

FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES-CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCE: EXPLORATORY CASE ON MISSION IDENTIFICATION IN THE SPANISH HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Corporations in the hospitality industry have to succeed in creating experiences. This requires having a direct relationship with consumers and knowing their behaviour trends (i.e. through satisfaction questionnaires). This paper provides the results of a study of six Spanish hotel firms. Based on a face-to-face sample of interviews to 66 Spanish hotel managers and front-line reception employees, the findings suggest that employees' corporation mission identification is highly correlated with customer identification outlined here through the percentage of satisfaction questionnaires filled.

Keywords: Corporate mission identification; customer-to-employee interaction experience; Spain hospitality industry.

La experiencia en la relación entre los empleados de primera línea y los clientes: caso exploratorio sobre la identificación con la misión en la industria de la hotelería española

RESUMEN

Las empresas de la industria de la hotelería deben saber destacar por lo que a creación de experiencias se refiere. Para ello es necesario tener una relación directa con los consumidores y conocer sus tendencias de comportamiento (por ejemplo, a través de los cuestionarios de

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satisfacción). El presente artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio realizado en seis hoteles españoles. A partir de las entrevistas a 66 cargos directivos y recepcionistas de los hoteles estudiados, los resultados demuestran que la identificación con la misión corporativa de los empleados está estrechamente relacionada con la identificación del cliente, justificada a través del porcentaje de cuestionarios de satisfacción que estos rellenan.

Palabras clave: Identificación con la misión corporativa; experiencia en la interacción entre cliente y empleado; industria de la hotelería en España.

1. INTRODUCTION

The hotel industry is highly customer focused and market oriented, so consumer satisfaction is essential to long-term business success. Organizations of the 21st century have faced an environment of constant change. In a customer-centric business environment, hospitality firms have recognized consumer power and are obliged to shift from doing business to customers to doing business with customers (Verhoef, Reinartz and Krafft 2010). It is widely accepted that satisfied consumers are less price sensitive, less influenced by competitors' attack and loyal to the firm longer than unsatisfied customers (Dimitriadis 2006). Employees are those who are in direct contact with customers and those who transmit the philosophy of the organization, so it is essential to obtain and maintain updated information on the behaviour and ideas of guests, to try to know everything about their experience during their stay at the hotel. The goal of the study is to investigate one of the ways customers communicate with corporations - satisfaction questionnaires - and try to set a relation between the employees' corporate mission identification and customer satisfaction (see Figures 1-2 in next section), in the framework of customer-to-employee interaction.

Although previous research has examined the relationship between consumer satisfaction and consumer loyalty (Nam, Ekinçi and Whyatt 2011), service climate (Kralj and Solnet 2010) and job satisfaction (Lam, Zhang and Baum 2001; Nadiri and Tanova 2010) among other issues, such as the relationship between human resource management practices, service behaviour and service quality in the tourist hotels (Tsaur and Lin 2004), no previous research has considered these metrics together in hospitality industry. No study has examined the influence of the employee mission identification in the amount of satisfaction questionnaires filled, so the purpose of the research is to measure employee identification with the corporate mission and the hypotheses of this study are: a) the more knowledge there is in relation to satisfaction questionnaires procedures and their usefulness in connection to continuous improvement, the more identified do employees feel, and b) the more identified employees feel, the more satisfied customers feel and a higher proportion of these are willing to fill satisfaction questionnaires (see Figure 3).

The aim of this paper is to verify through hotel staff surveys that, in terms of success, the most important to the hospitality companies is the quality and management of the relationship between the hotel and the customer. But is this feedback efficient? How are data output used? Are the subsequent actions carried out coherently? For this reason,

staff members are the focus of the research: do employees know the procedure in relation to satisfaction questionnaires and do they therefore know the mission of the company? Moreover, is the sentence that affirms that «providing a quality service implies that the last of our employees can respond satisfactorily to the requests of the best of our customers» applicable to the cases studied? The issue will be analysed in a larger sample, hence taking into account the limitations mentioned in the last section of this paper. Regarding the implementation of experience economy, it must represent a source of effective communication, which added to the uniqueness of the establishments has to allow customers to be the main characters of their story: their stay.

Experience economy applied to the hospitality industry can be an economic instrument that with the ultimate goal of achieving customer satisfaction is also an instrument to improve profitability and the gradual consolidation of the brand image of the corporations. The higher the degree of employees' corporation mission statement identification, the most perfect fit there is also between the know-how of the establishment and the identity of clients, and consequently more of them are willing to fill the satisfaction questionnaires; as they feel as part of the corporation. Several researchers pointed out elements included in firms' missions, as part of corporations' identity, which includes quality, value and customer service (Leuthesser and Kohli 1997). The key issue is the knowledge and identification of this mission by the employees, and considering subsequently the value of mission statement both for the brand image and for the customer's service quality perception and satisfaction (Kucukusta, Mak and Chan 2012).

Heskett and Schlesinger (1994) suggest that the firm's financial performance is derived from customer satisfaction, which is derived from employee performance, which, in turn, is derived from employee satisfaction. In this sense, some researchers find a strong relationship between employees' job satisfaction and customer perceptions of service quality performance (Hartline and Jones 1996; Nadiri and Tanova 2010; Yoon, Beatty and Suh 2001). Studies have shown that job satisfaction, which is one of the most researched phenomena in the organizational behaviour literature, is positively related to employee perceptions of service quality (Schlesinger and Zornitsky 1991). It is expected that satisfied employees will engage in better service delivery (Schmit and Allscheid 1995) and this will positively influence customer trust and word-of-mouth and will as well contribute to achieving customer loyalty (Nadiri and Tanova 2010), i.e. resulting in willing to fill out satisfaction questionnaires as studied in this paper.

High employee satisfaction is important as the central role that human resources play in the services sector as services are delivered inseparably from their provider. Gill (2008) argues that employees with higher degree of trust will have higher levels of job satisfaction in the hospitality industry and some researches described the role of the human resources for tourism and hospitality businesses (Kusluvan, S., Kusluvan, Z., Ilhan and Buyruk 2010). An appropriate quality of services includes employee attitudes and behaviours that meet customer expectations (Yang, J.-T. 2010), because service quality is the result of comparing customer expectations and perceptions (Albacete-Sáez, Fuentes-Fuentes and Lloréns-Montes 2007). Consequently, employee job satisfaction is a necessary contributor to meeting such expectations (Karatepe and Sokmen 2006; Rust, Stewart, Miller and Pielack 1996). Several studies have also found significant correlations between feelings of

empowerment and job satisfaction (Snipes, Oswald, LaTour and Armenakis 2005). Thus, maintaining high service quality is also a function of providing employees with the control and authority to better serve customers.

In a competitive world, hotel managers should constantly provide and improve services to meet customer requirements and achieve therefore competitive advantage. In this sense, customization services include more amenities, comfortable rooms, fast check-in/check-out, courtesy and high-speed Internet service, among others. Customization service describes the efforts of a hotel to provide services that match changing customer needs and lifestyles (Deng, Yeh and Sung 2013; Neal, Sirgy and Uysal 1999), because consumers are keen on transferring their day-to-day habits to the purchase of tourism products (Miller 2003). Service quality precedes customer satisfaction, so it is expected to directly and positively influence customer satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor 1992; Terblanche and Boshoff 2010). It is essential for a firm to ensure high service quality in order to retain customers (Kucukusta et al 2012), as it can be seen in the conceptual model proposed in this paper. In addition, each emotional experience is influenced by the environment and represents actual customer perceptions and feelings regarding a service (Deng et al 2013). Emotions play an important role in tourism since individuals' enjoyment is based on their own experiences, so cognitions and emotions jointly participate in satisfaction formation since feeling is an important component of experience (Del Bosque and San Martín 2008). Hotel service delivery is characterised by strong interaction between employees and consumers (Lewis and McCann 2004) and front-line employee actions and services frequently influence customers' emotions (Mattila and Enz 2002). Thereby, hotel providers have begun designing services to positively influence guest emotions (Jang and Namkung 2009).

2. PROVIDING EXPERIENCES: FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES-CUSTOMERS RELATIONSHIP SERVICE QUALITY IN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

2.1. Experiences in tourism industry

Experience economy is a concept that attempts to contextualize a new trend in economic development where the main issue is the search of individual identity and the involvement in a society that increasingly tends to morph into the «upper class», or «creative class» as named by Florida (2002, 2005). Lorentzen (2007) suggests that it is the last step in an evolution that aims to get the market's most possible value. It is, therefore, a particular way of competing in a global marketplace where agricultural economy offers raw materials to an anonymous market; the industrial economy standards manufactured goods to consumers; the services' economy personalized services to customers; and the experience economy delivers personal experiences to guests (Pine and Gilmore 1998). Nowadays, the success of a product depends on the experience that this product is capable to create in the client: today's experiences are the integration between products and services, as hotels or restaurants organize their offer around specific themes or malls carry out events and exhibitions.

The experience, according to Pine and Gilmore (1998), is a competitive advantage that products may have: an experience occurs when a corporation intentionally uses services

and also their products and accessories to attract individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event. The experience derived, therefore, from the interaction between the event organizer and the state of mind of the person, as argued by Vittersø, Vorkinn, Vistad and Vaagland (2000) everyone is in front of an individual experience although many people may have similar experiences. In this sense, Pine and Gilmore (1998) analyse the new developments in society and advocate that products and services are no longer enough to satisfy consumers. So, companies must create experiences for each customer if they want to succeed in a global world with growing competition, and keep in mind that although the firms can establish a framework for the experience, it is always the consumer who then creates his own experience as individual reaction to the «plot».

The key is how to make the customer experience the centre of the strategic planning of the organization (Azevedo 2009), because the success is achieved when a client transformation is obtained through the use of a particular corporate offer (Denzin 1992; Lyck 2010; Pine and Gilmore 1999), and the individual experience associated to it. The experience economy, even according to Pine and Gilmore (1999), means to promote events and memorable services based on a positive experience where customers are no longer passive consumers to move on interacting and spending ones in a more sensitive and emotional way, as product becomes the own experience (Crompton and Love 1995; Gonçalves and Barreto 2010). In Denmark, new strategies tend to link the condition of the locals with the intentions of policies based on experience so as to design a more dynamic experience that involves co-created relationship between producer and consumer (Andersson 2009; Azevedo 2009; Ostrom, Bitner, Brown, Burkhard, Goul, Smith-Daniels, Demirkan and Rabinovich 2010). Thus, the most successful entrepreneurs are those in which the interaction between end-users, developers and local government takes place and where public and private companies are acting as facilitators and not strictly as planners and developers.

This is the reason why, the integration of digital technologies (Hjalager 2002; Lortzen 2007) can also respond to new ways of talking about the city as a show of and from local experiences with public participation. Here, satisfaction is measured by how well leisure activities are perceived to fulfil the basic needs and motives that stimulated the idea to participate in the activity (Crompton and Love 1995). Experiments such as Usman Haque's *Sky Ear* put as much emphasis on how facilities-show - performances - can become collective environments that people can deal with in real time thanks to wireless infrastructure and physically from their own city (Andersson and Thomsen 2008). These technologies help in the constant need for information and travel experiences, where tourists need: the critical information needed to get, spontaneous travel, information's needs on the ground, and experiences in general (Hjalager 2002; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier 2007).

The overall quality of the travel experience of every tourist can be interpreted by their statements of satisfaction, the number of sites visited, the level of activity at each attraction, and the knowledge gained on the trip. Based on the data, tourist satisfaction with tourism products and services is determined by the perceived quality of the travel experience, and thereby the amount of activities offered affects the knowledge that tourists could get from the destinations, as argued by Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2007). The total value of the travel experience should be analysed for the interpretation of overall satisfaction, problems and whole knowledge acquired during the tourism practice. It has to be kept in mind that

the majority of tourists have experiences with other destinations, and their perceptions are influenced by comparisons between facilities, attractions and service standards (Laws 1995).

As Wang (2000) suggests, tourism provides an alternative experience of time, it means time off or holiday time, which appears as an alternative rhythm, free from constraints of daily tempo. Offering unique and imaginative products or services, hospitality companies can differentiate from the competition and gain a competitive advantage over those who still offer the same products or services that may have become obsolete (Azevedo 2009). Throughout this context it is essential to apply the concept of the experience economy to the hotels; as accommodation is one of the main destination facilities and services. The pioneer country – Denmark – in the application of experience economy in tourism industry, offers several examples of how some hotel owners have managed to achieve strong market positions in a setting of new dynamic consumer experiences, as the generation and usage of new knowledge to feed innovation and product development is critical for the competitiveness of both tourism destinations and hospitality industry (Florida 2002, 2005; Hjalager 2002; Lyck 2010). A case study of three hotels in Copenhagen, which were forerunners in the use of the experience economy, have been presented, analysed and discussed by Lyck (2010): hotels were unique in relation to ecological and organic products. This approach is the basis for the profitability of the hotel image and customer satisfaction: they have developed a constantly and updated knowledge about consumer behaviour and consumer trends. At the same time, all experience economy projects should be evaluated in comparison to other existing or past projects because the decision to or not to carry it out will be based on cost-benefit analysis.

People redirect their lives in experiences projects, which means a daily life but with an increasing focus on aesthetic and enjoyment dimensions. This change represents the core of the «society of the experiences», where it must be remembered that these are always individual (Del Bosque and San Martín 2008). Satisfaction with tourist experiences contributes significantly with life satisfaction (Deng et al 2013; Neal et al 1999), which is one of the central concepts of human well-being (Oishi 2006). In this way, the list of the experiences reported by respondents in other research are examples of memorable experiences, related to events in cities, food, room service or welcome parties (Azevedo 2009), among others. The lessons learned from these cases show that the hotel's experience economy can also be a useful tool for creating profitability and strengthening image and identification, based on the uniqueness of each establishment (Lyck 2010). The role of experience economy in branding, is at the same time to create innovative, high quality and human resource development.

Regarding the role of marketing, experience economy should not only promote the corporation, but also get information on consumer behaviour and ideas of consumers, that is, experience economy projects must contribute as a source of effective communication (Lorentzen 2007; Lyck, 2010). As described in the previous paragraphs, the experience economy should be based on individual personal hospitality combined with a specialization in dynamic products of high relevance to the consumer, so as to allow the hotel to read and understand consumer trends and desires, and immediately be able to put into practice in the hotel services and events. The use of the experience economy is focus on the human resources management and careful selection of materials, events and employees as well.

Moreover, to achieve an economic surplus there must be a unique and specific concept, as well as quality management combined with the empowerment that enables staff to react in relation to the mission statement and conceptual basis, because human resources are the major influence for the successful innovative behaviour and whole implementation of the experience economy (Lyck, 2010). The catering company *Egon* encourages its customers with the slogan «if you are satisfied, tell your friends; if you are not, tell us». Positive consumption emotions can create satisfactory services experiences and thus deliver customer value and increase customer loyalty (Dube and Kenaghan 1999; Dube and Menon 2000). In this sense, it must be recalled, as said before, that providing a quality service also means that the last of our employees must be able to serve successfully the best of our customers. Tourism industry should be capable of offering a mixture of emotions to enrich individuals' experience and achieve their true satisfaction and loyalty (Del Bosque and San Martín 2008).

2.2. Service quality and hotel corporations' employees

Service quality is identified as crucial in differentiating service products, and creating competitive advantage in the service sector (Deng et al 2013). Most managers today understand that to make a substantial impact on organizational service quality, frontline workers and customers need to be the centre of management concern (Snipes et al 2005), as suggested in the previous section. In recent decades, a substantial body of literature has examined the concept of service quality, its dimension and measurement methods (Albacete-Sáez et al 2007). Thus, Heskett and Schlesinger (1994) argue that service quality drives customer satisfaction and fidelity, and the lifetime value of a loyal customer can be astronomical. In this sense, dimensions analysed by Nam et al (2011) in terms of brand loyalty and consumer satisfaction are: physical quality, staff behaviour, ideal self-congruence, brand identification and lifestyle-congruence. And the dimensions mentioned most frequently for services are: employees, facilities, experiences and word-of-mouth (O'Cass and Grace 2004).

This study is focused on the employees' context and their identification with the corporations' mission. Mission is part of the corporate identity (Van Riel and Balmer 2007) and also considered a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practice (Kucukusta et al 2012). Thus, corporate identity refers to the way in which an organization reveals its philosophy and strategy through communication, behaviour, and symbolism. An important aspect of communicating that identity to both internal and external publics is including a firm's mission statement (Leuthesser and Kohli 1997). Previous literature review considers mission statement must be written down in the handbooks of employees (Kucukusta et al 2012) to be effective among firms' employees. According to Klemm, Sanderson and Luffman (1991) mission is a statement of the long term purpose of the organization reflecting deeply held corporate views and there are two simple views on the purpose of the mission statement; one is that it is primarily for external public relations and second is that it is to motivate staff within the company.

Previous research also indicates that environment and mission are the two most important CSR factors in explaining service quality and also in describing the brand

image (Kucukusta et al 2012). Organizational identification theory states that an individual becomes a member of a social group in order to support his/her identity and his/her sense of belonging (Mael and Ashforth 1992). Staff behaviour is the image projected by competence, helpfulness, friendliness, and responsiveness of the hotel employees (Ekinci, Dawes and Massey 2008; Madanoglu 2004; Slatten and Mehmetoglu 2011). And consequently, service quality is central to the development of brands because it enhances perceived superiority of the brands and helps to differentiate brands in competitive markets (Low and Lamb 2000; Yoo, Donthu and Lee 2000; Zeithaml 1988), having positive effects on brand loyalty via consumer satisfaction. Differentiation through service offering is a key way to develop the competitive advantage.

The challenge for managers is how to create an environment that supports employees at all levels in the consistent delivery of superior service quality (Kralj and Solnet 2010), which must be analysed by means of customer satisfaction indicators considering that service quality is the consumers' subjective judgement of a service. Hereupon, transaction-specific satisfaction is an immediate post-purchase evaluative judgement and, as such, it is an affective reaction to the most recent experience with a firm (Oliver 1993). The transactional-specific approach suggests that satisfaction occurs at the post-consumption stage following a single encounter with the service provider, i.e. satisfaction with a specific employee (Jones and Suh 2000). On the other hand, overall satisfaction is an evaluative judgement of the last purchase occasion and based on the whole encounter with the service provider (Bitner and Hubbert 1994). Thus, overall satisfaction is an aggregation of all transaction-specific satisfaction caused by each service encounter (Veloutsou, Gilbert, Moutinho and Goode 2005). It means transaction-specific satisfaction is likely to vary from experience to experience while overall satisfaction is an average that is relatively stable and most similar to an overall attitude towards purchasing a brand (Auh, Salisbury and Johnson 2003), that is, brand loyalty.

Personality features of brands should be studied from the consumer's point of view so as to develop a brand image to match with the consumer's ideal self-concept. To get it, marketing tactics have to be applied in the hotel industry; in the way that Wyndham Hotels, for example, encourages customers to display their personal items (i.e. family photographs) in their rooms to express their individuality (Nam et al 2011). The findings of the studies of Nam et al (2011) also show that consumers develop brand loyalty because the brand experience fits well with their lifestyles and social identity (Deng et al 2013; Neal et al 1999). It is argued that the front-line employees play key roles in brand development and delivering brand promises in the hotel industry because of high quality customer-to-employee interaction. In hotel firms, frontline employees have direct interaction with customers, and customer perception, satisfaction and loyalty are developed during such interactions (Yeh 2013). Frontline employees should themselves be satisfied in order to deliver quality service and to satisfy customers (Spinelli and Canavos 2000). Satisfied frontline employees can maintain high performance and deliver quality services (Kusluvan 2003; LaLopa 1997), since satisfied employees have satisfied customers. Then, the quality of staff behaviour can be strengthened through appropriate training and recruitment programs; the importance of recruiting, retaining

and managing assets must be well taken into account, since this can help organizations to increase competitiveness, which has become a crucial factor in the success of hospitality industry (Nadiri and Tanova 2010; Nam et al 2011; Tsaur and Lin 2004; Ulrich, Halbrook, Meder, Stuchlik and Thorpe 1991). For this reason, the human resource management practices can create an environment that encourages positive employee behaviour, thereby enhancing service quality, as also argued by Tsaur and Lin (2004). Therefore, the front-line employees must have appropriate service capability to provide a good service to customers. In this sense, the high quality service to the customers is the direct antecedent of customer satisfaction, where service capability means to have the required knowledge, skills and concepts for these front-line employees to be able to offer excellence service (Berry 1995; Jaworski and Kohli 1993).

Figure 1
CHAIN OF INFLUENCE BETWEEN EMPLOYEES' MISSION IDENTIFICATION AND THE PERCENTAGE OF SATISFACTION QUESTIONNAIRES FILLED IN THE FRAMEWORK OF CUSTOMER-TO-EMPLOYEE INTERACTION



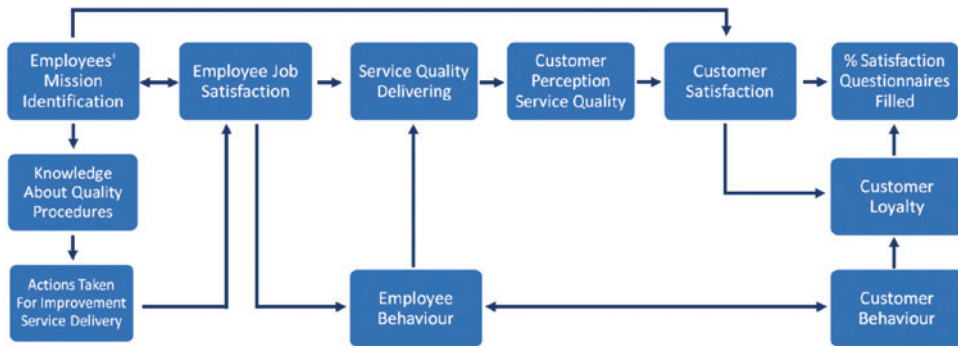
Own source.

Figure 2
CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR HYPOTHESIS' ANALYSIS



Own source.

Figure 3
INTEGRATED MODEL BASED ON FIGURES 1 AND 2



Own source.

Among the features of tourist services are: intangibility, non-standardized, perishability and simultaneity of production and consumption. Tsaur and Lin (2004) suggest that service quality depends strongly on the effectiveness with which front-line employees deal with customers and clients. In the service encounter, employees are performers rather than simply workers, and their behavioural performance is the service quality that customers perceive (Bitner 1990). In this way, Schneider and Bowen (1985) and Tsaur and Lin (2004) find that employee perceptions of human resource management practices were significantly related to customer perceptions of service quality. However, customers evaluate only what they experience, that is, their relationship with customer-contact employees, as their perception of service quality. Thus, the better employee service behaviour is perceived, the better is service quality perceived by customers in tourist hotels (Hartline and Jones 1996; Williams 1999).

The importance of quality is blatantly evident as most of individual hospitality enterprises measure customer satisfaction as part of their quality assurance programs. Using a suitable customer satisfaction index to understand the state of customer satisfaction and post-purchase behaviours is a crucial management issue for hotels (Deng et al 2013). SERVQUAL is a service quality assessment instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985, 1988) and includes five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. SERVQUAL has been successfully applied to the hotel sector, as some researchers argue (Deng et al 2013). Nonetheless, a number of researchers have criticized the SERVQUAL approach (Albacete-Sáez 2007; Carman 1990; Cronin and Taylor 2007; Oh 1999), regarding for example its applicability to all services or about its lack of expectations' measurement as subjects are not able to differentiate among different types of expectations when they provide evaluations. For example, Oliver (1981) introduces the expectancy-disconfirmation model for studies of customer satisfaction in the retail and service industry, which was one of the most applied (Wirtz, Mattila and Tan 2000), and where satisfaction results from perceived outcomes exceeding expectations.

So, perception of service quality is the gap between expectation and perception and it is the evaluation not only of the service outcome, but also of the whole service delivery process. The measure of service quality perceptions is to compare customer expectations to real service performance, because customer satisfaction is related to the perceived value. The higher quality is perceived by the customers, the higher their satisfaction is. Thereby, satisfaction questionnaires are one of the ways to get the feedback from hospitality firms' customers. For a hotel, loyal customers are the most profitable customer type since they tend to repeatedly purchase hotel services. Furthermore, loyal customers represent a source of positive word-of-mouth advertising (Knutson 1988).

It seems appropriate to affirm that increasing customer satisfaction means reducing customer complaints. Service quality and perceived value are positively related to customer satisfaction (Otto and Ritchie 1995), customer satisfaction is positively related to customer loyalty, and customer satisfaction is negatively related to customer complaints (Deng et al 2013). Fornell (1992) indicates that the direction and size of the relationship between customer complaints and customer loyalty is influenced by the company's complaint-handling system. If hotel managers apply a general customer satisfaction survey to estimate hotel's customer satisfaction, they will not be able to attain the extra information of post-purchase customer behaviour provided by the used model to improve satisfaction and achieve competitive advantage (Deng et al 2013). Consequently, it must be noted that efficient handling of a customer's complaint can obviously increase customer satisfaction and transform a complaining customer into a loyal one (Fornell 1992).

3. STUDY METHODS

The sample for this study is drawn from a total of six four and five-star hotels which are located in six Spanish cities. First of all, it has been chosen the two peninsular Spanish cities with a major number of hotel industry employees, as indicated in the Spanish Statistics National Institute: Barcelona and Madrid. The other four cities are randomly selected among the other province capitals in Spain: A Coruna, Cordoba, Santander and Zaragoza. Then, a four or five-star hotel of each of the cities, each of them belonging to a different national hotel chain, is also randomly chosen. These six randomly selected urban hotels (named in the research from 1 to 6) from the mentioned cities in peninsular Spain are approached to determine whether they would permit the interviews, and authorisation to conduct the face-to-face interviews with employees and managers is granted. The anonymity of the hotels and of the employees that collaborate in this research, is ensured and it was a condition set by the hotels to let researchers carry out the interviews. The interviews are carried out during the following period: March to August 2013.

The method used is based on collecting data from face-to-face interviews with Spanish hotels staff, both at basis and executive level. Directly interviewing employees, a method commonly used in applied research, allows to assure objectivity and reliability of the study. In each of the hotels, a member of the managing team has been interviewed before interviewing ten front-line reception staff's members. A total of 66 people respond to this survey: 60 of them are front-line employees and 6 are employees at a management level. Gender composition of the sample is 45% female versus 55% male. The average

age of respondents in the sample is 38 and the average seniority is of 9 years. The survey presented comprised different questions: first of all, a manager interview to know the satisfaction questionnaires' procedures, the treatment of complaints, implementation of improvement considering customers suggestions, the mission statement of the corporation and the percentage of customers that deliver filled satisfaction questionnaires to the hotel. Secondly, the interview to the front-line employees is divided into two parts: yes/no questions about their satisfaction, their belief of continuity in the hotel's staff in five-years time, their knowledge about satisfaction questionnaires' procedures and their visualization of completion of procedures and actions taken. Finally, a last question is asked to know each employee's definition of the hotel's «corporate mission».

4. STUDY FINDINGS

After conducting all the interviews and analysing data obtained, different issues about the hotels studied can be argued. The six hotel executive level employees' interviewed state that all customers' queries and complaints are treated each day with the employees and closed as «incidences», depending on the quality assurance system of each hotel. Despite of the fact that the majority of the 60 employees who are interviewed are satisfied with their job (90%), the average satisfaction (S) is 7.2/10. Furthermore, 80% of the interviewees are delighted to be working in their hotel in five years' time (I). Procedures (P) in relation to satisfaction questionnaires are known by the majority of the respondents (93% of the employees' interviewed) - the remaining 7% are employees hired recently which aren't yet familiar with corporation's mission -. Actions (A) also are taken in all hotels so as to respond to customers' suggestions and complaints, and the inforcement of the actions taken is perceived by all employees. The hotels' satisfaction questionnaires procedures' type (SP) observed are three: (a) questionnaires are located in the rooms and once filled, customers have to hand them in at reception desk, (b) front-line reception employees deliver questionnaires personally to customers after their stay, and (c) customers receive questionnaires by mail after their stay.

All hotels assure the fulfilment of the established procedure in relation to satisfaction questionnaires; that is, all hotels analysed do deliver questionnaires received directly to the Quality Department or Direction. By and large, the head of reception is who is in charge to hand in the questionnaires to the Quality Department or Direction, who then reads them and takes the consequent actions. Then, monthly or quarterly statistics reports are made and sent to the head of department who is responsible to deal with the basis employees. In relation to the mission (M), the six hotel mission statements analysed together included the key noun words customers, excellence, expectations, guests, happiness, quality, rooms and service, and the verbs to come back, to enjoy, to satisfy, to sell, to serve and to overcome. The hotel mission statements are checked here with the statements given by the employees and identical words matches have been pointed out so as to set the level of coincidence (37%), as described in Table 1. Finally, the last column in Table 1 indicates the rate of customer response (CA) of satisfaction questionnaires.

Regarding the Table 1, employee satisfaction (S) is generally high and even higher in hotels where seniority is less (cases 3 and 4). Employees’ responses related to maintaining their current post in five years’ time (I), knowledge of procedures (P) and taken actions (A) are also high, considering that it is because of closed questions that may foster this positive result. The first hypothesis of the current research is a) the more knowledge there is in relation to satisfaction questionnaires procedures and their usefulness in connection to continuous improvement, the more identified employees feel, which can be supported here because of the higher rates obtained in relation to these issues which will be deeply analysed in a second phase of the research. On the other hand, mission result (M) is really low: it becomes evident that hotels with less seniority of employees and a younger staff (cases 4 and 6) are those that have a better match between employees’ mission concept and the company’s mission (see Charts 1 and 2, as result of working out the Spearman correlation between the variables mentioned, obtaining rates of -0.63, -0.40 and 0.58 in each case).

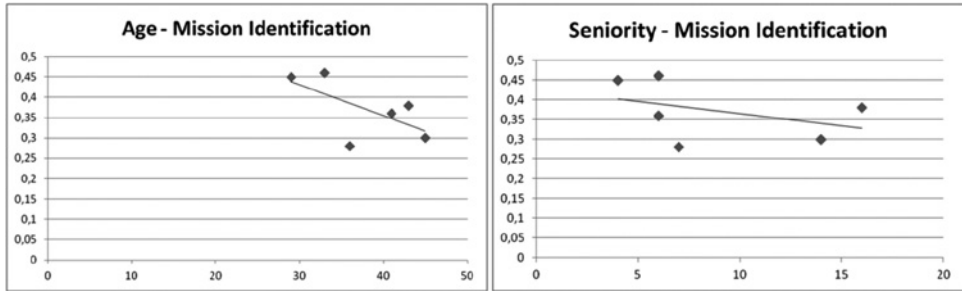
At this point, it is interesting to point at the fact that in the cases investigated it is shown that people with a lot of years of service do insists on mentioning terms such as «money» or «profit» whereas young people refer rather to customer satisfaction situations and concepts, which may explain this better fit between missions statements on younger people than in older people. It seems obvious that this doesn’t mean that experienced people don’t deliver a quality service, but in relation to research hypothesis and data obtained, younger hospitality industry employees appear to be more likely to provide higher quality service to their customers. Thus, in relation to the response rate of the satisfaction questionnaires case 4 is remarkable – it is the hotel with younger employees – where one out of four customers are answering satisfaction questionnaires. This high result is also attained in procedure type (b), which is the only that implies the direct request of the questionnaire to customers. In the other two procedures that apply to the five remaining hotels, it is shown that in any of the cases not even one out of five clients respond to questionnaires.

Table 1
HOTEL AND EMPLOYEES’ DATA INDEXES ANALYSED

Hotel	Age	Seniority	S	I	P	A	M	SP	CA
1	45	14	0.64	0.70	0.80	1.00	0.30	a	0.11
2	36	7	0.67	0.80	1.00	1.00	0.28	a	0.12
3	41	6	0.79	0.80	1.00	1.00	0.36	a	0.14
4	29	4	0.79	0.90	0.90	1.00	0.45	b	0.25
5	43	16	0.73	0.90	1.00	1.00	0.38	c	0.12
6	33	6	0.70	0.70	0.90	1.00	0.46	c	0.17
Average	38	9	0.72	0.80	0.93	1.00	0.37		0.15

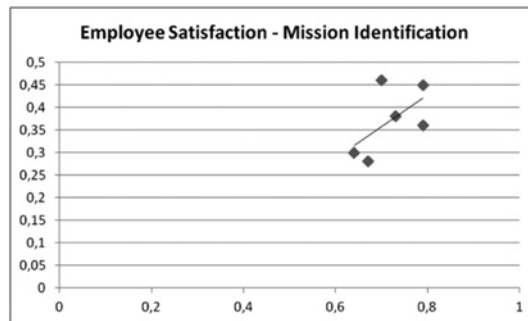
Own source.

Chart 1
GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SPEARMAN CORRELATION
BETWEEN AGE & SENIORITY AND EMPLOYEE MISSION
IDENTIFICATION



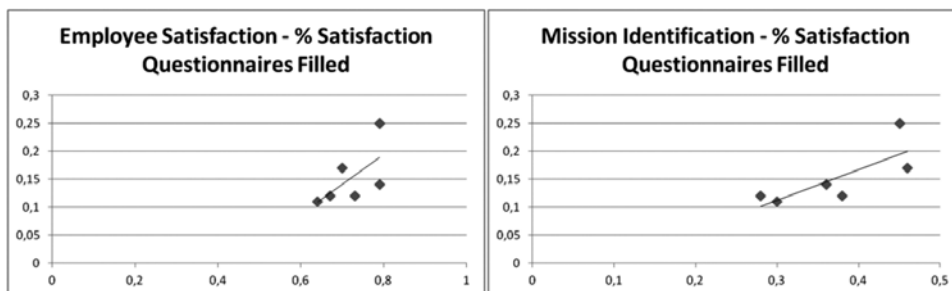
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Chart 2
GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE SPEARMAN CORRELATION
BETWEEN EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION AND MISSION IDENTIFICATION



However, cases 2 and 5 show the same percentage of customer response in relation to a very different seniority (7 and 16 years respectively). In this case, the mission also plays a key role since case 2, which with a younger staff with less seniority has a much lower percentage of mission statement identification than case 5 (28% to 38%). It allows indicating that if this hotel with a younger staff achieved an identification of the mission near the average, it would get a higher customer response rate (see Chart 3, obtaining here a higher correlation with rates of 0.63 and 0.77 as result of calculating the Spearman correlation between the variables). In addition, it needs to be noticed that case number 1 with 80% of employees' procedures knowledge (the lowest) is also involved in one of the lowest identifications with the mission of the company (30%) with the consequent lower percentage of responses from customers (11%), while being the hotel with the highest average age and the second ranking in seniority, according to the conclusions of previous statements.

Chart 3
GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SPEARMAN CORRELATION
BETWEEN EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION & MISSION IDENTIFICATION
AND PERCENTAGE (%) OF SATISFACTION QUESTIONNAIRES FILLED BY
CUSTOMERS



Own source.

Thereby, the results of this study suggest that younger staff better identify with the company's mission; achieving consequently a higher response rate of the questionnaires (see cases 4 and 6). This supports the hypothesis b) outlined as the more identified employees feel, a higher proportion of customers are willing to fill satisfaction questionnaires, because it is understood that satisfied clients, or loyal ones, are those that fill the questionnaires –nonetheless leaving aside a number of variables about customer satisfaction that will be studied in future studies–. It also stands out the importance of the process type used; although when process c is applied different response rates (12% or 17%) are obtained, which is a gap caused by the different levels of mission identification of the 5 and 6 hotels' employees, which also supports paper hypothesis. In future research the reasons why there is this socket on the mission as conceived by employees with the mission of the company should be analysed, to see at what point of the chain the relationship between employees and company may fail. This paper informs hospitality businesses of the importance to take more control of customer relationship management by also considering the management of the customer-front-line employees relationship. The ways to obtain this control should be studied henceforward also analysing the reasons why younger staff feel more identified with the mission.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study examines the employee identification with the corporate mission in the Spanish hospitality industry and its relation with customer identification, which is known by the corporations through the filling out of satisfaction questionnaires. It is proven that daily complaints are treated directly by hotel staff in according to quality assurance systems and it can be argued that only the customers committed to the hotel – because employees have transmitted the mission and customers feel identified with hotel values – do fill out satisfaction questionnaires. Furthermore, this paper suggests

that hospitality firms should create a closer relationship with their employees and take into account their feelings and needs, because of the effect that it will have in the double-way contact between front-line employees and customers. The current study delineates how meaningful relationships can be established between employees and customers through mission statement, so it provides some preliminary insights into the relationships between front-line employees' mission statement identification and customers' identification shown by questionnaires filled by them.

This paper contributes to the emerging literature on a key research issue, and it is the first to examine this influence of mission employee identification on satisfaction questionnaires response rate in the hospitality industry. Thus, this research points out that employee identification with corporate mission is partially misunderstood and it is consequently related to the lower percentage of customers that fill out the satisfaction questionnaires. However, several limitations exist in the present study. First of all, the small sample size may limit the generalization of this study's results and also the fact that the research carried out here is specific to the Spanish urban hotel industry. Moreover, future research chances don't only consist on expanding the sample in hospitality industry but also on the application of an analytical methodology on companies in other sectors. Secondly, to examine the impact of employees' mission identification current research captures only employees' perception and objective data on percentage of questionnaires filled out. This would mean to deepen on a customer perspective on whether they feel identified with hotels and the reasons why they are willing or not to fill the questionnaires, which must be an issue for future research.

Higher quality of performance and levels of satisfaction are perceived to result in increased loyalty and future visitation, greater tolerance of price increases, and an enhanced reputation (Baker and Crompton 2000). For this reason, ulterior studies could also survey the opinions of employees on service, climate, job satisfaction or human resource management practices, matched again against the opinions of actual customers in relation to their quality service perception and satisfaction, because service quality is the main influence on customer satisfaction (Deng et al 2013). Developing an human resource policy and in consequence a mission statement strongly rooted in employees is a key practical implication for enterprises in order to provide high levels of service quality, improve customer perception and ultimately, increase customer satisfaction in the tourist experience. To better serve customers, hotel firms must understand attitudes and values that frontline employees should have in their jobs (Yeh 2013). It can't be forgotten that many of the problems that arise in the hotels will be catered to and solved directly, so it can be affirmed that most customers don't see it as essential to complete the questionnaires. However, it is very important to the hotel to get these points of view of the customers since it means that the customer is loyal and aims not only at solving these issues in the short term, but also by filling out satisfaction questionnaires the customer wants to invest in long term improvement.

So, mission not only contributes to service quality and brand image perception but also to having a strong influence on preference to stay (Kucukusta et al 2012). This could represent a hypothesis for future line of research, taking into account the mentioned limitations together with other further research opportunities, proposed above.

It is obvious that the fact that the hotel has a direct feedback from the customers is of unquestionable value and the basis of the success of corporations in hospitality industry. Satisfaction is conceived as the key to business success in today's competitive landscape (Morgan, Attaway and Griffin 1996). When clients fill the questionnaires it doesn't mean they may be satisfied, but what is important is that they are giving to the hotels the chance to improve. This is the reason why this research outlines that only customers that are loyal with corporations are those who respond to the satisfaction questionnaires. They feel identified because employees have previously felt identified, since both are sharing and will share the tourist experience, and thus, firms must take into account the whole quality service process when delivering experiences to guarantee their excellence over time.

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