

Volume 1, No. 1, August, 2012
(Bi-annual)

Refereed Journal
ISSN No. 2278-8379

Tourism Innovations

(A Journal of Indian Tourism Congress)



DIAN
URISM
NGRESS

Indian Tourism Congress (ITC)

www.indiantourismcongress.org

SERVICE QUALITY OF HOTELS IN COIMBATORE – A GAP ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS TOURISTS EXPECTATION AND EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Coimbatore is Tamil Nadu's second largest city with 0.5 million population and one of India's fastest growing metro cities. There are more than 30,000 tiny, small, medium, and large industries and textile mills. Coimbatore is the textile capital of South India. It is also popularly known as the Manchester or Detroit of Southern India. The city hosts global business meetings and business fairs. It is the number one revenue district of the state with revenue crossing 6000 corers per annum. The heavy flow of Business Tourists opens up opportunities for Hospitality Sectors in the city. Quality service delivery in the hotels enhances customer satisfaction and thereby increasing the flow of business Tourists. In this background the present study has been undertaken to find the gap between the guests' expectation and experience. SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al, 1985) model dimensions (Tangibility, Reliability, Assurance, Responsiveness and Empathy) are used to measure the gap of business tourists' pre-purchase belief and post-purchase evaluation. The study also gives an insight of business tourists' needs and wants and also gives pavement for customer oriented marketing.

Key Words: Service delivery, Expectation, Experience, SERVQUAL.

INTRODUCTION

Coimbatore is among the famous business centres in India. It is the textile capital of South India. Many programs have been initiated by the government and public sectors to promote the growth of business tourism industry. There are various activities which have been organized to attract tourists from local and foreign countries. Coimbatore is Tamil Nadu's second largest city and one of India's fastest growing metro cities. There are more than 30,000 tiny small, medium and large industries and textile mills. The city is known for its entrepreneurship of its residents. The climate is comfortable round the year. The other major industries are machinery, automobile spares, motors, electronics, and steel and aluminium foundries. There are lot of business meetings and business fairs held in Coimbatore.

Hence there are lot of business tourists coming into the city, this requires lot of opportunities for the hospitality sectors in the city. Today tourism has turned into a major lucrative business worldwide. The industry consists of many infrastructure and service companies. Hotels are of paramount importance in this field. One of the important factors that should be considered to invite more tourists is by providing good accommodation (Cooper et al, 1996) in order to make their travel more convenient and comfortable (Middleton & Clarke, 1999). Thus, with this condition, hotel industry has become one of the most competitive services industries in Coimbatore. From time to time, the challenges in hospitality industry become serious with the increasing number of hotel in our country. Due to the increasing number of hotel in the industry, customers will have more choice in choosing which services they are willing to pay and satisfied them. Hotels today are much more than just a place to sleep and rest. Many travellers view them as an integral part of a gateway experience. With the recent boom in boutique hotels, budget properties, and novelty accommodations, travellers can choose a hotel that is as much a selling point as the destination itself.

Furthermore, many hoteliers are willing to spend more money to provide good services for their customers. This activity is one of the profits on investment for the company (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1996). Therefore, in order to gain a competitive advantage in current market, the hotel must offer and provide good services. In others words, to remain competitive and financially successful, the hotelier should serve their best to meet customers' satisfaction and expectations (Presbury et.al, 2005).

According to Landrum et.al (2009) when the revenues of companies come from services delivery, they should use accurate and reliable instruments in order to assess a good services quality. Therefore, in business practices the hotelier should consider all the factors for ensuring customers' satisfaction. It is clear that hotels play a vital role in improving tourism in Coimbatore and contribute to remarkable economic growth in business tourism of the city. The present study focuses on hotel industry; five business class hotels in Coimbatore were chosen as samples and a survey was carried out in order to assess their customer satisfaction by using Servqual model.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Generally, this study aims to understand about current service quality and customers' satisfaction in the hospitality industry in Coimbatore. In line of direct participants of customers for this study, it provides great information for the hotelier on customers' perception towards hotel services. Specifically, this study also contributes to the hotelier as guidance to provide better services in future and also to set their marketing plan and strategies in order to achieve the customers need and satisfaction. On the other hand, this study is one way to help the managers maximizing the value of their investment in the business activities through customers' perspective about their services provider.

NEED FOR THE STUDY

Theoretically, this research is also contributing to the increasing number of research on service quality and customers' satisfaction for the hotel industry in Coimbatore. The present study also evaluates service quality of Business class hotels in Coimbatore. It determines the pre purchase expectations and the post purchase evaluation of business tourists. This will definitely contribute on quality service delivery in the city. With the findings of the study the service providers can identify their strengths and weakness. In other words the study will definitely be a pavement for quality service delivery, which leads to satisfied customers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Service Quality

Service quality is a degree and direction of discrepancy between customers' service perception and expectations (Parasuraman et al 1985, Berry et al 1990) or the outcome of a comparison between expectations of a service and what is perceived or received (Czeipiel et.al 1985; Klaus 1985; Parasuraman et.al 1985). Parasuraman et al. (1985) defined "service quality" as the degree and direction of discrepancy between a customer's perceptions and expectations, whereas "perceived service quality" is the gap between a customer's expectations and perceptions as a measurement of service quality. The smaller the gap, the better the quality of service and greater the customer satisfaction. Barsky (1996) suggests that the customers may be excellent sources of information for management on how the organization can provide quality service. Through surveys and focus groups, customers can help management to determine which service areas are most in need of improvement.

Customer expectation means uncontrollable factors including past experience, personal need, word of mouth and external communication about hotel service. It is the pre-purchase belief of a particular service. Different customers have different expectation based on the customer knowledge of product or service.

Customer perception means customers feelings of pleasure or displeasure or the reaction of the customers in relation to the performance of the hotel staff in satisfying or dissatisfying the services. In other words it is the sum total of perceived performance.

Customer Satisfaction

Satisfaction refers to the impressions of customers feeling or emotions towards service quality in the hotel industry (Hansemark & Albinsson 2004), it can be defined as an overall positive evaluation of performance based on the customer's experience after using the service (Parrott 1992; Anderson 1993). In 1983, three

researchers as Parasuraman, Berry and Zethaml started a vast research on the issue of service quality. They highlighted the importance of service quality and the assessment of service quality prior and after service delivery. On this basis the five main dimension that the customers use in order to judge for service quality are explained as follow :

Tangibility

Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials. Tangibles are an appearance of the hotel physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials used (Parasuraman et.al, 1988).

Reliability

Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Represents the service provider's ability to perform service as promised and accurately (Parasuraman et.al, 1988); this includes such qualities as dependability, consistency, accuracy and so on.

Responsiveness

Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Responsiveness is an eagerness of the firm to offer prompt service in a timely manner and facilitates guest (Schneider & White, 2004); this includes helpfulness, friendliness and willingness.

Assurance

Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. Assurance is an ability of the firm's people to encourage confidence and trust in the hotel through their understanding and politeness (Schneider & White, 2004); this include trustworthy, honesty and security of all types (physical, financial, confidentiality, and so on)

Empathy

Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers. This refers to how the service providers concern about their customer in terms of caring and individualized attention that the hotelier provides its customers (Parasuraman et.al, 1988); this includes ease of approach and contact, understandable communication and understanding of the customer needs and so on

To evaluate these five aspects of service quality, Parasuraman et al., designed "Servqual" model. Accordingly, service quality is assessed as follows:

Quality

It consists of a collection of specifications of a product or a service which meets expectations of a customer and are indicated by the customer neither the producer nor a service company. (David Garvin, 1987).

Service quality

The difference between customer's expectations and that of his perceived concept of real performance of service. (Zethaml & Bitner, 1996).

Perceptions - expectations = Service Quality

"Servqual" has many applications. Its most important usage is keeping the track of the changes in service

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"Servqual" has many applications. Its most important usage is keeping the track of the changes in service

quality of an organization which is acquired by making a periodic survey on customers. SERVQUAL can also be used for both marketing studies and comparison of a service with a similar service offered by rival companies (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Expectations

The same ideal service which is desired by a customer before his entering to the organization.

Gaps Model

The SERVQUAL instrument is useful to perform what is called gap analysis. The SERVQUAL survey instrument can be administered in a variety of ways that examine different gaps. For example, SERVQUAL can be used to explore differences in perceptions among customers. In this model, Parasuraman et al (1988) suggested that customer's expectation scores should be deducted from their perceptions score ($Q = P - E$). The better the positive score indicates superior service quality or vice versa. Thus, in the SERVQUAL model, there is important to examine and identify the expectations and perception of customer regarding the service. It is because this comparison will also determine as indicator of customer satisfaction (Chen-Hsein, 2005).

Customer Perceptions of Service Quality

Measurement of this consider the gap between consumer expectation (before the use of service) and consumer perceptions (after using the service) regarding to the service quality delivery. Recently, most of scholars and academician use this gap as a principal focus of their research to examine the service quality because with this analysis, the management was able to know how well actual service performance compared with the expectations of the consumers (Tsang & Qu, 2000).

Most of the study was found there have negative gaps in the result of gap analysis (perception - expectation). This result was indicated that guest perceptions score were consistently lower than their expectations towards some of the service quality variables (Tsang & Qu, 2000; Juwaheer & Ross, 2003; Qin & Liu, 2008). Hence, it determined that the levels of service quality performance from a consumer's perspective are low. In this background the researcher has taken some of the five major business class hotels in Coimbatore for the present study to evaluate the pre purchase and post purchase of the service delivery in hotels. A sample of 150 people was taken for the survey. The method used was convenience sampling. Those who were willing to participate in the selected hotels were considered for the study.

METHODOLOGY

In this review of literature background, the current study has been undertaken to find the Gap in the service delivery of business class Hotels in Coimbatore. For the present study five four star hotels in Coimbatore were chosen for the study. A sample of 150 tourists was taken for the survey. The method used was convenience sampling. Those who were willing to participate in the selected hotels were considered for the study. The service quality of front office department were considered for the present study. As the front office department were considered as the nerve centre of hotel operations; the service quality gap of front office personnel were analysed in this study. The major limitations of the study are, the sample size and the selection of sample. The sample size is only 150 and the selection of sample is convenient sampling. It is based on the convenience of hoteliers and hotel guests. Hence the findings of the study generalised keeping all these factors in consideration. The main Objectives of present study are:

OBJECTIVES

To assess customers expectation and reception level towards service quality in five dimensions: Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy.

To identify the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions of hotel service delivery.

The hypothesis tested in the present study are:

Ho: There is no difference between customers' perception and customers' expectations regarding to the hotel services quality.

TABLE -1
TANGIBILITY

Sl.no	Tangibility	N	Mean	SD	t- value	Level of Significance
1	Expectation	150	16.89	2.510	2.538	.026
2	Perception	150	16.23	2.469		

From the above table the tangibility dimension includes physical aspects such as the physical appearance of hotel services including the neatness of service personnels and professionalism.

The t-value 2.538 for the mean difference in tangibility score of the respondents of their expectation and perception is significant. ($P < 0.026$). The mean tangibility score of the guest's expectation and their perception were 16.89 and 16.23 respectively.

The analysis shows that there is a gap between customer expectation and perception on service delivery personnel that the appearance and cleanliness of the employees needs to be improved.

TABLE-2
RELIABILITY

Sl.no	Reliability	N	Mean	SD	t- value	Level of Significance
1	Expectation	150	16.79	2.488	3.500	.001
2	Perception	150	16.11	2.211		

From the above table the reliability dimension refers to the ability of the front office hotel staff to provide services dependably and accurately. Reliable service performance has to meet customers expectation. Service must be accomplished on time, every time, in the same manner and without errors.

The t-value 3.500 for the mean difference in tangibility score of the respondents of their expectation and perception is significant. ($P < 0.001$). The mean tangibility score of the guest's expectation and their perception were 16.79 and 16.11 respectively.

The reliability of service personnel shows that there is a gap between the expectation and reception

of the guest. The imitativeness, promptness and the reliable information also needs to be improved.

TABLE- 3
RESPONSIVENESS

Sl.no	Responsiveness	N	Mean	SD	t- value	Level of Significance
1	Expectation	150	13.03	1.976	5.285	.000
2	Perception	150	12.24	2.055		

From the above table the responsiveness dimension involves willingness to help customers and provide prompt services. It is essential that front office hotel staff is willing to help customers and to provide prompt service and meet customer expectation.

The t-value 5.285 for the mean difference in tangibility score of the respondents of their expectation and perception is significant. ($P < 0.000$). The mean tangibility score of the guests expectation and their perception were 13.03 and 12.24 respectively.

The responsiveness dimension also shows a gap between customer expectation and perception. It suggests that service personnel should provide relevant relative information and guide the guest in proper directions.

TABLE- 4
ASSURANCE

Sl.no	Assurance	N	Mean	SD	t- value	Level of Significance
1	Expectation	150	21.10	2.741	1.888	.061
2	Perception	150	20.68	2.643		

From the above table the assurance dimension refers to the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence including competence, courtesy, credibility and security.

The t-value 1.888 for the mean difference in tangibility score of the respondents of their expectation and perception is significant. ($P > 0.061$). The mean tangibility score of the guests expectation and their perception were 21.10 and 20.68 respectively.

Hence it can be inferred that there is no gap between hotels guest expectation and the perception. The service delivery between the expectation and perception is based on that the customers are satisfied with the services that the staff makes them to feel safe when staying at the hotel. In addition, cashiers are very credible and responsible when handling expenses or money from guests. They are also well versed in using advanced technology. This shows a high hospitable service towards the guest.

TABLE - 5
EMPATHY

Sl.no	Empathy	N	Mean	SD	t- value	Level of Significance
1	Expectation	150	17.23	2.044	5.836	.000
2	Perception	150	16.05	2.432		

From the above table the empathy dimension represents the provision of caring and personal attention to customers including access or approachability and ease of contact, effective communication, and understanding the customers.

The t-value 5.836 for the mean difference in tangibility score of the respondents of their expectation and perception is significant. ($P < 0.000$). The mean tangibility score of the guests expectation and their perception were 17.23 and 16.05 respectively.

Finally the empathy also shows a gap between hotels guest expectation and the perception. The guest should have the communication and should pay attention to personal service and specific service to the guests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The table below shows the service delivery gap in the five Servqual dimension attributes.:

TABLE- 6

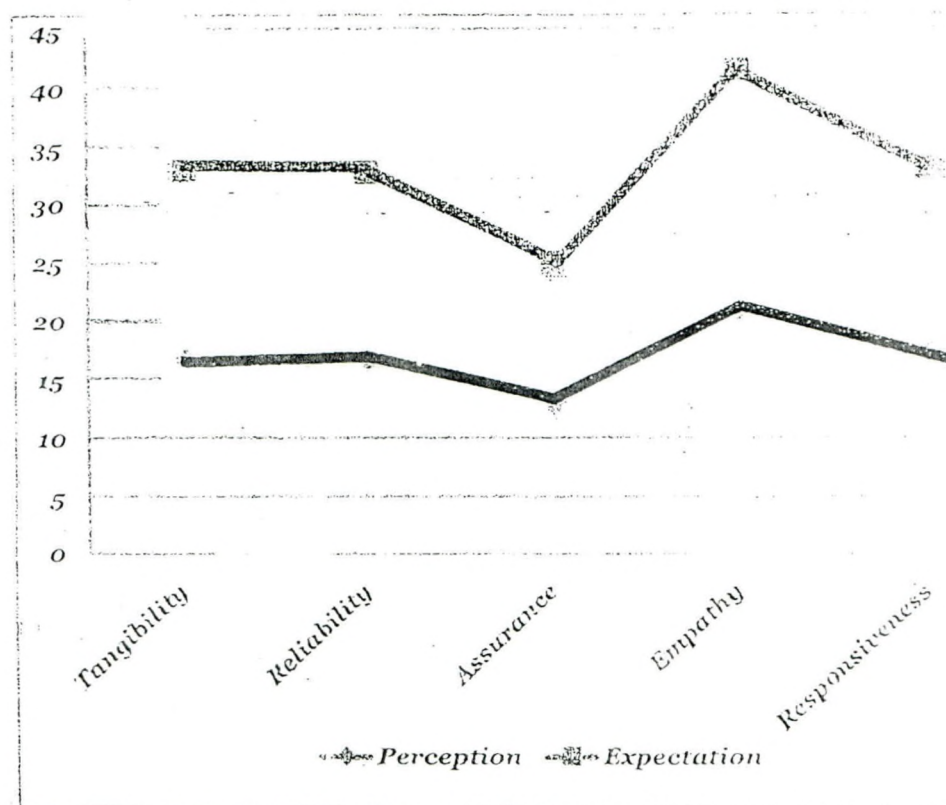
Service Quality Gap

Dimension	Expectation	Perception	Gap
Tangibility	16.89	16.23	-0.66
Reliability	16.79	16.11	-0.68
Responsiveness	13.03	12.24	-0.79
Assurance	21.10	20.68	-0.42
Empathy	17.23	16.05	-1.18

The gap analysis shows that there is gap in all servqual dimensions. In all dimensions there shows negative gap. It shows that the customer expectation is higher than the customer reception. Which shows that the service delivery in the hotels is poor than the customer expectation. The gap is high in Empathy dimension and less in Assurance dimension. It shows from the study that the assurance - knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence among guests relatively high the service personnel are very polite and trustworthy in the hotels. However the empathy attribute of service personnel need to be improved. Individualised attention and more personal care towards guests need to be improved remarkably. The other dimensions are Tangibility, Reliability and Responsiveness.

These dimensions also shows negative Gaps. Tangibility is the appearance of physical facilities, equipments, and communication skills etc need to be enhanced to match up to the guests expectation. The Reliability attributes of service personnel the dependability and accuracy in service delivery also need to be improved to match up to guests expectation. The responsiveness attribute contributes to the initiativeness of service personnel and prompt service delivery needs to be improved.

CHART 1
SERVICE QUALITY



The t-test analysis is done to show the level of gap between customer expectation and perception of service delivery personnel. The results revealed that the assurance dimension has the lowest gap, where the dimension fulfilled the highest level of perception. This study focused further on the gap between customer's expectation and their perception of front office service quality. The results showed that the overall mean score of expectation was higher than perception in all dimensions, yielding a negative SERVQUAL gap. Moreover, their expectation of service exceeded their perception. The tangibility, reliability, responsiveness shows a negative factor.

There is a gap in the level of expectation and level of perception in these dimensions. Which shows that guests are having high expectation on various service delivery dimension like tangibility, reliability and responsiveness. Their receptions of service in these dimensions are not matching with their expectation. The findings of this study were found that by focusing on tangibility, reliability and responsiveness hotel should deliver quality service in order to achieve high level guests of satisfaction. In assurance dimension very little or negligible amount of gap in the perception and expectation.

Key Recommendations to Improve Service Quality

The recommendations are based on the results generated from the quantitative analyses. The key recommendations are summarized as follows:

- The hotel management has to interact more with the hotel guests to understand their needs and expectations. With this practice, the managements were able to reduce the gaps between customers' perception and expectations.

- The hoteliers may invest their money on developing more innovative and comfortable guestrooms and public spaces, thereby creating more memorable guest to reduce the gap in Tangibility dimensions.

- Staffs are needed to acquire a formal training in service quality to deal with all of the different

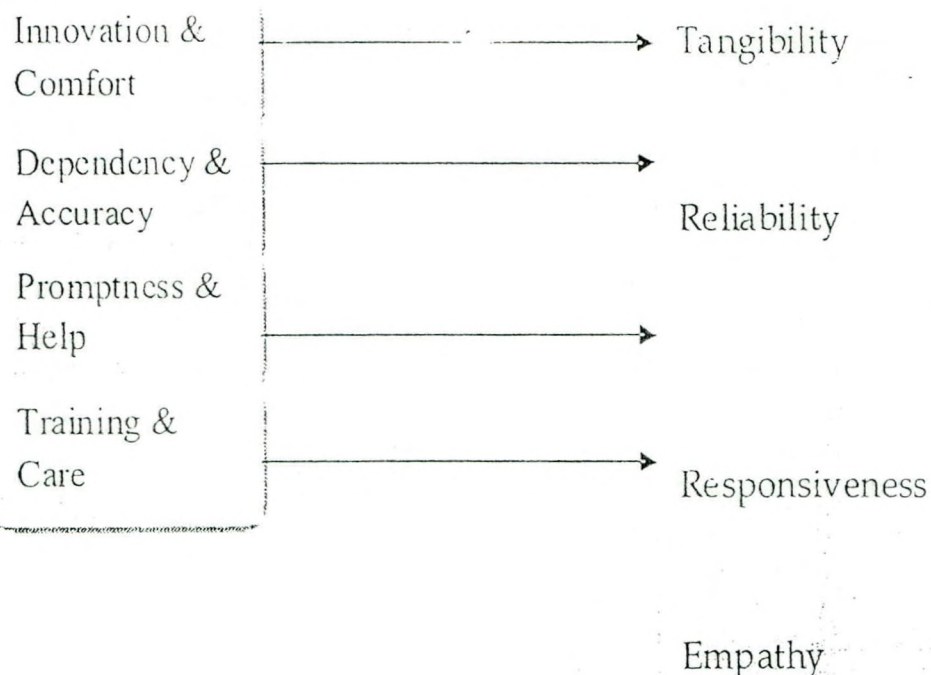
types of guests and their needs. This recommendation relates directly to empathy.

The service personnel should be more dependable and accurate in their service delivery. This relates reliability attribute of service personnel.

Promptness in service delivery and a helping in service delivery and a helping attitude of service personnel can reduce the gap in Responsiveness dimension. The service personnel should continue to be trust worthy and should build confidence among guests to maintain the least gap in service delivery.

The proposed marketing strategy is represented explained above is represented in the given model:

FIGURE-1



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JOURNAL OF TOURISM STUDIES

AJTS, Vol.7, No.1, January-June 2012

Atna-Journal of Tourism Studies is a platform for academicians, researchers and professionals in the field of tourism to interact and expand the frontiers of knowledge in domestic and international perspectives. Focusing upon the original investigations and analysis of theoretical concepts of tourism, the Journal aims to contribute for better understanding and wisdom to the fields of travel, tourism and hospitality.

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