Full Length Research Paper

Service failure as a causative of customer aggression on hospitality industry employees

1*Nwokorie, E.C, 2Ezeibe, N.

1 Department of Hospitality Management and Technology, The Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, Nigeria.
2 Department of Hospitality Management and Technoloogy, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author email: eddygozie@gmail.com
Accepted 30 May, 2016

ABSTRACT

This study investigates service breakdown as the cause of customers’ aggressive behaviours in the hospitality industry and how customer aggression affects employee performance. Survey method was adopted in conducting the research. Questionnaire was the major instrument for data collection as both primary and secondary data were used. A hypothesis was formulated for the study to confirm whether (or not) there is significant relationship between service failure and customer aggression. Data analysis was done with simple percentage whereas chi-square (X²) statistical technique was used to test the hypothesis. The study revealed that customer aggression is caused by poor service delivery. Over 79% of the respondents agreed that adoption of maintenance culture is effective in eliminating customer complaint and aggression. Frontline employees are the major victims of customer aggression, hence it is imperative to recognize that customer aggression towards hospitality industry employees is a serious problem confronting the industry. The study recommends an improvement in customer satisfaction in order to give customers value for their money.

Keywords: Customer aggression, customer satisfaction, employee performance, service quality.

INTRODUCTION

Hotel customers in recent times are aware of the ‘value for money’ concept, irrespective of the size of the hotel. The fact that hotel products and services are not inexpensive; and the extent to which these products and services are rendered is significant upon the financial strength of the customer; makes it a necessity for guests to always have this craving for all round value for their money. Customers want to be satisfied having spent a lot of finance for the required product and desired service, and the slightest error in the course of service delivery by the service provider may likely give rise to aggression by the customer as a way of driving home their displeasure on service breakdown.

Customer aggression is defined by the Commonwealth of Australia (2014) as “an unacceptable hostile behaviour exhibited by a current or former customer of an organization towards an employee that creates an intimidating, frightening or offensive situation”. Extensive studies in the hotel industry has exposed the fact that guests are less able to treat customer contact employees in a courteous and respectful manner. Grandey, Dickter and Sin (2004) confirms that “work behaviours like yelling, rudeness and threats have been studied under multiple labels, including interactional injustice, work aggression, workplace bullying, incivility, and interpersonal conflict. The reality here is that these
workplace behaviours are related to negative workplace reactions like poor attitude to work, emotional exhaustion, stress and health related problems, retaliatory behaviours, and turnover intentions (Grandey et al., 2004).

**Objectives of study**

The study investigates service breakdown as a possible cause of customer aggression in the hospitality industry and its impact on employee performance. It equally looks at the possibility of minimizing customer aggression in the hospitality industry through maintenance culture and service improvement. To this end, three hotels in Ogun State, Nigeria, were investigated as case study to understand the dynamics of customer aggression within the Nigerian setting.

**Hypothesis**

$H_0$: Failure in service delivery has no significant relationship with customer aggression.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

In an attempt to breakdown the wide range of aggressive workplace behaviours, Neuman and Baron (1998) classified workplace aggression based on verbal-physical, direct-indirect, and active-passive dichotomies. Other researchers equally offer a classification system based on the relationship between the aggressor and the victim. For instance, the Type II (Customer/Client) classification occurs when the aggressor has a relationship with the organization and reacts aggressively while being served as a customer. Therefore, customer aggression is a form of workplace violence including any unacceptable hostile behaviour towards frontline employees that creates an intimidating, frightening or offensive situation thereby adversely affecting work performance and wellbeing.

**Possible causes of customer aggression**

**Service Failure**

Service failure, simply defined, is service performance that fails to meet a customer’s expectations. Typically, when a service failure occurs, a customer will expect to be compensated for the inconvenience in the form of any combination of refunds, credits, discounts or apologies (Henning-Thurau, 2004).

Violence and aggression in the hospitality industry may come about between customers and employees when customers have disputes or complaints about poor (or failure in) service delivery, and dissatisfaction in product output, including requests for refunds, anger or overlong waits in queues. In other words, customer aggression may likely arise when complaints of service failure are treated with levity by frontline employees, hence the concerned customer resorts to the display anger, ego, or disappointment as a result of failed expectations on the part of a given hospitality establishment. The issue here is that customer aggression do not just happen, it has remote and immediate causes, which definitely is traceable to the service provider (Reynolds ad Harris, 2006).

Furthermore, a recent study revealed that “poor outlook management” by customer contact employees is a possible cause of strong emotional outburst by customers who, as a result of unprofessional dressing, make sexual advances at frontline employees, hence “addressing them the way they are dressed” (Nwokorie, 2015). A frontline employee who dresses in an unprofessional manner unknowingly arouse negative emotions from unsuspecting customers who end up either making advances or uncourteous remarks towards the employee.

**Behaviours of customer aggression**

Customer aggression is manifested in many forms in the hospitality industry. The most frequent forms of aggression exhibited by customers in the hospitality industry include:

a. **Expressions of Hostility:** These include verbal hostilities like yelling at a customer contact employee, shouting, swearing, or sending threatening messages through emails, phone calls, and the social media. Neuman and Baron (1998) added that they include dirty looks, or other negative eye contact, giving someone a silent treatment, holding target’s work up to ridicule, negative or obscene gestures towards the target, interrupting the target when he/she is speaking/talking, flaunting status/acting in a condescending manner, verbal sexual harassment or sexual gestures, and sending unfairly negative info to higher levels in the company.

b. **Overt aggression or physical violence:** These may include physical attack like, hitting, pushing, shoving; attack with weapon, threats to physical violence and failing to protect target’s welfare or safety.

c. **Obstructionism:** This may include breaking of the working computer of the employee, confiscation of his or her cellphone and other working materials, as well as other forms of interruptions to the target’s work flow that is directed towards interfering with or blocking the target’s work.
Impact of customer aggression on employees’ performance in hotels

It is not entirely out of place to state that customer aggression is a work-stressor; hence, it is a source of stress to hotel employees. The stress situation in the work environment induces a strong state of emotional and physiological excitement. Chronic levels of aggression can result in psychological and behavioural strains.

Employees in the hospitality industry view customer aggression as stressful and threatening, typically accompanied by a negative emotion; like fear and anger; and physiological arousal. Lazarus and Folkman (2004) observed that given the human discomfort with being the target of anger, and the fact that this behaviour communicates that the goal of satisfying the customer is not being met, it is therefore imperative to note that aggression (whether verbal or physical) is highly stressful; hence it impacts negatively on the job performance of the hotel employee and they are most likely to carry out service operations with unnecessary apprehension and fear. In such situations, workflow is likely to slow down, and this is likely to result to customer heightened complaint and dissatisfaction, and invariably, the establishment will lose revenue. If such situation persists, management of the establishment might consider the option of reducing staff strength, thus creating unintentional turnover.

Additionally, Karatepe (2011) wrote that frontline employees who are routinely confronted with aggressive behaviors of customers such as verbal and physical aggression, and sexual harassment, experience elevated levels of emotional exhaustion/burnout. Under these circumstances, negative outcomes such as job and life dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and turnover intentions are inevitable (Boyd, 2002; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Karatepe et al., 2009).

A person who has experienced customer aggression more often is more likely to have a negative general view and interpretation of ambiguous comments from customers as being aggressive in nature. Therefore, a customer may make an ambiguous comment on service related issue and an employee with high negative feeling about aggression may respond more defensively, evoking hostility in the customer. Similarly, an employee with high negative perception of difficult customer has fewer coping resources, and this may portray the event as more threatening.

Customer aggression management strategies

Management of hospitality establishments can adopt the following strategies in managing customer aggression;

a. Quality Service Approach: Service quality is a way to manage business process in order to ensure total satisfaction to the customer at all times during the business transaction. Igbojekwe (2009) wrote that the employee must possess the technical competence and interpersonal skill to; be ceaselessly courteous with the customer; greet the customer with a genuine smile; and be at the disposal of the customer to exhibit willingness to quality service delivery.

b. Social Skills Approach: Akpabio (2008) wrote that “it is a waste of time to argue that customers are difficult, because we are in the business to please them irrespective of their faults. Social competence, therefore, focuses on the ability of the service employee to key into the customer’s perspective during interactions. Specifically, the perspective can be visually (understanding what the customer thinks) or emotionally (understanding how the customer feels). These facts enable the employee to understand customer needs and consider them necessary for fulfilment (Henning-Thurau, 2004).

c. Staff Training: Training in the hospitality industry should emphasize on voice modulation, facial expression, and trusting/natural attitude. There is need to adopt good people communication skills acquired during training to enhance customer/staff interactions. In this respect, customer service employees are required to handle mental responsibilities of customers while delivering services with a genuine sense of concern and interests. This part of service is the significant component of customer perceptions of service quality (Misty & Robert, 2008; Karen, 1999; Chu, 2002).

d. Regular Maintenance of Facilities: Hotel facilities are put in excessive and regular use by customers on daily basis, hence these facilities suffer undue wear and tear. It is, therefore, imperative that these facilities be maintained to forestall issues of reoccurring customer complaint as a result of malfunctioning of facilities.

e. Public Relations: The use of public relations to manage customer aggression is necessary because of its ability to establish support and goodwill between customers and hotel employees. In this case, management should adopt proper communication channels to ensure customers that the employees are at their service.

f. Swift Resolution of Customer Complaint: A dissatisfied customer will always complain for attention. Complaints should never be glossed over or taken flippantly as this has the tendency of flaring the temper of the affected customer.

METHODOLOGY

Survey research design was adopted for data collection.
Table 1. Population of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected Hotel</th>
<th>Frontline Employees</th>
<th>Supervisors</th>
<th>Customers</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hotel A</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel B</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel C</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=90 Source: Field Survey, 2015.

Table 2. Respondents Distribution by Establishments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected Hotel</th>
<th>Frontline Employees (r1)</th>
<th>% of (r1)</th>
<th>Supervisors (r2)</th>
<th>% of (r2)</th>
<th>Customers (r3)</th>
<th>% of (r3)</th>
<th>Σ (r)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.84</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.63</td>
<td>25.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15.66</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.43</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>42.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12.05</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.43</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12.05</td>
<td>32.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38.55</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21.67</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39.78</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=83 Source: Field Survey, 2015.

which included the use of questionnaire, interview and personal observations.

Study population

The target population was made up of supervisors, and frontline employees of the establishments of study, as well as selected customers of the establishments. A census of the study population was conducted as represented in Table 1.

Sample size

The sample size for the study was determined using the Taro Yamen formula:

\[ n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2} \]

where:
- \( n \) = sample size
- \( N \) = finite population
- \( 1 \) = constant
- \( e \) = correction factor level (level of significance of error assumed to be 5% or 0.05) (Schawmms, 1994). Therefore, the sample size for the three strata of the population were separately determined thus;

a. Frontline Employees

\[ n = \frac{35}{1 + 35(0.05)^2} \]

\[ n = \frac{35}{1 + 35(0.0025)} \]

\[ n = \frac{35}{1 + 0.09} \]

\[ n = \frac{35}{1 + N(0.0025)} \]

\[ n = \frac{35}{1 + N(0.09)} \]

b. Supervisors

\[ n = \frac{19}{1 + 19(0.0025)} \]

\[ n = \frac{19}{1 + 0.0475} \]

\[ n = \frac{19}{1 + N(0.05)^2} \]

\[ n = \frac{19}{1 + N(0.0025)} \]

\[ n = \frac{19}{1 + 0.09} \]

\[ n = \frac{19}{1 + N(0.0025)} \]

The research instrument was, as a result, distributed to the respondents accordingly as represented in Table 2.
Table 3. Poor Service Delivery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Hotel A (rA%)</th>
<th>Hotel B (rB%)</th>
<th>Hotel C (rC%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Σ(r)%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>74.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=83 Source: Field Survey, 2015

Table 4. Poor Management of Customer Complaint

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Hotel A (rA%)</th>
<th>Hotel B (rB%)</th>
<th>Hotel C (rC%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Σ(r)%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=83 Source: Field Survey, 2015

Table 5. Adoption of Maintenance Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Hotel A (rA%)</th>
<th>Hotel B (rB%)</th>
<th>Hotel C (rC%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Σ(r)%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=83 Source: Field Survey, 2015

Table 6. Statistical Table for the Hypothesis (at 0.05 significance level)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From Table</th>
<th>Calculated X² Value</th>
<th>Critical X² Value</th>
<th>(O – E)²</th>
<th>(O – E)²+E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 and 4</td>
<td>22.08</td>
<td>3.841</td>
<td>961</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


RESEARCH RESULTS

Data Analyses

Data generated from field survey were analyzed using simple percentage method while chi-square statistical method was used in testing the stated hypothesis. The results of the study are presented in the following tables.

Statement: Customer aggression is mostly caused by poor service delivery on the part of the hotel industry.

Results in Table 3 show that 83 questionnaires were returned as distributed among the respondents from the three hotels, and 74.7% were in agreement that poor service delivery is a causative of customer aggression in the hotel industry.

Statement: Customers are not likely to react aggressively when complaints are poorly handled.

In Table 4, the 83 respondents returned the distributed questionnaires out of which 51 respondents (61.4%) rejoined in the negative thereby attesting that poor management of customer complaint is a factor that triggers off customer aggression against hotel frontline employees.

Statement: Customer complaint and aggression can be eliminated by regular maintenance of hotel facilities.

Responses in Table 5 indicate that 79.5% of the respondents attested positively that adoption of maintenance culture by hotel establishments will help eliminate reoccurring customer complaints, and by extension, customer aggression.

Test of hypotheses

Since the calculated X² value of 22.08 is greater than the critical X² value of 3.841 as revealed in Table 6, we reject the null hypothesis which states that failure in service...
delivery has no significant relationship with customer aggression. Accordingly, there is significant relationship between service delivery and customer aggression in the hotel industry.

CONCLUSION

This study has exposed customer aggression as a menace to the hotel industry. Employees’ emotional exhaustion, high negative job performance, and turnover intentions within the industry have been linked to continuous aggression by hotel customers. However, customers have attested that most aggressive behaviours could be traced to have emanated from service failure to total service breakdown, and poor customer service management on the part of the hotel industry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Prompt attention should be given to customer complaint the moment they are brought up by hotel customers.
2. A customer relationship management (CRM) unit should be put in place by every hotel establishment in order to further educate customers on aggression related issues and being reasonable while making demands, and by so doing, make customers realize they are the “reason for the occasion.”
3. Customer satisfaction should be seen as a continuous process within the industry, hence it is imperative that continuous improvement in customer satisfaction should be enforced in order to give customers value for their money.
4. Training should continuously be organized, especially, for frontline employees on issues of emotional labour and customer aggression management with a view to expecting cases of difficult customers, so that they may not be thrown “off guard” when these customers come on board with their cases.
5. Hotel establishments should create a form of maintenance culture that would establish a regular and articulated maintenance system to forestall breakdown in the service process and enhance customer satisfaction. This will go a long way in eliminating unnecessary complaints from customers.
6. Supervisors should endeavour to offer reasonable support to subordinates in managing emotions and stress. Various studies suggests that supervisor support acts as a moderator of the effect of customer aggression on emotional exhaustion, life satisfaction, and turnover intentions. Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory suggests that support emerging from supervisors can mitigate the effects of stressors on burnout, because employees may be able to circumvent the resource depletion process and avoid burnout, if they have adequate job resources such as supervisor support (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Hobfoll, 2001). Cole and Bedeian (2007) also argue that social support at work may minimize the detrimental effects of exhaustion that emanate from stressful situations. Accordingly, employees with sufficient supervisor support can deal with customer aggression, and experience less emotional exhaustion than employees who lack this support. Employees can consider supervisor support as a coping mechanism to reduce the stress-outcome relationship (Carlson and Perrewé, 1999; Parasuraman, Greenhaus and Granrose, 1992).

REFERENCE

Chu KHL (2002). The effects of emotional labor on employee work outcomes. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg Virginia.
Misty MJ, Robert HW (2008). Recognizing the emotional element in

Published by Basic Research Journal of Business Management and accounts
service excellence. *J. Hotel Manag.* 49(3), 310-316.