

DO CUSTOMERS IN MEXICO CARE? THE IMPACT OF SUSTAINABLE HOTEL PRACTICES ON GUEST SATISFACTION IN MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

For more than a decade, the hospitality industry has been under pressure by government legislation and regulations to implement environmental strategies and thereby reduce their carbon footprint [12]. In addition, increased customer awareness regarding the environment has provided for new marketing opportunities for the industry [8]. Research has shown that many of these consumers will actually pay more to purchase products that are less harmful to the environment [6]. A comparative study of hotels in Mexico however, found that hotel managers felt social, legal, and political pressure to implement environmental strategies but generally considered consumer pressure and competition as unimportant in their decision to take action [8].

INTRODUCTION

Hotels have implemented a gamut of green strategies in their operations, from recycling to installation of low-flow showerheads, to purchasing from local suppliers. These practices however are often implemented despite a lack of research on how specific green attributes might influence a customer's hotel selection [7]. Mark Dolliver [3] suggests that green marketing has now become mainstream to consumers, and that companies need to make more informed decisions regarding money spent on environmental initiatives. He discusses reasons why marketers should not assume they can ride the green wave without first understanding what their customers want.

Research has shown that not only do three quarters of American travelers considering themselves "environmentally conscious" [11], but that a significant majority (95%) thought that lodging companies should be undertaking green initiatives; three quarters of business travelers expected lodging facilities to recycle; a similar proportion expected them to use energy-efficient lighting and almost half expected to have water-saving devices in the rooms [10].

Other marketing research studies have concluded that customer satisfaction is expected to result in repeat purchases. Customer satisfaction is also proven to have a close relationship with purchase intentions [1] [2] [5] [9]. Consumers form their beliefs of products' attributes through their cognitive-learning; then generate affective responses and attitudes regarding their likes or dislikes for the products; and finally, the likes and dislikes lead to purchase behavior intentions and purchase behaviors [4]. While a wealth of research concludes that relationships existed among performance, expectation, satisfaction

and behavioral intentions [2], this finding has not been applied to the impact of sustainable practices on customer satisfaction nor on customers' intention to return.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objective of the study is to investigate which sustainable practices contribute to hotel guests' satisfaction and impact guests' intentions to return to the hotel. The following research questions will be explored:

1. Do guests in Mexico care about their hotels' environmental practices?
2. Which sustainable attributes contribute most to hotel guests' satisfaction?
3. What are the relationships between "green" attributes and overall customer satisfaction?
4. Is there a relationship between hotel guests' intention to return based on their perception of importance of sustainable hotel practices?

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was developed by adapting items from Millar and Baloglu [7]. The first part of the self-administered survey asks respondents to rate, using a 7-point Likert type scale, how satisfied (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied), they would be with ten suggested sustainable hotel practices. The following environmentally friendly attributes were included: energy saving light bulbs throughout the hotel, occupancy sensors throughout the hotel, key cards that turn power to the room on & off, water-saving devices in public spaces, water-saving devices in guest rooms, the hotel makes an effort to purchase from local suppliers, the hotel has a recycling policy in place, the hotel uses dispensers instead of individual containers (soap, shampoo, lotion), the hotel encourages guests to re-use towels and bed linen and the hotel makes an effort to purchase environmentally friendly products and supplies.

Questions inquiring about tourists' perceptions of the importance of these environmental friendly policies to their overall guest satisfaction, and their intentions to return to the hotel, were included next. In addition, guests were asked about their willingness to pay a premium for their room, as well as incentives that would motivate them to participate in a hotel's environmentally friendly programs.

The final section of the survey related to behavioral, demographic and psychological characteristics such as gender, age, education level, occupation, personal values, and the environmentally friendly activities they currently perform at home.

An intercept method was used to capture a sample of the eligible population within a geographically defined area. The surveys were distributed in public tourist areas of San Miguel de Allende, one of Mexico's top tourist destinations. Participants were tourists age 18 years or older who were willing to participate and who were staying in the city's hotels and inns, most of which are small independently-owned operations. A limitation with this data collection method is the potential for bias caused by surveyors not approaching eligible respondents for certain unknown reasons and its nature of being a convenience sample. All data has been collected and is in the process of being analyzed.

A quantitative data analysis will investigate means and frequencies for each environmentally friendly hotel room practice, and demographic descriptive statistics and differences in preferences based on gender, age, education, and guest's values. Finally, the impact of hotel practices on guests' satisfaction and guests' intention to return to the hotel will be tested with multiple regression analysis.

APPLICATION TO THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIA

These results will help hoteliers by providing them with specific environmental hotel practices that are important to travelers in Mexico. In addition, the study will reveal what motivates guests to participate

in environmental programs and whether they are willing to pay a premium for an environmentally friendly room. Furthermore, the measured impact of environmental hotel practices on guest satisfaction and their intent to return will reveal the items that are significant to customers. This knowledge will allow hoteliers to reach a new and growing market segment (the environmentally friendly traveler). In addition, this study will extend on the paucity of existing research about environmental hotel policies and practices, and will enable researchers to develop future research projects.

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