

FOOD PRODUCTION IMPROVEMENT

SCIENTIFIC MONOGRAPHY

SCIENTIFIC EDITORS:

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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF SERVICES OFFERED BY THE CATERING AND HOTEL COMPANY, ON THE BASIS OF THE CUSTOMERS' OPINION SURVEY

Abstract: Quality is a fundamental element of the effective functioning of any enterprise. It is the factor that plays an important role in achieving commercial success, but also the determinant of organizational culture. Catering and hotel companies must improve their services to stay competitive. They undertake various projects such as creating elaborate and sophisticated menus, providing additional recreational services and high-quality customer service. Due to the always increasing competition, entrepreneurs constantly expand their knowledge about the behaviours and preferences of customers in the context of the quality of services. Customers' opinion surveys relating to assess the quality of services are the most important source of information for companies. The aim of the study was to identify the areas of improvement of services provided by the catering and hotel company on the basis of the customer's opinion survey. Results of the survey proved that despite some difficulties, the hotel meets the expectations of its customers. However, it should be noted that the identified issues require a separate, detailed research.

Key words: Quality, improvement, opinion survey, hotel and catering industry

3.1. Introduction

Increase in the number of catering and hospitality enterprises, creates competition and forces companies to expand their offerings. These companies try to attract, as many customers as possible, to visit their resort. Achieving the level of quality of services that would satisfy

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the expectations of the customers is not an easy task. The customers expect a certain quality, to which they are used to or expect something new that will provide them with the overall positive experience (INGALDI M., JURSOVA S. 2013). Customers evaluate the quality of the services and food, the manner in which the dishes are served as well as the interior design and the surroundings in which the resort is located. Thus, each enterprise should, as much as possible, adapt to the needs and expectations of its customers, which is consistent with the 1st Quality Management Principle - that is customer-orientation.

The concept of quality exists in many realms of human activity and is associated with, among other things: the quality of tangible products, services and processes related to management (LISIECKA K. 2001). Most often the term "quality" is understood as the degree of adaptation of a particular object (product, service, manufacturing process) to the probable expectations of a consumer-customer. Quality is the appropriate relationship between employees, co-operators, owners and society. The quality is also, in part, acquisition of relevant information, the aim of which is to bring multiple benefits to interested parties (URBANIAK M. 2004). Contemporary companies that understand the concept of quality have to be customer-oriented through related components presented in Figure 3.1.

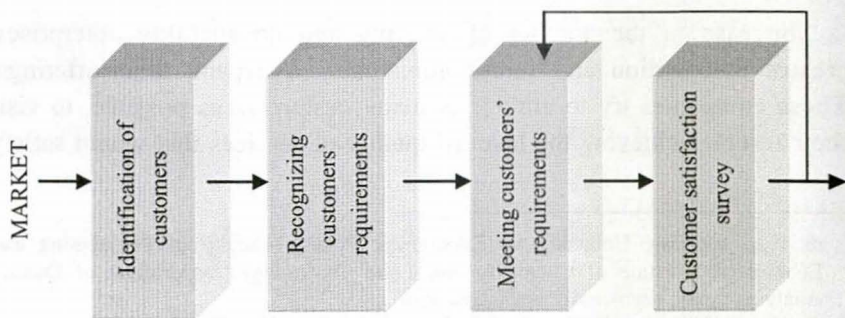


Fig. 3.1. Customer-oriented processes.

Source: based on HAMROL A. 2008

Based on Figure 3.1, it can be concluded that every company should pay particular attention to:

- **Identification of customers**

It is necessary to get to know, as thoroughly as possible, the internal and external customers as well as the groups interested in the outcome of the companies' commercial activity (i.e., suppliers, local communities, shareholders). Most often the "client" turns out to be the whole society (KARASZEWSKI R. 1999, URBANIAK M. 2004).

- **Recognizing customers' requirements**

In quality management, requirements and expectations of each customer must be systematically identified through the use of appropriate methods, such as interviews, and surveys. Obtaining actual knowledge about the customers' needs is only possible if there are measures which allow suppliers and buyers to compare different products or services. It is difficult, because most often the evaluation is subjective (URBANIAK M. 2004).

- **Meeting customers' requirements**

Meeting the needs and expectations of customers is executed in: design processes, production, providing services, shipping, shopping; etc. Each company has a unique sequence of these processes, a unique set of resources used for that purpose (KARASZEWSKI R. 1999).

- **Customer satisfaction survey**

Quality-oriented company has to obtain data related to customer satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction and then use the gathered information to further improve the products and services they offer, that is in accordance with the Rules of the Quality Management (URBANIAK M. 2004).

Data concerning the level of customer satisfaction can be obtained from:

- public surveys,
- conversations with customers,
- market research,
- customer complaints,

- reports created by consumer organizations and various mass media.

Similarly to the process of identifying customer's requirements also in the process of assessing the quality of services it is necessary to be able to measure quality. The most common method of researching customer's satisfaction is the analysis of the opinion survey. However, to create a questionnaire that enables the company to gather desired information, it is necessary to define the purpose of the survey and prepare reliable research tool (HAMROL A. 2008).

3.2. The aim of the study and methodology

The aim of this study was to identify the areas of improvement of the quality of services that are provided by the catering and hotel company, on the basis of the customers opinion surveys. To achieve the goal, the following methods, among others, were used: observation, inductive reasoning, deduction, analysis and synthesis. The main research method used in the following study was an interview conducted on the basis of questionnaire designed specifically for this purpose. When creating a questionnaire it is essential to remember about maintaining the order of questions asked their form, the vocabulary that was used and the rating scale that affects the responses of the respondents and the quality of the entire process. While preparing the research questionnaire, it is necessary to clearly define the objective of the measurement and to debate what kind of information are expected to be provided by the respondents.

Due to the analysis of the results of the survey, i.e. dependence between the data characterizing the respondents and the responses they have given, an important element of the survey is the part named demographics. It is a part of the survey where respondents are asked to state their age, gender and level of education (SOBOTKIEWICZ D., WANIOWSKI P. 2006).

There are 4 types of questions that can be found in a survey (KACZMARCZYK S. 2002):

- open-ended questions - allow respondents to formulate their own opinions in a way that is most suitable for them.
- closed questions - they require the respondents to select one or several of the provided answers, which are the closest to their convictions.
- semi-open questions - enable respondents to give both open and closed kind of answers as they are mixed together.
- filter questions- are the questions that precede other, more specific, questions; they simplify the process of completing the questionnaire by eliminating the questions that are not applicable to particular respondents.

Depending on the nature of the research, the following methods of conducting a public survey can be distinguished (KACZMARCZYK S. 2002):

- personal interview,
- telephone interview,
- postal survey,
- online survey.

In this study, a method of personal interview, based on the constructed standardized questionnaire, was used.

3.3. Initial deliberations before creating the survey questions

The extent, to which the services offered meet customer's requirements, reflects the level of their satisfaction. Opinions of the purchasers are subjective and do not necessarily reflect the reality (ALEXANDER J., HILL N. 2003). Customer satisfaction may be associated with the immediate reaction to the offered service. Satisfying the customers' needs can be thus defined as the process of learning about what is quality. At this point it is important to meticulously collect information on the requirements and expectations of the purchaser (NIEŻURAWSKI L., WITKOWSKA J. 2007).

The main area of commercial activity of enterprises in the catering and hotel industry, that can be evaluated by the customers as the value-added process is the customer service process. It is the company's employees who decide on the quality of the provided services. Commercial activity of hotels reflects the contemporary thesis concerning the importance of qualified employees in the overall success of the organization. The employees who are in direct contact with the customers have particular impact on the customer satisfaction. Traits such as professionalism or credibility contribute to creating long-term relationships with customers. These relationships can be translated directly into room occupancy of the researched hotel. It was therefore decided that before constructing a questionnaire, an analysis of the team work, among the employees of the catering and hotel enterprise, which are responsible for providing direct service to the customers should be performed along with the analysis of the hotel occupancy in years 2010-2012.

3.3.1. Analysis of teamwork skills of the employees responsible for direct customer service in the hotel and catering company

One of the most important factors affecting the success of the hotel is teamwork. Staff responsible for customer service must cooperate with the employees of the technical department (e.g., inform about the technical issues), the reception desk staff have to work together with the staff from the marketing department (in order to notify about the customer complaints regarding prices or quality). Customer service should be reliable and fast. Companies that provide hospitality related services pay special attention to good customer relations as they can affect the way in which the customers view the company.

Usually, there are three main reasons that are mentioned to demonstrate the importance of direct customer service employees for the commercial activity of the enterprise (SMOLEŇ T. et al. 2006):

- employees that are directly involved in customer service are responsible for satisfying the "service users" and building their loyalty,
- usually they are the only link between the company and customers,
- customer service employees are perceived by consumers as executors of the services, as they are the ones who are in direct contact with the customer.

Moment when buyers of the services and employees of the service providing company communicate directly is the key moment in which customer evaluates the quality of the services. Such moment is defined as the "moment of truth". Satisfaction of the consumer is dependent on the attitude and competence of employees. According to T. Baum and J. Kokkranikal: "Customers do not necessarily appreciate the company for the execution of service, but they rather praise the companies that during the time the service was provided exhibited exceptional thoughtfulness, commitment and resourcefulness" (BAUM T., KOKKRANIKAL J. 2008). That is why the role of employees responsible for direct contact with the customer is so crucial. Those employees should have specific character traits and qualifications necessary to make important decisions, implement services and maintain professional conduct when providing service to guests. Furthermore, such employee should have the ability to adapt easily and have comprehensive competence which allows him to, in unexpected situations, replace another employee, temporarily unreachable, that is being waited for impatiently by one of the guests.

Policy regarding personnel in the catering and hotel company should strive for selection and training of the employees that possess the following characteristics (MARTIN B. W. 2006):

- tact and eloquence,
- ability to cope with work related exhaustion and overload caused by long shifts,

- positive attitude towards the customers of the hotel (that includes the use of polite phrases, accentuation of speech, tone of voice, body language),
- professional response to complaints and examining them,
- empathy, sensing the needs of guests,
- ability to be assertive (elimination of submission, intolerance for aggression),
- willingness to provide help,
- flexible response to the requirements of most prominent guests,
- sales performance.

Studied catering and hotel company pays special attention to the above mentioned requirements and continually improves its customer service standards. The company obtained a certificate confirming compliance with the requirements of the quality management system according to ISO 9001:2008 in the field of hotel services, catering, and the spa services as well as ISO 22000:2005 for the provision of catering services in the hotel restaurant. Implementation of international management systems in the enterprise resulted in recognition granted by foreign visitors, for whom the ISO certification indicates a high level of services provided. The enterprise that has the implemented and certified management services concerning the quality of catering and hotel services can observe its influence on the manner in which the resort is functioning and particularly how it is reflected in the quality of the customer service.

In the studied company each customer is treated as an individual customer. At the same time there are different determinants which qualify visitors into the "privileged guests group". Some of the most common determinants are: frequency of using the services of the catering and hospitality company, the value of those services, as well as the reputation that stems from co-operating with this particular client. For this purpose, the employees use a database which is a part of the booking program. It enables to identify customers' preferences and take action to meet their requirements.

Various departments use the above information in the following ways:

- receptionists, while making a reservation are able to view the reservation history, the type of room that was previously chosen by the guests,
- employees of the marketing and sales division are able to figure out, on the basis of the database, what new promotional offers may be of interest to individual clients,
- chefs prepare menus that are tailored to customers' requirements, e.g. eliminating the ingredients the customers are allergic to.
- room service employees are aware of individual customers' preferences; for example, when a guest considers the presence of fresh flowers in the room to be very important, the room service staff will place fresh flowers in the room before the customer arrives at a hotel.

Individual customers make all the arrangements concerning booking and all the details related to the stay through reception desk. Reception desk employees are also responsible for bookings made by companies that are in the "patrons group", as discounts that were decided on previously enable automatic booking, which will be consistent with the previously negotiated terms. The person responsible for organizing the stay of a group in a hotel, which will express, by phone or e-mail, interest in what the hotel has to offer, is sent directly to the sales and marketing department. He is then able to discuss the conditions of the stay with the appropriate specialist who deals with domestic or international groups. Employees of this department are also responsible for organizing and serving the institutional customers. They can help customers in organizing conferences or training sessions.

Whereas, arranging the details of special events (such as banquets, 1st communions, gala dinners), is the responsibility of the hotel manager. Moreover, whenever an organized group of guests is to arrive at the resort he is responsible for assigning tasks for each of the employees who will be in direct contact with the customers. He also determines the scope

of their responsibility. As a result, the whole enterprise is organized in a more efficient way, as it eliminates repetition of actions performed by the employees and plans out the sequence of tasks yet to be performed. What is more, the hotel manager is also responsible for appointing the person who will be responsible for managing the employees who will be responsible for direct contact with the customers. This person will also be available to the person who manages the group during their stay at the resort. All the arrangements made by the hotel manager make the customer service staff conscious of their role and place in the hotel. Moreover, they are aware of their contribution into the continuous process of improving the quality of customer service.

In case of a complaint, if the customer informs the reception desk of the problem that has occurred, the receptionist, whenever it is possible, should attempt to try to resolve the issue, and when it is beyond his/hers competence the matter should be submitted to the reception desk manager (or, as a last resort, to the hotel manager himself). If the customer experienced any kind of discomfort or inconvenience associated with submitting a complaint, he should be offered compensation such as complimentary breakfast, parking space, or additional discount for the period of his stay at the resort.

3.3.2. Analysis of the occupancy of the hotel at the turn of 2010-2012

Hotel occupancy rate shows the percentage of rooms that were in use at a certain time. It is counted by dividing the number of booked rooms by their nominal number. Research Institutes repeatedly analyzed what is the most optimal occupancy rate and accepted that it varies between 65 and 70%. Higher occupancy rate is possible in high season (summer or winter). However, the international hotel chains believe that the optimal use of rooms is just one of the elements affecting the efficiency of hotel management (TURKOWSKI M. 2003).

Figures 3.2-3.4 present the annual occupancy rate in the studied hotel. The graphs present the occupancy rate as observed in years 2010-2012.

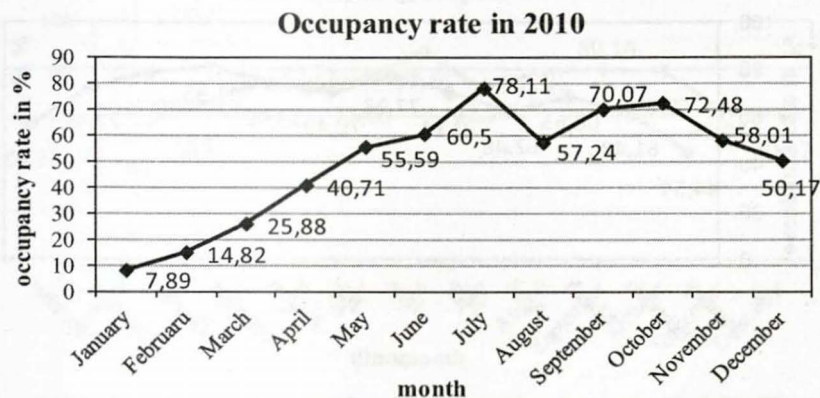


Fig. 3.2. Percentage of annual occupancy rate observed in the hotel in year 2010.

Source: own study based on the data from the analyzed company

As it can be seen in Figure 3.2 the percentage of occupancy has an upward tendency. In the first three months the percentage has almost doubled. It reached the maximum annual occupancy in July. In the second half of the year the percentage of occupied rooms maintained a constant level. The average occupancy rate in year 2010 amounted to 49.48%. It is a very good result for a hotel which has just started its business activity.

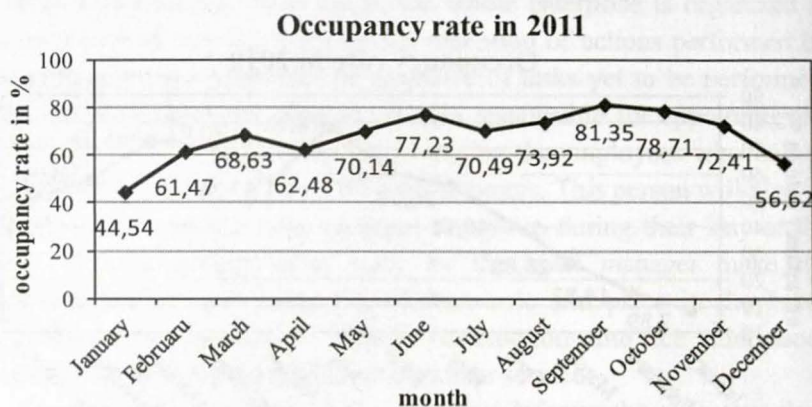


Fig. 3.3. The annual percentage of hotel occupancy rate in year 2011.

Source: own study based on data from the analyzed company

The occupancy rate in 2011 was much higher than in the previous year and the annual average occupancy came up to 68.17%, which means that it increased by over 18%. This means that the hotel has gained customers throughout the year. During the holiday season the occupancy rate has been maintained at the 74%. Maximum occupancy of rooms in 2011, fall on September and October.

Occupancy of hotel rooms in 2012, increased by 4% compared to the previous year, which is an evidence of the upward tendency. September and October were the months of higher occupancy due to the presence of corporate customers. However, the maximum occupancy was noted in June. In that month Poland was the organizer of the European Football Championships and three of the games were held in Wrocław.

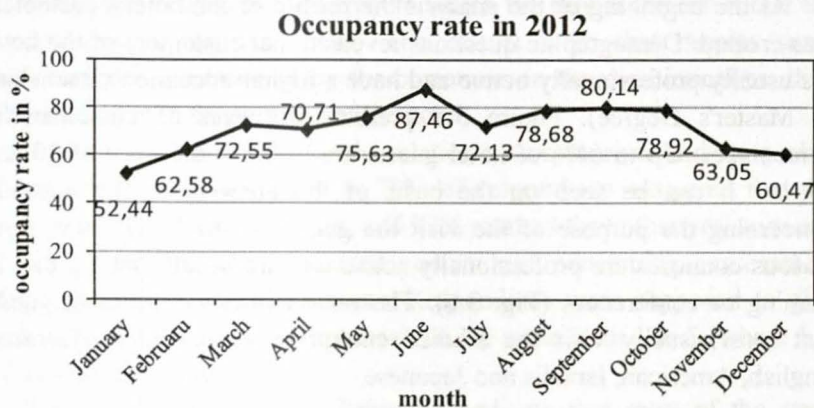


Fig. 3.4. The annual percentage of hotel occupancy rate in year 2012.

Source: own study based on data from the analyzed company

3.4. Analysis of the results of the customers' opinion survey relating to service provided by the catering and hotel enterprise

Initial research described above made it possible to carry out opinion surveys, the aim of which was to identify the areas of improvement of the quality of services provided by the catering and hotel enterprise based on customer evaluation. The study was conducted between 1.04.2013 and 30.04.2013, the survey was completed by 60 customers. The questionnaire was available in two languages: Polish and English. In total it consisted of 12 questions concerning, inter alia, the purpose of the visit, or the assessment of individual features of the hotel, such as location, room facilities, security, service, etc. In the surveys used the scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 represented the lowest, and 5 the highest rating) to assess the degree of customer satisfaction with the quality of services provided by this particular enterprise.

At the beginning of the analysis the profile of the hotel's customers was created. Demographic questions revealed that customers of the hotel are usually professionally active and have a higher education (Bachelor's or Master's Degree). Figure 3.5 presents the ages of customers in percentages. Up to 64% of hotel guests are between the ages of 30 and 49. As it can be seen on the basis of the answers to the question concerning the purpose of the visit the guests of the hotel come from various countries are professionally active and are usually taking part in training or conferences (Fig. 3.6). The nationalities of the most guests that most usually visit the studied enterprise were: Polish, German, English, American, Israelis and Japanese.

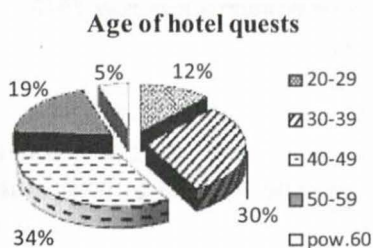


Fig. 3.5. The age of hotel guests.

Source: own study

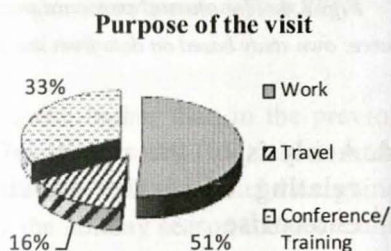


Fig. 3.6. Purpose of the visit.

Source: own study

Gaining information on how the customers familiarize themselves with what the hotel has to offer is another important matter that has to be considered by the management. The results of the questionnaire show that as many as 56% of the customers found information concerning the hotel online. It is important information that can be utilized by the marketing department. On the other hand, 13% of respondents found out about the hotel from their friends. Only 4% of the customers answered that they found out about the hotel through "ad in the press".

The most important question included in the survey, related to the assessment of the quality of services provided by the catering and hotel

company, was related to the extent to which the stay at the resort met the expectations of the customers. The results were that despite some inconveniences, mentioned by the customers in the questionnaires, they felt satisfied with the services of the hotel.

Another question regarded the relation between prices and the quality of services offered. As many as 78% of respondents answered that the price is on par with the services, and 22% marked the 'rather yes' answer.

The questionnaire included questions concerning assessment of specific customer service areas. Respondents were supposed to give each area of customer service a mark on the scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is the lowest and 5 the highest).

The results presented in Table 3.1 indicate that most of the areas listed in the questionnaire were rated very highly. These areas include, among others, location of the hotel, which received a maximum number of points from every customer taking part in the survey. The hotel is located at a small street, in the centre of Wrocław, away from the hustle and bustle of the centre, which allows for a peaceful stay.

Table 3.1. Customers' assessment regarding the quality of services in the catering and hotel company

Features of the Hotel	Average rating
Location	5
Quality of services provided at the reception desk	5
Individual approach to each customer	5
Quality of the catering services	5
Restaurant services	5
Menu in the restaurant	5
Competent and knowledgeable employees	4,97
Safety	4,83
Conference room	4,83
Hotel's website	4,5
Room facilities	4,43
Cleanliness and aesthetics	4,29

Wellness & SPA	3,96
Parking	3,1

Source: own study

Employees of the restaurant, the menu and the quality of the catering services received equally high scores. The competence and attitude of reception desk employees has also been recognized by the customers of the hotel. Observation of the way in which the staff served the customers proved that they are very professional in their conduct.

Hotel website, room facilities and their cleanliness received slightly lower scores (approximately 4.4). The cleanliness issue was a result of the fact that there were not enough chambermaids in relation to the occupancy rate of the hotel, as it was deducted while observation of the work of floor staff was being conducted. Housekeeping manager explained that this was due to sudden indisposition of three chambermaids. He also stressed that the cleanliness of the rooms is crucial to the hotel. It can be thus, assumed that the excess of work resulted in receiving slightly lower scores (4.29).

Wellness & SPA received 3.96 points in the 1-5 scale. Analysis of the customers' comments included in the survey, resulted in identifying two elements, which could have resulted in the insufficient satisfaction of the customers. The first element to be considered are the opening hours of the Wellness and SPA center which are 11am-11pm. The second element that causes dissatisfaction of the customers is the lack of a swimming pool. After analyzing the requirements that must be met by the five-star hotels for them to be included in the desired category, it was found that such hotels are required to have a swimming pool as part of their SPA center. However, if the hotel is located in a historic building it is not required to have a swimming pool. The hotel analyzed in this paper is located in historic building and thus it is not essential for it to have a swimming pool.

The worst rated aspect of the hotel is the mark that was given by the customers to the hotel car park. It received 3.1 points. This result could

be considered to be a satisfactory result, however, in comparison with other aspects being rated it clearly stands out. After analyzing the situation, it turned out that the hotel car park provides only 20 parking spaces and considering that there are 47 rooms available at the hotel it can be definitely considered to be an insufficient number. Moreover, due to the fact that the car park is relatively narrow inexperienced drivers have issues with both entering and leaving from it.

Despite these minor drawbacks, respondents declared that they would like to repeat their stay at the hotel and that they will recommend the place to their friends.

3.5. Conclusions

Conducting a survey among the hotel guests enabled to establish what are their expectations, needs and requirements, and ipso facto it allowed to assess the quality of services offered. Results of the survey proved that despite some difficulties, the hotel meets the expectations of its customers. However, it should be noted that the identified issues require a separate, detailed research.

The results of the analysis lead to the conclusion that the object of study offers high-quality services while meeting the expectations of its guests by:

- making sure that the staff are aware of how important it is to meet the requirements of customers,
- getting to know and paying attention to customers' requirements throughout the process of providing services,
- monitoring and evaluating the level of meeting customers' expectations, in accordance with the established techniques of obtaining and utilizing such kind of information,
- controlling the management process through analyzing the information gathered from customers, which help to define the needs, directions and actions which will improve the management process.

However, an immediate response to the currently emerging difficulties is necessary - the difficulties can be of various kind, they can be technical (internet, television), as well as more serious - not enough parking spaces.

In addition to overcoming current difficulties, the management of the hotel needs to develop its long-term strategy. Meeting the requirements of customers in an effective way guarantees success and continuous growth. It is well known that tourists (particularly families, business travellers, and small tour groups) show an increasing desire to spend their time together during a stay in a particular place. Hotels usually do not offer them a broad range of entertainment, sports or dining options. Due to that guests spent most of their time using the services, which are typically offered by the city centres. As a result significant amount of money spent by guests is spent outside of the hotel. A good way to retain customers would be to expand the offer of the hotel in such a way that the hotel would stop being only a waiting room, and became a kind of "social environment". The owners of the enterprise could develop a project, the goal of which would be to combine business, catering, entertainment and children's areas. In this way, the customers could eat, surf the internet, or have fun playing board games while staying together at all times. Such project would take the needs of various customers into consideration. Children's area would allow for parents to watch their children from all parts of the lobby. Vending machines could provide all kinds of food and drink regardless of the time of day.

Another form of retaining customers would be to create a diverse gastronomic offer. Meals prepared on the basis of traditional and regional products specific to the region, which are a part of its cultural heritage. Catering and hotel enterprises may seek the recommendation of an international SLOW FOOD ® organisation, which aims at "protecting the right to taste". The SLOW FOOD organization was founded in 1986 in Italy, to provide the widely understood protection and support for small, regional food producers - especially the ones producing "original food", produced in a way that is different to other parts of the world, traditional food, healthy, and increasingly at risk of disappearing as a result

of aggressive expansion of fast foods. Another alternative could be to create a new menu based on organic products since organic food is characterized mainly by the fact that it is produced without the use of chemical fertilizers and chemical pesticides, maintaining soil fertility and biodiversity.

The above solutions require bearing necessary expenses that are related to their execution. Therefore, before attempting to implement them, it would be essential to carefully analyze the behaviour of the hotel guests as well as build and test out the prototypes of the final concepts.

Acknowledgments

The paper is an output of the project VEGA number 1/0635/14 "Status and prospects of development of the organic food market, traditional and regional foods in Slovakia".

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