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## A TOURIST'S EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF SERVICE DELIVERED BY THE FRONT OFFICES: A CASE OF THE NAMIBIAN WILDLIFE RESORTS

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**Abstract:** *This paper measures the service quality delivered by the frontline offices at wildlife resorts in Namibia. The objectives of this study were to assess customer's expectations and perception level towards service quality of the front office of the wildlife resorts using the SERVQUAL model. The study adopted the quantitative method. Data was collected from both local and foreign tourists who visited the wildlife resorts during the period of the study. The study unearthed customer dissatisfaction emanating from a lacuna between the customer expectations and their perceptions of the service they receive. It was recommended that the organization introduce and implement the following: regular customer surveys and feedback mechanisms, training in service delivery of frontline staffs, employee rewards and recognition schemes and to adopt a customer focused culture.*

**Keywords:** *Tourist, Frontline office, Service quality, Customer satisfaction, service expectations.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The “voice” of the customer is the enabling epitome in crafting marketing strategies towards customer satisfaction [1]. Customers’ evaluation of service quality is critical to the development of marketing strategies [2]. Tourism industry is made up of different sectors that include the travel, hospitality and the visitor sector. Namibia Wildlife Resorts Ltd (NWR) is a state owned enterprise, mandated to run the tourism facilities within Namibia.

Despite a number of efforts by top management of the wildlife resort in trying to focus on service delivery of the frontline office through training and empowerment, there still exist a lacuna in the expectation and perceptions of the service quality delivered to its customers. Verbal complaints, lack of complaint handling processes, are some of the issues that render the delivery of good customer satisfaction impossible. The study was prompted by the preponderance of poor service delivery to customers who use the wildlife frontline offices to make reservations and other services.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this study were: to assess customer’s expectations and perception level towards service quality of the front office staff in five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy; to measure the quality of service delivered by the frontline office using the Servqual model on the five dimensions and to analyse the discrepancy gap between customers’ expectations and perceptions towards service quality of the front office staff.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Both descriptive and a cross-sectional survey was adopted for the study. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the quality of service delivered by the frontline offices of the wildlife resorts. A modified SERVQUAL measurement instrument tailored to the tourism and hospitality sector was used for this study. The servqual is one of the most widely accepted models of measuring service quality. The first section of the questionnaire contains 22 questions designed to measure the customers’ expectations of the service that the airline offers. The questions cover each dimension of service quality. The second portion of the questionnaire also contains 22 questions which are designed to measure customers’ perceptions of the service they receive from the front office of the wildlife resorts. Again all the dimensions are covered. Each question from the first section has a corresponding



question in section two so that every customer expectation is measured against the corresponding perception of service in that dimension. The difference between the perception score and the expectation is the performance gap. Based on the 22 items in the original servqual model the dimensions for this study has been condensed to five dimensions and have been modified to fit the tourism industry[3];[4].

Section A comprised of demographic data of the respondents, that is gender and age group, purpose of visit to frontline offices, the number of times of visits to the frontline offices and whether the customer would recommend the frontline services to others.

In Section B, there were two questions to cover each dimension. These questions were designed to measure customers' expectations of frontline services. The customers' were requested to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with given statements on customer expectations. Section C contained ten questions. There were two questions for each dimension. These questions were designed to measure customers' perceptions of the service they get from the frontline offices. The respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with certain statements designed to solicit information on customer perceptions. Both sections B and C made use of a Likert 5 point scale requesting respondents to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with certain statements. Section D requested respondents to comment on any aspect that was not covered in the research instrument which is in line with qualitative research. Data analysis was carried out at different levels. The first stage involved analysing the questionnaire item by item beginning with the first section of the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, correlation and significance testing were used on the data analysis.

The aggregate score for each dimension was calculated as the sum of the scores from the different respondents on that dimension. The higher the score the higher the customers' expectations on that dimension. Using the aggregate scores the dimensions was ranked according to customers' expectations.

The second section of the questionnaire also contained 10 questions designed on a Likert Scale model. The respondents were requested to indicate the degree to which they agreed with statements about perceptions on the different aspects of services dimensions. The scale gave options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree



The mean score for each service dimension was calculated. The dimension with the least score is the dimension, which customers perceived to have the least customer satisfaction. The second level of analysis involved calculation of service gaps. The difference between the perception score (P) the expectation score (E) for each pair of corresponding questions was calculated as P-E. The dimension with the biggest P-E score is the dimension with the worst customer satisfaction.

### **DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES**

Questionnaires were placed on the counters in the front office. Once a customer entered the frontline office and fitted into the target group he/she was be approached to participate in the study. The aim of the research was explained and the introductory letter given to the customer. An assurance was given that the data given will be used for the purposes of the research only. Questionnaires were only handed out to those respondents that consented in participating in the research. Each respondent was given the questionnaire and a ballpoint to complete the questionnaire with. The researcher was present throughout the process to answer any queries that the respondent might have. The completed questionnaires were collected soon thereafter and filed in a box file.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

One hundred and twenty three out of 137 questionnaires were useful. The analytical techniques used in this study were sensitive to missing data and for that reason 14 questionnaires were removed. Excel spreadsheet was used to load the data which was then exported to the SPSS software package for analysis. Data analysis was carried out at different levels. The first stage involved analysing the questionnaire item by item beginning with Section A relating to demographics, Section B on customer's expectation of the frontline office service quality and Section C on customer's perceptions respectively.

There were 74 female respondents and 49 male respondents. Therefore 60% of the respondents were female and 40% male. Of the 123 respondents 13 were from Swakopmund (10.5%) and 110 were from Windhoek. Statistically this data is skewed towards Windhoek, and therefore the findings are more of a reflection of the Windhoek population. 43.1% of the respondents were between 21 and 30 years, while 35%, 11.4%, 10.6 % were in the age groups 31-40, 41-50 and above years respectively.



## SAMPLE COMPOSITION BY NUMBER OF VISITS TO THE FACILITIES

The respondents were asked to indicate how many times they had visited the MWR facilities. This was a proxy measure of repeat buying or repeat utilization and patronization of services.

Only 9 out of 123(7.3%) respondents were visiting for the first time. The other 92.7% represents repeat business.

## SUMMARY OF EXPECTANCIES AND PERCEPTIONS

The respondents were requested to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 what they expected from service offered by excellent companies in five service dimension. For each service dimension there were two questionnaire items. The Item score shown in Table I below reflects the sum of all the responses for that Item and the Dimension Total Score represents the sum of the responses to all items for that dimension.

**Table I: Summary of results**

Factors	Expectancies (E)	Total (E1+E2)	Perceptions(P)	Gap Analysis by Item (P-E)	Total Gap by Factor
Tangibles1	365		590	225	
Tangibles2	595	960	567	-28	225-28=197
Reliability1	594		560	-34	
Reliability2	591	1085	555	-36	-34-36=-70
Responsiveness1	598		551	-47	
Responsiveness2	598	1196	555	-43	-47-43=-90
Assurance1	594		560	-34	
Assurance2	598	1192	563	-35	-34-35=-69
Empathy1	600		570	-30	
Empathy2	591	1191	561	-30	-30-30=-60
Total Perception of Quality					(197-70-90-69-60)=-92

Tangibles1 had the least expectation with a score of 365 while Empathy1 had the highest score with 600. Since item Tangibles1 represented tangibles, specifically the presence of soothing music, it is evident that the respondents did not attach much importance to this factor. On the other hand item Empathy1 was in response to the question, "Excellent Wild Life resorts give customers individualized care". It is evident that of all the factors investigated the respondents place the greatest weight and importance on this factor. Of the five service dimensions Assurance with 1192 and Responsiveness with 1196 outscored the other dimensions in terms of customer expectations. Tangibles with 960 were well



behind the others. Since the customers' expectations is a proxy indicator of the importance they attach to that particular service dimension it follows that the customer regard the assurance they get from the front line staff and the responsiveness of the staff very highly while the tangible factors such as the attire of the staffs and the ambience of the buildings is of very little importance to the customers.

The Perception scores were similarly calculated. The Tangibles dimensions received the best rating followed by the Empathy dimension. The customers are therefore most impressed with the tangible aspects of the service, although generally they rated the service on all dimensions highly.

### **GAP ANALYSIS**

Service Quality was measured as the gap between the respondents' expectations about service and their perceptions of the service they received. When the perception score is greater than the expectation score, it entails that the service rendered exceeded the expectations and is viewed favourably. On the contrary negative disconfirmation occurs when the perception of the quality of the service received is lower than what was expected from the organization by the customer.

The summary of the gap analysis presented above reveals that in the Tangibles dimension of the service, the expectations were exceeded as indicated by the total score of positive 197. In all other dimensions of the service quality there were negative disconfirmations. The worst performance was recorded with the Responsiveness dimension with a score of negative 90, followed by Reliability with -70 which is in turn closely followed by Assurance with -69.

A closer analysis of the Tangibles dimension is very revealing. Although the overall score for the dimension is a positive 197, the score for the item Tangibles2 was -28. Of course, on the aggregate score this was off-set by the positive 225 recorded for the item Tangibles1. In essence negative disconfirmation was recorded on all the items on the questionnaire except the item Tangibles1. The customers are therefore pleasantly surprised by the presence of soothing music which exceeds their expectations but are disappointed with all other aspects of the service.

Further analysis was performed to establish whether there were significant differences in perceptions of the quality of service along gender lines. The t test for significance was



employed for this analysis .The most significant difference was recorded with the item Tangibles<sub>2</sub> with a t value of 0.001. This was followed by Reliability<sub>1</sub> with 0.033, Responsiveness<sub>2</sub> with 0.036 Responsiveness with 0.048 and Empathy<sub>2</sub> with 0.048 respectively. On all other items there were not significant differences between the perceptions of the male and female respondents.

### **INTENTION TO VISIT AGAIN**

The respondents were asked whether they intended to visit the wildlife offices facilities again, and they were asked to indicate their answers by selecting between Yes, No and Not Sure. A total of 59.7% were affirmative in wanting to visit again while 29.3% did not intend to visit again and 9.8% was not sure.

The respondents were asked, “Would you recommend the reservation service to friends?’ and were given three options to choose from namely Yes, No, and Not Sure. Of the customers that responded to this question 108 or 91.5 % indicated that they would recommend this service to friends while 6.8% said they would not. Only 1.7% was undecided.

Correlation analysis was performed to ascertain the relationship between the number of visits to the wildlife front offices, the intention to visit again and the intention to refer friends to do business with the wildlife resort. There is a significant positive correlation between the intention to visit again and the willingness to refer friends to do business with the wildlife resort, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.293. Essentially this indicates that the customers who intent to patronize the wildlife resort’s services are also willing to recommend friends to do likewise.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Of the five service dimensions Assurance and Responsiveness outscored the other dimensions in terms of customer expectations. Customers had the least expectations about the Tangibles dimension. Since the customers’ expectations is a proxy indicator of the importance they attach to that particular service dimension it follows that assurance and responsiveness are of paramount importance to the customers. On the contrary the customers do not place a premium on the tangible aspect of the service such as the attire of the staffs and the ambience of the buildings is of very little importance to the customers.



Most of the customers perceive the quality of the service very highly. Furthermore, the Tangibles dimensions received the best rating followed by the Empathy dimension and Assurance dimension. The customers are therefore most impressed with the tangible aspects of the service, although generally they rated the service on all dimensions highly.

There are some very important observations to be underscored. The first observation is that; the customers are most satisfied with the Tangibles dimension of the service, and yet they attach the least importance to this dimension. The organization is therefore performing exceedingly well in a dimension that the customers least value. This is indicative of a mismatch between what the customers value and what the management believe the customers value. What the managers are concentrating on in terms of service delivery is likely to be out of sync with customers' expectations. The other important observation is that the customers placed a lot of value on Assurance and Responsiveness. Although the customers' perceptions of the quality of the service offered in these dimensions were generally positive they were not as positive as the perceptions for the other dimension.

The obvious conclusion stemming from this is that the service offering is generally perceived in good light but the organization is not truly customer centric, since in a customer centric organization the dimensions that the customers place more value on receive more attention and therefore better perception scores.

### **Quality of Service**

Respectively objectives two and three were to measure the quality of service delivered by the frontline office using the Servqual model on the five dimensions and to analyse the discrepancy gap between customers' expectations and perceptions towards service quality of the front office staff. These objectives were accomplished by the gap analysis presented earlier.

In the Tangibles dimension a positive gap was established. This means that the quality of service offered by wildlife front office exceeds the expectations of the customers in this dimension. However, negative disconfirmations were recorded in all other dimensions. In these dimensions namely Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy the service offered does not meet the expectations of the customers. However, this should not be taken in isolation as the data analysis presented revealed that in all the dimensions the customers perceived the quality of service offered to be high. Three conclusions can be





made from these results. First, the quality of service offered is perceived by the customers to be high. Second, the same customers are of the view that although the service is high it still does not equal their expectations as revealed by the negative disconfirmations in four of the five dimensions. The third conclusion follows from the first two and it is that the wildlife resorts are operating in an environment characterized by very demanding customers with very exacting standards and expectations.

Analysis of the data along gender lines revealed that females tended to be less satisfied than their male counterparts in almost all dimensions.

### **Customer Loyalty**

Up to 92.7% of the customers that participated in the study had visited and patronized wildlife service's more than once. This would suggest that either the wild life resort is operating in an environment with a monopolistic market structure or that the front office of the wild life resort has a very loyal clientele. Furthermore, 57.7% intend to patronize the wildlife resorts for services again while 87.8% are willing to recommend the services to friends. The customers therefore, possess a lot of goodwill towards the wildlife resorts front office.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Customer Surveys and Feedback Mechanisms**

The disjuncture between what customers expect and the customer perceptions can be cured by implementing regular customer surveys. The surveys should focus more on establishing what the customers believe is important to them with emphasis not only on the outcome but also the process involved. Furthermore, the wildlife resort management should put in place feedback mechanisms so that they get timely feedback on what the customers feel about their service.

### **Loyalty Schemes**

Management should put in place loyalty schemes to further cement the loyalty of their customers. A scheme which allows customers to accrue redeemable points whenever they patronize the front office of the wild life resort for services can go a long way towards achieving this. Furthermore, management should take advantage of the fact that most customers are willing to recommend to friends. A scheme which offers customers discounts or points whenever they successful recommend to someone should be implemented.



### **Training of Frontline Staffs**

The negative disconfirmations recorded can be reversed by constant training and development of the frontline staffs. The training should take into consideration the fact that the females were more dissatisfied than the males. In future service delivery should be gender sensitive to take care of the unique needs of the female clientele. The beginning point should be to establish through a customer service survey what the females feel should be improved and how it should be improved. Particular emphasis should be put on improving the service delivery in the Responsiveness, Reliability, Assurance and Empathy dimensions. Training must be on a continual basis to help existing staff improve their customer skills [5].

### **Employee Reward and Recognition Schemes**

Management should implement an employee reward and recognition system which recognizes and rewards those employees that excel in customer service. The customers should be given opportunities to evaluate the service they receive from every frontline staff whenever they visit the wild life offices. Bonuses, promotion, salary increments and career advancement should be linked to positive customer feedback.

### **Customer Focused Culture**

The organisation should adopt a customer focused culture. The reason there is pervasive customer dissatisfaction is not that frontline service is of a poor quality. It is good but could be better. The panacea to this problem is to develop a customer centred culture in which products and service designs are a product of extensive customer consultation and involvement. It is recommended that the organisation should initiate customer satisfaction based on the Servqual model, and use the results of the first survey as the baseline value against which future survey results will be compared.

### **Importance of Customer Feedback**

The organisation should start encouraging and rewarding customer feedback. By encouraging customers to provide feedback when they are not happy with the service, the management will be able to identify problem areas before they escalate into major dissatisfaction. Suggestion boxes can be placed in the frontline offices where customers can put their suggestions. Such an exercise can assist the management to keep its fingers on the



pulse of the customer. Electronic feedback technology that is now available on the market can come in handy in this regard.

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