



Communication and Productivity with Guests at Front Office; A Qualitative Study on Hotels

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Abstract

Hotel businesses are focused on customers. So the satisfaction of the customer is highly important. Hotel management begins in the front office department with reservation, followed by guest check-in procedures, accommodation and ends with check out and after check out processes. Communication with the customers is a long process that starts before the customers enter the premises and continues even after the customers check out. Because of this, customer satisfaction and increasing productivity lie within the communication abilities of the front office staff. In short, in the front office, communication is vital for the productivity of the facility. This is why the front office department is highly important in hotels. In the hotels which are labor intensive and which try to provide the customers with efficient service, productivity is highly related with front office manager detecting the communication problems related to the customers. In the research that was made, it was determined that there weren't enough studies that contain customer communication and productivity issues in front offices. This is why this study carries great importance. With this trait, this study will also be informative to the upcoming academic works. The study was done using a structured interview method. Prior to the study, related literature has been reviewed and questions were prepared ahead. Afterwards, with face-to-face interviews, these questions were asked to front office managers and answers were requested. The replies were categorized. From the front office managers, information was acquired about who was responsible of communicating with the customers in the front office department, what the communication problems were and how productivity was affected. It was conducted on thirty five front office managers. The study was made in the Konaklı, Avsallar and Manavgat districts of the Mediterranean region which is majorly centered on tourism. This study also revealed that communication is very important in the front office department. Front office managers stated that they should manage the communication process and they have an economic aspect. At the end of the study all of the front office managers have concluded that communication problems affect the productivity negatively.

Keywords: Hotel Administration, Front Office, Communication with Customers, Productivity.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the whole of the events and relationships that arise from temporary accommodation that people have made while traveling away from places they live in, often demanding goods and services produced by tourism enterprises in places. Primarily accommodation, then food and beverage and partially need for entertainment are provided by hotel managements. Because of this hotel managements are of great importance for the tourism sector.

Communication, which is an information exchange between people using common symbols, is an indispensable element of individual and organizational life. Communication is the only tool used by people to understand each other. Also Communication has organizational and social functions such as, informing, guidance, expressing wishes, making connections and problem solving.

Productivity is the production of resources in accordance with the needs of people by using them effectively. Hotels are labor-intensive managements. It is people that both serve and get served. It is extremely important that the customer wishes and needs are provided accurately. Because of this reason effective communication is required at hotels. In short, people are served at hotels so, service sales are carried out, not goods. In hotel managements, providing a quality service to ensure that customers are satisfied with the hotel in intense competition conditions is the main purpose to reach desired goals. This situation provides more productivity by allowing customers to keep coming back to the hotel or recommending it to other people. Because of this reason effective and constant communication with guests is required in hotel managements.

Hotel managements that growing day by day in today have a more complicated structure in time. Within this evolving complex structure, various departments have come to the fore in order to provide efficient service of the hotels. Every department in the hotel business is important within its responsibilities. The front office department is very important because it has a long communication process starting from the reservation stage with the customers and continuing with the entrance and accommodation stage and ending with the checkout and post-checkout. For this reason, effective communication is the key to productivity in the front office department, which is the longest and most intensive department of communication with guests (Akova and Karakaya, 2003: 8-12).

In the front office, if there are communication problems with the guests, it is seen that the guests do not prefer the hotel or they want to leave the hotel upon being dissatisfied with the service. This causes the productivity of the facility to decrease.

1- FRONT OFFICE DEPARTMENT, COMMUNICATION and PRODUCTIVITY in HOTELS

Hotel managements are, 'Economically, socially, and disciplined establishment that accepts provision of temporary accommodation and partly food and beverage needs for a fee as a profession, with the characteristics such as technical equipment, comfort, quality of service of staff as desired by a civilized person (Olalı and Korzay, 1989: 25), and most dominant industry of tourism sector' (Gee, et al, 1989: 295-299).

According to another definition, hotel managements are, 'Organizations that are structured to meet the needs of people who travel, especially accommodation, eating, drinking and entertainment, and all relationships with staff, architecture, practices and customers are connected to certain rules and standards' (Akgöz, 2003: 1).

In short, hotel managements are generally; profit-oriented establishments that satisfy the needs of firstly accommodation then, food & beverage and entertainment for people who have travelled to places that they are not currently living in.

Front offices in hotel managements are the first contact between the establishment and the guests. The first communication starts in the front office. In hotel managements sections in which the front office department can carry out their functions are "front office units" and "the back office units" (Szende and Reddy, 2017: 1-7). In front office department the front office service units consist of "reception" , "front cashier" (in some hotels this job is done by receptionists) and "concierge personnel" while the back office unit consists of "reservation" and "switchboard" (Şener, 2006:22-23). This is the department which is seen first by the new-coming and the last seen by the leaving guests. It is placed in the entry of the main building, near the stairs and the elevators, by the lobby for everyone to see and arrive at without effort. It is designed suitable for the management's class

and it is also designed to match the management's class. (Zomerdijk and Vries, 2007: 110; Kantarcı, 2004: 45). The first opinion of the lobby where the most activity and the business traffic happens is clearly important. This is the reason for the lobby and the front office to be compatible with the management. The front office which is defined as the brain of the hotel management is the place where the customer is greeted, hosted and sent off. In accommodation facilities, front office is the first connection between the hotel and the customer (Demirtaş, 2010: 26). The first communication between the personnel and the guests in the process of renting rooms and reservation. Accepting guests upon arrival, the check-in processes, the problems of the customers, the check-out processes and post-checkout communication are all done by front office department. Briefly, in accommodation facilities, the front office is the center of contact between the hotel and the guests and it takes part in satisfying both the customer and their needs (Safizadeth, at al. 2003: 557-576; Gökdeniz and Dinç, 2006: 21; Şener, 2011: 2-22; Gray and Liguori, 1994:101-111; Kandampully and Suhartanto: 2000).

Communication, derived from the Latin word 'communis' and used as the 'communication' in most of the western tongues, is the common process of sharing meaning among the individuals in the shortest sense. Communication is the endless process in which the messages sent between interpersonal relationships are both taken and given and is interpreted and deduced (Mısırlı, 2004: 1).

Productivity is the effort of people to get better by using the resources available. At the core of productivity are effective communication, personal integrity, unity and product, management and life quality. Productivity is the right thing to do in the way people expect, in the right way, for the benefit of people (Toprak, 2005:75-78). The first point of contact for guests arriving at the hotel is the front office. The first relationship between the front office staff and the guests begins at the reservation stage. The front office is one of the areas where communication with guests is most intense. The front office department is the most important department where not only complaints about guests' accommodation activities but also complaints about all staff and departments are followed and followed. For this reason, it plays an important role in productivity via meeting the needs and desires of the guests and increasing their satisfaction (Kasavana and Brooks, 1995: 113). (Rao and Sahu, 2013: 39). As a consequence of dealing with people and their problems, front office may face up with unpleasant situations. Because of this, front office personnel need to have sufficient communication skills (Ünlüönen at al. 2007: 27).

Preventing faults and mistakes in the front office department, increasing service quality, increasing customer satisfaction, in short: increasing productivity is related with the quality of the communication that the front office employees perform. Increasing communication problems in the service-producing front office department prevents efficient operation and thus causes the end of customer satisfaction over time and thus the productivity of the accommodation, causing a great damage to the accommodation operation. Briefly, while the success of communication increases customer satisfaction and productivity, miscommunication and problems in communication cause the decrease of the satisfaction of the guests and hence the decrease of the productivity (Patah, Radzi at.al., 2009: 168; Zilva, Wong, 2012: 4-6)

2- COMMUNICATION AND PRODUCTIVITY with GUESTS AT FRONT OFFICE; A QUALITATIVE STUDY on HOTELS

2.1. Aim and the Scope of the Study

Because the front office department is the department that has the most communication with the customers in the accommodation business, all the complaints of the customers are informed to the front office and the complaints are followed by the front office,. This makes the front office a communication oriented department. Since accommodation is a service prioritized industry, it is

possible to reach the desired objectives and increase the productivity of the business only by effective and successful communication with the customers.

Acquiring the satisfaction of guests in accommodation businesses is made possible via minimizing communication problems by the front office.

The aim of the study is to determine who and what processes will be carried out in front office departments. In addition, the front office department is to identify the communication problems with customers. Another aim is to learn the thoughts of the front office managers about the effects of communication problems on productivity.

2.2-METHODOLOGY

The study is a descriptive study. The research findings were obtained by structured interview technique. Firstly, the relevant literature was searched and then the questions were prepared. Providing in-depth information on the subject searched by the interviewees and the difficulty of obtaining this detailed information by means other than interviewing method was effective in selecting the interview method. The managers were asked face to face, the answers received were noted, and the answers were evaluated by separating them into categories. At the end of the negotiations, the questions were handled one by one and the observations and the whole text were taken together.

2.3. HYPOTHESIS of THE STUDY

It is inevitable that the research should be based on some assumptions in order to solve the general problem of the research. For this reason the following considerations will be taken as basis. In the front office department, which is evaluated in the service sector and kept on the front line of human service, the communication problems experienced with the customers affect both the satisfaction of the guests and the productivity of the business; therefore the negative effects on productivity occur.

2.4. TARGET POPULATION of THE STUDY and SAMPLE

Population of the study is the hotels which are widely spread in Konaklı, Avsallar, Manavgat regions located in the Mediterranean Region. Samples of the study are 35 of these hotels in the region. Five star hotels in this area were considered. The employees of the front office and 10 people working at the top were included in the study. Interview questions were asked to the front office managers in the accommodation facilities that are in the population of the study and their answers were taken.

2.5. APPLICATION of THE STUDY, FINDINGS and COMMENTS

Interview questions were asked to the only front office managers in the accommodation facilities face-to-face. In the answer phase of the questions, the expressions and attitudes were related to each other and notes were taken. The answers were noted, categorized and then analyzed. The clarification of the studies and explanations was done by evaluating the answers to the questions asked. Front office managers were asked questions and were asked to answer these questions. The answers given and comments about these answers are as follows:

a- In your department, in which stages does the most communication with guests occur?

Table 1: The stage of communication with guests

	%
reservation phase	76
accommodation phase	14
check-out and after phase	10

According to the answers given, 76% of the front-office respondents answered in the reservation phase, 14% in the accommodation phase and 10% in the check-out and after phase.

Within the scope of the answers given, although reservation stage is one of the most communicative stages, it was seen that the accommodation stage was also communication intensive. In accommodation facilities, the booking stage is the initial communication with guests. When the guest is informed about the facility at the stage of the reservation, the main purpose is to persuade the guest to stay at the facility. In this process, the most appropriate room and price conditions are conveyed to the guest, taking into consideration the preferences of the guest. If the guest decides to stay, the necessary information for booking is also taken. This initial reservation negotiation meant for guests to speak to the facility. Guests also keep the communication on tracks by wanting to keep in touch with the first staff they see for booking changes and cancellations. For this reason, the front office department is of great importance as it is the first place for communication. The time spent between entry and check-out is the accommodation stage. During this time, guests get the information they need about the indoor and the surrounding area. During the stay, the guests will notify the front office about their wishes and problems. The front office will again receive information on whether the problems have been resolved or not (Sriyam, 2010: 77; Hogan, 2006).

b-During the reservation stage, reservations and room sales to customers are done by whom?

Table 2: Room sales

	%
“Front Office Manager or Chief	45
Reservation Manager or Chief	35
Receptionists	15
Hotel Managers	5

The percentage distribution of the interviewed managers is given in Table 2. This distribution was classified as pre-office managers or chiefs of 45%, reservation managers or chiefs of 35%, receptionists of 15% and hotel managers of 5%. As it is understood from the survey conducted, it is seen that the sales marketing department in the accommodation businesses performs their duty only in 35% of the accommodation enterprises, but it is seen that in many businesses this unit is not needed, and the duty is done by front office manager.

c-What are the communication problems with customers encountered in reservation stage?

Table 3: Communication problems in reservation stage

	%
Giving incorrect information to guests due to missing information	40
Personal inadequacy of the personnel	35
Culture and language barriers	20
Guest sourced problems	5

According to the answers given, 40% were giving incorrect information to guests due to missing information, 35% were individual deficiencies, 20% were language and cultural differences, and 5% were about individual guests. The room sales stage for guests is an extremely important stage for the hotels. It is impossible for a hotel to continue their businesses with empty rooms. In the accommodation stage, “service” so essentially imagination is sold to the guests. For this reason, the personnel who will make the sales transaction should have good communication with the guests, be able to use verbal, non-verbal and written communication very well and have enough information to persuade the guests about the facility and convey the information completely. Also, personnel who sell rooms should know at least one foreign language well and have knowledge about other cultures.

d-At the reservation stage, what are the impacts of communication problems with the customer on the efficiency of your department?

Table 4: Communication problems of front desk's effect on efficiency

	%
Customer dissatisfaction and loss	72
Reduce of service quality	19
Loss of work motivation and work efficiency	9

The front office personnel interviewed in the survey indicated that if there were no communication problems with the guests at the time of booking, the room fullness of the facility would rise to the highest level. Guests arrived at the facility with complete knowledge, will be able to meet their expectations and will be encouraged to come back and recommend the facility to others. Answers showed that room occupancy and operating profits will increase and the productivity of the front office department will reach the highest level. 72% of front office managers stated that these problems will cause customer dissatisfaction and loss, 19% stated that there will be a decrease in service quality, while 9% stated that work motivation and work productivity will be decreasing. Also managers reported that because of these reasons, communication problems experienced during the reservation stage will affect the productivity of the front office.

e-Who is most likely to communicate with customers in the front office department during the accommodation stage?

Table 5: Whom is communication done by during the accommodation stage?

	%
Receptionists	64
Front office managers or chiefs	23
Concierge personal	13

According to the answers given, 64% were receptionists, 23% were the front office supervisor or chief, and 13% were concierge personnel. The reception department is the department where all kinds of information that the customers need can be found and it is the place where all the complaints, wishes and requests of the customers are notified to. The reception unit is where the most intensive communication is done by both personnel and the guests.

f- What are the problems encountered in communication with customers during the accommodation process?

Table 6: Problems encountered with guests during accommodation stage

	%
inadequate information and insufficient attention	65
personal insufficiency of the employee	22
language and culture differences	12
Guests sourced problems	1

According to the responses to the problems encountered in the communication with the guests during the accommodation phase, 65% were the front office staff's insufficient information to the guests and personnel's insufficient attention, 22% were the individual inadequacies of the staff, 12% were the language and culture differences, while only 1% were because of guests themselves.

During the stay, the receptionists should not create the impression that guests are in a foreign place and create an environment where they can come to without hesitation and communicate their problems for their guests. In the study conducted 65% of the front office personnel stated that biggest problem in communication with the guests was giving inadequate information to the guests and not paying attention to them sufficiently. In order to solve communication problems, the receptionists must listen carefully to the problems of the guests, try to solve them as soon as possible, and return to the guests and inform them. In the study conducted, 22% of the front office officials stated that individual inadequacies are the most communication problem. Especially in premises working with foreign tourists, front office personnel should have knowledge about other cultures to know guests and expectations from other cultures and should have enough knowledge to understand them and also speak at least one foreign language.

g- What are the effects of communication problems encountered by customer in accommodation process on productivity?

The main purpose of accommodation facilities is to increase room sales, therefore increasing productivity. Every guest who leaves the facility in a content and happy state will want to revisit the facility in the following season and will recommend the facility to people around them; therefore these happy guests will provide the hotel with a positive outlook, which will result in the facility being fuller with a higher productivity (Aprillia, at. al., 2017: 111-115). Effective communication with guests should be established. If there is no effective communication, customer satisfaction decreases. The efficiency of the front office department decreases, and room sales and profit decrease in the long term.

During the research that was made, 100% of the front office managers agreed to this opinion and stated that miscommunication that happens during the accommodation process will decrease productivity in the front office department and therefore in the overall facility.

h. Who should be responsible with communicating with the customers whilst they check out from the facility and after the check-out process?

Table 7: Check-out and communication during the check-out process

	%
Receptionists and bellboys	82
Front office managers	18

According to received answers, 82% of front office managers stated that the communication during the checkout process is made by receptionists and bellboys, and %18 stated that front office managers deal with communication during check out. When the guests are leaving the facility, their check out process is done by the receptionists and the guests are sent off with the receptionists again, along with bellboys and the front office manager. Bellboys take the guests' belongings and bring it to the lobby and accompany them into their transportation after the check-out process is completed. After the check-out process, the guests are sometimes contacted by the receptionists or the front office manager if any of the belongings were left behind and/or forgotten. Contacting the guests with information about forgotten belongings give off a good impression about the facility's trustworthiness. Contacting and messaging the guests on special days like birthdays, new year's or holidays help them to feel remembered and missed (Sumner and Quinn, 2017:243-254).

i. What are the communication problems with customers that may come up during the check-out process or after the check-out process?

Table 8: Check-out and communication after the check-out process

	%
Mistakes regarding calculation	49,8
Not properly sending off the guests and creating a image about the end of vacation	13
Not communicating with the guests about forgotten items	15,6
Not informing the guests about the check-out hours	16,6
Guests' demand of extra discount on prices because of close-relations	5

According to the received answers about what most common communication problems were, %15,6 of the front office personnel said not contacting the guests after their departure about their forgotten belongings, 49,8% said miscalculation about overall fees, 16,6% said not informing the guests about the proper check out time, 13% said not sending off the guests with well wishes results in the guests feeling as if the staff is happy to see them leave and 5% said guests asking them to give an extra amount of discount based on the staff's sincereness.

As seen in the research that was conducted, the leading problem during the check-out process was miscalculation of the fees by 49,8 % and that issue was followed with not informing the guests properly about check out time by 16,6%. Guests who are fulfilled with the facility's services during their stay could be affected negatively if the check-out process isn't done properly and this could lead them into thinking the staff is slacking on service because the guests are already leaving, thus giving off a bad impression and resulting in a very important loss. Not contacting the guests about their forgotten belongings also paves the way for negative reviews for the facility. When contacting the guests, boundaries should always be on point and no compromise should be made. In the research, 5% of front office personnel stated that even though discounts were made during the guests' stay, because of the sincereness displayed during their check out, the guests' have a tendency to request more discounts and with these extra discounts, the facilities often end up losing money.

j. What are the effects of the problems that are encountered by customer during the check-out process on productivity?

According to the answers given, while 88% of front office personnel stated that problems that arise during or after the check-out process affect the productivity of the front office negatively, the other 12% stated that guests who were happy with their stay usually rush to get on the road therefore the check-out process is quick and easy.

The process of accommodation in accommodation facilities' front office departments is a process that includes several other processes such as: reservation, check in, accommodation, check out and after check out processes. In every aspect of these said processes, for the productivity of the facility, a clean and clear communication between the guests and the staff is mandatory (Raha, and Ariffin, 2017, 249-256). Miscommunications with the guests after accommodation or during the check-out process affect the overall good impression of the facility and leave the guests with a lesser impression of the facility therefore reducing the productivity. Because of this, during and after check out, communication with the guests shouldn't be neglected and should be done efficiently.

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

According to responses from front office managers, 76% of the reservations are done by front office personnel. This situation brings the question of not having reservation units in the hotels and this duty is performed by front office personnel.

40% of the problems encountered during the reservation process usually consist of the guests either not having or not providing the required information properly, 35% of the problems are usually because of the staff's personal inadequacy.

It is deduced that during the reservation process, the receptionists are mostly on duty and do most of the communication and 65% of them state that misinforming the guests and not being attentive enough were among the most common problems encountered during the reservation process followed by the 22% stating dealing with inadequacy of the staff.

During and after the check-out, most of the communication is done by receptionists and bellboys, and 16,6% of the personnel state not communicating with the guests after their check out about belongings that are left behind, 49,8% state miscalculation of the fees, 16,6 state misinforming of the guests about the check-out time are among the bigger problems.

Despite all of the front office personnel stating that these problems affect their productivity negatively, in all steps along the way, most of these problems arise either when the guests are misinformed or when calculations are done faultily. This indicates that the personnel in charge are inadequate, and even though the front office supervisors are conscious, they don't value the proper training the personnel is supposed to have. It is thought that front office personnel should be properly educated by inside or outside establishments of the sector (related organizations, universities etc.).

The rate of employment and the high economical profit of today's accommodation facilities has increased the importance of these facilities in the eyes of the leaders of the country. The competition created by the rising importance of the tourism and accommodation industry has resulted in many major facilities being established.

The miscommunication problems that are encountered during the reservation process often result in the guests not preferring to accommodate in that particular facility. Problems that arise during check in, accommodation, check out and after check out processes lead to the guests who pay to receive proper service from the facility to leave the facility, not choose that facility again, speaking lowly of the facility and therefore leaving the premises unsatisfied (Hai-yan, Baum, 2006, 509-518).

It should not be forgotten that the guests who are extremely satisfied with the hotel services will come again and face to face presentations. This will increase the facility's rate in the market and will prevent the facility from getting affected negatively from the conditions of the competition therefore

increasing productivity. This study was made in hotels in Konaklı, Avsallar and Manavgat districts around Mediterranean Region. The same study could be made around the same or different regions or countries on different dates if the results are desired to be compared.

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