

## The Positive Customer Experience as a Factor for Guest Satisfaction and Loyalty

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### Abstract

*In the contemporary hospitality industry, superior customer experiences are essential to gaining customer loyalty and achieving a competitive advantage. The guest experience lies at the heart of hospitality and is a major driver of loyalty and personal recommendations. Guest satisfaction reflects the experience guests have in the hotel establishment. But it also reflects the performance the hotel achieves through the services it offers and the way it differentiates itself from its competitors. That is why it is important that guest satisfaction and experience are at the very heart of a hotel's management strategy.*

*Improving customer satisfaction is a critical component of the hospitality industry's value proposition to the guests (Siguaw a. Enz, 1999). Consequently, the hospitality industry spends millions of dollars per year to better assess guest satisfaction and understand the elements of loyalty. With an understanding of what causes guests to stay and to return, hoteliers can act to increase loyalty.*

*This article aims to provide an overview of what is known so far about customer experience and identifies some emerging issues that play an important role in it. It will also describe ways that create excellent customer experience. This will help practitioners to understand the factors that influence customer experience and thus to choose the right satisfaction effective strategy which will turn their guests into loyal customers.*

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### Introduction

Today's travelers are looking for an offer where they can be sure that the destination's services, outdoor and indoor experiences and the hospitality of the local community are of a high-quality level that is worth the price (Marinov, 2015). With regards to the aspect of operations management, customers are central to any business. Before determining the strategies to apply or the type of business structure to implement, every business entity should have its customers in mind (Tabaku & Shpetim, 2016). According to Esther & Bambale (2016), during the strategic planning phase, common questions that may arise include who consumers of the services shall be, what's their location, how much are they willing to spend on the service, how can they be reached, and how likely are they to get satisfied with the services offered? After evaluating these factors regarding its potential customers, the organisation can develop the desired product, perform market segmentation, and increase customer awareness (Esther & Bambale, 2016). This scenario, therefore, depicts the importance of customers in any business undertaking. From a marketing perspective, customers are the reason for the firm's existence, and "to satisfy the customer is the mission and purpose of every business" (Drucker, 1973) When making a product or service purchase, the main aim of every customer is to achieve satisfaction. In the current marketplace setting, winning customers entails not only the provision of the required products but also building customer relationships (Fida et al., 2020).

Firms are recognizing the critical roles played by positive customer experiences across all industry sectors (Teixeira et al., 2012). Today's technology-driven, digitally advanced customers expect personalized experiences at every point of interaction. A survey by Gartner (2014) shows that 89% of firms expect to compete primarily on the basis of customer experience, and it is now one of the key strategies adopted by hospitality firms: leading firms such as Marriott, Hilton, Starbucks, Disney, and Starwood excel by creating a distinctive customer experience both offline and online.

Customer experience (CE) reflects the customer's journey through all interactions with the firm—pre-consumption, consumption, and post-consumption (Kandampully and Solnet, 2015). CE is therefore more than the result of a single encounter: it is affected by every episode of the customer's interaction process with a firm (Verhoef et al., 2009) and often is co-created through interactional activities among actors (Ponsignon et al., 2015). The CE in hospitality settings is not derived solely from food, beverage, accommodation, and entertainment but also from a myriad of supporting features and processes, such as websites, technology, online and offline interactions, in-room entertainment, facility designs, and interactions with service personnel and other customers.

Therefore not by chance Thompson (2015) said that "Customer experience is the new competitive battlefield", because it is a core component of hospitality and is essential to ensure that customers perceive value and is satisfied, which on the other hand make it critical for long-term business sustainability .

### **1. Customer experience**

The concept of "experience" is the subject of long discussions, and it can be said that no consensus has yet been reached on it. (Marinov, Ilieva,2015). It is an elusive and vague concept. A difficult construct to define, let alone measure, because of its multiple elements and individualized, personal nature. Every user is unique. Each person brings a different background, values, attitudes and beliefs to the situation; everyone experiences it through individualized "rose-colored glasses." (Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola, 2018).

Multiple definitions of CE appear in the literature; Gentile et al. (2007), for example, propose that customer experience consists of interactions between customers and companies. This experience is very personal and involves the participation of clients on different levels (rational, emotional, sensory, physical and spiritual). Kavitha and Haritha (2018) state that customer experience refers to the internal and personal response that customers have to various interactions with a firm, whether direct (e.g. usage, service consumption, purchase) or indirect (e.g. online reviews, word of mouth, advertising). According to this definition, companies competing to achieve a satisfactory customer experience must organize all customer contact, direct or indirect, during the service process. Therefore, the construct of customer experience must be holistic and include cognitive, emotional, social and physical (behavioural) responses of customers. User experience management may not be completely under the control of businesses; it may include elements that are difficult for companies to influence, such as other customers in the service (Harris and Daunt, 2013) or online reviews (Sparks and Browning, 2011).

Verhoef et al. (2009) note that the customer experience encompasses activities at various stages, such as search, purchase, consumption, disposition and other related activities. Puccinelli and others. (2009) examine customer experience from the perspective of consumer behavior and relate specific aspects of these behaviors—goals, schema, information processing, memory, involvement, attitudes, atmosphere, consumer attributes, and choices—to customer experience management strategies. According to Grewal et al. (2009), since customer experience encompasses every moment of truth in which customers interact with a company, product or service, it must be included in any business strategy that leads to a mutually beneficial relationship between the company and its customers. Palmer (2010) suggests three key constructs—involvement, emotions, and interpersonal relations—that either parallel or contribute to the customer experience.

For Gahler (2019), customer experience results from a positive post-experience evaluation of the customer experience relative to the customer's pre-experience expectations. Tourists may share information at the post-trip stage, mainly to express their experiences and/or their concerns (Ilieva, Boteva,2023) This naturally relates to the need to provide superior customer service during interactions.

In summary the guest experience refers to the overall impression and emotions that a guest has during their entire interaction with a business or attraction, from the moment they start

researching or booking their stay, to their arrival, their stay or visit, and even after they depart. It encompasses every touchpoint and interaction a guest has with a business, including the physical environment, service quality, amenities, and even the emotional connection they develop with the brand. The guest experience is holistic and encompasses the entire guest journey, focusing on creating positive emotions, memorable moments, and long-lasting impressions. Emotions can be considered as a dimension of an overall multidimensional and multifaceted customer experience in which several experiences are generated (Verhoef et al., 2009; Brakus et al., 2009).

That is why many authors such as Fernandes and Pinto (2019) and Wijaya (2019) see it as a strategy to promote loyalty and satisfaction, positive word of mouth recommendations, reduce complaints and improve retention. The notion of customer experience has captured the minds of marketers and has arisen as an important dimension in contemporary marketing due to its capability to accomplish competitive advantage, differentiation and success for the firm (Borishade et al., 2019). Worlu et al. (2016) posit that customer experience is now a critical management tool because it affects consumer actions. Customer experience is regarded as a strategy to foster loyalty, and satisfaction.

## 2. Customer experience in hotel service

The growth and survival of hotels have been found to be tied to the delivery of an enjoyable and unforgettable hotel-stay experience to guests (Banki, Ismail, Danladi & Dalil, 2016). A survey from intellectsoft from 2021 showed that customer experience is the most important factor why customer will choose one hotel, even more important from location and price.

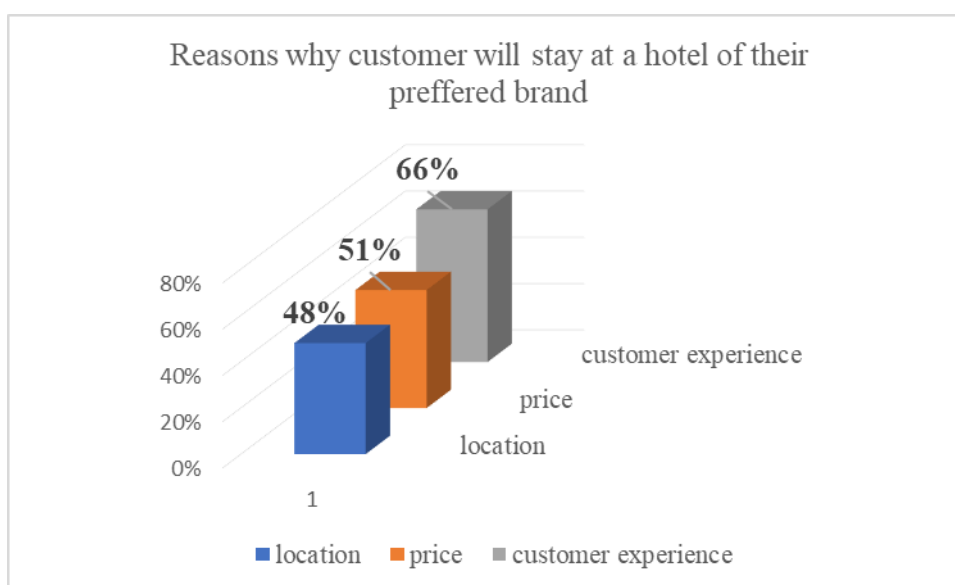


Figure 1: Reason for choice of the hotel

Source: <https://www.intellectsoft.net/blog/customer-service-in-hospitality-industry/>

Tourism and hospitality industry has been seen as the more experience-based service industry (Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Yuan & Wu, 2008). Selling services are not enough to differentiate the hotel's offerings; it is required to provide memorable experiences to the hotel guests (Gilmore & Pine, 2002).

There is increasing global competition in the hospitality sector and this has become a challenge for marketers in the sector to deal with. Part of the difficulty in winning the competitive war is the personal, unique nature of the guest experience (Gentile et al., 2007). Although issues related to hotel guest behavior have been studied over the years, guest experience and its

management have received little attention (Ritchie et al., 2011). The earliest mention of experience in the hospitality industry was by Clawson and Knetsch (1963) while studying outdoor recreation. Over the years, researchers have attempted to improve understanding in this research stream with an emphasis on creating memorable experiences.

For example, Okumus, and McKercher (2007) applied the experience construct to achieve successful destination marketing using customers' food experience as a measure to promote a memorable experience. Oh, Fiore and Jeoung (2007) adapted the dimensions of experience from Pine and Gilmore (1999) to show that a memorable experience in the hospitality industry results from the four domains of experience as posited by Pine and Gilmore. Similarly, Kim, Ritchie and McCormick (2012) developed a scale to measure memorable tourism experience (MTE) consisting of seven dimensions. In the luxury hotel, Walls (2013) measured experience as a culmination of the physical environment and human interactions that give rise to cognitive and emotional values.

Also, Otto and Ritchie (1996) developed a four-dimensional approach to measure guest experience - hedonic, tranquility, involvement and recognition, thus demonstrating that the mental state felt by guests can be explained by those in the hotel sector, and also with contributors to satisfaction. Pizam and Ellis (1999) argue that the attributes of a service encounter in the hotel setting include the product, the behavior and attitude of the service providers, and the service environment. This suggests that a satisfactory hotel experience is a combined effort of these factors that seek to provide utilitarian, hedonic and relational customer values that have the potential to increase customer satisfaction, word of mouth and repeat hotel visits.

From an operational perspective, hotel services, including the attitude of employees and the response to guest requests, contribute to the nature of the experience that is remembered afterward. In the new economy – the experience economy, profiting from providing a unique, personalized and quality experience to customers, especially hotel guests, is the way to win a piece of their heart (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999).

In the studies of many authors such as Oh et al., (2007); Otto & Ritchie, (1996) et al. on measuring components of the customer experience are indicated utilitarian/cognitive, hedonic/affective/emotional, and relational experience.

Utilitarian experience is a component of guest experience that reflects thought process and conscious mental state (Gentile et al., 2007). For hotel guests, this is demonstrated in the form of cost-benefit, design, space and service performance (Kim et al., 2012). Hedonic experience is generated through moods, feelings and emotions. This is achieved when customers are entertained during their stay.

The hotel service environments offer guests an opportunity to interact especially outside their normal daily routine. This social relationship leaves an impression on the guest, which may be memorable or otherwise and constitutes what Schmitt (1999) and Gentile et al. (2007) conceptualized as relational experience.

Another method for enhancing the customer experience in the hotel industry is to concentrate on 3 components also known as "the three C's":

- Communication
- Convenience
- Choice

### **Communication**

Guests long to be heard, informed and taken into consideration. Staff's good communication skills and hotel's contact capabilities allow guests to feel that their needs are heard, their questions answered and their problem solved. They will feel that the hotel value their feedback. Thus guests will be more open when they feel connected, which leads to a better guest experience and customer loyalty.

The hotel can try enhancing its communication with guests by:

- sending a detailed email before arrival to simplify the check-in process.
- encourage guests to connect either at the hotel or online by making it easy for them.
- answering their questions and solving problems quickly.
- thank them for staying with the hotel, ask for detailed feedback and consider it.

### **Convenience**

Guests are getting poorer on time. It doesn't matter if it's a business trip and work or holidays and spending days discovering the area. Guests need convenience, they need a carefree stay.

The hotel can try enhancing its guests' convenience by:

- providing a self-check-in option and having a 'skip the line' key pick-up desk.
- partnering with local tour guides and restaurants to save guests some time with research.
- providing a transfer from the airport.
- including a special requests section when booking a room so to be able to provide basic amenities for every type of traveler.

### **Choice**

The highly competitive hospitality industry is constantly raising the bar for guest experience, and therefore a big part, if not the most important part of it, is now personalization. Giving each customer the choice to create their stay according to their expectations and helping them experience the place the way they want is the real key to guest's heart. It also allows the hotel to show that it cares about its customers and the things they care about.

The hotel can try giving its guests more options by:

- offering customized packages (for example spa treatments for bleisure travelers, tour buses for Boomers, local food/beverage tasting experiences for Millennials or Gen Z travellers, etc.)
- let guests decide when they need housekeeping (a sign of environmental sustainability).
- asking about special occasions.
- having availability of different ways to contact the hotel staff (phones in rooms for older guests, online self-service for younger guests.)

Simply put, the guest experience is the overall satisfaction of hotel's guests before, during and after their stay. More explicitly it means that at each stage of their stay certain aspects create an emotional reaction, which helps customers determine if the experience reaches their expectations.

### **3. Customer satisfaction and loyalty**

The global services market continues to be very competitive. Accommodation businesses were challenged to increase their quality and service levels, improve their product design and reduce product development cycle time. Significant progress has been made in these areas, but one of the most important goals of the hotel market today is to ensure total customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is considered one of the most important outcomes of all marketing activities in a market-oriented company. The obvious need to satisfy the firm's customer is to expand the business, gain higher market share, and acquire repeat and referral business - all of which lead to improved profitability (Kandampully, Suhartanto, 2000).

The service marketing literature suggests that satisfied customers buy more each time they visit and buy more often. Satisfied customers also refer their family and friends. The relationship between sales, service, satisfaction and profits is direct. The more satisfied customers are, the more they spend (Siskos, Grigoroudis, 2002). The more customers spend, the more it sells. And usually, when more is sold, profits are greater (Siskos, Grigoroudis, 2002). In addition, satisfied customers are less likely to look for the lowest prices, and the cost of selling to them is much lower than the cost of attracting new customers from the competition. Satisfied customers are the cheapest and most effective form of advertising. Conversely, a disappointed customer not only takes their business elsewhere, but most likely tells a few others about the experience. Although it may take

many positive encounters to create customer loyalty, it usually only takes two negative encounters to create a lifelong enemy (Hill and Alexander, 2000).

Practitioners and researchers have not clearly identified a theoretical framework that identifies the factors leading to the development of customer loyalty (Gremler and Brown, 1997). However, there is consensus among practitioners and academics that customer satisfaction and service quality are prerequisites for loyalty (Gremler and Brown, 1997). One of the important indicators for measuring loyalty is consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction with products and services (Adzhani NK, Hartoyo, Simanjuntak M. 2021). According to the results of a study by Biedenbach and Marell (2010), high loyalty to goods or services develops through satisfaction with the customer experience provided by the company. Positive user-generated experiences can be one of the company's competitive advantages. Many authors' research through years proves that customer experience has a significant effect on loyalty with satisfaction as an intermediary variable. For example, Anggraeni and Yasa (2012) suggest that consumer loyalty is influenced by the satisfaction experienced by consumers as a result of a positive experience. According to Senjaya customer satisfaction has a significant positive direct effect on customer loyalty (Senjaya et al. 2013). Maintaining customer satisfaction as an effort to achieve loyalty due to Adzhani, Hartoyo and Simanjuntak (Adzhani, Hartoyo, Simanjuntak, 2021). Cronin defines customer satisfaction as the primary key to loyalty (Cronin et al. 2000)

Given the complexity of the guest experience, measuring and managing hotel guest satisfaction is a challenging task. In the hospitality industry, research has shown that there is a gap between what managers believe is important and what guests say is important when choosing and evaluating accommodations (Ko, 2018).

Hotel guest satisfaction is a complex human experience within the hospitality setting. Guest satisfaction research began as early as the 1970s. Various definitions of guest satisfaction have emerged. Hunt (1975) considered satisfaction to be an evaluation of what customers have experienced with services, at least as good as intended, while others define customer satisfaction as an emotional response to using a product or service. A commonly used definition of customer satisfaction adopts a disconfirmation perspective of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, which suggests that satisfaction is the result of the interaction between the consumer's pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase evaluation.

From a managerial perspective, it may be more important to understand the components or antecedents of hotel guest satisfaction. For example, a hotel product is conceptualized as consisting of several levels. That is, the core product, i.e. the hotel room, deals with exactly what the customer gets out of the purchase. In addition, the hotel product also includes facilitating, supporting and complementary elements that relate to, for example, how the customer gains from the purchase, the interactions with service providers and other customers, and the necessary conditions (e.g. reception) that provide access to the core product and multiple value-added products and services (Kotler et al., 2006). A hotel product can also be represented as a set of attributes, as suggested by Dolnicar and Otter (2003) and others (e.g. Kandampully, Zhang, Jaakkola, 2018). These attributes include services, location, room, price/value, food and beverage, image, security and marketing.

Thus, guest satisfaction can be viewed as the guest's evaluation of his/her experience by interacting with different service areas. It has also been described as a summary evaluation of a customer's overall experience with an organization or its products (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

#### **4. Relation between customer experience and customer satisfaction**

Based on research results Lemke et al. (2011) define eight factors that are important as a measuring tool in influencing customer experience and which show the relation between customer experience and customer satisfaction:

a) **Accessibility:** the extent to which consumers find easy access to customer service or appropriate facilities. For example, as a web page. Some companies make it easy for users to access

appropriate facilities (high ease of access). If the website is difficult to access, users will slowly leave the company. Shortly accessibility can be defined as easy access to the right customer service or conversation guide, or the ability to easily accomplish what users want to do. In the study of Senjaya et al. (2013) stated that the accessibility variable has a strong influence on customer satisfaction and is the variable that most influences customer satisfaction. Ease of access to customer service and access to the website are the main thing to achieve what consumers want in the first purchase from the website. If the user's desire is fulfilled, the user will be satisfied. Good access to the company influences good customer experience (Ridho and Octavia 2016). If the customer experience is good, it will affect customer satisfaction with the company. Accessibility is a variable found in customer experience and is a variable that has a positive effect on customer satisfaction (Njoto et al. 2016).

b) **Competence:** employees can give customers confidence that they know what they are doing and are able to do their job correctly (competent), while incompetence and inability to do their job the way they are required (incompetent) will reduce the level of trust of users in the services provided by the company. Competence is one of the dimensions of customer experience that affects customer satisfaction (Mulyono and Djatmiko 2018). With a high competency value, it explains that customer experience service is in a good category (Ridho and Octavia 2016). If the customer experience is good, it will affect customer satisfaction.

c) **Customer Recognition:** customer recognition is the consumer's feeling that their presence is known and recognized by the company. In this, customer recognition is a variable that has a significant effect on customer satisfaction (Senjaya et al. 2013). If there is an increase in customer recognition, then consumer satisfaction will also increase (Njoto et al. 2016). Good customer recognition is a reflection of good customer experience, so it can affect customer satisfaction (Ridho and Octavia 2016)

d) **Helpfulness:** helpfulness relates to the ease with which consumers seek help from the company and receive a good response from it. Good assistance will affect the company's user satisfaction (Ridho and Octavia 2016). Helpfulness is the dimension of customer experience that has the most dominant influence on customer satisfaction (Senjaya et al. 2013). If the customer experience is good, it will affect customer satisfaction with the company.

e) **Personalization:** the consumer's feeling that he is receiving treatment / facilities that make him comfortable as an individual for a product or service. It is the degree to which users feel treated in a personalized way. Some companies seem to know consumers as individuals and personalize service delivery (personalized customer care). Personalization is a dimension of customer experience. Good and high personalization affects customer satisfaction (Ridho and Octavia 2016)

f) **Problem Solving:** problem resolution is the consumer's perception that the problem has been resolved by service provider. It is the extent to which users feel that staff try to solve their problems. Problem solving has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction (Senjaya et al. 2013).

g) **Promise Fulfillment:** promise fulfillment is the fulfillment of promises by suppliers of products or services. It is the extent to which companies keep the promises they make to consumers. In the study by Njoto et al. (2016), promise fulfillment has been shown to have a significant effect on consumer satisfaction.

h) **Value for Time:** the consumer's perception that his/her time is valued by the product or service provider. It is the extent to which companies demonstrate that they value and strive to use customers' time efficiently (e.g. by reducing waiting times and providing service efficiently

According to a study by Mulyono and Djatmiko (2018), accessibility, competence, customer recognition, helpfulness, personalization, problem solving, promise fulfillment, and value for time have a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction. The higher the customer experience (availability, competence, customer recognition, helpfulness, personalization, problem solving,

promise fulfillment and time value) variables will lead to increased customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is a specific evaluation of all services provided by the company, so customer satisfaction can only be measured by the experiences that consumers have gone through during the purchase process (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996) According to Ali (2018), for service providers to compete, their services must create a positive user experience and their services must lead to customer satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction and customer experience are distinct constructs and shows a contributory relationship with each other. Customer satisfaction is a specific evaluation of all services provided by the company, so that customer satisfaction can only be measured from the experiences that consumers have gone through during the purchase process (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996). In Nobar and Rostamzadeh's research (2018), customer experience has a significant influence and has an important impact on consumer satisfaction. According to Ali (2018), for service providers to compete, their services must create a positive consumer experience and their services must result in customer satisfaction. Caruana (2002) proposed customer satisfaction and brand loyalty as an outcome customer experience. Customer experience brings customer satisfaction which subsequently resulted into brand loyalty.

Customer experience and customer satisfaction are closely linked, as customer experience has a direct impact on how satisfied customers are with hotel brand. In simple terms, customer experience refers to the overall interactions and experiences a customer has with hotel brand, while customer satisfaction refers to how well those experiences meet their expectations and needs.

Furthermore, better experiences lead to positive feelings and emotions due to that consumer want to repeat these experiences that not only influence satisfaction of the customer but also results into brand loyalty. Studies put forward the significant impact of experiences on brand loyalty through customer satisfaction (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). When customers have a positive experience with hotel services, they're more likely to be satisfied with the interactions and more likely to return for repeat business. On the other hand, a negative customer experience can have the opposite effect, with dissatisfied customers spreading the word about their bad experience and turning others away from your brand. This can be especially damaging in the digital age, where information travels fast and negative reviews and feedback can go viral quickly.

In a world where 88% of businesses compete primarily on customer experience, understanding and prioritizing customer satisfaction has never been more crucial. In fact, a staggering 84% of customers are willing to pay more for a better experience according to a Forbes article "50 Stats That Prove The Value Of Customer Experience" (Morgan,2019). According to a survey from Hausman (2023) 96% of customers say customer service is important in their choice of loyalty to a brand and 73% of consumers say a good experience is key in influencing their brand loyalties. Also 49% of consumers have left a brand in the past year due to poor customer experience. This underscores the importance of the connection between performance and customer satisfaction and its impact on a company's success (Hausman, 2023)

The link between customer experience and customer satisfaction is clear: customer experience sets the stage for customer satisfaction, and a positive customer experience is a key driver of customer loyalty. By delivering a positive customer experience, the hotel will be able to build strong relationships with its customers, increase customer loyalty, and drive business growth.

### **Conclusion**

Exceptional customer service is the heart and soul of the hospitality industry (Brown, 2021). It is not a mere aspiration but an attainable goal through dedication, innovation, and unwavering commitment. As the hotel strive to deliver experiences that are professional, interesting, amazing, and attractive to the guests, it has to remember that in this industry, excellence is not a destination; it is a journey. By constantly refining its approach and embracing the art of exceptional service, the hotel management can elevate their establishment to new heights and leave an indelible mark on



guests' hearts and minds, because people can forget what is said, can forget what is did, but will never forget how the hotel service made them feel.

That is why it could be said that guest experience is a hospitality business's main indicator of quality service. To remain relevant, it can't be anything else than excellent. For a hotel to improve its ability to deliver a first-class experience to its guests, it must know its customers, understand their needs and style of travelling, and give them what they expect at every touchpoint they have with it, from pre-arrival to post-stay. Exceptional guest experiences also launch a positive cycle of high guest satisfaction and a good online reputation which in turn will lead to newer and repeat business while keeping the costs down.

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