# What is Service Quality in Hotel Services ?

* Nongnuj Sritanaanant

Service quality' has been focused on as a strategic issue of the 1980's for the management of service operations because the majority of related businesses have gradually become positioned in a more fiercely competitive industry. This is probably a result of the rapid growth of the service economy. The situation shows no exception for the hospitality industry, where food and hotel segments are revealed to have reached or are about to reach the coming saturation point of growth (Mill, 1989, Olsen, 1989, Sritanaanant, 1990). However, the findings are perhaps more relevant to what happens in the developed world where several quality improvement programmes have been created and successfully implemented by the management to strengthen the marketing strategy. There may, nevertheless, exist insufficient recognition of *'quality'* for hotel and food services among developing countries, including Thailand, with a result that improvement programmes in this regard have not yet been fully implemented.
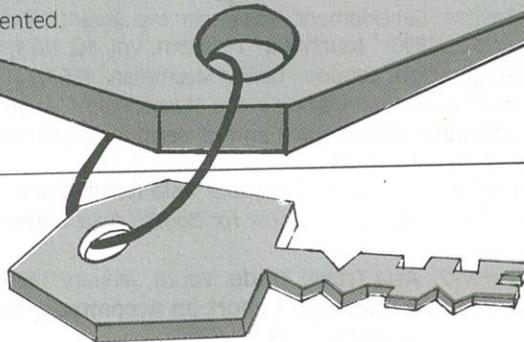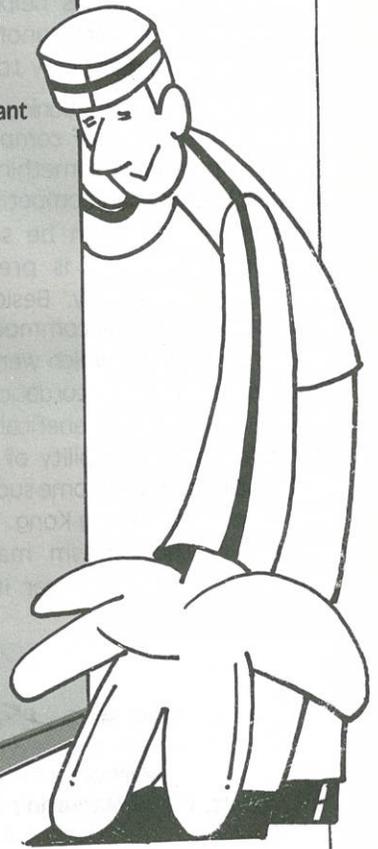
* Instructor, Faculty of Humanities, Dhurakijpundit University : Msc. International Hotel Management, University of Surrey, United Kingdom.

This paper, therefore, is written with a belief that only by tracing the proposed concepts in the areas of service quality can certain guidelines for improving quality be achieved. This may seem, to many, a revision of various studies on service quality with certain applications for hotel areas. It is expected that some of those established programmes can probably be just as successfully applied to the countries of developing economy in order to attain progress in the hospitality industry at both the national and international levels of market competition.

Concept of service

As suggested by Barrington and Olsen (1987), the concept of service can be categorised according to its basic attributes as (1) service product characteristics and (2) the dynamics of service delivery.

The Characteristics of service product include intangibility, perishability or temporal nature, and heterogeneity of service. These attributes apply well to hotel industry situation and thus create resultant problems for the management because (1) the service product is very difficult to measure and evaluate, (2) managers are unable to store service (hotel rooms, restaurant seats, etc.) in an inventory, and finally, (3) it is rather impossible to predict the kind of service being produced by individuals.

The attributes considered as part of the dynamics of service delivery are the short channel of distribution (the entire process of service delivery can be seen from start to finish), the inseparability of consumption and production (customer participation can be substantial in the actual production), the fluctuations in demand according to periods of time, the high amount of customer interaction with service employees (a customer often becomes an input to service performance), and finally, the difficulties in ensuring the reliability and consistency of service products.

These attributes suggest the complexity of the service product which has indeed caused major problem for standardisation as well as managerial control over its quality.

Service quality

Originally, knowledge about quality is developed in the manufacturing sector. It is believed that quality is considered a marketing strategy for corporate success, particularly during the time when there is massive production and consumers are increasingly aware of value of money spent on each purchase. When adopted in the service industry, the quality of service is seen to be dependent on customer expectation and satisfaction level (as the evaluation outcome of perceived service). However, as hotel service or product is very complex in its nature, it has been suggested that service quality can be divided into three dimensions: technical, functional and image quality (Lewis, 1987).

Technical quality refers to what the consumer receives as a result of his interactions with the hotel, e.g. hotel beds, rooms or meals. This dimension allows objective measurement by the customer from direct consumption or use of physical goods or facilities since it largely involves tangible products of service. Hence, managers may find it somewhat easy to make this area conform to customer requirements, encouraging standardisation to facilitate management control. The functional quality dimension represents the service delivery process and is perceived only by subjective measurement because of the dynamics of delivery discussed earlier.

It is suggested that technical quality together with functional quality will create image quality, the third, and perhaps the most important, dimension that can satisfy consumers despite the inadequacy of technical and functional quality. The consequence most desirable for the management is that the positive image quality as perceived from actual experience will be sufficiently strong to create 'word of mouth communication' among the potential customers. This becomes a very powerful marketing tool for the hotel sector today. Since the image dimension is difficult to measure, any attempt to measure customer satisfaction is probably an indication of image quality but not a substitute for total quality.

Strategy to control and improve quality

Given the three dimensions that constitute total quality, technical quality is the most likely to be standardised and controlled. Hence, Jones and Lockwood (1989) have proposed the established model of 'quality control' as the most appropriate approach to manage the tangible aspects of hotel service provision. This comprises four major stages: (1) the design of quality level, (2) the setting of product standards and specification accordingly (often determined or guided by the grading systems, e.g. AA's Star system together with the marketing mix of the hotel), (3) the checking of conformance in terms of the actual outcomes and process (the former by evaluation on the basis of customer satisfaction, the latter by supervisory control), and (4) the correction or adjustment of non-standard output (King, 1985).
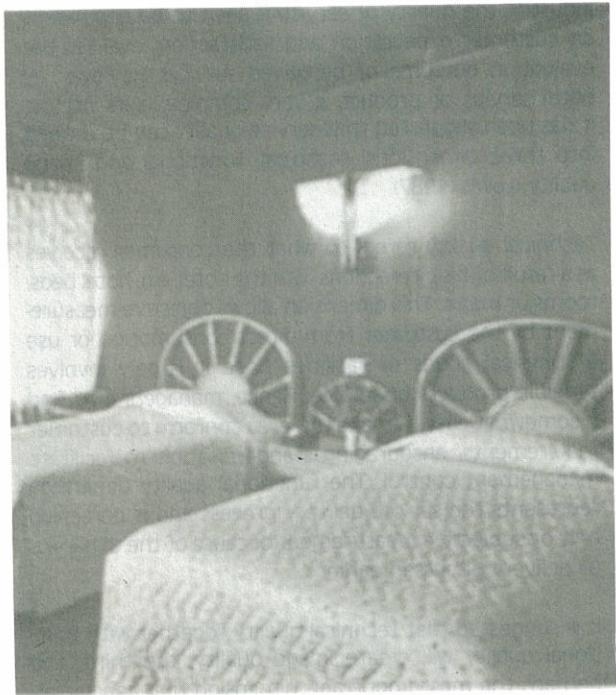
As for the functional dimension which refers to face-to-face contact with hotel guests, the existing concept of *'quality assurance'* should be put in practice specifically for hotel operations in the front-of-the-house area, to *'ensure that errors and faults do not occur'* (Jones & Lockwood, 1989). A particular technique to be included here as a short-term approach is the Japanese model of quality circle in order to show a total commitment to the idea of quality service (from management support and voluntary participation of staff).

To a certain extent, the applications of quality control together with quality assurance programmes should contribute to the construction of hotel image and at the same time prolong the image quality. In practice, improving quality for hotel service can be done in two ways. First, the physical aspects of hotel product can be refurbished and upgraded to provide a higher standard of quality but this may cause the price to rise. Second, in the delivery aspect, a hotel can offer a more personalised style of service as a unique product. The latter is increasingly considered to be the effective way for hotels, particularly relatively small establishments, to withstand competitive pressures in the hospitality industry ■□

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