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Accepted: June 26, 2018

ABSTRACT

This study focused on professional customer management and how it affects the revenues of organisations in the hospitality industry in Kenya. The organisation selected as the research site is Nairobi Serena Hotel, which is part of a group of hotels with several hotels in different counties within Kenya. The respondents were the guests at the hotel. The study used quantitative research design to find out whether there was any evidence of a relationship between professional customer management and increased revenues, and used a questionnaire as the data collection instrument. Ten initial copies of the questionnaire were sent to the Nairobi Serena Hotel guests for a pilot study to assess whether the guests fully understood the questions directed at them, these questionnaires were discarded and the data therein not considered in the final analysis. The researcher used test-retest reliability to measure the instrument reliability and the questionnaires were administered one week apart; the reliability co-efficient was greater than 0.7, therefore the questionnaire developed was considered reliable. The questionnaire also had content validity since it covered all the facets of research carried out. The research took place within one day. The data collected was analysed with the use of SPSS and after the analysis, the researcher tested the hypothesis and accepted it, based on the data analysed. The findings of this study were important since they established the relationship between professional customer management and revenues in an organisation; this informed the organisation on the prominence it ought to provide professional customer management within the organisation. The findings of this research would be used for future reference by other academic researchers as well as by other organisations as they seek to increase their revenues through improved customer service. The findings indicated that professionalism to difficult customers have a substantial effect on the revenue earned in the hospitality industry. The study gave conclusion and recommendations for the result obtained.

Key Words: Customer Service, Customer Management, Revenue, Hospitality Industry

INTRODUCTION

Customers in an organisation must be handled in a professional manner. Maister (1997) refers to professionalism as: a pride in the work you do, being dedicated to the interest of the customer and being ready and willing to help them as well as commitment to quality; professionalism is not a label you brand yourself with, rather it is a depiction you hope others will have of you. Real professionalism applies across the board, regardless of the business one is running, what title one has in an organisation or their education level. Many employers will testify that it is easy to find employees with the necessary technical skills required for a job but rare to find employees who are professional in their work. Maister (1997) further articulates that organisations should focus on hiring persons for their attitude and their character as opposed to skill; his argument being that: you can teach skill but one's attitude and character are intrinsic and they can only be encouraged to develop or stifled, but they have to be there in the first place.

A satisfied customer is an asset to any organisation and critical for business success for several reasons: they will be loyal to the organisation's products and services, they tend to purchase more frequently, they are usually willing to pay higher prices and they will also be happy to refer others to the organisation; this therefore means higher revenues for the organisation (Hoyer & Macinnis, 2010). It costs five times more to attract a new customer than it does to keep an existing one; if these numbers are extrapolated over a period of one year, these losses would dent both the revenues and profits of the organisation (Miller & Miller, 2007).

Hospitality defines the relationship between a host and a guest, where the host welcomes and caters to the basic needs of a guest, that is, food, drink and accommodation and in return, the guest pays a fee. The hospitality industry therefore refers to all the organisations that provide accommodation and/or food and/ or drink to guests for a specified fee (Mackenzie & Chan,

2009). The hospitality industry has various sectors, which include the accommodation sector and the food and beverage sector. The accommodation sector includes any institution that offers a place for its guests to lodge; for example, hotels, guest houses, motels and inns. The food and beverage sector includes the organisations that offer food and drinks to the guests; for example restaurants and hotels (Mackenzie & Chan). While the hospitality industry's basic product is accommodation, food and beverage, the industry is fast growing its products and product lines. For example, Serena Hotels, beyond the basic product expected, has also gone an extra mile to offer other products and services within the hotel such as: spa facilities, transport facilitation to and from the airport, salon and barber services as well as game drives in the wildlife parks. These extra products and services, offered at an additional fee, go a long way in ensuring that the guests have a memorable and enriched experience during their stay at the Serena Hotels (Serena Hotels, 2012).

In the international context, Brotherton (2003) indicates that the hospitality industry covers a range of businesses, which mainly include hotels, restaurants and the food service sector. In the US and Europe, the hospitality industry, in addition to hotels and restaurants, will also cover other businesses such as lodges, inns, hostels, guest houses and apartment-hotels.

The hospitality industry is just as robust in Africa as it is globally. Though many African countries were affected by the global recession in 2009, due to the fact that a large percentage of its hotel guests are from the Western countries, many African countries are changing their strategies so as to increase the accommodation rates in the hospitality industry; for example, by encouraging domestic tourism. In 2012, the revenue per available room (RevPAR) in sub-Saharan Africa was expected to be at 7-15%, which was double that of the US as well as Asia; an indication of a growing hospitality industry (Moorad, 2012).

In South Africa, the total number of hotel rooms went up from 48,500 in 2007 to 60,500 four years later; this is an indication of the growth that occurred in the hospitality industry. The total number of hotel rooms is expected to increase to 62,500 in 2016; this will aid in supporting the growing number of customers visiting the hotels. To support and grow the hospitality industry, the South African government opened new visa application points in Shanghai and Beijing in 2012- this was an effort towards increasing the number of visitors from Asia (South African Hospitality, 2012).

In Kenya, the hospitality industry, as in many other countries, is strongly linked to the tourism industry and there is a direct relationship between performance in the tourism industry and performance in the hospitality industry. This can be deduced from the fact that the performance of the tourism industry is directly related to the hotel bed-nights occupancy rates (Ministry of Tourism, 2010). Statistics in Kenya indicate that in 2011, there was an increase of international visitors, who mainly stay in hotels, from 1.6 million in 2010 to 1.8 million; this in turn increased the tourism earnings by 32%, from 73.7 billion Kenya shillings in 2010 to 97.9 billion Kenya shillings in 2011 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). During the post-election violence that broke out in Kenya towards the end of 2007 to early 2008, the hotel bed-nights occupancy dropped from 6,939,200 hotel occupants in 2007 to 3,699,100 hotel occupants in 2008, therefore reducing hotel revenues across the board as the number of tourists, mainly international tourists, had gone down (Ministry of Tourism, 2010). The hospitality industry, in Kenya, therefore continually has an eye on the performance of the tourism industry as this will in turn affect their performance. However, the hospitality industry should aggressively focus on their diversification of sources of occupants, for example domestic tourism, which will boost the hotel bed-night occupancy rates during low seasons as opposed to only the international visitors that are their main

clients and who provide bulk of their business in the peak seasons (Ministry of Tourism, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

A good statement of the problem is one that: seeks the relationship between variables, is unambiguous, has no ethical or moral position and one that can be used to collect data (Singh & Bajpai, 2008). One of the major reasons of existence for any profit-making organisation is to maximise on the profits they make. Profits are calculated by deducting expenses from an organisation's revenues (Warren, Reeve & Duchac, 2009). This therefore means that a negative impact on revenues will have an adverse effect on an organisation's profits; generally, the greater the revenue, the greater an organisation's profits. Customer service in an organisation has a direct effect on an organisation's revenues. While good customer service has the effect of increasing revenues, due to repeat customers as well as referrals from previous customers, poor customer service, on the other hand, has an adverse effect on revenue.

Many organisations have made an effort towards stemming the problem of poor customer service through induction of employees as they are employed by the organisation; the organisations in this case want to ensure that the new employees, who at this point are impressionable, are aware of the organisation's expectations, in terms of customer service, (Cook, 2008). Other organisations have invested in continuous customer service training of the existing employees, so as to ensure that their employees are abreast in new trends in customer service (Evenson, 2011). Some organisations have even used mystery shoppers (Murley, 1997), who are trained evaluators in customer service, who visit an organisation incognito and report on their experience as customers- in this way, the organisation is able to have a first-hand report on what really happens on the ground.

Organisations have clearly invested in different methods of stemming the problem of customer

service; however, there is still a gap between the organisations' efforts and excellent customer service. Organisations seem to have made an investment in improving customer service yet this investment does not seem to be paying off. This research therefore embarked on dealing with the existing gap between organisational effort toward improving customer service, specifically professional customer management and the prevalent poor customer service in the organisation, which in turn has had a negative impact on an organisation's revenues.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to assess the effects of professional customer management on revenue within the hospitality industry in Kenya.

Conceptual Framework

Professionalism in customer management refers to being dedicated to the interest of the customer, being ready and willing to help them and a commitment to quality of service (Maister, 1997). When a customer perceives that an employee of an organisation has their best interest at heart and is ready and willing to assist them, this increases the customer contentment and in turn increases the chance that the customer will return and also refer others to this particular organisation, hence increased revenues through both repeat business and referrals.

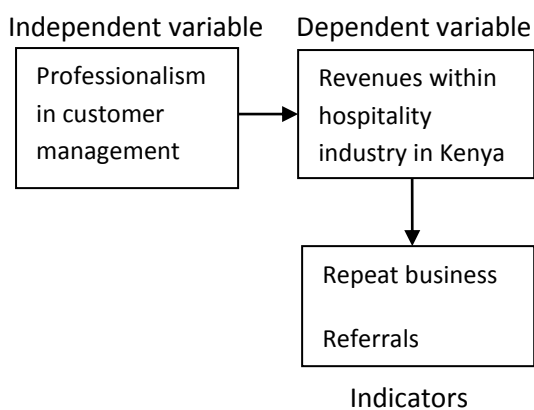


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Author (2012)

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

A professional is a person who has achieved an acclaimed level of expertise in a certain specialised area of work. Professionalism therefore refers to the level of superiority or excellence that would be expected of a professional (Maister, 1997). When one is referred to as a professional, it is expected that they give a certain level of standard of care, which is professional, to the customer. Professional standard of care refers to the moral duty of a professional to exercise a commendable level of diligence, care and skill as spelt out in the code of ethics of their profession (Murcko, 2012). Professionalism in customer service therefore refers to exercising an excellent level of diligence, care and skill when handling any customer who walks in through an organisation's doors.

Employees at all levels in the organisation have to practice professionalism, whether or not they are dealing directly with the customer; professional customer service is not just for those who sit at the reception or front desk of an organisation. Ukens (2007) emphasized this point when she articulated that to deliver excellent customer service, all employees must work as a team; this is because the person at the front desk who is in direct contact with the customer, heavily relies on those in the back office to support them so as to deliver excellent service to the customer. This support is achieved through an interactive group of co-workers who cooperate with each other, overcome adversities and accomplish together. This therefore means, on the other hand, that lack of professionalism by those behind the scenes will negatively affect the final service delivered to the customer. It is therefore imperative for all the employees to be trained on professionalism in customer service so that everyone in the organisation realises the huge role they play in delivering the final product to the customer.

Professionalism goes way beyond one's education level and the title one holds in an organisation and due to this fact, Maister (2007) insists that an organisation should hire employees based on the

strength of their character and attitude (which are intrinsic and cannot be taught) as opposed to mainly focusing on skill (which is teachable). An employee with a bad attitude will inevitably lack professionalism when handling customers since they usually behave as though they cannot lose their jobs, are rude to everyone and usually hate their jobs (Vickie, 2008). These negative tendencies usually spill over to the customers, hence giving them a bad customer service experience.

Lack of employee professionalism, when dealing with customers, will definitely cause a bad experience for the customer and this in turn could cause the loss of business for the organisation as customers move to competitors and tell others of their bad experience, hence loss of referral business. Employees must understand that customers must be treated in a professional manner at all times (regardless of the employee's feelings or the customer's attitude) because their pay-check depends on them, therefore without them; there is no work in the first place (Vickie, 2008).

Revenue is the gross income amount, received from an organisation's main activities (which include sale of products and services as well as use of assets and capital in the main operations of the organisation) and from which the entire organisation's expenses and charges are subtracted so as to establish the net income (Murcko, 2012). Revenue is the total amount of money or revenue that an organisation receives, from customers, in exchange for its goods and services; it is the gross inflow of cash that is

acquired through ordinary organisational activities and increases equity of the organisation (Alexander, Britton, & Jorissen, 2007). In the hospitality industry, revenue would therefore have its basic source from the accommodation services it provides and the food and beverages it serves within its restaurant section.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher used quantitative research design, whereby the problem was quantified and its prevalence understood by seeking for results that was projected to a larger population. The researcher selected to work with Nairobi Serena Hotel as her research site. The target population for this study was the customers in the hospitality industry in Kenya. This researcher used probability sampling, specifically random sampling, where each potential respondent was given an equal chance of being selected. The Nairobi Serena Hotel had a total of 195 hotel rooms (KAHC Guide, 2012). The researcher used SPSS (now also known as PASW), a software program, to analyse data into meaningful information (Flinders University, 2013).

FINDINGS

To determine the level of professionalism of the staff members of the hotel, the researcher had to set some questions.

On whether guests were well-received at the hotel reception, the question sought to find out the level of professionalism of the staff based on how well they received the guests on arrival at the reception. The findings were as indicated in figure 2 below:

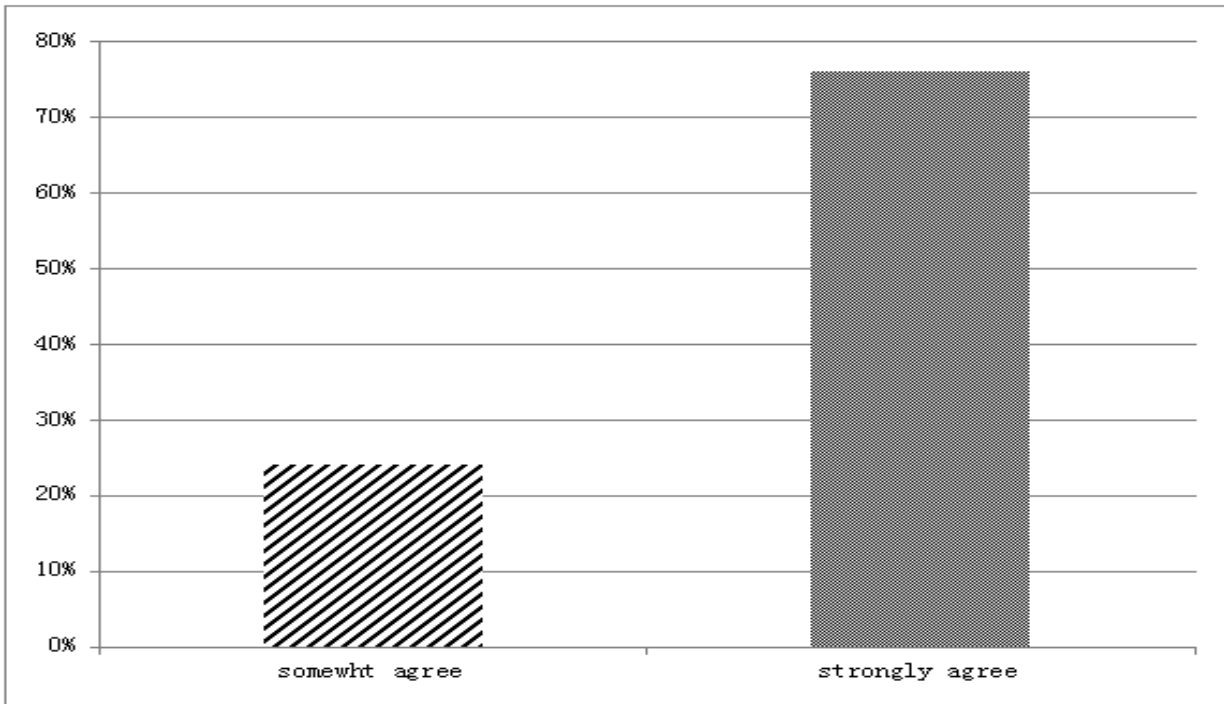


Figure 2: Whether Well-Received at the Hotel Reception

The findings indicated that 24% of the respondents somewhat agreed with the statement that they were well received at the hotel reception and 76% of the respondent strongly agree that they were well received at the hotel reception.

On whether the staff members at the hotel were helpful and kind, one major measure of staff professionalism was whether they were at hand to help their guests and in a kind manner. This question was set to determine the helpfulness of the staff to the hotel clients. The findings to the question were as presented in figure 3.

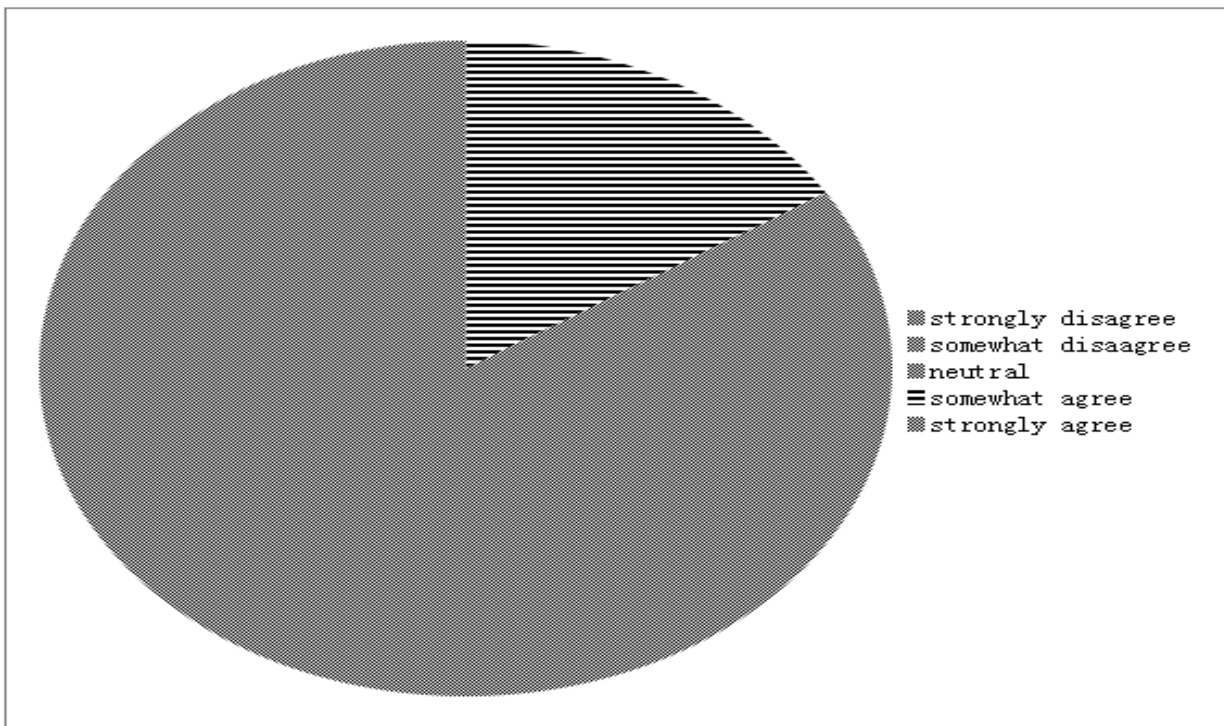


Figure 3: whether the staff members at the hotel were helpful and kind

The results indicate that 84% of the respondents strongly agree that the staff members were helpful to them and 16% somewhat agree with the same.

On whether respondents would hire the staff at the hotel at their own hotel, if they had one, this

question sought to find out the level of professionalism of the staff members and whether if the respondents had their own hotel they would hire them with regard to their level of professionalism. The findings were as shown in figure 4.

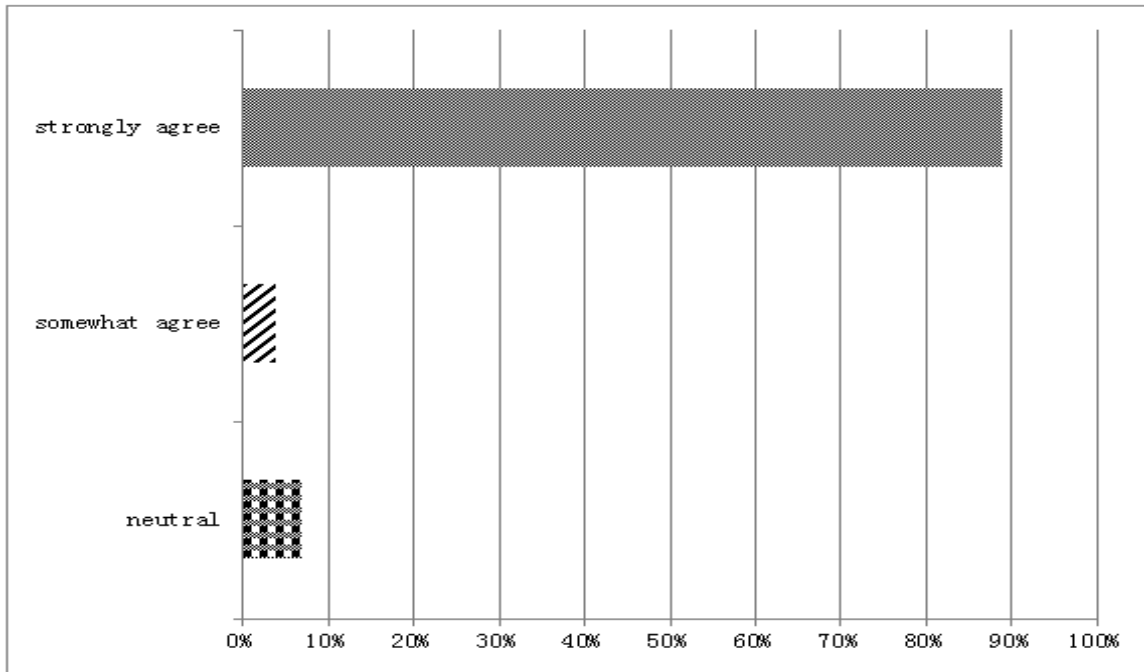


Figure 4: Whether respondent would hire the staff at the hotel at their own hotel, if they had one

The result showed that 7% of the respondent remained neutral, 4% somewhat agreed and 89% strongly agreed with the statement.

On whether hotel employees were good time-keepers, punctuality is a foundation for

professional excellence in many situations. This question was set to determine the punctuality of the staff members. The results are as shown in figure 5.

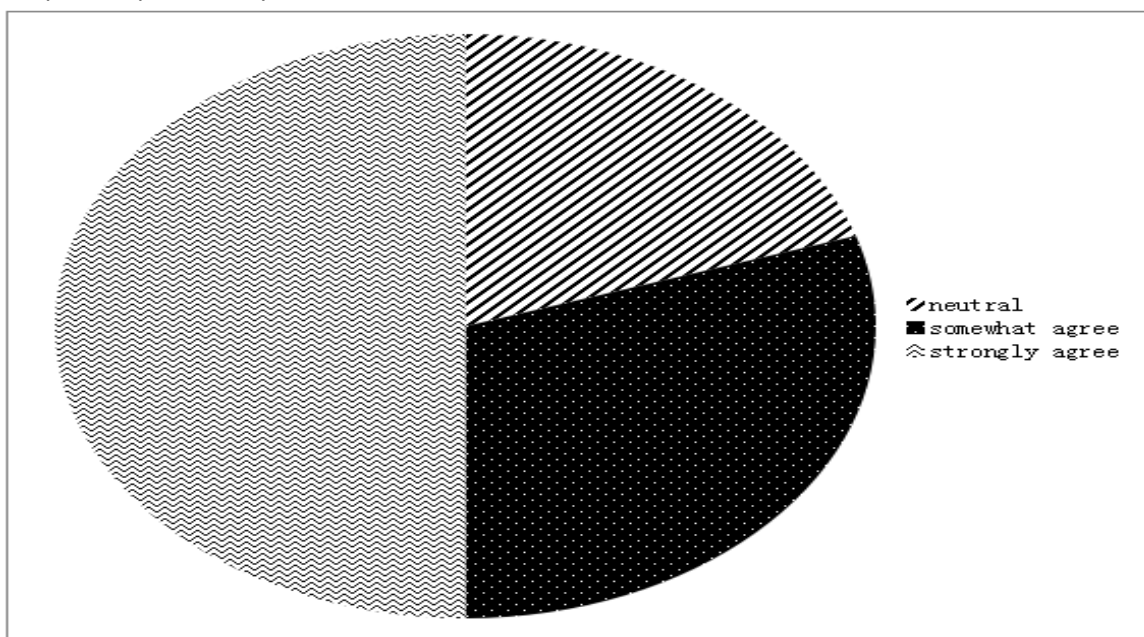


Figure 5: Whether hotel employees were good time-keepers

The findings revealed that 36% of the respondents somewhat agreed with the statement, 24% of the respondent remained neutral. A majority of the respondent, at 60%, strongly agreed with the statement.

On whether respondent would choose to come back to the hotel, to know the level of satisfaction of the hotel's clients, this question was set. The findings were as indicated in figure 6.

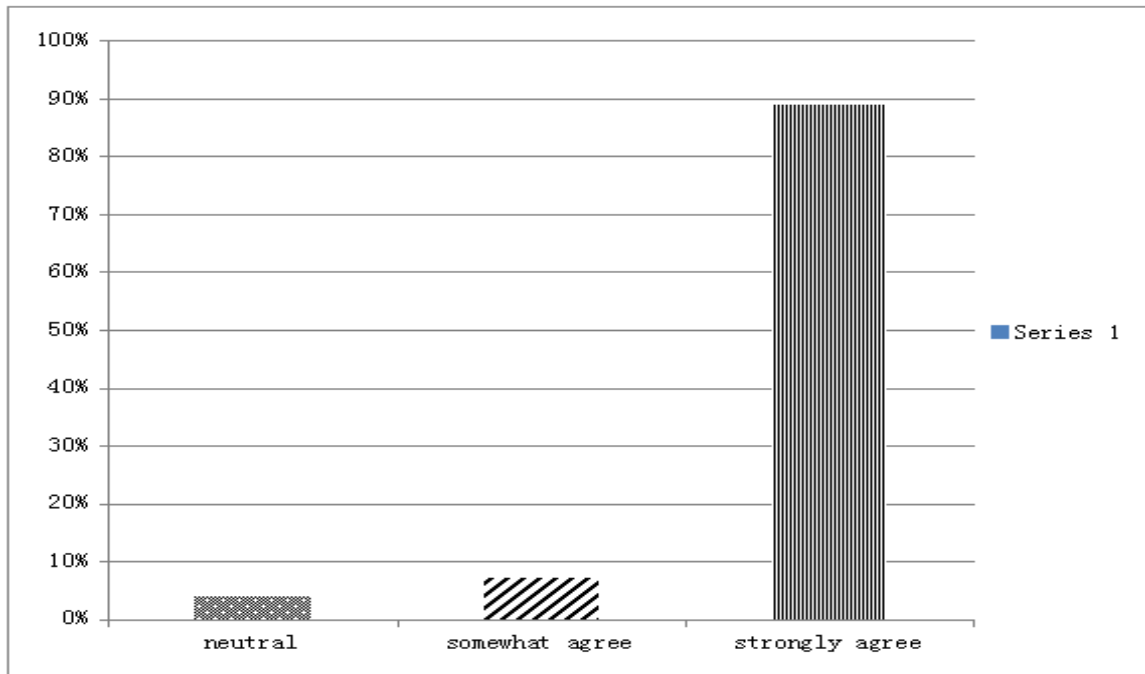


Figure 6: Response to whether respondent would choose to come back to Nairobi Serena Hotel

The findings indicated that 4% of the respondent remained neutral, 7% somewhat agreed and a majority of the respondents at 89% strongly agreed that they would return to the hotel.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicated that on the issue of reception at the hotel, majority of the respondents, at 76%, strongly agree that reception at the hotel was commendable. The results also indicate that 84% of the respondents strongly agree that the staff members were helpful to them. 89% of the respondents strongly agreed that they would hire the staff at the hotel at their own hotel, if they had one. 60% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement that hotel employees were good time-keepers. On the issue of whether the respondents would choose to come back to Nairobi Serena Hotel, majority of the respondents at 89% strongly agreed that they would.

Conclusions

Employees at all levels in the organization have to practice professionalism, whether or not they are dealing directly with the customer. Professional customer service is not just for those who sit at the reception or front desk of an organization. All employees must work as a team; this is because the person at the front desk, who is in direct contact with the customer, heavily relies on those in the back office to support them so as to deliver excellent service to the customer. This support is achieved through an interactive group of co-workers who cooperate with each other, overcome adversities and accomplish together. This therefore means, on the other hand, that lack of professionalism by those behind the scenes will negatively affect the final service delivered to the customer. It is therefore imperative for all the employees to be trained on professionalism in customer service so that everyone in the organization realizes the huge role they play in delivering the final product to the customer. Professionalism goes way beyond one's education

level and the title one holds in an organization and due to this fact, organizations should hire employees based on the strength of their character and attitude (which are intrinsic and cannot be taught) as opposed to mainly focusing on skill (which is teachable). An employee with a bad attitude will inevitably lack professionalism when handling customers since they usually behave as though they cannot lose their jobs, are rude to everyone and usually hate their jobs. The researcher concluded that where staff members of an organisation handle the customers in a professional manner, by being helpful, kind and warm, then the customers would easily respond by choosing to return to the organisation again.

Recommendations

The researcher recommended that all the employees of an organisation must practise high levels of professionalism every time so as they are able to offer customers an excellent standard of care. Professionalism is closely linked to one's attitude and therefore, organisations may need to

consider hiring persons for their attitude and character, which are intrinsic, as opposed to only their technical ability, which are teachable.

Suggested Areas for Further Study

This study focused on external factors and how their satisfaction affects revenues in the hospitality industry. Based on the research findings, the researcher established that professional customer management has a major impact on the revenues of an organisation. With this in mind, the researcher would suggest that future studies are conducted in the same area but with a focus on internal customers, that is, employees. Generally, a contented employee will tend to offer excellent services to the external services, hence serve as an intervention for countering poor customer service offered by employees to external customers. Further research should also be conducted in other organisations that have a direct link to the hospitality industry for example, suppliers of the hospitality industry such as the agricultural sector.

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