

## **CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF HOTEL ACTIVITIES (an attempt to adapt general characteristics of services)**

Hotel activities suppose providing accommodation, preparing food and beverages, and also giving special attention to the direct contact with customers. The complexity of hospitality activities makes it difficult, but not impossible, to perform them at a high quality standard. A correct analysis of their characteristic features must start from classifying them among services. Their characteristic features are applicable and they allow for specific developments of a high degree of pragmatism.

### **1. Intangibility**

Intangibility is a basic characteristic feature of services in general and of hotel services in particular. A large part of them concern tangible aspects connected to providing food, beverages and accommodation. From this point of view, the aspects that must be considered are: How warm is the food? What does it look like? What size is the bed? How large is the bathtub?, etc. At the same time, the related non-tangible elements must also be considered: What will be the quality of the service offered? Will the promises made upon booking be kept? Does the client feel comfortable and safe? How long does it take to honour an order? These elements become all the more critical when the client, for instance, leaves for the first time for a tourist destination where he or she will benefit by accommodation, catering and entertainment services or, on a more modest scale, when he or she enters a restaurant for the first time. They generate not only questions but also induce a certain state of "anxiety", of incertitude in the client.

Customers always take smaller or higher risks when they decide to enter a hotel, to dine in a restaurant or to leave for a destination hundreds kilometres away. Their cause is precisely this "sum" of elements that are

hard to evaluate because they do not have a clear delimitation in space, dimension, colour, smell, label, etc. The situation is totally different in the case of a tangible good that, most often, can be taken in the hand, looked at, analysed in terms of colour, weight, composition, smell and even tried before it is purchased.

The consumer of services takes certain risks and the accommodation and catering services are no exception to this rule. For exemplification, we shall analyse the case of a tourist that makes a reservation in a mountain resort where he or she goes for the first time. The first surprise, contrary to what he was told upon booking, the hotel does not have an organised and guarded parking lot, so that he or she has to accept situations of insecurity for his or her car; the second surprise, the material facilities (furniture, equipment, etc.) do not look as flawless as in the brochures that he or she was shown; the third surprise, the staff are careless, hard to approach and inconsiderate towards the client. Of course, we could add more examples of aspects that do not match the promises made and the customer's expectations. Beyond the disappointment, frustration and the obvious dissatisfaction towards the services offered, the consequences as losses are of another nature as well: *financial* (transportation, accommodation, food have their own cost); *time* (the client has allotted days of his holiday and, why not, of his life, to be spent in this resort).

It is only natural to ask ourselves: how can we diminish this perception of risk? If we go back to the previous example, it is obvious that the main role in diminishing risk belongs to the first link in the chain that the customer has contact with, namely the tourism agency. We can envisage three major ways:

**a. Information** – even if most times it is the client that requires to be informed, the action is compulsory for the service provider. It can take several forms: *verbal* – the agent offers explanations, presents to the customer the tourist destination, the facilities offered, details on particular elements, and answers the customer's questions; *passive-visual* through posters and promotional brochures, leaflets, flyers; and *animated-visual*, by showing films or promotional clips on screens, on TV or on personal computers.

**b. Brands (reputation, notoriety)** – influence the client's choices under the circumstances where there is competition in the offer for accommodation or catering. For a foreign tourist coming to Romania, "Holliday Inn" has a totally different resonance from, for instance, "Central", even if the two hotels have the same number of stars and prices,

with insignificant differences. Hence the hotel owners' permanent effort to make themselves known through their name, brand, offer and quality of the services, the particular features of their own offer, and so on. A trademark that has been intelligently chosen is a precious asset for any company. It allows differentiation from the competition, it is easy to remember and it facilitates the evocation of the images that correspond to the type of service provided.

*c. Recommendation* – a satisfied client will recommend a quality product to others as well. Potential clients often rely on acquaintances, relatives, friends, and opinion leaders when taking a decision. It is well known that certain types of customers wait for a product to be tested, tried by others first and then, upon their recommendation, they become consumers of the product themselves. In these cases, the hotel's success depends on the quality of the service that it offers.

To these three ways, we could add another one: supplying warrantees. Under this broad category we could consider several elements: a certain classification of the hotel (according to stars, for instance) may induce a supplementary feeling of safety owing to the fact that it was done by a renowned specialised institution (in numerous cases it is under the state's authority); the information provided by the tourism agent may be a supplementary warrantee for the customer; the signing of a contract between the service provider and the client is, nevertheless, the best warrantee that the promises made by the hotel officer will be kept. However, because the client cannot test without paying for these services, he will never receive a compensation that should cover possible dissatisfactions, but also losses (of money or time) generated by poor accommodation or catering services. To give just one example: how large should be the damages paid to a client who fell ill after eating infested food? Anyhow, the warrantee given to the client obliges the firm to establish clear and realist norms of efficiency (performance criteria) and it determines the examination of the company's own service providing system in order to identify deficiencies.

## 2. Heterogeneity

This is the characteristic feature with the highest impact on the work processes in these services. Despite a manager's efforts to plan quality services, performance oscillates in time for numerous reasons that depend

on the variety of services, the work polyvalence, the customer's perception and "evaluation" by the employees, the large effort required in certain periods, etc. It is difficult to have a constant level of performance from an employee and it is difficult to draw a comparison between employees. The customer expects a certain "permanent standard" of the service: content and quality must be constant and identical both in time and in any of the hotels or restaurants belonging to the same chain.

To clarify this concept, heterogeneity, let us analyse its opposite, homogeneity, for a while. Homogeneity is specific and it is a basic characteristic feature of industrial processes. On the one hand, for instance, fabricating the part of a machine requires a technologic process where operations have a logical and rational succession: if succession is not respected or if any operation is not performed, the finite product cannot be achieved. The situation is different in services. The processes are composed of clear operations, that are most times compulsory for the providing of the service, but they also comprise more ambiguous elements that are related to the attitude towards the client. A receptionist, for instance, must do the booking as such (allotting a room) but he or she must use polite greetings when welcoming the clients, direct them to where their room is, offer other information on the services that they benefit from. If any of these latter operations is not performed, the booking is not affected by it (we are not considering the quality of the service here). Also, the receptionist can change their order at any time (supplying first the information and then booking). Unlike in industry, the processes are no longer so rigid, some operations can be skipped and their order is not always compulsory.

On the other hand, the task of an industrial worker, for instance of a lathe operator, consists, most times, of tens, hundreds or even thousands parts, not just of one. All parts are made according to a list of identical operations and they all should have the same quality in the end. He must observe the same succession of movements when shaping the parts on the lathe. It is through repetition that the operator manages to achieve his or her responsibilities. If we are to exaggerate a little, the operator turns into a "robot" (in fact, this is what mechanisation and automation are based on). Without denying the fact that in services the activities, on the whole, are also repeated, in the content of the same service, at different moments, there can be modifications depending on the employee's state of mind, attitude and spontaneous inspiration, or on the need to adjust to certain requirements specific to the client. The result of these modifications can be positive or negative but it is clear that in this case the quality of the service provided is

harder to control. Many managers are irritated when the employees have personal initiatives and there are differences from what they initially planned. A good employee means (apart from other qualities) a person that managers can trust and, consequently, to whom they allow more freedom of action.

The lack of homogeneity has unfortunate consequences on costs, as well. In industry, the logical and rational succession of the operations, the clear record of the energy and materials that have been consumed, as well as of the work of the employees, allows for a realistic evaluation of the costs generated by the manufacturing of a product. In the service industry, one cannot establish quotas of time for a receptionist, for instance. Providing a service has often parts or elements that are hard, if not impossible, to quantify. Despite this, in the case of chambermaids or cleaners it is preferable to establish at least an approximate list of the operations performed (per room, for instance), otherwise the total lack of control causes financial losses. Standardisation, the possibility of a rigorous control, the correct cost evaluation have generated attempts to introduce in services management and organization principles from industry; thus services become *industrialised*. In tourism there are quite few fields of activity that lend themselves to such an approach. Such processes as the standardisation of cleaning operations in rooms or the standardisation of the menu in some restaurants have been successful. Yet, the best example that can be given is that of the fast-food company McDonald's. The customer can choose from a limited range of standardised, already packed food products – and the amount of handling and movement is limited and somehow repeated (taking the order, turning, picking a tray or bag, taking a product, placing the product on the tray or in the bag, turning, registering in the cash machine, cashing in, etc.), which allows for the rapidity (fast) of the service.

From what we have presented so far we could see some disadvantages of services caused by this heterogeneity. Despite this, services have a well-recognised advantage over industry: *flexibility* (in fact, at the moment, industry is making efforts to integrate flexible technologies). The capacity to adjust to the client's requirements is not only a simple advantage but also (in numerous cases) the solution to providing quality services.

Homogeneity has another advantage: the establishment of standards and norms allows a quite precise estimation of the number of workers. In services, this is more difficult to do, especially if we consider the seasonal aspect of the demand. Also, another phenomenon must be considered: when buying two hotels with the same number of places but with a different

classification (2\* and 5\*) we will notice that the latter has a larger number of employees. The conclusion is obvious: ensuring the quality of the services imposes an increased number of employees. In a luxury hotel there are not only a number of chambermaids and cleaners: they are in charge with a limited number of rooms (or just one) and when an important client arrives a chambermaid or a service boy will serve him exclusively. This is an example of the so-called *personalisation* of services. Many times, the wish for excellence in quality requires financial sacrifices from the business owner or manager.

### 3. Simultaneity of production and consumption

The simultaneity of production and consumption is sometimes materialised as the perishable character of the service, or it is separated from it, or it comprises (this is our view as well). Indeed, if we analyse services carefully, in most cases, production and consumption take place only when the customer requires them. "Outputs" are usually supplied at the customer's request starting from already existing resources. If there is no demand, resources cannot be used in a productive way. In this case no output can be created or stored.

A time lag between production and consumption takes place in catering in the case of serving packed meals, most often cold, or in the case of home delivery or delivery at somebody's workplace. It must be clear to everyone that a food product cooked in a specially equipped space is not a food supply service until it is delivered (served) and consumed. Similarly, a vacant hotel room is not an accommodation service but a storing place. The service only appears when it is actually provided.

Simultaneity has another consequence too: it is impossible that services should be stored; they are perishable. A vacant seat at a restaurant table at a certain hour or a vacant room in a hotel for one or more nights mean losing potential profit. Management problems become all the more difficult when we consider the seasonal aspect of the demand. Numerous owners/managers prefer to close down hotels when the season is over so as to reduce useless costs to the minimum. From the point of view of quality there is yet another consequence, not fully favourable: services cannot be evaluated or analysed before they were sold or delivered to the consumer.

#### **4. The client's participation in the service**

In many cases services cannot be provided without the client's "contribution": The receptionist cannot make the reservation without exchanging information with the client, the waiter waits for the client's order, etc. Apart from this rather passive participation, there are situations when, without the client's increased implication, the service as such cannot be provided. In restaurants and cafeterias that have adopted the self-service system, clients must take the tray from the end of a service line, and then, walking in front of the day's offer, they choose the products that they want and place them on their tray.

It is also customary for clients in hotel rooms to serve themselves – to make the bed, to use the sanitary facilities, to switch on the TV, and so on. Sometimes, the increase of limitation of customer participation can be part of the firm's accommodation or catering policy and strategy. To return to the example of the customer in the hotel room, we must mention that in luxury hotels, the chambermaid or man servant can take over part of the customer's self-service tasks: making the bed, arranging the clothes in the wardrobe, preparing the bath-tube, cleaning and polishing shoes, etc. Such "undertakings" are compulsory because they influence the quality of the service provided.

On the other hand, many bed-and-breakfast hotels have adopted the so-called "Swedish buffet" as a self-service technique: instead of being served at the table, the clients serve themselves from tables and/or service lines where there are various food products and drinks. This self-serving modality has been adopted by hotels of higher classifications as well, for breakfast, with the difference that the variety and ingenuity in preparing the offer is much larger. Self-service has been introduced in some hotels and restaurants for lunch also, and in fewer cases for dinner, but only after a careful study of the clientele, of the organisation of the serving process and, of course, after making efficiency calculus.

There are categories of clients that accept and adopt easier the self-service system even at higher levels of hotel or restaurant classification; at the same time, there are clients who hardly accept self-service, or do not accept it at all. In organising services there must be a co-relation between the restaurant's classification and the variety and preparation of the dishes on the menu, otherwise there may appear a feeling of frustration from the client. The variety and the increased care taken in preparing the food can, on

the other hand, supplement the menu presentation and cooking costs. So, the decision to introduce self-service will have to be taken after all the implications and consequences have been analysed and the customer, with his characteristics and options, must be the top priority. In some more analytical approaches (*Pierre Eiglier, Eric Langeard, Servuction. Le marketing des services, Ed. McGraw-Hill, Paris, 1987*), the customer's participation can be described not only as we have done above, but almost at any moment when he or she is the beneficiary of the services:

Table no. 1

Forms of participation and their manifestation

Participation	Specifying the service provided	Action Process	Control (process and performance)
Physical participation	Information gathering	Self-service	Simplified and directed self-control
Intellectual participation	Information Source	Manipulation of sophisticated technology	Feed-back Source
Affective participation	Spontaneity	Application of procedures to ground their acceptance	Permanent self-control based on the feeling of belonging

A delicate problem, often ignored or neglected by managers of such services, is the introduction of a more or less sophisticated technology. The aim is to decrease the staff's level of stress, to reduce even the staff, to improve the quality of services by offering better facilities to the clients or by increasing the reliability of a certain piece of equipment. In numerous cases, this can be a matter of keeping abreast of the innovations on the market (a client who is used to some equipment of a certain technical level can perceive as devaluing a hotel that does not offer it).

In accommodation and catering the problems are not so complicated, unlike in other services (transportation, telecommunications). For instance, the introduction of self-service in catering (the introduction of the Swedish buffet for breakfast) has led to the introduction of some automated equipment, especially for basic drinks – milk, coffee, tea, which, on the whole, has been welcomed by clients. In accommodation, situations of this category are met especially in sanitary rooms. Although the technology is not usually so sophisticated, when a hotel or a restaurant have an international renown, with a heterogeneous clientele in terms of educational background and habits, or when they introduce innovations in the service processes, that are based on technical support, customers must receive at



least a minimal instruction either directly (from the employees) or indirectly (through information media). The manager's indifference may lead not only to a loss of face (clients who cannot use some equipment will feel frustrated and disrespected) but also to financial loss (clients can "insist" even if they do not know how to operate the equipment, and thus they ruin or break down the equipment).

This presentation of the characteristic features of services does not cover all opinions and variants of this problem, but attempts to interpret and adjust them to the specific features of accommodation and catering services.

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