



The Significance of Hotel Grading in Service Delivery in Zimbabwe

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This paper reports the results of an exploratory study on the significance of hotel grading on service delivery in Zimbabwe hospitality industry. The findings show that hotel grading alone has no much impact on service delivery but it aids to the upgrading of service standards. The argument was that improvement on service delivery is initiated by hotel assessment and grading that pinpoints the areas of needy in a hotel establishment. This has been disaffirmed by most hotel operators who said they don't usually wait for ZTA assessment and grading to improve in any service area but they are proactive. Improvements in service delivery cannot be totally attributed to grading but it is considered as one of the several factors that aids to this fact.

KEYWORDS: Hospitality, service delivery, hotel star rating, accommodation, quality assurance.

INTRODUCTION

This research seeks to investigate the significance of the Hotel Grading on service delivery. Grading is the assessment of how good or bad are the services and facilities that are offered by the hotels while service delivery focuses on the way an organization distributes the services to the guests. A survey of the relationship that exists between hotel star

rating and service delivery was conducted from the various hotels of different categories i.e.2-5star hotels.

BACKGROUND

Accommodation is a necessary component in the development of tourism within any destination that seeks to serve tourists other than day trippers (i.e. excursionists). The quality and range of accommodation available will both reflect and influence the range and type of visitors to a location, that is, destination image. One can identify a situation where accommodation is seen as part of overall tourism infrastructure without which tourists will not visit the place. It also assists in attracting wider investment in the tourism product at the locality.

Hotel grading is a necessary requirement for the world's fastest growing industry whose customers' needs and demands change with developmental phase. The development of this industry has brought up the "new tourist" who has improved needs, wants, tastes and expectations. This tourist is now more knowledgeable about travelling due to the availability of advanced technology. Globalisation has enabled him to compare destinations hence he knows and demands exactly what he wants.

It is against this background that the researcher would like to find out the impact of the country's hotel grading system to the overall quality of service delivery in the hospitality sector of the tourism industry.

Problem Statement

The standard of hotels in the 1900s left much to be desired. A traveller in 1913 wrote "I suggest that the government would do better to watch hotel keepers than motorists. I estimate that for every person killed by motorists, 10 are killed by hotel keepers", (Johnson, 1975:107). Klein (1972:316), was asked to investigate the standard of the country hotels in the 1930s for a hotel journal. He wrote, "I inspected dozens of ghastly kitchens, slept in shabby rooms and ate a variety of ghastly meals"

From the above statements, it was clear that a control body was directly needed at this stage to co-ordinate standards, rating, licensing, etc (Narvol, 1936).

This however only materialised in 1965 when the Hotel Board was created to improve standard of accommodation and to make funds available for the establishment of new hotels and the improvement of the existing ones. However, limitation of funds did not permit the construction of new hotels by then but major strides were made in improving standards through star- grading system (Heath, 1988).

Following the above background, Zimbabwe implemented the new grading system for hotels to improve on the system that was in use since the colonial era when grading of visitor facility was being done only on hotels though the hospitality sector comprises of other facilities like lodges, camp sites, camping safaris and self catering accommodation. The then Zimbabwe Tourism Development (ZTDC) was responsible for this old grading system which was inherently a British System. Nevertheless, this old grading system of the Statutory Instrument 424 of 1980 has some of the contents overtaken by events hence was inapplicable to the modern hospitality industry.

After the realisation of the above weakness, the Authority came up with the new grading system that is in Statutory Instrument 128 Of 2005 which is currently in use. With this system, all hospitality facilities are assessed and graded to match the current market. When the system was implemented in June 2006, all hotels were to be graded and regraded in order to see if they were matching with the expected requirements. This exercise is a continuous process that needs commitment from both the operators and the ZTA Quality Assurance Executives to maintain the set standards that would influence the service delivery.

Since the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority has managed to improve on its grading system, the researcher wants to find out whether the system has an impact on the service delivery in hotels in the hospitality industry.

Research Objectives

This research's objectives are to:-

- (i) deduce the significance of the hotel grading on service delivery in the hospitality industry.
- (ii) measure the extent to which the hotel service delivery has been influenced since the inception of the new hotel grading system.

- (iii) ascertain whether the current hotel grading system is meeting the operators and customers' expectations and needs in terms of service delivery.

Research Question

Does the grading of hotels have any significant role on the service delivery in the hospitality industry?

Other Research Questions

1. How important is the grading of hotels to the hospitality industry?
2. How has the current hotel grading system impacted on the service delivery in the hospitality sector of the tourism industry?
3. How do the hotel operators and visitors view the Zimbabwe hotel grading system in relation to the service delivery?
4. How competitive is the country's hotel grading system to others in the region and internationally?

Delimitation

This research only focuses on hotels though the hospitality industry comprises of other accommodation facilities that are mentioned in the background. The researcher opted for hotels on the basis of their size, proportion among the other facilities and their potential to attract almost all types of tourists. Verginis and Wood (1999), support this when they said,

“hotels are undoubtedly the most significant and visible sub sector within the accommodation or lodging industry and are the tourism sub sector that provides the greatest total employment in global terms and probably accounts for the highest level of receipts”.

This reason generally makes them to be a true representative of the hospitality industry though one can accept the market changes in terms

of preferences towards greener environments, pointing to other alternative forms of accommodation because of their general location.

Limitation of the Study

The researcher has been restricted to sample Harare 1 to 5 Star hotels.

Justification of the Study

This research is basically carried out to find out the extent to which the grading of hotels can impact on service delivery in hotels in the hospitality industry. In addition, the findings of this study shall serve as a guideline for the ZTA quality assurance executives on how they can improve the grading system and its implementation in order to match the international hotel service delivery standards. Hotel operators are expected to benefit from the feedback from customers' and the Authority's assessment of their service delivery. After all the above have been approved, it is the wish of the researcher that this study will return the fortunes of the country's tourism industry.

Literature Review

The subject of grading of tourist facilities has been researched widely by those who seek to use quality standards as a way of attracting and retaining visitors in their tourism destinations. To ensure content validity an extensive review of the hospitality literature and previous researches was conducted to find the important variables related to the construct of both service delivery and hotel rating systems.

Grading is a qualitative assessment of tourism facilities to assign them some grades or ratings depending on the standards they offer in terms of services and amenities.

In this study, references shall be made to other countries to see how the grading and registration of hotels have been carried out for the benefit of stakeholders.

Grading

This is a common term that is well defined and widely used by assessors of visitors' facilities worldwide. Callan (1995) defines it as "a qualitative assessment of the facilities described under qualification. Grading assesses how good or bad are the facilities and services offered". This scholar believes that, quality assessment aims at improving the quality of the existing services than asking hoteliers to provide additional equipment and facilities in their rooms.

Grading means "checking, assessing and evaluating the material and physical condition of the premises and standard of services offered by any type of designated facility and assigning a particular grade", (Statutory Instrument 128, 2005).

Verginis and Wood (1999) echoed the same sentiments when they emphasise on "quality dimensions". The two suggested that,

"a grade expressed simply in a non-contentious way is what the consumer requires. Hoteliers may have many different views but many independent operators see the grades as important marketing tools which they would not be without".

However, their major concern is that most commercially operated schemes concentrate on grading with quality perceived to be an add-on which does not impact on star rating of an establishment.

Blackman, Rowe, Smith and Steward (2005), believe that,

"grading identifies accommodation according to certain verifiable objective features of the services offered, such as number of courses offered at meals, whether twenty-four hour room service and so on".

From the above mentioned definitions, one can conclude that, grading is unanimously agreed to be ensuring quality in both tangible and intangible products and services of the accommodation facilities and assigning grades.

Though the concept of grading is widely acceptable, it has been discovered that countries are at liberty to use the symbols or insignia of their choice for grading their facilities as long as they have meaning to their operators and consumers. Stars are used for hotels worldwide. The number of levels of rating depends on respective countries. Some

members of the hospitality industry have claimed a six or seven-star rating for their operation. As no organization or formal body awards or recognizes any rating over five star deluxe, such claims are meaningless and predominantly used for advertising purposes. For some time the Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai was said to be a 'seven star' property, but this was never the case, (Wikipedia, 2010).

Zimbabwe Tourism Authority maintains the Stars for hotels. Kenya grading system uses 1-6 Shields for hotels. Nevertheless, the country says that people should not be confused as the shields share the same purpose with stars that are used in Zimbabwe and Europe.

Star Grading for Hotels

According to Blackman, Rowe, Smith and Stewart (2005), “*star ratings symbolise the level of service, range of facilities and quality of guest care customers can expect. Hotels are required to meet progressively higher standards as they move up the scale from one star to five stars*”.

The above quartet went on to define each star grade as follows:

TABLE 1. Star Grading for Hotels: Blackman, Rowe, Smith and Stewart (2005).

Star	Description
1*	This offers practical accommodation with a limited range of facilities and services including food and beverage. Service may be informal. There is a high standard of cleanliness throughout but, decor, furnishings, fixtures and fittings may have domestic quality. Three quarters of bedrooms must have ensuite or private facilities comprising either a bath or shower and WC.
2*	These are small and medium sized hotels, perhaps with limited public areas, better equipped bedrooms, all with ensuite or private bathrooms and a colour television. There is often an element of personal service and management and staff are smartly and professionally dressed. A lift is normally provided.
3*	These are hotels that offer higher standards of service and facilities, including larger public areas and bedrooms, a receptionist, room service and laundry. Management and staff are smartly and professionally presented and usually uniformed.
4*	These hotels offer accommodation with superior comfort and quality, all bedrooms with ensuite bath, fitted overhead shower and WC. There are spacious and well- appointed public areas. There is more emphasis on food and drink and serious approach to cuisine. Room

TABLE 1. (Continued)

Star	Description
	service is available for all meals plus twenty-four hour drinks, refreshment and snacks. A dry cleaning service is available. Excellent customer service is expected with a formal professional service structure with smartly uniformed staff. There will be extra facilities depending on location and style of operation such as conferencing and banqueting, business centre, health and leisure suites.
5*	These are spacious, luxurious establishments offering the highest international quality of accommodation, facilities, services and highest quality cuisine. There will be a range of extra facilities such as ensuites, health spas, gyms and conference and banqueting facilities. Rooms usually cater for both leisure and business stays. One will feel very cared for by professional, attentive staff providing flawless service. Guests will notice the attention to detail compared with four-star properties and these hotels set the highest international standard for the industry.

The general aspects that are considered internationally for hotel grading are service provision, the exterior and interior of the establishment, the public areas and bedrooms, the drainage system, the personnel qualifications among others.

Callan (1993) stated that, hotel grading or rating system embraces two parts: i.e. the basic registration standard which is the physical requirement that a hotel property must meet the minimum quality requirement and the grading standard which is an extension of basic requirements of qualitative and intangible services allowing a hotel to be compared with other properties.

Hotel grading systems worldwide can be categorised into two groups: official and non official. Official ratings are established and conducted by government agencies and followed on a compulsory and regulatory basis for the main purpose of controlling lodging tariff and taxes. In contrast, non official ratings are developed and implemented by private organizations such as hotel/tourism associations on a voluntary participation basis by hotels for non social obligations, (WTO&IH&RA, 2004).

Whether the rating is official or non official as stated above, it should be done for some purpose(s). Callan (1995) and Wood (1999) gave some benefits of grading the visitor facilities that are:

- (i) Standardization- to establish a system of uniform service and product quality that helps to create an orderly travel market distribution for buyers and sellers. In addition, Nigeria Tourism Development Corporation sees grading as tool for creating the enabling environment for tourism activities to flourish through the promotion of good standards and efficient service delivery in the hospitality industry and to facilitate investment sector.
- (ii) Revenue generation- to provide revenue from licensing and the sale of guest bookings among others. In addition, the governments use hotel ratings to regulate the hotel industry in tariffs and taxes and to meet basic requirements of safety and hygiene, (WTO&IH&RA, 2004:68).
- (iii) Control- to provide a system of controlling general industry quality.
- (iv) Investment incentive- to give operators incentives to upgrade their facilities and services in order to meet classification and grading criteria.

In addition to the above benefits, Mr. Mohammed Nour (2006), Acting Director of the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority's Economic Department of Nigeria said, 'grading is important as it aims to:

- Provide Information to Customers- rating systems allow customers (visitors, travel agents and tour operators) to make informed choices about where to stay by allowing them to make comparisons among hotels. WTO&IH&RA, (2004) concluded that, 'hotel companies use grading schemes as 'branding' which convey both qualitative and quantitative assessment of properties to their customers.
- Encourage and guide investment in hotels i.e. internationally based standards will encourage the private sector to make investments in improving and maintaining the quality of the local hotel infrastructure.
- Help local brands to compete more effectively. Mr. Mohammed Nour (2006) reported that, it was observed that when international and local visitors have no objective rating system consistent with international standards, many visitors simply select well-known hotel chains that conform to certain quality standards.

Service Delivery

According to Lovelock C and Wirtz J (2004), 'service delivery involves decisions about where, when and how a service can be delivered to the customers. These decisions have an important impact on the nature of customers' service experiences because they determine the types of encounters, if any, with service personnel and the price and other costs incurred to obtain the service'.

However, in the tourism industry there is often nothing to move as 'experiences' are not being stored and shipped and informational transactions are increasingly conducted via electronic channels. Service delivery usually has three elements that are:

- (i) information and promotion flow that refers to the distribution of information and promotional material relating to the service offer.
- (ii) negotiation flow that focuses on reaching an agreement on the service features and configuration and terms of the offer so that the purchase contract can be closed, (i.e. the right to use a service).
- (iii) product flow that refers to the strategy of development of a network of local sites.

Most times, the above elements are influenced by the rating of the hotel that gives it its competitive edge in the market i.e. market positioning. The belief from both the customer and service provider is that, the service delivery systems and procedures should tally with the service or product itself so that the 'claim' can be fairly proved. For example, a five star hotel should prove its superiority in all aspects of its service delivery if it goes for a 'more for more' claim.

According to Bettencourt Lance A. (2002), 'Customers contribute to service quality through their roles as promoters of the firm, co-producers of the firm's service and consultants to the organization. A model of customer voluntary performance (CVP) is developed and empirically tested with a sample of grocery customers. Customer voluntary performance refers to helpful, discretionary customer behaviours that support the ability of the firm to deliver service quality'.

While technology makes products similar, it is service delivery quality that differentiates them in the market, (Denburg and Kleinen, 1993). The importance of service delivery is well recognised in the

hospitality industry since hotels cannot survive intense competition without satisfying their customers with quality service.

Benefits of good service delivery are rationalised as enhancement in customer loyalty, increase in market share, higher returns to investors, reduction in costs, lowering vulnerability to price competition and establishment of a competitive edge, (Khutson, 1988 and Wnest, 2001).

‘Competitive marketing demands local and international hotels to seek standards and tools that reflect their service quality. One of the answers to this need is a reliable hotel grading system which ranks, certifies and reflects the quality of hotel’s facilities and service’, (Narangajavana Y and Bo Hu, 2008).

Callan (1989), found out that hotel operators valued the classification awards and grading as promotional assets that provide significant amount of business to the hotels.

The above assertion was confirmed by Vallen and Vallen ,(2005), who noted that an approximation of 20% increase in sales among top-rated hotels in the Mobile Guide and a 40% increase in business among small hotels rated in AAA after hotels were awarded with classification. Therefore, hotel ratings functioning as a promotional tool might be associated with growth in hotel business measured by volume of sales and occupancy rate.

Hotels also perceive ratings as a pricing tool. This has been proved by Israeli and Uriely (2000) who examined the impact of star ratings and corporate affiliations on hotel room prices in Israel where the star rating could be used as significant predictor of hotels’ decision in setting prices. After a higher grade, prices also increase and its normal with 4 and 5 star hotels that charge any price at their will.

However, this is not always the case since other researchers like Fernandez and Bedia, (2004), see no direct correspondence between hotel ranking and perceptions and expectations of customers though grading works as a guide to reach an expected level of service quality and to convey this message to the public.

In conclusion, Narangajavana Y and Bo Hu (2008), reported that, hotel rating systems are related to service quality improvement while service quality improvement is associated with changes in hotel performance. Grading system serves to encourage hotel operators to improve the service delivery which may lead to changes in hotel performance.

METHODOLOGY

This research that seeks to find out the impact of the grading of hotels on the service delivery qualifies to be a qualitative research. With qualitative research, according to Nachmias D.(1987), “the researcher will be attempting to understand behaviour and institutions by getting to know well the subject involved, the symbols, beliefs and emotions”.

In order to get the details of the subject matter, the tools that were used are the questionnaires and interviews.

Questionnaires

For this research, questionnaires were used to collect data from the guests who usually have no time for strangers. These respondents were chosen because they are the users of the facilities and are believed to have enough experience to provide the needed data.

Interviews

For this study, both structured and unstructured interviews were used for the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority quality assurance executives who are the hotel assessors and the hotel managers who see the impact of grading on their daily business.

Unstructured interviews were basically for hotel managers since the researcher wanted to explore into the several factors in the situation that might be central to the broad problem area as propounded by Sekaran U, (2000). This is also a more effective way if one needs some in depth data about people’s feelings or experiences in a relaxed atmosphere that avoids the impression that what is occurring is a cross examination or a quiz.

Sampling

This is a process of selecting a sample from the population, that is, the subdivision of the population into sampling units. This has been done in order to reduce work volume since the population of this study is too

large. However, the sample used in this study is believed to be a true representative of the whole subject. Purposive sampling in which the researcher purposely selects the sample which is relevant to the study as one has clear knowledge of the study objectives has been used. The researcher in this case particularly used selective judgement sampling in which the sample was chosen on the basis of the researcher's access to the respondents who have the requisite information.

In view of the above propositions, the researcher chose some Harare hotels on the basis of their merits for this research. A sample of hotels from different categories was used to get a fair representation of hotels in Zimbabwe hospitality industry. The five star hotels were represented by Meikles Hotel and The Rainbow Towers. Ms Chipso Mutasa, Rainbow Tourism Group limited chief executive officer was quoted in The Herald of 2007 saying,

“the hotel this year vigorously pursue expansion through tapping and establishing niches in new business areas while US\$1.2m would be channelled towards ongoing renovations at five star hotel Rainbow Towers. The intention is to spruce up the image of the group to attract as many occupants as possible. Ms Mutasa went on to report that, just under US\$1m was last year pumped into Rainbow Towers refurbishment, which brought a refreshing new look to the reception area in addition to restoring the mixed cuisine restaurant, The Harvest”

Also Meikles is a five star picked for the same reasons. Crown Plaza Monomotapa stands in for the four stars. Cresta Lodge represents the three stars while Courtney is for the two stars.

Analysis of Guests' Responses

The findings indicate that there are more male respondents than females which may mean that males frequent and use hotels more often than females for both personal and corporate business. The Harare hotels get more of local business tourists than foreigners because there is no much adventure as compared to resort hotels in Victoria Falls and Nyanga. Since the findings have various types of tourists, it means that the hotels are able to host different types of tourists hence they need to provide

facilities and services that meet different expectations and needs as per the demands of the guests.

The survey shows that most of the respondents who are also regular customers of the targeted hotels are local visitors as the others who are the first time visitors were mostly foreigners. The reasons for the choice of the various hotels range from convenience, affordability as denoted by the price, reputation as reflected by the grade, good established relations with regular guests, the brand, good previous experience among others.

Most of the business tourists and foreigners were aware of the grade of the hotel but not very knowledgeable about the criteria. The other local visitors had very little knowledge about the grading except about the size of the establishment and its affordability. Comments about the need to improve on service delivery as well as the interior and exterior appearance of some establishments in order to fully qualify for the awarded grade were noted from the hotel users.

However, the majority of respondents were satisfied with the experience they got from the respective hotels may be because they are regular visitors who do not have much complaints. Those who indicated better and disappointing experiences could be the first time and rare visitors who were probably comparing with the previous hotel experiences. These are usually rare visitors because of some personal reasons and they are still to find satisfactory establishments. But they are a potential market that hotels need to consider more seriously. The disappointed visitors could be the first time visitors who usually come with higher expectations only to be let down by the actual experience. But if this group's complaints are amicably resolved they may become a good market for these establishments.

Overally, the survey shows that, Zimbabwe hotels are not as bad as some people would portray.

Responses from Hotel Managers

Most hotel managers had their hotels assessed for grading in 2006 and 2007 since 2000 when ZTA embarked on its new grading system. The managers have a fair knowledge of the grading system because the ZTA quality assurance executives discuss with them about it when they come for assessment though they do not have an input in terms of its contents. Since the inception of the new grading system in 2006, most of hotels

undertook renovations in various areas in order to maintain their current grades or to be upgraded hence an improvement in service delivery. Most managers agree that rating of hotels helps to improve the image of the organization in the market and there is a slight increase in terms of business volume after the rating but grading alone cannot be credited for the increase in the general performance of the organization in the industry. Some said that their improvement in service delivery was not because of the grading but it was an already scheduled plan to hire qualified professionals and to acquire better service equipment.

Most managers said that the ZTA grading system is good but the quality assurance executives should at least invite the operators' input since some of the requirements will be inapplicable to some already established organizations e.g. the increase in the size of a particular room to meet a certain grade. Also the criteria used was said to be too subjective and hence lacks consistence in terms of application e.g. "very good structure, with attractive and well-designed architectural features with stylish high quality furniture and fittings". This description can be interpreted differently by various organizations depending on their needs and ability to provide them. This resulted in dissatisfaction of the current hotel grades by the operators.

Responses from ZTA Quality Assurance Executives

According to the ZTA quality assurance executives, grading means "checking, assessing and evaluating the material and physical conditions of the premises and standard of services offered by any type of designated facility and assigning a particular grade". The grading system is the instrument that has requirements which are used to carry out the assessment.

The system checks on the interior and exterior facilities and the qualifications of the personnel of the establishment to come up with a fair rating. The grading system was said to be very effective since it is the only instrument that the ZTA uses to measure and maintain quality standards in hotels. Most hotels seem to improve in their service delivery after the assessment especially those that would have been upgraded so that they can match with the awarded grade. The assessment exercise must be conducted every two years in order to achieve the desirable results. The system is assumed to be covering both operators' and

customers' needs when it was designed thus it caters for both types of ZTA clients.

Measures that are used to enforce the system include issuing of warnings, down grading, striking the facility off the register until satisfactory conditions are met and imposing penalties.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the guest questionnaires were drawn mainly from business tourists who were dominating the industry considering the period in which the research was carried out (i.e. September to December). This period has low numbers of leisure tourists who seem to have no vacations at this period. Their loyalty to these establishments may mean that they satisfied with the service delivered by the respective graded hotels. This can be derived from Lovelock C and Wirtz J's (2004) assertion that 'the hotel's grade influences negotiation flow that focuses on reaching an agreement on the service features and configuration and terms of the offer that the purchase contract can be closed between the service provider and the client'.

Those few foreigners who indicated disappointment in service delivery in relation to the hotel grade could have their needs failed to be met or they are still hunting for a 'good' establishment. Also these foreign visitors who could be from developed and better countries than Zimbabwe will be comparing their home hotel offerings of the same grades with those of ours which will never be compatible considering the economic crisis the country is experiencing. However, one cannot totally disregard customer complaints because these 'contribute to service quality through their roles as promoters of the firm, co-producers of the firm's service and consultants to the organization', (Bettencourt L. A. 2002).

The indication of a fair knowledge from a total of 8 hotel managers that were interviewed means that grading is considered important in the Zimbabwe hospitality industry. In Zimbabwe just like in any other countries, grading helps the hotel brands to compete more effectively in the market as well as providing information to customers for their decision making as propounded by Mohammed N. (2006).

Most managers agreed that grading can to some extent help to improve service delivery quality since it is a requirement that each grade awarded should tally with the quality of service delivery as attributed by Lovelock C and Wirtz J (2004). But the managers reported that their improvement in service delivery came as a result of the already planned renovations and refurbishments not mainly by ZTA quality assurance executives' assessment and grading exercise.

The disgruntlement from most hotel managers about the current hotel grades came from their complaint about the subjective grading criteria.

It was recommended that the quality assurance executives should do their assessment regularly than waiting for the conditions to rot like it was in Zimbabwe. It is also a plea from hotel managers that the grading be more objective for easy interpretation and implementation. To support the above request, the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) Chief Quality Assurance Officer, Thembi Kunene (2010), recommends that star-graded establishments must undergo annual quality checks to ensure that standards are maintained. She adds that, TGCSA is not a policing body, but it sees itself as a collaborative partner in the hospitality industry's efforts to attain and maintain high standards. It was recently incorporated as a business unit of South African Tourism. According to her report of 30 July 2010, the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa was said to be on track to implement an enhanced accommodation grading system come 01 October 2010 to assure holidaymakers of a top-notch stay whenever they book into a professionally assessed, star-graded establishment. The new grading criterion also means improved consumer protection.

The ZTA quality assurance executives are well versed with their grading system which they well defined. The system that assesses facilities' interior and exterior designs as well as the personnel's qualifications is not bad because it goes well with the international expectations as reported by Blackman, Rowe, Smith and Stewart (2005). The frequency of assessment of two years by the Authority is reasonable but it needs to be shortened since customer needs change rapidly and require urgent attention. The system is said to be effective because the desired results are seen though not to the paramount expectations. It has been reported that if all customers and operators' views are to be considered the system might lose its focus of standardization.

However, according to the Wikipedia (2010), in 1999, VisitScotland, formerly the Scottish Tourist Board, introduced the first star rating

scheme in the world based on quality outputs, as opposed to a ranking of facilities and service which is seen as a model with potential for a worldwide scheme, as it has developed a means of objectively assessing the quality of the guest experience, as opposed to measuring an inventory of services and facilities, and can be adapted for varying worldwide markets. Its standards are based on guest expectations, rather than being a prescriptive formula to regulate hotel operations and delivery. Around 80% of hotels in Scotland chose to participate in this voluntary scheme. This led to the development of the current Common Standard for England, Scotland, and Wales, initiated by VisitScotland, for star grading in 2006. The VisitScotland model is now being introduced by some other countries such as Namibia which launched the scheme this year with VisitScotland providing consultancy services. The scheme incorporates consumer feedback on quality standards and grades into its assessment process.

The Wikipedia (2010), also reported that, some scholars considered that, as it has been the case in other areas (e.g. international accounting standards), hotel classification standards should result from a private and independent initiative. This may be the case of the World Hotel Rating (WHR) project, which notably aims to set international classification standards and rating criteria along the lines of a world star-rating system. The project will also establish an information platform on the hotel industry which will be multilingual and multicultural. WHR intends to play a key role in the development of quality hotel services, as well as equitable and sustainable tourism, and the protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage.

From the interview held with one of the ZTA quality assurance executives, the researcher gathered that plans are there for the SADC countries to come up with a regional hotel assessment and grading system to try and standardize the regional hospitality industry. This idea is welcome.

Conclusion

Business tourists are very time conscious that any inefficiency in service delivery is not tolerated hence the regular visit to a particular hotel means the customer's needs are satisfactorily met or they are biased. But one should not forget that, to a customer, any hotel that he visits for the first

time is no better until he finishes comparison with other similar facilities though at times the first impression could be true. The hotel operators should consider guests' comments seriously since these are the direct beneficiaries of their services and products without whom there would be no reason for the hotels to exist.

To this regard hotel like Rainbow Towers, Meikles, Crown Plaza Monomotapa, Cresta Jameson Holiday Inn and Courtney have responded by carrying out renovations and improvements in various areas. This then shows that the sampled hotels have their grades not commensurate with their service delivery standards. Though most customers showed ignorance in hotel grading criteria one can conclude that this theme is implied in guests' responses hence it is important. But this cannot solely influence the customer's choice of a hotel and service delivery as theories suggest though it adds to the various factors.

Hotel grading in Zimbabwe is voluntary, but one can conclude its importance by the overwhelming response to it by hotel operators. More than 75% of hotels in Zimbabwe are graded though most of them are in holiday resorts and cities. Managers of the graded hotels said that they opted for grading basically for recognition purposes than other suggested reasons since some could do much better in terms of service delivery without a grade assigned to them. One can conclude that the managers are against the subjective grading criteria than the system itself.

The quality assurance executives' standard form grading criteria seem to be unwelcome by its targeted clients because it is inapplicable in some areas as noted in the findings from hotel managers. One can conclude that there is need to further improve the current grading criteria to meet the regional and international standards since the current graded hotels are failing to meet the needs and expectations of the international travellers who can objectively compare the country hotels' offerings with those of other countries.

Recommendations

ZTA should consider the interests of the operators and consumers in its structuring of the grading system to achieve its objectives because the clients should own the system than to be at war with it. It is advisable that the Authority should continuously be in touch with other countries to

avoid lagging behind in terms of developments in the hospitality industry.

ZTA like in the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa should not be a policing body, but a collaborative partner in the hospitality industry's efforts to attain and maintain high standards to avoid resistance from the hotel operators.

Instead of being the sole hotel assessment and grading authority in the country, ZTA should consider involving other private agencies like Automobile Association in the rating of hotels for objective assessment and maintenance of higher hospitality standards. Consumer and operators' feedback should be encouraged so that the authority works with authentic information than assumptions in coming up with an objective and effective assessment tool.

Hotel managers especially those whose establishments are outside cities and resorts are encouraged to apply for grading for improved marketing purposes. Effort should be made by hotel managers to have a good knowledge of the assessment and grading system that directly affects their business operations. Of importance is for hotel managers to be proactive than reactive if they want to reach excellence in their service delivery. Visits to other countries for comparison purpose have to be considered by effective operators than to leave the task to ZTA only if they are to be competitive. Guests' demand for the value for money should not be seen as a problem but an opportunity for upgrading the facility's service.

Questionnaire for Hotel Guests

Instruction

Please tick the letters representing the most appropriate responses for you.

1. Indicate your sex a. Male b. Female
2. Indicate your country of origin or nationality.....
.....
3. What purpose have you travelled for?
a. Business b. Leisure c. Education d. Other
4. How often have you been to this hotel?
a. first time b. Once c. Regularly d. Rarely

5. Why have you chosen this hotel?.....
.....
.....
6. Are you aware that this hotel is graded?.....
.....
.....
7. Is the grading commensurate with the service offered?.....
.....
.....
8. How do you compare the service delivery experience of this hotel with the one from other hotels you have been to before?
a. satisfactory b. Better
c. Disappointing d. Very disappointing
9. If you were to rate this hotel, what grade would you give it and why?
.....
.....

NB

I sincerely appreciate your time and cooperation. Please check to make sure that you have answered all questions.

Interview Questions for Hotel Managers

1. Do you have any knowledge about the hotel grading and criteria that is used by the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority?
2. Does Zimbabwe Tourism Authority consult you on any issues that pertain hotel grading?
3. When was your hotel last inspected and assessed for grading?
4. Are there any service delivery changes that have been brought by the recent hotel rating in your organization?
5. How do you perceive the current grade of your hotel?
6. What is your comment on ZTA's current hotel grading system?
7. Any suggestions that you can recommend to ZTA about hotel grading system?

Interview Questions for ZTA Quality Assurance Executives

1. May you tell me more about your hotel grading system?
2. What issues do you consider when assessing hotels and how often do you do the exercise?
3. Do you consider operators and customers' suggestions on your grading system?
4. Why do you grade the hotels?
5. How effective is your hotel grading system to the performance of hotel business?
6. Does your hotel grading system have an impact on hotel service delivery?
7. What measures do you use to ensure that the hotel operators comply with your grading requirements?

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