
AN ASSESSMENT OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH FIRST LEVEL HOTELS IN GONDAR: INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK

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ABSTRACT

Gondar, due to its historical palaces and churches, has been one of the top tourist destinations in Northern Ethiopia. For that matter, the number of domestic and international tourists visiting the town is increasing from time to time. Looking at this potential of Gondar many people are venturing into the field of hotel business. This study was conducted to assess customer satisfaction with first level hotels in Gondar. The responses of the international tourists were taken for the purpose of analysis. Only the international tourists were approached so as to have a holistic and unbiased analysis of the hotel sector in the town. A total of 352 tourists staying in first class hotels of Gondar were approached for data collection in between 22nd March- 22nd April 2013. However, only 313 questionnaires were completely filled and thus considered for study. It was found that though the staff is hospitable, the hotels are neat and comfortable, the taste of food is good and some services such as credit card facility is available in the hotels still efficiency in service, variety of food items, location of the hotel, the landscaping, spaciousness of rooms and value for money are some burning issues which demand immediate attention by the hoteliers.

Keywords: *Customer Satisfaction, Service Quality, Hotels, International Tourists, Importance-Performance Analysis*

Introduction

In the era of increasing competition one of the biggest challenges is to maintain a good relation with the customers so that the long term interests

can be protected. To make the customers special the formation of effective strategies which can differentiate the organisations from one another is necessary. Customer satisfaction is very important to get new customers and to retain the old ones (Martin, 2002). According to Oliver (1980) satisfaction is when the experience is better than the expectation and dissatisfaction is when the experience is below than the expectation. Customers' expectation and a matching experience could lead to customer loyalty, enhanced image, reduced costs and increased business performance (Choi & Chu, 2001; Ramanathan & Ramanathan, 2011 as cited in Boon & Rompho, 2012).

Desire of the consumer for quality products and service in the tourism industry has become more and more apparent to professionals. Nowadays one of the major challenges for the hotel industry is to present and maintain high levels of customer satisfaction (Lam & Zhang, 1999; Yen & Su, 2004). In the constantly changing environment the requirements of the guests needs to be effectively monitored in order to facilitate their analysis and ensure the management of change in the performance of the hotel product (Curaković et al., 2013).

In the context of the hotel industry, attributes, such as imprecise standards, short distribution channels, reliability and consistency, face-to-face interaction, and fluctuating demand, have been identified as some of the challenges (Akibaba, 2006; Sohrabi et al, 2012). In addition, the demand for a different hotel types in different countries is usually clustered around peak periods such as holiday seasons, which makes it difficult to provide consistent service quality measures (Boon-itt and Rompho, 2012). However, the practice of excellent service quality has been proven to lead to increased customer satisfaction (Martin, 2002).

In this research an attempt was made to see whether tourists are satisfied with the first level hotels in Gondar, Ethiopia. Gondar, due to its historical palaces and churches, has been one of the top tourist destinations in Northern Ethiopia. For that matter, the number of local and international tourists visiting the city is increasing from time to time. These tourists expect the best from the Hotels that can enhance their satisfaction. In Gondar city, the emergence of Hotels industry is traced back to the time of Italian Occupation. The first five Hotels in Gondar were Ethiopia Hotel, Goha Hotel, Fogera Hotel, Quara and Terara Hotel and these hotels are still operating. Nowadays, the city's Hotel sector is showing advancement due to the increasing number of tourists and overall development of the city. As per Gondar city administration culture and tourism office, there are twenty three first and second level Hotels in the city (Sewnet, Sharma and Sileshi, 2015).

Literature Review

The ability of service providers to predict the customer needs helps them to attain and continue with a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Multiple methods are used to know about the desires and expectations of the customers. For planning different actions of the company customer satisfaction is the starting point (Sekulović, 2009).

Customer satisfaction leads to repeat purchases, customer loyalty and positive brand advertising therefore, customers are the base for any flourishing business (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2001). According to Bowen and Chen (2001) a satisfied customer is not sufficient. It should be a highly satisfied customer. For building a sustainable competitive advantage building customer loyalty is no longer a choice but it is the only way to do so (Bansal and Gupta, 2001).

For marketing managers and intellectuals customer satisfaction for long has been an important pointer of company's past, current and future performance (Oliver, 1999). The key concept of customer satisfaction is based on Lewin's (1938) expectancy-disconfirmation theory, which affirms that "satisfaction judgment is based on comparisons between expectations held a priori and the perceived performance post hoc by a customer with an evaluative norm". According to the theory customer satisfaction is a function of subjective disconfirmation under various circumstances (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982). It can be said that if performance exceeds customers' expectation (a positive disconfirmation) then the customer is satisfied and if performance falls below expectations (a negative disconfirmation) then he is dissatisfied (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

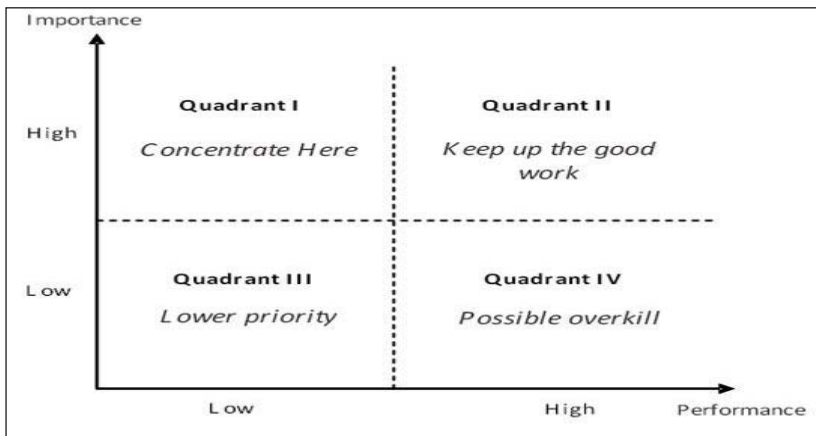
Characteristics of hotel products which customers say are important have been examined by a number of studies. For example, according to Choi and Chu (2001) the quality of staff, quality of the rooms and the value you get for a price are the top three factors in determining guest satisfaction. Others authors state that it is quick service, convenience of location, comfort, employees' behavior, timeliness (Curaković et al., 2013). Atkinson (1988) found that the purity, safety, "value for money" and friendly staff determine the degree of satisfaction of hotel guests.

Importance-Performance Analysis Model (IPA)

Importance-performance analysis has been applied as an effective means of evaluating a firm's competitive position in the market, identifying improvement opportunities, and guiding strategic planning efforts (Hawes and

Rao, 1985; Martilla & James, 1977; Myers, 2001). Importance performance analysis, first introduced by Martilla and James (1977), identifies which product or service attributes a firm should focus on to, enhance customer satisfaction (Matzler et al., 2004a). The means of performance and importance, commonly utilized in practice, divide the matrix into four quadrants.

Figure 1. Importance Performance Quadrants



Source: Importance-performance Analysis framework adopted from Martilla (1977)

Quadrant I

Attributes are perceived to be very important to respondents, but performance levels are fairly low. This sends a direct message that improvement efforts should be concentrated here.

Quadrant II

Attributes are perceived to be very important to respondents, and at the same time, the organization seems to have high levels of performance on these activities. The message here is To Keep up the Good Work.

Quadrant III

Attributes are with low importance and low performance. Although performance levels may be low in this cell, managers should not be too concerned, since the attribute of this cell is not perceived to be very important. Limited resources should be expended on this low priority cell.

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Quadrant IV

This cell contains attributes of low importance, but relatively high performance. Respondents are satisfied with the performance of the organizations, but managers should consider present efforts on the attributes of this cell as being over utilized.

Based on this analysis, particular improvement opportunities are determined. For example, researchers commonly suggest that major weaknesses (Quadrant I) should be top priority and targeted for immediate improvement efforts (Martilla & James, 1977). Conversely, attributes deemed major strengths (Quadrant II) should be maintained, leveraged, and heavily promoted (Lambert and Sharma, 1990).

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) acts as a framework for overcoming many of the identified difficulties implicit with the SERVQUAL and SERVPERF scale. IPA, like SERVQUAL, maintains that quality is a function of customer perceptions of performance and the importance of the attribute.

The importance a customer places on any given service attribute is a principle dimension of IPA. Thus the important service attributes with the SERVPERF scale can then be combined with the performances attributes to form an IPA. The IPA model has been used in hospitality and tourism research for years (Qu & Sit, 2007). It has been proven by many researchers as an effective quantitative research tool. Sethna (1982) proposed that the IPA provided a clear direction for action, identifying areas where scarce resources should be concentrated. Lewis (1984) used the IPA as a competitive analysis technique to identify visitors' perceptions of the hotel industry. In 1989, Lewis and Chambers reported the effective use of the importance-performance technique in the monitoring of customers' satisfaction by Sheraton Hotel Corporation. While Evans and Chon (1989) used the IPA to formulate tourism policy, Almanza, Jaffe, and Lin (1994) used the IPA matrix to determine means for improving customers' satisfaction. In 1995, Martin examined service quality in the hotel industry by using the IPA technique. The ease of application and the appealing methods of presenting both data and strategic suggestions seem to be the factors, among others, that contribute to wide acceptance of the IPA technique (Martilla & James 1977).

Statement of Problem

Gondar receives a number of international tourists every year due to its numerous attractions. Looking at this potential of Gondar many people are

venturing into the field of hotel business. However, it needs to be examined whether this mushrooming growth of hotels is able to cater tourists in a satisfactory manner or not. If the hotels are able to satisfy the guests they will come again which will not only be profitable for the hotels in terms of revenue generations but as well as for the Govt. because of taxes. Additionally, it will also help in creating a good image of Ethiopian tourism. Therefore the question that arises is “Where do the first level hotels of Gondar stand in terms of customer satisfaction?”

Significance of the Study

The findings of this research are important for both existing and upcoming hotels as well as for Tourism offices and other administrative bodies of the city. Gondar city administration culture and Tourism office can obtain insights, as this office is concerned to ensure the provision of quality services in all tourist service organizations of the city. Gondar city administration will also benefit from the findings of this research as high customer satisfaction with hotels is highly essential to create a positive experience to tourists, and to build a good image of the city.

Research Design

An understanding of what the tourists, wants will not only help the existing and upcoming hotels to grow their business in a manner which is sustainable, but would also take care that this does not end in a mad rush which can leave a number of negative impacts commonly associated with tourism. Therefore, to achieve the stated purpose it was decided to approach the international tourists. Only the responses from international tourists were taken up for this study because they are more experienced travellers and in addition their responses will be totally unbiased. As most of these tourists prefer to stay in good hotels therefore, four hotels which are also classified as first level hotels by Gondar city administration culture and Tourism office were chosen. As per Gondar city administration culture and tourism office, there are 23 hotels, which are categorized as first and second levels (Sewnet, Sharma and Sileshi, 2015).

Primary data for the study was collected from participants by administering close ended questionnaires which measured the items on a five point Likert scale. International tourists who stayed in the first level hotels in the town of Gondar from April 9 to May 8, 2013 formed the target population for this study. The researchers reviewed customer satisfaction researches in hotels, banks, restaurants, airlines and other related service organizations to

obtain the best possible sampling technique. The findings from reviews of these studies indicated that the convenience sampling technique was almost employed in all researches. Hence, as employed in most researches in the hotel industry (Boon-It and Rompho, 2012; Mohsin & Tim Lockyer, 2010; Qu & Sit, 2007) convenience sampling technique was employed to approach the respondents. A total of 352 international tourists from the first level hotels were approached for the data collection. Twenty nine hotel attributes were selected based on their frequency of inclusions in hospitality researches. In doing so, hotel researches in the last five years were considered. Hotel managers and experts from the industry were consulted to provide comments on the draft questionnaire. A pilot survey was also conducted on 10 international tourists who stayed in hotels under study in order to test reliability of each item of the instrument. The reliability of the measures was examined through the calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficients, one of the most widely used methods to test the reliability of the questionnaires. Cronbach's alpha values of all attributes of the hotels considered in this research were greater than 0.8. This figure implied that each item in the questionnaires was well understood by the respondents, and also the items measured what they had intended to measure. The instrument was developed in English because the target of the research was International tourists who stayed in first level hotels in the city of Gondar for the period of data collection. Researchers gave a brief description and training to the receptionists in each hotel about the overall objective of the research and how to get the questionnaire filled by international tourists. The Questionnaires were placed at reception because it was a convenient place.

Only the people who are well-travelled, and were above the age group of 18 years were considered as the respondents in the research. Moreover, the respondent had to reserve a room and stayed at least one night in the hotels to be part of the research. Respondents were given the questionnaire at check in time and returned at check out time. During the data collection period, the researchers monitored the progress of the distributed questionnaires by visiting the hotels every three days and by making a phone call to receptionists.

The completion of the questionnaires was entirely based on a voluntary basis. A cover page was attached to the questionnaire explaining the objective and importance of the research so as to inspire the respondents to fill the questionnaire properly and provide genuine response. (Sewnet, Sharma and Sileshi, 2015) Questionnaires were distributed to 352 international tourists, however only 313 questionnaires were completely filled and thus considered for analysis. Data collected were analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences 16.0 (SPSS, 2001). Mean ratings for the responses of the respondents' on twenty nine hotel service attributes were calculated and used for Importance Performance Analysis (IPA). The cross-hairs (vertical

and horizontal lines) were calculated to separate the hotel attributes into four identifiable quadrants. As Martilla and James (1977) suggested, the mean is preferred to be used as the dividing point to avoid discarding useful information. The data were then presented on a grid, where each service attribute was plotted according to its perceived importance and performance level. The two-dimensional grid displayed the importance of attributes on the vertical axis from high (top) to low (bottom), and the performance of attributes on the horizontal axis from high (right) to low (left).

Analysis and Discussion

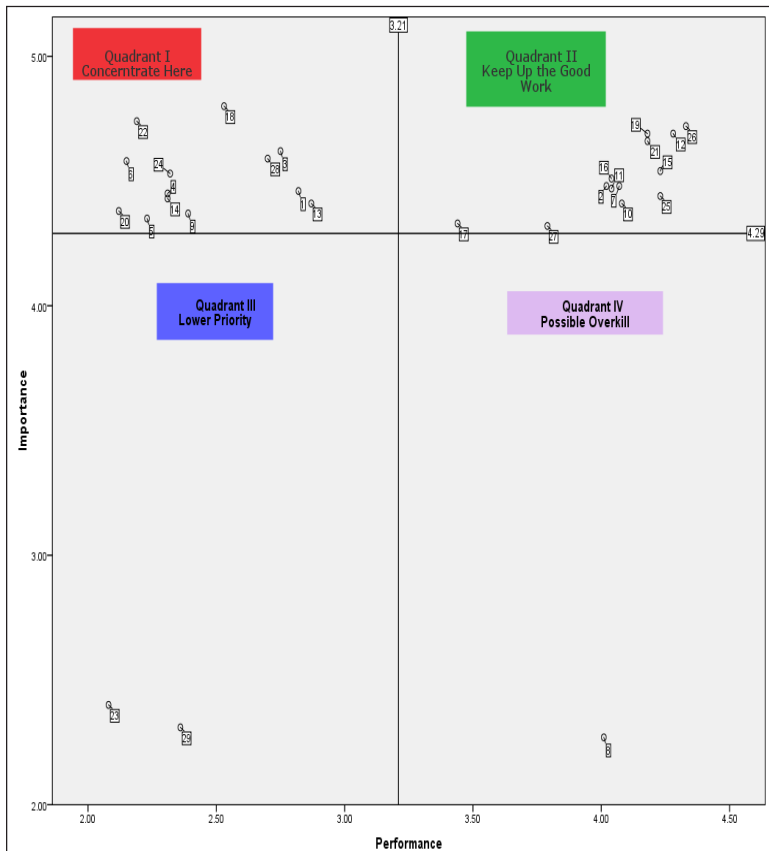
Customers' Importance and Performance rating mean values for the twenty nine variables used as input for the Importance performance matrix are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Importance Performance (Mean Values)

S. No.	Attributes	Mean Importance (Y)	Mean Performance (X)
1	Spaciousness of rooms	4.46	2.82
2	Comfort of bed, mattress, and pillow	4.48	4.02
3	Quietness of rooms	4.62	2.75
4	Bath room amenities	4.45	2.31
5	Convenient opening hours	4.35	2.23
6	Value for money	4.58	2.15
7	Taste of food	4.48	4.07
8	Large food portion	2.27	4.01
9	Variety of food	4.37	2.39
10	Food presentation	4.41	4.08
11	Variety of drinks in bars	4.47	4.04
12	Cleanliness of hotel	4.69	4.28
13	Attractiveness of surrounding environment	4.41	2.87
14	Landscaping	4.43	2.31
15	Hotel Ambiance	4.54	4.23
16	Comfortable furnishings	4.51	4.04
17	Proximity to attractions	4.33	3.44
18	Prompt service	4.80	2.53
19	Neat and clean staff	4.69	4.18
20	Communication skill of staffs	4.38	2.12

21	Friendliness of staff	4.66	4.18
22	High speed Internet	4.74	2.19
23	Frequent guest program	2.40	2.08
24	24 hour cold and hot water	4.53	2.32
25	Shuttle service to and from airport	4.44	4.23
26	Safety and security at hotel	4.72	4.33
27	Electronic card payment	4.32	3.79
28	Appropriate location	4.59	2.70
29	Hotel's promotional materials	2.31	2.36
	Grand Mean	4.29	3.21

Figure 2. Importance Performance Matrix



These mean scores were plotted in an Importance Performance matrix as shown in figure 2. The grand means for performance rating ($x = 3.21$) and

importance ($y = 4.29$) determines the placements of axes on the grid.

Quadrant 2 (Keep up the good work)

The attributes that the hotels should take as their strengths are friendliness of staff (21), neat and clean staff (19), safety and security at the hotel (26), cleanliness of the hotel (12), hotel ambiance (15), comfortable furnishing (16), comfort of bed mattress and pillow (2), variety of drinks in the bar (11), the taste of food (7), food presentation (10), proximity to attractions (17), shuttle service to and from airport (25), electronic card payment (27).

It is well known that the Ethiopian people are quite hospitable and their hospitality was visibly noticed by the international tourists also. That is why the attribute friendliness of staff has been rated in this Quadrant. Moreover the attributes neat & clean staff and safety & security at the hotel are also rated positively. The cleanliness of hotel and hotel ambiance has also been admired by the tourists. The tourists have also found that furnishing as well as the bedding in the room was quite comfortable. As far as the drinks are concerned the respondents have enjoyed them well. The respondents have relished what so ever dishes were served to them. This is quite evident as the taste of food and food presentation has been given a positive score. The respondents have rated the hotels as quite near to the attractions. The reason for doing so can be that Gondar is a small town and one place is not far from any other place. The hotels are providing shuttle service to and from airport and also accept a credit card which is a facility liked by the tourists.

Quadrant1 (Concentrate here)

The attributes which should bother the hotels of Gondar and where the hotels should put their maximum effort are prompt service (18), value for money (6), communication skills of staffs (20), variety of food (9), 24 hour cold and hot water (24), bathroom amenities (4), appropriate location (28), spaciousness of rooms (1), attractiveness of surrounding environment (13), landscaping (14), quietness of rooms (3), convenient opening hours (5), high Speed Internet (24).

It is well known that foreign guests who stay in first level hotels are habitual to prompt service and this they have also reflected in this research also. Hotels should try to employ people who are well versed with the standards in the tourism industry. Hiring untrained people may prove cheaper, but would be detrimental to the overall image of the Hotel. The same goes for the attribute's value for money and communication skills of staffs. Hotels

may also try to employ chefs who have reasonable experience in making continental cuisines so that tourists from different countries can at least get some minimum number of dishes of their choice. Arranging for 24 hours cold and hot water should not be a problem, but frequent power cuts aggravate the issue. Though the hotels do have arrangements for power backups however, running electric geysers for longer periods of time are still difficult. Moving towards alternate sources of energy such as solar energy would be highly beneficial. This will not only help to make the hotel self reliant in terms of energy but would help in saving the electricity bill as well as be able to conserve the environment also. The bathrooms can be given a face lift so that they can give an international look. The attributes appropriate location, spaciousness of the rooms and attractiveness of the surrounding environment can be more useful for the new hotels as the new hotels should first survey the area and only then should start construction. Coming up with haphazard construction everywhere in the city will not do any good for the business and would also create visual pollution. In addition hotels should also try to have some green area as this is highly expected. Quietness of rooms can be increased by using sound proof material, especially for the guest rooms as no one would like to have a disturbed sleep. The hotels should strive for having their pantry/ food outlets open round the clock so that if the guests want to go for an early morning walk or probably need to catch a cab for going to some other place of interest at least they can get a cup of tea and some basic things to eat. The last but not the least is the facility of having high speed internet access. However, being an external factor and beyond the control of the hotels, there is not much that the hotels can do about it.

Quadrant 3 (Lower Priority)

The attributes frequent Guest Program (23) and hotel promotional material (29), are in this quadrant. Although performance levels were low in this quadrant, a hotel manager should not be overly concerned since the attribute in this quadrant are not perceived to be very important.

However, limited resources should be expended on these attributes as these are quite useful in attracting domestic tourists and therefore, should not be underestimated.

Quadrant 4 (Possible Overkill)

Large food portion (8) is the only attribute which falls in this quadrant.

It appears that the quantity of food which is served in Hotels of Gondar is much more than what is served in the hotels of the respective countries of the tourists. The hotels should not devote much of their resources on this attribute because international tourists rated it as low in importance. However, as the hotels cater to domestic tourists, therefore it also will be wiser to keep the service at the same level.

Conclusion

In Ethiopia the town of Gondar is a famous tourist hub. It boasts of many natural and cultural attractions within and around and thus receives many domestic and international tourists every year. The hotel sector is fast to respond to this growing demand. However, it is pertinent to know about the limitations of these organizations so that they can improve upon their deficiencies and cater to their customers in the best possible manner. To understand what do the international tourists feel about first level hotels of Gondar this research was undertaken. The collection of data was almost done in a month's time. A total of 313 completed questionnaires were used for the study and their analysis was done using Importance Performance Analysis (IPA).

The competitive advantage of the hotels in Gondar emanates out from hygienic, safe, hospitable and comfortable atmosphere with delicious food and drinks. These factors if packaged effectively can create a USP for the hotels. However the five aspects which need immediate attention by the hoteliers are first requirement of well trained staff, second inclusion of continental dishes in menus, the third provision of services of international level in terms of facilities at the rooms, fourth survey of land and fifth value for money, before the construction of a hotel. It is interesting to note that even in this research the issues of training of staff, value for money, the quality of the rooms and convenient location are raised as suggested by the literature in many other customer satisfaction researches with hotels around the world. The frequent guest program and promotional programs have been given low priority, perhaps because these tourists usually use travel intermediaries to book their accommodation and are not frequent travellers to Gondar. The food portions served at the hotels in Gondar are large however they should be kept like that only. The last three attributes may not be important for the international tourists, but still should be maintained at the same level as it should not be forgotten that the hotels not only cater to international tourists, but even for the domestic tourists, who make for a big chunk of their profits. The limitation of this study is that only international guests staying in first

level hotels were consulted for the purpose. Therefore, generalization of outcomes is not warranted.

In future the studies of this nature can be conducted for second level hotels and domestic hotel guests. In addition, internal customer (employee) satisfaction shall also be examined in order to get a broader picture of the service delivery process of hotels in the city of Gondar.

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