THE HOTEL COMMENT CARD: A MOTIVATOR OF GUEST SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the traditional pen and paper hotel comment card (HCC) from the guests' perspective to gain an insight and to improve its effectiveness. The HCC has long been the predominant method of soliciting guest feedback. Although electronic methods of collection are now available the HCC has a sense of familiarity, has general acceptance, and is widely employed. Initially, a literature review of the hotel comment card is provided. Then, the study explores how frequent guests categorize HCC attributes. These attributes are then extended to include evaluation criteria identified in the literature and desired by hotel managers. The extended evaluation criterion is then used to explore how frequent hotel guests believe that future HCCs may motivate guests to provide feedback and assist in the co-creation of value. The overall finding is that the HCCs design and execution can be improved.

Keywords: Hotel comment card, Guest feedback, Satisfaction, Co-creation of value, Content analysis

INTRODUCTION

The traditional hotel comment card (HCC) is a pen and paper printed collateral and the predominant method of soliciting feedback from hotel guests worldwide (Ogle et al., 2013) and the most commonly utilized feedback channel used by hotel guests (Heung et al., 2010). This paper proposes that the HCC, can be an effective tool to facilitate communication between the hotel management and the guest and improve managers' knowledge of guest expectations. The effectiveness of HCCs as a communication facilitator is determined by a number of factors.

The HCC is an invitation for feedback from the hotel manager to the hotel guest. It is also an opportunity for the hotel guest to make an arm's length comment. There are mixed opinions towards HCCs. Advocates see them as invaluable (Geller, 1984). They state that guests are familiar and comfortable with the HCC as they are placed in most hotel guestrooms and at convenient locations (Ford and Bowen, 2003; Lewis and

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Pizam, 1981; Shea and Roberts, 1998; Su, 2004; Trice and Layman, 1984). This availability could be interpreted as a 'hygeine factor' (Herzberg et al., 1959) because HCCs are expected and whilst they may not always be utilised, guests are comforted by their availability and should the situation arise; such as, when performance is below or exceeds expectations they are easily employed (Chipkin, 1999).

From a hotel manager's perspective the literature portrays HCCs as being a simple low-cost method that alerts the management of deviations from standards (Desombre and Eccles, 1998) and problems that need to be addressed (Kapiki, 2012), measures performance against expectations (Jones, 1999), provides information for individual/team performance benchmarking (Prasad, 2003), and may be the source of ideas that leads to innovation (Sampson, 1998). The typical HCC according to Pullman et al. (2005) can contain closed questions, open-ended questions, or a combination of both.

According to Zou and Lee (2007) the HCC has limitations; it rarely provides a deep understanding of the consumer and information is generally limited to predetermined and restrictive categories. Some scholars suggest that poor question design coupled with poor analysis techniques have eroded the effectiveness of the HCC (Lewis and Pizam, 1981). Poor question design due to ambiguity can retard the ability to analyse the data (Losekoot et al., 2001). Other scholars (Trice and Layman, 1984; Kwortnik, 2003) state that poor response rates can also reduce a manager's confidence in the data. Kraft and Martin (1997: 162) argue that the ineffectiveness of the HCC is often the result of being "poorly conceived and haphazardly developed". Another area that may impact on response rates is that staff may not promote the HCC as it is often viewed as a tool of punishment rather than reward (Wisner and Corney, 1999; Yearwood, 2000). Generally, hotel managers perceive the HCC as a tool that only records extremes of dissatisfaction or satisfaction (Sampson, 1996). Gilbert and Horsnell (1998) agree and suggest that the HCC is not a representative sample of hotel guests and the data is therefore not a true indication of performance.

Whilst there are critics there is continuing support for the HCC. It is used extensively and if the limitations are taken into consideration, the HCC is a comforting means for guests to communicate with the hotel manager. The HCC also provides the guest with the ability to communicate with the hotel manager to co-create value and to reduce service variability (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). As the guest and the hotel staff is inseparable in the creation of value the HCC may be viewed as an important component of the service (Brownell, 2003; Nikolich and Sparks,

1995). In their study, Powell and Watson (2006) found that housekeeping staff received feedback on the condition of the guestroom both in person and in the form of a comment card or note. Other industries have also adopted the comment card as a means of improving customer satisfaction and hospitality scholars have given it considerable attention (Inui, 1999; Brotherton and Wood, 2000; Buttle, 2004; Butcher, 2005; Sheringham and Daruwalla, 2006; Riley, 2007).

It has been noted that low response rates reduce the effectiveness and the confidence of the HCC, that guests see the HCC only for cases of disconfirmation of expectations, and managers often see the HCC as a document that may only be noticed by a hotel guest if unavailable (Barsky and Labagh, 1992).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed method approach; however, as it was exploratory in nature, qualitative methods played a greater role than quantitative methods. A two-step methodology was chosen. The first part, using a qualitative approach, explored 40 typical HCCs. The participants were frequent hotel guests (FHGs) with knowledge of the four and five star hotel experience; the objective was to uncover a list of HCC attributes. Armed with the list of attributes the second step evaluated the list of attributes to determine how they would influence a hotel guest's motivation to attend to, complete and return a HCC. The second step employed a mixed method approach. An expert panel comprising six FHGs was chosen on the basis that they were familiar with the qualities of four and five star hotels and familiar with the expectations of hotel guests. This is an important selection criterion as it is generally agreed that pre-purchase expectations are the basis of post-purchase evaluations of satisfaction (Stauss and Seidel, 2004). In the second part of the study 71 typical HCCs were provided to the participants. Each HCC was reviewed at least three times by the expert panel.

Step 1: Identifying the attributes of HCCs

Step 1 of the study employed the Quasi-Q-sort technique of Dunlap and Hadley (1965). This technique was adapted from the Q-sort qualitative technique developed by Stephenson (1953). Although this technique is normally applied to ranking a set of statements, it has also been broadly applied (Brown, 1996: 561); including as an instrument to measure service quality and customer satisfaction in the hotel industry (Ekinci and Riley,

1999). In keeping with the needs of this study the Quasi-Q-sort technique has also been employed when "aesthetic judgment" needs to be applied (Amin, 2000, p. 410). In this study it was employed to allow participants to categorise 40 sample HCCs in a spontaneous manner as recommended by Kosslyn (1980).

A total of 71 HCCs, were requested and collected from the front desk personnel at four and five star hotels in Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore. To avoid unnecessary complexity in the sorting process the initial 71 HCCs was reduced to 40. The sample contained a mix of HCCs from hotel chain and independently operated hotels. The 40 HCC were introduced to fifteen purposefully selected participants. The participants were English speaking and frequent hotel guests (FHGs). The participants were invited to sort the HCCs by attributes according to their own preference, however, were asked to identify recurring patterns, and to sort according to how the HCCs would be perceived by hotel guests. The attribute sorting process demonstrated that although individuals sorted to their own preferences, consistent attributes patterns emerged. The participants were then interviewed and given the opportunity to elaborate on their personal attribute sorting process. The interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed as is the tradition for qualitative interviews.

The attribute sorting process revealed that participants sorted firstly using visual and tactile cues and then cognitively. The HCC attributes categories were document format, question format, and perceived costs and benefits to guests. The sub-categories are listed below

- Document format
    - Tone of the document
    - Aesthetic appeal – design, layout, type, graphics,
    - Instrument size
    - Paper texture and weight
    - Degree of confidentiality
- Question format
    - Coherent line of questions
    - Closed questions (multiple choice or multiple response)
    - Open ended questions (adequate space to answer)
- Perceived costs and benefits to hotel guest
    - Completion time
    - Completion effort
    - Co-creation of value

Step 2: Content Analysis by expert panel

The themes identified in the attribute sorting process were compared with the literature and then extended to include additional attributes. This resulted in a list of 11 evaluation criteria. A scoring sheet listed the evaluation criteria: management tone; instrument size; print quality; question format; visual quality; ease of use; the likelihood of guest completion; purpose of visit; personal demographics; operational performance; and overall quality.

Content analysis of communication documents is to study the meanings inferred within a document through qualitative and quantitative methods (Berelson, 1952). It is a methodology employed to identify key words, themes, concepts, structures, and the characteristics of a message (Berelson, 1952; Malhotra et al., 2002); Krippendorf, 2004; Busch et al., 2005) and has been applied to HCCs (Clow et al., 2001; Gilbert and Horsnell, 1998).

In this study content analysis is employed to explore the relationship between HCC attributes and the motivation to attend to and complete a HCC with the intent of providing feedback and, for some guests co-creating the product. A panel of six FHGs was purposefully selected to perform the content analysis of the 71 HCCs. Responses utilizing 3-5 point Likert-type scales and yes/no answers. The question format was selected by the primary researcher as the most appropriate for the attributes under review. The HCCs were distributed to the participants and the average number of reviews per participant was 42, each HCC was reviewed at least three times and in total 253 reviews were undertaken. Following the review a qualitative focus group was conducted with participants.

RESULTS

The results of the content analysis by the six FHG expert panel members are listed below. It should be noted that the attribute categories are not mutually exclusive and there is considerable overlap. Table 1 shows the correlation between management tone, print quality/legibility, visual quality, ease-of-use, overall quality and the likelihood of guest completion.

Table 1. *Pearson's Correlation among Hotel Guest Questionnaire Variables*

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Management tone	-				
2. Print quality/legibility	.352**	-			
3. Visual quality	.424**	.562**	-		
4. Ease of use	-.076	.127*	.366**	-	
5. Overall quality	.325**	.478**	.690**	.505**	-
6. Likelihood of guest completion	.111	.088	.428**	.507**	.677**

**p<.01   *p<.05

According to Berelson (1952: 17), the overarching quantification requirement characteristic of content analysis "does not necessarily demand the assignment of numerical values to the analytic categories". He goes on to qualify that statement by saying that "sometimes it takes the form of quantitative words like "more", or "always" or increases" or "often"' (Berelson, 1952: 17). Hence, both description of the content in quantitative terms and qualitative terms is made throughout the chapter to facilitate what Berelson (1952: 123) refers to as the "reflection" of "deeper phenomena".

Management tone reflects the degree of sincerity in the HCC document. Degree of sincerity is the guest's initial perception of the managerial importance given to the document. The FHGs suggested that management tone could also be referred to as communication style. Surprisingly, only 38% of HCCs were perceived as having a sincere management tone. Some HCCs were identified as having a patronizing tone, contained platitudes, and/or colloquialisms. Others lacked the succinctness and clarity expected from a professional document, contained jargon, or lacked an explanatory preamble. There is a correlation between management tone and willingness to attend to and complete the HCC. In the initial sorting process this was identified as 'costs to hotel guests', however, in the second part of the study it is grouped under the wider 'ease of use' category. The correlation between management tone and ease of use is supported by a previous study by Ogle et al. (2005). The study found that management tone in HCCs can also influence the quality of the relationship between hotel managers and hotel guests (Hendrie, 2006) and be influenced by other factors: visual quality, overall quality, and print quality.

The data indicated that 37.9% of the questionnaires were perceived as being sincere in tone (rating of >3). Correlation analysis of the data (Table 1) showed the following:

a) the higher the visual quality, the more positively the management tone was viewed (r=.424, p<.01);

b) the higher the overall quality, the more positively the management tone was perceived (r=.325, p<.01);

c) the higher the print and legibility quality, the more positively the management tone was perceived (r=.352, p<.01); and

d) the management tone did not have any apparent influence on the probability that the guest would complete the questionnaire. However, although there was no direct correlation between management tone and probability of usage, there was a strong correlation between overall perceived quality and probability of usage (r=.677, p<.01).

Instrument size reflects the physical dimensions of the HCC. Instrument size is referred to paper size as it takes into account paper orientation and folding. Instrument size varied considerably, 7% could be considered large, 58% medium, and 35% small (approximately postcard-sized). Instrument size is influenced by the budget and the corporate guidelines. However, there appears to be no correlation between instrument size and probability of use.

Print quality reflects the quality perceptions or the presentation quality of the HCC. This attribute has an impact on guest attention and motivation to complete. Print quality, clarity and sharpness, legibility, size of font, font selection, color were identified as appropriate in 81% of the HCC documents. Correlation analysis revealed print quality to have direct relationships with management tone (r=.352, p<.01), visual quality (r=.562, p<.01) and overall quality (r=.478, p<.01). However, print quality and ease of use were only weakly related (r=.127, p<.05).

Visual quality, although similar to print quality, reflects the use of graphical design and layout to gain attention and stimulate interest. The visual aspects or aesthetic appeal included motif, color palette, illustrations and pictures. Visual quality was found to have strong correlation with overall quality (r=.690, p<.01), suggesting that hotel guests are sight dominant, supporting Suzuki's (2002) opinion that humans live in a visually oriented world, the vast majority of whose attention is focused on what can be seen and echoes the findings of attribute sorting process. Regression analysis as shown in Figure 1 below showed management tone (p<.05) and all aspects of visual quality to significantly affect overall quality. Standardized coefficients were 0.15 for print quality and legibility, 0.44 for visual quality, and 0.33 ease of use.
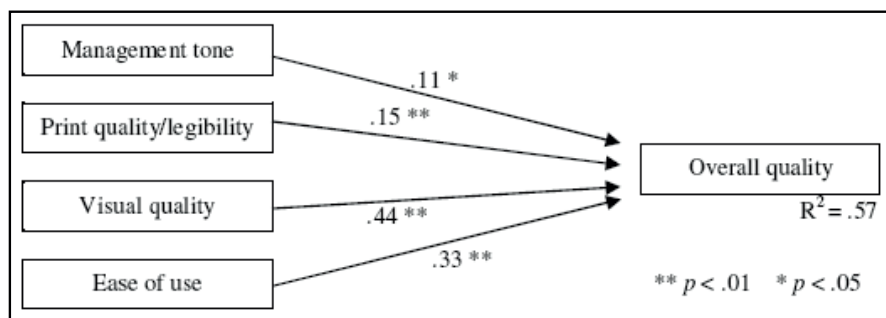
Figure 1. *Regression analysis results for visual quality*

Cluster analysis gave further credibility to the visual – overall quality link. The visual quality of a HCC was also found to be linked to the perception of overall quality as shown by the lowest distance cluster (Figure 2).
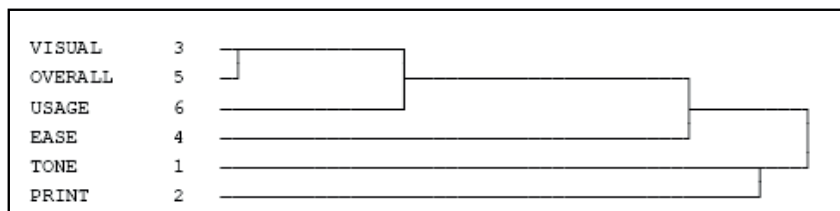

Figure 2. *Cluster relationship among six questionnaire attributes*

Professionally designed and professionally printed HCCs were more appealing, they received an overall quality mean score of 3.5, and higher than those that had apparently been in-house produced, and then photocopied on plain paper. This finding supports the findings of the earlier sorting process where participants tended to employ visual and tactile cues as heuristics for quality.

Question format reflects the individual question type and structure of the questions. HCCs typically comprise closed questions, open-ended questions, or a combination of closed and open (Pullman et al., 2005). Moreover, it appears that this question format has become the industry standard. Within the selected HCC closed questions are generally formatted as multi-choice questions (MCQ) and multiple response questions (MRQ). Multiple response questions such as Likert-type scales ask hotel guests to select the most appropriate answer. Interestingly, Likert-type scaled questions were included in 82% of HCCs.

Hotel guest seem familiar with the HCC structure and as a rule, blank or lined spaces following a question are construed by hotel guests as an open-ended question and an opportunity to elaborate. According to

Wisner and Corney (1999: 112), open ended questions provide an opportunity to "express a concern or comment more precisely". Although most HCCs appear conventional in question format there was one innovative exception that allowed hotel guests to express themselves both in words and drawings. The use of mixed methods within the HCC supports Coxon's (2005) assertion that the qualitative-quantitative argument is of less importance than the quality of the information gathered.

Regardless of the question format there were a number of questions within the sample HCCs that lacked clarity due to ambiguity or jargon. The FHG panel felt that, in some cases, this could be interpreted as an intention to manipulate the result in a favorable manner and in others a lack of attention to detail. The perception of manipulation may lead to guest cynicism and a reduce motivation to complete the HCC.

Another area of question format that generated discussion is the appropriate number of questions; too few may give the impression of a lack of management interest (Trice and Layman, 1984), whereas too many will lead to guest fatigue. Having said that, the sample HCCs were seen as appropriate in length and contained between 20–30 questions. Trice and Layman (1984) also contend that a lack of writing space can be interpreted as a lack of interest by management and this may reduce the motivation to complete the HCC. Therefore, as would be expected, the data revealed no apparent correlation between the number of questions and motivation to attend to and complete the HCC.

Ease-of-use reflects the costs to the hotel guest to complete the survey; costs are time and effort. The FHGs rated 70% of the sample HCCs as having an acceptable degree of time and efforts to complete. Nevertheless the FHGs identified a number of concerns that would have impact on the motivation to attend to and complete a document: an appropriate management tone, a description of how the document will be used, succinctness and clarity, a guest centric language, an appealing visual design, appropriate type size and font, a balance of closed and open questions. In addition, it should be devoid of ambiguity, platitudes and a patronizing tone. Ease-of-use was found to correlate with overall quality; and regression analysis indicated visual quality and print quality/legibility were the antecedents of overall quality. An attractive HCC is therefore more likely to impact positively on response rates compared to an unattractive one and respondent fatigue could be reduced if the HCC is simple and user friendly. This implies the expected effort needed from the respondent should not be an imposition. Overly detailed instructions were reported to be patronizing and likely to negate the instrument's positive

intention. For example, of the eight HCCs rated less than 3 using 5-point Likert-type scaling, 7 comprised between 33 and 64 questions. Approximately 70% of the sample was highly rated on the propensity for usage variable, especially on the ease-of-use dimension.

The **likelihood of guest completion** reflects the guest's motivation to attend to, complete and return a HCC. Of the sample HCCs 28% were evaluated as having an above average likelihood that they would be completed and returned. The likelihood of guest completion was positively related to ease-of-use (r=.507, p<.01) and overall quality (r=.677, p<.01). There are factors that can influence the likelihood of guest completions. Personal request from a senior manager emphasizes the importance of the guest and their feedback to the organization (Wisner and Corney, 1999). Sometimes referred to as a preamble it may be a face to face or written request. Individual personalized written requests are often placed passively in the guest's room. Written notes soliciting feedback may be signed by 'the staff' to reflect a team spirit or give no sender information. Alternatively a staff member may invite and assist a guest to complete the HCC if the situation warranted it. The usage of more personal requests implies attention to detail, and is appropriate when a deviation of guest expectations has come to the attention of a senior staff member. If handled correctly this may reduce negative word of mouth and enhance positive word of mouth (Stauss and Seidel, 2004).

Degree of confidentiality was identified as an attribute in step one of this study and it was also considered important by the expert panel in step two. They stated it is one thing to have a HCC completed; it is another to have it returned. The FHGs questioned the confidentiality of the HCC if it did not permit sealing and returning to a senior manager. Confidentiality provides security and "generates the purest expression of information" (Wisner and Corney, 1999: 115), but most of the HCCs that were reviewed did not permit sealing or sought personal data. Dillman (2000) suggests that personal data is likely to increase socially desirable answers and therefore reduce data integrity. The FHGs felt that socially acceptable answers may also be increased if guest incentives are employed. Whilst incentives may increase the rate of HCC completions (Pizam and Ellis, 1999), they do not appear widespread in this study as of the 71 HCCs reviewed; only one incorporated an incentive scheme.

The next three evaluation criteria (purpose of visit, demographic information, operational performance information) were not identified in step one and were included as they were identified in the literature and were a common feature of the selected HCCs. It should be noted that this

is understandable as step one was conducted by frequent hotel guests and not hotel managers.

Purpose of visit is a recurring feature of HCCs. Although not identified in the initial sorting process by FHGs, purpose of visit provides insight into the effectiveness of a number of marketing activities: market segmentation, managing capacity and demand, reward programs, and pricing decisions. The fact that it did not appear as an attribute on the attribute sorting process and yet does in the literature is revealing. Purpose of visit whilst important to managers is not relevant to hotel guests and may be viewed negatively by hotel guests (Shall, 2003). The participants in this study suggested that unnecessary questions could add to participant fatigue and reduce the motivation to complete the HCC.

Gathering **demographic information** is also a recurring feature of HCCs and another that was identified in the literature but not identified in the initial sorting process. Like purpose of visit questions it provides insight into the effectiveness of a number of marketing activities: market segmentation, creating relevant communication messages and may alert managers to demographic movements. The expert panel of FHG viewed the collection of demographic information as a benefit to hotel management; this is consistent with Dillman (2000) who warns that unnecessary questions could be considered intrusive and viewed negatively by hotel guests. The participants in this study suggested that unnecessary questions could add to participant fatigue and reduce the motivation to complete the HCC.

Operational performance reflects the intent to gather data on service encounters between the staff and the hotel guest. Operation performance information was also a recurring theme in 82% of HCCs. Gathering this information was viewed differently by the FHGs to the collection of personal information in purpose of visit and demographic information. It is clear that this information is collected to obtain a macro view of the operations and to improve the product quality, participants felt that in some small way, through feedback, the guest became co-creators of value.

Although accommodation was the main focus of HCCs, food and beverage outlets were also included in most HCCs. Additionally, it was noted that some hotels also surveyed city guests of their food and beverage outlets through their HCC. The study confirmed that there is a need for HCCs to ask questions consistent with the hotel guests' purchases, experiences, and interactions (Pizam and Ellis, 1999). Some FHGs felt that often there was an over emphasis on food and beverage questions. Additionally, there were different opinions regarding the order of operational performance questions and this subjective opinion is

consistent with the literature as some promote randomization (Solomon and Kopelman, 1984) whilst others suggest that it may impact on ease-of-use and motivation to complete (Aaker et al., 1995).

The final evaluation criterion, **overall quality** reflects a cumulative evaluation of the HCCs. This is an important criterion because each HCC may contain negative and positive attributes. Overall quality refers to an evaluation of the total attributes in a more holistic manner, representing an overall assessment. More than 75% of the sample viewed the HCC favorably or better.

CONCLUSIONS

This study began with a literature review of the HCC. It then asked a number of frequent hotel guests to sort and identify a list of HCC attributes. This information was then provided to another group of frequent hotel guests to evaluate the attributes as to how the HCC may be improved, gain increased adoption, be completed in an accurate manner and be returned. The information was then summarized and a list of recommendations reported.

To conclude, it is clear that the HCC is of comfort to hotel guests and provides an opportunity for hotel guests to make comments that may be uncomfortable to make in a face to face situation; in this regard the HCC may provide an opportunity to recover when service failures happen and may reduce negative word of mouth. The HCC is therefore an important component of maintaining or improving service quality and could therefore be identified as a motivator of customer satisfaction.

The attribute sorting process, the literature review and the evaluation of attributes provided a list of recommendation to improve the effectiveness of the HCC. The following recommendations should be noted:

1. A greater uptake of the HCC will increase the integrity of the data and make it more representative of the actual levels of satisfaction. Therefore, the HCC should be promoted to hotel staff and hotel guests as a means of improving guest satisfaction.
2. A sincere management tone should be employed when verbally promoting the use of the HCC and also incorporated in the HCC document itself. The document should be free of patronizing language and colloquialisms.
3. The HCC should have the ability to remain confidential; should be sealable or be supplied with a sealable envelope marked "CONFIDENTIAL, The General Manager". The envelope should

have a postal address and a postage paid facility. The opportunity to easily post should be considered when considering instrument size.

4. Questions should be kept to within the 20-30 range. Questions should be well crafted to avoid jargon, ambiguity, or be of a leading nature. The question type should be appropriate to the subject and there should be a mix of closed and open questions. Open ended questions should have adequate space for full discussion.

5. The quality of the paper and the print should reflect the importance of the HCC document. The HCC document should have an easy to read font type and size appropriate to the demographics of the hotel. Aesthetics should be considered when producing the document layout. The document should reflect the corporate image of the hotel.

6. Justification and the expected outcomes should be explained when requesting personal information; it should be considered whether the HCC is the best vehicle to collect information that may be available within a CRM system.

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