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# VIP SERVICE IN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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This bachelor's thesis investigates the processes involved with VIP treatment in hospitality industry and more specifically in the hotel environment. It aims to explain the significance of the VIPs in the hotel business and the tools the hotel can utilize to accommodate the needs and requests of the VIP guests'. This study was commissioned by a full service hotel Baltimore Marriott Waterfront in the United States.

This thesis gives information about the types of VIP guests in hotel industry in the United States and the specific procedures the hotel departments use in order to answer to the various needs of the guests and to provide high quality customer service. The study uses the full service property Baltimore Marriott Waterfront as an example to give a more profound understanding of the daily processes involved in the customer service for VIP guests. The thesis provides information about duties of different hotel departments and focuses on the significance of the front office department in VIP processes and service in general.

The study utilizes both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Interviews have been chosen as the qualitative research method and a survey as a quantitative. The interviewees consist of managers and supervisors of different departments at the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront. The aim of the interviews was to provide practical information on the VIP service and give a more profound impression on all of the levels involved in executing the service. Additionally the thesis uses information from Baltimore Marriott Waterfront hotel's Guest Satisfaction Surveys in 2010 – 2013. Through these means the thesis offers theoretical information but also applies the theory to practice and gives front line information of the VIP treatment in Baltimore today. Although the study is limited to the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront, the information can be adjusted to meet the needs of another property.

VIP service is extremely important to hotel business because of the great influence on the revenue. Therefore it is imperative to be aware of the processes involved in the VIP treatment and to consider the guests' needs and preferences before acting. This thesis provides valuable information to consider when planning VIP processes and doing business with VIP guests. Although the study is not all-embracing, it implements the significance of VIP guest satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Noora Sirkiä

# VIP PALVELU HOTELLIALALLA

Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii VIP kohteluun liittyviä prosesseja hotelliympäritössä. Opinnäytetyön tarkoitus on selittää VIP vieraiden merkitys hotellitoiminnassa ja antaa keinoja VIP vieraiden tarpeiden ja toiveiden täyttämiseen. Tämän tutkimuksen toimeksiantajana on ollut täyden palvelun hotelli Baltimore Marriott Waterfront Yhdysvalloissa.

Tämä opinnäytetyö kertoo, VIP vieraista USA:n hotellimarkkinoilla ja tavoista, joilla hotellin osastot voivat vastata VIP vieraiden kysyntään ja siten antaa täydellistä asiakaspalvelua. Tutkimuksessa käytetään Baltimore Marriott Waterfront –hotellia esimerkkinä, jotta käsitys VIP kohteluun liittyvistä päivittäisistä prosesseista välittyisi paremmin. Raportissa käsitellään eri osastojen tehtäviä ja keskitytään vastaanoton merkitykseen VIP prosesseissa ja palvelussa.

Opinnäytetyössä käytetään haastattelua tärkeimpänä tutkimusmenetelmänä. Tutkimusta varten on haastateltu Baltimore Marriott Waterfront hotellin eri osastojen johtajia ja esimiehiä. Haastattelujen tarkoituksena on ollut käytännön informaation tuottaminen ja syvällisemmän käsityksen antaminen VIP palveluihin liittyvissä eri tason prosesseissa. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa käytetään Baltimore Marriott Waterfront hotellin Guest Satisfaction Survey tutkimuksen tuloksia vuosilta 2010 – 2013. Tutkimus soveltaa teoreettista tietopohjaa käytäntöön ja lisäksi antaa päivitettyä tietoa VIP kohtelusta Baltimoressa. Vaikka tutkimus rajoittuu Baltimore Marriott Waterfront hotelliin, tietoa voidaan soveltaa myös toisen yrityksen tarpeisiin.

VIP kohtelu on erityisen tärkeää hotelliliiketoiminnassa sillä sen vaikutus tulokseen on merkittävä. Tämän vuoksi on oleellista olla tietoinen VIP kohteluun liittyvistä prosesseista ja huomioida vieraan tarpeet ja toiveet ennen toimimista. Tämä opinnäytetyö tarjoaa oleellista tietoa VIP prosessien suunnitteluun ja VIP vieraiden kanssa asiointiin. Vaikka tukimus on antaa vain rajallisen määrän tietoa, se osittaa kuinka tärkeää VIP asiakkaiden tyytyväisyys on hotellialalla.

ASIASANAT:

Palvelun laadun johtaminen, matkailu, VIP palvelut

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

In hospitality industry the quality of service determines the productivity of a business. In fact several studies have proven there to be a positive relationship between sales and the quality of the service (Chiang-Ming Chen & Yu-Chen Lin 2012, 1330). Therefore all of the guests should be treated as VIP's to encourage them to return to the hotel and to increase the sales. Although all of the guests are considered very important people, the hotel needs to be aware of the cost of going above and beyond the guest's expectations. Because different guests spend different amount of time at the hotel and bring different amount of money to the hotel, the hotel needs to weigh the options it has to fulfill the particular guests' needs. Therefore it is likely that guests spending the most time and money at the hotel are more likely to receive exceptional service.

This bachelor's thesis was commissioned by Baltimore Marriott Waterfront in Maryland, USA and aims to explain the processes and factors involved in VIP treatment in the hotel industry. This thesis uses a full service hotel Baltimore Marriott Waterfront hotel as a reflection point and focuses especially to the Front Office department's involvement in treating VIP guests. The research uses manager interviews as the most important research method and therefore uses the interview material to structure the paper. The research question of this thesis is: How can a hotel provide VIP service to its guests and furthermore why is it important to provide VIP service.

# 2 VIPS

VIP guests are of great importance in hospitality industry because of their significance on the revenue of the business. Although all guests should be treated as VIPs there is research indicating that different businesses prioritize their guests differently. VIPs can be categorized based on their loyalty or recognition but overall should always receive the best service the property is able to provide.

## 2.1 Definition of a hotel guest

A hotel guest used to be someone who was primarily looking for accommodation for the desired nights. Today there are more factors involved. In addition to the price, location and room, the guests are interested in the technological features, loyalty points and customization (Watkins 2003, 36). Approximately 25% of the hotel guests in the United States are between 17 and 34 years of age, have the least loyalty to a brand and are the most difficult guests to satisfy in the industry (Barsky & Nash 2011, 14). Also this exact group is predicted to be the largest consumer group in the history of United States. The hospitality business is continually evolving to satisfy the changing needs of the guests'. After the collapse of the world economy it seems that the hotel guests today have a changed perception on price. The guests want more value with less money (Barsky & Nash 2011, 14). What the value is - can be debatable, as different guests have very different needs.

## 2.2 Who is considered a VIP?

In hospitality industry every guest should be treated as a VIP because the guests are the reason for the company's success and over all existence. Although good customer service is important in every business, hospitality industry differs from them because the product in fact consists of services. It is imperative to treat all guests with respect and provide personalized services in order to

keep the guests coming back. Even though all guests need to receive excellent service, for some of the guests the hotel needs to utilize all possible resources to meet with the guests' needs and expectations. This group of guests naturally consists of the guests who have a long history with the company for instance through a loyalty program and guests who provide the company with significant financial investment. According to a Baltimore Marriott Waterfront Front Office Manager Karl Heinz a VIP is someone who spends, or has the potential to spend, a lot of time and money in a property. The upper 6% of US society is known as the affluent, which means a combined household income of over $100,000 a year. Virtually all wealthy people travel (Mann 1993, 54). Almost 50% spend more than 20 nights a year in hotels and spend $500 to $2,000 per couple per night (Mann 1993, 54). The very important people at the Waterfront property consist of the Platinum Elite Members and VIP groups 1, 2 and 3 including group contacts, meeting planners, high profile individuals, high profile Marriott employees, TV and movie production crews, sports celebrities and international diplomats. The VIPs want the "finest facilities and amenities, personal attention, responsiveness, sparkling bathrooms, good china, elegant linens, superb table appointments, and to be surrounded by other affluent people. Given all that, they will gladly pay for it" (Mann 1993, 54).

## 2.2.1 Loyalty programs

Loyalty programs are used by several companies to attract consumers through discounts and personalized services in exchange to their loyalty for the company (Berman 2003, 123). Additionally loyalty programs can offer the consumers exclusivity and a sense of higher social status the higher they are on the company's loyalty level (Drèze & Nunes 2009, 890). Basically loyalty programs give the company a means to segregate the guests according to their level of commitment to the company. Commitment on the other hand translates to spending in the hotel business. According to the Pareto Principle about 80 percent of any company's profit comes from 20 percent of the customers (Brogan 2010, 46). Therefore from the business management point of view it is necessary to rec-

ognize the 20 percent of customers who provide the company with such an exceptional amount of revenue. Although these programs relate to the money the guest invests in the hotel, they also provide a tool for the hotel to offer exceptional service and answer to the guest's needs. Through loyalty programs the company can get specific information on the guests' preferences and requests and therefore provide better guest service. In addition to recognizing the preferences the guest is being rewarded through hard benefits like upgrades and soft benefits such as restricted check-in counters (Drèze & Nunes 2009, 891).

At Marriott International the loyalty program has different levels that refer to the amount of rewards points the guest has (Figure 1). The reward points received after one night's stay vary from 7,500 points to 45,000 according to the hotel brand used. For instance if the guest stays at hotels including JW Marriott, Autograph Collection, Renaissance Hotels, Marriott Hotels and Resorts or Marriott Vacation Club, the guest will earn 10 points or 2 air miles per every US dollar spent at the property (Marriott Global Sources 2013). On the other hand if the guest stays at Residence Inn or Towne Place properties he will only earn 5 points or 1 air mile per US dollar spent on the room rate (Marriott Global Sources 2013). Therefore it can be stated that guests staying in upscale hotels will receive more points and furthermore be on the higher membership level.

## Silver Benefits at a Glance

| | Silver | Gold | Platinum |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nights Needed Per Year: | 10+ | 50+ | 75+ |
| • 48-Hour Guaranteed Availability | | | ● |
| • Guaranteed Platinum Arrival Gift | | | ● |
| • Dedicated Platinum Reservation Line | | | ● |
| • Guaranteed Room Type | | ● | ● |
| • Room Upgrade (Upon Availability) | | ● | ● |
| • Guaranteed Access to Concierge Lounge | | ● | ● |
| • Exclusive Offers | | ● | ● |
| • Bonus on Marriott Rewards Base Points | 20% | 25% | 50% |
| • The Ultimate Reservation Guarantee | ● | ● | ● |
| • Dedicated Elite Reservation Line | ● | ● | ● |
| • Dedicated Elite Guest Services Line | ● | ● | ● |
| • Priority Late Checkout | ● | ● | ● |
| • Marriott Gift Shop | ● | ● | ○ |
| • Elite-Only Redemption Awards | ● | ○ | ● |

We would like to thank you again for your loyalty and being a

Marriott Rewards Elite Member!

Figure 1. Marriott Rewards Benefits

To achieve the VIP status which the Platinum Elite Members have (Heinz 2013), the guests need to have earned the appropriate amount of points. A new registered member will automatically be on the Marriott Rewards Member level. On this level the guest will get an account that will register all the preferences

the guest has for the room and amenities. This record will provide a means for the hotel to meet the guest's needs during every stay. Additionally, the guest on Rewards Member stage will be able to use the Elite Member's check-in line which will provide a quicker and more personalized arrival experience. To achieve the next level, the Silver Elite status, the guest needs to have stayed 10 – 49 nights or held 1 – 4 events per year at a participating hotel. The benefits of Silver Elite membership are for instance Priority late check-out, weekend discounts, gift shop discounts and 20 percent bonus on points for stays. A guest with Marriott Rewards membership or Silver Elite Membership can buy an upgrade to the concierge lounge for 30 dollars. This upgrade also includes complimentary amenities in the room. The Gold Elite Member is entitled to all of this and additionally to a free internet access, continental breakfast, local phone calls, local faxes and complimentary room upgrade. Also Gold Elite members are guaranteed to get the requested room type as well as 25 percent bonus on points for stays. To gain the Gold Elite Member status the guest needs to stay 50 – 74 nights or hold 5 – 7 events a year at participating Marriott hotels.

Finally the Platinum Elite Membership is reached when the guest spends 75 nights or more or holds 8 or more events per year at a participating Marriott hotel. These VIP's are more than two and a half months away from home per year for either business or pleasure. These members receive a guaranteed Platinum Elite Member's arrival gift at check-in and get 50 percent bonus on points for stays in addition to the benefits related to the lower levels. As a Platinum Elite Member, the guest also receives a complimentary room upgrade, unless the hotel is sold out. If the hotel is unable to honor a Platinum Elite Member's reservation, it will pay the guest's accommodation for the night at a nearby comparable hotel and compensate the member for the inconvenience (Marriott Global Sources 2013). The additional compensation includes $200 cash on site plus two complimentary night certificates. Relocating a VIP is very undesirable and expensive to the hotel and therefore by pre-checking the guest in, the hotel is ensuring that this guarantee is being met. When Platinum Elite Members are checking in, the front desk associate will provide the guest with a personalized welcome and an arrival gift. Another interesting fact is that in Marriott Waterfront

the Platinum and Gold Elite Members are typically placed on the higher floors 24 – 32, that can be accessed through a separate elevator set in the lobby. By recognizing the VIP's and giving them the access to these high floor elevators it also adds value to the guest's experience. Gold and Platinum Elite Members in Marriott Waterfront also have access to a Concierge Lounge in the 31st floor. The lounge has a spectacular view of the harbor and the city and it provides the guests with complimentary beverages, breakfast, horderves and desserts on weekdays. The Platinum Elite Members are very important to the hotel management because they naturally spend more time at hotels than an average guest. Their opinion is essential because they are responsible for an exceptional share of the hotel's yearly revenue. Also as they are frequent users of the hotel's services, they are able to provide the company with a realistic understanding on the quality of the services. This perspective is extremely valuable for the company in maintaining the level of services on the desirable level. It is extremely important to maintain a good relationship with the Platinum Elite Members and keep communication lines open (Heinz 2013).

## 2.2.2 Other VIP's

The guest's who are not members of a hotel's loyalty program, but receive VIP treatment are some group contacts, high profile individuals, high profile hotel employees, TV and movie production crews, sports celebrities and international diplomats (Heinz 2013). Front Office Manager Heinz states that unfortunately in hospitality business the guests who invest the largest amount of money to the hotel often get the largest amount of recognition from the establishment. For example a foreign royal family that stays in the hotel's penthouse and has no limited budget will get more attention from the hotel than the guest staying with a discounted rate at a general hotel room. Although it is imperative to treat all guests to the highest standard, the hotel needs to recognize the special demands of high profile individuals. These high profile individuals are considered VIPs by the hotel and they receive all the special treatment listed in their resume as well as special recognition by the hotel and for example nightly refresh

service from the housekeeping. VIPs are divided in 3 groups; VIP 1, VIP 2 and VIP 3, at the time of reservation. Different VIPs have different benefits, which is why it is important to communicate the right information to the Property Management system and to the relevant departments.

The guests registered as VIP 1's are typically group staff members (Marriott Global Sources 2013). They receive nightly refresh service from the housekeeping, are guaranteed to get the requested room type and are guaranteed to have a room ready upon arrival. They receive housekeeping services in their room before noon and they can request a standard amenity upon arrival. Also, if requested, the VIP will have an access to the concierge lounge.

The VIP 2 group consists of titled VIP's, for instance vice presidents and chief executive officers and general meeting planners (Marriott Global Sources 2013). This group of VIPs also receives nightly refresh service and service before noon from housekeeping, is guaranteed to get the desired type of room and is guaranteed to have the room ready upon arrival. They all have the concierge access and they will receive a standard amenity upon arrival. When the amenity is delivered, the housekeeping manager inspects the room to make sure everything looks perfect. The VIPs receive their room keys in a personalized key packet and they have bathrobes, slippers and bath rug in the room. After check-in, but before 9 pm, the front office manager gives the guest a follow-up phone call to ensure everything is according to the guest's preference.

VIP 3 status is given to meeting planners, high profile VIPs and Site Inspection VIPs (Marriott Global Sources 2013). All of the previously listed services are available for these guests. Additionally if requested, the hotel can provide transportation to the guest from the airport or train station. Because all VIPs bring a great amount of business to the hotel it is important to give perfect customer service to all of them despite their classification in the reservation.

# 3 BEST PRACTICES IN VIP SERVICE

In this section the best practices of VIP service are investigated. The research is implemented from management's, development's and quality's point of view adding examples of VIP service innovations from around the world. These areas of research are implemented in the hospitality industry to improve the value of the service provided for VIP guests.

## 3.1 Service management

Service management relates to the VIP services because of the hospitality sector's reliance on services and the customers' perceived value on the service (Kandampully, 2006). It has been defined as a multidisciplinary field of practice that includes services marketing, services operations management, and services human resources management (Schneider, 2004). According to Albrecht (1988) service management is a total organizational approach that makes quality of service, from customer's perspective, the primary driving force for a business. Because quality of service is considered one of the most essential and influential factors in service management, it needs to stay consistent and therefore have adequate processes in place.

## 3.2 Development of best practice processes

All hotel managers agree that service is the highest priority in the hospitality business (Mann 1993, 54). That is why it is imperative to have practices in place that improve the level of service in the hotel. If the service is exceptionally good the guests return to the property. In the hotel industry, service quality that satisfies customers is important to encourage them to revisit and to earn their loyalty and satisfaction (Babajide 2011, 48; Christie 2002; Hersh 2010, 209; Ladhari 2009, 311; Oliver 1999). No matter how spectacular the property is, unobtrusive personal service is what brings the guests back (Mann 1993, 54). Developing

standards and practices takes time from the management and it is important to consider the specific property and customer base when creating these practices (Siguaw & Enz 1999, 42-53). Knowing who your guests are, what they want, and how they want it will make the process easier and the quality of the product and service will determine the guest-retention rates (Siguaw & Enz 1999, 42-53). It is essential to stay focused on the goals and design a targeted program. Guest-satisfaction ratings can be improved by a diverse body of practices, whether the practices involve developing a quality program for the entire company or simply improving one operation, such as check-in. Implementing improved operational practices can benefit many areas of the organization - whether that improvement is hotel wide or located in a single department (Siguaw & Enz 1999, 42-53). The company should involve everyone who will be affected by operational changes in the development and implementation of new practices (Siguaw & Enz 1999, 42-53). Also valuable practices may be lost or discarded as organizations shift to accommodate new management and staff (Enz & Siguaw 2003). Therefore it becomes essential to create transparent communication system between management and departments and to implement, retain and improve the existing best practices.

Hotel chain Four Seasons believes, that only employees' motivation and attitude effect on the guest's experience (Dube & Renagham 1999, 16). Because even the most detailed set of standards cannot ensure consistent service delivery, Four Seasons seeks to hire people who are motivated to serve guests. Technical skills can be taught to employees, but without the right employee attitude and motivation, the guest still may leave unsatisfied. Low pay, long work hours, heavy workloads, customer aggression, role stress, and inconvenient work schedules are some of the things influencing employees' motivation in service industry (Karatepe & Karadas 2012, 614-615). Dube and Renagham point out, that managers should lead by example in addition to only offering formal training and a motivational work environment. Zemke (1991) has discovered that:

> *"Frontline employees working in an environment where management is not committed to service excellence cannot deal with customers' requests*

*and complaints successfully. It is obvious that any efforts made by such employees are doomed to failure from the start unless management is fully committed to service excellence".*

Therefore healthy and motivational work environment are imperative in executing excellent customer service. To achieve these standards there needs to be management commitment.

## 3.3 Quality of service

A research evidenced that service quality has a significant influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty compared to product / service characteristics (Donnelly, Neil, Rimmer, & Shiu, 2006). Additionally service quality has been proven to lead to decreased costs, increased profitability, improved organizational performance and positive word-of-mouth (Seth, Deshmukh, & Vrat, 2005). Consequently it can be stated that quality of service relates to a hotel guest's perception of the property and furthermore the intention to return to the property. Because this thesis researches the VIP services, it can be stated that there is a significant relationship between repeat guests and the quality of service. Loyalty programs that several repeat guests and VIPs follow, would eventually discontinue if the quality of service was disappointing. To encourage the customers to choose a certain business over another the level of service quality needs to be on a high level from customer's perception and the service quality needs to stay consistent.

## 3.4 Examples of service innovations

The Diamond Palace Hotel & Casino in Condado, Puerto Rico has established their philosophy in providing VIP treatment without spending unreasonable amounts of money (The Diamond Palace Hotel & Casino 2006, 22). The company for instance argues that VIP treatment can be created through simple things like choosing the right location for right services. That is why the hotel

has chosen to locate its restaurant to the penthouse, which offers a spectacular view of San Juan for the customer. Additionally the company has recently set a grill in the pool area to serve the guests with lunch and a drink with an exceptionally low price. Although the location of services can play an important role in making the guest feel like a VIP, the Diamond Palace & Hotel claims that experienced staff can make a difference as well.

Convenience is of a great importance among the VIPs of the future (Mann 1993). This is implemented for instance by St. Pancras Renaissance hotel's new invention in London, United Kingdom. The hotel offers to its VIPs an exclusive travel experience to and from the hotel in cooperation with Eurostar high-speed railway service (Marketwired 2013). The service gives the hotel guest the opportunity to relax in the executive lounge until 30 minutes before the train departs. Then, the guest is escorted quickly through the terminal security and to their seat at the Eurostar carriage. This provides the guest with luxurious and exclusive service experience that is available only for the VIPs.

At Marriott properties the convenience for VIPs is implemented for instance by expediting the guest's check-in. Prior to a VIP guest's arrival the rooms control in the front office department will pre-check the guest in the hotel, thus, the rooms control associate will assign the guest a room that is clean and inspected (Marriott Global Sources 2013). The room keys are encoded and given to a bellman to test before the guest's arrival. The VIP status is implemented for Platinum and Gold Elite members through grey Elite key cards indicating the guest's membership status. Upon check-in the VIP guest simply picks up the key and uses a separate set of elevators to access his suite. This procedure provides the VIP with a seamless and expedited arrival experience and eliminates the possibility of guest receiving a dysfunctional key or waiting in line for long periods of time while the correct room is being assigned. Because the VIPs are the first priority, they should be assigned a room before anyone else.

VIPs tend to travel significant amount of their time and therefore they are increasingly aware of their needs and hotel requirements. For instance sports teams have special requirements when choosing a hotel. The location needs to

be right, the agreements need to be fulfilled by the hotel and the players need to receive privacy, safety and isolation from other hotel guests (Tse & Suk-ching 2006). To be able to fill such demands, hotels need to establish consistent processes that are in line with the demands. If the hotel does not have procedures in place it can violate the contract and lose an important guest or furthermore pay for any consequences. According to Antony and Ghosh (2004) and Harvey (1998), service quality means meeting and exceeding customer expectations.

# 4 STUDY ON VIP SERVICE

The study on VIP service was conducted at Baltimore Marriott Waterfront, which is a full service convention hotel with 753 rooms and a convenient location in downtown Baltimore. The hotel has a total of 80.000 square feet of meeting space which consists of 41 meeting rooms. The hotel attracts especially business travelers from all over the world. Because of the facilities and the excellent service, the hotel accommodates a remarkable amount of business meetings, seminars and special events. These occasions bring the business and the majority of the revenue to the hotel. Because the nature of the trade at Marriott Waterfront revolves around business events it is clear that business travelers are the heaviest users of the facility. Business travelers on the other hand are typically frequent travelers and therefore likely to be members of Marriott Rewards loyalty program. This concludes to the realization that majority of the guests at Marriott Waterfront are business travelers and Marriott Rewards Members.

## 4.1 Research methods

### 4.1.1 Qualitative method

This section introduces the methods used to examine the VIP services in practice. The study has used two principal research methods, qualitative and quantitative. Interview was chosen as the qualitative research method because it is one of the most common and powerful data collection tools in qualitative research (Lechuga 2012, 2). Additionally interviews provide another perspective to theory. As Nielsen in 2007 has found, the aim of an interview is to get beyond definitions and theories in order to articulate the everyday level of processes. The study uses six in-depth interviews that have management level respondents.  An in-depth interview is an equal approach to interviewing which develops research relationships and respect with participants by focusing on the partici-

pant's experiences from their own perspective (Beale et al 2004, 141). Interviews used in the research had ten open ended questions to allow the interviewee to provide as specific responses as possible. The interviews were conducted in a hotel environment at Baltimore Marriott Waterfront, in the United States and the interviewee group consisted of department managers.

The first questions in the interview consisted of definitions. The respondents were asked to define a VIP guest and to analyze why a particular guest is considered a VIP. Furthermore managers were asked to list processes involved in VIP guest service and to give real life examples on VIP service in order to discover all the services the hotel offers to VIPs. To further examine the guest satisfaction the respondents were asked to consider why certain services are offered to VIPs and what the desired outcomes of the VIP processes are.

## 4.1.2 Quantitative method

The second research method used in the study is the quantitative method and more specifically a survey. According to Babbie in 1973 surveys are most commonly used to gather facts opinion and attitudes, and the major purposes of survey research include, explanation, description and exploration. Because the study investigates VIP services it is essential to represent the guest perspective in order to get realistic results. The study uses guest satisfaction survey results from two different time periods to be able to compare the present results with the past. The Guest Satisfaction Survey (GSS) was conducted online by Baltimore Marriott Waterfront in January through July of 2010 and 2013. The survey was taken in 2010 by 173 Marriott Elite Members and 52 of them either had Gold or Platinum membership status. In 2013 the survey was taken by 140 Elite Members including 75 Gold and Platinum Members.

The survey conducted measures guest satisfaction at Baltimore Marriott Waterfront through several different focus points. The guests are asked to for instance evaluate their overall satisfaction with the property, intend to return to the property, intend to recommend the property for others and satisfaction with the staff.

Also the guests are asked about the facilities, amenities and meeting spaces. Majority of the questions are relatively straightforward and are answered in a scale from one to ten, 1 being poor and 10 being excellent. Some of the questions have a different evaluation scale as shown in a survey page in appendix 2. At the end of the survey there is space for additional guest comments.

## 4.2 Results of the interviews

### 4.2.1 Front Office

The interviews revealed versatile information about the processes involved with VIP guest service at Baltimore Marriott Waterfront. As the majority of the interview respondents are form Front Office department the results reflect the interviewee group. Managers Drake, Heinz and Miller provided open information about VIP guest service processes at the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront hotel from management perspective as well as from an associate perspective due to their long experience in the hotel business.

Front office is typically the first department the guest is in interaction with when arriving to the hotel. Therefore the valet, bell stand and front desk need to give an outstanding first impression to all of the guests upon arrival. Additionally the hotel needs to recognize the guest's VIP status. All of the associates in each department in Baltimore Marriott Waterfront receive information about arriving VIP guests every day before starting their shift (Heinz 2013). Therefore all associates are prepared to welcome the VIP's along with all other guests.

Platinum Elite Members have the privilege to request and reserve a sedan pick up from the airport upon their arrival (Miller 2013). In this case the guest will be able to skip the check-in process and the hotel will pre-assign the guest a room. After arriving to the hotel the VIP receives his room key card in the lobby from a concierge desk representative and therefore does not need to wait in line to progress the check-in. At this point the guest is advised to come by the front desk at his convenience to provide a method of payment for his stay. This VIP

arrival experience is beneficial to both the guest and the hotel, because the guest receives a speedy and personalized check in and the hotel benefits by utilizing several parts of front office instead of overloading the front desk with check-ins.

For high profile individuals the Waterfront hotel is able to secure the elevators from other guests and additionally provide a red carpet arrival (Miller 2013). For famous sports teams and other VIP groups the front desk provides pre-assigned room keys to expedite the arrival. In this case generally the room and tax are taken care of for the players, but the hotel needs to get a method of payment for the incidentals from each member of the team. Again, the guest is welcome to provide the desired method of payment at their convenience. After check-in, all of the VIP's receive a follow-up welcome call preferably from the General Manager or a department head to make sure everything is according to their preference and to welcome them to the hotel.

Upon arrival the front desk has a great opportunity to personalize the service. Through personalization each guest can feel like a VIP (Miller 2013). One of the personalization tools the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront uses is walking the guest to the elevators (Miller 2013). In practice this means that after check-in each guest is escorted to the elevators by the person who checked them in. On the way the front desk agent provides the guest with the room key card and gives information about the property. Finally the associate shakes the guest's hand and pushes the elevator button for the floor where the guest's room is located. If the guest is a VIP, he will receive also a welcome call from the General Manager when arriving to his room. Although personalization is time consuming, it results as better scores in guest satisfaction surveys and therefore reflects to the perceived level of service (Miller 2013).

If the guest is an Elite Member and has used a Marriott Mobile Application, it is imperative to provide the guest with an express check-in and consequently enable the benefits of the application (Miller 2013). This application is free of charge and the guest can download it from the App Store. It offers the Marriott Elite Members a tool to make the hotel check-in easier and more efficient.

When the guest logs into the system, he can choose to enable the Mobile check-in service. After accepting the process, an "At Your Service" agent at the hotel, responds to the information by requesting a desired check-in time. After receiving the check-in time, the agent makes the appropriate changes on the guest's reservation on the Property Management System and assigns the guest an available room. When the room has been assigned the guest receives a notification that the room is ready and the guest may check in. When the guest arrives to the hotel after using the application, he does not need to stay in line waiting for service, but he can just pick up the keys and head up to his room (Drake 2013). The mobile application is especially useful for the frequent travelers who are familiar with the property and do not need assistance with getting around in the hotel. Because the Mobile Application is used by Elite Members it is important for the front desk associate to recognize the status of the guest and thank the guest for using the mobile application. If the Mobile Application service is not fluent it directly correlates with the VIP GSS results. At Marriott the Elite Members and Mobile Application users are directed to a specific part of the front desk, to offer a personalized check in and to be able to appropriately thank the guest for being an Elite Member. Although elite recognition is important for the hotel, no matter who is checking in, the guest needs to be provided with excellent customer service and respect (Heinz 2013).

"At Your Service" (AYS) is a call center and a part of the Front Office department at Marriott Hotels. This unit is responsible for providing excellent guest service over the phone. At Your Service has major responsibility on the communication in the hotel, it is imperative the guest's status is appropriately recognized. If the unit does not inform for example engineering department about the guest's VIP status, the engineer will not be able to recognize the status when providing services to the guest (Drake 2013). This consequently will influence the perceived quality of service in the hotel and give the guest a less individualized customer service experience. Because VIPs are in an extremely important position from the business stand point, it is imperative to examine all of the issues the VIP guests face during their stay. Losing a VIP is very expensive to the company and therefore the hotel needs to ensure all of the guest's concerns

have been taken care of (Miller 2013). Even gestures that seem relatively small can make a big difference in the hospitality industry where the competition is intense. Because VIP treatment is all about personalization, the hotel needs to pay attention to detail and pursue to take care of the guests every need.

## 4.2.2 Engineering

Engineering department is a less visual department for the guests than for example the front office, but it has a great significance in complying with guests' requests and needs and the hotel's overall success (Novella 2013). As part of facilities management, engineering needs to consider the safety and security of the building, service, cost control, asset management and it needs to make sure the hotel facilities comply with the law and regulations (Stipanuk 2006, 20). But also it needs to ensure the facilities are in appropriate condition to accommodate guests from all over the world. Engineering is able to provide the guests with exceptional equipment in the room upon their arrival but also it plays a crucial role when accidents or disasters in the building occur. Because of relatively large amount of guest interaction, the engineering needs to be able to positively interact with the guests and also recognize the VIP status of the guest (Novella 2013). Furthermore, because engineering receives the work orders from the customer service, it is important the information of the guest's VIP status is being delivered from a department to another.

Marriott Waterfront has had the privilege to accommodate plenty of VIP guests during its twelve years of existence. For instance the hotel has once accommodated a famous movie star who requested the room to be completely black and dark for him to be able to sleep at day time (Novella 2013). The engineering team at Marriott Waterfront was able to meet this need by sealing every hole by the doors and windows to block the light from coming in the room. Another example of engineering involvement in VIP service was in the summer of 2013 at Marriott Waterfront when the royal family of an Arabic country stayed in the hotel for two months. The guests accommodated 3 floors of the 31 stories high

building and had a great amount of requests to be taken care of. According to the group's preferences the engineering team for instance tore down walls, installed bidet toilets, changed two rooms into doctor's offices and completely changed the decor in the rooms (Novella 2013). Additionally against all the property policies, the group was allowed to smoke in the rooms. Naturally the rooms were deep cleaned after departure by the funds received from the guest group.

### 4.2.3 Food and beverage

Restaurant has various ways it can respect the VIP guest's needs in a hotel environment. Because the VIPs typically enjoy their privacy, the restaurant will not face tremendous challenges in the physical restaurant setting (Agafonova 2013). However a hotel has the possibility to accommodate VIP dinner parties in separate meeting spaces if the hotel restaurant is too busy or the space too public. These arrangements are typically been taken care of well before the guest's arrival and listed in the group's resume.

A hotel is also able to make structural changes in the kitchen to meet the guests' needs. For example the kitchen in Baltimore Marriott Waterfront has made changes to enable the royal family's chefs to fit in and be able to prepare food for the royal family. The spaces included both the work space and the storage space in the hotel's kitchen. Although this arrangement created changes for the daily routines of the staff, bringing the royal family's own chefs might have been one of the line conditions for their arrival. Therefore it is important to respect the guest's special requests and strive for the most cooperative solution.

### 4.2.4 Security

Security issues are a major concern when VIP guests are in question. In Marriott Waterfront the Loss Prevention department takes care of security issues in

the hotel. Besides taking care of the security issue, the most fundamental step is recognizing the guest's VIP status. Generally the high profile VIPs, for instance international diplomats, have security personnel taking care of their safety and they arrive with a police escort (Novella 2013). Typically these guests prefer using the side entrances instead of the main entrance and checking in off peak hours preferably by someone else than the actual VIP (Heinz 2013). In the Arabic royal family's case a security person was hired to stand by the elevators guarding the floor around the clock (Novella 2013). For high profile individuals the Loss Prevention department specifies alternative exits to use if they are not comfortable or allowed to use public spaces. By providing these alternatives to the guest, the hotel is able to create a safer, comfortable and more personalized experience to the VIP.

4.2.5 Housekeeping

From the housekeeping department's point of view, the VIP guests are like any other guests (Taylor 2013). The room needs to be cleaned according to the standards whoever the guest will be. The work needs to be consistent and superb at all times. However every day by 10 am housekeeping is notified which rooms are going to be accommodated by a VIP. These rooms need to be ready and cleaned by noon on the day of the VIP's arrival (Taylor 2013). Each of these rooms also needs to be inspected by a manager before the guest checks in. In-house VIPs on the other hand should always receive early housekeeping service if possible. According to housekeeping manager Mrs. Carmen Taylor at Marriott Waterfront the VIP's guest room looks exactly like any other guest's room with the exception of some additional amenities in the room. However the housekeeping staff can organize something special for the VIP guest if it wants. For example fruit platter or milk and cookies are an easy treat to arrange for a special guest. Only the VIPs who are not Marriott Rewards members are provided with a nightly refresh by the housekeeping, also known as turndown service. These guests include high profile individuals, group contacts and international diplomats as previously listed. Platinum Elite Members will not receive

nightly refresh service. This is due to a result in an Elite Members' survey, which proved that turndown service is not particularly important to the Gold and Platinum guests (Miller 2013). Leaving the Gold and Platinum Members without the turndown service also contributes to the profit improvement in the hotel which is ultimately an extremely significant factor in the hospitality industry.

The housekeepers start the nightly refresh service every evening at 6 pm and aim to change the atmosphere in every VIP room so that the guest will feel like going to bed after a long day (Taylor 2013). The housekeepers make sure the bed has been made, close the drapes, turn a light on by the bedside and place the remote control on the night stand. Finally they place chocolates on the bed and leave a next day's weather card in the room for the guest to see (Picture 1). By providing nightly refresh service the hotel aims to create a comfortable living environment for the guest and also offer luxurious and continuous care for the guest.
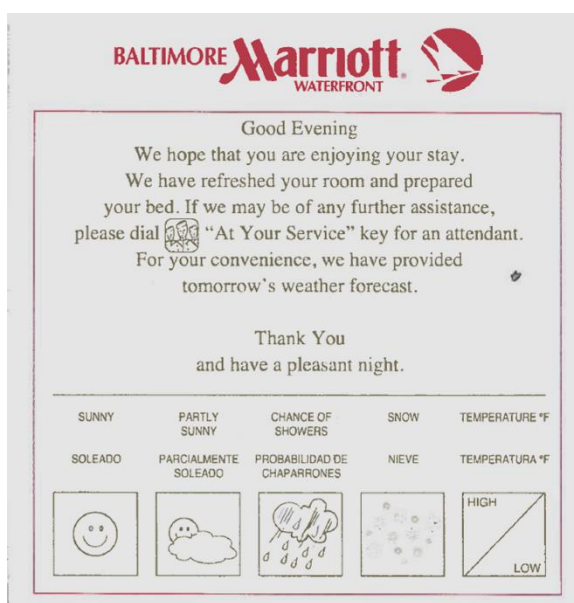


Picture 1. Weather card

Sometimes the housekeeping needs to be prepared for bigger VIP groups that demand more service. According to the Housekeeping Manager of Marriott Waterfront for example the royal Arabic family's arrival required the housekeeping management to increase the housekeeping staff by 4 people for two months

(Taylor 2013). Another challenge with this group was the different culture. Because of the different daily rhythm of the guests' the housekeeping was busy around the clock. The guests would for example request service at 11:30 pm which was challenging to organize when the evening shift staff normally clocks out at 11:15 pm.

4.2.6 Acting on preferences

VIP treatment is based on personalization according to Front Office Manager Erik Miller (2013). Therefore it is crucial for the hotel to be aware of the guest's needs, requests and preferences. Preferences are very personal to most people and that is why people feel truly heard and appreciated when their preferences are being recognized. Often the VIPs are traveling a significant part of the year and that is why the hotel becomes a home away from home. Consistent loyalty towards the guest's needs and recognition of the guest's preferences creates a positive relationship between the hotel and the guest. This is where loyalty programs serve a great purpose. When the guests' preferences are in the company's data base the hotel manages to provide personalized service for each member during each stay.

Typical guest requests at the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront include the requests for a specific room type, view or bed type. A typical guest at Waterfront is a business traveler who prefers a room with a harbor view and a king size bed (Heinz, 2013). For Gold and Platinum Elite Members an upgrade for a harbor view room on the Concierge Lounge level is complimentary, but for everyone else a harbor view request will cost 40 dollars extra per night (Heinz 2013). The Platinum Elite Members are also entitled to a complimentary upgrade to a Deluxe King Suite, which will cost for all other guests 120 dollars extra per night. Additionally these VIPs receive complimentary internet access in the room. The purpose of taking care of room, bed type, and view preferences is to make the guest's stay in the hotel as comfortable as possible and to keep the guest coming back.

Upon departure, several guests have concerns about the check-out time, which at Marriott Waterfront is 12 pm. Upon request, all of the Marriott Elite members are entitled to a late check-out up to two hours later than the standard check-out time with no additional charge (Heinz 2013). If the guest is not an Elite Member, the hotel can extend the check-out only based on availability. By extending a check-out the hotel risks its guarantee for the 4 pm check-in. Furthermore this can become expensive if there is a VIP unable to check in to a clean room at 4 pm (Heinz 2013). The housekeeping staff will do its best to have all vacant rooms available and clean at 4 pm, but in case there are several rooms left to check-out at 2 pm the housekeeping can only do so much in two hours.

4.2.7 Cost of VIP service

According to Baltimore Marriott Waterfront's Front Office Manager Erik Miller there are several ways to make a guest feel like a VIP without spending enormous amounts of money. Room upgrades are perhaps the easiest and the most flexible inexpensive way to provide additional value to the guest. Because VIP's bring great amount of business to the hotel, it is extremely important to provide the guests with the best possible room available. Unless the hotel is sold out, the VIP's should always be offered a room upgrade. Mr. Miller also points out that room upgrade should be available for all of the guests upon arrival. There is no reason in having the best rooms empty. Any guest should be upgraded to a suite if there is one available that night. The hotel should always aim to give the best possible experience to the guest.

Another inexpensive way to provide VIP treatment is by giving the guest a complimentary internet access (Miller 2013). In Baltimore Marriott Waterfront the internet costs $12.95 per day to all of the guests except for VIP's. Therefore by providing free internet access, any guest can feel like a VIP. Although the saving is significant to the guest, the hotel does not lose remarkable amounts of money. This is due to the fact that the hotel needs to pay for the internet access

for the whole property despite the possibility that none of the guests end up using it.

Concierge lounge access is given to all of the Gold and Platinum Elite Members as well as to all other VIPs. This means that the guest is allowed to use the lounge during its opening hours and enjoy free meals and beverages. Although the concierge lounge offers upscale experiences to the guest, according to Mr. Miller it has been calculated that in fact it only costs the hotel $4.75 per guest per day to treat the guest with concierge lounge access at Waterfront property. Therefore it is has been proven to be also economical to the company to offer this luxurious experience to the guests. Also non-VIP's can utilize this service, but the charge for one day's concierge lounge access is fifty dollars. Also to maintain the luxurious and business driven atmosphere in the lounge area, the access is not offered to families with children (Miller 2013).

A simple way to create a "wow" experience to the guest is simply personalizing the service (Miller 2013). It is important to be interested in the guest's background and the guest's need and wishes. Upon arrival the VIP's also receive arrival gifts such as fruit baskets, cookies and hand written cards. According to the Waterfront's Front Office Manager Erik Miller, all of these are very inexpensive treats but they create an atmosphere of personalization upon arrival. He also states that it is vitally important for the hotel to realize and understand the cost of losing a VIP guest. When using that perspective, it can be stated that VIPs are extremely important for the hotel business and which is why they should receive best possible service.

4.3 Results of the Guest Satisfaction Survey

The Guest Satisfaction Survey between January and June of 2013 was taken by 140 Elite Members of the Marriott Rewards loyalty program (Figure 2). 75 respondents were either Gold or Platinum members. The results show that the overall satisfaction with the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront was ranked to 90% and among Platinum Elite guests the score was as high as 91.2%. The staff

satisfaction is at 90.8% among all Elite guests and at a high 96.9% among Platinum Elite members. Some of the scores are less commendable. For instance the guests' intend to return to the property lies at 76.5% and the guests' intent to recommend the property in the future is at 79.4% among all Elite members.

**GSS GUEST TYPE REPORT**
Continent: AmericasProgram: US/Canada
Brand: Marriott
Property:Baltimore Marriott WaterfrontMARSHA:BWIWF
Rewards Levels

| | Platinum (A) | | Gold (B) | | Silver (C) | | All Elite (D) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Respondents | 34 | | 41 | | 65 | | 140 | |
| **OVERALL MEASURES** | | | | | | | | |
| Overall satisfaction | 91.2 | | 87.8 | | 90.8 | E | 90.0 | E |
| Intent to return to property | 76.5 | E | 70.7 | E | 54.0 | | 64.5 | E |
| Intent to recommend in the future | 79.4 | E | 78.0 | E | 61.9 | | 71.0 | E |
| Property exp. influences future brand stay consideration | 59.4 | | 60.0 | | 52.5 | | 56.4 | E |
| Compared to competition on physical condition | 77.8 | | 84.4 | E | 76.6 | | 79.2 | E |
| Compared to competition on staff service overall | 82.6 | | 72.2 | | 77.8 | | 77.9 | |
| Value received for price paid | 88.2 | E | 75.0 | | 82.5 | E | 81.8 | E |

**GSS GUEST TYPE REPORT**
Continent: Americas    Program: US/Canada
Brand: Marriott
Property: Baltimore Marriott Waterfront   MARSHA: BWIWF
Rewards Levels

| | Platinum (A) | | Gold (B) | Silver (C) | All Elite (D) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Respondents | 34 | | 41 | 65 | 140 |
| **HOTEL STAFF SERVICE** | | | | | |
| Staff service overall | 96.9 | | 88.6 | 88.7 | 90.8 |
| Warm and hospitable | 100.0 | E | 90.2 | 93.3 | 94.0 |
| Responsive to needs/requests | 100.0 | D  E | 85.0 | 91.5 | 91.7 |
| Going the extra mile | 96.6 | | 86.5 | 86.2 | 88.7 |
| Skilled and well-trained | 100.0 | E | 87.8 | 95.1 | 94.1 |
| Authority to take care of issues | 96.3 | | 91.2 | 90.4 | 92.0 |
| Making you feel appreciated as Elite Rewards Member | 100.0 | D | 92.3 | 83.6 | 90.2 |

Figure 2. GSS Guest type report. Final report Jan - Jun 2013

Although the GSS scores in 2013 are relatively positive, three years ago in 2010 the results were completely different (Figure 3). Among all (173) Elite guests the overall satisfaction was at 86.7%. Among 52 Platinum Elite guests the score was left at 76%. The staff service satisfaction was at 90.9% among Platinum Elite Members but was left at 89.2% among all Elite Members. Especially alarming results were received on the guests' intent to return to the property, 55.8%, and on the guests' intent to recommend the hotel to other people, 64.9%.

**GSS GUEST TYPE REPORT**
Continent: AmericasProgram: US/Canada
Brand: Marriott
Property:Baltimore Marriott WaterfrontMARSHA:BWIWF
Rewards Levels

| | Platinum (A) | Gold (B) | Silver (C) | All Elite (D) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Respondents | 25 | 27 | 121 | 173 |
| **OVERALL MEASURES** | | | | |
| Overall satisfaction | 76.0 | 88.9 | 88.4 | 86.7 |
| Intent to return to property | 68.0 E | 55.6 | 53.3 E | 55.8 E |
| Intent to recommend in the future | 56.0 | 74.1 E | 64.7 E | 64.9 E |
| Compared to competition on physical condition | 75.0 | 91.3 | 78.2 | 80.0 |
| Compared to competition on staff service overall | 70.0 | 82.6 | 77.5 | 77.2 |
| Value received for price paid | 80.0 | 85.2 | 78.2 | 79.5 E |

**GSS GUEST TYPE REPORT**
Continent: AmericasProgram: US/Canada
Brand: Marriott
Property:Baltimore Marriott WaterfrontMARSHA:BWIWF
Rewards Levels

| | Platinum (A) | Gold (B) | Silver (C) | All Elite (D) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Respondents | 25 | 27 | 121 | 173 |
| **HOTEL STAFF SERVICE** | | | | |
| Staff service overall | 90.9 | 92.0 | 88.3 | 89.2 |
| Warm and hospitable | 87.5 | 100.0 D E | 88.0 | 89.8 |
| Responsive to needs/requests | 66.7 | 100.0 D E | 86.2 | 85.5 |
| Going the extra mile | 83.3 | 100.0 | 84.9 | 87.0 |
| Skilled and well-trained | 82.6 | 92.3 | 90.4 | 89.6 |
| Authority to take care of issues | 71.4 | 100.0 | 86.2 | 86.3 |
| Making you feel appreciated as Elite Rewards Member | 83.3 | 92.3 | 83.8 | 85.0 |

Figure 3. GSS Guest type report. Final report Jan - Jun 2010

The company has made significant improvements in the property to lift the GSS scores from 2010 to the 2013 level. The management of Baltimore Marriott Waterfront in 2010 found that the level of VIP guest satisfaction was not on the desired level. This prompted a discussion among management and created a need for better VIP guest service processes. The company looked into a comprehensive study on the guests to find out who the guests are, what they enjoy, what kind of things they appreciate in the hotel environment and why the scores are as low as they are. As Siguaw and Enz in 1999 indicated, it is essential to consider the customer base of a specific property before creating new standards and practices. Through customer base and GSS research Baltimore Marriott Waterfront set its own goals, which in 2013 are GSS score of 89% among all guests and Event Satisfaction Survey score of 83% among all guests. To improve GSS scores and to achieve these goals each department was assigned "lead measures" (Miller 2013). According to Corey-Tuckwell (1993) management must choose productivity measures which maximize selling behaviors and optimize profit and the total guest experience (p. 23). Therefore

management chose to use lead measures which are realistic to take into action and which increase quality of service. Through practical daily processes the departments have aimed to achieve the lead measures since 2010 to better the GSS scores. The company encouraged to get everyone involved in the new practices, exactly as Siguaw and Enz suggested, and pushed the new processes to action. The reason behind descending guest satisfaction scores is not always declining service level but the changing needs of the guests'. Hotels cannot remain static (Siguaw & Enz 1999, 42-53). To retain the status of the hotel business, managers must constantly seek to improve operations.

The lead measures for Baltimore Marriott Waterfront engineering department are as follows. Complete 10 room inspections per week for Elite members prior to arrival, maintain a back log of no more than 150 work orders in Guest Ware and inspect 10 rooms per week (Novella 2013). All of these lead measures aim to guarantee the high quality of the rooms. By making a conscious effort to cut the engineering issues in the rooms during the guest's stay, the department has been able to contribute to the hotel's goal to improve the overall GSS scores from the year 2010. Because Elite Members are extremely important for the convention hotel Marriott Waterfront, the department has established the mandatory VIP room check-ups in the list of lead measures. This particular lead measure has been of great importance in improving the VIP GSS scores for the hotel over the three years.

Restaurant department at Marriott Waterfront has their own list of lead measures they need to follow in order to keep improving the level of service. At the restaurant the morning shift aims to connect with five leisure guests per week. This means for example discussing their trip during breakfast or creating small "wow" moments for them (Agafonova 2013). By acting on this lead measure the hotel aims to connect with the rare leisure travelers in a business hotel. This on the other hand lets the guest know that they are being appreciated which will ultimately lead to better GSS ratings.

The lead measure for the room service department is the "Call Ahead" (Agafonova 2013). This means that the server on duty randomly picks three

room service orders and confirms the order with the guest by calling the guest's room before the order is put forward to the chef. This way the guest can be sure that the order will include exactly what he wanted and also it gives the guest the option to add something to the order at the last minute. Nevertheless, by calling the guest, the room service opens a channel for communication and therefore improves the customer service.

Loss Prevention department has a goal for 2013 to improve Elite recognition to 88% by using a specific lead measure since 2010. The officers of Loss Prevention need to recognize the guest's Elite Membership during all guest calls. This means that the guest's Elite status will be recognized when the guest calls for instance regarding a lock-out. By improving Elite recognition the Loss Prevention department on its part contributes to better GSS scores.

Housekeeping has used the following three lead measures to achieve the wildly important goals: room completely clean, wows in the guest room and elite recognition (Taylor 2013). Housekeeping has focused on the department's lead measures since 2010 and helped the GSS scores rise significantly over the three years. To be able to focus on the lead measures each department creates its own operation models. As housekeeping has elite recognition as one of the lead measures it has a great focus on how VIP related issues are handled.

Over the three years of acting on the lead measures the Marriott Waterfront has been able to make significant change on the GSS scores. It has succeeded in its attempt to improve the unpleasant GSS scores remarkably. The best practices and operational processes introduced to the hotel in 2010 have influenced positively to the GSS scores among the hotel's VIPs as well. In 2013 on the same time period as in 2010 the survey was taken by 140 Marriott Elite Members. The GSS score for Elite Members overall satisfaction had improved from 86.7% to 90% and the Platinum guests solely rank their overall satisfaction to 91.2% when three years ago the number was as low as 76%. Also the level of perceived staff service quality according to Platinum Elite Members rose from 90.2% to 96.9%. These results prove that extensive changes have been made inside the organization. Some scores still remain on lower levels but have nev-

ertheless improved significantly from previous years. One example of this kind occurs in the guest's intention to recommend the property for people. In 2010 the Platinum guests ranked this to 56% when three years later the score is as high as 79.4%. Over 23 percent point increase is undoubtedly a sign that practices taken to action during these three years are worth the investment. According to a front desk manager Ria Drake at Baltimore Marriott Waterfront there are additional explanations that contribute to the change in GSS scores from 2010 to 2013:

> *"The change in management structure had a major impact on the employees in 2010".*

The front office was assigned new managers in 2010 which helped in motivating the employees to better customer service. Manager Drake remarks that when there are enough employees and competent managers the guests will receive better service. Researchers have also argued that satisfied employees are more committed to serving customers (Loveman 1998, Silvestro and Cross 2000, Yoon and Suh 2003).

## 4.4 Discussion on results and improvement

### 4.4.1 Outlook on operations and workforce

VIP services are of great importance in hospitality industry because of the amount of business involved in it. Therefore hotels use great amount of time and resources to keep the existing guests and to attract new VIPs. The study by Siguaw and Enz (2003) suggested that improved operational practices benefit several areas of the organization and this was also proved by the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront's case on guest satisfaction improvement. The results of the management level interviews indicated that there is a significant emphasis on the daily operations when dealing with VIP guests. The VIP services are executed according standards and therefore kept as consistent as possible, thus changes in operations correlate with Guest Satisfaction Survey results. Alt-

hough it seems straightforward that the procedures have an effect on the GSS scores it is likely that there are additional factors influencing the results. As Manager Drake mentioned, the property went through management level hiring in 2010 which had a considerable effect on the employees at the time. Therefore it can be stated that employee satisfaction must not have been on the highest level either at the time of low GSS scores in 2010. New improved processes can benefit the company but it will not guarantee the success without satisfactory management and employee satisfaction.

As noted in the example from Four Seasons, the employees delivering the intangible service are in an important position. The employees can exclusively by using their personality and problem solving skills improve the level of service. Management needs to perceive that the procedures only will not make a change in the quality of service. Without profitable and supportive working environment the employees will not be able to create superior guest service. It is essential to have a management team that is motivated and cares about the staff in order to execute any new procedures or standards. To create the atmosphere of motivation in the company, the managers should be assigned quality training and opportunities to interact with employees. For the managers to be able to track the level of service it needs to be present and involved with daily operations. Because the hospitality industry revolves around people providing services to other people it is helpful to consider the words of John Willard Marriott:

*"Take care of your employees and they'll take care of your customers."*

4.4.2 Outlook on VIP service improvement

According to the Guest Satisfaction Survey results at Marriott Waterfront there were several areas that experienced great improvement over the three years of implementing "Lead Measures". However there were two prominent sections that are ranked lower than the others: intent to return to the property and intent to recommend the property in the future. As these are property specific points it

raises a question about the uniqueness of the property. Perhaps these scores would be higher if there was an attracting feature at the property, other than the high-quality service, that the competitors do not possess. The feature could be a service or an exquisite characteristic of the hotel. As discovered, the travelers today are aware of their needs, which is why they are looking for something that exceeds their expectations. This opens opportunities for hotels to invent something spectacular that attracts VIP guest and provides quality service simultaneously. As the St. Pancras hotel in London, companies need to come up with products that offer both convenience and luxury at the same time. For Baltimore Marriott Waterfront consequently an option would be creating cooperation with for instance the Baltimore – Washington International airport so that all the VIPs get complimentary escort to and from the airport as well as service for managing their flight documents and details. This way the VIP would not be required to handle his transportation issues and he could focus exclusively on the purpose of the trip. Naturally widening the spectrum of services in general is costly, but with thorough research on VIPs, particular planning, quality management and sufficient resources this could be executed. Because the innovation does not concern a wide customer base, management needs to weigh the options and take risks to stay on top of the constantly changing hotel industry.

Another area of improvement at the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront hotel would be the family recognition. The lead measures do not focus on families primarily because Waterfront property is a conference hotel. To increase the GSS score for "Intent to return to the property", the property could for instance create a loyalty program for children of the VIPs. This could include a special child friendly Rewards Card and a personalized gift at check-in. The hotel could track the age and interests of the child and provide appropriate check-in gifts according to the guest's age and interests as well as recognize his or her upcoming birthday with special offers directed to his parents. By involving the children the hotel would consequently be able to control the parents' hotel choices. For a full-service conference property like Waterfront it is imperative to maintain a luxurious and productive atmosphere in the hotel to sustain existing guest relationships. Therefore it should be considered that any addition to services in family sector

should be implemented with taste and punctuality without becoming overly dis-
tinguishable.

# 5 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis was to implement the different processes involved in the treatment of VIP guests in hotel business. I aimed to present profound information on VIP service in practice that can be utilized in other properties and businesses. Through examples from Baltimore Marriott Waterfront I aimed to give a realistic overview on the VIP services related to different departments in a hotel environment. By using management level interviews and Marriott Guest Satisfaction Surveys I pursued to provide up-to-date data on the daily routines and processes utilized today in a Marriott property in Baltimore. This study focused on the best practices in hospitality industry and the daily and management level processes involved in VIP service. These focus points were provided by the management of Baltimore Marriott Waterfront as well as the authors of the professional articles used to conduct the study.

The VIP guest services continue to have a great impact on the hospitality industry that is greatly affected by loyalty programs. Therefore the level of VIP services continues to have a great impact on the revenue of the business as well. To be able to maintain the existing VIP relations the property needs to excel in the job without exceptions. As discusses VIP guests also include high profile individuals from around the world and therefore it is imperative in the hospitality business to make a long lasting impression that gives a positive impression of the property and furthermore affects on the reputation and revenue of the hotel.

In the future the VIP guest services could be further researched by utilizing properties that are more involved with transient guests or properties that are located in other countries. This might provide surprising information on the VIPs. Although VIPs in different cultures and locations may have different requests and preferences, the fact that the hotel should nevertheless provide the guest with undivided attention and act on preferences and requests does not in my opinion change. I believe Mann in 1993 was right about the fact that unobtrusive personal service keeps the guests coming back to the property. Also for future reference I would recommend using an objective guest satisfaction sur-

vey targeted to the VIP guests. Although this might be challenging to organize without causing trouble to VIPs, I think it would correctly executed provide valuable information to hospitality industry.

Because hospitality industry relies on customer service it is essential to have a comprehensive training program for the associates who are providing the service. By providing professional and polished customer service the hotel is able to demonstrate that every guest is as important and that the guest is the reason for the hotel's existence. In my opinion the basis for excellent VIP service starts from recruitment and continues through training. This combined with well planned VIP service processes results in high-quality customer service and in impressed guests.

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# Appendix 1. Guest Satisfaction Survey page

**MARRIOTT**

**TEST PROPERTY**

**Overall Impressions**

Start | Finish

**If in this area again, how likely would you be to stay at TEST PROPERTY again rather than other hotels in the area?**

| Definitely Will | Probably Will | May or May Not | Probably Will Not | Definitely Will Not | Not Returning to Area |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ |

**Given the opportunity, how likely will you be to recommend TEST PROPERTY to a friend or business associate in the future?**

| Definitely Will | Probably Will | May or May Not | Probably Will Not | Definitely Will Not | Not Sure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ |

**Compared to other similarly priced hotels that you stayed at during the past six months within the same local area, would you say that:**

| | Much Better | Better | About the Same | Worse | Much Worse | Didn't Stay at Other Hotel in Area in Past 6 Months |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The physical condition of TEST PROPERTY is: | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ |
| The staff service overall at TEST PROPERTY is: | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ |

**How would you rate the value you received for the price paid at TEST PROPERTY?**

| Excellent | | | | | | | | | Poor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ |

Previous | Next