Influence of Interpersonal Communication on Hotel Performance: A Case of Classified Hotels along the Kenyan Coastal Tourism Hub

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ABSTRACT

Kenya's coast is a renowned tourism hub, thanks to its natural beaches, a serene environment and world-class hotels. Unfortunately, these hotels' average check has been inconsistent. Insecurity, seasonality challenges, and frequent travel advisories have been pointed out as some of the contributing factors to the trend. Interestingly, other destinations facing similar challenges bounce back so fast thanks to their inventive approaches to reducing guest churn. It is not clear whether Kenya's coastal classified hotels have adopted such strategies. This study sought to assess whether communication approaches could improve hotel performance in classified hotels in Kenya's coastal tourism hub. It targeted hotel guests of the 15 classified hotels in Mombasa County, based on a descriptive research design. A stratified sampling technique was adopted where three strata based on the hotels' star ratings were formed settling on the 384 guests, 26 for each of the hotels. Both a questionnaire and an interview schedule were developed for data collection. The results revealed that there was a significant relationship between interpersonal communication and hotel performance in classified hotels in Mombasa County (R=0.795; P=0.000) These findings serve as a red flag to classified hotel managers to re-innovate interpersonal communication strategies used to maximize hotel performance.

Keywords: Interpersonal communication, hotel performance, classified hotels. Customer retention, Kenya coastal tourism hub

INTRODUCTION

A hotel is an essential tourism enterprise that serves the basic needs of guests away from their usual domiciles. Other than providing accommodation, most hotels offer food and beverage, leisure and recreation facilities. Globally, the remarkable growth of the hotel industry is illustrated by the annual growth rate of 6%. This has not only increased hotels but also the number of guest flows. As such, the industry has become highly competitive, thanks to its susceptibility to external forces and the ever-changing expectations of its customers. Anticipating and fulfilling customer expectations in itself is a complicated task as it is not only labour-intensive but also requires simultaneous consumption (Yildiz, 2015).

Unlike other industries, the hospitality industry doesn't have a constant customer base that can draw business. In as much, due to its intangible and perishable nature, production and consumption take place simultaneously (Yildiz, 2015). As such, a flaw in service provision is easily noticed and can have a diverse effect on the overall guest experience. Thus, retaining a guest is an ardours task. Indeed Syaqirah & Faizurrahman (2014) posit that retaining an existing guest is cheaper in the long run than gaining a new guest whose acquisition costs are five times higher. According to Dominici & Guzzo (2010), success in the market can be achieved by implementing policies geared towards guest retention (gaining their satisfaction and loyalty) rather than attracting new ones. To foster guest satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability, the hotels should thus concentrate on exploring customer retention strategies that aim to find, collect and capture the right information, evaluate and pass it on to the organization (Moreno, Lockett & Morales, 2014). To shield themselves from fluctuating markets dictated by the dynamic economy (Gee, Coates & Nicholson, 2008), most hotels have formulated guest retention strategies. Among them include, guest service, service integrity and interpersonal communication.

In Kenya, the widespread ascent in the country's economy and secure guests' earnings has resulted in the extension and development of hotels. The expansion has been occasioned by insistent advertisement in the domestic and international markets, which has seen the number of hotel bed-night occupancy rise. Unlike the general national performance of the industry, the coastal region of Kenya, the country's main tourism hub, faces fluctuation in occupancy rates (KNBS, 2017). This is despite the region having world-renowned natural beaches, tourist sites such as the Fort Jesus Museum, Mombasa Marine Park, Bamburi nature path (Haller Park), Old Town, Mombasa tusks and a considerable number of classified hotels which offer a variety of services and accommodation to guests from diverse economic backgrounds (MoT, 2016). This is partly occasioned by seasonality challenges and constant travel advisories.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The number of guests visiting Kenyan has been inconsistent especially in the coastal region (KNBS, 2018) although much effort has been made to position the region as a destination of choice. Most of these guests, who constitute both new and return guests, are hosted in the hotels. Since return guests take the greatest proportion of arrivals to destinations, a factor that determines the hotels' performance, it was unclear whether interpersonal communication could be used as part of guest retention strategies by classified hotels to influence hotel performance. The main objective of interpersonal communication is to ensure the addressee of the message can comprehend well and take corrective measures (Paramitha, 2020) thereby creating a gap as to whether interpersonal communication strategies put in place would influence increased visitation rates, guest commendation, competitive advantage and improved bed nights per visit.in classified hotels within Mombasa County, Kenya

Globally, studies regarding guest retention strategies and productivity have been made. While Sim (2006), Jasinsken (2016) & Syaqwalo (2014) concentrated on the consequences of guest retention in various hotels in Europe and Asia, Fazul (2009) found that attitudes and motivations influenced guest retention in Dubai hotels. In as much, Deng, et. Al. (2013) found that guest retention could increase the present net value of a firm. Locally, Soita (2016) researched guest strategies used by Internet service providers concerning hotel performance in Kenya while Kimutai (2015) carried out a study on the factors influencing guest retention among hotels utilizing mobile telephone services in Kenya. Closer to the current study, Yildiz (2015) qualitative study focused on Internal communication functions and hotel productivity.

Visibly, empirical studies on the relationship between communication and hotel performance are scanty, more so, in the hospitality industry. Studies conducted in Kenya focused on banking, and mobile telecommunications, while those in the hospitality sector were in the form of case studies thereby making generalization difficult. Owing to Patterson (2016)'s assertion that there is a need. to understand the role that interpersonal communication plays in the total guest experience, the study sought to establish the influence of interpersonal communication on hotel performance in classified hotels in Mombasa County, Kenya. A null hypothesis was thus formed;

Ho There is no significant relationship between interpersonal communication and hotel performance in classified hotels in Mombasa County, Kenya

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal communication is a unique form of conversation involving face-to-face statements conducted by two individuals which leads to straight-spoken and unspoken rejoinders (Solomon & Theiss, 2020). Alternatively, Berger & Roloff (2019) posit that interpersonal communication is a special form of communication that entails direct contact using media such as the telephone and promotes passion, motivation and feelings. Interpersonal communication is therefore a varied and sophisticated form of communication based on the individuals involved. Vibrant interpersonal communication also has an impact on advancing and improving employee performance in hospitality industries hence promoting excellence in

service delivery (Putra & Smolek, 2020)

Based on scholars Orie, Michelle & Natasha's (2016) findings, communication channels, and information standards have a direct link to guest loyalty. A view shared by Etemad & Sajadi (2016) revealed that on-line interactions instantaneously had a practical impact on guests' purpose to frequent a given organization and on-line certainty. Wello and Novia (2021) further argue that interpersonal communication entails sharing information, feelings, and senses through verbal and non-verbal conversations. Interpersonal communication is all about the interpretation of the conveyed information such as in the form of tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language. Therefore, the staff would be able to judge whether guests are satisfied or unsatisfied. The efficacy of interpersonal communities includes sincerity, compassion, supportiveness, incontrovertibly, and fairness. Surafel (2018) posited that assuring trust in transactions as well as marketing communication results in natural attachment and patronage to the hotel. As such Melo, Hernández, Munoz &. Gallego (2017) asserts that hotel managers should uphold digital marketing plans and use them effectively for digital information as regards metrics from review sites, incorporating third-party reviews, and utilizing on-line travel agent management reports. More so, hotels should establish a digital marketing plan by promoting conversation management approaches with guests such as feedback from guest reviews and motivating guests to post remarks. For example, synchronous control influences dispersive justice, emotional control, influences proceeding justice, and decisive control, which influences interconnection justice, which in turn influences guest satisfaction and loyalty (Bloemer, Hillebrand & Joosten, 2017). Kwok, Xie & Richards (2017) argue that there is vast interest in assessing the indicators of on-line reviews and their influence on organizational performance since past studies ventured into guest feedback and guest culpability. Similarly, Pengnate & Sarathy (2017) reported that both flexibilities in the organization's on-line programs and aesthetically pleasing were indicators of on-line confidence. It can, therefore, be argued that on-line trust is established mainly through guests' self-perceptions based on their direct experiences and interaction with on-line hotels' responses to remarks and information on changes in policies through websites hence are motivational drivers to guests in hotels (Wei & Lu, 2013). According to Bstlolona et al, (2020), interpersonal communication entails positivity, open attitude, responsiveness, supportive attitude, and equivalence which is of great significance in any organization.

Blal and Sturman's (2014) results revealed the relevance of digital marketing through information technology strategies as a factor in better hotel performance since capacity and attitude affect on-line reviews adversely and to a lesser degree service recovery and receptiveness. Solomon (2015) aver that loyal guests may be retained though the use of social networks and internet worldwide. In the report of Spaerks, So & Bradley (2016) purveying on-line feedback, the responsiveness of feedback and utilisation of human voice rather than non-manual cues promotes loyalty and affectionate viewpoints. Ye, Law & Gu (2009) devised a mathematical tool that explains the impact of person-generated remarks on hotel sales and profitability. According to the model, a 10% development in opinions brought about a 4.4% increase in income. Effective communication is interrelated to guest feedback and views, satisfaction, loyalty, and guest retention as guest needs are met through the transmission of relevant information (Mascareigne, 2013). Viglia, Minazzi & Buhalis (2016) reported that reviews whether positive or negative have an impact on the hotel's popularity and hence occupancy rates. Reviews inform guests of the availability requirements in terms of products and services and can entice and trigger normative behaviour in guests. Furthermore, Mahmoud, Robert & Maxwell (2018) noted the need for hotel owners to develop approaches to conflict handling through effective communication and trustworthiness to satisfy and hold on to guests, as there was a direct connection to better hotel performance.

However, the mentioned studies majorly centred on front office operations and did not delve in to occurrences in hotel operations in regions that are experiencing unpredictable turn over as is the case of Mombasa County hotels.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study targeted hotel guests of the 15 classified hotels in Mombasa County. It was based on mixed methods research approach. A stratified sampling technique was adopted where three strata based on the hotels' star- rating (i.e., four-star, three-star, and two-star) were formed while simple random sampling was applied, using Fisher, Foreit, Laing, Stoeckel & Townsend (2002) formula, to settle on the 384 guests, 26for each of the hotels. A structured questionnaire was formulated for use during data collection. A pre-testfor reliability using the Crombach Alpha coefficient test of 70% alpha coefficient was used to measure the internal reliability of the constructs. The test, revealed a reliability coefficient of 0.923, indicating that the questionnaire was highly reliable. The data from the questionnaire were condensed to get rid of errors and to guard uniformity. Simple linear regression analysis was used to assess the relationship between Communication and hotel performance. Caution was observed to protect sensitive or privileged information, while a permit was obtained from Kenya's 'National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation' (NACOSTI). To assess the influence of interpersonal communication on hotel performance in classified hotels in Mombasa County, interpersonal communication tenets were included in the likert scale.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The respondents were then asked to rate their perception of the extent to which they agreed or disagreed,with the factors on the services they received on a scale of 1-5. The Likert scale used ranged from 1 = strongly agreed to 5 strongly disagreed as shown in (Appendix B). Hotel performance as a dependent variable was transformed into interval data.

Descriptive analysis was used to create the standard deviation and mean for each tenet as shown in table 1 below. This was measured against aspects of hotel performance which included; visitation rates, guest commendation, competitive advantage and improved bed nights per visit. 'Staff clearly express themselves as they offer services. ' (M=2.18, SD=1.160); 'I freely express my concerns to the hotel staff ' (M=2.16, SD=1.123); 'I get to know of all changes in hotel policies' (M=2.54, SD=1.142); 'I get to know of all relevant information, in hotel' (M=2.31, SD=1.052) and Staff freely discuss with us through the internet (M=2.83, SD=1.111).

Table 1 Descriptive analysis of Interpersonal communication items by guests in Classified Hotels

	N	Mean		Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
The staff clearly express themselves as they offer services	252	2.18	0.073	1.16
I freely express my concerns to the hotel staff	252	2.16	0.071	1.123
I get to know of all changes in hotel policies	252	2.54	0.066	1.042
I get to know all the relevant information, in the hotel	252	2.31	0.066	1.052
Staff freely discusses solutions with us through the internet	252	2.83	0.07	1.111
Valid N (listwise)	252			

The findings revealed that the variables yielded mean scores in the range closer to 2 and a high standard deviation. This implied a higher variation in the answers from respondents.

The findings imply that though all the indicators influenced productivity, freedom of speech had a greater influence in classified hotels. This is because respondents strongly agreed with 'I express my concerns to the hotel staff ' (n=97, 38.5%). As such, classified hotel Food and beverage managers should put much emphasis on staff interpersonal communication with guests. To assess whether a relationship existed between interpersonal communication and hotel performance, a null hypothesis was set; 'There is no significant relationship between interpersonal communication and hotel performance in classified hotels. The study hypothesized that there was no significant relationship between interpersonal communication and hotel performance (Visitation rates, guest commendation, competitive advantage and bed nights per visit) in Mombasa County.

The linear regression analysis technique was used to examine the relationship between interpersonal communication and hotel performance. Since the data was ordinal, it was first converted to interval data by generating composite scores for the two variables. Linear regression analysis was used by applying the model in the table below.

The linear regression model used is as follows: $Y = a + \beta X + e$

Where;

Y=Hotel performance

a= Constant/ Intercept

β=Slope (beta coefficient for communication)

X= Interpersonal communication.

Table 2 Model summary of the influence of Interpersonal communication on Hotel Performance.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. The error in the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.795a	0.633	0.631	3.11952	0.633	430.479	1	250	0

a. Predictors: (Constant), communication
b. Dependent Variable: hotel performance

R-value=0.795 denoted a high correlation between the independent (communication) and dependent (hotel performance) variables. R square value was 0.633 (63.3%).

The R-value, which denoted a simple correlation between the independent and dependent variables, presented that interpersonal communication and hotel performance was 0.795, which implied that there was a high correlation between interpersonal communication and hotel performance (Visitation rates, guest commendation, and competitive advantage and bed nights per visit). The R square value indicated how much of the total variation in hotel performance could be explained by interpersonal communication, (63.3. %).

To establish whether the regression model for communication could predict the dependent variable (Hotel performance), an ANOVA statistic was run (Table 3)

Table 3 ANOVA for the influence of interpersonal Communication on Hotel Performance

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4189.156	1	4189.156	430.479	.000b
	Residual	2432.844	250	9.731		
	Total	6622	251			

a. . Dependent Variable: Hotel performance.
b. Predictors: (Constant), communication

Table 3 reports the ANOVA analysis, the probability significance was .000b (P=0.000). Reveals that the regression model applied, significantly predicted the outcome variable (hotel performance).

Table 4. The coefficient for the influence of interpersonal communication on Hotel Performance

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	2.629	0.582		4.515	0	1.482	3.775
		0.945	0.046	0.795	20.748	0	0.856	1.035

a. Dependent variable: Hotel performance

Table 4 above, shows information to determine whether interpersonal communication significantly contributed to the model applied. From the table, the regression equation was expressed as follows (Hotel performance= 2. 629+0. 945 (communication).

From the equation, it meant that for every additional element of interpersonal communication, hotel performance would be expected to rise by the value indicated in the unstandardised coefficients column (0.945). The probability significance (commonly referred to as P-value) was 0.000 i.e. (P=0.000) meant that the relationship between interpersonal communication and hotel performance was statistically significant and these findings are generalizable to the population from which the sample was drawn. The null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative was accepted.

When the hotel Food and beverage managers were asked to expound on the practices, they used to enhance interpersonal communication with guests and how they measured hotel performance in the classified hotels, one manager stated;

'…we enforce this by ensuring information flows, getting feedback, and comments every time from the front office department or guests' relations. But again "Guests can access all relevant information on-line" "Our hotel mainly determines performance by consistently checking the metrics or triple advisories, this guides us on whether we are excelling or deteriorating" (Food and beverage manager 3, Mombasa, 2019) When asked about the practices put in place in their hotels to ensure staffs communicate effectively with the guests; one Food and beverage manager responded;

"Guests can access all relevant information on-line; there is no need for emphasis on communication" (Food and beverage manager 2, Mombasa, 2019)

As regards communication, the majority (n =10,83.3%) of respondents embraced interpersonal communication through the use of on-line, websites notice boards, and individual letters and emails to frequently enlighten guests in classified hotels, (n = 2, 16.6 %) respondents stated that information was always available on-line and hence no need for further emphasis. Hotel performance indicators included feedback, triple advisories, metrics, and feedback forums (n=8, 66.6%). There is a likelihood that the Food and beverage managers were aware of guests' rating of interpersonal communication as a factor in measuring performance and thus strived to effectively meet these needs. Consequently, the results concur with Park and Allen (2013) who found that frequent guests' responses and feedback can create a positive basis for effective corrective action thereby influencing visitation rates in classified hotels.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to establish whether a relationship existed between interpersonal communication and hotel performance, based on quantitative and qualitative approaches among star-rated hotels in Mombasa County, Kenya. The significant relationship observed between Interpersonal communication and hotel performance can be accredited to classified hotel staff striving to clearly express themselves as they offer services to guests and allow them to freely discuss solutions through the Internet. If the emphasis is placed on interpersonal communication, hotel performance is expected to increase by the value of the unstandardised coefficient. This is important because when classified hotel guests feel that there is effective interpersonal communication in the hotels and timely relaying of relevant information about changes in practice, the more they can channel their concerns, comments and compliments. This in turn is likely to enhance loyalty and retention thereby resulting in increased visitation rates, guest commendation, competitive advantage and improved bed nights per visit in Mombasa County. better hotel performance.

These findings have important implications for the county government of Mombasa, other counties in Kenya, policy-makers like the Kenya Association of Hotel Keepers and Caterers (KHC), and the Pubs, Entertainment, and Restaurants Association of Kenya (PERAK). These stakeholders need to re-invent the interpersonal communication strategies used in hotels, restaurants, and any other eateries with the perspective of maximizing hotel performance. It is hoped that such an approach would not only minimize guest churn but also aid in improving guest retention and hence better hotel performance.
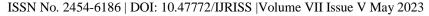
The results of this study revealed that interpersonal communication strategies had a statistically significant effect on hotel performance, further research considering other factors, needs to be undertaken to establish the most effective strategy for enhancing productivity and guest retention. The current research was executed during the high season in the classified hotels as such, future research can be done in the low season and diverse geographical dimensions to collate the results.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study's main objective was to provide the policy-makers or the management within the hospitality industry with relevant information to make logical and well-grounded facts to strategically position them in the competitive business environment. Entrepreneurs may equally review their interpersonal communication strategies and gear them towards improved visitation rates, bed nights per visit, customer commendation and competitive advantage. The research intended to assist the National government and county government to address challenges of performance in hotels. Hospitality institutions may embrace the study findings as a guideline to equip learners to become efficient future managers, supervisors, and workers in the hospitality industry, by ensuring that they are enlightened with the guest requirements. Furthermore, it offers an avenue for future research for academicians.

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