

THE REASSESSMENT OF THE SERVICE QUALITY SYSTEM WITHIN THE ROMANIAN HOTEL INDUSTRY – A PREMISE FOR INCREASING THE COMPETITION OF THE TOURIST OFFER

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Abstract

The main priority both at microeconomic and macroeconomic level is to provide high quality tourist services; more and more countries, as well as tourist enterprises are setting their own standards for services and quality.

In spite of the many advantages granted by the standards and the management quality system, these instruments of ensuring the quality of services in the hospitality industry are limited in terms of coverage and action area due to the fact that they do not allow national level quality insurance.

The new system should include: the total amount of criteria, the methods of the assessment, the designation of the institutions to be involved in the implementation of the system, the improvement of the system, as well as designating the staff that will evaluate the results and create the correcting measures.

The proposed system requests: completion of the extra criteria as per the methodological norms of stars classification based on quality elements on one side and the implementation by the Ministry of Tourism of the good practice standards, through a specialised office who will be in charge with the implementation of a compulsory self-evaluation system, the use of the information provided by the “mystery client” both by the Ministry and the organization to double check if the necessary and extra criteria are respected, the quality of services and the staff behaviour, in view of increasing the hotel services’ quality and food industry in Romania.

Keywords: quality management, standards of quality, extra-criteria of classification, hospitality industry, good practice norms, national quality system

JEL Classification: D20, D78, H53, M19

Introduction

The present economic environment is marked by the deep world crisis on one hand and by the increased concern within the tourism organisations to find solutions that could sustain the economic efficiency and limit the negative effects on the other hand. Tourists’ adjustment to the new economic conditions has triggered a higher interest in obtaining the best quality-price balance for the purchased tourist services, and particularly for hotel facilities.

“The experienced tourists” have engendered changes in the demand’s structure, as they started asking for more and more sophisticated tourist products and they became more demanding in what concerns the quality and authenticity of the offers.

Moreover, the higher competition among the hotel service suppliers has led to a different approach of competition influenced mainly by quality, which focuses now on the balance between quality and price, and on renewal, variation, innovation and the customer related approach [5].

Therefore, the main priority both at a microeconomic and macroeconomic level is to provide high quality for tourist services. Thus, more and more countries, as well as tourist enterprises (mostly hotel chains) are setting their own service standards and quality.

1. The need for a new quality approach in tourism

The quality of tourist services offered by each supplier is the result of joining two components: quantity, which is rather of material nature as it is represented by equipment and facilities, such as food, scenery, working methods; and quality, which is mainly behaviouristic [3].

The material component is influencing the quality of the tourist services through the demand for comfort, functionality, aesthetics, as well as ergonomics qualities of the equipment provided by certain units. One of the most important factors influencing these demands is the level of technicality, which determines the level of comfort and service quality. The higher the technicality, the better the service, as they offer heating and phonic isolation, different room facilities, such as reliable installations, which lead both to lower maintenance expenses and fewer complaints.

The implementation of the electronic database has positive effects on the quality of service, as a result of eliminating bureaucracy, which facilitates the correct management of the client account and the fast billing. Thus, it is also easier to optimise the system of data transfer that allows the calculation of the specific indexes. This increases the quality of service and gives staff more time for the relation with the customer. Even if the initial investment is higher, the benefits are visible on a long term.

Another important element of quality is represented by sizing and organising different spaces that must include aspects concerning the offer flexibility, in order to be able to provide complementary services such as the organisation of congresses and conferences, as well as other events.

The business card of a unit is represented by the interior decorations, “the atmosphere” created by decoration, the colours, the intensity and colour of lights, the thermal comfort (air temperature and humidity), air freshness and indoor sound system, elements that complete the product [4].

However, the most important quality component is the staff behaviour within the hotel, which is usually neglected, as the company is mostly concerned with employing the necessary qualified number of employees to know and apply standards and working procedures.

The effects of professional behaviour are directly connected to the quality of service and how it is perceived by the client. Unlike the material components we have discussed before,

the effects of the professional behaviour are unpredictable and almost irreversible. They are directly related to the number, the structure and the level of training and motivation of the staff.

That is why staff recruitment must take into account that beside professional training and general background knowledge, employers must seek to identify personal behaviour and attitude qualities in the future employee, such as: charisma, vocation for tourism, availability and learning abilities, sociability, empathy and other elements which will reflect the quality of services and the level of satisfaction of the clients [7].

Therefore, a client oriented professional behaviour may contribute to a better assessment of the quality of service rather than exposing material luxury and in some cases, an adequate professional behaviour may compensate for certain material deficiencies.

In this context the present classification based on stars is no longer responding to the demands of the client, whose expectations with respect to the quality of services are precise.

The methodological norms regarding the classification of the accommodation units consists of an administrative system of classification, that takes into consideration only the architectural features of the building, the level of facilities, equipment and inventory objects as well as the minimum services that must be offered by an accommodation unit according to its classification, [9] without emphasising the most important quality element like the staff attitude for example.

This administrative system of classification used by all countries, was found inconvenient to the new requirements. In this respect, some countries started reconsidering and changing the classification standards stressing on the quality of services especially on the hotel staff and its behaviour.

This approach is necessary due to the present economic crisis that led to an obvious decrease in the number of tourists, who shall mainly turn to suppliers who provide the best quality-price warranted balance.

In the case of Romania, which has a diverse tourist potential, with authentic components, the change from facility standards to service quality standards would be an element of differentiation and it would increase the competition of the Romanian tourist product. This has also been demonstrated by international research studies that consider Romania an interesting tourist destination.

2. Quality standards and systems in the hospitality industry

Both in Romania and in other countries with tourist tradition the service quality assurance is accomplished in two ways: according to the different types of standards and according to the quality management systems. Moreover, standards include: norms shaped by official organisations of different countries such as the standards of category classification (stars), occupational and other standards including facility, procedure, management, which are mostly created by hotel chains, especially those from 1991, since the first procedure of tourist star classification settled by The Ministry of Tourism and later on followed-up by several other variants.

The occupational standard is the document that states the competitive units and their level of quality according to their activity outcome for one occupation. This one includes the fields of competence and corresponding unities of competence. The competence fields are divided into three categories: fundamental, general and specific competences. Each unit of competence corresponding to an occupation include: competence elements, accomplishment criteria, variable range and assessment guide.

Fundamental competence includes: efficient communication at work and team work. General competences presuppose: the NPM and NPSI application, the job organisation, promoting the hotel image. The specific competences are differentiated according to occupational categories which include technological operations which are specific function. Despite their complexity they do not guarantee the quality of the rendered service as the general competences assurance is not enough to satisfy the clients. This particular client satisfaction is determined by other inner individual elements, such as: client needs awareness, active understanding, and service provider responsibility.

From the beginning, the methodological norms of star classification of the tourist welcoming structures are limited to quantitative aspects of the hotel services quality, without pointing to subtle quality elements of the tourist service, which represent essential attributes of the hotel product.

The internal standards were created by hotel chains in order to ensure a similar system of facilities, to have services and staff with a view to promoting and maintaining a brand image. These standards are different from one hotel chain to another, even if they have similar elements. In the case of independent hotels, only some of them have already created their own standards.

Taking into consideration that the ratio of the hotels which have created their own standards is low, the present ones have an increased level of heterogeneity, and some limits with regards to quality assurance which makes this method of quality implementation and assessment insufficient.

Regarding the quality management systems in tourism, the best approach is the use of an integrated quality management system which includes: the quality management system based on SR EN ISO 9001:2001, the environment management system based on SR EN ISO 14 001:1997, the food security management system according to the HACCP principles, based on the ISO 22000 standard and the health and labour security management system based on OHSAS 18002 from 1999.

The quality management is defined according to ISO 9000 as the total amount of activities of the general management function which determine the policy in the field of quality, in order to implement the objectives and responsibilities in the quality system by specific means, such as: quality planning, quality control, quality assurance and quality improvement [8].

The main objective of quality management is to efficiently accomplish at a maximum level the products which entirely satisfy the client's requirements and which are consistent with the society requirements and the applied standards and specifications, which consider all aspects regarding consumer and environment protection and which are offered to the client at the established price and term.

The introduction of a quality system brings benefits to all the parts involved: the designated country, the direct tourist services suppliers, the consumers and the mediators.

This implies a constant level of quality. That is why the implementation of quality is accomplished by a sum of requirements called standards which are grouped in types, according to their field.

To get quality does not only mean initiating standards and being consistent with them, but also quality performance to meet clients' requirements and expectations, as well as quality management.

In this context, the systemic management of the hotel service quality and the taking up of some measures are a maximum priority at this stage.

Thus, ensuring products and hotel service competition must be based on quality management, as it is a way to ensure the company's credibility on the market.

Even if the quality management system has been enforced since 1995, the ratio of hotel service suppliers who are certified is low, as many of them are not aware of the importance and implications of the certificate of quality.

Even in the case of certified organisations some of the subtle aspects of quality guarantee have not been identified and included in the specific documentation.

Thanks to the general nature of the ISO standards and to the lack of experience in the case of internal or external auditors within the certifying organisms, the subtle elements of quality guarantee have not been identified. This certificate is insufficient to ensure the level of quality that is required by the new demands in the economic environment. Though, the financial element, the high costs of authorisation and TQM are aspects that determine big hotel and food units to postpone certification, considering that they were not absolutely compulsory.

Despite its advantages offered by the standards and the quality management system, this instrument of ensuring the quality of service within the welcoming industry is limited as it does not allow the national level of guaranteed quality. Even the hotel field organisations, which have their own system of standards and are certified in an integrated system of quality management, have not reached the intangible components of ensuring quality of atmosphere and staff behaviour, but the entertainment service development has been forgotten, though they best underline the relationship between the supplier and the customer.

Regulation 636/2003 focussed on the initiation of the mark Q, with regard to the National Program to increase hotel service quality, with a consequence of founding the Tourist Service Quality and Hospitality Industry centre, in July 2005 –INQUALTOUR- a professional private association of public interest, a NGO and a non profit organization, with its head office in Bucharest. Its founding members are physically and legally competent and are also well known persons in the field of tourism quality, such as the Romanian Quality Insurance Company (SRAC); the Tourism S.C, the Hotel and Restaurant Consulting Group SRL - THR CG; the National Association for Rural, Ecological and Cultural Group - ANTREC, as well as experts with great expertise.

The reason to invite these associations, in Romania was to achieve a Centre of Excellency and expertise in the field of touring and hospitality to develop quality and competition of

Romanian tourism, its standard and business level, with a view to European Integration and globalization [2].

The Ministry of Tourism, in cooperation with INQUALTOUR and the professional field associations elaborated, at that moment, a guide of over 100 criteria to evaluate hospitality industry quality, which were presented to the managers in the field who had to make remarks to improve things in terms of specific quality standards and of implementing them at the national level a feed-back which hasn't been yet achieved, everything being still in the project stage.

These were the first steps in achieving a unitary system and a centralized one to certify hotel quality service in Romania.

3. A new view on the quality of services within the Romanian hotel industry

Most countries, which have not perceived the importance of tourism development and the shift to a new way of approaching service quality offered to the clients, have made a complex system of standards in the hotel industry at a national level, which demand the service to be characterised by criteria such as: reaction, creditworthiness, curiosity, flexibility, and so on.

For instance, since 1995 the Swiss standards included meeting clients in the norms of classifications and service quality standards in the hospitality industry at present. The classification norms in Swiss is hotels settled by the hotel association being very complex, considering both aspects with quantitative aspects, trying to diversify and individualize service as well as to increase staff behaviour.

The Swiss system of classification includes 14 criteria, each containing norms presented in a technical card organized in comfort categories.

The certificate of classification will be obtained as a reset of self-evaluation, of the evaluation of the regional commission and the commission of hotel classification.

The classification criteria deal with : security norms, building exterior and area, reception, public area, rooms, bathrooms, breakfast service, room-service, restaurant service, restaurant, further service, reception and entertaining service, quality, entertainment and sports outfit [13].

One should notice the 12 specific norms to organize entertaining activities which should be permanently achieved based on a settled program advertised in the hotel all season long in season hotels and the provision of at least one five – day entertainer a week for those hotels open all year-long, who may be a free time employee or a collaborator.

In the same classification system, other qualitative aspects such as air quality in the restaurants and bars, live music five days a week for four hours at least are also present.

Another example is the hotel certificate in France referential standard which represents the result of the cooperation between the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Tourism Trade Union Federation, the Quality Certification Body, the Association for the Consumers' Protection, on one hand and the tourist and hotel industry professional associations and the Tourist Department in France, on the other hand.

This quality referential commitment was initiated in 2001 and tested in 12 hotels in France; in February 2002 it was published in the "Monitorul Oficial" Review, becoming operational later on.

Hotel certification is a quality guarantee focussing on the client and on increasing service quality staff behaviour and attitude. It implies 7 quality standards, such as staff professional smile, cleanliness and hygiene, quality bed sheets, staff availability, quietness, tourist and practical information offered to clients as well as monitored quality.

Certification will comprise two stages: firstly consultancy and auditing need to reach the high level hotel service standard, and secondly the certification as such. The certificate is obtained after some steps have been taken: the "mystery clients" reports, hotel self-evaluation, settling clients' claims, their level of satisfaction and aspects of staff training. Checking is organized every month and it involves 550 issues.

At the same time, at the level of hotel chains, there are some assessment and control criteria that describe service and behaviour components by classical methods of management, according to their own standards by the chain inspectors who assess the quality of service and the quality and certifying hotel standards as clients.

Since 1996, the General Department of Authorisation and Control has dealt with giving tourism patents and classification certificates to different tourist units following an assessment process which matched the documentation with the specific conditions offered by the tourist offers.

This observation has led to making a decision to decentralise the authorising and control system as well as creating the Local Departments which continued to deal with the same type of activity according to the legislation, without improving the classification criteria concerning tourist welcoming structures and the system of quality assessment.

There are mainly two possibilities to approach quality improvement process in the Romanian hotel business as follows: completing the criteria under Methodological Norms regarding the star classification of the welcoming criteria, and creating a quality assessment system regarding hotels and food.

Creating a complex system of services quality standards in the Romanian hotel industry must be a priority of the Ministry of Tourism, of the professional tourism associations and of all organisations in the field.

The new system should include: the total amount of criteria, the methods of their assessment, establishing institutions which will be involved in the system construction, its improvement and setting the categories of people who will evaluate the results and will take the correcting measures.

In order to ensure the increase of the hotel quality services we consider that the most efficient solution would consist of an analysis of the Ministry of Tourism in order to issue a normative act which would be more complex than the present Regulation 636/2008. This should lead to a development of the existent criteria which will include extra criteria concerning the assessment of the service quality.

Starting with the present system of criteria which are included in the Methodological Norms regarding the star classification of the welcoming tourist units and the public food supply units, their improvement implies the inclusion of constructive features such as: the

hotel location, the accessibility, the quality of the access ways, the placement (close to the interesting tourist area, slopes, beaches, etc.), the attractiveness of the area.

The building assessment may also have in mind the exterior aspect and the architecture, including the novelty of the building or its refurbishment. There are also other ambient elements such as green areas, parks, gardens, waterfalls, fountains, lights, as well as entertaining areas for adults and children

A very important aspect is represented by the development of the criteria referring to the indoor space which signal the communication with the client represented by different types of information, design and decorative plants.

A basic element in separating and personalising the service supply is the adjustment to the structure and the facilities of the room to the client needs by offering for instance double-double rooms, rooms for disabled people, standard rooms, as well as luxury rooms for business people, or rooms for people with pets.

Room assessment criteria also include elements of ambiance, lights, aromatherapy, design, colours, but also aspects such as facilities level of usage, ergonomic furniture and equipment, extra beds, or baby care facilities.

Modern technologies have allowed the hotel to stop wasting resources, which improved the possibility to control and adapt the temperature and the lights. Thus they must be included in the assessment criteria.

A basic component of the hotel service is the food supply and the number, the structure and the specific service offered in the unit. Together with the quality of accommodation service, food supply is an important step in choosing a particular hotel.

Restaurants may be different according to the quality of the rendered service and by introducing hypo-caloric, vegetarian, healthy, thematic, or children menus by making lists of dishes which are specifically described: calories, additives percentage, or other elements which are part of the Methodological Norms in the chapter dealing with extra-criteria.

Internationally in this field, food supply service is assessed by other criteria too: serving standards, serving efficiency, careful and fast serving, competitive staff who help the client, staff outfit and appearance, visible prices, hygiene and production quality. This also implies the aspect of the dishes, their taste, freshness, temperature, as well as ambiance – the degree of silence, the smoking and non-smoking areas, the possibility to assist the cooking process, children facilities, etc. [12].

4. Ways to increase hotel quality service in Romania

One of the most important factors to attract key tour - operators to the Romanian tourist market is to increase quality standards and to achieve a modern and efficient system to certify hotel service quality, a reason for reconsidering quality concept and invitation of a more efficient system of quality in the hotel industry.

In principle, there are two ways to approach improvement of Romanian hotel industry service quality: firstly completing criteria in the norms of methodology with regard to star classification of accommodation units, structure, and secondly creating an evaluation system of hotel and restaurant service quality.

The Ministry of Tourism issued a government act with regard to the annual programme for tourist product development in 2009, published in the "Monitorul Oficial" Review no. 192/March 27/2009.

The main aspects of "Trainers of Excellency" are to accurately inform consumers to maximize their decisions to purchase training programs, to implement a vocational system, to check and update legislation in the field, to improve tourist service quality in Romania through achieving and implementing a model of good practice improved hotel service quality, introducing specialization for hospitality industry, considering the expertise of those countries which have already successfully implemented such specializations (such as hotels specializing in tennis games, in health cure, in wellness, etc.). [10].

The good praxis model will be based on consultancy and collaboration among the Ministry of Tourism, professional tourism associations, the Departmental Tourism Committee, and like in the HOTELcert French system, the association for the Consumer's Protection and one or several bodies specialized in certifying quality.

A simple list of free service and the setting of minimum extra-service are not enough to stimulate the hotel managers' concern to diversify the range of service and their improved quality, which impose the introduction of other elements such as: the quality of the provided range of facilities, special equipment for disabled people: telephone / alarm system / communication systems for the blind, or the deaf; fast service, hygiene, goods security.

The fame of a hotel is determined by the client attraction and constancy measures, meeting the clients' requirements and needs, which is in the staff responsibility. Nowadays, the most important quality component is the human potential, its training level, which are easily assessable elements [6].

Limiting the staff criteria to mentioning the level of professional training, the minimum rate of qualified staff and the need retraining every five years cannot fully ensure the process of improving service standards.

The staff criteria must include assessment components regarding the staff as follows: kindness, outfit, communication with the client, politeness, empathy, active understanding, as well as aspects related to the quality of service which include: fast services, efficient serving, client- oriented service and managing complaints. Another way to differentiate hotels is the number of foreign languages the staff can speak with the clients and the staff's fluency in these particular languages.

Romania must develop both its country brand and a hotel chain that should promote its quality brand image. This must include hotels which have already implemented the integrated system of Quality Management and which possess their certificates.

The Ministry of Tourism may stimulate the interest of the organisations that render hotel and food supply services to offer high quality service and an increasing level of service quality by creating a competitive assessment system which should include intangible assessment criteria to ensure their efficiency.

The proposed system implies the inclusion of the extra criteria in the Methodological Norms of star classification which consist of the elements previously mentioned and of other quality elements among which the compulsory accomplishment of a self-assessment

system for each unit, the “mysterious client” information which is to be used both by the unit and by the Ministry of Tourism and the creation of a body of auditors in tourism and in the field of quality who should unexpectedly check the covered criteria, the quality of service and the staff behaviour. Each system component should have a ratio of 25%, where the criteria are set according to the 1-5 marking system. At the beginning the system may be implemented in the representative units which will later be included in the national hotel chain and then it may be spread in all accommodation and food supply units. One person from the Department of Authorisation and Post Privatisation will be appointed to assist the system implementation and will also offer counselling and help to improve the activities within the unit.

A top of the main units, which have excelled in service and in high quality staff will be done every year. This will be published in the specific magazines and an excellence prize will be offered. This system will create a spirit of competition which will trigger increased standards of service nation-wide.

In order to follow the implementation conditions we should make some specifications. The self-assessment system of the unit must include the clients’ reports as well as the system of managing complaints. A “mystery client” may be any person over 18 who has a social status and whose advantages are: an increased spirit of observation, attention to detail, discretion, correctness, punctuality, good communication abilities. Thus, this method will help the hotels to improve their service and the staff will be stimulated to attract new clients.

Auditors must be selected from the specialists in the field, such as professional, correct people who are attentive to detail, discrete, and passionate in the field [1].

The new candidates who have been included on the list of auditors should attend a six-month course with an experienced auditor.

To accomplish and implement such a system is both a material and a human effort that may use European investment funds and personal funds, as well as money from the budget of the Ministry of Tourism. By 2013, the process of implementation and assessment is expected to have been over.

The economic implications will be on a large scale but they will be almost irreversible if the change of mentality with the Romanian hotel service suppliers is not fulfilled together with the system implementation.

Conclusion

A fresh tourist promotion in Romania is a complex process implying both the initiation of legal and institutional background and new technical devices, to allow diversifying the hotel and restaurant service supply, and to increase quality service level.

This year, the Tourism Ministry has initiated a step to a new quality assessment system, by reconsidering concepts and increasing the importance granted to the hotel staff and their attitude towards tourist service quality.

The economic implications will be critical, though hardly reversible in time, if not achieved in parallel with the implementation of valuable models and the change of mentality within the Romanian hotel service suppliers practice.

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