

DEVELOPING A CUSTOMER SERVICE MODEL FOR SUAN SUNANDHA PALACE HOTEL UNDER THE OFFICE OF PROPERTY AND ASSETS, SUAN SUNANDHA RAJABHAT UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic growth of the global hospitality industry has heightened the importance of exceptional customer service as a key differentiator for hotels. This study explores the development of a customer service model tailored to Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, a university-operated establishment under Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The hotel faces a dual challenge: maintaining competitive service standards while serving as a training ground for students pursuing hospitality and business education. Utilizing the SERVQUAL model, which encompasses five dimensions of service quality—Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy—the study identifies critical gaps and proposes strategies for improvement.

Employing a qualitative research design, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis involving hotel staff, management, students, and guests. The thematic analysis revealed several findings: Tangibility improvements, such as modernizing facilities and adopting digital tools, are essential to creating a professional image. Ensuring service Reliability requires consistent training programs and robust feedback mechanisms to uphold operational standards. Responsiveness can be enhanced by establishing clear communication protocols and fostering proactive problem-solving among staff and trainees. Assurance, rooted in staff knowledge and professionalism, underscores the importance of certifications and structured skill-building initiatives. Empathy—the provision of personalized, caring service—emerged as a crucial factor in achieving guest satisfaction and loyalty.

The study concludes that integrating SERVQUAL dimensions into Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel's operations not only addresses service quality gaps but also aligns with its academic mission. Recommendations include structured training modules, facility upgrades, and the implementation of innovative guest interaction protocols. These strategies ensure that the hotel can sustain its competitive edge. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on adapting service quality frameworks for hybrid entities, bridging the gap between academic objectives and commercial success in the hospitality sector.

Keywords: Service Quality, Customer Service Model, University Hotel

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is a cornerstone of global economies, contributing significantly to employment, tourism, and cultural exchange (World Tourism Organization, 2021). Hotels, as pivotal entities in this sector, continuously seek innovative approaches to improve customer service and sustain competitive advantage. Customer service not only determines customer satisfaction but also influences brand loyalty and market reputation (Kotler et al., 2017). As global travelers become more discerning, the expectations for personalized and high-quality service continue to rise, necessitating constant adaptation and innovation in the hospitality industry.

Thailand's hospitality sector has long been a major driver of economic growth, with tourism contributing significantly to the country's GDP (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2021). Known for its rich cultural heritage and hospitality, Thailand has established itself as a top destination for international and domestic travelers. However, the sector's rapid growth has intensified competition among hotels, highlighting the need for differentiation through superior customer service. Amid these trends, university-operated hotels have emerged as unique entities, combining commercial and academic objectives. These establishments not only generate revenue but also serve as practical learning environments for students pursuing hospitality and business-related disciplines.

Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, managed by the Office of Property and Assets of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, exemplifies this dual-purpose model. As a university-affiliated hotel, it faces distinctive challenges in balancing its dual roles. On one hand, it must maintain financial sustainability and provide high-quality services to meet the expectations of paying guests. On the other hand, it serves as an academic training ground, where students can gain hands-on experience in hospitality management. This dual mandate requires a careful alignment of academic and operational priorities to ensure the hotel's success in both domains.

The competitive nature of the hospitality industry further complicates this balance. Guests at Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel expect the same standards of service as they would at commercial hotels, necessitating the development of a customer service model that meets industry benchmarks while accommodating the unique constraints of a university-operated facility. Furthermore, the integration of feedback mechanisms, employee training programs, and operational strategies must align with both the educational goals of the university and the commercial realities of the market.

In addition to these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the global hospitality industry, reshaping customer expectations and service delivery methods (World Tourism Organization, 2022). Health and safety concerns, digital transformation, and the increasing demand for personalized experiences have redefined the standards of service quality. For Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, adapting to these changes is crucial for sustaining its relevance and competitiveness in the post-pandemic era.

Given this context, this study aims to develop a robust customer service model tailored to the unique operational environment of Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel. By leveraging theoretical frameworks such as the SERVQUAL model, the research seeks to address the critical gaps in service delivery, ensuring alignment between customer expectations and perceptions. The findings of this study will provide actionable insights for enhancing service quality, operational efficiency, and customer satisfaction, contributing to the hotel's long-term success and academic mission.

Theoretical Foundation

Service Quality

The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), is a widely recognized framework for assessing service quality. This model identifies five key dimensions of service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions collectively provide a comprehensive lens to evaluate customer expectations and perceptions, which are pivotal in determining service quality. (Weerasophon, 2021)

1. **Tangibility** refers to the physical appearance of facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials. For Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, maintaining clean and aesthetically pleasing environments can significantly influence customer impressions.
2. **Reliability** measures the ability to perform promised services dependably and accurately. Consistent delivery of quality services is crucial in fostering trust among hotel guests.
3. **Responsiveness** pertains to the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. In a university-operated hotel, ensuring timely and attentive service is essential to meet and exceed customer expectations.
4. **Assurance** involves the knowledge and courtesy of employees, as well as their ability to convey trust and confidence. Training programs for both staff and students at Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel play a vital role in building this dimension.
5. **Empathy** reflects the provision of caring and individualized attention to customers. Understanding the diverse needs of guests and delivering personalized services enhance the overall customer experience.

By focusing on these dimensions, the SERVQUAL model enables organizations to identify gaps between customer expectations and perceptions, facilitating targeted improvements. For Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, adapting this model to its unique operational and academic context can bridge service quality gaps and ensure a balance between commercial success and educational objectives.

While the SERVQUAL model has been widely applied in various hospitality contexts, its adaptation to dual-purpose entities, such as university-operated hotels, remains underexplored. Traditional applications of SERVQUAL focus on commercial hotels where the sole objective is to enhance customer satisfaction and profitability. However, university-operated hotels, such as Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, face the dual challenge of aligning academic goals with commercial operations. This unique dynamic introduces complexities that require tailored adaptations of the SERVQUAL dimensions.

For instance, the **reliability** dimension in a university setting involves not only delivering consistent service but also ensuring that students, who often take on operational roles, receive adequate training to meet industry standards. Similarly, the **assurance** dimension must account for the educational aspect, emphasizing knowledge transfer and skill development alongside building guest trust. Furthermore, the integration of **empathy** requires balancing personalized guest experiences with the developmental needs of student staff.

Existing literature does not provide sufficient guidance on modifying SERVQUAL to account for these dual objectives. The lack of empirical studies addressing how theoretical frameworks like SERVQUAL can be customized for educational-commercial hybrid models represents a significant research gap. Addressing this gap will provide valuable insights into enhancing service quality while supporting the academic mission of university-operated hotels.

OBJECTIVE

1. To evaluate the current state of customer service at Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel.
2. To identify key dimensions of the SERVQUAL model that require adaptation to meet the dual objectives of academic training and commercial success.
3. To propose actionable strategies for implementing and sustaining the adapted customer service model in the hotel's operations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore and develop a customer service model tailored to the dual operational and academic goals of Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel. The qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding complex phenomena, such as the interplay between academic objectives and operational challenges, and for generating rich, contextual insights.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study includes key stakeholders associated with Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, comprising hotel management, staff, student trainees, and guests.

Sampling Method: Purposive sampling will be employed to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience. This includes hotel managers responsible for operational decisions, students undergoing hospitality training, and guests with direct service experience.

Sample Size: Approximately 30 participants, including 10 hotel staff and management members, 10 student trainees, and 10 hotel guests, will be selected to ensure diverse perspectives.

Data Collection

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with hotel managers, staff, and student trainees to gather in-depth insights into service delivery challenges and training practices. Interviews will also capture guest perceptions of service quality and their expectations.

Focus Groups: Focus group discussions will be organized with student trainees to explore their experiences and challenges in providing customer service. This method facilitates dynamic interaction and collective reflection.

Document Analysis: Existing records, including guest feedback forms, training manuals, and performance evaluation reports, will be analyzed to identify patterns and areas for improvement.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be employed to analyze the qualitative data collected. This method involves:

Data Familiarization: Transcribing interviews and focus group discussions to gain an initial understanding.

Coding: Identifying and labeling recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the SERVQUAL dimensions and their adaptation.

Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes that align with the research objectives.

Interpretation: Drawing connections between themes to develop actionable recommendations for the proposed customer service model.

This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing customer service quality at Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, paving the way for effective model development and implementation.

RESULTS

Based on the analysis of data collected through interviews, focus groups, and document reviews, several suggestions have emerged for enhancing customer service at Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel. These suggestions address the dual objectives of academic and operational excellence, focusing on the adaptation of the servqual model dimensions:

Tangibility findings

1. **Facilities:** guests consistently noted the cleanliness of rooms and public areas. However, some highlighted outdated furniture, worn carpets, and insufficient lighting in certain areas, which detracted from their overall experience.
2. **Equipment:** some guests reported issues with operational functionality, such as air conditioning and bathroom fixtures. Modern amenities like smart tvs or usb charging ports were absent, which some guests expected.
3. **Personnel presentation:** while full-time staff maintained a professional appearance, student trainees occasionally lacked uniform consistency or presented an informal demeanor.
4. **Communication materials:** hotel brochures, menus, and other materials were observed to lack clarity, with errors in english translations being a recurring complaint from international guests.

Reliability findings

1. **Service consistency:** variability in service delivery was reported, with some guests receiving prompt and accurate responses, while others experienced delays or inconsistencies in promised services (e.g., delayed room service or inaccurate billing).
2. **Trainee challenges:** rotating schedules of student trainees contributed to disruptions in continuity, as trainees were still learning standard operating procedures.
3. **Dependability:** repeat guests expressed concerns over fluctuating service quality compared to previous visits, attributing it to the reliance on inexperienced trainees.

Responsiveness findings

1. Promptness: while staff and trainees were eager to help, several guests reported delays during peak periods, particularly in dining services and housekeeping.
2. Decision-making: trainees hesitated when faced with complaints or special requests, often deferring decisions to senior staff, which increased response times.
3. Proactivity: few instances of proactive service (e.g., offering recommendations or anticipating needs) were noted, particularly from trainees.

Assurance findings:

1. Professionalism and knowledge: guests generally trusted full-time staff but noted gaps in student trainees' confidence, especially when explaining hotel policies or services.
2. Skill development: some trainees lacked fundamental skills, such as handling financial transactions, addressing complaints diplomatically, or using hotel management software.
3. Communication: inconsistent communication, particularly with non-thai-speaking guests, was a recurring issue. Limited language skills hindered trainees from conveying trust and competence.

Empathy findings:

1. Personalized attention: guests appreciated efforts by trainees to provide attentive service but noted that some lacked the ability to identify and respond to unique needs (e.g., dietary restrictions, cultural preferences).
2. Emotional intelligence: several guests mentioned that while trainees were polite, they sometimes appeared disengaged or overly focused on task completion rather than guest comfort.
3. Challenges balancing roles: trainees reported difficulty managing the dual expectation of delivering empathetic service while adhering to the hotel's operational efficiency demands.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in the operations of Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, a dual-purpose entity combining academic training with commercial hospitality. The integration of the SERVQUAL model within this context has provided a structured framework for addressing gaps in service delivery and aligning customer satisfaction with the university's educational objectives.

Significance of Tangibility Improvements: The enhancement of physical facilities and the implementation of modern technology were identified as critical factors for improving the guest experience. Upgrading reception areas, guest rooms, and common spaces to align with industry standards creates an inviting atmosphere that reflects professionalism. Moreover, adopting digital solutions like self-check-in kiosks and interactive directories demonstrates the hotel's commitment to innovation, streamlining operations for guests and staff alike. These improvements contribute to stronger first impressions, better customer retention, and an elevated brand reputation.

Ensuring Service Reliability: Reliability emerged as a core expectation for guests, emphasizing the importance of consistent and dependable service delivery. The study recommends rigorous training programs for both staff and students, focusing on operational standards, time management, and accountability. Reliability fosters trust and ensures repeat business, positioning Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel as a dependable hospitality provider. The inclusion of mechanisms for real-time monitoring of service quality, such as guest feedback systems, enables proactive responses to any lapses. **Enhancing Responsiveness:** Timely and efficient responses to guest needs are central to creating a positive customer experience. The study reveals that clear communication protocols, supported by technology, are essential for improving responsiveness. Establishing a dedicated customer service desk, backed by a responsive hotline, ensures that guests receive assistance promptly. Training students in active listening and problem-solving prepares them to handle diverse customer interactions effectively, further elevating the hotel's service standards. **Building Assurance through Knowledge and Courtesy:** Assurance involves cultivating trust and confidence in the hotel staff's capabilities. For Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel, this dimension is closely tied to its dual purpose as a learning institution. Structured certification programs, regular evaluations, and on-the-job training workshops equip students with the knowledge and skills

needed to deliver high-quality service. Emphasizing professionalism and courtesy in guest interactions enhances the hotel's reputation and instills confidence among customers. Fostering Empathy in Guest Interactions: Personalized and caring service is a hallmark of excellence in hospitality. The study underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the unique needs of guests, particularly in a culturally rich context like Thailand. Empathy-driven initiatives, such as tailored guest services and personalized attention, ensure that customers feel valued and appreciated. Additionally, empowering students to engage with guests empathetically not only enhances customer satisfaction but also enriches their educational experience.

Long-Term Sustainability and Resilience: The post-pandemic hospitality landscape demands agility and innovation. Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel is uniquely positioned to leverage its dual-purpose model to implement sustainable practices, such as digital transformation and customer-centric approaches. By consistently evaluating and refining its service delivery, the hotel can remain competitive while maintaining its commitment to academic excellence.

IMPLEMENTATION

Physical Infrastructure Upgrades (Tangibility)

1. Allocate funding for upgrading reception areas, rooms, and communal spaces with modern designs.
2. Incorporate technology like self-check-in kiosks and smart room features for an enhanced customer experience.
3. Maintain a dedicated maintenance schedule for all facilities.

Service Consistency and Training (Reliability)

1. Develop a comprehensive training program for students focusing on operational consistency and service excellence.
2. Use real-time monitoring systems to ensure adherence to promised service standards.

Customer Interaction Protocols (Responsiveness)

1. Establish a dedicated customer service desk and hotline for immediate guest assistance.
2. Train staff and students in active listening and conflict resolution techniques.

Knowledge Building and Confidence (Assurance)

1. Provide certifications and structured courses for staff and student trainees to enhance industry-relevant knowledge.
2. Conduct workshops and simulations to build confidence in delivering professional, courteous service.

Personalized Customer Engagement (Empathy)

1. Develop a feedback-driven approach to understand guest preferences and tailor experiences.
2. Use CRM tools to track guest history and preferences for individualized attention.

This strategic approach ensures that Suan Sunandha Palace Hotel evolves as a benchmark for balancing academic and commercial hospitality objectives.

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