

An Analysis of Hotel's Responses to Negative and Mixed Online Reviews in Varna

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Abstract

Nowadays hotel reviews, published on various travel websites like TripAdvisor, Booking, Expedia and Orbitz, are the main source of information about the quality of services and play a significant role in the purchase decision process. At the same time hotel responses to online reviews are widely regarded as a main online reputation management tool. Researchers in this field found that they have a strong impact on hotel occupancy, customer satisfaction and financial profitability. The main purpose of this article is to analyze the response rate and the structure of hotel responses, used by 4-star hotels managers. The data was collected from Booking.com. The results of this study expand the understanding of hotel responses and can be used for creating successful online reputation strategy.

Keywords: hotel online reputation, Booking reviews, online reviews, content analysis, negative reviews, online review responses

JEL Code: L83, L86, M31

Introduction

The management of the online reputation is not a new conception. Since 1995 Amazon.com has allowed its customers to publish reviews. Many critics in that area find this decision for very inappropriate and even threatening the business, but exactly this innovation puts the company on the top spot in the online trade by retail and subsequently changes the consumers' online behaviour completely. Two of the largest trip platforms in the world appeared several years later: Tripadvisor.com and Booking.com. They were released on the market in 2000 and their purpose is to popularize tourism by advertising hotels. Both platforms have developed quickly not only because of the huge variety of destinations, which they offer, but also because of the interest caused by the customer reviews in them. The founders of Tripadvisor.com report that one year after the company establishment, the main traffic to the website was because of the customer reviews. There is not a big difference with Booking.com. In order to use this new tendency in the consumer's behaviour the two companies use different approaches. With the purpose of collecting more customer reviews and transforming into a leading platform for sharings Tripadvisor.com does not require a categorical proof that the customer has used the service. Thus in a very short period of time the company lines up on the first place in the world as per number of left reviews. 884 million reviews have been published on the platform only for 2020. Booking.com directs towards a more different strategy. In order to guarantee reliable and quality reviews, the company allows their publishing only by customers who have bought the service through their platform. Nowadays Booking.com offers more than 28 million places for accommodation and together with Tripadvisor.com are some of the largest world markets for trips.

One of the main reasons the using and reading of customer reviews to be popularized especially in the sphere of hotel business, is that the customer cannot see the service before he/she uses it. In the not so distant past the travelling people have relied mainly on advertising catalogues, brochures, television, radio advertising and etc., but this activity has been "controlled" by the hotels themselves and their partners. Nowadays the future customers not only trust the customer reviews, but they accept them as the most reliable information source. According to Siteminder 81% of the customers read the reviews before reservation, above 50% read average between 6 and 12 reviews, and 52% shall not reserve a hotel without published reviews. These and many other researches

show that the customer reviews already are a main factor in the process of making decisions for a reservation.

The manager responses are not of less significance. They are an indicator for personal care towards the customer and create added value not only of the customer reviews, but also of the hotel online presentation. In a research of Tripadvisor dated 2019, 84% of the inquired people indicate that the manager response would help them with planning a trip, and 89% of them indicate that it would change their initial impression about the hotel, caused by negative reviews.

1. Literature review

The manager responses are a main element of the online reputation of each hotel. They render strong influence on the reservations, the financial performance of the hotel (Prosperio and Zervas, 2017; Xie et al., 2017) and its competitiveness (Baka, 2016). On the one hand the replies of the positive reviews increase the customer satisfaction and the opportunity for a repeated purchase (Xie et al., 2014), on the other hand the responses to the negative reviews may regain the customer trust and minimize the caused damages (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2018). For negative reviews are accepted all, which contain negative comments about the quality and the variety of food, the level of servicing, the cleanliness of the rooms, the hotel location and etc. (Vasquez, 2011; Zheng et al., 2009).

General indexes of the manager responses are their volume and speed of response. In 2008, according to Vasquez (2014) the responses are only 1% towards the reviews. Several years later O'Connor (2010) made a research, which shows that the interest in review responding has increased significantly. The percent of the responses has already reached 10%. A profound research by Park and Allen(2013) in this direction finds a difference between the percent of the manager responses, depending on whether the reviews are positive or negative. In the same research was also carried out an inquiry to the managers of hotels and another important fact was reveled: most managers understand the significance of the public response, but they do not have established practices and have difficulties, because they do not know how to react. In such cases they often resort to usage of rote responses. The rote responses are these, which contain standard phrases and have very close contents (Liu et al., 2021; Wang and Chaudry, 2018). They have their advantage because of the fact that they save resources – time and expenses. But simultaneously with this they are not interesting for the audience, they often influence the future customer negatively and put under doubt the fact that the hotel exerts personal cares towards its customers (Sparks et al., 2016). An interesting fact is that their usage has a less negative effect with the hotels, a part of chains, than with the independent, from where follows that the latter must exert more efforts in this direction. Regarding the manager responses the researchers undoubtedly share the view that the personal response, which shows care, is preferred by the potential customers, compared with the rote response. Levy, Duan and Boo (2013) discover that the hotels, which use responses with elements like appreciation, an explanation for the situation and apologies or such showing empathy and concern towards the customer have a higher rating than the rest. Leung, Law, Hoof and Buhalis (2013) add that the managers have to indicate following corrective actions. Ajanovich and Çizel (2015) reach a similar conclusion. On the grounds of the research carried out on 364 reviews and the responses adjacent to them, the researchers determine the creation of unique content, the personalization by insertion of customer's words, the emphasizing on the strong sides of the object and the coping with the negative reviews as basic elements of the successful online reputational business. Min, Lim and Magnini (2014) reach similar conclusions. According to the researchers the showing of empathy in the manager responses, as well as the paraphrasing of the described problem are evaluated better. Ho (2017a) assures that three elements in the manager response are absolutely obligatory: acknowledging of the problem, expression of feelings and thanking reviewer. Zhang and Vasquez

(2014) study the generic structure of 80 manager responses, published in Tripadvisor.com and established ten main „moves”, of which: expression of gratitude, apologize for sources of trouble, invitation for second visit, opening pleasantries, proof of action, acknowledge complaints, refer to customer reviews, closing pleasantries, avoidance of reoccurring problems and solicit response. It is interesting to be noted that the all ten elements have presented in neither of the reviews. In the same study the three most frequently used moves are: expression of gratitude, an apologize and an invitation for a second visit.

2. Methodology

Subject of the present study are the manager responses towards the negative and mixed customer reviews of the four-star hotels on the territory of Municipality of Varna, published on Booking.com, for the period (June-August 2021). Booking.com, a part of Priceline Group Inc. is among the leading platforms for online reservations in the world. 355 million night accommodations have been reserved on the platform for 2020. Unlike other websites, Booking.com gives right only to customers, who have bought night accommodation via it to leave customer reviews. The study is directed towards the hotels from the Municipality of Varna. According to data of the National Statistical Institute for 2020 in the city of Varna are realized almost 2 million night accommodations, which put it in top positions among the rest cities in Bulgaria. In the national tourist register are included 67 places for accommodation on the territory of the Municipality of Varna in this category. 59 hotels of them are included in the platform of Booking. For the reported period they have received 4610 mixed and negative reviews, and 687 manager replies have been reported, which shows that the response rate of replying of the 4-star hotels on the territory of municipality of Varna is 14,9%. For mixed replies are accepted all, which contain both positive and negative comments, while for negative are accepted such, which contain only negative (Figure 1).

Negative review	Mixed review
<p>Big NO</p> <p>:(- Unfortunately, nothing</p> <p>:(- If you haven't booked your stay at this hotel, i strongly recommend you to look for another place. The place is not clean or safe for small children</p> <p>The entire family got some kind of food poisoning and we spent the entire trip vomiting and having diarrhea</p> <p>The food was the same for the entire trip and it was poor in quality</p> <p>The pool is great for kids, although the music is so loud it is unbearable to stay near the pool for a longer period of time</p> <p>The music from the pool can be heard in the rooms with pool view</p> <p>The room had old furniture and everything had this "icky" feeling, like they haven't cleaned the place properly</p> <p>There are no regulations regarding covid</p> <p>The parking is a nightmare</p> <p>The beach and city center is close but if you have a stroller, it is very difficult to go up and down so many stairs</p>	<p>Just ok</p> <p>:(- 1. The view from the balcony (sea view). 2. The room was nicely decorated and very spacious. 3. The "all inclusive" part is very relaxing, allowing you to enjoy whatever drink you anywhere. Also free drinks in the room. 4. They were trying to respect the COVID19 restrictions with using masks inside and gloves in the restaurant area.</p> <p>:(- 1. If you want something done you have to give tips to almost everyone from the parking guys to the guys from the beach bar. 2. Not clean enough for a 4 star hotel. 3. The food is okish but not great. 4. The "no reservation" policy of the sunbeds is applicable only to those who do not tip de guys from the beach bar. 5. The bathroom drainage was not working properly so when we took a shower water flooded the entire bathroom and it took a while until it dried (despite our efforts to use as little water as possible).</p>

Figure 1. A negative and a mixed review

Note: The examples in the figure are taken from Booking.com and are a part of the study.

In the process of the study was established that out of all 59 hotels in the system of Booking.com only 25 of them have published at least one response or for the period (June-August 2021) they have received 2600 customer reviews and have published 687 manager responses or the response rate of the studied hotels is 26,4% (Table 1). Later the hotels, which have replied to or less than 5,5% of the customer reviews are excluded from the studied excerpt. Thus the number of the studied manager replies is reduced to 668, published by 16 hotels.

Table 1. Response rate of four-star hotels in Municipality of Varna

Hotel	Reviews	Responses	Response rate
1	104	8	7,7%
2	68	6	8,8%
3	74	60	81%
4	190	1	0,5%
5	231	1	0,4%
6	315	1	0,3%
7	12	5	41,7%
8	76	1	1,3%
9	253	142	56,1%
10	83	2	2,4%
11	102	1	0,9%
12	55	19	34,5%
13	67	64	95,5%
14	186	39	21%
15	72	8	11,1%
16	118	88	74,6%
17	21	4	19%
18	50	42	84%
19	8	8	100%
20	41	26	63,4%
21	38	2	5,3%
22	80	69	86,3%
23	81	80	98,8%
24	245	9	3,7%
25	30	1	3,3%
	2600	687	

For the purposes of the present study an analysis of the manager responses is carried out via manual coding of the content. For a more profound study the hotels were divided into two groups: such, which are a part of chains and independent. It is interesting to be noted that the response rate of the hotels, a part of a chain is 57,4%, and of the independent is 20,2%.

In the next stage of the study first were separated the rote responses, which do not take into account the content of the customer review at all and do not pay any attention to the general complaint. In these replies were used identical or close as per content texts - patterns (Figure 2). In the studied group they are 103, as 45 of them were published by hotels, a part of chains.

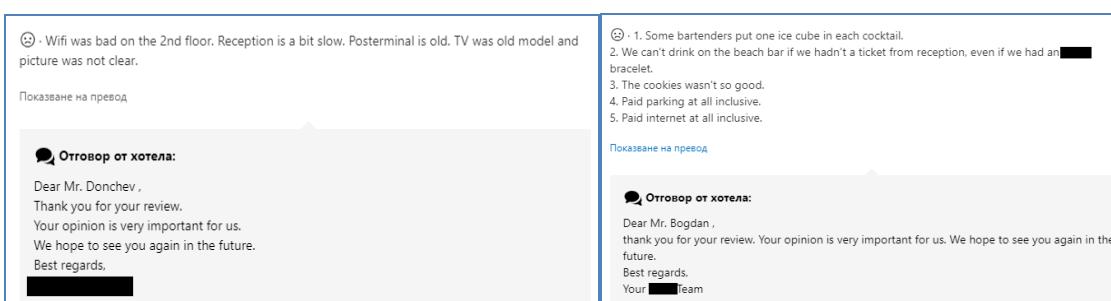


Figure 2. Rote responses

Note: The examples in the figure are taken from Booking.com and are a part of the study.

The rest 565 responses were studied about the content as per preliminarily prepared framework with the main elements, which are met in the manager replies, determined until this moment by scientific researchers. 8 elements were chosen (Table 2) and their frequency of usage was studied.

Table 2. Main elements in the manager response

Main elements	
1 element	Expression of gratitude
2 element	Apology for sources of trouble
3 element	Paraphrasing
4 element	Explanation of the situation
5 element	Undertaking corrective actions
6 element	Offering a compensation
7 element	Disagreement or rejection of the complaint
8 element	Invitation for a future visit

➤ *Expression of gratitude*

The expression of gratitude is a main communicative strategy towards the customer (Sparks et al., 2016; Zhang and Vasquez, 2014). Nevertheless that this element is strongly routinized, it is recommendable because it shows that the reviewer is evaluated for his/her comment. In the manager replies most frequently „the gratitude” refers to the time, which the customer has spent in order to write the review, to the choice of a hotel, as well as to both of them together.

1. *Thank you very much that you have chosen our hotel for your holiday.*
2. *Thank you very much for the spent time to share your comments about your stay with us.*
3. *Thank you very much that you have chosen our hotel and about the time, which you have spent to write this review.*

Most frequently this element is positioned in the beginning of the response and is applied single time. In some cases one and the same response is repeated and it is met in the beginning and in the end of the text, which enhances its influence (Figure 3). In the studied 565 manager responses the expression of gratitude is met in 530 of them, which once again proves the conclusions of the scientific studies carried out until now that this is the most frequently met element.

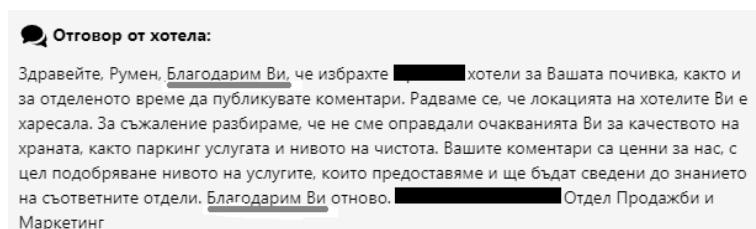


Figure 3. Expression of gratitude.

Note: The examples in the figure are taken from Booking.com and a part of the study

“Response by the hotel:

Hello, Rumen. Thank you that you have chosen hotels for your holiday, as well as for the spent time to publish comments. We are glad that you liked the location of the hotels. Unfortunately we understand that we have not justified your expectations about the food quality, as well as about the parking service and the level of cleanliness. Your comments are valuable for us with purpose increasing the level of the services, which we give and they shall be brought to the knowledge of the respective departments. Thank you once again. Sales and Marketing Department”

➤ *Apology for sources of trouble*

The insertion of an apology or regret in the manager response is one of the key strategies for coping with negative reviews. The apology expresses regret and compassion towards the guest's dissatisfaction. It always has a positive effect (Crant and Bateman, 1993). The including of an apology in the response does not necessarily mean that we agree with the indicated affirmations on behalf of the customer, but certainly shows attitude and care towards him/her. The responses, which contain "an apology" are accepted for empathic although they would hardly make the customer repeat his/her purchase. Frequently used expressions are:

4. *I am really sorry to see you were disappointed about the parking.*
5. *We sincerely do apologize for any disappointment caused.*
6. *We are truly sorry we were not able to meet all your expectations during your stay.*

In the present study it is met in 318 responses or approximately in 56 % of them. It is interesting to be noted that it presents more frequently in the responses of the independent hotels, than in these of the hotels part of chains. With the first ones it is met in 68,8% of the responses, while with the second ones - only 34%.

➤ *Paraphrasing*

According to the theory for active listening the paraphrasing is one of the key methods, which is used as a proof that the guest is heard. Recommended by the specialists, it is a key component in the manager responses, which shows the reviewer, as well as the potential customers that the responses are read in fact and that rote responses are not used. The paraphrasing in most general meaning is insertion of words from the customer review in the manager response (Figure 4). In the studied responses it is met 324 times, 57% in the hotels' responses, belonging to a hotel chain and 57,5% with the independent.

😊 · Room was very comfortable.
Breakfast was great but the eggs were cold.

😊 · I've covered my pillows with a towel, because they smelled like sweat. The whole pillow should be washed, not just the cover.
The dinner in the lobby restaurant was not hot. This happened more than one time.

 **Hotel response:**

Dear Raimund,
Thank you for having taken your time to provide us with your valuable feedback. I am sorry to hear about any inconvenience you may have experienced with the food for which I can only apologize. We would like to apologize for the pillows as well. Your helpful comments are much appreciated and your feedback will help us to continually improve the standard of facilities and services offered to all our guests.

Figure 4. Paraphrasing

Note: The examples in the figure are taken from Booking.com and are a part of the study.

➤ *Explanation of the situation*

With the explanation can be admitted the mistake, as well as to be rejected the responsibility of it. In many of the cases this is the only way for the hotel to protect itself from the unfair accusations. Its usage is successful also in the cases when the solution of the problem could have been settled at the hotel, but the customer has not informed the employees about it. Quite often the explanation is used in situations, which limit the responsibility of the hotel like: the discomfort, which may cause the holding of a conference on the territory of the hotel, the crowding of tourists at exactly specified time at the restaurant, regardless of the fact that a wide

time range is given, the lack or the payment of a parking lot, which is mentioned on Booking.com or on the website of the hotel, but it remained unnoticed by the tourist, the type of feeding and etc. The study shows that 166 responses out of 565 have included the explanation as an element. An example for a response, which contains an explanation of the situation is the following:

„ I did not like the location of the hotel. It was quite far from the beach. I was disappointed at the reception desk when I found out that I should pay 20 BGN per night for parking lot. The shower in the bathroom was broken and did not stop dripping. We could not sleep peacefully even one night.”

Response:

„ Thank you for the time, which you have spent for writing your comment. Regarding the location of the hotel, it is marked on Booking.com and you can inform yourself about it before making a reservation. The parking lot costs 20 BGN per night as it is written on Booking.com and on our website. We sincerely regret about the problem, which you had with the room. If you had shared at the reception desk, our employees would have reacted immediately in order to solve this unpleasant situation.....”

➤ ***Undertaking corrective actions***

The including of corrective elements shows that the hotel has undertaken actions, which shall minimize or shall completely exclude the possibility the unpleasant situation to be repeated. Often met in the responses are:

7. *We shall discuss your problem with department Administration in order to be sure that this shall not repeat anymore.*
8. *Your remarks have already been referred to the managers and I can assure you that we shall take all necessary measures.*
9. *Your comments will be shared with the appropriate department as we always strive to improve.*

Corrective actions are declared in 417 responses or 73,8% out of all responses of the management show readiness and action on behalf of the hotel the problem to be solved. It is met in 64,5% of the cases with the hotels, which are a part of chains and in 79% with the independent.

➤ ***Offering a compensation***

Sometimes the hotel-keepers offer a compensation in the online space with purpose to minimize the negative effect of the written review. It is found in previous studies that as a whole this step is not very preferred and it is used quite rarely because of the visibility of the responses in the online space and the possibility this to cause more complaints with purpose a subsequent compensation.

In the studied responses is found only one, offering a compensation response, which shows that the Bulgarian managers are not inclined to offer compensations in the online space.

➤ ***Disagreement or rejection of the complaint***

In this case the hotel-keeper categorically rejects the possibility he/she to be guilty about what has happened. (Figure 5). Quite often with expression of disagreement the tone is strongly emotional. As a whole it is not accepted as the best strategy at writing responses, because of the difficulty the polite tone to be preserved.

In the study only 7 reviews or 1,2% of all responses have expressed firm disagreement with the demands put forward, as 2 of them belong to a hotel chain.

(;) • за 4-звезден хотел, както е посочено в характеристиката на хотела, нямаше нито чехли, нито кана за топла вода, чаши, хавлиите бяха много малки, за да си послужи с тях човек! Храната под всякаква критика, малко като количество и ограничена като разнообразие!

Отговор от хотела:

Здравейте,
Благодарим за коментара!
Относно забележките Ви:
- Чехлите не са задължителни за категорията
- Каните за топла вода също не са задължителни за категорията
- Хавлиите са различни размери, най - големият е 70/140, съгласно изискванията на категорията. По - големи са само кърпите за плаж, но хотел [REDACTED] е градски хотел и не такива не се предлагат.
- Закуската е в два варианта - на буфет или а ла карт, в зависимост от броя на закусващите.
- Закуската на буфет предлага разнообразия повече от 20 вида храни и напитки в неограничено количество.
- Закуската а ла карт, по меню, без ограничения в избора на броя ястия и количеството.
В заключение: Намираме, че всички отправени забележки не отговарят на истината и не могат да касаят категоризацията на хотела. Разпоредбите в това отношение са ясни.
Моля, ако имате други по - основателни причини за Вашите критики, пишете ни.
Благодарим още веднъж за коментара!
Поздрави

Figure 5. An example for rejection of the complaint

Note: The examples in the figure are taken from Booking.com and are a part of the study.

"For a 4-star hotel as it is indicated in the characteristics of the hotel, there were neither slippers, nor a jug for hot water, glasses, the towels were very small in order to be used! The food was beneath criticism, little as quantity and limited as variety!"

Response by the hotel

"Hello,

Thank you about the comment!

Regarding your remarks:

- *The slippers are not obligatory for the category.*
- *The jugs for hot water are also not obligatory for the category.*
- *The towels are in different sizes, the largest is 70/140 in compliance with the requirements of the category. The beach towels are only bigger, but hotel is a city hotel and such are not offered.*
- *The breakfast in two variants – at a buffet or a la carte, depending on the number of the people for breakfast.*
- *The breakfast at a buffet offers a variety of more than 20 types of food and drinks in unlimited quantity.*
- *The breakfast a la carte, as per menu, without limitations in the choice of number of dishes and the quantity.*
- *In conclusion: We find that all directed remarks are not true and they cannot concern the categorization of the hotel. The orders in this regard are clear. Please, if you have other more well-grounded reasons about your criticism, write us.*
- *Thank you once again about the comment!*
- *Best regards"*

➤ ***Invitation for a future visit***

The invitation for a repeated visit is a good indicator for the fact that each customer is important for the hotel, even the dissatisfied. It is usually put at the end of the review and it has a strongly softening effect.

10. *Looking forward to welcoming you again.*
11. *It will be pleasure for us to meet you again and we expect to change your opinion about us.*
12. *We shall be glad if you are our guest again and this time to justify your expectations.*

442 responses or 78,2% contain an invitation for a new visit at the hotel. It is also strongly routinized as well as the expression of gratitude and the excuse. It is met in 73,4% of the cases with the chain hotels, and 80,9% with the independent.

3. Results and discussion

The study carried out on the analysis of the manager responses shows that the three most frequently used elements are: expression of gratitude, invitation for a future visit and undertaking of corrective actions (Table 3). All the three elements can be easily stereotyped, subsequently routinized and their frequency of usage may be explained by this. It is interesting to be noted that the apology for sources of trouble is the fifth most frequently used element. Most scientific studies until this moment put it in the first three as per frequency of usage, but the current study lines it at a lower position. An explanation of the situation is present only in 29,4% of the responses, while the paraphrasing is in 57,3%. This is explained to a certain extent by the fact that the paraphrasing requires much less time and efforts on behalf of the manager, than the explanation of the situation. The low values of the last two elements in the table categorically show that the Bulgarian manager does not express disagreement and does not offer a compensation in the public space.

Table 3. Usage frequency of the main elements in the manager response.

Elements	Responses, containing this element	Percent of usage in the responses
Expression of gratitude	530	93,8%
Invitation for a future visit	442	78,2%
Undertaking corrective actions	417	73,8%
Paraphrasing	324	57,3%
Apology for sources of trouble	318	56,3%
Explanation of the situation	166	29,4%
Disagreement or rejection of the complaint	7	1,2%
Offering a compensation	1	0,1%

Some similarities and differences are clearly outlined at the differentiation of the hotels in two groups, independent and such, which are a part of chains (Table 4). Both groups of hotels express gratitude in their responses, as well as they direct an invitation for a future visit. Paraphrasing is used equally frequently and with both type of hotels. Undertaking corrective actions is reported strongly with the independent hotels, while an explanation of the situation prefer to give the managers of hotels, which are a part of a chain. A significant difference is reported in the indicator „apology for sources of trouble”. It is used only in 34% of the responses of the hotel chains, while it is 68,8% with the independent hotels. This shows to a certain extent the forming of a more different style in the manager responses of the two types of hotels. The managers of hotel chains are more inclined to give explanations for the situation, but not showing regret for the caused inconvenience. Their style can be determined as more formulaive, less personalized and including in itself less expressive vocabulary.

Table 4. Usage frequency of the main elements in the responses of independent and hotels a part of chains.

Elements	Hotels, a part of a chain	Independent hotels
Expression of gratitude	88,2%	97%
Invitation for a future visit	73,4%	80,9%
Undertaking corrective actions	64,5%	79%
Paraphrasing	57,1%	57,5%
Apology for sources of trouble	34%	68,8%
Explanation of the situation	43,3%	21,5%
Disagreement or rejection of the complaint	0	1,9%
Offering a compensation	0	0,3%

Conclusion

The manager responses play a decisive role in the management of the online reputation. Nowadays they are one of the most effective marketing instruments. The publishing of timely, worthwhile responses increases the customer satisfaction, shows personalized attitude and care towards the customer and increases the sales of the hotel. The current study shows that the Bulgarian managers are still approaching this instrument timidly. Out of 4610 mixed and negative reviews, published on the platform of Booking.com for the period June-August 2021 only 687 of them have received a manager response, as almost every 7 is similar, not reporting the content of the review. It can be said with certainty that the hotels a part of chains are more active in this activity. The structural analysis of the content of the responses brought out the three most frequently used elements in the Bulgarian manager responses, and namely: expression of gratitude, invitation for a future visit and undertaking corrective actions. The study has its limitations, because it includes only the four-star hotels on the territory of Municipality of Varna. In order to be carried out a more thorough and accurate profile of the manager response it is well to be studied also the manager responses of hotels in a different than the studied category.

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