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Utilizing Consumer-Generated Online Reviews in an Urban Destination to Develop a Comprehensive Hotel Complaint Framework

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ABSTRACT

While negative online reviews can damage a hotel reputation and virally spread negative word of mouth, guest complaints in these reviews can offer lodging executives a valuable and accessible source of market research information. This study investigates the nature of online complaints and responses by content analyzing nearly 2,000 one-star consumer-generated reviews of 86 Washington DC hotels from ten travel electronic distribution channels and social media websites, including TripAdvisor, Priceline and Yelp. A detailed complaint typology was derived, comprised of 47 complaint areas representing hotel, staff and guestroom issues. Destination managers are encouraged to utilize the complaint framework to enhance local accommodation quality by providing its membership with aggregated feedback and structured market intelligence from online review websites.

Keywords: *Consumer generated media, service failure, reputation management, online reviews*

INTRODUCTION

Hotels provide a core element of the tourism experience (Smith 1994). As such, researching hotel guest experiences are not only important to lodging executives, but critical to destination managers and marketers. Fortunately, many guests post details about their positive and negative accommodation experiences in the form of online reviews, a part of consumer-generated social media which also includes blogs, videos, and social networks (Xiang and Gretzel 2010). While online reviews have become an important source of information-sharing between travelers (Pan, MacLaurin and Crofts 2007), organizations are able to utilize these online reviews as a way to improve operations and reward employees. This study examined nearly 2,000 one-star online reviews of hotels in Washington D.C., the U.S. capital and major urban destination on the U.S. East Coast which attracts both international and domestic travelers. Given the importance of consumer generated media in the lodging industry, particularly the

potentially damaging effect of online complaints, we aim to investigate the nature of online reviews by content analyzing one-star reviews to identify major complaint areas and formulate a comprehensive complaint framework. One-star reviews are typically the lowest possible ratings accorded by consumers within travel-related online review websites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of online consumer reviews, a major form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), has been widely documented in the extant literature (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Duan, Gu, and Whinston 2008). Online reviews provided by travelers also are often perceived as more up-to-date, reliable, and trustworthy information than content offered by travel service suppliers (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). As hotels are increasingly making use of the growing range of electronic-distribution channels (O'Connor and Frew, 2002), the need to closely monitor techniques across multiple online distribution channels and the importance of eWOM increases to understand customers' eWOM behavior. While studies on marketing in blogs can be easily found (e.g., Bronner and de Hoog, 2011), studies on consumer review sites (e.g., TripAdvisor or Yelp) are relatively limited (O'Connor, 2010). Moreover, there has been an increase in the understanding of the impact of eWOM on consumer behavior in the tourism and hospitality industry (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Litvin et al., 2008), yet, a lack of discussion about social media marketing exists in previous studies.

METHOD

We analyzed 1,946 one-star reviews of 86 Washington D.C. hotels between 2000 and 2011, performing a content analysis of complaints within hotel reviews from ten popular online review websites, provided to us by a third-party online review and social media aggregator focused on the lodging industry. According to Sproull (1995), content analysis makes "inferences about variables by systematically and objectively analyzing the content and/or process of communications" (p.246). In developing a framework to categorize the complaints, we first reviewed common hotel complaint typologies from previous studies (e.g., Lee and Hu 2004; Manickas and Shea 1997) in addition to the robust typology used in automated keyword sentiment analyses employed by the online review aggregator. Subsequently, we used an iterative process in developing the complaint framework. During the first stage of complaint analyses, two independent judges frequently met with the lead author to add, remove or merge complaint topics to ensure that the framework was conceptually supported, comprehensive, and managerially actionable. Then, discrepancies were resolved by one of the study's authors. An acceptable level of inter-rater reliability was assessed by calculating Cohen's Kappa (Cohen 1960), with inter-rater agreement of 43.3 percent for the complaints, representing moderate agreement (Landis and Koch 1977).

RESULTS

Our complaint framework (see Table 1) was informed by the 1,947 one-star online reviews we analyzed. The framework encompassed 47 problem areas, of which 20 were mentioned in at least five percent of all one-star reviews. These included eight hotel issues (billing, check in, hotel look and feel, internet, restaurant, room service, parking, safety), ten guestroom issues (air conditioning, bathroom, bedding and linens, bugs, cleanliness, décor, noise, room size, smell, television) and two departmental staff issues (front desk, housekeeping).

Below, we share the five most frequent problem areas and illuminate these issues with characteristic reviews.

Guest complaints about the front desk staff were mentioned in 26.8 percent of one-star reviews, making this easily the most common issue across all chain scale segments, from a high of 31.3 percent in economy and upper midscale/midscale lodging to 22.9 percent within upscale hotels. Major complaints in this problem area featured service errors, disrespectful behavior, and a lack of responsiveness. These were typified by reviews such as “The hotel did not register me correctly at check in, and they gave my room key to another guest!” (Review 140) and “The front desk attendant started the conversation off with "NO!" even before I told her why I was back at the front desk” (Review 663). Guests cited bathroom issues as the second most common complaint, found in 17.6 percent of all one-star reviews. Most common issues with the bathroom involved room size and functionality as well as problems with the shower, bathtub, sink and toilet. For example, one reviewer complained “The bathroom is extremely small and impossible to move about in without hitting something. You cannot get to the shower/tub without shutting the bathroom door and the toilet is right against the front of the tub” (Review 80). Guestroom cleanliness issues (17.1 percent) rated as the third most frequent complaint, and ranked among the top four issues across all chain scale segments with the exception of the luxury segment. Common complaints about cleanliness included “The first room we were given had dirt on the floor; although the bed was made, the bed linen had not been changed - you could see the dirt and hair on the sheets” (Review 965). The fourth most frequent type of complaint (16.5 percent) was related to noise issues, ranging from over 21.9 percent in economy lodging to 12.8 percent in upscale hotels. Many noise complaints were caused by guests in adjacent rooms, often exacerbated by inadequate soundproofing, for example “The walls in this hotel are paper thin - if you have a neighbor who talks, uses the shower, sneezes, etc., you will hear every word, sound, run of water, etc.” (Review 1322). Numerous guests (14.1 percent) complained about hotel check in, the fifth most common complaint area. The most frequent check in issues involved the unavailability of requested room configurations or rooms in general, overbooking situations, as well as the loss of confirmed reservations. Many of these problems took prolonged effort and time to resolve. A typical complaint about room availability was “Not only was the room that I twice confirmed not available when I arrived at my appointed time but I was forced to stand at the reception desk for nearly two hours while staff tried to find rooms for me and for numerous other guests who had confirmed but unavailable rooms” (Review 935).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One star reviews can be dangerous and spread viral eWOM of serious hotel crises such as health (e.g., bedbugs, food contamination) and safety (e.g., crime, dangerous patrons) concerns, permanently damaging hotel and brand reputations. In the best case scenarios, one star reviews can drag down a hotel’s average guest ratings, placing recipients at a competitive disadvantage within valuable online distribution channels, as ratings have been found to influence guest awareness, booking intentions, and actual guestroom sales (Jeong and Jeon 2008; Ogut and Tas 2009). As destination management organizations (DMO) play a leadership role in tourism market research (Perdue and Pitegoff 1990), DMOs have an opportunity to contribute to improved accommodation service and product quality by providing its membership with aggregated feedback from online review websites. Hotels are often the most prominent sector represented in DMOs, as DMO budgets often are based upon hotel occupancy taxes. As such, it

is in the DMO interest to provide valuable market research to its hotel membership on hotel guest complaints so as to provide value-added services to its membership.

Care must be exercised regarding generalizing the finding, as this study was restricted to reviews of hotels in one city on the U.S. East Coast. Other factors which were not considered in this study can also influence customer complaints, such as guest mood, prior stay experience, and perceived brand image. Many authors have argued for the importance of monitoring and responding to online reviews to manage hotel reputation. However, there have been only limited attempts to organize and analyze online reviews beyond highly inaccurate automated keyword sentiment analysis systems. This is somewhat understandable given the abundance of online reviews, as hotels in our sample averaged 812 online reviews per property. As hotels possess limited social media resources for analyzing complaint-rich one star online reviews, we suggest that destination management organizations take a leadership role in this effort, which can be utilized for market research and knowledge management purposes. This feedback can contribute toward total quality management and continuous improvement processes. One could argue that complaints from these online reviews are more valuable than internal survey feedback from hotel guests, as the transparency and popularity of eWOM contribute much more to consumer perception and intent to stay. As consumer-generated content continues to grow in popularity and usage in travel and hospitality, tourism destinations should not miss opportunities to mine and utilize the market intelligence which exists within online complaints.

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1
Online Review Complaint Framework

<i>Hotel issues</i>	<i>Room issues</i>	<i>Staff issues</i>
Check In	Bathroom	Front Desk
Restaurant	Cleanliness	Housekeeping
Parking	Noise	Bellhop
Billing	Room size	Concierge
Internet	Air conditioning	Maintenance
Look and feel	Smell	Doorman
Room service	Television	
Safety	Bedding and linens	
Location	Bugs	
Construction	Décor	
Booking	Bed	
Pool	Carpet and floor	
Elevator	View	
Smell	Minibar and refrigerator	
Vending machines	Amenities	
Gym	Heat	
Shuttle	Furniture	
	Towels	
	Walls	
	Window	
	Phone	
	Coffee	
	Lighting	
	Kitchen	

- *Problem areas ordered by frequency of occurrence in this study*

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