the notion that attempts at personalisation by management had a positive impact. The reviewer noted a range of different tones from impersonal to personal. A signed preamble was seen as "personally signed and directly personal".

3.1.4.3 Length

Another dimension of size is the length of the questionnaire. Length is quantified by the number of individual enquiries contained within. An enquiry could be in the form of a single directed question or as a branch/sub question. The number of questions found varied from 0 to 64. A zero score represented a questionnaire which did not contain a

question per se but an open invitation to provide open comments or comments to a specific query. It appears that the majority of the questionnaire sample was of intermediate length ($M=28.45$, $SD=14.342$). The frequency distribution is depicted in Table 3.3 below.

Length (question count)	Frequency	Category
0-10	6	Short
11-20	12	Short to Intermediate
21-30	17	Intermediate
31-40	15	Intermediate to Long
41-50	11	Long
>50	4	Very Long

The length scores ranged from 0 to 64. The mean was 28.54, and the mode was 26 and 27. The length of the questionnaires sampled were longer in comparison with those sampled by Sampson (1998, p. 80) with an average of 18.46 questions on average which he considered to be already “quite involved”. It would appear that the scope of the enquiry, which reflects its objective/rationale, dictated the number of questions posed and hence its length.

According to Trice and Layman (1984), respondents of longer questionnaires especially those with spaces for comments had the impression that the management was genuinely interested in seeking feedback on their operations. They further assert that this favourable impression could enhance survey response rates.

This, Trice and Layman (1984) conclude, was informed by the observation by those who failed to engage with the instrument because of a belief that it was ineffectual. This could have been an anomaly as anecdotal accounts indicate a preference for shorter questionnaires over longer ones. The data, however, showed no apparent correlation between length and propensity for usage. Gauging from an overview of format in regards to the following aspects: a) order of scale, viz ascending or descending; b) scale skew, that is favouring the positive or negative; and c) size, no perceptible linkage either could be made between format and propensity for usage.

3.1.4.4 Returnability/Confidentiality

Confidentiality allows for the purest expression of information (Trice & Layman, 1984; Wisner & Corney, 1999). Most questionnaires sought personal data (contact details) from guests although a few indicated that the provision of data was optional. Those offering incentives however stipulated that contact information was required in order that the guest be eligible to participate in the draw. Wisner and Corney (1999) advocate the provision of a collection box on premises and/or a postage-paid return instrument in order to assure data integrity and largely eliminate the phenomenon of socially desirable answers associated with in-house feedback collection (Dillman, 2000).

Only eight hotels (11.3%) provided a return postage facility and although hotels commonly place a collection box at the front desk, there may remain a concern of unfavourable feedback being censored by line staff and therefore never reaching the senior management. When examined against usage, there appeared to be no notable consistent influence of this feature. Nonetheless, it may possibly be a contributory factor in the determination of the ease-of-use rating as all but one of the group had been rated 'Moderate' to 'Somewhat Easy'. Table 3.4 shows the relationship between attribute variables (Affiliation, Size, Length, Ease-of-use, Overall Quality & Usage) of those questionnaires.

Table 3.4 <i>Degree of Usage of Questionnaires With Postage Paid Return Feature.</i>						
Questionnaire Code	Affiliation (a)	Size (b)	Length (c)	Ease of Use (d)	Overall Quality (e)	Usage (f)
41	SCd	1.5	15	4.25	3.5	3.5
T	LCi	2.25	39	3.75	3.75	3.5
27	LCi	1.75	39	3.75	3.25	3.0
IX	LCi	1.67	21	3.0	3.33	3.0
24	SCd	1.75	33	3.75	3.0	2.75
33	SCd	2.0	31	3.0	2.5	2.75
23	MCi	2.0	30	3.0	2.67	2.33
18	SCd	2.33	49	2.33	3.0	1.33

Key:
 (a) Affiliation:
 hotel size (*Small/Medium/Large*);
 chain or independent (*C/I*);
 international or domestic (*i/d*)
 (b) Size: mean of questionnaire size assessments by panel (scale range 1=small – 2=large)
 (c) Length: number of questions contained in the questionnaire
 (d) Ease of use: mean of ease of usage by panel (scale range 1=difficult – 5=easy)
 (e) Overall quality: mean of overall quality by panel (scale range 1=poor – 5=excellent)
 (f) Usage: probability of questionnaire completion/usage (scale range 1=low – 5=high)

3.1.4.5 Incentives

Incentives given to customers may increase the rate of questionnaire completion (Pizam & Ellis, 1999). Four hotels, all located in Australia, provided a form of incentive to guests to complete and return the questionnaire. The incentive was for the guest to be entered into a draw for a reward which ranged from a complementary upgrade to a five-night holiday. However, three of the questionnaires were rated below 2.75 in terms of propensity of usage thereby indicating that the incentive was probably ineffective. One questionnaire was likely to be completed with a rating of 4.0. The offer of an incentive does not appear to relate to questionnaire length as reported by Nichols (1988) as these questionnaires were in the mid-range in terms of length (17-33 queries).

Two reviewers noted this aspect in the content analysis. One of those reviewers volunteered that she looks out for incentives and was surprised that she came across only one example. This finding may imply that the notification of the incentive was ineffective or that incentives were not important, in general, to the reviewers.

It is striking that incentive usage was found only in the Australian hotel sample. Barsky and Huxley (1992) suggest the typical 'non-incentive-ized' hotel guest questionnaire, which they note is the most common type used in the hotel business, represents a low-quality sample which yields the greatest non-response bias. This response bias phenomenon also affected mail surveys (James & Bolstein, 1990). This peculiarity would appear to be location specific: even when hotels of the same chain(s) were sampled at each of the locations, only the Australian hotel questionnaire used incentives.

3.1.4.6 Other Conclusions: Ease-of-use

Ease-of-use encompasses simplicity of the questionnaire and its user-friendliness. This implies the amount of effort that the respondent would have to expend in completing the instrument.

One aspect of user-friendliness involves clear and succinct instructions. The instructions provided were found to vary from scant to highly detailed. While it may be assumed that the completion of a guest questionnaire is self-explanatory, some questionnaires provided extensive explanation especially when complicated scales were used. Overly

detailed instruction may negate the positive intention as remarked by a content analysis panel member.

I found this survey to be very patronising – like I was given instructions on how to fill out a multiple choice test.

Conversely, if there is insufficient instruction, the guest may misinterpret the questions or scales thereby either causing the questionnaire to be abandoned or erroneously completed.

There were eight questionnaires that were rated less than 3 on a 5-point scale from difficult to easy (questionnaires: 20, A, 16, 18, B, L, F, C). An interesting observation is that seven of the group contained between 33 and 64 questions (see Table 3.2 for frequency) making them the longer questionnaires in the sample. A notable exception was a fully free-response format questionnaire that did not contain a question per se. The questionnaire simply stated:

“Impressions are important to us. That’s why we’d like to hear what you think about your stay with us. And if you have any suggestions on how you think we could improve things, we’d like to hear them too. Just write your thoughts here, then drop it off at the reception desk. Thank you.”

Five of the questionnaires applied scales of five or more scaling points and used Likert-type scales. As a result, it could be surmised that long questionnaires could be perceived to require more effort to complete. It can be further posited that wide interval scales may be perceived as requiring more effort to answer.

The following section discusses a second method of qualitative data collection and analysis conducted in the present study.

3.2 Quasi Q-sort

The Q-sort technique was developed by Stephenson (1953) to investigate a person’s self-concept. The motivation for the Q methodology was to provide a way to reveal the subjectivity involved in any situation (Brown, 1996) ranging from the abstract to the concrete. The Q-sort is the instrument of the Q methodology and conventionally

involves the rank ordering of a set of statements from agree to disagree but has been applied to other samples such as “pictures, recording, and any other stimuli amenable to appraisal” (Brown, 1996, p. 561). Often considered as quantitative analysis due to its association with factor analysis, Q-sort conventionally involves the ranking of a series of statements in order of level of agreement. Ekinici and Riley (1999) illustrate the value of the relatively laborious Q-sort technique as the first steps in developing a scale. They propose that the Q-sort technique plays a valuable role in construction of a “well-established instrument for measuring customer satisfaction or service quality which is focused on hotel services and which is reliable and valid” (Ekinici & Riley, 1999, p. 291).

The quasi Q-sort is an experimental derivative of the Q-sort and appropriate for this qualitative study as it does not impose predetermined structure on the sorting process and does not apply statistical treatments. Quasi Q-sort was developed by Dunlap and Hadley (1965) and applied in the self-evaluation of conference leadership skill.

Quasi Q-sort applied in this study allows the respondent to categorise tangible sample units in a spontaneous manner thereby avoiding any preconceptions or judgment. It however retains the ability to incorporate both graphical and textual means of investigation which takes into account how humans think, both visually and in words (Kosslyn, 1980), unlike most research tools that are “verbocentric” (Zaltman, 1997, p. 425). As the questionnaires are presented differently in terms of typeface, size, colour and graphics, they warrant “aesthetic judgment” (Amin, 2000, p. 410) for which quasi Q-sort is appropriate.

3.2.1 Objectives

The objective of the quasi Q-sort was to obtain unprompted and spontaneous respondent categorisation of the sample questionnaires. The hotel guest questionnaire, being hitherto practically nondescript to the typical guest, is categorised from a guest perspective with respondents identifying “stimuli which can be clustered to form a description”-based classification (Ekinici & Riley, 1999, p. 287). This procedure complements the ‘passive’ perspective taken by the content analysis respondents. Taking into account the possibility of idiosyncratic behaviour among the respondents

which could result in a wide range of sorting criteria, this exercise was carried out to determine if there was a distinct pattern in how guests categorised the sample. If a recurring pattern emerged, it would indicate how guests may typically perceive the questionnaire and could inform the design parameters of future questionnaires.

3.2.2 Methodology

3.2.2.1 Sample

A sample of forty questionnaires was selected at random from the total sample of seventy-one questionnaires using an online calculator (GraphPad Software, 2005). The reduction was to expedite the independent sorting process. A reduced sample was deemed necessary based on the time constraints observed in conducting the panel content analysis as the researcher had observed that the time required by the panel members to score each sample item was more than anticipated. This would allow all of the items to be sorted within a reasonable period of time thereby encouraging participation. A convenience sample of fifteen (15) respondents was enlisted from the local community to participate in the quasi Q-sort. The criteria applied for selection were that the subject: 1) was an adult; 2) had a professional background; 3) had stayed previously in hotels internationally and domestically; and 4) had not participated in the preceding content analysis phases. The researcher attempted to enlist a heterogeneous sample group in terms of demographic profile to assure a sufficiently wide range of sorting outcomes. The participant demographics are shown in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5 <i>Quasi Q-sort Participant Demographics.</i>	
Gender	Female (9), Male (6)
Profession	Human Resources Executive (1), Marketing Executive (1), Banker (2), Engineer (1), Hotelier (1), Public Relations Manager (1), Civil Servant (1), Primary School Administrator (1), Secretarial Staff (2)

3.2.2.2 Process

The participants were given the questionnaires which were not in any particular order and were instructed to place the questionnaires in piles as they pleased based on their own created themes or categories as determined by each participant after a preliminary survey of the questionnaires. Participants were allowed to change their categories and to

move questionnaires from one category to another. Once they were happy that all questionnaires were placed into the correct categories (as determined by the participants), the Q-sort for the participant was completed. No time limit was stipulated and the exercise was conducted in the participants' homes or any other location where the participants were at ease. At the end of each sorting exercise, the researcher recorded the number of piles and conducted a focused interview which provided an opportunity for respondents to elaborate on the process and outcome. The data was recorded on a scoring sheet (see Appendix 3.4).

3.2.3 Results of Quasi Q-Sort

This experiment showed categorisation of the sample was idiosyncratic and there was a divergence in the categories that were created. The data demonstrated a spontaneous impression of the sample and the results could be extrapolated to represent the first impression that guests would have when encountering the questionnaire. Ten out of the fifteen participants used 'dimension' as at least one of their categories. In total, five participants used presentation (appearance) as their main categorisation criteria and four participants used the question format. Three participants used geographic location, either country or city, as their categories. The full results are presented in Appendix 3.5.

Emergent themes identified were:

- a) Question Format
- b) Graphic Design/Appearance
- c) Dimension
- d) Texture/Paper weight
- e) Ready to mail format
- f) Time taken to complete
- g) Ease-of-use
- h) Geographic/locality
- i) Familiar/expected/customary form/appearance

Given the findings, it would appear that the participants used visual cues as a major factor in their categorisation. Eight participants indicated that they had sorted based solely on the outward appearance of the questionnaires and had not considered the content at all. This suggests that a critical aspect of questionnaire design is its appearance and ability to visually stimulate guests. If a questionnaire is eye-catching, there would presumably be a higher chance of a guest picking it up and perusing it.

Conversely, as mentioned earlier, three participants sorted the sample according to geographic location of the hotel from which the questionnaire was obtained. They had not given any indication of being stimulated by neither appearances nor content thus suggesting that behaviour is very idiosyncratic. Eight participants sorted according to question format, dimension, time taken to complete and ease-of-use, such that it appeared to be a sort by 'user-friendliness'.

Confidentiality

One of the quasi Q-sort participants indicated that the DL fold with flap format facilitated confidentiality as the questionnaire could be easily sealed upon completion. The participant however remarked that although this may be advantageous, it actually diminished the chances of usage because it was perceived as an additional effort which involved "another action". Therefore what management might have considered to have been a feature that would encourage usage, albeit at additional production cost, could be counterproductive and actually discourage it instead. Another participant indicated that provision for the questionnaire to be sealed greatly influenced the perception of confidentiality. If a questionnaire did not have the capability of being sealed, its integrity was perceived to be suspect and it therefore did not warrant usage. However, the participant was also of the opinion that, even if a questionnaire could not be sealed, should it contain instruction that the completed questionnaire be returned to a senior member of the staff, there would be a sense of the seriousness the management placed on the feedback and that would persuade the participant to use it.

Four respondents incorporated the questionnaire format in their sorting criteria and three of them indicated that they would use a questionnaire that used the MCQ format citing its 'ease-of-use' factor.

In summary, the Quasi Q-Sort demonstrated that perception of what could be considered a banal item could be perceived very differently because of circumstantialities and viewer idiosyncrasies. This variability presents, on the one hand, opportunity for questionnaire design variety and design innovation but, on the other hand, a challenge to ensure that equilibrium in terms of message coherence is achieved. The foregoing data

informs the construction of a typology using semantic and visual categories. The typology is discussed in the following section.

3.3 Guest Questionnaire Typology

A typology is, by definition (American Heritage Dictionary, 2007), “the study or systematic classification of types that have characteristics or traits in common”. A distinction between typological concept and typological method is made by Rouse (1944) when highlighting the inherent subjectivity in any classification which leads to a possibly contentious inclusive/exclusive disparity. This typology construction exercise is loosely underpinned by the typological concept which provides a broad classification based on two physical characteristics:

- Instrument size – is likely to have an impact on ease-of-use evaluation, attractiveness, and response rate; and
- Question format – has an impact on what type of responses are given (qualitative versus quantitative) and perception of ease-of-use;

Instrument size is defined in this present study as the length which denotes both physical dimensionality and the number of questions contained therein. A discussion of length and question format follows:

3.3.1 Length

Length is quantified as the question count is a dominant feature of questionnaires. As indicated in the preceding content analysis segment, length varied quite tremendously with a 0 (zero) denoting a non-specified questionnaire.

Based on the literature (Trice & Layman, 1984; Webster & Hung, 1994), questionnaires of ten or less questions would be optimal and hence are categorised as short. This serves as the basis of the categorization used in Table 3.2. From the data, the distribution is multimodal with outliers. The length could be considered as a representation of a questionnaire preference or attitude by the hotel management; therefore the multimodality may be indicative of several clearly definable types of questionnaire

length categories. Physical dimension and length are consolidated under the label 'Length' ('short' to 'long').

3.3.2 Question Format

Question format refers to the way in which the questions are presented. Questions may be posed in the form of an open-ended or closed-ended question, and with or without prompts. Hotel questionnaires typically consists of multichotomous and dichotomous questions, commonly referred to as multiple-choice questions (MCQ), open-ended questions or a combination of both (Pullman & Cleveland, 2004).

The data suggests that a multiple-choice question-dominant format is favoured by industry. Interestingly, though, two Australian chains had adopted questionnaires that featured a single open-ended question, perhaps on the premise that open-ended questioning allows for responses not limited by closed questions and provides the opportunity for the respondent to “express a concern or comment more precisely” (Wisner & Corney, 1999, p. 112). Open-ended comment areas can also generate aspects of feedback not addressed in the Likert-scale areas (Pullman & Cleveland, 2004).

From the findings it could be surmised that the multiple-choice questions and supplementary open-ended questions with blank spaces for comments would be the de facto industry standard. Respondent preference for format, however, was indeterminable from the content analysis data.

The typology is presented in a diagram (see Figure 3.3) which enhances comprehensibility and serves to highlight questionnaire format differentiation. Figure 16 is a simplified two-dimensional view of the three-dimensional diagram presented in Chapter 2 on page 51.

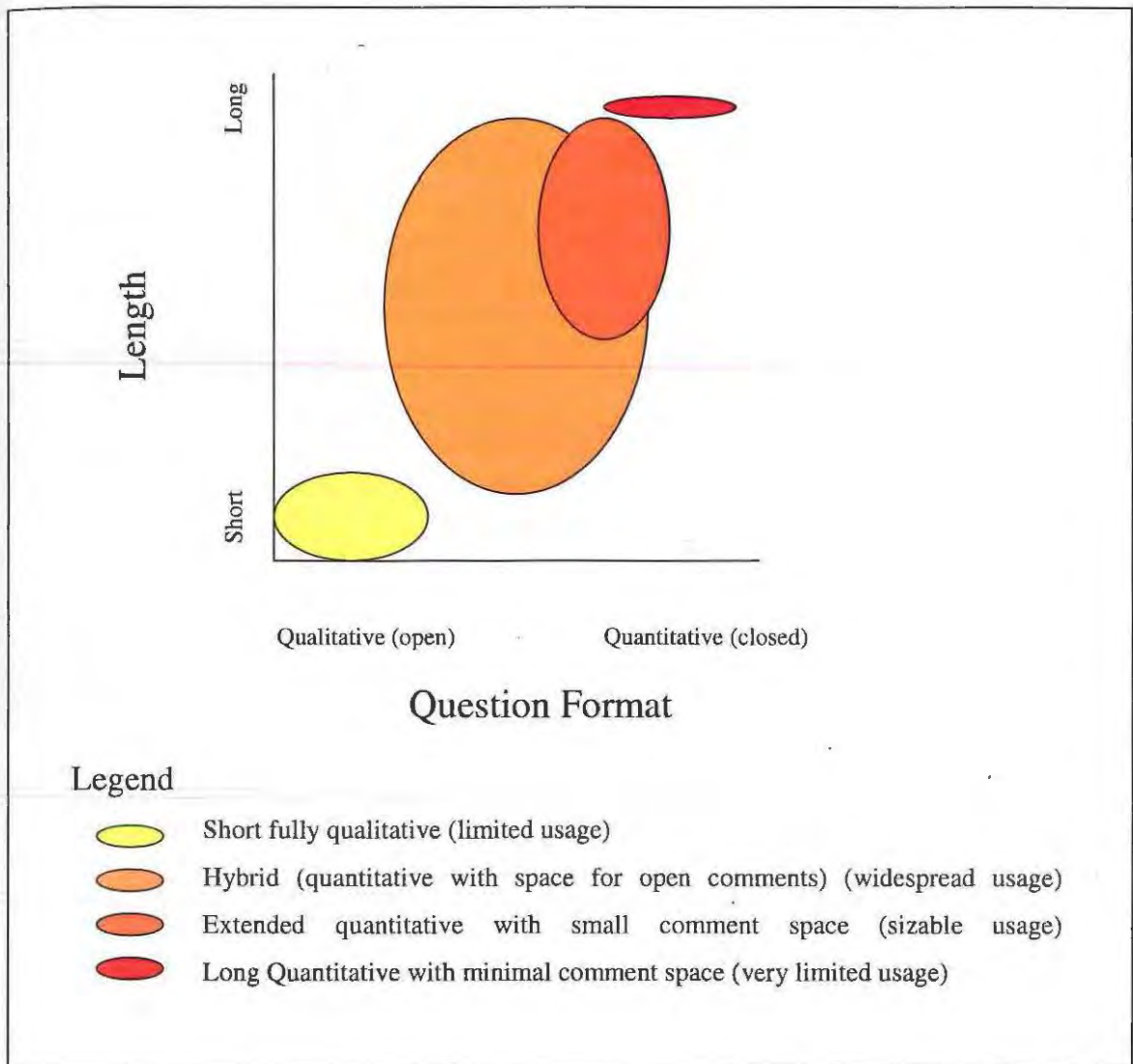


Figure 3.3. A typology of hotel guest questionnaires.

3.4 Conclusion

From a guest point of view it would appear that a critical aspect of the questionnaire is the first impression made of the instrument. If it is attractive and eye-catching, a positive 'moment of truth' for the hotelier, there is a high likelihood of the instrument being examined and thus creates a service encounter whilst conveying the ethos of the establishment. If the questionnaire is perused, then there is a chance of it being filled out and ultimately returned. It appears that the standard questionnaire, albeit well designed content-wise, is typically ignored. The quasi Q-sort interviews revealed that there may be some guests who would complete a questionnaire if a request was made in person by

a representative of the hotel and in this circumstance, the outward attributes of the questionnaire would not be so critical.

From the observations, it could be deduced that hotel guests have a preconception of what a questionnaire should look like and contain. The high incidence of the anchor points, scaling order, size, and overall quality typically found in hotel guest questionnaires as possible contributory factors leading to usage indicates a possible reactive rather than proactive behaviour in hotel guests. The fact that non-typical questionnaires were included in the 'high propensity for usage' group supports the need to test alternative formats.

Hoteliers appear to differ in their attitude towards the questionnaire based on the heterogeneity of questionnaires in the sample. While a de facto industry standard was discernable, the study showed that questionnaire form and function was the prerogative of the operator or mandated by franchising requirements. While some questionnaires indicated clear objectives, others appeared to be inadequate in terms of design and execution.

A key outcome of the analysis would be the identification of the form, defined as the combination of the size, which encompasses enquiry count and physical dimension, and question format, most prevalently adopted by the industry. This data, together with data emerging from the semi-structured interviews with hotel general managers and guest focus group interviews will be used in triangulation.

The next chapter of the thesis will focus on the use of questionnaires from the perspective of hotel guests.

Chapter 4: HOTEL GUEST PERSPECTIVE

This chapter details the second phase of data collection which employs focus group interviewing of hotel guests. The findings and analysis segment is divided into two broad sections in accordance with the research objectives: 1) to ascertain how guests view and use the hotel guest questionnaire, and 2) to determine if guests expect to have a service encounter with the top management, primarily the General Manager, during their stay. Additional information and materials used in the focus group interviews are presented in the appendices.

4.1 Focus Group Interviews

“... as the literary philosopher Kenneth Burke once observed (in a memorable fashion that I like to describe as the Burke theorem): “A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing – a focus upon object A involves a neglect of object B.” (That maxim, by the way, is clearly one to be remembered in the use of focussed interviews and focus groups.)”

(Merton, 1987, p. 551)

The preceding quote provides a platform to explicate the adoption of the focus group method in this study and delimits the scope of its application. The focus group, according to the American Marketing Association’s (2007) consumer behaviour definition, is “a method of gathering qualitative data on the preferences and beliefs of consumers through group interaction and discussion usually focused on a specific topic or product. Also, it is a group of respondents brought together for this purpose.” This definition clearly delineates the method as focused activity in terms of operation (group interaction) and objective (topic specificity, qualitative consumer data). While Merton

(1987) cautions focus group practitioners not to be blinkered, it is the researcher's premise that a partial view is preferable to none. The rationale behind this position is that while a portion of a view may be obscured, a credible mental image can be formed from other presented stimuli. This resonates with Schensul and LeCompte's (1999) view that the absence of a direct stimulus, such as silence during an interview, could be an attitudinal clue. The act of 'not seeing' in the words of Burke (cited in Page, 2000) may inadvertently yield outcomes akin to that from the use of unobtrusive methods viz unexpected and counterintuitive results.

Merton and Kendall (1946, p. 541) stipulate that a "distinctive prerequisite of the focused interview is a prior analysis of a situation in which subjects have been involved". Merton's (1987) supposition that the contemporary 'focus group' mode of research evolved from Merton, Fiske and Kendall's (1956) 'focussed group-interview' justifies the adoption here given the sequencing of research steps taken in this study. Focus group interviewing is widely used in both academic and professional environments because it is user-definable to suit specific requirements (Lewis, 1995) and the method has been modified for purposes of this study in line with Calder's (1977, p. 355) advocacy of taking a phenomenological approach in qualitative marketing research "to understand the everyday experience of the customer".

Focus groups have been conducted in many ways (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Irrespective of form, its core underpinnings are preserved: discussions between organised samples of people chosen for their similarity of interests, ideas and experiences on specific issues (American Statistical Association, 1997), and the utilization of group member interaction to produce data and insights. The outcome of this group dynamic conducted in a "permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5) is a unique feature of the focus group methodology: (a) a more diversified range of responses and several perspectives about the same topic area (Gibbs, 1997); (b) spontaneous and candid reactions from participants (Quible, 1998) engendering useful and provocative ideas (Bogart, 1984); and (c) an extended basis on which to form the conclusion of a discussion (Lewis, 1995) that is well suited in answering 'fuzzy' psychology-related customer questions (Kwortnik, 2003).

While Kwortnik (2003) advocates the use of in-depth interviews as a vehicle to elicit data for qualitative analysis, the researcher found that interviewing hotel guests individually would be impracticable due to an apparent reluctance of hoteliers to allow the researcher to recruit participants from their in-house guest list. Hoteliers seemed more comfortable recommending present and past guests for focus groups than for in-depth interviews, perhaps because they feel the group experience could be more social and less clinical. As there were few differences between the groups, the data are reported by individual focus group participants rather than by focus group as an entity. It was decided that the focus group approach would be used instead, despite the different dynamic involved in the two methods (individual interview versus focus group), and its resultant data (Wilkinson, 1999). The more informal and interactive format would nonetheless derive data that would be equally suitable for fuzzy research topics.

The nature of the method, however, opens it to abuse and suspicion. Merton (1987) attributes the impression of contemporary focus group market research as being dubious to it being often used as a standalone method in isolation from other confirmatory research methods. Chappelow (2004) asserts that the practice of favouring focus group data over existing customer feedback undermines the focus group technique and perpetuates the doubts on data validity. Furthermore, focus group participant recruitment uses non-probability purposive sampling and is therefore not designed to generalize in the same way as survey research (Fern, 2001). This limitation is akin to transferability of data which is one of the four trustworthiness criteria cited by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Hence, the trustworthiness of focus group-derived data is subject to question but when the technique is used in combination with other research methods to allow triangulation, the data becomes relevant and valuable.

The focus group technique was therefore considered highly appropriate for this investigation in a hotel setting as it permitted the researcher to obtain rich and spontaneous exploratory data from suitably qualified participants in an expedient, timely and cost-effective manner as a means to model development. The results of this study therefore are not intended to be generalizable in the scientific (positivistic) concept to a wider population and the researcher acknowledges the possibility of inherent biases. However, the method used and the results of this study may provide useful information

to practitioners and researchers dealing with similar problems through what Stake (1978, p. 6)) define as 'naturalistic generalization' which is "arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings".

4.2 Objectives

This part of the study was designed to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do guests view and use the hotel guest questionnaire?; and
- 2) What is the expectation of the guest in terms of a service encounter with the top management, primarily the General Manager, during a stay?

The main objectives were to:

- 1) Gain an insight into how the guest questionnaire is perceived by hotel guests vis-à-vis its purpose, utility and efficacy;
- 2) Identify salient characteristics of hotel questionnaires commonly used and assess its functionality as a hotel-guest interface; and
- 3) To ascertain the relationship guests have with the hotelier.

4.3 Methodology

4.3.1 Sample

Six mixed-gender hotel guest focus groups, averaging eight participants per group, were conducted in total between 2 December 2004 and 24 January 2005. Two focus groups were conducted in each of the three locations. While the groups varied in size ranging from seven to nine (Perth1: 7; Perth2: 7; Penang1: 9; Penang2: 8, Singapore1: 7; Singapore2: 7), each group was within the optimal range of between six and twelve people (O'Donnell, 1988), which helps prevent a split in conversation. The focus groups were comprised of adults who had familiarity with the hotel product and met certain eligibility criteria. Two guest focus groups were conducted at each city to avoid the generalization that may occur during single group discussions. Homogeneity in terms of participant familiarity with the product, namely the recent hotel stay criterion, was due to the fact that focus groups that are made up of highly diverse participants tend to

produce inconsistent results due to the possibility of arguments within the group (Zikmund, 2000). While not intending to homogenize the results, the purposive sampling adopted served to prevent overly disparate results thereby allowing a suitable focus on the subject matter. The participants were recruited using three methods:

- 1) The collaborating hotel¹ invited in-house guests;
- 2) The hotel gave access to names and contact details of previous guests (local nationals who had previously stayed at the hotel or sister property in the preceding calendar year); and
- 3) The researcher canvassed amongst the local community (local nationals who frequently stayed at similar rated properties in their country).

The researcher intended for the participants to be primarily in-house guests. Due to factors outside the control of the researcher, recruitment of in-house guests was insufficient thereby requiring contacting previous hotel guests and supplemented by members of the local community. This diversification, however, does not adversely affect the quality of data collection for the following reasons: the tourism and hospitality industries at each of the locations are considered matured and therefore participants recruited with methods 2 and 3, despite being locals, would be equally discerning as foreign guests; and the high incidence of domestic tourism would certainly mean that there would have been a high probability of an in-house guest being a local resident. In the case of Singapore, it being a small city state, domestic tourism per se is non-existent and Singaporeans perceive that travelling to neighbouring countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia is comparable to domestic tourism. Most of the respondents (84.4%) frequently stay in hotels and therefore had the requisite experience of the hotel accommodation product to provide informed opinions.

The focus groups were made up of combinations of the above. This recruitment method inevitably involved couples (partners/spouses) in some cases. However, this was not deemed to be a problem as the couples frequently held opposing views.

¹ Collaborating hotels had agreed to facilitate the focus group interviews, i.e. providing complementary onsite venue for the focus groups, discounted Food & Beverage, invitations to in-house guests

Within the homogenous sample, there will be an acceptable level of diversity which will not create the negative group dynamics referred to by Zikmund (2000). An even distribution of participants according to gender was achieved at each target hotel, hence ensuring a sample that is representative in terms of gender distribution. There was also an appropriate mix of guest type according to purpose of stay (such as business/vocation, leisure).

Table 4.1 <i>Focus Group Participant Demographic Data.</i>				
	Perth (PER)	Penang (PEN)	Singapore (SIN)	
Male	7	7	7	Total: 21
Occupation	Tradesman (1) Academic (1) Technician (1) Musician (1) Engineer (1) Solicitor (1) Graphic Engineer (1)	Academic (2) Manager (1) Entrepreneur (1) Consultant (1) Retiree (2)	Academic (1) Pilot (1) Surgeon (1) Manager (2) Doctor (1) Musician (1)	
Female	7	10	7	Total: 24
Occupation	Retiree (1) Admin. Assistant (2) Research Coordinator (1) Entrepreneur (1) Teacher (1) Recruiter (1)	Academic (2) Housewife (1) Retiree (1) Financial Controller (1) Secretary (1) Executive (1)	Hotelier (1) Housewife (1) Clergy (1) TV Producer (1) Academic (1) Surgeon (1) Optometrist (1)	
Nationality	Australian (12) UK (2)	Malaysian (12) UK (2) German (2) US (1)	Singaporean (4) Malaysian (5) German (1) US (1) Canadian (1) Australian (1) UK (1)	
Hotel usage (per year)	Infrequent (1-2 times) 7	Frequent (3-12 times) 33	Very Frequent (>12 times) 5	
Origin type	A (6) B (8) C (0)	A (4) B (8) C (5)	A (5) B (7) C (2)	
	14	17	14	Total: 45
Origin type legend: A: Local nationals who had previously stayed at the collaborating hotels in the preceding calendar year B: In-house guests C: Local nationals who had stayed at a sister hotel of the collaborating hotel in the preceding calendar year or who frequently stayed at similar rated properties in their country (n = 45)				

The demographic data of the focus group participants are presented in Table 4.1. It shows divergent distribution in respondent nationality at each location which reflects the scale of domestic tourism such as that in the case of Western Australia and Peninsular Malaysia, hence the higher representation of Australians and Malaysians in each respective case.

4.3.2 Process

The focus group interviews were conducted in a meeting room on the premises of the collaborating hotel so that participants were in situ. This choice of venue was mainly for logistical reasons: in-house guests would have easy access to the venue, the facility had been provided gratis by the collaborating hotels, and it allowed non-guests (Group 1 and 2 participants) to better assume a guest 'hat wearer' mentality. The researcher conducted the focus group interviews in person. For the initial two groups, the researcher had been unassisted but subsequently engaged volunteer assistants exclusively for logistical assistance such as ushering.

The proceedings were both tape recorded (simultaneous recording on primary and back-up devices) and video-taped to promote a smooth flowing discussion and to facilitate transcription. The participants were informed about the purpose of the focus group at the start of proceedings and asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 4.1). Participants were also required to provide the researcher with their personal details and to classify themselves into hotel stay frequency groups on a form (Appendix 4.2). The researcher provided participants a complimentary meal (for a similar approach see Barnett, 1989) at the collaborating hotel restaurant immediately after the proceedings as a token of appreciation for their participation in the research.

The focus group interviews commenced with broad open-ended questions intended to obtain spontaneous mentions of key issues. Once those issues had been identified and elaborated on, general discussions ensued on a range of topics as identified in the non-exhaustive list below as questions. The topic list served as a sequencing guide only.

- 1) How the hotel has communicated with the guest (hotel-guest communication) and the level and type of contact with guests;

- 2) The feedback channels (guest-hotel) that the guest was aware of and comfortable with;
- 3) What guests had expected after providing feedback and how they thought their complaints/suggestions were going to be handled by management; and
- 4) The perception of the paper questionnaire in terms of:
 - a. Usage
 - b. Form
 - c. Function

Transcripts were produced from the focus group recordings. The data was coded into NVivo 2.0 for data management and analysis. In the majority of cases, the verbatim quotes used in this focus group findings section are exact. Some amendments, additions and deletions have been made in order to allow the reader to comprehend regional colloquialism used by participants. These do not alter the sense and are shown in brackets.

The participants are identified by an alpha-numeric tag placed next to their quotations. When a direct quote has not been used, the tag is located in-text wherever applicable (e.g. Respondent 44 is identified as FG44). This abbreviated tag has been adopted to avoid the clutter associated with long strings of respondent identifiers. The profiles of participants are provided in Table 4.2 which displays the following identifiers: Gender; Age; Hotel usage; Primary Purpose of Stay; Interview Location: PER = Perth, PEN = Penang, SIN = Singapore, 1 = Group 1, 2 = Group 2; Nationality: GB = British, AU = Australian, MY = Malaysian, US = American, FRG = German, CA = Canadian

Table 4.2

Focus Group Participant List.

Tag	Gender	Age	Hotel Usage	Primary Purpose	Location	Nationality
1	M	>60	I	L	PER1	AU
2	F	>60	I	L	PER1	AU
3	F	40-59	F	L	PER1	AU
4	F	40-59	F	L & B	PER1	AU
5	F	26-39	F	B	PER1	AU
6	M	26-39	F	L & V	PER1	AU
7	M	>60	I	L	PER1	AU
8	F	26-39	I	L	PER2	AU
9	M	26-39	I	L	PER2	AU
10	M	26-39	F	B	PER2	UK
11	F	40-59	F	L	PER2	AU
12	M	40-59	F	B & L	PER2	AU
13	M	40-59	F	L	PER2	UK
14	F	40-59	VF	B	PER2	AU
15	M	40-59	F	B	PEN1	MA
16	F	40-59	VF	V & L	PEN1	MA
17	F	40-59	F	L	PEN1	MA
18	M	40-59	F	L	PEN1	MA
19	F	40-59	F	L	PEN1	UK
20	M	>60	F	L	PEN1	UK
21	F	>60	I	L	PEN1	US
22	M	>60	F	B & L	PEN1	MA
23	F	>60	VF	V & L	PEN1	MA
24	F	40-59	F	L	PEN2	MA
25	F	26-39	F	B & L	PEN2	MA
26	F	26-39	F	L	PEN2	MA
27	M	>60	F	L	PEN2	FRG
28	F	>60	I	L	PEN2	FRG
29	M	40-59	VF	B	PEN2	MA
30	M	>60	F	B & L	PEN2	MA
31	F	>60	F	L	PEN2	MA
32	M	26-39	F	L & V	SIN1	MA
33	M	26-39	F	L & B	SIN1	SIN
34	F	40-59	F	B	SIN1	SIN
35	M	40-59	F	L & B	SIN1	SIN
36	M	26-39	F	B & L	SIN1	CA
37	F	26-39	F	L & B	SIN1	MA
38	M	>60	VF	L	SIN1	US
39	M	40-59	F	L & B	SIN2	UK
40	F	40-59	F	L & V	SIN2	MA
41	F	26-39	F	B	SIN2	MA
42	F	40-59	F	V	SIN2	AU
43	M	26-39	F	V &, L	SIN2	FRG
44	F	26-39	F	L	SIN2	MA
45	F	26-39	F	L	SIN2	SIN

Hotel Usage (annual):

Infrequent (I) = 1-2 times, Frequent (F) = 3-12 times, Very Frequent (VF) = >12 times

Gender: Male = M, Female = F

Primary Purpose: Leisure = L, Business = B, Vocation = V

An initial set of clusters (referred to as free nodes in NVivo) representing the central thematic enquiry of the focus group interviews was created (Management-Guest Communication, Questionnaire Usage). Progressively, free nodes representing antecedents to these main themes were added during transcript examination. Finally a hierarchy was constructed to provide an appropriate representation of the salient attributes of the themes. The data were then analysed and conclusions drawn in relation to the research objectives. Conclusions are summarised first and then more detailed discussion is presented of the material which was elicited in the focus groups.

4.4 Data Analysis

The key findings of this data can be categorised into three broad areas:

- 1) Guests' perspective: the way in which feedback provision is pictured in the guests' mind's eye.
- 2) Questionnaire usage: there is considerable variation in guests' readiness to complete the questionnaire thereby demonstrate that subjectivity is a salient factor in guests' in-house behaviour determination thereby suggesting the importance of the flexibility of customization to suit different guest segments and location/geography.
- 3) Guest-Hotelier interaction: this interaction is highly customer idiosyncratic with highly divergent antecedents (contributory factors) and consequences (behaviours and outcomes).

The findings indicate that, in general, hotel guests are indifferent to having contact with the hotel management either in person or via questionnaire unless deemed warranted or precipitated by exceptional circumstances. This apathy, as indicated by the data, could be rooted in 'presumptive posturing' which refers to preconception of the motivation and sincerity of the hotelier, and/or conditioned response which is based on past guest-hotelier experience(s). However, it would appear that while some guests do harbour a desire to have a 'relationship' with the hotel General Manager, there are others who wish complete anonymity and "shy away from establishing relationships of any kind" hence preferring a "pseudorelationship" (Guttek, 1995, p. 213), thereby forming a continuum anchored by the degree to which a guest might desire hotelier interaction.

The disparate usage could indicate that despite its inherent deficiencies as a standalone method of hotel guest feedback elicitation, the traditional questionnaire remains relevant in contemporary hotel management as an adjunct in a multi-approach strategy. The questionnaire or a derivative has the potential to become the vehicle to facilitate remote service encounters between hotelier and guest, and by doing so avail the hotelier to two possible outcomes: proactive 'relationship' building, and reactive service recovery.

4.5 Specific Conclusions

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the specific conclusions deduced from the data obtained from the focus group interviews. It is divided into three major sections: (A) The Guests' Perspective; (B) Questionnaire Usage; and (C) Guest-Hotelier interaction.

Questionnaire usage is discussed in terms of voluntary, compliant or involuntary usage.

4.5.1 The Guests' Perspective

The findings broadly suggest that a guest's mindset vis-à-vis giving feedback to the hotel, in general, and using the guest questionnaire, in particular, could be formed based on either the presumption that hoteliers are disinterested in guest feedback or through actual previous experience(s) of feedback provision via questionnaire. Both scenarios are underscored by the nature of the response from the hotel, if any, to guest usage of questionnaires. A discussion of both scenarios follows:

4.5.1.1 Presumptive Posturing

Most of the time you tend (to) ignore it because you know that they don't place much importance on the questionnaire (FG44)

I always hope that somebody will look at it otherwise it defeats the purpose and wasting money printing questionnaires (FG30)

The above comments are a good indicator as to how a typical hotel guest may perceive the questionnaire in terms of its utility based on presumption, qualified or otherwise, of how the hotelier values the device as a feedback channel. If the guest has any doubt as to

the credibility of the questionnaire or its integrity, the sincerity of hoteliers in seeking feedback is called to question and, as a consequence, professional integrity is undermined. One respondent (FG35) asserted that the manner by which a hotel responds to feedback “reflects the hotel’s philosophy and concern for the customer”. This posturing can be differentiated as pragmatism and cynicism. This differentiation is elaborated on below.

4.5.1.1a Pragmatism

There were some respondents who demonstrated a quiet resignation to accepting the status quo with the belief that their voices, even if they were to be heard, would make little impact. This will be a major disincentive to offer any feedback.

One respondent (FG29) conveyed a belief that because a questionnaire was found in every guestroom, a “general consensus” would emerge, effectively nullifying any opposing opinion. This view would suggest that some guests may have an erroneous impression that the response rate of the questionnaire is high, the volume of feedback would be commensurate with occupancy (FG5), and that it captures a majority view.

It also further suggests that on the assumption that the product and service received is a reflection of the status quo, then any opposing view would only be anomaly and hence petty, not deserving any mention. This disempowerment is reflected in the following statements:

You may not like the glass, but if it is not important and nobody has complained, why should they change it then? (FG29)

It depends on the magnitude of each question and the replies... usually if it is repair works that needs to be done to upgrade the room I reckon they should take action but if it is just general complaints, like... if you don't like the furnishings, then you will have to live with it when you come to stay next time (FG26)

This attitude relates to a certain post consumption behaviour such as negative word of mouth (FG6) or 'voting with the feet' (FG41; FG32; FG12).

4.5.1.1b Cynicism

In contrast to the somewhat benign demeanour demonstrated by the pragmatists, there were instances where respondents held overtly cynical views indicative of possible underlying animosity and confusion.

This is evident in a declaration by one respondent (FG42) that "I sometimes feel sceptical as to if they will take much notice of it so one part of me says that I should fill it in because it's important for people to have feedback and quite often I'm just lazy and don't do it". Subsequent statements by the same respondent show conflicting opinions:

Perhaps they want to give the impression that they take your feedback seriously but whether or not they read it?; When you see something, it is more or less management saying they take the feedback seriously. Whether or not they do, I don't know.

This cynicism is also obliquely insinuated when one respondent (FG22) pondered "whether the hotel (does) really study the questionnaire that is returned" and when another respondent (FG14) says "but they are only good if they follow up on them". In his article "Hotels take customer comments to heart", Borcover (2007) tries to persuade his readers to alter their entrenched cynicism:

Believe it or not, hotel companies do pay attention to guest comments cards and suggestions. Don't like the bedding? Say so. Can't figure out how to set the clock radio on the bedside table? Let the hotel know. Think those free cold breakfast options are awful? Don't be shy. Fill out a card at the hotel or respond to e-mail surveys that many hotels rely on to get feedback.

The following blog entry, however, clearly illustrates the cynical view:

And hotel guest questionnaires. What a waste of time they are – what’s the point?.... So, when I was handed a guest questionnaire I decided that instead of being sceptical, I would offer comment. I mean, if you don’t tell them then how can they put things right?

So, I put a few crosses in the less favourable boxes in the leisure section and left the rest of the form blank.

Why did I bother? I’ve just received a letter from the manager. He’s apologised for the pool but said how pleased he is that I enjoyed my stay and found the staff friendly and helpful etc.

You know, when I flicked through the form, I thought about crossing through the sections I didn’t bother filling in, and then chided myself for being so petty.

I had put my prejudices to one side, just to have them confirmed by hotel staff. They filled in the rest of the form on my behalf, deciding to mislead their manager and misrepresent the customer.

A joke? Maybe. But it just shows, as I’ve always feared, that these guest questionnaires are a joke too.

(Karen Bowerman, 2006)

There were some respondents who were more disparaging in their opinions:

They should be aware of the business... they should know (how to run the hotel) already (FG1)

This is supposed to be your business... I shouldn’t be the one telling you how to run your business, so, no I wouldn’t (make a suggestion to the management) (FG6)

While presumptive posturing is essentially mental ‘background noise’, conditioned response is based on actual experience but may also be coloured by the same ‘background noise’. A discussion on conditioned response follows.

4.5.1.2 Conditioned Response

According to Kaul (2006, p. 43), in written business communication the writer expects the reader to be highly reactive given the premise for the communication being “to inform the reader and to request him to take action”. The literature on e-mail complaint handling (for example Strauss & Hill, 2001) can be construed as being a canon for corporate best practice on response rates and times. The findings seem to suggest a general impression that hoteliers, in general, do not ensure that questionnaires are acknowledged and responded to. For example, one respondent (FG1) remarked “you would expect, if you sent a written complaint in on one of these forms - it's a written complaint, ... feedback to say that we have rectified that complaint or your complaint is not justified, etc.”. Another respondent (FG13) echoes the sentiment by stating “I guess I would expect them to acknowledge it in the first place, and then find out what really was what I wanted or if there was a problem... that's all you can expect”. A third respondent (FG35) said:

It makes you feel good that the feedback is acknowledged rather than we don't know whether it's somewhere in the dustbin!

A commonality in the previous three remarks is the expectation of ‘satisfaction’ in the form of affirmation or rebuttal. The implication is that for some a rebuttal would be an acceptable outcome, but this is less likely for the following respondents:

I wanted them to say that yes, there was a problem, acknowledge the problem and that although nothing could have been solved there and then but at least to acknowledge it did happen (FG41)

I would want a reaction. If I pay money for something and it was not part of the contract that I agreed to, then I would want a reaction from a financial department or personally I would want to have changed what I am unhappy with and then I want a financial compensation. And if they didn't offer it, I will ask for it. (My husband) is not like me. But it takes (nerve) - not everyone is confrontational. Not everyone can do that, it is not easy (FG8)

Similarly, another respondent (FG23) required some affirmation of receipt as a condition for cooperation in filling out a questionnaire because “I wasn’t sure they would even look at it”. One respondent (FG32) took delight at having received the occasional response to feedback although a response was not expected. Another said:

It is nice when someone gives you something - sometimes I think when I fill it up and I don't think that management looks at it at all. The next time you come, they still give you the same. I think that was a very nice gesture.... I did get a thank you letter from the GM when I came back – ‘thank you for filling up the form’ (FG24)

The response served as affirmation and an encouragement to continue the behaviour.

The following remark is indicative of the inherent complexity in guest perspective when pragmatic and cynical paradigms both shape a conditioned response.

I think any half-decent hotel would respond and tell you what you want to hear and to tell you that they will fix the problem but I suppose it must be related to what the problem is to how much you are paying, or how much is being paid, for the hotel. If someone is being unreasonable, because you do get people who are really unreasonable, complaining and the management has to deal with that as well. And that must be difficult... a bit of a balancing act (FG10)

The duality is also demonstrated, albeit to a lesser degree, in the following statement which relates with the perceived ‘quality’ of the hotel, ostensibly an indictment of the hotelier:

(It) depends on the quality of the establishment... good places do try to address your issue, bad places don't (FG12)

4.5.1.3 Non-response

The root of conditioned response, surmised from the vicarious comments of respondents, is the failure of the hotel to react appropriately to questionnaires that their guests have completed and handed in. The prevalent view is that the questionnaire is simply window dressing with little, if any, utility except perhaps as a superfluous

garnish or legacy printed collateral that is counter productive (FG1; FG2; FG3; FG4; FG6; FG33).

One respondent said:

In my experience, not many hotels will reply to you to thank you for your feedback (FG35)

This unresponsive behaviour by the hotel negatively impacts on guests in four ways:

First, it does not 'reinforce' a guest who has an intention to provide feedback;

... normally when you give feedback to the hotel you wonder whether they are happy and with bad feedback whether they will say thank you. On one occasion when... the towel(s) smelled, in my evaluation I wrote (it up). I did get a thank you letter from the management saying "thank you for your feedback" and they were doing something about it. That made me gratified. It wasn't a complaint - it was a feedback. Because we don't get feedback from the management when we keep quiet (FG16)

If something is not good, it is not a complaint (per se) but it is hoped that they will make a difference then I would make a complaint (FG17)

Second, non-response provokes 'extinction' in feedback provision in a guest who has actively provided feedback in the past;

I have seldom worked up the energy to fill out a form and on the odd occasion when I have, it seemed to have fallen on deaf ears so that has discouraged me from filling any more forms (FG12)

Third, perpetuation of the unfavourable perception of hotelier indifference;

Not just the complaints but even when you give them bouquets, when you write nice things, there is no acknowledgement that, you know, like 'we are glad you

have enjoyed your stay'... I think that would have been a nice touch to sort of further that relationship (FG6)

Fourth, escalation in the level of aggravation:

You expect that they are going to react, and in general they do as you would expect your expectation are fulfilled and if not, you take the firmer line until you get what you want, mostly that is the case (FG14)

While non-response would appear to be the norm, the data also shows that some hotels do respond to submitted guest questionnaires. One respondent (FG12) received an acknowledgement and an upgrade on his subsequent visit. In one case, non-response could be attributed to the guest (FG6) being anonymous. When made aware of the ramifications of anonymous questionnaire (that is an unsigned or unidentifiable questionnaire), the respondent was of the realization that his experience of not having received any response to feedback he had given via questionnaire was not necessarily a reflection of a dismissive attitude toward feedback. It is evident from the data that hotels affect responses in two distinct ways: generic and customized.

4.5.1.4 Type of Response

4.5.1.4a Generic Response

This typically is a prewritten letter containing a 'canned' message in response to feedback be it good, bad or indifferent. These 'bed bug' letters could incorporate simplistic customization such as the insertion of guest name and date but the standard text would be a script intended as an appeasement. Basso and Hines (2007, p. 96) note that "unfortunately, this practice still creeps its way occasionally into modern business practice".

A cruise message board forum (Cruisemates, 2005) highlights a major deficiency of generic letters when two disgruntled customers discover that they had received the exact same reply. While one of the customers was initially pleasantly surprised that the cruise company had responded quickly, knowledge that the response was canned could easily

nullify any feel-good effect and if the customer were to perceive the action of the service provider as patronizing or flippant, then it could instead escalate the dissatisfaction.

4.5.1.4b Customized Response

This would be in the form of a letter individually tailored to respond to incidences of feedback. This personalization conjures a sense of caring and genuine appreciation which a guest would find endearing. This format capitalizes on the qualitative feedback captured by open-ended questions.

I did one in Indonesia a couple of years ago and by the time I got home I had a letter waiting for me explaining... apologies 'that didn't work' and what they had done about it and that they took it seriously.... I think any reply to whether you are praising them or being constructive in how they can improve or if you have a major issue - just a quick reply.... yeah, acknowledgement but some indication of about what they are doing. What I like about this letter I got from Indonesia was they acknowledged, they apologize and this what we are doing to make sure it doesn't happen again and we hope don't lose your custom, etc.... I was quite surprised to get a response (FG14).

A customized response may be made in a form other than in writing. A respondent (FG41) received a telephone response which may engender more impact because of its immediacy.

A hotelier should respond to a guest who had taken the time to fill in a questionnaire in a timely manner (Schijns, 2003). The assertion by Zehrer and Pechlaner (2006, p. 54) made in reference to e-mail responses would equally apply to the paper questionnaire: “from the guest’s point of view, the speed of response and breadth of information are to be seen as decisive factors for service quality and customer satisfaction”.

4.5.1.5 Antecedents of Guests’ Perception

This section is a discourse on the two emergent factors that colour the way guests perceive the questionnaire: a) Perceptual dissonance, and b) Confidentiality/Anonymity.

Respondents were queried by the researcher during the focus group interviews as to what they thought the intention the hotel management had in administering the questionnaire, and what they envisioned the management would do with the data collected.

4.5.1.5a *Perceptual Dissonance*

The first factor is the dissonant perceptions of hotelier and guest. This phenomenon is evident in Luk and Layton's (2002) study that showed that managers were less likely to accurately perceive customer expectations compared to the guest contact staff. This disparity could conceivably be attributed to the 'detachment' hotel general managers often have from the frontline operation. To compound the dissonance caused by contemporary hotel management constraints, Ladkin (1999, p. 167) notes from her review of the research done on hotel general managers, that the notion of the position "carries a number of perceptions surrounding the nature of the profession and the people who undertake it". The apparent propensity for misassumption has led to the stereotypical caricature of the hotelier being a somewhat idiosyncratic and cavalier persona. This caricature is a hindrance to establishing concordance and is symptomatic of power distance (Hofstede, 1980).

According to Santana (2003), perception is reality in the tourism industry and guest perception is a critical determinant of an organisation's success (Harris, Bojanic & Cannon, 2003). This notion was addressed by Chung and Hoffman (1998) in their work on critical incident tracking in food service and also would appear, based on the data, to apply to hotel guests in how they perceive the guest questionnaire. The focus group interviews readily allow guests to form opinions on which they base their decisions, which Jackson and Humble (1994, p. 39) describe as "their version of reality". Given that perception can dictate behaviour, it would be tenable that it can influence a person's, in this case the guest's, belief system. One respondent (FG12), however, points out that "there is a distinction between your expectation and belief". Another respondent (FG13) retorts "in my experience that is what I have always received... that is what I believe", illustrating a linkage between perceptions informed by experience. If ill-informed, externally-induced expectation or anticipation of how the hotelier would behave translates, erroneously or otherwise, into perception, then indeed perception is

belief. Also, given the endemic negative misconception perceived from respondent feedback, the perception is self-propagating and, unless debunked, entrenches itself into the mindset.

Guests' perception of the motivation of management in seeking feedback can be broadly classified as follows: A) Invitation to constructive engagement; B) Manipulative manoeuvre; and C) Vindictive manoeuvre.

A) Invitation to constructive engagement: this is represented by those respondents who were categorised as Voluntary and Compliant respondents.

The primary function of collecting feedback, based on the apparent concurrence in responses, was to gauge performance (FG15; FG17; FG18; FG23; FG30; FG35) and identify weak areas in the operation (FG15; FG29; FG31) in order to institute improvements (FG10; FG16; FG17; FG18; FG19; FG22; FG26; FG31; FG32; FG37; FG41).

Some respondents were of the opinion that recording complaints allowed hoteliers to ascertain “whether there is some sort of repetitiveness in the same sorts of complaints” thereby pinpointing legitimate faults (FG5; FG43) and to help them overcome operational myopia (FG30; FG34). A respondent (FG9), however, points out that although the exercise might be well-intentioned, it can be ineffectual:

(Every guest) gets one: surely there will be someone who fills one out, quite a few of those in the room and depending on what kind of people are filling them out you might get totally totally negative, totally positive... which ones do you act on, it doesn't seem like a good way to actually figure out what is going on.

One respondent (FG34) thought that it was a means to keep staff motivated and when data was collected across a hotel chain or group, it could be used “as a measure and (to) set standards”. Another respondent (FG4), by remarking “you would expect (feedback) to be addressed with the staff, you know behind the scenes”, intimates the Human Resource Development role involved.

B) Manipulative manoeuvre: any initiative that has negative connotation.

An attempt to 'use' the guest for competitive/commercial advantage using 'hooks' such as inducements, thereby portraying the action as being mercenary. One respondent (FG32) received a proforma letter with a '£10 off the next time you visit' voucher enclosed.

This tact is not entirely discredited as one respondent (FG19) thought it would be justifiable because the hotel was in the business to "make money". Another respondent (FG7) offered empathy for hoteliers who elicited information as part of their job responsibility.

One other aspect of manipulatory behaviour is indiscriminate usage of the information such as self-promotion (FG32), and information suppression such as in a cover-up or blame avoidance (FG7). An insidious manipulation is "data cooking" and flawed instruments which contain "questions can be quite filtered and slanted in certain ways to elicit a response" (FG13). Another respondent (FG38) highlights the "tremendous bias" that arises from using the questionnaire in a self-selecting sample and therefore insinuates that management has dubious intention.

An attempt to 'steer' the guest, albeit well intentioned, may inadvertently be perceived as patronizing, as highlighted by a content analysis participant reference to excessive questionnaire completion instruction. It should be noted, however, that the use of smiley faces which could arguably be considered as juvenile and hence conceivably have a 'dumbing down' effect, did not appear to evoke any negative reaction from neither content analysis nor focus group participants. Notwithstanding the minutiae of form and function, if the questionnaire is seen to be simply useless window dressing, guests could perceive its presence as facetious and belittling (FG41; FG44).

Yeah, if it is just a token or something, is it just there to look good? (FG8)

A benign uncertainty of the motivation behind the questionnaire inadvertently puts it in poor light:

...sometimes you do not know why the feedback form is actually there and you sometimes wonder if they really react to the feedback form fast enough so I feel more obliged to tell them face-to-face (FG45)

C) Vindictive manoeuvre: deceptive usage of feedback particularly complaints about service quality as grounds for employee sanctions.

4.5.1.5b Data Anonymity and Confidentiality

Well, I've used it occasionally but as someone has said there is an extreme reluctance to put your name and address on it because you could get yourself onto a list that you don't want to. So sure, it'd be nice to send in a questionnaire and get a response if you knew that your privacy was protected (FG38)

Depends on what type of questionnaire... some questionnaires do ask for your address or name and I never. I just toss them out (FG35)

Wisner and Corney (1999, p. 115) state that “confidentiality allows for the purest expression of information”. Hence, any erosion of confidentiality could result in information distortion. This relates to the process of questionnaire handling and involves the issues of confrontation avoidance and filtering. The implications go beyond paper questionnaires as reflected in the newsletter of a major UK contract catering company: “remove the anonymity of the customer’s e-comment system so the ‘silly’ comments that demotivate our committed catering teams are reduced” (Pinch & Punch!, 2007).

Confidentiality would appear to facilitate confrontation avoidance which could overcome reluctance some guests may have to using the questionnaire while onsite.

I wouldn't do one unless when I filled out to get to the hotel they took my e-mail address and when I am sitting down at work and get five minutes over a cup of

coffee, ah, the Ambassador hotel survey, there it is and you go click click, tick a few boxes feedback section, bed is too soft, didn't like the view, not staying here again, send... that would be easy. I am not dealing with anyone so I can be as confrontational as I like. Hate your guts, don't like this, don't like that. To me that works really well, because I get to say exactly what I feel cause I am not embarrassing or hurting anyone's feeling, but I can say what I want (FG9)

A salient point of the above quote beyond an apparent concern for employees' feelings is explicit indications of avoidance behaviour to possible employee reprisals.

Most of the ones we ever had they were always in the rooms. So that means, this is my take, if you have a complaint with the chambermaid...And she sees it lying there and it is a complaint about her, she'll trash it (FG1)

Impinging on the willingness of guests to volunteer feedback via questionnaire is the perception whether the method is accessible, presentable and 'secure' (data integrity). Security is underpinned by whom the signatory is which suggests to what extent efforts are made to ensure that the information reaches its recipient safely, the mode of return which is the method of securing the questionnaire and delivery to the recipient, and whether there is susceptibility to filtering by line staff (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2003) or censoring by line managers. The common practice of requesting the guests to leave the completed questionnaire in the guestroom or at the front desk for collection or requiring it to be handed to an employee may result in muted responses or no response at all (Wisner & Corney, 1999).

Having examined the guests' perspective, an examination of questionnaire usage is made in the following section.

4.5.2 Questionnaire Usage

The guest questionnaire was known to all focus group participants which is indicative of its widespread utilization. This finding is in accordance with the literature and pertains particularly with the view that the use of questionnaires is ubiquitous in hotels. One participant (FG20), however, appeared to be facetious by saying "I've never seen one to be honest" as he had stayed at numerous hotels. His spouse (FG19) immediately retorted "it's in the drawer", apparently out of embarrassment. Another implied by saying

“unless somehow or other if they had a questionnaire in your hotel room” that there had been instances when she did not find a questionnaire in the guestroom (FG2). While this observation could be construed as questionnaire availability in guestrooms being ad hoc or property specific, it might simply indicate that there had been occasions when questionnaire placement in the guestroom had not been sufficiently conspicuous, possibly resulting from either managerial oversight or by design as reflected in a general dislike for guestroom clutter. A respondent sums up the effect of poor in-room placement by saying “something that doesn't stare you in the face will probably be ignored” (FG43).

Nonetheless, the data clearly demonstrated that the frequency of use and propensity to use the guest questionnaire varies to a large degree amongst hotel guests. It is postulated that two possible contributory factors to this variation are the familiarity of a guest with the questionnaire (such as previous experience with its usage), and what a hotel stay means to the guest (simple/utilitarian provision of accommodation versus a customer experience of product and service provision; purpose of stay; price point/value for money).

Guest usage has been classified according to the emergent findings viz the disposition toward the questionnaire which appeared to have a direct influence on propensity for usage:

A) Voluntary: this denotes that the guest had filled out the questionnaire willingly and without prompting/coercion (NB: the effects of incentive schemes are not considered). This category is further sub-divided according to frequency:

i) Frequent, ii) Occasional;

B) Compliant: this refers to guests who would only fill out a questionnaire when requested or prompted; and

C) Involuntary: this denotes guests who would not, and had no intention of filling out a guest questionnaire.

Each of these is further discussed in the following sections.

4.5.2a Voluntary

Voluntary usage can be frequent or occasional. Frequent voluntary use of guest questionnaires indicates that respondents have an intrinsic desire to provide written feedback and spontaneous willingness to fill out the questionnaire.

Frequent

A respondent (FG30) volunteered that he had frequently completed questionnaires during his frequent overseas business trips to Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Given that the primary purpose of his travel was consultancy work, it could be presumed that he would have been staying at hotels without his spouse. This inclination to fill questionnaires appears to extend to the occasions when he had been accompanied by his spouse on business trips or when they were on vacation given the response by his spouse “usually, when we’re together when there is one in the room – so either he does or I do” (FG31). This statement may suggest that a person, in this case a spouse, could adopt a behaviour of another or simply that each person had this behaviour and would each have filled out a questionnaire if there was more than one copy placed in the guestroom.

The motivation to frequently fill questionnaires can be overt as seen in the following quote:

I just love feedback... I always enjoy giving my feedback. I think it's valuable – if I go back there or just to help, that is just my nature but I enjoy the questionnaire – well I don't enjoy them but I always fill them out (FG3)

However, some respondents, while stating their desire to fill in questionnaires, did not specifically state the motivation for the behaviour;

I always fill them in (FG5)

If I want to, even if I were very angry or very happy, I am going to fill it in (FG11)

In contrast to respondents who would, or have a high propensity to, fill out questionnaires on their own accord, there were those who indicated a desire to provide written feedback as a direct response to events pertaining to their material hotel stay were categorised as occasional users.

Occasional

The primary criticism directed to the questionnaire as seen in the literature is that people complete it when they are very happy or very unhappy creating an inverted bell-shaped curve of responses. Within this category some variations are observed:

a) Guests who would address both exceptionally good *and* exceptionally poor incidents within the same response (FG17; FG21).

b) Guests who would only write in about exceptionally negative experiences:

Very infrequently, usually then only when there is something not nice to say to them as well as the information of (what) the hotel (needs) to improve (FG15)

...if I had an issue I might be more tempted to use it (FG42)

c) Guests who would only write in about exceptionally positive experiences: (FG2; FG6; FG7; FG43)

One respondent implied this intention but makes it conditional: *“but in terms of you trying to make some positive comments and hope that they will do something”* (FG30)

d) Guests who would write about either exceptionally positive *or* negative experiences: (FG9; FG21; FG39)

There's no real reason to fill one out... unless you are very unhappy or very very happy... all the people are in-between (FG9)

If it was a really good experience, or really bad experience then probably yes, but if it was just another hotel stay then I would most likely wouldn't bother (FG5)

e) There were some respondents who did not specify the circumstances which would warrant filling up a questionnaire (FG27; FG29; FG35; FG45). Some, however, suggested that if their feedback were to make a difference they would be willing to volunteer information (FG2; FG34). There was a comment that appeared to be facetious but may be construed as feedback could be forthcoming if proactive means of feedback elicitation is initiated:

When you are bored! (FG18)

There were some respondents who indicated that while they might do one or more of the above, they would also engage in third party responses. The following quote indicates the adverse impact un-recovered dissatisfaction can have:

But last week I was in Melbourne and they stuffed up my booking really badly and I didn't get any satisfaction from them, I am not going to bother with them anymore... but if it's a bad experience, I'll just go away and tell ten friends (FG6)

While there were respondents that were inclined to provide feedback via questionnaire, some appeared to favour making comments in writing via letter:

I would be quite willing to take a piece of paper and fill it out (FG11)

...the thing we do is when we come to the end of our stay, we always send a letter back thanking everyone for the enjoyable stay which is better than the questionnaire really (FG20)

If I think the hotel can improve on feedback or comment I would definitely write a letter (FG34)

I have written letters of complaint, written letters saying that's not good enough
(FG12)

Yet, there were participants who were “more inclined to go face-to-face and tell the person (directly)” (FG45) and “rather go to the line staff to resolve the problem rather than go to the top” (FG21) thereby indicating that the questionnaire would be a less preferred option.

There appears to be a noteworthy trend amongst voluntary respondents: a desire to recognize hotel employees who had provided good service (FG4; FG17; FG34; FG44). Although such behaviour was demonstrated by only female respondents, it does not preclude male customers and therefore the findings can be construed to show that a willingness to articulate praise may be intrinsic to some guests and spontaneous in nature. On the other hand, the behaviour could be induced and triggered by a prompt or request placed in the questionnaire to name staff members who had made a positive impression and therefore are deserving of recognition, or precipitated by having been made aware that the hotel had a staff recognition programme in place (FG43). Inferring from the findings, the questionnaire therefore could be considered a vehicle to facilitate guest feedback by invocation of conscientious or altruistic behaviour in the guest. The findings do not, however, indicate the antecedents of the behaviour but given that many hotels have formalized staff recognition schemes as a part of their Human Resource Management strategy (Enz & Sigauw, 2000a, 2000b; Kamoche, 2003; Maxwell, Watson, & Quail, 2004). Hotels often highlighted their staff recognition schemes on printed collaterals as ‘advertisement’, both as a ‘hook’ to obtain feedback on exemplary employees in particular and general feedback in general and to impress on guests a guest-centred mindset.

There was no indication of the authenticity of the feedback. The assumption was that customers ‘speak their minds’ and their evaluation is not subjected the ‘word mincing’ condoned in personnel evaluation (Withiam, 1997).

The underlying motivation for voluntary usage is a self-motivated desire to complete and submit the questionnaire irrespective of external prompts. It therefore can be surmised that the availability of the questionnaire is key to deriving spontaneous and

candid feedback. It also suggests that the physicality of the questionnaire would not likely influence its usage for these guests.

4.5.2b Compliant

The respondents in the category of compliant usage acquiescently engaged with the questionnaire when requested both either in person or by proxy.

One respondent (FG23) had previously filled out a questionnaire upon having received a personal request. An invitation to provide feedback, in her view, spelt clear intention to “find out something to improve (on)” and provided an assurance that “they (the hotel) are not wasting my time”,

This view is congruent with that of another respondent who stated:

But usually I ignore it because if it is in a hotel, it is in the stationary... I don't even notice it at all, and if I do find it there's usually no time. I like that idea if you are ever in the situation you have it presented (FG21)

Whilst the respondent did not explicitly indicate compliance, willingness is implied. The inference drawn is that for some guests, the impact of questionnaire quality and accessibility on propensity for usage is negligible, which mirrors the findings of the questionnaire content analysis discussed in Chapter 3.

There were specific examples of actual questionnaire usage as a corollary to face-to-face solicitation. One respondent (FG4) had obliged when “handed a feedback form... (when) paying the bill.” Another point of contact solicitation was reported by another respondent (FG45) when checking-in which made her feel “obliged to fill it out”. Feedback solicitation can be opportunistic as demonstrated by the following statement: “they give us a questionnaire; we are very willing to fill it out because we are excited” (FG17).

An invitation made in a novel way can entice a response: “I think I would because (the mail post-stay survey) is not common.... even though it was a mediocre stay “ (FG4).

The data therefore appear to strongly suggest that more guests could be persuaded to use the questionnaire if a proactive solicitation is made in person (for example, see Bowerman, 2006) which contrasts with the passive appeal made via questionnaire and other printed collateral discussed in the Voluntary Occasional section above.

4.5.2c Involuntary

Some respondents indicated that they were disinclined to utilize the questionnaire for various reasons. One reason was being completely disinterested as implied in the declaration “we don’t even read the questionnaires” (FG19). A perception that filling out a questionnaire would be time consuming (FG9; FG21) was another reason cited, while the view that the questionnaire is ineffective appeared to be a major disincentive:

For me I think that the feedback form and letters are useless. If you have a complaint, just see the manager there and then and see what he says about your concern. Because once you leave the place I see no point in writing because I don't plan to go back anyway (FG32)

A perception that filling in the questionnaire takes too much effort also appeared to be off-putting and impacted on the propensity for usage:

I've never filled one out...I would have to be really pissed off to actually be bothered to do that actually... it's my lethargy I suppose (FG10)

Non-response from respondents when queried about questionnaire usage was construed as a reluctance or ambivalence, and classified as involuntary.

It appears from the data that there would be both a higher propensity for occasional voluntary and involuntary questionnaire usage compared to compliance. When ‘questionnaire usage’ categories of voluntary, compliant and involuntary are used as a

continuum of usage motivation, it matches the inverted bell-shaped curve depiction of questionnaire usage in the literature. Drawing from the data, guests' attitudes towards feedback provision appear to be shaped by past experiences of questionnaire usage. Therefore, it can be posited that a strategy to increase guest questionnaire usage is to employ positive conditioning. This strategy would involve facilitating questionnaire usage by making the process inviting and gratifying.

4.5.3 Guest-Hotelier Interaction

None of the respondents reported hotelier-guest interaction via questionnaire, hence every incidence of hotelier-guest interaction had been of a face-to-face nature. The preferred means to affect a complaint, according to some respondents, was to directly engage a manager. This preference could be underpinned by the immediacy of the feedback available to those who instigate a face-to-face encounter. Susskind (2006) found that in a restaurant setting, the majority of guests would prefer a face-to-face communication when lodging a complaint but would also be inclined to complain directly to a manager either face-to-face or via written communication. His study also showed that the comment card and dealing with line-level employees was generally least preferred because the comment card was found to be the "least rich communication channel" (Susskind, 2006, p. 11).

Customer-Employee Rapport Experiences

One respondent (FG29) related his delight at being addressed by his name: when he received a personalised letter from the resident manager of a hotel and when being acknowledged by name by hotel employees.

... my experience with the Shangri-La Hotel in Bangkok was the most delightful one, when you check-in most people know you by name, they greet you "Mr. Wee, good morning" instead of "good morning, sir"

Raajpoot (2004) notes that personalization of service, such as using a customer's name to recognize the customer as a unique individual, is an extremely important dimension of service evaluation. According to Korczynski and Ott (2004, p. 589), addressing

service-recipients with their names contributes to the “promotion of the enchanting myth of sovereignty”. This guest name usage is embodied in the modus operandi of one of the hotels, Crowne Plaza Perth: “when someone comes through the door, we really work on knowing that customers’ name! If they have been with us for four or five days, we want to know their name on the first day so we are using their name; we train our employees to use the customers name whenever they can...” (Kerry Devine, General Manager Crowne Plaza Perth, personal interview, 2004).

Questionnaire Preamble

There was no direct reference to the questionnaire preamble during the focus group interviews but a number of respondents implied the importance of how the hotelier had communicated the desire for constructive feedback.

Guest-Hotelier Service Encounter

Chase and Dasu (2001, p. 84) declare that “ultimately one thing really matters in a service encounter – the customer’s perception of what occurred”. This perception is determined by hotelier behaviour, as seen in the following quotes:

If you get the welcome letter... in that letter you could place that message. But put it in such a way that you value the customer input and it has helped the hotel and is really appreciated (FG23)

Virtually, you get the traditional, you know your 4-star hotel, they (welcome message) will run across the TV screen, welcome and your name and this is what you do but virtually silence – check-in, check-out and no interaction unless you have a problem and you instigate it virtually (FG14)

Communication with the general manager may be desirable for some guests. The preference guests have to deal with top management when complaining in writing (Lewis & Morris, 1987) infers the importance of GM-guest interface. Smith and Bolton’s (1998) conclusion that failure to recover, such as the inability or unwillingness

to respond appropriately, had a greater impact on creating dissatisfaction with a service encounter compared to the initial service failure. This preference could be underpinned by the expectation that the top management would be empowered to affect a satisfactory resolution compared to a line employee. Prompt problem resolution would drastically mitigate the impact of the service failure.

Verhoef, Antonides and de Hoog (2004, p. 62) found that customer satisfaction can be enhanced with the provision of a positive peak experience during the service encounter. Their finding is highly applicable to the hotel stay that involves “a relatively short time period and consist(s) of rather related events”, and if contact with the hotelier would constitute a desirable event for certain guests, then such a service encounter could represent a positive peak experience.

The proposition that hotelier-guest contact is valuable is reflected in an online trade article (Motivation Strategies Online Magazine, 2007) that advises incentive planners to enhance the appeal of an individual trip by arranging a personal welcome letter to the recipient from the hotelier.

To some guests, privacy is paramount and direct interaction may not be appreciated as indicated in the following quote:

I don't like being... not harassed (as such), but I don't like being asked too many questions that is not work (related). I just like not (to) talk (FG8)

Hence, an indirect/non-intrusive communication may be more appropriate. One respondent (FG12) suggested “an exit interview asking if you have any complaints would probably be more effective” which prompts the question as to why this practice is not as widespread as suggested by Lewis (1983). A probable reason is the impracticality of conducting a ‘formal’ exit interview as a mandatory step of the check-out procedure.

Other guests, though, might have the expectation of being acknowledged as a valued customer or being important through contact with the General Manager.

I only see the GM when (the) big guys come along (FG17)

I notice that they seldom come to talk with us, people like us. I suppose if you are somebody, or somebody who has a title or somebody who is well known to them, he will probably drop by and offer you whatever service he has. But if you are an ordinary guy in the hotel, I don't think they will offer you that type of service (FG18)

I have never been approached by a GM – except the one who is my cousin, or something (FG15)

In most big hotels you are only a number.... here you be a friend. It's almost like second home (FG27)

Stephens and Gwinner (1998, p. 176) identified “ego involvement” as a factor in determining the stress level of a service encounter. This reference to customer ego is pertinent to the hotel industry because of the intangible aspect of the hotel stay experience. Guest ego is also touched on by Raajpoot (2004, p. 188) when he found shortcomings in the literature on service encounter quality: “the recognition and respect of a customer’s social status and the provision of preferential treatment”. A study by Gwimmer, Gremler and Bitner (1998), however, showed that special treatment considerations were less important than the social benefits enjoyed by customers. The comments given by the focus group respondents above would appear to support this view as they imply that ego involvement comes into play when the General Manager interacts with in-house guests. Inferences to guest ego made in the Penang focus group confirm the view of the importance of public recognition of a person’s social standing in societies with high power distance (Hofstede, 1980): Malaysia, according to Hofstede (2003), has the highest PDI (Power Distance Index) among the three countries.

Disillusionment with the ‘traditional thing’ which contains “questions (that) can be quite filtered and slanted in certain ways to elicit a response” (FG13)

Maybe they are asking what they are interested in, not what the guest is interested in (FG9)

This resonates with criticism of patient surveys in a healthcare context: the focus on aspects decided by industry professionals and therefore may not be reflective of what is important to the respondent (Nelson & Niederberger, 1990).

A respondent highlighted a deficiency in the way hotels track their guests which results in the perception of discriminatory treatment being accorded guests according to their purpose of stay or 'position'.

When I go on business, when they already know you are coming, there is always a letter waiting for you, or there is a basket of fruits but otherwise, when you go on holiday or vacation, you do get the standard letter. And quite often they just type your name, not 'Dear Guest' but they type your name in. But I don't see the manager ringing you up to say "how are you?" unless you go on a business meeting – then they are on the watch for you (FG30)

Such oversights serve to colour guests' perspective.

Focus group interviews elicited a range of opinions about the use of questionnaires and the advantage of having a personal request to complete the guest questionnaire. The next section considers how guests perceive feedback provision to the hotel management in general and the use of the questionnaire as a feedback conduit in particular.

Apart from the three broad themes discussed, a major aspect of the questionnaire is its design attributes. These attributes are presented in the next section.

4.5.4 Questionnaire Attributes

The likelihood for questionnaire usage appeared to be contingent on certain common factors/attributes: preamble, format, perceived ease-of-use and required time to fill questionnaire. It should be noted that there was no direct reference made to questionnaire 'quality' by any of the focus group participants although aspects of the questionnaire that had a direct impact on its quality were discussed. It therefore can be surmised that questionnaire quality, namely its design and execution, are 'hygiene factors'. This assumption is supported by the overall high rating obtained by the content analysis panel.

4.5.4a Question Format

Opinions on the question format were diverse and referred to all categories used in the questionnaire panel content analysis reported in Chapter 3. The scale categories were as follows: multiple choice questions only, predominantly multiple choice questions with supplementary open-ended questions, predominantly open-ended questions with supplementary multiple choice questions, and open-ended questions only.

The data suggested that while there was clearly a divergence in format preference, the hybrid questionnaires appeared to be the most preferred format. This may suggest that a fully closed or open format appealed to small niche audiences based possibly on subjective preference or even the peculiar nature of the feedback being provided (e.g. easily classifiable versus highly descriptive) .

One participant (FG20) preferred a completely open-ended enquiry because in his view providing a personal account was more intimate and would not be restricted by a 'yes or no' answer. Another (FG33) also liked the open-ended question format and indicated that a single question would suffice. This supports the observation by Danaher and Haddrell (1996) that for some respondents a categorical scale may not fully allow them to articulate their views. This point is also mirrored in the healthcare literature: "the closest patients come to expressing their views, in their own words, is through responses to open-ended questions" (Fallis & Chewitt, 1997, p. 49). A comment made in response to a question if the trend for television-based questionnaires was appealing implied that apart from it being impersonal, "it doesn't leave you space to write comments". Another respondent, while voicing an preference for "minimum scaling", would "always look for the bottom portion to write (his) own comments" (FG30). These statements confirm the preference for the open-ended format among some guests.

Another view (FG43) was that the multiple choice question format was "essentially a rather indistinctive way of asking a question" and that there was a tendency for respondents to respond at the scale midpoint where possible, thereby erroneously raising or lowering the average response level (Frary, 1996). This opinion was also expressed by another participant (FG44). Another view (FG35) was that if a comment had to be

made, the ability to express it succinctly was preferable and hence suggesting the desirability of an open-ended enquiry.

An opposing view was that the open-ended format would provide the administrator with too much information which would be difficult to analyse (FG23), a view widely held in academia (Pullman & Cleveland, 2004).

Some participants made indirect indication that they preferred the open-ended questions to be the primary questioning format with some multiple choice question-type questions to supplement them. One participant (FG30) required more opportunity to write his own comments. Another participant (FG8) indicated that she would prefer to articulate opinions in writing. The statement “I don’t mind giving more details, that is supposed to be what the questionnaire is for” (FG29) was an oblique affirmation for questions that elicited subjective feedback. An interesting observation was made (FG10) that while “something prescriptive is probably more helpful to the hotel” he would not necessarily complete questions that required him to do much writing. One participant implied ambivalence about the format provided that the questionnaire was short and contained “basic questions which... could cut a punch” (FG2).

The Multiple Choice Question-dominant Format

Although Danaher and Haddrell (1996) found that more than half of their respondents had submitted written comments on their questionnaires indicating a balance in the way feedback was relayed, the data clearly indicates a preference for a multiple choice question-dominant format supplemented by open comment areas (FG12; FG15; FG17; FG21; FG23; FG32; FG35; FG39; FG40; FG44; FG45).

One respondent (FG18) noted that ticking boxes was easier but a remarks column would allow to report “something that is special”. Another respondent (FG42) sums this view up by saying:

I would go for a mixture too but I think people are more inclined to tick boxes because they are quicker and you get an idea whether something is bad or good

though not in much detail. But I would probably go with tick boxes with some general open-ended questions at the end.

There was the view that underpinning the ease of multiple choice questions was good question design. One respondent (FG14) indicated that there should be “*clear categories or sections*” and another (FG12) mirrored this by stipulating the need for organisation according to “*basic categories (guestroom, service)*”.

There would appear to be a preference for the multiple choice questions because they are perceived to be less time consuming but at the same time one respondent felt that the hotel would get more value out of just a few questions that allowed for unstructured feedback. That respondent did not think “*survey-type tick-the-box*” questionnaires provided valuable information and therefore prefers a small number of multiple choice questions with room for feedback (FG9), such as complaints (FG37).

A contrasting view was that multiple choice questions provides the numbers that management would like in order to get the full benefit and advocates a combination of multiple choice questions and open ended questions (FG34). This view is in line with the finding that semantic differential scale had the highest reliability (Westbrook & Oliver, 1981) and therefore would be most beneficial to management.

The usage of nominal multiple choice question scaling using the ‘smiley’ (☺) and open space for comments (FG7) was noted. This usage of the smiley was highlighted by a content analysis participant as reported in Chapter 3. The low frequency of mention in both content analysis and focus group stages would suggest that this does not provoke much interest despite its wide application in hotel guest questionnaires.

Multiple Choice Questions Only

The overriding reason for the popularity of the multiple choice question is its ease and simplicity (FG24; FG25; FG26; FG32). Other reasons it is popular were that it could be answered more quickly compared to open questions (FG10), it didn’t require “*filling in*

too many details and spending time to compose a response” (FG31) and it was “*short and sweet*” (FG27). The following quote sums up the sentiment:

I suppose I would rather go for the tickbox... it doesn't have to be complicated... if there was a big space there with comments and one simple question with comments, I would probably won't do it so much as ticking the box (FG10).

Notwithstanding its ease, too many multiple choice questions would be considered too confusing and became “*too much of an intellectual exercise*” (FG15).

De Leeuw (2001, p. 151) observes that open-ended questions subject the respondent to undertake additional steps in the question-answer process in order to verbalize a judgement to suit “social desirability or situational adequacy” which increases the chances of miscommunication. Therefore it is implied that open ended questions may tax some respondents and hence may be off-putting. This, view however, is rebutted by Geer (1988) who found that the non-response to open-ended questions is low. He found that non-respondents were either disinterested in the issue or would have provided a response if they had reason to (Geer, 1988).

4.5.4b Size

There appeared to be divergent views on questionnaire size which is denoted by the number of questions posed (length) and dimension. Dimension was not specified in the focus group interview guide but emerged as a salient characteristic which resonates with the results of the quasi Q-sort.

Some clearly preferred a short questionnaire. The consensus was that the questionnaire should not exceed one A4 page in length (FG2; FG4; FG5; FG7; FG8; FG12; FG27; FG31; FG33). Others had a preference for questionnaires of a medium size. One respondent preferred a questionnaire to be “no more than 2 pages” (FG24) and another, no larger than a “double fold” (FG39). The following quotes are a good illustration of how long questionnaires are received:

I think on your final night like you said earlier on your exit basically, if when you are leaving your exit is probably a good idea because although I filled one in a hotel where I was it was everywhere and I was there for a fortnight, I had the time. You can just get used to seeing it and ignore it and leave and never do it No, I didn't have that much energy (FG14)

You weren't tempted to fill out six different responses (FG12)

Notwithstanding a general disinclination towards long questionnaires, one respondent said “I would probably prefer to do the comprehensive one” (FG37).

It would appear that the adage ‘different strokes for different folks’ applies in regards to questionnaire length. However there is a caveat: multi-questionnaire-approach is not widely favoured although some hotels have used different questionnaires for the guestroom and food and beverage outlets, or even different types of questionnaires in the guestroom. A respondent offers simple yet profound advice to hoteliers in regards to questionnaire length:

I think this is a question of what you want achieved, what the organisation wants to achieve. And, how it can be packaged, and it was to achieve in a certain form... Could be that you could structure a questionnaire to be very short and yet effectively achieve what the organisation wanted, or you might need long (ones) (FG38)

Some (58.3%) of the sampled hotels used a medium sized questionnaire and this was generally preferred by guests. However, the characterization of size has to be qualified as some guests appear to perceive ‘size’ in terms of physical dimension and the number of printed pages, while ‘size’ in the literature typically refers to the quantity of questions posed. A respondent did use both number of questions and page size in combination in describing the desirable questionnaire length: “*probably you have something like four multiple choice question with the absolute crap, excellent... and then just space for any other comments...(in no) more than one page...*” While there may be a relationship between the physical size of the questionnaire and its content, a simplified document would be feasible and therefore warrant the use of a short hotelier communiqué.

The issue of questionnaire quality per se was not raised during the focus groups except for a criticism of the choice of print (word) colour which decreased legibility for one respondent (FG22) and font size for others (FG4; FG23). Another respondent (FG14) stated that the questionnaire “*must look simple even before (she) actually start(s) to read it*” as “*otherwise (she) will just toss it aside*”. This suggests that the typesetting and presentation is important. It can be surmised that most questionnaires are professionally produced and therefore are of a high quality in terms of presentation and print quality.

4.5.5 Guest Communication from the Guest Perspective

The premise that the hotel questionnaire provides a means for managers to gauge performance standards was criticized by one of the participants: “making the assumption that the law of large numbers will allow you to draw conclusions about hotel performance from people who are willing to answer your survey is specious” (FG38).

It was evident that management response to guest feedback was effective in encouraging constructive feedback from guests but the data showed inconsistency in hotelier behaviour viz responding to questionnaires. However, there appeared to be a high incidence of non-response, thereby giving the impression that they did not receive the feedback and therefore could not have responded, or at worst, ignored the feedback altogether. This view is supported by Van Bennekom (2006) who, not receiving a response from the management to a website based feedback form and paper questionnaire, attributes non-response to either a failure in the information system that supports complaint solicitation or a disregard towards responding to and addressing customer issues.

The literature shows that incentives are often offered to customers to encourage participation in surveys. In Chapter 3, it was reported that some hotels in Perth offered incentives to guests. In this section, the question ‘Does an incentive work?’ is posed to the focus group respondents. The following quotes show a wide range of responses:

The last time I did it was this weekend because they offered a three night stay in a lucky draw if I returned the questionnaire... that is the first time I say an

invitation to return a questionnaire with a prize attached to it... there was only once that there was a reward. I suppose it wasn't a habit that was encouraged, it never appeared at any other hotel, the cost must be high to put everything in and give to anybody who comes (FG15)

If you really want to get a feedback on a specific thing that the management wants to find out, OK at the end of your stay when you come to the desk to hand in your key, you could give out a souvenir a key ring or chocolate (FG23)

I don't think so. I think it is human nature because depending on my interest, I might decide 'oh what is this?' It's just hotel shampoo.... unless it is a special shampoo! (FG31)

But I think that is better than nothing (FG24)

It will be a surprise to receive something (FG26)

Put a chocolate there at least. I appreciate going into the draw for two more nights in this hell hole (FG9)

The night before you leave, a complimentary chocolate (should be) left on your bed (FG12)

Not if you are really annoyed because something is broken, no amount of chocolate in the world could appease me if my aircon(ditioner) isn't working. I know I love chocolate and never met one that I didn't like! (FG8)

Uh, I'd consider it. But I don't usually use it unless there is some reason. Sometimes they say I'll give you a voucher, so to speak, then I'll probably fill it in (FG32)

Would they charge you for it at the end? (FG43)

An article in the *Asian Hotel & Catering Times* (Hui, 2007) reported that it was not common for hoteliers to offer incentives to encourage guest participation in satisfaction surveys. This report, while corroborating the data reported in Chapter 2 which showed

that incentives were only offered by Australian hotels, notes that some hotels do offer some form of a goodwill gesture.

Another factor that impacted on guests is the expediency of the enquiry: “I wouldn’t mind if it wasn’t go on for too long” (FG35); “...provided the survey is not too long.... Normally just five to six questions” (FG33) and visual clues such as typesetting and design can give the impression of a short questionnaire. The typical guest would allocate a certain amount of time to filling out a questionnaire. According to Chase and Dasu (2001), research indicates that people pay little attention to the duration of an activity unless it is markedly longer or shorter than expected. This may hold true in the case of questionnaires as the feedback indicates that respondents would have a high propensity of not finishing the questionnaire if it took longer than anticipated presumably because they had become acutely aware of the amount of time that had been consumed by the exercise. However, the awareness of how quickly a questionnaire is or can be completed may leave a positive effect.

One of the subtle functions of the questionnaire is to establish a rapport with guests by way of opening a line of communication, providing a vehicle for airing grievances or accolades, and ice-breaking via the preamble, then it is well suited to play a remote service encounter function, or if using the term enhanced encounter which Gutek, Groth and Cherry (2002) use to describe a loose linkage between service provider (hotelier) and customer, and tight linkages between service organisation (hotel or chain) with customer and service provider. This is especially pertinent when it is common practice for hoteliers particularly with large chains to be moved from property to property in a relatively short period of time. This ‘property hopping’ phenomenon is not documented in the literature but is explained by the Vice President of Human Resources of Starwood Asia Pacific Hotels and Resorts:

Our GMs typically stay between 2 - 3 years. It is very seldom that they stay longer (but we have cases of course).

There are a few reasons for that:

- the perception that expatriates are on 2 year contracts (in other companies they are - maybe related to work permits, but in Starwood we have open ended contracts)

- *a lot of hardship locations requires a change after a maximum of two years not to burn out the GM*
- *after 3 years a lot of GMs become stale and lose the initial motivation and drive that comes with a new job*
- *it is a general practice to move every 2 years in the hospitality industry*
- *we turnover our GMs, as we are expanding rapidly and we put experienced GMs in our new openings and put new GMs in operating properties (Claudia Al-Bala'a, personal communication, 2007)*

Therefore the hotelier would conceivably be for most guests simply a representative of the chain with which there is little or no direct contact.

4.6 Conclusion

A number of notable observations have been made based on the feedback obtained from respondents during the focus group interviews. The general impression was that respondents still think that hoteliers are 'going through the motion' of asking guests to fill in a questionnaire. The prevalent practice of leaving questionnaires in the guestroom frequently without giving any incentives or explanation of the need for obtaining feedback in order to enhance the services of the hotel underpins this impression. Respondents also indicated that when they had filled in questionnaires and had submitted them, in most cases there had not been any response, not even a proforma 'thank you' note or any form of acknowledgment that the feedback had been received or had been followed-up on.

Generally the focus group participants seem to have a cynical view of the use of questionnaires and surveys by the hotel management and consequently response rates are very low because guests appear to ignore the need to fill in a questionnaire. Consequently, hoteliers need to consider more positive encouraging ways to enhance the return rate. This perhaps can be achieved by introducing a positive conditioning approach, providing prompt managerial action which indicates that management is concerned about comments made, demonstrating that negative comments are being

acted upon and perhaps by introducing a form of incentive by acknowledgement in word and kind.

It appears from the respondent feedback that when people are very satisfied with the hotel services, they are most likely to use the questionnaire. Similarly, those who are very unhappy about certain aspects also make an effort to use the questionnaire. This concurs with the widely held views of researchers in the efficacy of customer questionnaires. It also points to the greater proportion of people in the middle who do not seem to care about providing positive and/or negative comments on their experience. This raises the question as to how managers can make people more proactive in completing and returning questionnaire. Based upon the comments made by the focus group participants, a personal invitation by the 'management' or a welcome letter with the guest name are tangible ways to state that a person's views are very important and will be acted on by management in a confidential fashion. Such clues may increase the response rate. On negative comments, follow-through and in the form of a verbal or written acknowledgement by the staff would certainly enhance the propensity for future questionnaire usage. Another major aspect emphasized by respondents was the wide range of question, the extreme variation in length, and the sometimes bias of questionnaires towards a positive response seem to act as a disincentive to the usage. Hence focussing on a more simplified and more easy-to-use questionnaire may increase return rates.

The general view of all the respondents was that the general manager of the hotel was not approachable and did not seem to be involved with everyday guests, except perhaps when business clients were booked into the hotel. There was a sense that corporate guests were accorded preferential treatment such as having personalised welcome letter from the general manager and upgraded amenities.

Therefore it seems that to increase response rates, firstly, greater rapport needs to be proactively nurtured by the manager in his/her willingness to engage with the guest. Secondly, the staff, including the management team, should capitalize on every service encounter opportunity.

These factors identified by the respondents indicate that usage of questionnaires is very much dependant upon satisfaction by the guest. The solid line in Figure 4.1 indicates a hypothetical usage curve based on satisfaction. The aim of a positive proactive management is to seek ways by which greater involvement and overt indicators of customer feedback could raise the level of usage as indicated by the dotted line as indicated in Figure 4.1.

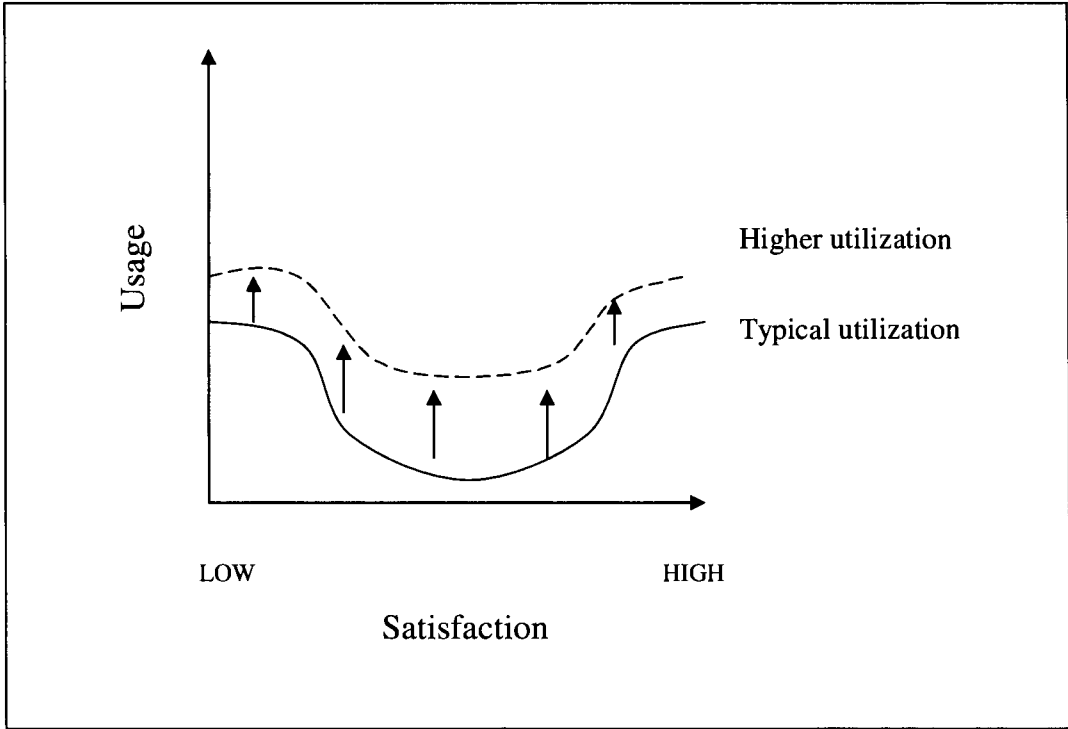


Figure 4.1. Questionnaire responses by guests according to satisfaction level.

However, personal face-to-face contact between management and guests over time will only minimally increase the number of encounters which is similar to when managers are not involved and remote service encounter questionnaires are used as shown in Figure 4.2. The slope of both lines appears to be the same gradual increase over time. However, by combining face-to-face encounters between senior management and guest with remote encounters achieved by way of simplified, user-friendly questionnaire, a dramatic effect on the return on questionnaires may be created, thus increasing the occurrence of service encountering significantly as shown by the hypothesized parabolic line in the Figure 4.2. These incremental encounters achieved through remote

encounters could conceivably have a multiplier effect as guests acquire a voluntary desire to have engagement with the hotelier.

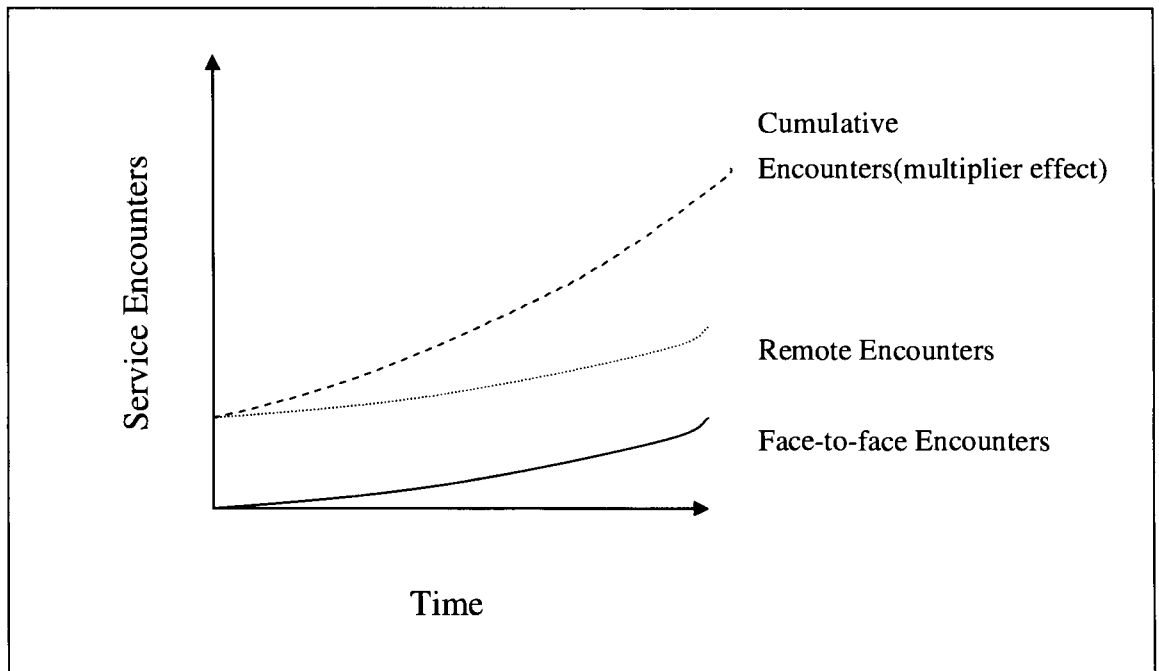


Figure 4.2. Opportunities for hoteliers to encounter guests.

Finally, it would appear that the focus group participants have greater preference for a hybrid type questionnaire, supporting one of the conclusions of the content analysis. Nevertheless, the response rates are low as indicated by the factors discussed above. These factors are: a) a cynical view of the use of the data obtained from returned questionnaires and b) a general perception that the hotelier is not genuinely interested. This chapter reported the results of the guest perspective which precedes and leads to the next stage of qualitative data collection involving hoteliers. The findings of the focus groups allowed the researcher to fine-tune the research questions to be addressed during the hotelier interviews as reported in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: HOTELIER PERSPECTIVE

This chapter describes the third and final phase of the main data collection and focuses on in-depth interviewing of hoteliers. The specific methodology is described and the findings reported.

The objectives of this phase of data collection are to ascertain the views of hoteliers on 1) the importance of the interaction they have with their guests (hotelier-guest dyad); and 2) non-face-to-face interactional interfacing (service encounter), specifically the traditional paper and e-questionnaires. In this chapter, a discursive discussion on guest questionnaire-derived data attainment, analysis and utility is put forward.

5.1 Methodology

Semi-structured in-depth personal interviews with twenty-two hoteliers were conducted and the focus was on the major salient issues raised in the content analysis of individual hotel guest questionnaires. In deciding upon in-depth interviews with hotel management, the researcher implemented the advice by Tull and Hawkins (1987) to provide a number of categories of investigation. This categorisation, in their view, makes individual in-depth interviews particularly valuable. Engaging with “professional people or with people on the subject of their jobs” (Tull & Hawkins, 1987, p. 311) via personal interviews lends itself as an appropriate research approach.

5.1.1 Sample Selection Criteria

Interviews were conducted with hoteliers from a range of hotels. Hotel general managers, who “arguably hold the key executive position in the hotel industry” (Ladkin, 1999, p. 167), were invited to participate in this step of the research process because being the most senior manager at the property level, they were in the best position to definitively articulate their hotel’s operational philosophy and affect managerial changes. Peterson (1987, p.437) proposes several important steps in preparing for the individual in-depth interview, the most important of which is: “the participants need to be carefully selected so as to be relevant to the problem under study”.

Access to these hoteliers was through the personal contacts of the researcher. Criterion purposive sampling (Patton, 1990), (convenience rather than probability sampling) was used due to the anticipated constraints that would be encountered in obtaining respondents related to business seasonality. The interviews were conducted in the months of December 2004 and January 2005, which represented the peak holiday season, and could be influenced by: 1) the unavailability of respondents due to high hotel occupancy; and 2) the customary expatriate general managers’ year-end vacation. The selection criteria are as follows:

- General Manager or Hotel/Property Manager position. If unavailable, the Executive Assistant Manager (EAM), Rooms Division Manager (RDM), or Front Office Manager (FOM) would be acceptable if suitably qualified.
- Employment at a 3-star rated hotel or above.

Table 5.1

Hotelier Interview Respondent Demographic Data.

Code	Hotel category	Room inventory	Sex/ Ethnicity	Position	Nationality
H1	4	35	M/C	GM	Australian
H2	1	52	F/C	FOM	Australian
H3	3	189	M/C	GM	Australian
H4	4	190	M/C	GM	Australian
H5	3	119	M/C	Mgr	Australian
H6	1	94	M/A	GM	Malaysian
H7	4	96	F/C	GM	New Zealand
H8	1	119	M/C	GM	Australian
H9	2	237	M/A	GM	Malaysian
H10	4	101	M/C	GM	Australian
H11	3	320	M/A	GM	Singaporean
H12	2	376	M/A	GM	Taiwanese
H13	4	259	M/A	GM	Malaysian
H14	2	440	M/C	GM	American
H15	3	323	M/A	EAM	Malaysian
H16	4	451	M/A	GM	Malaysian
H17	3	380	M/C	GM	British
H18	2	1261	M/C	EAM	German
H19	3	326	M/C	Snr VP	Australian
H20	1	580	M/C	GM	Irish
H21	4	480	M/A	GM	Malaysian
H22	1	40	F/A	Mgr	Singaporean

Hotel Category: 1. Independent; 2. International Chain; 3. Regional Chain; 4. Domestic Chain

Ethnicity: A: Asian; C: Caucasian

Position:
 GM: General Manager
 EAM: Assistant Executive Manager
 Mgr: Manager
 Snr VP: Senior Vice President
 FOM: Front Office Manager

5.1.2 Sample Size and Description

The researcher interviewed twenty-two hoteliers located in Asia Pacific (Perth, Australia; Penang, Malaysia; and Singapore). The purposive convenience sample was drawn from a broad cross section of hotels. Seven hotels belonged to domestic chains, five to regional chains, five were international chain properties, and five were independent. As this is exploratory qualitative research, the sample is not statistically significant and results are reported in conventional qualitative style, without implying any statistical quantitative significance.

The country of origin of respondents was wide and although the influence of country of origin culture has been discussed in many research papers (Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998; Bjerke, 2000; Earley, 1994; Tan, 2002), it falls outside the scope of this study. However, to increase the generalizability of the research findings, a range of hotels in different host cultures was included in this study. Table 5.1 shows the coding and demographic data of the hoteliers and this convention is used throughout the thesis.

5.1.3 Procedure

Tull and Hawkins (1987) indicate that individual in-depth interviews require 30-45 minutes and that the interviewer does not have a specific set of prescribed questions that must be answered according to an order imposed by a questionnaire. Kwortnik (2003) also observes that the semi-structured depth interviews vary in length but commonly last up to an hour. For this study, an interview length of approximately one hour was anticipated. An interview schedule was designed to guide the interview process with a set of topics having been identified in advance in order to assure data consistency (see Appendix 5.1), but allowed the fluidity and flexibility for ad hoc modification. It was found that with each subsequent interview, the focus became more targeted resulting in subtle changes in the nature of the enquiry which would account for certain variability in the data. This variability, however, does not confuse the findings. Certain missing data is evident but as it was impractical to follow up with the interviewees due to the time lapse, has been acknowledged as a limitation and has been reflected as such in the

findings. The interviews were voice recorded, and the respondents requested to sign a consent form prior to the interview (see Appendix 5.2).

The interview tapes were transcribed and coded for analysis with NVivo. Data saturation occurred at differing stages due to the different topics being explored. While a 'variable' such as attitude toward guest communication and the guest questionnaire was achieved at an early stage, the incentive method on the other hand reached saturation at a later stage.

5.2 Findings

This section begins by reporting the wider perspective of the hoteliers vis-à-vis their interaction with guests particularly in regards to communication. This wider focus shifts to the impact of that interaction and the engenderment of a hotelier-guest service encounter via remote means as depicted in the Hospitality Service Encounter Dyadic Paradigm (Figure 1, p. 7).

5.2.1 Hotelier Communication with Guests

All respondents exhibited a positive or very positive response to guest communication per se and the usage of questionnaires, a finding that resonates with the literature (Banker, Potter & Srinivasan, 2005; Barsky & Labagh, 1992; Heung & Lam, 2003; Pullman & Cleveland, 2004; Tordjman, 2004; Wisner & Corney, 1999):

We are driven pretty much by what our customers (say) and our motto has always been to determine focus on the customer (H8)

Let's see what the customer has to say (H14)

We are a hospitality service industry, so everything surrounds the customers' requirements, and without communication it isn't going to happen (H18)

The comment made by a respondent that "*the general manager, to me, has to be accessible*" (H1) clearly suggests that apart from being able to be contactable, the

general manager must be personable and communicative. One respondent commented that he “*sometimes cynically think(s) they (guests) are bored, and they have got time*” (H1), revealing a personal interpretation of guests’ underlying intentions in offering feedback. This view would appear to be partly justifiable given a focus group participant’s remark that guest questionnaires are filled in “*when you are bored*” (FG18). An adverse reaction to increasing complaining behaviour by some guests is also apparent in the following observation: “(they) *seem to be fundamentally focusing on what they don't like (while being)... extremely frugal with positive comments*” (H18).

5.2.2 Hotel Guest Questionnaires as a Feedback Vehicle

The guest questionnaire was used across the board by this sample of hoteliers. One respondent was of the view that the questionnaire was important “*particularly when there has been some negative (comment) come back*” (H20) but another cautioned that the questionnaire should “*not be used as a witch hunt tool*” (H6).

The widespread use of the questionnaire by hoteliers does not in itself demonstrate that it is the hoteliers’ preferred method of gathering feedback from guests. Several respondents felt that face-to-face communication was best, but one respondent acknowledged that a good alternative to meeting people in person would be “*written communication ... the questionnaire in (hotels) doesn't fit that big role... it is just one extra avenue for the guest*” (H22).

There was overarching agreement on the importance of the guest questionnaire, but divergent views on its use. Some hoteliers advocated a proactive approach whereby the guest would be given a questionnaire by a member of staff or verbally invited to fill one out in addition to placing it in the guestroom. The traditional passive placement in the guestroom, typically in the compendium located either in the drawer or on the writing table, has been augmented by procedures such as placement on the bed at turn-down time to increase visibility. Some hoteliers had adopted the ‘pillow talk’ variation but there was no consensus about the value of placing a flower and/or chocolate with the questionnaire on the bed as a gentle inducement for the guest to complete it. Likewise, there was disparity in views on when, if a proactive approach was taken, would be most

opportune time to issue the invitation to guests to fill in the questionnaire. While some hoteliers felt that the time of check-in was suitable, others thought check-out time would be more appropriate on the premise that the guests would find it more relevant, being in a better position to give a response after having had the experience of using the product and services.

5.2.3 Responding to Guest Feedback

As with questionnaire distribution, the procedures for the collection and processing of questionnaires were also variable. Notwithstanding the variability, all the hoteliers acknowledged (19 explicitly and 3 implicitly – please refer to Appendix 5.3) the importance of providing a response to guests who had provided feedback. This fits the assertion made by Lewis (1983, p. 24) that “many hotel companies pride themselves on responding to every complaint they receive, and consumers presumably recognize that their hotel complaints are likely to be acknowledged”. This ideal, however, does not necessarily translate into action. For example, one respondent took questionnaire response very seriously and declared “*I do respond to every single guest comment form, good or bad. If it is within the region I try and do it within 24 hours, if it is international, I try to do it within 48 hours*” (H20).

In contrast, some hoteliers only responded to guests who had made negative remarks or provided unfavourable evaluation (H1; H5; H19). Other hoteliers appeared to be disinclined to respond unless the nature of the complaint was severe enough to warrant a follow-up (H7), or if the guest had indicated a desire to receive a response (H8).

There would appear to be a number of factors that could influence the propensity for a hotelier to provide responses. The two main factors that emerged from the interviews were operational factors and personal managerial ethos. A few hoteliers cited logistical reasons for not responding to all questionnaires. On the assumption that the quantity of feedback would be proportionate to the number of rooms, managers of large hotels would be required to handle large amounts of correspondence which would prove to be time consuming and therefore a disincentive. This however proved to be erroneous as only one large hotel (a 326-room property in Singapore) responded only to negative feedback, while the other hotels that selectively responded to feedback were small to

medium in size in Perth (No. 1: 35 rooms, No. 5: 119 rooms, No. 7: 96 rooms, No. 8: 119 rooms).

One hotelier (H6) asserted that while he did respond to all questionnaires received, he elected not to respond to abusive ones. This suggests that the behaviour demonstrated by the guest could impact on hotelier attitudes toward responses. Constructive feedback, albeit negative, was welcomed, but abusive feedback was either processed in accordance to procedure or ignored. Some hoteliers may have become disillusioned with the process:

A lot of them go in the bin! I used to keep them all, but there were so many of them... all that I decided... okay so another satisfied guest. If it is bad then I will find out who they are, where they were; did anybody at any stage have any feedback - any of my girls, receptionist - usually they let me know straight away. If we have got a problem then we can fix it, it's when they go and we don't know ... that's the annoying thing. I find out to the best of my ability if anything happened, and then I'll write. Usually I put it in writing (H2)

The same respondent, though, would not provide a response to positive feedback:

Well, if they are happy, they're happy! You know if they come back and I ask them down here 'would you stay with us again?'..., "Of course, yes - always do!". We don't need anything else, so I don't waste my time. I've got them anyway (H2)

Unfortunately though, ignoring complimentary feedback is to overlook potentially valuable data (Kraft and Martin, 2001), and to forego gleaning any benefits.

5.2.4 Proactive Feedback Solicitation

The researcher did perceive a strong commitment to Customer Relationship Management ethos which purportedly translated into proactive solicitation, and

conscientious follow-up with authentic follow-through on elicited feedback in some respondents, evidenced by statements such as:

(contact) is a daily occurrence, it is fundamental to what we do here. Everything we do is aimed at the customers; we are a hospitality service industry, so everything surrounds the customer requirements, and without communication it isn't going to happen (H18)

(guest communication) is vital to the success of any business. The service you provide (is) what the customer wants. Unless you have communication between those two avenues, how can you have customer satisfaction? You don't know what they want! (H2)

(talking) is the most essential (thing) that you should do, and the thing that you least do. (H20)

Apart from just feedback, hotels tend to use the responses from guests for a number of other purposes such as staff evaluation and compilation of statistics, and hence the data is subjected to different operating procedures. The operating procedures instituted by the owners or mandated by chain hotel franchiser also appear to affect the way responses to such questionnaires are handled by the hoteliers. A delay in response may be caused by a centralized corporate structure that may require that any feedback be channelled to the head office before a response is sent to the guest. In addition, the response may be scripted in accordance to a corporate identity or formulated by a corporate back office manager. In the cases of third-party-administered questionnaires, the property manager may encounter a time lag which hampers an ability to provide an expedient response. This delay may be misconstrued as the hotelier being callous or inept.

Some hoteliers bring the completed quest room questionnaires to their daily departmental meetings with their divisional and department heads. Some bring the questionnaires to such meetings on a weekly basis which suggests different degrees of urgency apply to handling formalized complaints. This rationale is subjective as the general manager may have actioned high priority feedback by executive decision leaving those less pressing issues for later resolution or simply to use the meeting for

information sharing. If this is not the case, then the weekly frequency is highly indicative of low priority being assigned to guest feedback and its response. Often, questionnaires are copied to pertinent parties, filed in records and incorporated in employee recognition programmes. Some respondents revealed that they post up questionnaires on the staff notice boards so that both compliments and complaints are made known to all members of staff.

5.2.5 Form and Function

The questionnaire format varied in accordance to the different types identified during the questionnaire analysis stage. One hotelier was of the opinion that “*you have to understand that the guy who is filling this out (the questionnaire) doesn’t want to spend half his life filling out the form... it needs to be quick and simple. Also this (quick and simple) form tends to get filled out in the end*” (H20). However, there was little consensus as to what constituted a simple format, as questionnaire format (open-ended versus closed-ended questions) preference is varied. Proponents of an open-ended format would consider a short targeted question to be preferable while those inclined toward multiple-choice or scales would argue that tick boxes and Likert-type scales simplify the process for respondents.

People would much rather fill out the ‘Pillow Talk’ [fully open-ended questionnaire] than this one [hybrid]: so we get many, many more Pillow Talks. You know, I think a lot of hotels have gone for the Pillow Talk style. Again, 10 years ago when I worked with SHC Groups, they used to have these long winded questionnaires, you know, rate in 1 to 5, 5 being the best and 1 being the (lowest)..., and people would just look at it and go ‘No, too much!’....so we get, since we’ve gone for these Pillow Talks, and this is only six months ago, these pillow style, since we have gone for these we have had a great response with these on (H5)

The data indicated a preference for the hybrid-type questionnaire, the de facto industry standard.

While this preference for the hybrid-type questionnaire could explain its widespread use, it is also possible that its widespread use by the hotel chains results in a level of familiarity which helps to explain the preference. Mainstream hotel management is shaped to a large extent by large international hotel chains and management companies which wield influence on academic curriculum and vocational training. It is noteworthy that chain-mandated questionnaires are strictly adhered to due to corporate identity and uniformity for benchmarking purposes although franchisees or managed properties may be granted certain discretion in modifying the template to suit a niche target market. Some respondents indicated satisfaction with their questionnaires but others showed an interest in exploring different alternative options. It can therefore be posited that the incumbent hoteliers are predisposed to the format which can comprehensively cover all pertinent areas of concern and an objective scale which allowed accurate performance indicators, including that of the hotelier and where the replies to the questionnaires determined the hotelier's performance. A wide acceptance of the virtues of qualitative feedback was noted and the increasing provision of white spaces for guests to comment. This sits well with the assertion made by DeVeau, DeVeau and Downey (1996) that space for open comments facilitates guest feedback on missing facilities.

Prima facie, the key determinant amongst the hoteliers as to whether they prefer a qualitative or quantitative type of feedback is its function, that is what and how the feedback was to be used. Those who required more quantitative type of feedback used such data for statistical analysis, especially when they had the necessary computer software to handle such data. Some depended on such quantitative analysis for rating the performance of the hoteliers, with the consequent determination of remuneration packages by the hotel owners and/or corporate headquarters. The qualitative type of feedback was preferred by some as it gave an indication of the success of the hotel to 'please' its guests and in addition also gave an indication of the level of satisfaction experienced by its clientele. The drawback in this regard was that the terminology used in the questionnaires gave rise to multiple interpretations. For instance, what is 'Comfortable'; and what is 'Satisfactory'? Kraft and Martin (1997, p. 162) elucidate this ambiguity when posing the question "does an attribute rated "Average" mean that the customer is satisfied or not?"

The willingness to explore different questionnaire designs may be rooted in the appreciation for technological and generational influences. One aspect of questionnaire design that has broad implication given the international domain of hotel management is language. Some hotels offer bi-lingual questionnaires or even multiple language variants. Some hoteliers were of the opinion that multi-lingual questionnaires look cluttered, and inadvertently make the questionnaire complicated. There would appear to be a consensus that English was considered to be the language of the hospitality industry and a mono-lingual questionnaire in English was acceptable. Some hoteliers (H16 (Penang); H20 (Singapore)) preferred having the option of including a second language to accommodate specific market needs but held the opinion that the majority of the hotel clientele would be able to communicate in English. Although the absence of a foreign language may dissuade some guests from using the questionnaire or exclude them entirely if the guest was unable to read English, the provision of a supplementary language could give rise to dissatisfaction among hotel guests. One senior hotelier based in Singapore elucidates the problem as follows:

Yes, you are going to slight somebody. You put Chinese down here, somebody from Japan is going to turn around, why haven't you got Japanese; and to be quite honest, our mix of business in this hotel, 13% of our market is Australian, 11% is UK, 10% is Indonesia, and then about 4% is Malaysia, 4% US, we don't have a big enough ethnic base of one particular group that is not English speaking that would (warrant a variant) (H19)

Some of the hoteliers wrote a separate covering letter (attached to the guestroom questionnaire) to the guests inviting them to offer their views about their stay, but some did not personally sign the document. In one case, the hotelier had changed and his name was obviously deleted from the questionnaire, leaving an unsigned letter from the 'General Manager' of the hotel.

Several hoteliers have an affinity to the 'on-screen' questionnaire being provided in the guestrooms, while some were lukewarm to this proposal. Likewise, some favoured a post-paid arrangement for the guests to post in their completed questionnaires, while

others felt that very few guests would bother filling out the questionnaire at the airport or at home, unless they had very strong feelings about their stay in the guestroom.

The 'pillow-talk' technique was favoured by some hoteliers who wanted to literally "put the questionnaire on the pillow" so that it would be the last thing that the guest would see before retiring. This could act as the final 'service encounter' of the day between hotelier and guest.

Of the guestroom questionnaires completed by hotel guests, the response was a balance between complaints and compliments. In general, 90% could be negative and 10% positive but this varied from hotel to hotel, and country to country. In other instances, the hoteliers received more compliments than complaints. This was attributed to the peculiar clientele these hotels accommodated – whether purely business travellers or leisure guests. But all found that more females and Caucasians (British & Australian) tend to fill out the forms. Some, especially the Japanese (and other Asians) are non-confrontational. They tend to go away and not return, but might express their unhappiness through their tour agents. Singaporeans, Koreans and those from Hong Kong, however, were described as very demanding. These accounts are highly stereotypical cultural and gender traits as it is evident that there could be two contradictory views expressed by different hoteliers on the guests hailing from the same country.

Generally hoteliers thus have an in-depth idea of what their guests want in their room while some of them depend on the comments from guests to reaffirm their perceptions. A couple of the hoteliers have even used their spouses to assess the shortcomings of the guestroom using the mystery guest approach.

In response to the rhetorical question "Can the guest be fully (feasibly/realistically) satisfied?" which was posed to explore hoteliers' views on guest expectancy behaviour, a sense that guests have unrealistic expectations vis-à-vis the hotel product and service was indicated. This perception is underscored by the heterogeneity of guests; therein an underlying factor for such behaviour is that the needs of the guest on business and those who are on vacation would vary considerably. As one hotelier puts it "... *we are looking after the customer; your needs and my needs, his needs, her needs, are always different*

– *try to please most people most of the time*” (H20). Guests of Asian origin were described as tending to look at amenities in the room as important, as experienced by the SHA Villa in Singapore; they “*look at the value of the room based on physical things*”, while a ‘Western’ guest “*look at the value of room with other things as well - like the experience itself*” (H22).

5.3 Beyond the Act of Communication

While much research has been undertaken with respect to the questionnaire as a vehicle for guest feedback and guest satisfaction measurement, little research has been done on the response of hoteliers to feedback made therein.

Despite indicating a positive attitude to questionnaires, were guests comments acknowledged and acted upon? According to Lewis (1983, p. 24), “many hotel companies pride themselves on responding to every complaint they receive, and consumers presumably recognize that their hotel complaints are likely to be acknowledged”. Three hotels indicated they only respond to complaints, one only in relation to negative comments and highly positive comments, and another only where the guest requested a response. Thirteen hotels indicated they did respond, and this was via letter, telephone and e-mail.

Generally respondents saw the feedback as a source of information that enables the hotelier to “*track the guest*” (H12) or to “*improve your business*” (H17). Some respondents saw that it was about “*building relationships*” (H10; H19). A number indicated that they relish the opportunity to solve problems encountered by guests expediently and preferably before the guest’s departure. This was demonstrated by the following comments: “*if I see something wrong, if something is serious, I would jump in and speak to them*” (H7); “*I think that any adverse comments should be followed up very quickly*” (H19). Many also saw the advantage of having questionnaire-derived feedback as a trigger for service recovery, and so, positively affect repatronage (Andreassen, 2001; Tax & Brown, 1998) and circumvent negative word-of-mouth.

Much of the information possessed about the guest’s service experience is held disparately by staff throughout the organisation as a consequence of service encounters

across the guest's stay. In hotels, Knowledge Management would be rudimentary despite the prevalence of guest history management software incorporated in Property Management Systems and the availability of Customer Relationship Management software designed to streamline and consolidate the feedback process and the resultant knowledge management function (Abrahamson, 1991; Palmer, McMahon-Beattie & Beggs, 2000; Sigala, 2005). A link to the conclusions drawn by Schubert and Leimstoll (2004) that Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which most tourism enterprises belong (Buhalis, 1996), are sceptical toward e-commerce applications which use personalisation can be drawn. In the absence of an effective Knowledge Management system that aggregates this knowledge, however, much of the feedback from guests is lost.

5.3.1 Information Sharing

A question posed is to what extent hoteliers would be willing to share information to better understand the guests' experience so that individual hotels can better meet their expectations and take corrective action where necessary to improve the quality of the hotel experience. This sharing could occur via a number of forums. Traditionally formal associations of hotels, such as the Australian Hotels Association (AHA), exist where information is shared. But what information from guest questionnaires would be shared with competitors?

Some respondents indicated they would not share such information with competitors. One explained that this was "*because what would be pertinent to one property wouldn't be pertinent to another*" (H2), thereby providing an apparently pragmatic justification. The others, however, were explicitly guarded and secretive:

There is no willingness for us to share that with our competitors (H3)

No chain will share that information (H4)

Most hotels tend to keep these (important) things to themselves (H6)

It's a competitive environment (H5)

In all three research locations, there was a cadre of veteran hoteliers who had remained at the same property for much longer than average. Their attitude is summed up by one respondent (H17) who observed:

So possibly their mindset or their thinking is they are here and they are sort of protective of what they have got and possibly suspicious or guarded with whatever they are going to do.

Here he referred to the prevalence of 'kia-su', a saying in the Chinese Hokkein dialect spoken in Singapore that literally means 'afraid to lose'. This shows the impact of culture on attitudes to collaboration or sharing. Respondent H20 expressed this view: *"the industry is competitive enough; I think you are somewhat naïve if you are going to share good ideas that you have gleaned with others because you can bet your arse they don't share with you"*.

Respondent H17 commented further:

It's not the norm in this industry to do that but what is the norm is that your competitors are obviously always looking at you and what you are doing, so it wouldn't be long for them to pick up if you were doing something that was quite noticeably different.

Respondent H3 echoes this sentiment:

...so there is not much that you can do in a hotel that your competitors aren't going to find out within six months anyway.

In contrast to this guarded stance, Respondent H12 described himself as being very open-minded and did not have any reservations about sharing information. Some respondents, while maintaining that they were open, however, qualified the information that they would be willing to share with their competitors. Information that would be mutually beneficial in nature such as that pertaining to *destination* (H10), *hotel industry* (H9), *tourism* (H16) and *safety* (H22) would be readily shared. Other information could be shared, providing it did not erode competitive advantage.

The importance placed on proprietary information hints at the importance placed on guest feedback derived via questionnaire: (a) Information from guests was deemed important enough to engender a competitive advantage; and (b) anonymous questionnaires were considered acceptable (H1; H2; H3; H17; H18; H22).

The responses to those questions would appear to be consistent with the commonly held view that hoteliers are notoriously secretive and have been reluctant to share information and ideas with others, especially their rivals, due to a “fear of information leakage” (Chung, Oh, Kim & Han, 2004, p. 429). The remark made by senior hotelier (H19) in response to a query whether he shared daily operating statistics with his colleagues, “*we tell the truth and they lie*”, is highly indicative of an underlying suspicion and unease with information sharing amongst hoteliers.

One respondent derided the apparent obsession with competitiveness:

I have a small restaurant, bar restaurant... (which) is not doing very well. There are five or six other bar restaurants in the same area, none of which are doing very well ...I said to them “why don’t we get together” and they go “you’re the competition”. Screw the competition ... why don’t we club together ... collectively sell the area...all six (sic) are on the brochure... selling is the destination, not the product... We need to work collectively. My five cohorts, if that’s the right word to use, all thought I was absolutely nuts, and it hasn’t happened. We, none of us, are making money (H20)

It can be surmised from the findings that hoteliers consider the information derived from guest questionnaire as valuable. The guardedness many of the hoteliers interviewed had shown when handling such information, as suggested by the high propensity not to share information with competitors, is clearly indicative of the importance placed on this data stream. This assumption, however, may be symptomatic of a general unease with losing proprietary information. This finding therefore is reflective of the general reluctance demonstrated by hoteliers towards collaborative initiatives (Rowe & Ogle, 2007).

5.3.2 Service Encounter

Apart from the customary welcome letter used at some hotels, the questionnaire provides the general manager with an opportunity to 'touch' the guest (Ogle, Nosaka & Pettigrew, 2005). This communication is typically presented in a scripted preamble, which had an effect ranging from a sincere invitation to engage with the guest, to impersonal formality (Ogle & Gharavi, 2004). Ogle, Nosaka and Pettigrew (2005) argue that the questionnaire, as one of the tangible elements in the hotel operation, is a service encounter in which a hotel general manager may in principle engage, albeit passively, with every in-house guest.

In this way the completion of the questionnaire has been deemed to be a remote service encounter which could arguably engender comparatively less immediacy and intimacy than that of a face-to-face service encounter: *"I still feel that direct face-to-face communication is the best.... though of course it is the most costly"* (H22). However, given the time constraints faced by hoteliers *"due to operational requirements"* there are fewer opportunities for face-to-face interaction with guests (H20). This is compounded by the volume of guest traffic associated with large hotels *"where perhaps something like a guest comment form comes more into play"* (H10). The time pressures of a general manager are reflected in the statement: *"In the beginning I did have some time for me to talk to customers...but I don't think so (now)"* (H6).

Also, constant guest interaction can create a dilemma – *"becoming too closely attached...and some customers start bullying the staff"* (H6). This sentiment is shared by another respondent who by remarking *"I guess in theory it is the most effective but in reality it is not always practical"* (H8), acknowledges the virtues of face-to-face interaction but also laments that easy accessibility has led to opportunistic behaviour such as name dropping: *"the more experienced traveller knows all the tricks... knows how to get the best.... they are always after something anyhow"*.

One respondent however argued that the anonymity of the questionnaire enabled the client to be more honest: *"if it's face-to-face, they would never show the disrespect of standing in the lobby and coming face-to-face and most probably telling you their true sentiments"* (H17). Others make reference to the issue of confidentiality and

transparency of the conduit. Respondent H4 broached the issue of confidentiality that is a concern of guests by iterating that the questionnaires are sealed and that “there is no way that they can be interfered with”, hence indicating an affinity for statistical data.

He, however, indicated a contrasting opinion on the validity of the data when discussing questionnaire format and length: as a manager, he would “*need to steer guests to get some sort of statistical database*” by “*prompt(ing) them on specific questions*” and thereby allowing benchmarking against hotel standards in different areas while at the same time “*need a certain amount of freeflow feedback as well, so you also have to provide space and say ‘give us some feedback on your experience’*”. This approach entails a hybrid questionnaire that is of a reasonable length. However, he “*would rather fill in a shorter one*” if he was the guest but commented if “*sufficiently motivated by experience (he) would go right through the whole room, chapter and verse*”.

A passive, non-threatening method of eliciting guest feedback would be more appropriate for Asian guests who, according to respondent H17, “*would never show the disrespect of standing in the lobby and coming face to face and most probably telling you their true sentiments*”.

A form of remote interface is the e-questionnaire. E-questionnaires are questionnaires delivered in the form of an e-mail which provides a platform for guest feedback or an invitation via hyperlink to a hotel website-hosted questionnaire. Since this is increasingly used in the hotel industry, special attention to e-mail as a customer interface with hotel management is presented next.

5.4 E-mail: A Customer Interface

Murphy, Schegg and Olaru (2007, p. 743) underscore the popularity of e-mail in the hospitality industry which “*provides a unique opportunity for personalized and intimate interactions with guests, thus enhancing customer relationships*” (italics added) but suggest that its application by hospitality operators is unsophisticated. Nevertheless, large hotel chains such as Hilton and Marriott have been reported in the press to phase out paper questionnaires and surveys in their North American properties and replace them with e-mail based derivatives (Alexander, 2006). Their action suggests they believe that the technology is proven and that the average hotel guest is receptive to the

technology. This uptake is likely to be buoyed by reports that extol the virtues of e-mail. For example, two commercial studies on the effectiveness of e-mail communications found e-mail to be an effective marketing tool (Nelson, 2006). Grönroos, Heinonen, Isoniemi and Lindholm (2000, p. 250) highlight the interactive online communicational nature of e-mail which “illustrates the dialogue that can occur between the service provider and the customer”. This dialogue, according to Schegg, Murphy and Leuenberger (2003), can be facilitated in hotels by websites and e-mail. Apart from a customer interface function, e-mail also provides opportunities for marketers to create and maintain dialogue with customers (Grönroos et al., 2000; Newell, 2000).

Other studies, however, indicate that the pace of uptake is varied. In Turkey, Aksu and Tarcan (2002) found that dedicated e-mail channels for guest complaints was in its infancy, and similarly in Switzerland, Frey, Schegg and Murphy (2003) discovered variability at the implementation stage.

5.4.1 Changing of the Guard: Paper to e-Questionnaire

Susskind (2006) found in his study of communication-channel preferences of restaurant guests that written communication directed at management (letter, e-mail or web) was preferred over questionnaire/comment card to convey a complaint which suggests that the migration to e-questionnaires may be underpinned by a perception that the virtual variant is more effective than its traditional paper counterpart. However, studies have shown that e-mail responses are ineffectual (Murphy & Tan, 2003; Schegg, Murphy & Leuenberger, 2003) and operationalization deficient (Fux, Noti, & Myrach, 2006; Half of customer e-mails, 2007; Schegg, Liebrich, Liu, & Murphy, 2006). This begs evaluation of how hoteliers at the property level perceive e-mail communication with their guests in terms of proactively obtaining guest e-mail addresses and actual utilization as part of their managerial *modus operandi*. This is particularly pertinent given that technologically savvy guests are more demanding, requiring an immediate response via e-mail (Mattila & Mount, 2003), which resonates with recent findings that timeliness is a key element of the customer’s attitude about the hotel that leads to customer satisfaction and establishing customer loyalty (Jones, Mak & Sim, 2007; Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006). According to Alexander’s (2006) newspaper article, fast

response was the underlying reason for Marriott to switch to e-mail. Tardy or inconsistent e-mail response would therefore be off-putting for guests who may wish to volunteer feedback. As a consequence, a hotel would potentially lose the opportunity to seize upon negative critical incident knowledge that would mitigate switching behaviour in guests (Colgate, Tong, Lee, & Farley, 2007). Notwithstanding the limitations of the static service-encounter-based variant of the critical incident technique (Roos, 2002) which applies to paper and e-questionnaires, these tools continue to be relevant and useful to the hotel management.

This leads to the question of e-mail versus a more traditional response via letter. While some respondents categorically maintain that the use of e-mails is prevalent, for example:

Quite a lot of people put their e-mail address these days so it's generally one of the two (e-mail and telephone). Very rarely do I actually mail a letter these days.
(H3), others might differ (for example, H5).

The increasing popularity of e-mail responses from hoteliers adds a remote service encounter dimension to Bitner, Booms and Tetreault's (1990) classification of antecedents of customer satisfaction with service encounters that is based on personal face-to-face interactions.

5.4.2 Hotelier-Guest Relationships

Hoteliers use the term relationship loosely which fits the characterisation of an interaction between the customer and the service-providing employee (King, 1995; King & Garey, 1997). Price and Arnould (1999) show that the parochial usage of relationship is confounding while McColl-Kennedy, Daus and Sparks (2003) assert that it is subjective, due to the variations of relationships available to consumers. Hoteliers continue to use the generic term despite its complexity (for example see Louvieris, Driver, & Powell-Perry, 2003). Literature directed at operators (such as Gutek, 1995, 1997; Gutek, Groth & Cherry, 2002; Magnini & Honeycutt Jr., 2005) indicate the need to differentiate between the different 'relationships' that occur between customer and service provider. Perhaps the use of the term has been perpetuated by the media as

demonstrated by a declaration made by a travel industry pundit that e-mail is a facilitator of customer relationship (Hareveldt in Sharkey, 2003).

Roos (2002), however, points out that relationship between customers and service providers extends beyond face-to-face encounters as new technology has been increasingly used to control and support service encounters. Relationships, pseudorelationships, encounters and enhanced encounters apply to the hotel industry (Gutek, 1995, 1997; Gutek, Groth & Cherry, 2002). More recently, Riley (2007) notes that 'relationship encounters' is a tourism and hospitality phenomenon. Therefore, the question arises: is a relationship in hotels a misnomer? The frequent posting movement phenomenon by hoteliers especially those with hotel chains (Nankervis, 2000; Clark, personal interview 2005; Claudia Al-Bala'a, Vice President Human Resources Starwood Hotels and Resorts Asia Pacific, personal interview, 2007) strongly suggests that such hoteliers do not have relationships per se but rather enhanced encounters or 'commercial friendships' (Price & Arnould, 1999).

Notwithstanding the semantic issues, Lin's (2007) study of customer satisfaction in Taiwan using a comprehensive perspective serves to highlight the importance of the interaction between service provider and customer. He found that the 'interpersonal-based service encounter' is better than the 'technology-based service encounter' in terms of 'functional quality', while the reverse applied to 'technical quality'. He also found that functional quality influences customer satisfaction in a positive and significant way; likewise service quality effects service value; and service value has a corresponding effect on customer satisfaction. Therefore, he surmised, the service encounter directly influences relationship involvement which in turn impacts on customer satisfaction.

There has, however, been no indication that hotels in Asia Pacific have followed the path taken in North America given the continued widespread use of paper guest questionnaires. Given that e-mail evaluation is in its infancy (Murphy, Schegg & Olaru, 2007), it is fitting that an exploratory study be conducted in the Asia Pacific context on the uptake of this emerging trend.

The in-depth interviews revealed diversity in hotelier attitude towards e-mail as a vehicle for hotel-guest communication:

a) There was a general inclination to use e-mail to communicate with guests. One respondent said:

...not a lot of people actually put their e-mail address on there... but if they have bothered to put an e-mail address on there, I would suggest that the thought was that they were expecting an e-mail (H17)

This, however, is the personal interpretation of that behaviour by this respondent as the provision of an e-mail address by the guest does not necessarily imply a desire for contact to be made, be it by e-mail or any other means.

b) The increased e-mail traffic with guests was a natural reaction to guest prompts:

Quite a lot of people put their e-mail address these days so it's generally one of the two (e-mail and telephone)... very rarely do I actually mail a letter these days (H3)

c) E-mail was impersonal: Respondent H5 said that notwithstanding having used telephone and e-mail responses, *due probably to my age, I still feel e-mail is a little bit impersonal still... I still prefer the written letter*, a sentiment shared by Respondent H17 who, while maintaining that *a proper document with a letterhead on it is most probably the way to go*, grapples with *what is the difference between a letter and an e-mail... a letter is generated again on a typewriter or from a computer, it is not as if it is the days when somebody actually sat down and wrote by hand.*

Some conservative hoteliers may not be entirely comfortable using new technology due to its impersonal connotations, and therefore present with adoption issues which fits the perception that there is a tendency to be resistant to change in the industry and being the last to adopt new technology. Lam, Cho and Qu (2007) suggest that hotelier mindset influences the uptake and adoption of information technology and therefore if the hotel manager is uncomfortable with the technology, then there is a possibility of a trickle down effect. Hotelier conservativeness may not be reflective of personal views on

technology but rather, as respondent H10 implied when saying that his mother *still writes letters – there are millions of people in the world who are still like that*, of a concern of guest attitudes toward technology.

Murphy, Schegg and Olaru (2006, p. 174) recently encourages hoteliers to “establish and train (their) staff on email policies” although the necessity of basic e-mail procedures had already been previously identified (Murphy, Schegg & Olaru, 2006; Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). There appears to be a lingering discomfort with e-mail usage felt by some hoteliers despite it being widely available since the mid-90s (Wei, Ruys, van Hoof & Combrink, 2001) and considered a guestroom amenity (Shundigg 1997; Wolchuck 1997). Could this be attributed to a concern that including an e-mail field on the paper questionnaire would create clutter or simply an embellishment?

5.5 Relationship: Is This Viable in the Virtual Domain?

Some respondents referred to the term ‘relationship’ during the course of the interview. One respondent indicated that a relationship was a longer term interaction thereby indicating an appreciation for the definitional distinction between service encounter and relationship but apparently not further discrimination between relationship and pseudo-relationship:

To me it’s all about relationship building and that relationship is built over perhaps not so much as always on an official basis.... on a casual basis, we get to know the people a little bit better (H10)

The respondent, however, implied that personal relationships were important in the hotel industry and that he would *invite people in for dinners,...do entertaining, correspondence through e-mails, etc.*

This appears to contradict the view of one respondent that relationships with guests could be problematic when lamenting that *becoming too closely attached (can manifest in) some customers (to) start bullying the staff (H6).*

One respondent underscored the importance of commercial friendship by stating *what I believe what makes you comfortable is if you know the guy that is there. You know the GM or the FOM or the concierge or the housekeeper or something, then everything else is a lot easier to follow* (H20). This counters the pseudo-relational orientation of the sampled questionnaires.

The qualitative nature of this data is reflected in the extensive use of verbatim quotes which teases out nuances in attitude towards a highly subjective matter of discourse. This is juxtaposed against the objective subject of technology and lends for some interesting contrasts.

E-mail communication is widely embraced globally as shown by studies such as that on Swiss Small and Medium Enterprises (Schubert & Leimstoll, 2004) and Australian travel agencies (Vasudavan & Standing, 1999). According to Werthner and Ricci (2004), the tourism industry is the leading application in the business-to-consumer (B2C) arena. Based on the findings of this study, the hotel sector would appear to be lagging behind the other sectors while highlighting the B2C orientation of e-commerce in the treatment given to e-mail communication. This appears to contradict the findings of a study by Wei, Ruys, van Hoof and Combrink (2001) of international hotel executives which showed that 97.5% of hotels at which the respondents worked used e-mail, and also that e-mail was commonly used to contact guests (66.1%). There would appear to be a bandwagon effect occurring in the hotel sector in the uptake of e-mail as a primary method of hotel-guest communication given the recent studies showing poor quality in feedback. This concurs with the view of Murphy, Olaru, Schegg and Frey (2003) that hoteliers have been party to the internet bandwagon effect and some have not fully realized the potential of e-mail as a business-communication tool despite hosting websites.

Questionable efficacy of e-mail-based communication channel as a platform for relationship building is noted. 'Relationship', in the context of the hotelier lexicon is the interaction between hotelier and guest and may not constitute a relationship per se or as defined by Gutek and Welsh (2000). The degree of relationship is not distinguished in the hotel industry and is commonly used interchangeably with service encounter. This

perhaps occurs because hotelier-guest interactions can be seen as 'boundary open' transactions which Arnould and Price (1993, p. 27) describe as those "resembling a meeting between friends". Given the cynical view that, from a customer point of view, the relationship may actually be spurious (Liljander & Roos, 2002) with companies "pretending it's a relationship" (Guttek & Welsh, 2000, p. 3) thereby connoting a perception that the action taken by the establishment is mercenary, manipulative and inauthentic, a concerted effort to project genuineness is paramount. This cannot be undermined by initiatives that could be considered impersonal or mechanical, aspects that would surely further erode the tenuous relationship which the hospitality industry strives to develop. What appears to be a notion of relationship is what occurs between the service provider, in this case the hotel chain or a hotel as a business entity, with the customer, viz the guest.

However, in some cases, a personal relationship which can be described as a compound bond of social, cultural, ideological and psychological aspects (see Liljander & Strandvik, 1995), may indeed form between hotelier and guest, which becomes long-term despite career movement which can be attributed to the use of chain domain e-mail addresses provided of course the hotelier remains with a particular chain. Hence the relationship that extends beyond that is centred on relational benefits such as special treatment (for discussion on relational benefits in services industries, see Gwinner, Gremler & Bitner, 1998) which is accessible when a guest 'knows' the hotel general manager. The connection is reinforced when the guest name is known to the general manager and used in communications. One respondent (H12) submitted that the usage of the guest name makes the guest "feel recognized". Another hotelier incorporated this strategy in his operation by instituting extensive guest recognition by name amongst front line staff: "...we really work on knowing that customers' name! If they have been with us for four to five days, we want to know their name on the first day so we are using their name; we train our employees to use the customer's name whenever they can..." (H3).

The adoption of e-questionnaire as a direct replacement of the paper questionnaire can arguably be premature given the indicators that response mechanisms are in their infancy, the disparate hoteliers' attitudes, a lack of a uniform convention on e-mail

etiquette, and legality issues (for example on e-mail liability see Mills, Clay, & Mortensen, 2000). It would appear that although the hotels sampled had, similar to that noted by Frey, Schegg and Murphy (2003) in their study of Swiss hotels, gone beyond the initiation phase of having websites and e-mail, there has been marginal movement to the implementation phase at which policies governing operational administration should be in place. This delayed implementation is untenable given that the procedure consists of the “seemingly simple task of answering e-mail(s) promptly, politely and personally” (Frey, Schegg & Murphy, 2003, p. 197). E-mail, despite its lack of maturity as a guest communication channel, if properly executed plays an important function as an adjunct to the paper questionnaire and a component of a multi-channel approach (Schijns, 2004).

This is manifested not only in different variants based on content or nature of enquiry being used concurrently, but also cosmetically-based variants. This is demonstrated in the following quote:

We, in Jakarta had six... the first one was from me (the GM); the second one was from the housekeeper; the third was from Food and Beverage; the fourth one was from maintenance; the fifth one was from security; and the sixth one was from (someone else) ... very short letters and they were all written by me but they were all signed by the various department heads and it went “welcome back”, “nice to see you again”, “please let me know if I can cook something especially for you”... (H20)

5.6 Conclusion

What emergent knowledge was derived overall from the interviews? Firstly, an insightful hotelier perspective of their interaction with guests was obtained which demonstrated, inter alia, that relationships in the hotel context are often fleeting and shallow. The exception, when it occurs, is probably circumstantial, thereby reiterative of Siguaw, Simpson and Kasikci's (2004, p. 3) observation that “many guests stay for only one-night stands – that is, they show no commitment in the morning”. Consequently, the erosion of the meaning of relationship can be argued which in turn counters the

conventional marketing stance predicated by the notion of customer loyalty, and advances the advocacy of enhancing hotel service encounters.

Secondly, hotelier attitudes towards the questionnaire in both its traditional paper and e-derivative guises were reported. Despite the apparent heightened interest in e-questionnaires in the media, the findings indicated mixed feelings regarding the format. This divergent mindset coupled with apparent patchy utilization would perhaps suggest that wholesale adoption, that is abandonment of the paper questionnaire, is premature. Therein lays the catalyst for evolving questionnaire functionality and formatting. The general manager letter-based questionnaire was lent plausible viability by incorporating the salient factors of questionnaire ease-of-use, namely perceived management motive; managerial response, guest information confidentiality; “*WIIFM*” (What’s In It For Me) factor (H20); and, personalization/ego-boosting. Notable caveats are the perceived reliability of the data and the resources required for data input and interpretation.

The questionnaire provides immediate feedback and the ability to take immediate corrective measures (Lewis, 1983). Therefore it should preferably not be collated and analysed offsite to avoid the lag time typically associated with such third party or centralized data processing. General Managers anecdotally indicate a desire to allocate more time to interacting with guests depending on the type of hotel and clientele.

The guest questionnaire provides the opportunity for top management to have a service encounter with each and every guest during a stay if it can be designed and administered appropriately (Ogle, Nosaka, & Pettigrew, 2005). Such a service encounter may be a positive experience referred to by Smith and Bolton (1998) when reporting on research done that indicated affective service recovery could require as many as 12 consecutive positive experiences, suggesting the need to expediently initiate opportunities to engender favourable post-complaint encounters.

What I do is – and that is my usual routine – in the morning I will just be around the lobby before I come to the office, hoping to meet one or two guests... to catch them off-guard. Especially when they are about to check-out, whether they have enjoyed their stay with us, or anything they have encountered that is not up to

their expectations. I like that. They feel very good when I do that – the General Manager of the hotel – and it's a wow! (H11)

This “wow” factor is opposed to the “ouch” factor expressed by Respondent H20.

According to a senior marketing manager of a major hotel chain, many hotel managers report that they receive more data than they actually require to manage their properties. They find that the data is historical and therefore is not always relevant, in terms of the nature of the information (Stevens & McElhill, 2000) and timeliness, to day-to-day operations. This overload at the property level indicates that some data is not utilized by managers, and becomes redundant as it does not impact on company performance (Fletcher & Wheeler, 1989) or efficiency (Losee, 1989). There is a preference for real-time feedback which could be obtained from short questionnaires, hence the adoption of a postcard sized questionnaire in the Australian and New Zealand markets (Elizabeth Gualtieri Marketing Manager - Strategic Brand Development Accor Asia Pacific, personal interview, 2006).

Chapter 6: LETTER DEVELOPMENT AND TESTING

This chapter reports on the developmental and test stages of the Hotelier Interface-based letter. The initial developmental stage was the design of the 'test instrument', the Hotelier Interface letter. The subsequently test stage involved the testing of the letter alongside a typical hybrid-type guest questionnaire.

The letter development section first presents a discussion on data triangulation followed by the design brief. The section on testing is divided into the following sub-section: Process, Objectives, and Results.

6.1 Letter Development

6.1.1 *Data Triangulation*

The Hotelier Interface (HI) conceptual framework called for three streams of data. These data are used to inform the development and design of a paper interface that would facilitate a remote service encounter between hotelier and guest.

Content analyses revealed a wide variety of paper questionnaires being utilised in hotels. However, the hybrid type was shown to predominate, mainly as a standalone method although some multi-modal approach was observed. Multiple variants are tailored to different audiences and therefore would appear to take into account the need to cater to circumstantiality.

Guest focus groups showed a preference for the hybrid-type questionnaire. The usage, however, of questionnaires is low and a general sense of suspicion of, and ambivalence

to, the feedback in general and the questionnaire in particular diminishes the utility and efficacy of the instrument. Respondents wanted a personal touch and a sense of being valued via a response. However, hoteliers generally project disinterest by not responding appropriately to feedback provided via questionnaire.

Hoteliers attested to the importance of service encounter and value of guest feedback. Despite reporting low response rates, hoteliers endorse the questionnaire notwithstanding, for some hoteliers, the data is beyond their capabilities to interpret and implement. While hoteliers maintain public presence by being ‘lobby lizards’ and hosting cocktails, for example, there is a palpable sense of estrangement felt by guests from the hotelier. This might not be a deficiency to some guests while others may be indifferent or even delighted, but hoteliers report that detachment prevents guests from using familiarity in leveraging special treatment. While proclaiming to cultivate relationships with guests, it is more a case of establishing an enhanced service encounter which would be a more accurate characterization of the interaction between hotelier and guest given the fleeting contact and short tenures. While in general hoteliers embraced technology in the form of e-questionnaire and e-mails, some found it still on the impersonal side and therefore any way to personalize contact would be preferred.

The Letter Format

At each stage of data collection, reference to the letter as a communication interface was made, thereby underpinning a major tenet of the test instrument design.

When there is a negative comment, a ‘personalized’ letter rather than a normal proforma letter is preferable. The personalized letter could be either drafted individually but also could be based on a template that allows it to be tailored to different complaint or dissatisfaction scenarios. The projected personalization evokes empathy by giving the reader the impression that a point was made by the respondent to address the actual issue(s) raised. This personalization could be easily achieved by including an apology such as “*we apologize for this, we will make sure that in future blah, blah, blah*”(Respondent H10).

In contrast, a standard or generic reply letter, albeit very easily generated, would seem fake and insincere. A standard nondescript response letter could be misconstrued as a poor attempt at appeasement with no indication of the management actually having given the feedback any due consideration. Acting as a callous and frivolous measure, the standard reply, although comparatively better than a non-response, would do little to assuage dissatisfaction. Gilbert and Horsnell (1998, p. 450) describe an example of dissatisfaction as “the cathartic experience of a mediocre or poor stay in a hotel”. This ‘catharsis’ is also used by Merton and Kendall (1946) to convey the depth of experiential emotion of customers and if dissatisfaction, for example, is not appropriately dealt with, it could have more serious consequences such as negative word-of-mouth activity or customers ‘voting with their feet’.

6.1.2 The Test Instrument: The Personalized Feedback Solicitation Letter

Thus, a special letter from the hotelier was designed taking a number of factors into consideration:

1. Personal-ability:
 - a. sender identification and contact details
 - b. use of guest name
 - c. content and tone of letter
 - d. hand signed
2. Confidentiality: mode of delivery – direct access without possibility of filtering
3. Ease-of-use: phone or written feedback to the specific query posed
4. Transparency/objective
 - a. non-marketing/data collection and non-benchmarking/performance measurement related
 - b. mutually beneficial

The primary brief of the design was to engender feedback and to make guests feel that they have a valuable contribution to make to the hotel. This contribution is via enhanced guest feedback provision made possible by the guest playing the role of “organizational consultant” based on the Customer Voluntary Performance model (Bettencourt, (1997, p. 385). This voluntary information could be considered the epitome in guest feedback

as it is authentic and geared towards enhanced relationships. The proposed 'hotelier interface' (HI) letter is shown in Figure 6.1. It introduces the general manager (by name) to the guest, seeks their participation in providing constructive feedback on their hotel experience and provides a confidential way of transmitting that information. The letter incorporates aspects determined to be favourable from the focus group respondents' perspective: positive managerial tone, personalization and usage of guest name, assurance of confidentiality, importance of service encounter with the general manager, and recognition of guest opinion and stature. It offers flexibility in that it may elicit and gather supplementary data, when deemed pertinent, by composing it in a different way.

This mode of enquiry is not meant to be market research per se but could loosely be categorised as informal 'decision research' (Ganeshasundaram & Henley, 2006) from which management is able to monitor guests' perceptions of the product and service provision which can directly prompt intervention such as service recovery. The letter is ideally operationalized as a component of a larger guest communication strategy and plays a specialized function. This model fits the Elements of a hotel Service Encounter model (Figure 2.12), which illustrates the interactions between hotel product and service elements, and guests within a hotel context. The guest questionnaire is printed collateral and hence part of the physical environment but, with appropriate modification in form and execution, can engender a service encounter that mimics a direct interaction between general manager and guest, thereby augmenting hotelier 'presence' on property.

Guest Feedback Letter Specimen

This is a specimen of the guest feedback letter. This is the template on which variants, e.g. for repeat/returnee guests, informal letters, caters best to specific requirements.

Dear (Salutation/Last Name)

Let me take this opportunity to introduce myself and welcome you to (hotel name).

I seek your opinion on how my team and I have managed your stay. I passionately believe that your feedback is vital to the continued success of this hotel. It is by knowing our guest that we can strive to provide you the highest level of product and services.

I would therefore appreciate hearing from you regarding any aspect of your interaction with us. *[This could be focused on a single or multiple aspects according to managerial requirements, e.g. guestroom cleanliness, breakfast service, etc.]*

Kindly give me a call on Ext.XXX to let me know when you will be available for a chat or alternately write me on the enclosed hotel stationary and use the postage paid envelope which is addressed to me directly.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

(First Name/Last Name)

(Designation)

(Contact details)

Figure 6.1. Test Letter.

Davidow (2000) tested a model of complainants' perceptions of the organisational response and the impact of that response on the customers' post-complaint behaviours. The six dimensions included in the model were timeliness, facilitation (policies, procedures, and tools that a company has in place to support customer complaints),

redress (the actual outcome received by the customer), apology, credibility, and attentiveness. The study found attentiveness to be the most influential variable affecting satisfaction, word-of-mouth valence, and intention to repurchase among the participants who had a complaint experience in the recent past. This finding was consistent with the results of research by Mittal and Lassar (1996) who found personalization (interpersonal interaction) to be the most important variable in determining customer satisfaction and repatronage. The findings of Davidow (2000) also reflect the conclusions made by Scanlan and McPhail (2000) in their study of hotel guests from the business traveller segment and their service expectations of front desk receptionists. They found that these guests desired more emotional involvement from the receptionists for a more genuine and caring relational exchange rather than just empathy expressed in building a service relationship.

It is, however, worthy to note that a compromise is availed by the questionnaire whereby the remote encounter is able to convey the expression of empathy in the preamble but in any case, unless in a one-on-one situation a genuine and caring relationship exchange is unfeasible and untenable.

In order to test the adequacy of this 'alternate' form of obtaining guest feedback, the hotelier letter and a typical hybrid-type guest questionnaire (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3) were presented to a sample of hoteliers. This forms the next phase of the research.

The objective of this phase of the research was evaluating the proposed hotel service encounter interface framework, using a sample of general managers. This framework, as previously elaborated on in Chapter 6, is formed based on triangulation of findings obtained from earlier rounds of data collection and analysis. This evaluative process constituted showing the proposed alternative questionnaire, represented by an enquiry letter to the guest from the general manager, to a sample of hoteliers derived from the sample used in the hotelier interviews described in Chapter 5.

意見書 Guest Comments					餐廳及酒廊 Restaurants and Lounges						
	是否享用此服務 Did you use the service	出色 Very Good	滿意 Satisfactory	欠佳 Below Expectation	餐飲質量 Food & Beverage Quality			服務質量 Service Quality			
					良好 Very Good	滿意 Satisfactory	欠佳 Below Expectation	良好 Very Good	滿意 Satisfactory	欠佳 Below Expectation	
房間預訂 Reservation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	法國餐廳 Robuchon a Galera	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
接待服務 Reception Service					錦京日廊 Portas do Sol	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
轎車服務 Limousine Service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	不夜天咖啡室 Noite e Dia Coffee Shop	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
門僮服務 Door Service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	日廊 Gallery Lounge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
行李運送服務 Baggage Handling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	房層服務 Room Service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
前堂 Front Desk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	宴會及會議 Banquets & Meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
客務助理 Guest Relations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							
禮賓服務 Concierge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							
客房 Guest Room					如何選擇錦京酒店 Hotel Selection						
客房服務員 Room Attendants	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 朋友推介 Recommended by Friend / Associate <input type="checkbox"/> 個人喜好 Personal Preference <input type="checkbox"/> 互聯網 Internet <input type="checkbox"/> 旅行社 Travel Agent <input type="checkbox"/> 廣告 Advertisement <input type="checkbox"/> 其他 Other <small>(請說明 Please Specify)</small>						
洗衣服務 Laundry / Valet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	姓名 Name :	_____					
接線員 Telephone Operator	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	電郵 Email :	_____					
客房設施 Room Facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	地址 Address :	_____					
游泳池/健身中心 Pool / Fitness Center	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	入住日期 Date of Stay :	_____		房間號碼 Room Number :	_____		

Figure 6.2. Standard Hybrid Questionnaire (inside fold).



Figure 6.3. Standard Hybrid Questionnaire (outside fold).

Letter Design

The Hotelier Interface (HI) framework (Figure 2.15, p. 92) underpins the ‘test instrument’, that is the questionnaire variant to be evaluated. This item was a personalized feedback solicitation letter from the hotel General Manager² (Figure 6.1). Being open-ended, and hence wholly qualitative, this enquiry is not designed to specifically gather quantitative information and therefore does not lend itself well to producing statistical data. The letter is primarily a medium for interface between

² Or the most senior /hotelier manager on the property

manager and guest which may subsequently engender constructive guest feedback. It projects a desire, on the part of the manager, to show appreciation to the guest by “actively acknowledging the value of a customer by recognizing his existence and by establishing a knowledge of his particular needs and desires” (Vavra, 1992, p. 37). The letter incorporates aspects determined to be favourable from the respondent perspective: positive managerial tone, personalization and usage of guest name, assurance of confidentiality, importance of service encounter with the general manager, and recognition of guest opinion and stature. The letter could either feature an entirely open question which would not restrict what the range of answers, or guided question(s) for specificity of answers (Dolnicar, 2002). It would offer flexibility in regards to the scope of the enquiry: it may elicit and gather supplementary data when deemed pertinent with a view to devising a tailored solution to a hotel specific problem, depending on its composition. As Edwards and Ingram (1995, p. 25) point out, due to the “diverse nature of organisations and the multiplicity of unit types”, problems would be property-specific and hence require a tailored solution.

Due-in guests are randomly selected³ daily from the arrival list and letters prepared the day before arrival for presentation to the guest upon check-in⁴. The letters would be addressed to the guest by name and personally signed by the hotelier. An optional supplementary list of in-house long-stay guests and walk-ins may be considered by the administrator and would enhance sampling validity. This model may exist as a standalone approach or as part of a multi-approach strategy depending on individual property or chain management requirements.

6.2 Process

The letter was used during the confirmatory interview phase which involved follow-up interviews in December 2006 and January 2007 with ten (10) Perth and Penang hotel hoteliers who had participated in the in-depth interviews conducted in 2004/2005. The

³ Daily random selection via PMS on a quota necessarily for statistical analysis, if required

⁴ Meets the passive solicitation mode, or could be placed in the room prior to check-in

interview involved a series of questions (Figure 6.4) which probed the methods of guest feedback elicitation, genre of paper questionnaire used, and importance of service encounter between hotelier and guest as a prelude to introducing the items to be evaluated.

On the one hand, quantitative research methods depend on large randomised samples to produce results that can be considered generalisable (Lyn & Lyn, 2003). On the other hand, interpretive research can rely on samples that are relatively smaller and non-randomised (Kwortnik, 2003). Convenience sampling was adopted for the follow-up interview phase with selection restricted to only two locations due to budgetary and time constraints. All interviews were conducted in person with one exception which was a telephone interview (Respondent I).

6.3 Objectives

The interviews primarily sought to ascertain the viability of the model from a practitioner viewpoint via: (a) ratings of 4 different factors of the letter and a standard hybrid (Figures 6.2 and 6.3) and (b) questions probing the motivation for and utility of the prevalent paper form of guest feedback format, that is the standard hybrid questionnaire, thereby testing the position taken by the researcher that the feedback interface can be transformed into a service encounter opportunity. The interview scheme is shown in Figure 6.4. This study extends on the information previously obtained whilst clarifying:

- (a) What the hotel manager considers the primary purpose/objective of the guest questionnaire;
- (b) Does the standard hybrid-type function as an service encounter interface; and
- (c) Is the hotelier letter a viable management-guest interface?

The confirmatory interviews serve to validate the pertinent aspects of the proposed framework.

Follow-up General Manager survey

- 1) What method of guest feedback elicitation do you currently apply?
 - a) If you use a paper questionnaire, what type(s) do you use?
 - i) Please describe the objective for the questionnaire in one word.
 - ii) What response rate do you obtain?
 - b) In your opinion, what are the main positive and negative aspects of the paper questionnaire?
 - i) If you could revamp questionnaire, what would you do and why?
 - c) What are your views on a multi-questionnaire approach?
- 2) Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10, your evaluation of the these two items (1=least favourable, 10=most favourable)

	Standard Hybrid Questionnaire	Guest Feedback Letter
a) Guest acceptance factor (GAF), i.e. perception of guest acceptability/propensity to use		
b) Managerial Utility (useful/potentially useful information to managers)		
c) Practicability (effort required, cost effectiveness)		
d) Hotelier acceptance factor (HAF), i.e. willingness of GM to adopt/advocate method		

Optional Question

- 3) Service Encounter-related questions
 - a) Do you consider a service encounter, i.e. a face-to-face interaction, with your guest important?
 - b) In your opinion, do you spend sufficient time on "service encountering"?

Do you think a personalized feedback solicitation letter could be a viable means of affecting a service encounter? Why is this so?

Figure 6.4. Follow-up hotelier interview schedule.

6.4 Results

The hoteliers were overall approving of the proposition while cognisant of the situational constraints in its execution. The findings indicate that the paper hotel questionnaire is still relevant to contemporary hotel management; however, suggestions are made to enhance its value in creating service encounters, service recovery outcomes and guest commitment.

It should be noted that of the ten hoteliers sampled, six had participated in the hotelier interview stage with the remaining four being direct replacements of the former incumbents (Respondents C, D, E, H). This turnover had occurred in a period of two years, thereby attesting to the high rate of turnover highlighted in Chapter 5. It is also interesting to note that the replacement hoteliers were agreeable to the interview despite not having been involved at the earlier stage of the research. The researcher had erroneously anticipated reluctance for these hoteliers based on the assumption that there would not be any commitment to follow through on the commitment of a predecessor and the general reluctance of hoteliers to participate in applied strategic research (Phillips & Appiah-Adu, 1998; Cohen, Teresi & Holmes, 1986).

The results are tabulated in Table 6.1. The numerical ratings for Guest Acceptance Factor (GAF), Managerial Utility, Practicability and Hotelier Acceptance Factor (HAF) are reported with the hybrid questionnaire rating preceding that of the letter (i.e. hybrid/letter).

Table 6.1

Follow-up Interview Data.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Primary purpose/objective	Measure of guest satisfaction	Guest feedback relating to improvement	Customer feedback, marketing	Performance indicator	Measure of guest satisfaction, staff motivation	Indicator of performance	Customer service measurement	Customer service indicator	Measurement, improvement indicator	Performance barometer (guest view)
Assessment of paper questionnaire	User-friendly	Sufficient but has limitations*	User-friendly, handy, succinct	Benchmarking tool function	Cost effective, standard format	Benchmarking tool, guest expression	Good avenue for genuine feedback	Succinct overview, quick and easy	Familiarity with guests, instantaneous feedback	All aspects are positive
Importance of the service encounter	High	Average	Very High	High	High	High	Very High	Very High	Very High	Very High
Is specimen 'A' a viable way of creating a SE?	Yes	Yes	Yes (if resources are available)	Yes (depending on hotel locality and clientele)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (if viable/applicable)
GAF	8/10	7/8	4/8	8/9	9/10	8/7 3/7	10/8	8/9	8/7-8	5/7
Managerial Utility	10/10	8/6	7/8	7/8	9/9	8/8	9/9	9/9	8/5	10/10
Practicability	9/10	6/8	4/8	7/9	8/9	4/8	8/8	4/7	9-9/5-6	7/7
HAF	10/10	7/8	4/8	6/9	9/10	6/9	10/10	6/9	8-9/5	5/7

*non-specificity/too general, scales are too narrow, insufficient white space

Rating Scale

- 1 - 4 Unfavourable
- 5 Neutral
- 6 - 7 Favourable
- 8 - 10 Very Favourable

6.4.1 Primary Purpose/Objective of the Guest Questionnaire

The findings in this section are reported according to the sequencing of questions as shown in the interview schema.

6.4.1a Feedback Methods Favoured by Hoteliers Framed As “What Method of Guest Feedback Elicitation Do You Currently Apply?”

All respondents affirmed their predilection for face-to-face guest contact and the partiality to showcase themselves by seizing opportunistic public presence availed by being a ‘lobby lizard’. Respondent H, however, qualified the amount spent in the lobby as ‘minimal’ on account of the exceedingly high volume of guest movement at her downtown business property which is located near a major departmental store and bus depot. This direct contact was extended by some to hosting either regular or occasional cocktail parties, or formal entertaining (Respondents B, C, D, E, G, I). This practice, however, is less prevalent than previously due to budgetary and operational constraints, and gender bias (Respondent F).

Courtesy calls were commonplace (Respondents A, C, E, G, H, I) but often conducted by proxy. Respondent A delegated the task to his Duty Managers but would, on occasion, telephone an in-house guest himself. Respondent G volunteered that this activity was done by his Front Office Manager or front desk staff. One respondent, however, espoused “*the original form of communicating*” which was “*walking, and talking to guests*” and therefore extensively engaged guests via courtesy calls.

The exit interview approach was also (Respondents B, C, E, G, H, I) used despite minimal interest in it by the hotel guests. Respondent B was highly selective on whom the exit interview was to be conducted with, presumably for the same reason Respondents C and E cited, which was time constraints. It was interesting to note that Respondent F had previously practiced engaging with guests at check-out but had discontinued this practice because he perceived exit interviews as being too intrusive and lamented that the “*hit rate*” was too low.

The current interest in post-departure e-mail-based questionnaires was not reflected in the follow-up interviews. Respondent D would consider the option providing that it was web-base linked while Respondent H showed enthusiasm for the approach but was cognisant of the operational implications of databases and instituted a biannual data purge. Respondent I delegated the management of e-mail procedure to the Customer Care Manager. Conversely, Respondent E stipulated that e-mails would be redundant for her downtown boutique-style property and Respondent G noted that the e-mails were not pertinent as feedback should be captured pre-departure.

6.4.1b Questionnaire Usage Framed As “If You Use A Paper Questionnaire, What Type(s) Do You Use?”

All respondent were using at least one type of paper questionnaire. There were however some hotels that had multi-variants being used concurrently (notable examples being Respondents C using a separate ‘Suite Questionnaire’ and ‘Restaurant Survey’ which while not being a multi-variant in a strict accommodation sense, could be taken into consideration as there would be a demarcation between room and city guests’ opinions.

Respondent I characterised his well ‘designed’ and ‘structured’ corporate chain-mandated questionnaire as being highly quantitative which resonates with the findings of the content analysis that questionnaires being used by this particular chain are lengthy. Respondent J, on the other hand, sought qualitative feedback and this was reflected in her questionnaire which was ‘signed’ using the company’s hallmark tradename thereby suggesting a highly personalized communication (<http://www.missmaud.com.au/AboutMissMaud/tabid/53/Default.aspx>).

There was a sense that hoteliers were not in favour of using different questionnaire variants concurrently (multi-variant questionnaires). Seven respondents said that they disliked the idea:

Hate it! (Respondent F)

Too badgering! (Respondent C)

Guests don't have enough time (for this) (Respondent E)

Admin(istrative) nightmare! (Respondent G)

OTT (over the top) (Respondent J)

Respondent G, while voicing his concern for the additional workload entailed with administering multiple questionnaire variants, recognized the advantage of the focused nature of targeted enquiries as manifested in the approach.

6.4.1c Questionnaire Evolution

The findings appear to suggest that the changes made to the questionnaire in the interim are superficial and while attention has been placed on its visual outlook (legibility, buzz lines), little if any changes to the 'form and function' aspects of the questionnaire appear to have been instituted. Hence, the paper questionnaire would appear to be stagnated in the evolutionary sense. This may explain the apparent interest in e-questionnaires as it would appear to offer a palpable shift. This raises the question whether a fundamental redesign is in order, and precedes a leap into alternative delivery formats.

The lack of innovation demonstrated in the high propensity for hoteliers to favour the hybrid-type standard is suggestive that hoteliers are ambiguous with regards to their questionnaire design: either they are highly conservative and reluctant to deviate from the status quo, or they are eager to innovate to the extent of abandoning the paper questionnaire altogether.

Noteworthy Modifications

Noteworthy modifications were observed to have been made to some questionnaires of the follow-up hotels during the course of this study:

Pacific International: 1) inclusion of incentive to guests in the form of entry into a monthly draw for 1 night complimentary accommodation, 2) additional questions and scale reduction from 4 (Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor) to 3 (Excellent, Good, Could

improve), and 3) enhanced confidentiality with the provision of adhesive appliqué on questionnaire flaps.

The E&O Hotel: 1) printed with a darker print face, and 2) the signatory changed from “The staff of the Eastern & Oriental” to “General Manager, Eastern & Oriental Hotel”.

6.4.1d Description of the Objective for Questionnaire in a Nutshell

The respondents were asked to “describe the objective for (their) questionnaire in one word”. The responses generally indicated a positive objective which centred on the guest/customer and incorporated the term in the answer: “*measure of guest satisfaction*” (Respondent A), “*customer*” (Respondent C), “*customer service*” (Respondent D), “*customer service measurement*” (Respondent G). Others described it in managerial terms of being a measurement instrument or tool: “*satisfaction indicator*” (Respondent E), “*indicator*” (Respondent F), “*customer service measurement*” (Respondent G). An extension of this measurement function is facilitates “*improvement*” facilitation (Respondent B). Other provided general traits that suggest a combination of the above: “*simple*” (Respondent H), “*valuable*” (Respondent I), “*perception*” (Respondent J).

6.4.1e Main Positive and Negative Aspects of the Paper Questionnaire

The responses provided by respondents to the question “in your opinion, what are the main positive and negative aspects of the paper questionnaires?” are tallied in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2

Main Positive and Negative Aspects of Paper Questionnaires Generally.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
User friendly/Self-explanatory	Non-Specific
Handy (compact)	Scale too narrow
Concise & clear (insight facilitation)	Limited space for open comments
Departmental focus	Guest are fed-up with them
Quick	Delay in relaying information
Cheap	Clutter in room
Standardization	Encourages guest to be intentionally picky
Staff motivation	

Communication vehicle (avenue for self expression)

Benchmarking (measurement standard)

Independent opinion (true guest stories)

Immediacy of results

From Table 6.2, on balance there appeared to be more positive traits compared to negative traits. One contradictory trait identified by Respondent I was that the questionnaire provided an ‘instantaneous result’ suggesting that the feedback was timely if it was received within the recovery opportunity window. Respondent F, on the other hand, lamented that the corporate questionnaire went directly to the corporate office, causing a time delay that deprived him of the opportunity to act in a timely fashion.

6.4.2 Service Encounter Interfacing

The hotelier letter was tested for operational feasibility and a number of variables.

6.4.2a Operational Feasibility

The findings serve to confirm an opinion obtained during the first round of hotelier interviews (Respondent H10) that the guest questionnaire “comes more into play” in a large hotel where guest movement is high which impacts on the extent that the top management can have face-to-face interaction with guests.

6.4.2b Comparability of Questionnaire Variants

The findings (Table 6.1) show that:

- a) the Guest Acceptance Factor of the letter was generally lower than the hybrid-type with the exception of Respondents E and F.
- b) the Managerial Utility scores were mixed with the comparative scores being very close together with one exception: Respondent I scored 8/5.
- c) the Practicality scores indicated the letter to be relatively less practical than the hybrid-type questionnaire with wide variances. Respondents G, J and I, however, rated them as being on par (8/8, 7/7, 9/9 respectively). Respondent I, however, added that in certain circumstances, it might be the reverse (5/6).

d) the Hotelier Acceptance Factor data showed an overall lower acceptance compared to the hybrid-type questionnaire. Based on the preceding data, it would appear that this is a relative evaluation and should not be construed as an indictment of its viability. In actuality, two hoteliers (Respondents A and G) gave both methods full scores (10/10) thereby showing parity in their acceptance of both. It is interesting to note that Respondent I mirrored his rating of the letter in terms of practicality with a score of 8-9/5 for Hotelier Acceptance Factor which might seem incongruent with his view that his MCQ-dominant lengthy questionnaire was “well-designed” and “well-structured”.

6.5 Hotelier Interface Letter Viability

All respondents acknowledged the importance of the service encounter. In response to the query framed as “in your opinion, do you spend sufficient time on “service encountering?””, there were mixed reactions. Six respondents felt that they were spending sufficient time meeting with guests while three respondents lamented that they did not have enough opportunity to mingle with their guests. One respondent did not provide an answer. The findings suggest that despite some hoteliers having the opinion that the time spent with guests was sufficient, additional service encountering was not to be ruled out. All respondents replied in the affirmative when asked “Is specimen ‘A’ (see Figure 19) a viable way of creating a service encounter?” Some respondents were cognisant of the operational constraints/considerations of using it vis-à-vis resources (Respondent B), specificity of hotel locality and market (Respondents D and J) and seasonality (Respondent A) thereby having reservations of its applicability at their particular properties. The study, however, shows that the letter has the potential to play a complementary, if not major, interfacing role.

This chapter discussed the operationalization and reports the findings of the follow-up interviews. This involved the final phase of data collection and the Chapter 7 provides a final summary.

Chapter 7: CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATION

This chapter presents a discussion of the major research findings emerging from the research. A discussion which draws on the literature review in trying to explain the emergent findings is made. This chapter also puts forth the limitations of the research and ramifications. The chapter is concluded with implications of the research findings, and suggestions for future research directions.

7.1 Summary

This research set out to accomplish a number of goals and for the most part has achieved those objectives. As noted previously in Chapter 1, this study is timely given the interest being directed to the e-questionnaire and away from the paper questionnaire.

The review of the literature on service encounters revealed a gap in the a) characterization, and consequently b) operationalization of the *hospitality service encounter*. These gaps provided sound justification for pursuing this research locus and for the usage of the guest enquiry along the hotelier-guest dyad as a research vehicle. This research has led to an extension of the body of knowledge on service encounters with strong relevance to the hospitality industry. The research is particularly pertinent to mainstream hotels but also has application in the wider services industry.

Crystallizing into a hotel service encounter interface framework which encompasses the hotelier-guest dyadic dimension, this study elicited viewpoints through focus groups, in-depth interviews and quasi Q-sort methodologies about the hotel guest questionnaire from guests and hoteliers in a variety of hotels located in Perth, Penang and Singapore. This data, together with a content analysis of various hotel questionnaires, resulted in a questionnaire typology encompassing the marked differentiation of questionnaire

lengths and formats, namely all-open, all-closed and combinations of open and closed-ended questions. This led to a proposition of an alternative 'questionnaire' in the form of an enquiry letter from the general manager.

As a final stage in the research, a confirmatory process was taken whereby the *specimen* was shown to a number of hoteliers who were overall approving of the proposition while cognisant of the situational constraints in its execution. The findings indicate that the paper hotel questionnaire is still relevant to contemporary hotel management; however, suggestions are made to enhance its value in creating service encounters, service recovery outcomes and guest commitment.

7.2 Findings of Particular Significance

Five topics of particular significance emanating from the findings are worthy of detailed explication. They are Customer Commitment, Service Innovation, Communication Channel Pliability, Communication in Hotelier-Guest Dyadic Interaction and Questionnaire Design.

7.2.1 Customer Commitment

According to Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000), it is widely proven and accepted that customer satisfaction is a prerequisite for customer loyalty (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000), that is, impetus for the extensive and widespread practice of guest satisfaction measurement by hotels (Gilbert & Horsnell, 1998), typically via the guest questionnaire. The focus of guest questionnaires is the measurement of property performance and guest satisfaction (Lewis & Pizam, 1981). However, commitment, according to Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992), is an outcome of relationship quality, and leads to satisfaction, loyalty, complimentary behaviour and generation of new custom (Kim & Cha, 2002). There would hence appear to be divergence in views on the causal relationship between satisfaction and commitment. The implication that commitment is an antecedent of satisfaction, however, is strengthened by Kandampully and Suhartanto's (2000) definition of guest loyalty as being the intention to recommend and repurchase. Bowen and Shoemaker (1998, p. 349) also characterise loyalty as, apart from the likelihood of repatronage, the guest's "willingness to behave as a partner to the organization". This partnership behaviour fits the concept of customer performance

volunteerism (Bettencourt, 1997) which was found to be related to customer commitment and loyalty. Hence the close linkage between loyalty and commitment is evident which serves to highlight the need to gauge guest commitment in addition to satisfaction. This is made even more salient when satisfaction is typically a transaction-centric measurement while customer loyalty is more holistic because it involves repurchase and engagement in partnership activities (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999).

As a consequence, it is posited that the contemporary guest questionnaire is deficient in accurately assessing guest sentiment. Further, it is essential for hoteliers to gauge guest commitment and this would be facilitated primarily by qualitative enquiry.

The focus group interview data suggests that some guests are willing to provide feedback in a conducive environment. Liao's (2007) finding that service recovery performance (SRP) positively influences customer satisfaction which in turn impinges on repatronage, holds true in this study as some respondents indicated that hotelier response to their complaint feedback impacted on their future consumption behaviour.

Bettencourt (1997) posits that Customer Voluntary Performance (CVP) is the result of commitment, satisfaction and perceived support. Hence in addition to gauging satisfaction to which closed-ended questions are suited, hoteliers should also attempt to measure commitment. Multiple-choice questions are not suitable for 'measuring' a subjective concept such as commitment, which could however be teased out through qualitative probing prompted by the hotelier letter.

The hotelier data showed that *prima facie*, hoteliers are eager to receive guest feedback and would act on it if feasible. The data also suggested that hoteliers may be overloaded with information which they cannot easily process but rely on real-time information to manage their properties optimally. The letter facilitates gathering strategic information while engendering a service encounter along the hotelier-guest dyad.

While the questionnaire content analysis did show that the questionnaires may seek repatronage intention information, it lacks sophistication when framed in a YES/NO optioned query, as commonly was the case.

Using the questionnaires associated with the follow-up interview respondents as a convenience sample, seven of the ten hotels included an 'intent to repatronage' query posed either in a YES/NO format (4), 4-point Likert-type scale format (1), 5-point Likert-type scale format (1) or open-ended format (1). The hotels using the Likert-type scales went so far as to query 'chain loyalty' in addition to separate likelihood of a future stay and making a recommendation to a friend or colleague. One of the hotels worded the query as follows:

Commitment to (chain name)

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement:

You would switch to a competing hotel group/chain if they offered a better rate or discount on their services (5-point scale anchored by Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree provided)

This follow-up interview data is illustrative of the lack of sophistication shown in probing the level of commitment. It is therefore important that hoteliers proactively encourage guests to return and to "collect the data necessary to develop a meaningful dialogue" with them (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999, p. 353) and not rely on a simple post-usage judgement (Fisk, 1981).

7.2.2 Service Innovation

Service innovation manifests itself in new hotel categories, the increased use of information technology and enhanced service customization (Victorino, Verma, Plaschka & Dev, 2005). While service innovation is a crucial aspect of market differentiation and revenue generation, adding more services may be untenable (Victorino et al., 2005). Hence service customization has its limitations but service innovation may be manifested, according to the definition provided by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (TEKES, 2004), as a "replicable element (that) can be the service outcome or the service process as such or part of them". Miles (1993) links innovation and a major characteristic feature of services consumption which is the role of the consumer in provision of input into design and production processes. The focus group interviews showed that guests are welcoming of service process innovations, including how they are engaged in feedback provision, providing that it enhances their experience. Hence the hotelier service encounter-based

framework is applicable and relevant as it uses service innovation, in its process sense, to build guest commitment and, in turn, repatronage.

The hotelier letter elicits, primarily through open-ended questions, inferences of guest commitment. Despite the characterisation of differentiating between closed-ended and open-ended question formats as being trite (Coxon, 2005), this aspect is not to be overlooked nor underestimated. This distinction is, however, highly pertinent to the guest: the focus group participants had divergent views about question formats. Despite a general preference for the hybrid-type question, guests were either highly in favour of or strongly opposed to open-ended questions. The participants demonstrating high probability of completing questionnaires tended to indicate a wish to express their views and welcomed a format in which they could articulate themselves. Others indicated that the simplicity of multiple-choice answers underscored their usage.

The focus group findings indicated that respondents were insensitive to nuances in scale and question design with the exception of question grouping according to functional categories. The provision of grouping such as scales in the multiple-choice question formats, however, may inadvertently affect auto-suggestion of a mistaken recollection (Rush, Philips & Lord, 1981). Even if this outcome is intended, such as being favourable, it may in actuality create an opposing effect because past negative experiences could possibly distort actual perception.

The hotelier can mislead the respondent by asking for an evaluation based on a subjective scale, for example, for the evaluation of the guestroom renovation. A wholly qualitative and authentic way of eliciting evaluation in such a case would be to pose an open-ended question. Although poor customer measurement in the numerical sense may lead to results that are not properly communicated and acted upon (Cook, 2004), coaching the respondent into assigning an evaluation on a numerical or expectation scale on something as subjective as comfort or décor is specious. Hoteliers appeared to be wary of the effort required to process and interpret qualitative data and hence invariably prefer quantitative data. Many hoteliers, however, acknowledged the value of qualitative data and, given their indication of the importance of face-to-face guest contact which is impinged on by time constraints, the letter offers a viable alternative.

7.2.3 Communication Channel Pliability

The literature suggests that flexible and adaptable communication is key in effective interfacing. This points to a need, in theory, for management to be proactive in their interaction with guests and have the ability to morph their strategies according to market conditions, which are constantly in a state of flux. Customer satisfaction, for instance, is highly subjective and therefore situation-specific, and so a one-fits-all solution is inadequate. Both guests and hoteliers appear to be ambivalent about how this impacted on the questionnaire and were focussed on the face-to-face encounter.

The content of the letter or questionnaire enquiry should be targeted according to particular guest segment or circumstantial needs, hence the departure from a one-fits-all solution in feedback solicitation. This ability to morph makes for better knowledge management using the approach best suited for the user needs (Coxon, 2005). This means the ability to alter the content and delivery of an enquiry on an ad hoc basis becomes pertinent. The letter enquiry allows for freedom to affect modifications while providing a means to encourage participation in the various methods of guest feedback being implemented by the hotel.

The focus group findings suggest that some guests would be willing to engage in sharing their opinions if they were personally invited to do so. Hence, a personalized invitation by the hotelier via the letter would not only facilitate direct guest-to-hotelier feedback, it would also serve to boost participation in the standard guest questionnaire. The follow-up hotelier interviews indicated a perceived importance of the service encounter and the desire to obtain guest feedback. The letter was considered to be a viable means of availing the hotelier an opportunity to encounter the guest, and thereby secure their valuable feedback.

7.2.4 Communication in Hotelier-Guest Dyadic Interaction

Hofstede (1980) championed the notion of culture dimensionality (Power Distance: PDI; Individualism: IDV; Masculinity: MAS; Uncertainty Avoidance: UAI; Long-Term Orientation: LTO). These dimensions are defined in Figure 7.1.

1. Power distance, that is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.
2. Individualism on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, that is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups.
3. Masculinity versus its opposite, femininity, refers to the distribution of roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found.
4. Uncertainty avoidance deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, it ultimately refers to man's search for Truth. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations.
5. Long-term versus short-term orientation: this fifth dimension was found in a study among students in 23 countries around the world, using a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars. It can be said to deal with Virtue regardless of Truth.

Figure 7.1. Definition of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. (Taken and adapted from <http://feweb.uvt.nl/center/hofstede/page3.htm>, Retrieved 29 Dec 2007)

The adoption of these specific 'cultural' categories is underpinned by culture being influenced by 'mental programming' (Bing, 2004) of guests, be it that of association with a particular population or community (nurture), or as an individual (nature). Hofstede (1991) asserts that "every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime". The focus group surveys revealed the factors that contribute to the formation of presumptive posturing by guests. It is therefore imperative that hoteliers strive to undo misconceptions that guests may have in their dealings with the management.

To this end, based on the five 'cultural' categories, a tabulation of this phenomenon is presented based on the different data sets emanating from this research. This tabulation serves to illustrate the communication dynamic that occurs between the guest and hotelier: the expectation of the guest vis-à-vis the need to communicate and be communicated with during a hotel stay experience.

Specific characterization of guest communication from different stakeholder perspectives have been noted and subsequently categorised in Table 7.1 according to definable semantic similarity. The criteria for inclusion into the table were frequency of mention of five times or more at each phase of data collection.

Table 7.1.
Guest-Hotelier Communicational Dynamic Using Hofstede's Culture Dimensions.

Research Participant Guest Communication Classification					
	PDI*	IDV*	MAS*	UAI*	LTO*
Questionnaire Analysis	✓	✓			
Guest Focus Group	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotelier Interviews	✓	✓	✓		✓

**PDI: Power Distance; IDV: Individualism; MAS: Masculinity; UAI: Uncertainty Avoidance; LTO: Long-Term Orientation*

The questionnaire analysis revealed that hoteliers appeared to relegate themselves relative to their guests by presenting the request for information with modesty and courtesy. This attitude is most evident in the tone set in the preamble in most cases. While some questionnaires appeared to originate from the hotelier, in many cases it was a generic message that was not written by the incumbent general manager. A sense of a clear demarcation of 'I/us' (hotel) and 'you' (guest/customer) is palpable and the 'us' further delineated from 'them' (competitors). A single standard questionnaire therefore does not have the ability to be tailored in order to cater to different audiences and hence the multi-variant approach has its virtues despite its indictment in the follow-up interviews.

From the tabulation, hotel guests are highly heterogeneous as a group in their attitudes vis-à-vis their communication with hoteliers. The wide spread across all five categories may be caused by the wide demographic diversity represented in the hotel guest sample which mirrors actual mainstream hotel guest profile irrespective of niche marketing. While there was obvious differentiation such as the propensity to engage in feedback, a commonality is the perception that guests are highly individualistic in their

communication needs and hence expect to be accorded personalized attention. This sits well with the notion that guests seek recognition, either implicitly or explicitly, and that customer recognition, which includes tailored messages, is a tactic to create loyalty (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999).

The hoteliers appear to be predisposed towards the 'assertive pole' and hence rate highly on masculinity. Possibly influenced by stereotyping, this tendency could result in negative conditioning and possible flashpoints given that the guest also has this trait, can be tempered if the service encounter could be facilitated remotely as demonstrated by the findings from the questionnaire analysis. Hence, the letter would serve to alleviate the possible negativity of sustained direct face-to-face encounters between management and guests. Instead, enhanced relationships can be established and honed via a remote yet personalized means. This finding bodes well for hoteliers as they are availed yet another opportunity to respond guest complaints, if any, in light of the findings of Karatepe and Ekiz's (2004) study that apology, explanation and effort are three organisational response options that exert significant positive effects on complainant satisfaction and loyalty.

The findings point to a managerial dilemma that hoteliers face in their interaction with guests. Guests, it would seem, are enigmatic with regards to the formality that is appropriate in their interaction with the hotelier. On the one hand, they would like to be treated like a customer, and on the other, as a friend. According to Atkinson (1982, p. 114), formality is widely interpreted by the "observers (and presumably participants too)", thereby making its interpretation highly culture and context-specific. The level of formality in the hotel industry appears to vary according to locality, guest demographic and culture. Notwithstanding the variances, the hotelier has to come across via the questionnaire directly through the preamble and indirectly via subtle design considerations. For example, can friendliness be implied or suggested by way of smiley usage in scales, or considered as an interaction which one focus group participant describes as "*familiarity breeds contempt*" (FG38).

The letter format allows the hotelier to fine-tune the tone projected on an ad hoc basis, therein applying the convergence approach which, as opposed to the 'maintenance approach' which "involves little of no attempt to alter or deviate from a script when

dealing with the customer”, allows personalisation in the interaction “by using the customer’s name, asking the opinion of the customer, and repeating details” (Harris, Bojanic, & Cannon, 2003, p. 276). The hotelier can therefore have the opportunity to engage in discourse relations instead of being limited by a purely rhetorical function. Figure 7.2 illustrates the antecedents of relationship formation put forth by Scanlan and McPhail (2000). With the ability to modify tone (demeanour) and syntax (phraseology), the hotelier addresses all the ‘critical relational attributes’ which can engender a future relationship.

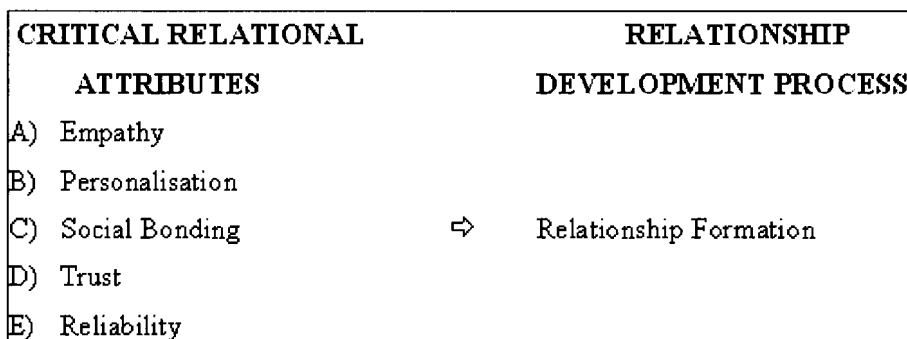


Figure 7.2. Critical Relational Attributes Model: Customer Perspective (Scanlan & McPhail, 2000)

The rapport between customer and employee in service relationships is defined as a customer’s “perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee, characterized by a personal connection between the two interactants” (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, p. 92), has positive relationship with satisfaction, loyalty intent, and word-of-mouth communication. The usage of the term relationship therefore requires qualification vis-à-vis the hospitality context.

According to the Merriam-Webster’s Medical Desk Dictionary (2002, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/relationship>), relationship is defined as:

- 1** : the state of being related or interrelated <research into the relationship between diet, blood, cholesterol levels, and coronary heart disease —Current Biography>
- 2 a** : a state of affairs existing between those having relations or dealings <called on to assume the role of personal advisor in the doctor-patient relationship —Journal of the American Medical Association>
- b** : an emotional attachment between

individuals <the role of empathic physiological communication in the formation of a meaningful relationship>

Hence, confusion may ensue when interaction between hotelier and guest is characterised as a relationship as is common practice in the hotel industry. Given that, based on the findings, the hotel 'relationship' more closely resembles a 'pseudorelationship' as depicted in Figure 7.3 which is derived from a summary made by Magnini and Honeycutt (2005), the continued usage of the relationship metaphor should be put under scrutiny. Further, the assertion made by Botschen (2000, p. 280) that service "encounters be considered the most fundamental, concrete, and intense mechanism through which a customer can begin or enhance a relationship with a company" lends credence to the proposition made in this study that service encounter engenderment should be optimized by way of 'service innovation'.

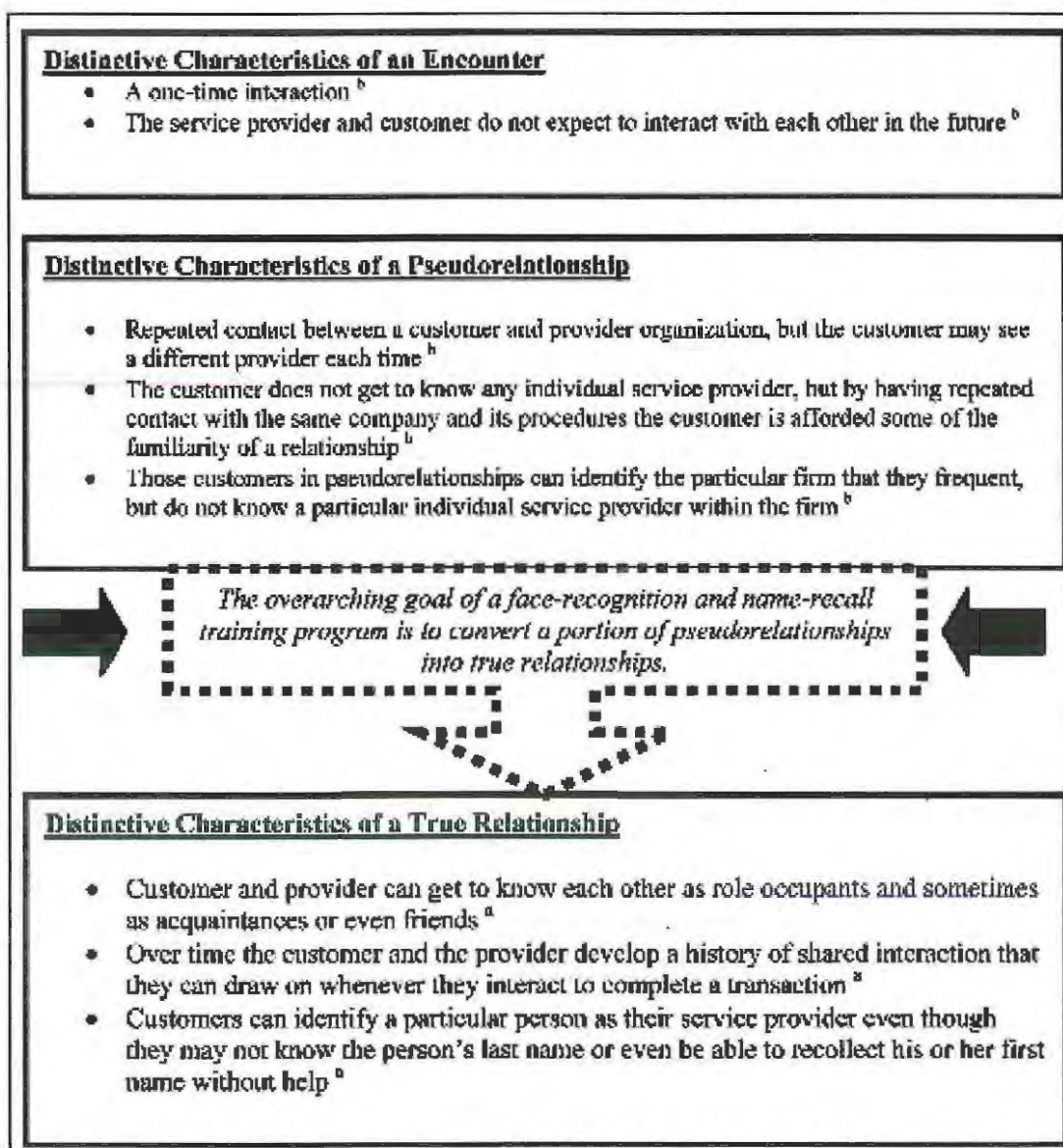


Figure 7.3. Taxonomy of Customer Interactions for Hospitality Firms (Adapted from Magnini, V. P. & Honeycutt Jr., E. D., 2005. Face recognition and name recall, *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 46(1), 69-78.

7.2.5 Questionnaire Design

Form and function are at the forefront of questionnaire design evidenced by the introduction of innovative approaches. While the majority of hotel questionnaires follow a conventional template, some questionnaires are innovative in the way the guest is stimulated to use it to provide hoteliers vital feedback. The content analysis indicated a

strong correlation between overall perceived questionnaire quality of which the following three aspects are components:

7.2.5a Management Tone

The finding that a longer preamble appeared to elicit a more favourable reaction suggests that ‘what’ (content) and ‘how’ (tone) the message is conveyed are important aspects of the questionnaire. Hence, it can be concluded that the preamble sets a favourable tone which may influence usage. Of the follow-up interview sample, all questionnaires contained a form of preamble. Six had a facsimile of a letter, five of which were from the hotelier or in one from ‘The Management’. Four of the former identified the hotelier by name and contained a signature. Hence, from this sample, it would appear that hoteliers seek to impart personalization into their questionnaires by giving the management a ‘face’ despite it being a generic ‘Dear Guest’ printed collateral.

7.2.5b Questionnaire Form

Preference of questionnaire form is highly subjective as demonstrated by the findings of the content analysis and mirrored in the focus group interviews. While the open-ended question is deficient in that it draws on the ability of the respondent to articulate a response and may thereby not accurately derive the individual’s underlying attitude, it allows for freedom of expression. The de facto standard suggests the continued need for a mixture of approaches and perhaps a method of catering to particular question format preferences within the guest population, hence the relevance of a letter that would resemble a fully qualitative enquiry or as a prelude for a more quantitative tact.

7.2.5c Length

The content analysis findings suggested that length did not impinge on usage. However, the focus group findings showed contradictory results. Despite the possible assumption that a longer questionnaire somehow implied more interest demonstrated, additional questions designed to reduce the amount of self-report inaccuracy associated with self administered questionnaires (Woodside & Wilson, 2002) may antagonise guests and produce a counter effect. Information overload was reported in the literature and echoed by hoteliers who are on the one hand eager to obtain statistical data, but on the other hand, at a loss as to what to do with it. Hence, ad hoc surveys designed for statistical analysis could be instituted to complement the ongoing questionnaire-based guest questionnaire.

7.3 Limitations of the Study

The present research is exploratory in nature and was interpretive and predominantly qualitative. Therefore non-probability sampling was considered appropriate at each stage of data collection. In spite of the research being conducted in three cities and involving a variety of hotel classifications and affiliations, the generalizability of the study can be enhanced through further investigation using randomly selected respondents in the research locations of the present research.

Previous studies had examined hotel guest questionnaire variables, specifically Kraft and Martin (1997), and Gilbert and Horsnell (1999), in the United States and United Kingdom respectively. This study was designed to focus on the Asia Pacific context and set about to examine localised evaluative criteria. This research therefore did draw from or extend those studies. However, a future comparison of the variables developed in each study can be conducted.

7.4 Implications of the Study

The present research has implications on practitioners: empirical applied research that is exploratory and relevant to the practitioner is dependant on industry collaboration. Such research serves as bridge between research and operations.

7.5 Areas for Future Research

This was an exploratory study and hence yielded tentative conclusions on which further investigation is possible particularly in key areas relating to remote service encounter-catalysed relationship building.

The present research touched on the possible influence of culture on guests' mindsets in relation to hotelier-guest interaction vis-à-vis the guest questionnaire. An in-depth study on this phenomenon using Hofstede's cultural difference model is warranted.

A wider intra-chain, inter-city or intra-city sampling with parallel testing of letter and hybrid-type questionnaire would serve to refine the framework or refute it.

At the more practical level, hoteliers should assess their existing questionnaire design vis-à-vis its purpose and desired objectives. A close assessment would reveal design deficiencies and incongruence, and perhaps prompt a revision of how and what feedback is solicited from guests.

7.6 Concluding Statement

This study built on previous hotel guest questionnaire/comment card research and contributes insight on several important issues. First, the findings indicate that the paper questionnaire is still relevant in contemporary hotel management. Second, the study contributes an important finding relating to remote service encounters along the hotelier to guest dyad. Third, the study prompts a reassessment of questionnaire design briefs to encapsulate commitment gauging. Future research feedback solicitation will contribute not only to an important area of services marketing theory but, as is clear from the present study, to developing practical customer relationship marketing strategies for hoteliers and other hospitality industry professionals.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 3.1

SCORING SHEET

Sample Ref. ()

Management Tone Rating: 1 (Insincere) – 5 (Sincere)	
Instrument Size 1: Small 2: Medium 3: Large	
Print Quality/Legibility 1 (Poor) – 5 (Good)	
Question Format 1: MCQ only 2: MCQ and some open-ended 3: Open-ended only 4: Open-ended and some MCQ	
Visual Quality 1 (Poor) – 5 (Good)	
Was 'Purpose of Visit' probed? 1: Yes 2: No	<u>If YES, why do you think this is so? How does this affect you?</u>
Demographic/Marketing Data Mining? 1: Yes 2: No	<u>If YES, what do you think is the motive? How does this affect you?</u>
Departmental/Functionality Focus 1: Overall/General 2: Food & Beverage 3: Accommodation 4: Others	
Ease of Use 1 (Difficult) – 5 (Easy)	
Overall Quality 1 (Poor) - 5 (Excellent)	
Would you use this questionnaire? 1 (Low probability) – 5 (High probability)	<u>Additional Remarks</u>

Appendix 3.2

Questionnaire Scaling Categories

3-point scale (n=21):

Excellent, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory

Excellent, Good, Poor

Exceeded, Met, Not Met

Good, Fair, Below Expectations

Excellent, Average, Unsatisfactory

Below Expectation, Met Expectation, Exceeded Expectation (X3)

Excellent, Good, Needs Improvement (X2)

Satisfactory, Good, Excellent

Excellent, Good, Unsatisfactory

Excellent, Good, Could Improve

Good, Average, Poor

Delighted, Satisfied, Disappointed

Excellent, Average, Poor

4-point scale (n=23):

Excellent, Good, Average, Poor

Courteous, Friendly, Efficient, Unsatisfactory

Excellent, Above Average, Average, Below Average

Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor (X3)

Excellent, Good, Average, Poor (X2)

Excellent, Good, Average, Dissatisfied (X2)

Excellent, Good, Fair, Unacceptable

Poor, Average, Good, Excellent

Definitely, Probably, Unlikely, No.

Not Met, Met, Exceeded, N/A

Exceeded Expectations, Met Expectations, Unacceptable, N/A

Above Expectations, As Expected, Below Expectations, Did Not Use (X2).

5-point scale (n=13)

Well Above Expectation, Above Expectation, As Expected, Below Expectation, Well

Below Expectation

Excellent...Poor (boxes)

Excellent...Poor(likert) (X4)

Excellent, Good, Average, Fair, Poor

Below...Met...Exceeded (boxes)

Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Very

Dissatisfied (X2);

Excellent, Above Average, Average, Below Average, Unsatisfactory,

Excellent, Above Average, Average, Below Average, Poor,

Very Satisfied...Not At All Satisfied (likert).

6-point scale (n=3)

Excellent...Poor (likert)

Poor...Excellent(likert); N/A

Very Satisfied, Somewhat Satisfied, Neutral, Somewhat Dissatisfied, Not satisfied.

Large scale (n=5)

10-point likert scale (Outstanding...Unacceptable) (X2)

11-point likert scale (Outstanding...Unacceptable, N/A) (X2)

10-point likert scale (Excellent...Poor, N/A).



Disclosure/Consent Form for Quasi Q-sort Participants

I, _____, am willing to participate in this research concerning the hotel guestroom questionnaire which is being undertaken as part of the requirements of a PhD at Edith Cowan University.

This research activity is a procedure known as a quasi Q-sort which entails the participant to spontaneously arrange a sample of 40 hotel questionnaires into categories according to any criteria. The researcher will conduct a short focused interview at the end of the sorting exercise to obtain feedback on the process and outcome. The information will be written on a scoring sheet.

I understand that the quasi Q-sort will take no more than 15 minutes. I will have the opportunity to review what I have said, and to clarify or expand on any information that I have provided. In addition, I will be able to comment in a collaborative manner on material developed by the researcher.

My participation in this study is voluntary and I realise that there may be no direct benefit to me, although the information that I give is likely to benefit the hotel industry. I understand that I may stop participation at any time and decline to answer any question. All information is confidential to the researcher and his research supervisor, and my identity will not be revealed on any transcript. I am also aware that the scoring sheet will be stored under lock and key for a period of five years after which it will be destroyed by shredding.

I have read the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study realising that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I understand that the research data gathered for the study may be published in academic publications provided I am not identifiable. I will be provided with a copy of the final report should I want one.

I acknowledge receipt of a copy of this form for my retention. I understand that if I have any questions about this project entitled "Mid-Range Business Hotels Guest Questionnaire: Guestroom Stakeholder Perspectives In Three Australasian Cities",

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 3.4

Quasi Q-sort Exercise (40 hotel guest questionnaires)

Participant: Date: Time:

Observations:

Final number of sorts: Categories:

Focused Interview:

- 1) Could you please explain the rationale behind your sort? (sequence, number of sorts, etc., culture/background)

- 2) Describe your thoughts/feelings about this exercise.

- 3) Given another opportunity, would you have a different sort? Why?

- 4) Which of the categories/sorts of questionnaire would you be most likely to use?
 - a. Why?

Appendix 3.5

Results of Quasi Q-Sort

Respondent	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	80% MCQ, 20% OEQ	50% MCQ, 50% OEQ	100% OEQ	100% MCQ	Dimension (handy/compact)	
2	<i>Youth Appeal: Aesthetics (colour, graphics, pictures [female], texture/paper weight)</i>					
3	OEQ	MCQ	MCQ with ready to mail format	Dimension (handy)		
4	<i>Appealing and quick to complete</i>	Tedious				
5	<i>Dimension (A4 with all questions on one side)</i>	Addressed to GM with ready to mail format and postage paid	Addressed to GM but not in ready to mail format	Dimension (A5) with monotone colour scheme	Glossy cards	
6	Dimension (A4)	Dimension (between A4 & A5)	Dimension (DL fold with flap)	Dimension (DL fold), glossy and extravagant	Dimension (DL fold) plain	
7	100% OEQ	50% MCQ, 50% OEQ	>50% MCQ but too involved with wide scales	>50% MCQ with simple scaling	Dimension (handy); >50% MCQ with simple scales	
8	KL	PEN	SIN	SYD	Other city/ Geographic location	
9	AU	MAL	SIN			
10	AU	MAL	SIN	Other country/ location		
11	100% MCQ	>50% MCQ, <50% OEQ	100% OEQ	Dimension A4, >A4, <A4		
12	Dimension (DL fold)	Dimension (Irregular: A5)	Dimension (A4)			
13	Dimension (A4)	Dimension (DL fold)	Dimension (A5, unusual)	Presentation (texture, paper finish, illustration, color)	Dimension (postcard self stamped envelope)	Presentation (plain)
14	Texture (plain paper) + Perceived effort/time required	Dimension (Irregular)	Presentation (texture coated/glossy, illustrations)	Dimension (DL) [regular hotel guest questionnaire]		
15	Dimension (A4)	Dimension (A5)	Dimension (DL, vertical)	Dimension (DL, horizontal)	Dimension (postcard)	Presentation (paper finish illustration color)

i Looks more professional

ii Attractiveness/Eye catching

• Manageable/reasonable

• Landscape orientation preferred. Would complete if personally invited

• Easy access, simplistic and visually evident

• Not too much effort required

• Short & sweet

• Ease with option to elaborate/comment

• Presentation/format appealing

• Familiarity

• Implies more respect by effort put into design

• Visually attractive & texture



(hotel logo to be inserted here)

Disclosure/Consent Form for Focus Group Participants

I, _____, am willing to participate in this focus group on the hotel in which I am residing/have resided in. I understand I have been invited to participate as I am familiar with mid-range hotel accommodation having stayed at this or comparable hotels recently and will be asked questions regarding my thoughts and feelings related to my hotel stay(s).

This research is part of a Customer Relationship Marketing (CRM) program conducted by the hotel in collaboration with Alfred Ogle, a doctoral research student from the Edith Cowan University (ECU), Australia. This project, which is designed to obtain important information for the ongoing hotel management improvement program and will also be included in the data of a PhD research study, has been granted approval by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

I understand that the interviews will take approximately an hour and that the proceeding will be video and audio taped for purposes of transcription facilitation. I will have the opportunity to review what I have said, and to clarify or expand on any information that I have provided. In addition, I will be able to comment in a collaborative manner on material developed by the researcher.

My participation in this study is voluntary. I understand that the hotel would provide me a complimentary set meal at the hotel restaurant as a token of appreciation for my participation. I am aware that I may stop the interview at any time and decline to answer any question. All information is confidential to the hotel management and the researcher and his academic supervisor, and my identity will not be revealed on any transcript or recording medium. I am also aware that the videos and audio tapes will be stored under lock and key for a period of five years after which it will be destroyed by erasure.

I have read the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study realising that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I understand that the research data gathered for the study may be published in academic publications provided I am not identifiable. I will be provided with a copy of the final report should I want one.

I acknowledge receipt of a copy of this form for my retention. I understand that if I have any questions about this project entitled "Mid-Range Business Hotel Guest Questionnaire: Guestroom Stakeholder Perspectives In Three Australasian Cities",

I also understand that if I have any concerns about the project and wish to talk to an independent person, I can contact the Research Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Edith Cowan University, 100 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup WA 6027, Australia or by phone on +618 63042170 and Email at research.ethics@ecu.edu.au.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 4.2

Guidelines for Focus Group Participants

Many thanks for your participation.

In order to obtain a wide-ranging discussion, may I suggest the following ideas about how everyone participates in the process:

- Open and vigorous discussion is ideal.
- Honesty and openness are the most helpful things you can bring to the discussion.
- You are free to disagree, but...
- ... You should not disagreeable!

I will raise a series of topics, and ask some specific questions, to promote discussion for 30 minutes or so. There will be a few pictures to talk about and the session will end with some refreshments followed by dinner.

The tape will be transcribed for me. In order to make the transcriber's life as easy as possible, please can you ensure that:

- Only one person speaks at a time.
- You don't have side conversations with neighbours.
- You turn your mobile phone off.

I may move around to change tapes, etc. Please ignore me if I do, and go on talking... I'll still be listening to you.

The whole process remains confidential. That means that I will not disclose your identity in anything that I write. It also means that you need to observe confidentiality about the comments that others make.

Thank you.

Alfred Ogle

Please complete this to give me a few personal details, and then return it to me:

First Name _____

My gender is Male/Female

My age is 18-25
26-39
40-59
over 60

I stay at hotels Infrequently (Once or less a year)
Quite frequently (1-6 times each year)
Frequently (7- 12 times each year)
Very frequently (>12 times each year)

My primary purpose of hotel stay is _____

Appendix 5.1

Hotelier Interview Schedule

Main

- 1) Managerial perspectives on customer communication: attitude toward guest feedback, opportunity VS “pest”
- 2) Allocation of time for face-to-face (FOF) guest contact; “quality” of FOF VS alternatives
- 3) Customer feedback: channels used by guests, complaints VS compliments, demographics
- 4) Analysis of guest complaints, methodology
- 5) Integration (property level), adoption (chain/group level) and diffusion (industry level) of guest feedback by management. Outcomes?
- 6) Impact of the guestroom experience/physicality on the evaluation of a hotel stay, and repatronage behaviour.
- 7) Based on customer feedback, what about the guestroom is a “turn-on”/satisfier for the occupant?
- 8) Can the guest be fully (feasibly/re-alistically) satisfied?
- 9) What determines the standard of the product provided, and is that accurate?
- 10) “Hat wearing”: do hoteliers put on a guest hat when evaluating their guestroom product? Which hat do hoteliers wear when they stay at hotels? How does this impact on their management philosophy (accommodation) and guest ‘empathy’.
- 11) What does a hotelier expect as a guest?
- 12) Benchmarking.

Supplementary

- 13) Contribution of Rooms to total hotel revenue; profitability of Rooms, RevPAR
- 14) Staff:Guestroom ratio, staff strength ratio according to operating department
- 15) Guest segmentation: FIT & Corporate business traveller, length of stay, revenue share, average spend, accompanied by spouse?
- 16) Personal pet peeve vis-à-vis the hotel guestroom.
- 17) Definition of “cleanliness” and “comfort”



Disclosure/Consent Form for General Manager Interviews

I, _____, am willing to participate in this research concerning the hotel guestroom questionnaire and accommodation product which is being undertaken as part of the requirements of a PhD at Edith Cowan University.

This research consists of an interview with the researcher who will ask questions regarding my thoughts and feelings, as the most senior hotel manager, related to my hotel operations and communication with guests.

I understand that the interviews will take approximately an hour and that the session will be recorded on audio tape to facilitate transcription. I will have the opportunity to review what I have said, and to clarify or expand on any information that I have provided. In addition, I will be able to comment in a collaborative manner on material developed by the researcher.

My participation in this study is voluntary and I realise that there may be no direct benefit to me, although the information that I give is likely to benefit my hotel and the industry as a whole. I understand that I may stop the interview at any time and decline to answer any question. All information is confidential to the researcher and his research supervisor, and my identity will not be revealed on any transcript or audio tape. I am also aware that the cassettes/videos will be stored under lock and key for a period of five years after which it will be destroyed by erasure.

I have read the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study realising that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I understand that the research data gathered for the study may be published in academic publications provided I am not identifiable. I will be provided with a copy of the final report should I want one.

I acknowledge receipt of a copy of this form for my retention. I understand that if I have any questions about this project entitled "Mid-Range Business Hotels Guest Questionnaire: Guestroom Stakeholder Perspectives In Three Australasian Cities",

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 5.3

1 of 8 GM Interview Data

Hotel Category	Independent: 1	International Chain: 2	Regional Chain: 3	Domestic Chain: 4	Personal Interviews with 22 Hoteliers in Perth, Penang & Singapore, December 2005-January 2006										
Legend:					Hotel Category		Ethnicity		Time Allocated to FTF Encounter						
					1: Independent	2: International Chain		3: Regional Chain		4: Domestic Chain					
					A: Asian	C: Caucasian		I: Insufficient		S: Sufficient		A: Ample			
Respondent	Category	Room Inventory	Gender	Ethnicity	Nationality	Time allocated to face-to-face encounters	Attitude to guest communication feedback in general & the hotel questionnaire (Q) in particular	Response to Q7: E-mail usage?	Debate for more detail?	Industry grouping - interviewee?	Operating performance data sharing?	Basic room occupancy & average rate?	Hotel data?	Valuable guest feedback sharing with competitors?	
1	4	36	M	C	AU	A	Positive! anon feedback valid ¹¹	Only complaints, ?	Y	Y	Yes, AHA	Basic	No (application of feedback from guest questionnaires ¹²)		
2	1	82	F	C	AU	S	Very Positive anonymous feedback valid	All, Y	Y	Y	Yes, AHA ONLY ¹³	Revpar	No "because what would be pertinent to one property wouldn't be pertinent to another"		
3	2	160	M	C	AU	S	Very Positive ¹⁴ , anon feedback valid	All, Y ¹⁵	Y	Y	Yes, AHA + informal grouping	Revpar	No "there is no willingness for us to share that with our competitors" ¹⁶		
4	4	160	M	C	AU	S ¹⁷	Vary Positive	All, Y	Y uses incentives	Y ¹⁸	Yes, AHA	Revpar	No "no chain will share that information"		
5	3	110	M	C	AU	I	Very Positive	(-)iva & highly (+)ive only, Y ¹⁹	Y	Y	Yes, AHA	Revpar	No "obviously in such a competitive environment we experience some of the highest occupancies in AU"		
6	1	94	M	A	MAL	S	Positive ²⁰	Yes (not to abusive ones), ?	Y	Y	Yes, AHA	Revpar	No "most hotels tend to keep these (important) things to themselves"		
7	4	66	F	C	NZ	A	Very Positive "myself I am quite inclined to take everything personally which is not a good thing"	Only when complaint warrants follow-up, ?	Y	Y	Yes, "AHA Mafia Group" (informal local grouping)	Revpar	Y/N "you have to protect yourself but you have also got to share new ideas as well..."		

2 of 8 GM Interview Data

8	1	110	M	C	AU	S ²¹	Very Positive	Only upon request for response, ?	Y	Y ²²	Yes, AHA & GMs group	Revpar	Y/N "if it is going to give a bit of competitive advantage, you probably wouldn't share it" ²³
9	2	237	M	A	MAL	S ²⁴	Very Positive	All, Y	Y	Y	Yes, MHA	Basic	Y/N "some are the things we do share and obviously we discuss common (concerns) in terms of industry & business-employee relationship, but you never go into operations"
10	4	161	M	C	AU	S ²⁵	Very Positive "building relationships"	All, Y	Y postage paid	Y	Yes, MHA	Basic	Y/N ²⁶
11	3	320	M	A	SIN	A	Very Positive	All, Y	Y	Y	Yes, MHA	Revpar	No "have to look at your own interest"
12	2	376	M	A	RUC	A	Very Positive "you can track the guest"	Y	Y postage paid	Y	Yes, openly	Revpar	Yes "I am very open minded"
13	4	260	M	A	MAL	A ²⁷	Very Positive "listening, always listening" ²⁸	Y	Y postage paid	Y ²⁹	Yes, MHA	Basic	No
14	2	400	M	C	US	S	Vary Positive "let's see what the customer has to say"	All, Y	Y	Y ³⁰	Yes, MHA	Revpar (strong implication)	Y/N "if you have a niche, you are going to protect that as long as you can, but I think in today's marketplace it is very hard to do that..." ³¹
15	3	323	M	A	MAL	S	Very Positive	All, Y	Y postage paid	Y	Yes, MHA	Revpar	Y/N "if it is something to do with my marketing strategy, of course then I won't"
16	4	261	M	A	MAL	S	Very Positive	All, Y	Y token gift	Y	Yes, MHA	Basic	Y/N ³²

17	3	380	M	C	UK	S	Very Positive "taking any... constructive comment obviously as paramount to improve your business" ¹⁷⁰³⁽¹⁾ anon feedback valid ¹⁷⁰³	All, Y ¹⁷⁰³ (see debate on e-mail usage)	Y postage paid; incentive to staff to ↑ guest usage; comp	Y	Yes, SHA	Basic ¹⁷⁰³	No "It's not the norm in this industry to do that... your competitors are obviously always looking at you and what you are doing, so it wouldn't be long for them to pick up if you were doing something that was quite noticeably different" ¹⁷⁰³ (application of feedback from guest questionnaires ¹⁷⁰³⁽¹⁾)
18	2	1261	M	C	FRG	S	Very Positive ¹⁸⁰³⁽¹⁾ anon feedback ¹⁸⁰³⁽¹⁾	All, Y	Y ¹⁸⁰³ (divergent view)	Y	Yes, SHA	Revpar	No
19	3	326	M	C	AU	S	Very Positive ¹⁹⁰³⁽¹⁾	Negative, Y	Y postage paid ¹⁹⁰³⁽¹⁾	Y	Yes (implicit) ¹⁹⁰³	Basic ¹⁹⁰³	BLANK (application of feedback from guest questionnaires ¹⁹⁰³)
20	1	580	M	C	USA	S	Very Positive "it is the most essential that you should do, and the thing that you least do"	All, Y	Y no inducement ²⁰⁰³	Y	Yes, SHA	Revpar	No ²⁰⁰³
21	4	480	M	A	MAA	S	Very Positive	BLANK	Y no inducement	Y	Yes, Riverside GMs (informal)	Basic	Y/N "Share with competitors – if there is a good cause, why not, but it depends on whether I know the GM on a personal basis, and whether we talk"
22	1	40	F	A	SIN	S ²²⁰³	Very Positive "alternatives would be written... though it will never be as good as face to face"	All, Y	Y offer to make a donation to guest's favourite charity	Y	Yes, SHA	Revpar	Y/N "it depends on what kind of suggestion, okay. If it is a suggestion for safety I will, but if it is a suggestion that puts my property on a competitive edge, sorry!"

- I this is a small boutique hotel with 34 rooms, the General Manager to me has to be accessible
- II People are shy. People don't want to enter into correspondence or whatever, but they want to pass on a comment. We get quite a few that don't have names. Either they don't inadvertently fill in their name or they just want to be anonymous. I can't see anything wrong with that.
- III Being a CBD hotel, we often have things like noise. We have 104 year old property. We have considered double glazing windows - we haven't got to it yet. We certainly have reviewed and revised events and activities with music and noise relative to the hours of operation. Guest services within the rooms; menus; the availability of room service; valet parking; we have changed our procedures or implemented things based on what customers want. Internet services; broadband; wireless connections - we are currently putting wireless in all of our common areas and we have had internet connections in every room, but we are now going to broadband for every room.
- IV It is vital to the success of any business. The service you provide being what the customer wants. Unless you have communication between those two avenues, how can you have customer satisfaction? You don't know what they want!
- V I don't do that to other hotels. I don't think there is any great benefit in doing that. I give it to AHA, and at the end of every month they give me a statistic report of hotels. I get that information anyway on a monthly basis
- VI Yes we see it, as I say we actually have developed a reasonably strong culture of employees that are actually seeking out feedback and it is, as you say, an opportunity for us to identify areas in the hotel that we do well. But the probably more important, what are the elements in the hotels where we are not satisfying customers needs or where they are staying at a different hotel in another part of the world, where they are getting a specific service that perhaps we are not providing. After you get enough of that feedback, you certainly get a feel for what elements of your business are good, and what elements need some work.
- VII Quite a lot of people put their email address these days so it's generally one of the two (e-mail and telephone). Very rarely do I actually mail a letter these days
- VIII I guess that is one of the things as your brand you pride in all the time, is that you develop a competitive edge – what are the things that we can do in a hotel that is different to that which the competitors are doing, so we certainly... there is no willingness for us to share that with our competitors, but the reality is that we are all competitively shopping the other products all the time. I am sending people out to stay at different hotels just to see what competitors are doing on a fairly regular basis, so there is not much that you can do in a hotel that your competitors aren't going to find out within six months anyway.
- IX
 MH: I wouldn't say that I consciously allocate time to it, but every part of the day, particularly in the morning or afternoon where you have arrival and departure, I will try to make some of my time available at the peak of guest movement in the reception desk. Be meeting and greeting guests.
 AO: So this is on a needs basis that you...?
 MH: Very much, but practically every day that I am here I will spend some of my time morning and afternoon at the lobby.
- X A pioneer in outsourcing housekeeping services in Australian hotels, & advocates the use of technology in data collection
- XI Look I have used telephone and e-mail responses in the past... e-mail, due probably to my age, I still feel e-mail is a little bit impersonal still. I still prefer the written letter
- XII In the beginning I did have sometime for me to talk to customers, some of our clients... but I don't think... it was more of a practical thing. It is a 2-way problem: if become too closely attached then very damn thing is brought to your attention, and some customers start bullying the staff... you know (pulling) 'I know your GM', anything they want for special attention...
- XIII TP Yes, it's not a thing do on a regular basis. If I can I will but generally it is not something I follow religiously in this property.

AO TP Face-to-face is that the most effective way in which to touch base?
I guess in theory it is the most effective but in reality it is not always practical and I often most times than not you don't get to know the problem till after they are gone because that is when they fill out the questionnaire and they leave it in their room, they don't necessarily bring it down with them at check-out. We can ask as many times as you want but they generally don't... they'll leave it in their room. Housekeepers pick it up then they come down. So in theory ideally one on one again I encourage the front office staff that if there is a problem and you are finding that you are not able to address the issue and you can see that the guest is not happy then only at the last resort would you like to speak to the manager and then I will step in and then even just doing that sometimes it just tends to diffuse the situation by the fact that they have the front office clerk or receptionist would say to them "would you like to speak to the manager" that in itself tends to make them feel well like we consider your complaint or issue important enough for us to involve a manager so they would say "oh, no it is not really necessary" and that sort of tends to diffuse it but you still do get guests that would prefer to but in the five months I have been here, two, I have only have had to be called in.

XV international hotel (chains) I found a little too constrictive: you don't have the freedom to make some of those decisions you thought was good for the business

XVI I think in Perth, the 5-star hotels tend to be very, and I think it is part of that multinational structural... they are guarded about everything and having been there, I don't know if that's changed but I certainly when I go to the GMs meetings, the 5-star hoteliers tend to stick together. I certainly wouldn't have any problem sharing most things but if it was something that gives me a bit of advantage over my colleagues, I would be very selfish

XVII there are occasions also when customer wanted to see me, so I have to attend to some personally. But some of the customers they feel more comfortable to deal with the higher management... So they don't believe in junior members of staff, so that is where I am going to meet up with them. They are also occasion sometimes I might spend my time in the lobby; hanging around in the lobby - meet the guests, greet the guests, and ask them "how was their stay here", "how was our food"; so these are one of those things which I have to do. Running a hotel is not only standing at the lobby meeting the guests but there are also other aspects of the business we have to look into especially operation, alright, administration, finance, sales & marketing; so basically as the hotel manager you have to be involved with everything. To meet up with customer is one of the aspects so I cannot quantify in terms of percentage time whether I do see customers or not. Yes, we have to do it - but there are times when - like I have to run my administration job, send reports...

AO: And you have to be behind closed doors?
EB: Yes.
AO: So you do on a regular basis - to go down and [show your face]
EB: [For sure] Business is actually out there, it is not in the office. Maybe in the office you have to spend answering back emails, calling this and that, the customer - but the real business is out there. Sometimes myself I have to go out for sales calls; I have to knock on people's door, be on the road then I have to meet up with some of our supporters. So it doesn't limit myself in the hotel only, I have to go outside.

XVIII It varies from day to day... and perhaps from periods of time, I mean, we have obligations as managers... obligations to owners for reports... I mean right now - having responsibility being the secretary of MAH, having responsibilities of attending, you know, State Government meetings in conjunction with this tsunami crisis - so you are obligated for that which can take your time, business planning time as well, collective agreements, which then binds you through time frames as well as binds you (to) a desk, to analyze and put together a plan which does take time and effort which then takes away from perhaps what I call operational issues or being out there - being a lobby lizard!

XIX No, just occupancy percentage and average rate. But I mean with those details you can generally work out what other people's REVPAR

XX It's because you are forever looking for you know, for that sort of, that competitive advantage. Generally, you wouldn't go out and share that idea, unless it had benefit for the destination. I mean destination being perhaps here in Penang. If it was a marketing idea, or something that involved a product or service that we commonly share, it is more just isolated to a particular hotel than it was a newer idea or concept that we had come up with, we wouldn't share that until it is already been implemented and recognized - as you know, unique aspect of the E & O and then they can copy. You are then being a leader, rather than a follower

XXI Of course the customer, the internal customer who is your staff, your supplier, and of course your board of directors and owners... I spent probably... let's say (in) 12 hours, I normally work 12 hours, I spend possibly 50-60% communicating with customers. Because I believe hotel industry communicate with customers is (the) most important thing.

XXII if I see something wrong, if something is serious, I would jump in and speak to them

XXIII (as an independent with my corporate office just upstairs) I am just one phone call away... "can I do this?"

XXIV Revpar, no. Maybe you can get it from statistics

XXV I think if everybody, if you have a niche you are going to protect that as long as you can, but I think in today's market place it is very hard to do that.... Yes, it's too transparent. There are people that stay in Shangri-La, like I said there are some places that we do not have Shangri-La, so people go and they stay at another hotel, and they have a rapport with another hotel manager who is a Hyatt (say) in Seoul, or any of the other major people - a Hilton in Tokyo - and gee they say I stay at the Shangri-La in so and so, and they call their cohort - what's the China World doing in Beijing? I have a customer who is raving about this in the guestroom or this in the coffee shop, so it is very, very transparent. Plus when you take a look at travel channels - the Discovery Channel it has a travel thing... I mean Richard Quest, the CNN guy, the traveller, I mean these people travel around, and once it gets on CNN then forget it.

XXVI We try and hold on to something special... Milk if you can before it gets out

XXVII In fact nobody shared any REVPAR that I remember!

XXVIII If it benefits everybody generally, (then) yes. We have our monthly meeting among all hoteliers and we do share a lot thing, so even though we are competitors, there are certain things we do share. For example concerns of guests who come in and looking at tourism aspect and when they comment that certain areas they visited, this and that, so we brief it up and share with everybody

XXIX ...if it is face-to-face, they would never show the disrespect of standing in the lobby and coming face-to-face and most probably telling you their true sentiments

XXX From my point of view I read it yes, but no it doesn't go into this particular form because you have to obviously understand why, you wouldn't want to think that there was somebody just writing in it to embellish themselves or get an apartment or whatever else. We need some criteria. I from a sense of reading it in the morning, highlighting it, because it may be somebody who had a dreadful experience and doesn't want to say anything about it and I would endeavour to try and find out who and where the person was and if they were specific and said I was in the restaurant at such and such time, and a, b, c happened, you would look at it to indeed see whether it was factual.

XXXI AO: Are you inclined to actually use email or other means to get back to the guests?
CC: Not - it's strange answering that question because it was something we were talking about only a couple of days ago...
AO: Oh I see.

- CC: ...and not a lot of people actually put their email address on their, but most probably if somebody has put their email address we were debating if somebody has taken the time to put it there, it is obviously a wish or a thing or thought from that person that they would like to be contacted; we thought maybe it is a little bit impersonal, or maybe a proper document with a letterhead on it is most probably the way to go. My argument or my question that I threw over to the Excom committee was, if somebody is going to write their name, and maybe I don't fill my address out, we may have it down at the front desk. But if they have bothered to put an email address on there, I would suggest that the thought was that they were expecting an email.
- AO: So I gather now that you don't now have a dedicated field.?
- CC: We haven't no. But for a reprint, and that was part of the reason we were talking about it, should we put email address, because it is now a matter of course as you probably know. So many people just for sheer ease and speed and everything else, email is the way to go, even if somebody would say that it is a little bit impersonal. But I then I would most probably question or argue really what is the difference between a letter and an email. A letter is generated again on a typewriter or from a computer, it is not as if it is the days when somebody actually sat down and wrote by hand.
- AO: It doesn't have a sense of urgency.
- CC: Exactly.
- XXXI It is supposedly secret; an internal thing - but then if you are putting your average rate and your occupancy out to work out REVPAR to most hoteliers wouldn't be too... it's not rocket science to work out roughly what people are getting.
- XXXII So possibly their mindset or their thinking is they are here and they are sort of protective of what they have got and possibly suspicious or guarded with whatever they are going to do (referring to the "extraordinary" high incidence of long-term expatriate hotel GMs in Singapore and their "kia-su" [a saying in the Hokkien dialect that literally means "afraid to lose"])
- XXXIII It was a property in Indonesia, Bintang Lagoon Golf & Beach Resort, where it was a pretty big resort and we had a couple of golf courses there and it was pertaining to the lower restaurant which had so many stairs going down with a void next to it, and this fellow wrote in and said if you are doing that way, could I suggest if you ...; it was like the flow of traffic going down the stairs and coming up the stairs and because it was a resort breakfast was inclusive; so you had a bottle neck with a lot of people coming and whatever else, and he said why wouldn't utilise that as a way out. In fact all it was (was) having to knock down a wall that was only aesthetically there just to see something. So we did that and had an in and out, and obviously the problem was solved, and it was fairly easy. He and his wife came back and he was very happy about seeing his idea ... was taking photographs of it and everything else. That was the one that stood out; it was a structural change that he had brought about.... He took so many photographs he is most probably still talking about how redesigned the outlet.
- XXXIV It is a daily occurrence, it is fundamental to what we do here. Everything we do is aimed at the customers. We are a hospitality service industry, so everything surrounds the customer requirements, and without communication it isn't doing to happen.
- XXXV We in actual fact do check when they are left, if they are dropped at the front desk we put the room number down on it, if they are left in the room the maid will put a number on it and we go through and we do check and go down to the system and check to see if it is kosher. We don't get many... we get one or two, but generally you can track them down pretty quickly.
- XXXVI
- AO: Would you consider dangling a carrot to the guest in order to get them to fill in this (questionnaire) as a viable option? Whereby we give you something, and maybe we get something in return? I don't know whether that is done with the CSM too?
- RL: No.
- AO: So it's purely voluntary?

- RL: Absolutely. I mean, you must be prepared to give your time and honestly share your views and experience, not you know putting in a lucky draw or you get a discount voucher or whatever.
- AO: Would you consider that a bit mercenary?
- RL: No. Yeah, I mean here it is Asia fullstop; and certainly Singapore is very heavily financially minded society. Everything turns one way or another around the dollar. Whichever way you are looking at it, whatever kind of language you use, there is a discount mentality, and [unless there is a deal in it for me, I am not interested.] I mean it is ... again, during sale time when you shop it is just fascinating to watch. It is just fascinating to watch, and I do question the psychology behind it, so no I don't see any value in buying feedback.
- XXXVII I think that any adverse comments should be followed up very quickly and I think it is also about building relationships with those clients
- XXXVIII No, we don't. Besides this, the questionnaire is there, and I in fact sign the letter, I personally sign a letter and it is attached to it, okay.
- XXXIX Yes. We tell the truth and they lie!
- XL They can work it out though because average rate of occupancy ...
- XLI One thing we did; we used to get complaints about the shuttle service, about timing and things like that, so now we have it as a prominent; we used to have the times on the keycard, but people didn't read the keycard! So what we do now it is on prominent display on the notice board downstairs as to what times the shuttles go, etc., etc. So that is how we cut that complaint out.
- XLII To be honest, not enough... with the owners being on site, next door, a significant part of your time is spent with them. Operational requirements, techniques - a considerable (amount of) time is spent doing that. For my own part here, in the hotel which is predominantly leisure with a certain amount of corporate business, 60% leisure, 20% corporate...; you have to time your availability to the customers availability.
- XLIII People say why don't you give away... if you want the information it is going to cost you, if you want to go anywhere for information you are going to have to buy it.... But you don't have to give away a Rolex watch every time you want a form filled out; you show interest. Our Duty Manager's job is to approach five customers a day... to try and solicit (feedback)... Part of that is to find out what is going on so you have first hand (information) - this is beside the focus group that we try and do, but also to try and urge people fill out the guest questionnaire, we'd love to hear from you...; fill it out and come down and see me and when you've got time, we will just go through it and have a cup of tea with me, come and have some coffee, come and have a beer if necessary, that's what I mean by trying to throw it in. So we are giving them every opportunity to tell us what actually is happening... but sometimes it's what I call the "WFM" - What's in it for me - if there is no WFM why would you want to do it.
- XLIV The industry is competitive enough, I think you are somewhat naïve if you are going to share good ideas that you have gleaned with others because you can bet your arse they don't share it with you
- XLV I still feel that direct face to face communication is the best.... though of course it is the most costly.