

Service Encounters and Guests Patronage of Hotels

Donald O. Ewanlen

Department of Entrepreneurship and Marketing
Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria
Email:ewanlendo [AT] fuotuoke.edu.ng

ABSTRACT---- *In service oriented businesses, interactions between service providers and customers are inevitable. These interactions create impressions in the minds of the parties which to some extent define patronage outcome. For a meaningful outcome, an understanding of the creators of satisfactory patronage is germane. This study investigates the influence of customers' encounters in defining the outcome of hotel patronage. This study adopted a cross-sectional design using a structured questionnaire survey of guests of 3 star and above rated hotels in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state Nigeria .Four hundred copies of questionnaire were distributed in ten strategically selected hotels, and 290 copies were found useful. This represents about 73% response rate . The SPSS 23.0 statistical software package were used for data analysis. Multiple regression analysis and Pearson correlation was employed to test the formulated hypotheses at 5% significance level. This study reports that youth are in majority of hotel patrons. Empirical analysis further reveals that all the dimensions of service encounters reports a significant relationship with word- of- mouth recommendations. Furthermore, the regression analysis reveals that peace of mind, moment of truth, outcome focus and product experience could explain about 53% variation in patronage outcome. The paper conclude that all the dimensions of customer experience has a significant influence on word- of- mouth recommendations of guests. This paper recommend among others things the training and retraining of service personnel. This training should equip frontline employees with the requisite skills that would enable them create and manage pleasurable experiences.*

Keywords---- Customers Experience, Patronage Outcome. Hotels, Service Touch Points, Yenagoa,

1. INTRODUCTION

The desire of every marketer irrespective of the channel of distribution is to deliver pleasant experiences to customers. These experiences arises from the interactions between a service provider or its representatives and customers. The experience a customer has from interacting with the service provider could emanate from functional and emotional cues developed at different contact points. It is also true that these interactions often times may result in either positive or negative value for the parties. This suggests that these interactions may not always be pleasant. A customer's pleasurable experience leads to positive feelings and emotions. Consequently, consumers would want to repeat these experiences that implies customers' satisfaction. Conversely, an unpleasant experience would dissuade a consumer from the consumption of the service. This implies that customers can no longer be treated as passive recipients of value. The realization of the fact that customers are rational and emotional decision makers has galvanised researchers interest in seeking an understanding of customer experience and its implications on the consumption of services.

Literature acknowledge that customers' experience is closely associated with the consumption of services. Specifically,[1] asserts that within the service quality domain, the importance of customers' perceptions of service encounters has gained greater currency. This is particularly so in the tourism and hospitality industry as the industry is seen as the more experience-based [2], Due to the nature of services, the activities involved in selling hotel services are becoming inadequate, instead the creation of a memorable experience has now become the new order. Subsequently, it is necessary that hotel managers rather than sell offerings should incorporate the provision of memorable experiences to guests. [3] opines that an understanding of customer experience plays a significant role in customers' adoption of services.

Recent studies have shown that scholars have devoted enormous attention to understanding customer experience in different sectors. The outcome of such a study serves as a basis for the understanding of the subtle actions that translates into memorable customer experience. This knowledge could also equip managers with the requisite skills that would be useful in employee education and service development. The benefits of this study notwithstanding, there appear to be little or no literature on customer experience in the hospitality industry [4] [5]. Sadly enough, despite the growing attention to customer experience researches in developed countries, to the best of the researcher's knowledge there are scanty customers experience researches in Nigeria. In the light of this, this paper sought to examine the influence of customers experience in determining hotel patronage in Yenagoa Bayelsa state. Arising from the research objective, the following hypotheses stated in the null form were formulated and subsequently tested in this study;

H₁: Peace of mind does not significantly influence guests' patronage of hotels

H₂: Moments-of-truth does not significantly affect guests' patronage of hotels

H₃: Outcome focus does not significantly influence guests' patronage of hotels

H₄: Product experience does not significantly impact on guests' patronage of hotels

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Customers Experience

To [6] service encounters are the interactions between customers and employees assigned to provide services. According to [7], feelings and emotions are the operational measure of customers' experience. This implies what constitutes customers experience varies from one person to another. [8] are of the view that customer experience connotes customers' internal and subjective response to interactions with a firm across several contact points. Undoubtedly, customer experience is strictly personal. In simple terms, customers experience implies the extent of customer's involvement in every transaction. The level of customers' involvement could be rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual. Furthermore, [7] views customer experience as the cognitive and affective assessment of all direct and indirect encounters with a firm. The implication is that customers experience is individualistic. It can be seen as a customer's subjective and holistic response to the direct and indirect encounter with a firm. Service encounter in its simplistic form is the face to face interaction between a customer and a service provider or its representative. It is important to acknowledge that service encounter is composed of service delivery processes as well as service outcomes. Service outcome refers to what the customer receives during interaction while the process of service delivery is concerned with the way the outcome is delivered to customers. A wholesome combination of service outcome and delivery process is expected to result in transaction satisfaction.

As a result of customers varied expectations, managers as a matter of necessities often assign staff with the requisite training and experience to man sensitive service positions. The critical contact points in a typical hotel operations are in the reception/departure unit, restaurants/bar section and housekeeping or room service department. The quality of the service outcome is largely determined by the social and personal attributes of each party. This suggests that services encounters in hospitality industry are characterised by high degree of person to person interactions. A striking feature of service is the inability of clients to select a specific employee that they would interact with during service encounters. This suggests that during transactions customers have little or no choice of the employees to interact with. In all cases, the employees that could ultimately attend to a customer may possess different personal characteristics. This personal characteristics could either facilitate or hinder the interaction processes. [9] assert that the value of services are formed from interactions between a service provider and a customer. Furthermore, the authors noted that direct interactions between a service provider and a customer may have both value creation and destruction impacts on customers.

Operationally, customer experience in essence is considered a journey that precedes service encounters. In particular, [3] observed that the experience a customer has of service has a close resemblance to a journey. This journey passes through service delivery and continues until after sales service. It is important to note that before a service is consumed, customers are exposed to direct or indirect media communications [10] and obtain word- of- mouth recommendations from significant others [11]. These mode of communication have implications on the creation of customers' experience just as marketing channels and the physical environment.

Service encounters are commonly understood as experiences gained in the process of consumption of a service. Often times this experiences are either acquired before, during or post consumption of a service. One central goal in service delivery is the pursuit of flawless performance resulting in zero defects in service encounters. Consequently, these encounters can become an integral part of the image that the customer has of the firm. These encounters become the building blocks in determining the success of the firm [12]. Interestingly, [13] remarked that customers often base their evaluations of firms and its services on their perceptions of the service encounter. This is as a result of the inter-personal nature of services. [14] explain that service encounters are not random events; rather they can be systematically treated. This suggests that management has a large ambit of control over issues connected with the success or failure of service encounters.

Arising from the strategic importance of service encounters, managers now recognise the need for its proper management as it could serve as a tool for competition. It is therefore expedient for managers to learn how to manage this moment- of- truth as this is often the period that defines the impressions customers have of firms' services. [15] acknowledge that the interactions at these points serves as a basis for the determination of the overall customers' satisfaction. Several marketing scholars acknowledge the important roles service encounter plays in the determination of customer satisfaction [16],[17],[18]. In particular, [19] report that service encounter plays a prominent role in determining customer repeat purchase. This importance is largely highlighted as the service is characterized by a high degree of person to person interaction.

Drivers of Service Encounters

It is a proven fact that employees of firms play unique roles in facilitating service delivery. In fact, employees are the fulcrum on which service wheels revolve. [20] remarked that the personal attributes of a service provider has a significant effect in creating service excellence. These personal attributes are generally recognised as the facilitators of service encounters. Service marketing literature highlight among several others the following attributes of a service provider that could enhance a pleasurable transaction experience.

Professionalism: It is generally believed that knowledge confers expertise. An expert is expected to behave in a more generally acceptable manner. This suggests that an expert is professional in conduct. This demand that an expert is not pushy as well as not condescending in their communication. The strategic importance of engaging professionals in the

conduct of business is that they are highly knowledgeable, demonstrate high proficiency and very good in fostering interpersonal relationship.

Civility: Civility as an attribute implies courtesy. A civilised employee is noted for his coherence in communication. This unique attribute of employees becomes handy in managing customers' relationship. Evidence has shown that employees with pleasant personalities radiates same to their immediate contacts.

Friendliness: Friendliness is a personality attribute that represent an affective display from one person to another. This attribute is demanded from service personnel at all times. This behavioural attitude could also mean caring, politeness, responsiveness, helpfulness and understanding. Other notable characteristics of friendliness are courtesy and familiarity. It is expected that service employees should exhibit impressionable character of familiarity to customers during service encounters. The essence is to cultivate and sustain a friendly relationship with the customers without compromising work ethos. [21] remarked that friendliness plays a crucial role in determining service outcome. The relevance of friendliness in influencing customers overall satisfaction with a service cannot be overemphasised. A satisfied customer is noted for his/her positive word-of-mouth, repeat purchase intentions and contribution to higher profitability.

Competence: An employee competence connotes the possession of requisite skills and knowledge to perform a required task. Competence in marketing literature is indicative of employees' expertise. However, an employee competence can also be deduced from the ability to make relevant information available to customers at the point of interaction. The importance of competence in a service encounter lies in its capacity to engineer customer satisfaction. Empirical evidence attest to the place of service providers' competence in facilitating customer satisfaction in every service encounter. In particular [22] report that service providers' competence plays a significant role in creating customer satisfaction. In the same vein, lack of competence is known to create negative service evaluations from customers. In sum, the more employee's friendliness and competence are integrated into work environment, the more likely satisfied customer will promote the business through repeat patronage.

Physical Appearance: [23] assert that the physical attractiveness of a service provider goes a long way in creating an impression on a customer during service encounter. The importance of a service provider appearance is further emphasised as customers often relies on cues to associate with a product. The implication of an employee physical attraction is that it often times exert a strong influence on the overall service assessment.

Dimensions of Customers Encounters

Extant literature reports that [24] advocates that for a better understanding of service encounter a dimensional approach is the most appropriate. The authors are of the opinion that the sociological perspectives would be most appropriate to reflect the interactive processes involved in service encounters. This interactive process are interactivity and rituality. According to [25], interactivity consist of responsiveness, listening, ability to explain and understanding. Others are personalization and psychological proximity. The rituality dimension indicates all the ceremonial and contextual issues that reflect the atmosphere surrounding the encounters. The issues involved here are courtesy; confidence, security and attitude of receptionists. Still others are waiting time and perceived competence of the contact personnel. However, [26] asserts that customer experience quality dimensions can be classified as peace-of-mind, moments-of-truth, outcome focus and word-of-mouth. A year later, [27] study of customer experience quality scale identified product experience, moments-of-truth, outcome focus and peace-of-mind as its dimensions. This study relies on [27] to examine the dimensions of customers' encounters.

Product experience refers to the experience developed from the features and range of different product offerings. Product experience is generally considered as a fore runner of loyalty [28] and plays a significant role in consumer behaviour modelling [29].

Moment of truth in a service encounter refers to the particular point the customer interacts with the firm or its employees. In a typical hotel setting, the moment of truth could take place at the reception/departure point, bar/Kitchen and during room service/ housekeeping. It also indicates when the relationship between service provider and client becomes questionable. Moments-of-truth is based on the variability and service recovery capacity of an encounter [30]. Truth be told, customers experience are nurtured at the moments-of truth. These experiences not only become long lasting but also influence consumer buying decisions. The experience a customer has at this point literally indicate the quality of services received.

Peace-of-mind dimension of customers experience is connected with the emotional side of services [7]. Furthermore, it incorporates the assessment of all the touch points with the services offered, These incidence could be before, during and after the purchase of a service.

Outcome focus reflects the importance of goal-oriented experiences. It is also concerned with issues that culminates in reducing transaction costs for the customers. Of particular interest here is customers search for a specified service within a specific period. Furthermore, [31] conceives outcome focus as it relates to the technical ability of the service provider. To the authors, outcome focus serves as an indicator of 'what' the consumers actually receive or gain from the service. Put simply, outcome focus is the final product of service encounter. [32] concludes that when a service is able to meet the expectation of a consumer, it has the capacity to result in psychological associations and ultimately enhancing the overall service encounters.

Guests Patronage Outcomes

Marketing literature is replete with several behavioural outcomes of customers’ experience. These outcomes include but not limited to customers satisfaction, word- of- mouth recommendations and brand loyalty [33]. According to [34], the experience a customer have from the consumption of a service is an indicator of customers’ satisfaction which is an antecedent of brand loyalty. The implication is that the better the experience, the more the customer wants to experience the same feelings and emotions. Several scholars have established a link between experience arising from brand loyalty and customers’ satisfaction [7],[35]. Furthermore, [7] investigated the influence of customer experience in generating positive word-of-mouth for banking services among other services. .

In the same vein, [36] reports that customer satisfaction and customer experience are entirely different constructs. They however exhibit contributory relationship with each other. Similarly, [33] study of Indian hotels reports that the dimensions of peace of mind, outcome focus, moment- of- truth and product experience exhibit a significant influence on word- of- mouth. In specific terms, the moment of truth and product experience reports a greater influence on patronage outcome. Furthermore, outcome focus report least influence on purchase outcomes. The implication of these findings is that the creation of a pleasant experience to hotel guests lead to positive word- of- mouth as well as nurture strong relationship.

3. METHODS

This study focuses on customers’ experiences arising from encounters between service providers and hotel guests in Nigeria. The choice is predicated on the fact that hospitality services are highly experiential [37]. The population of this study is the entire patrons of hotels in Yenagoa Bayelsa state Nigeria. Hotels abound in all nook and canneries in Bayelsa state. As a result of this, ten 3 stars and above rated hotels in Yenagoa were purposively selected. The study employed a structured questionnaire for data collection. This study adopted and modified the [7] questionnaire for data collection. The questionnaire has two sections .Section A and B. Section A elicited information about the respondents while Section B, had twenty five items obtained from five items each for product experience, moments-of-truth, outcome focus and peace-of-mind as dimensions of customers experience and five items for word of mouth recommendation.as proxy for guests patronage

As a result of the differences in study location, the questionnaire was subjected to a pilot test in hotels not located in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state. Furthermore, the cronbach alpha coefficient of the instrument was found to be 0.812 which is above the tolerable limit. The use of Cronbach alpha’s helped ensure the construct validity and reliability of the data. With respect to content validity, this was addressed through literature review and pilot test. The predictive capacity of the scale was assessed through regression analysis. Four hundred copies of the questionnaire were distributed. Following the approval of the hotel management, forty copies of the questionnaire were dropped in the different rooms in each of the selected hotels. Respondents used 5 point Likert type scale of 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree to indicate extent of agreement or disagreement with the sentences.

The completed questionnaire were only collected after the departure of the guest. Out of the four hundred copies, three hundred were completed and two hundred and ninety were found useful. This represent a return rate of about 73 %. On the basis of critical incident techniques, these two hundred and ninety guests of hotels were not expected to recall their experiences with employee service providers at the critical service points. However, respondents were expected to give their overall impressions of product experience, moments-of-truth, outcome focus and peace-of-mind.

In accordance with [7], the dimensions of customers experience was measured with product experience, moments-of-truth, outcome focus and peace-of-mind. Similarly, guests’ patronage was measured with word- of- mouth recommendation to other customers and associates. The collated data were analysed with descriptive mean statistic while the formulated hypotheses were tested with multiple regression analysis and Pearson correlation coefficient. With the aid of SPSS version 23.0, the formulated hypotheses were tested at 5 percent level of significance.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents Profile

Table1: Respondents demographics

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	260	89%
	Female	30	11%
Age Bracket	Under 25years	45	15%
	26-35 years	70	24%
	36-45 years	75	26%
	46-55 years	56	9%
	Over 55 years	44	15%
Highest Educational Qualification	Secondary Certificate	41	14%
	Polytechnic Certificate	38	13%

Occupation		
	Count	Percentage
First Degree certificate	121	42%
Post Graduate certificate	25	8%
Professional certificate	65	22%
Self Employed	85	29%
Private Sector Employee	45	15%
Public Sector Employee	60	21%
Unemployed	35	12%
Politician	40	14%
Student	25	8%

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of 290 respondents. Male respondents were 260 which translates to 89%.and female are 30(11%). The respondents within the age bracket 36-45 years was the most dominant (26%) while persons under 25years and those above 55 years were jointly least frequent (15%). On the basis of highest educational qualification, 121(42%) holders of first degree was the most common while the least was post graduate degree holders 25(8%) persons. Finally, the occupation of the respondents shows that 29% were self- employed while 8% were students. This finding collaborates [38] study that report that majority of hotel patrons are between the ages of 25years and 50 years. This have implications on marketing. A youthful population is noted for their adventurous nature and possess a very high propensity in search for varieties.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix: Product Experience, Moment of Truth, Outcome focus, Peace of Mind and Guests patronage outcome.

			1	2	3	4	5
1	Guests patronage	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1				
2	Product Experience	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.525** .000	1			
3	Moment of Truth	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.702** .000	.096* .055	1		
4	Outcome focus	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.435** .000	.473** .000	.006 .785	1	
5	Peace of Mind	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.087* .057	.061 .404	.023 .304	.078* .028	1

Result in Table 2 shows the Pearson correlation matrix between the dimensions of independent variable and outcome of guests' patronage. Specifically, all the dimensions expect peace of mind exhibit a significant relationship with patronage outcome. However, all the dimensions exhibit a positive relationship with guests' patronage outcome. On the basis of strength of relationship, moment of truth reports a strong relationship, while product experience is moderate, outcome focus shows a weak just as peace of mind post a very weak relationship. Furthermore, the result also shows the absence of multicollinearity. According to [39], multicollinearity occurs if the r- value of each independent variable is more than 0.90. However, result in Table 2, reveals that moment of truth possesses the highest r- value of 0.702 while the least is peace of mind with an r – value of 0.087

Regression Result

Table 3: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.534	.144		10.625	.000
Product Experience	.097	.028	.164	3.423	.001
Moment of Truth	.054	.025	.101	2.118	.035
Outcome Focus	.241	.025	.343	9.721	.000
Peace of Mind	.005	.029	.008	.180	.017
R Square	.582				
Adjusted R ²	.529				
Sig.F	.000				
F-Value	23.219				

Relying on the Cohen's rule for effects of sizes, the result in Table 3 shows the coefficient of determination (R^2) as 0.582 and the adjusted R^2 as 0.529. This implies that the dimensions of independent variable can explain about 53% variations in the outcome of guest patronage of hotels. In other words, a unit change in the independent variable is expected to account for about 0.53 unit change in the dependent variable. This implies the presence of about 47% other factors that could determine the outcome of guests patronage. The implication of this finding is that effect size of this study is large. Also the result shows that the regression model was adequate as seen in the F- value of 23.219 with p-value of 0.000. On the findings of about 47% of other variables accounting for guests' patronage outcome, this result corroborates [38] study that identified among others culture, lifestyle and family bonding as factors that influences guests stay in hotels.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One: Peace of mind does not significantly influence guests' patronage of hotels

As seen in Table 3, the peace of mind of a customer during service is significant with a p- value 0.017 and beta coefficient of 0.005. The implication of this finding is that the more the confidence of a guest, the more the guest will be most willing to inform others of the service experienced in the hotel.

Hypothesis Two: Moments-of-truth does not significantly affect guests' patronage of hotels

The regression analysis in Table 3 indicates moment of truth is significant at 5% level. This can be inferred from the p- value of 0.035 and a beta value of 0.054. This implies that customers moment of truth during service encounters significantly influence guests' word- of- mouth recommendations.

Hypothesis Three: Outcome focus does not significantly influence guests' patronage of hotels

The p-value of 0.000 and a beta value of 0.241 of outcome focus implies a significant relationship with word- of- mouth recommendation. This can be deduced from the regression model result as in Table 3. This suggests that once the outcome of a service is positive, there is the possibility of the guest recommending the same hotel to others for patronage.

Hypothesis Four: Product experience does not significantly impact on guests' patronage of hotels

From Table 3, customers' product experience report a significant relationship with word- of -mouth recommendations. This is evident as the regression analysis shows a p- value of 0.001 and a beta coefficient of 0.097. This means that a customer pleasant experience has the capacity of positively influencing the recommendation of the same hotel to significant others.

Discussion of Findings

The common conclusion that can be drawn from the tests of hypotheses is the failure to reject the null hypotheses. This implies that all the dimensions of service encounters significantly influences guests' recommendation of hotels patronized to others. These findings affirms [33] study of Indian hotels. The study in particular report that moment of truth and product experience reports a greater influence on patronage outcome. Furthermore, outcome focus report least influence on purchase outcomes. Besides, despite the unique cultural differences in the study area, the findings of this study share some resemblance with the Indian study. The most possible reason may not be farfetched from [40] study that found customer cultural differences play a significant role in determining service effectiveness.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Operationally, selling services is a herculean task. This difficulty is associated with the simultaneous production and consumption of services. Invariably, this simultaneous activity presupposes an interaction between customers and service provider personnel. To a manager, the ultimate objective in every service encounter is a healthy interaction between

the service provider and customer. For this to be achieved, the encounter should be thoroughly planned and should not be executed in a haphazard manner.

This paper investigated the effect of customer experience on the outcome of guests' patronage of hotels. Customer experience simply put encapsulates service quality dimensions. Employees- customers interactions touching points occurs before, during and after purchase of services. Specifically, the critical contact points in hotel businesses occurs at the reception/departure points, kitchen/ bar and room services/ housekeeping. An inquiry into customer experience dimensions is with the intent of gaining an understanding of what constitute a pleasurable patronage outcome. Service marketing acknowledge that the social exchange theory serves to explain service encounter phenomenon. This theory is noted for its ability to explain the roles of service facilitators in patronage outcomes. These outcomes has the capacity to generate gains in the form of customers' repeat purchase and word- of- mouth behaviour. The outcome of this study is expected to be of great relevance as it is expected to provide an insight into service encounters that could create a pleasurable or unpleasant experiences. A major contribution of this research is in its ability to explain customer experience dimensions in hotel operations. The findings of this study is expected to empower managers with the capacity to identify crucial touch points during interaction with customers and appreciate the roles of such interactions on guests' continuous patronage.

The results of this study shows that the dimensions of service encounter exert influence on guests' patronage of hotels. Specifically, the study revealed customers experience dimensions significantly influences word-of-mouth recommendations. In short the moment of truth exert the greatest influence on word of mouth. In conclusion, the ability of a firm to create and manage pleasurable experiences generates positive word-of-mouth recommendations. The implication is that a thorough understanding of the entire interaction of a customer with a service organisation provides a much better insight into customers' experience.

Recommendations

Sequel to the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereafter proffered.

- (1) Human resource managers at the point of employee recruitment should place high premium on applicants' emotional and intellectual capacities. This could help in the early identification of applicants that are competent, professional, civil, and friendly and possess pleasant and attractive appearance. The essence of these characteristic should be reinforced at the point of staff orientation.
- (2) The importance of nurturing and sustaining a healthy interpersonal relationship should be ingrain into the organisation culture. This can be stated in the vision and mission statement of the organisation. In addition, the import of this creed and how to continuously improve on service delivery processes should serve as the basis for staff training and retraining.
- (3) Managers of hotels could embark on periodic customer loyalty campaign as they invite regular patrons to special events earmarked for the recognition of their unbroken patronage. At this events prizes could be won and rebates offered to attendees. Such events if well managed could create unforgettable experience to regular patrons and families.
- (4) This paper suggests that in future studies other researchers could expand the frontiers by including larger sample size as well as cover wider geographical area. Equally attention could be paid to understand the roles of culture and religion in hotels patronage

6. REFERENCES

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