



A GUIDE BOOK FOR MAKING A RESERVATION AT THE RECEPTION OF A HOTEL

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ABSTRACT

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A Guide Book for Making a Reservation at the Reception of a Hotel

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The aim for this bachelor's thesis was to produce a guide book for making a reservation to be used at the reception of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. The need for such a guide book was introduced by the hotel itself as there was no guide book of this kind specifically designed for Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. There was only a very large and rather impractical chain-level guide book for the system used in the front desk computers which had not been in active use by the reception staff. The main element of the created guide book was practicality.

The guide book created for the hotel covers all the most commonly used reservation types and it has very specific instructions and visuals so that knowing beforehand the computer program that is being used is not necessarily required. The guide book also has a concise presentation of the room types in the hotel. In addition, the most important and most often used side functions in the computer program were scrutinized when they were connected with making the reservation. The guide book can be found in the appendix of this thesis to respect the privacy of the company.

The author used his own work experience at the front desk, as well as the experience of his colleagues, when going through the most important factors of the guide book. The wishes of the management of the hotel were carefully enquired and updated during the process. Theoretical framework for the thesis consists of theories and concepts of good service and its importance in bringing customer value.

The guide book will be used at the receptions of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves and other Sokos Hotels in Tampere. It is especially aimed for trainees and new staff members who would then gain the needed information effectively and consistently. It is of major importance that the guide book is updated whenever needed due to changes in working environment, such as when new reservation types are introduced or the products (hotel rooms) are renewed.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The aim for this bachelor's thesis was to create a guide book for making a reservation correctly and effectively at the reception of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. The guide book is mostly meant for trainees or new employees not familiar with the system used in the case hotel but it may as well be used as a reminder of the chain standards for the more experienced staff members too.

The wish for a standardized model for making a reservation came from the hotel itself. The revenue management department has for example special interest in having all the reservations made according to the rules since it helps them plan ahead the future pricing decisions as the information gathered from the past reservations is adequate and uniform. The front desk can give better service when the practices are clear to everyone and less dependent on who is giving the service. A well done reservation also does not require a lot of additional work at the reception. All this leads to a smoother hotel experience in all departments, both for the guests and the employees.

The objective was to create a standardized model for making all the most common reservation types a front desk employee does. When there were several different ways in which the employees would make a reservation, the most suitable one would be chosen after an oral questioning of the employees of the front desk and the revenue manager of the hotel. The ready guide book will be used at the reception of the case hotel and possibly at the receptions of the other Sokos Hotels in Tampere as well.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Topic

The author selected this topic because it is closely linked with his current job at the reception of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves where he has gained knowledge and personal experience on the subject. The author has done both of his practical training periods that are included in the Degree Programme in Tourism at the case hotel in different departments. This topic was chosen after it was suggested by the hotel's revenue manager.

Sokos Hotels is a big chain in its field in Finland and it does have chain-level instructions for making a reservation using the Opera system. These instructions, however, are rather non-specific and have not been in active use at the reception when guiding new employees or when looking for answers to problematic cases. The briefing for making a reservation has until now relied on the skills and habits of an individual employee and the results may have been varying.

The aim for this study was to create a comprehensive yet functional guide book for active use at the receptions of Sokos Hotel Ilves and other Sokos Hotels operating in Tampere. After the guide book has been put into operation it can be used as a guideline in teaching consistent manners of making a reservation no matter which individual is giving the instructions.

2.2 Service concepts and theories

2.2.1 Service

The definition of service as a phenomenon is not simple as it has many forms and variations. There have been many attempts to define the concept (Grönroos 1998, 52) but Grönroos (2000, 46) himself defines it:

“A service is a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not always, take place in interactions between the customer and

service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems.”

In addition, Grönroos states that for most services there are three basic characteristics that can be identified (Grönroos 2000, 47).

1. Services are *processes* consisting of *activities* or a *series of activities* rather than *things*.
2. Services are at least to some extent *produced and consumed simultaneously*.
3. The customer *participates in the service production process* at least to some extent.

Holloway (2004) points out that there are four main characteristics of tourism services: intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability. *Intangibility* means that the product is not available for testing before it is actually purchased so there is always a risk involved for the buyer. It also means that in place for a distribution system there is a reservation system which is the industry's tool for coping with demand and supply. *Heterogeneity* is, as later explained by Puustinen and Rouhiainen as well, the idea that a service product is never exactly the same due to uncontrollable factors such as weather conditions and individual employee's work performances. *Perishability* indicates that the service product which has not been sold today cannot be stored and sold tomorrow but it is gone forever. Holloway also links time-variable demand with perishability since it is a common problem in tourism industry meaning that the products often have a very clean peak season, for example public holidays and the summer vacation period. Time-variable demand is best fought against with careful price planning and revenue management. Lastly, *inseparability* links the product and its seller closely as the personalised selling has a huge impact on how the service product is perceived. Due to this Holloway emphasises the fact that training an employee is extremely important. The thesis' guide book has been created with this in mind. (Holloway 2004, 16-18.)

One more characteristic of service products is added by Evans, Campbell and Stonehouse (2003) and that is *ownership*. In a hotel for example a customer only buys the right to use a hotel room but an actual transfer of ownership is not involved in this process. This, much like inseparability, makes it harder to build long-lasting customer relationships and build brand loyalty. (Evans & Campbell & Stonehouse 2003, 32.)

Grönroos continues the topic; “services are, as a product, very heterogenic since they are affected by people on both giving and receiving side of the service and therefore no service is exactly the same for every customer” (Grönroos 2000, 49). This is not something that can be avoided but the level of service can be secured to be on a certain minimum level after the employees are given correct instructions and tools. A guide book, for instance, does not eliminate the human factor from either the customer's or personnel's side in this process but it will smooth out some of the differences in personnel's service. The importance of proper training is emphasized by Powers and Barrows (1999) as they state that an employee who is not given adequate training or instructions for a job is likely to start looking for other work (Powers & Barrows 1999, 535). This can be seen as a broader point of view for the benefits of a good guide book.

2.2.2 Quality in service

Grönroos (2000) states that “the quality of a service as it is perceived by customers has two dimensions; a technical or outcome dimension and a functional or process-related dimension” and continues: “various services such as -- technical service -- provide added value, which is partly of a technical nature (that is, adds to technical quality) and partly of a functional nature (that is, adds to functional quality)”. A well done reservation has both of these dimensions and it is important that they both are taken seriously as they affect directly to customer satisfaction. (Grönroos 2000, 63-65.)

As shown in following figure 1, company and/or local image works as a filter affecting the perception of quality. For example if a company has a favourable image, minor mistakes will probably be forgiven but if these mistakes happen often enough the image will be damaged. (Grönroos 2000, 64.)

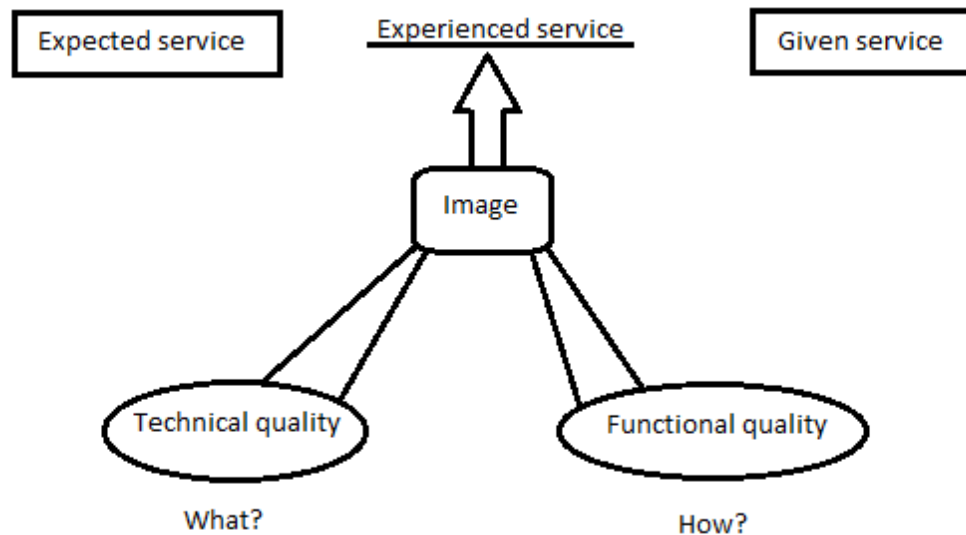


FIGURE 1. Two service quality dimensions (Grönroos 2000)

According to Grönroos “quality is produced locally in a series of moments of truth of service encounters or buyer-seller interactions and everyone contributes to customer perceived quality” (Grönroos 2000, 110). Therefore there cannot be any weak links when it comes to providing services, everyone needs to be familiar with the demands of good (customer) service. Front desk is often the first contact between the customer and the hotel so the front desk employee's skills are of great importance (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010a, 144). Making a reservation successfully is usually an important moment of truth or a customer touch point. Kotler and Keller (2012) explain a customer touch point as “any occasion on which a customer encounters the brand or product--”. For a hotel, the touch points include reservations--”. The customer touch point is important when trying to maximize customer loyalty. (Kotler & Keller 2012, 157.)

Furthermore this can be considered as empowering the employees. Grönroos (2000) says that “employees who have the authority to handle customer contact situations themselves, and who have the technical skills - - will fulfil promises effectively and in a customer-oriented manner”. Grönroos also points out that a lack of systems and technology support has a negative impact on the potential positive effects of empowerment. In the guide book's context all this means that it is necessary to be very meticulous with the technical aspects of making the reservation as it is impossible to productively implement all the information needed for making a good reservation if there is not the adequate technical knowledge to support it. (Grönroos 2000, 374-375.)

2.2.3 Marketing mix

The marketing mix is the set of controllable tactical marketing tools that a company melds to produce the response it wants in its target market. The many possibilities gather into four groups of variables known as the 'four Ps': product, price, place and promotion. (Kotler & Armstrong & Wong & Saunders 2008, 49.)

When the product is an intangible and abstract service, the number of Ps rises to seven (figure 2). The additional Ps are:

- Process
- Personnel/People
- Physical evidence/environment.

These additional variables are needed due to the differences when marketing services instead of goods. (Puustinen & Rouhiainen 2007, 79.)

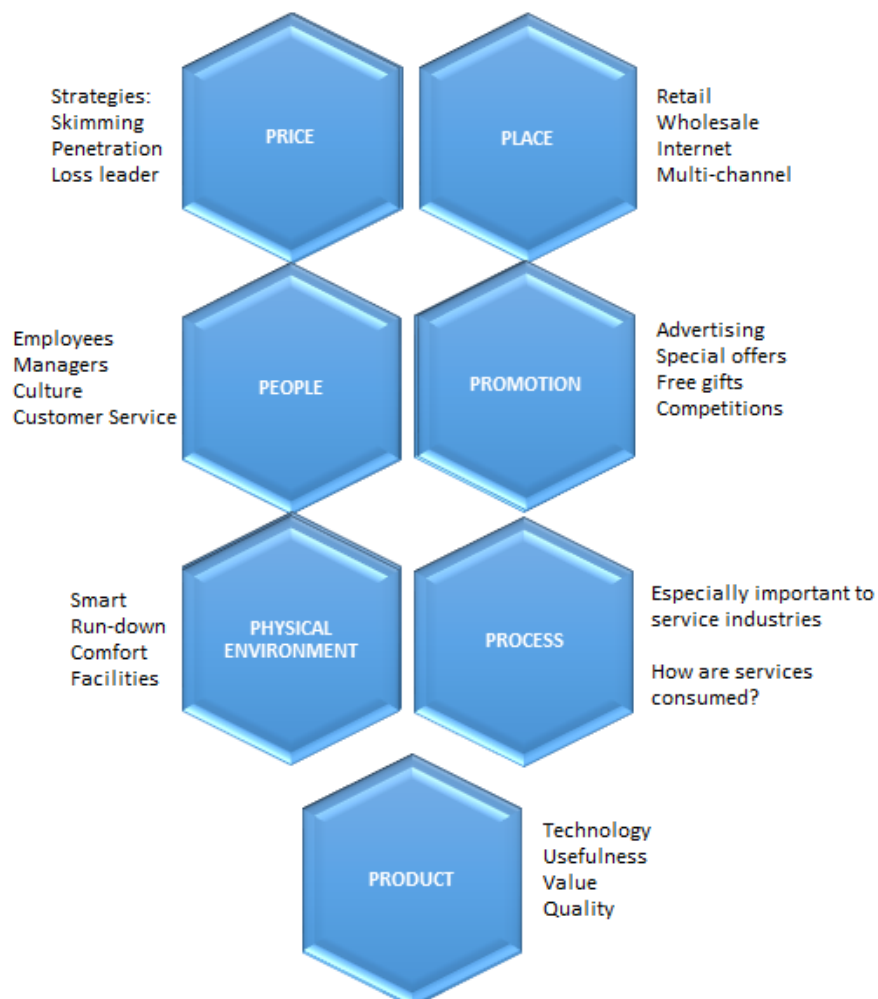


FIGURE 2. 7 Ps of the marketing mix (modified, Puustinen & Rouhiainen 2007)

Puustinen and Rouhiainen (2007) also pointed out that accommodation services are often intangible, heterogenic and cannot be stored for later use. A hotel room which stayed empty last night cannot be sold again today for it is gone for good. The role of personnel and their work with the customer is very important in creating value for customer's money. (Puustinen & Rouhiainen 2007, 188-191.)

While selling the product to the customer, in this case making the reservation, we need to concentrate on listening to the customer's hopes and expectations and trying to fulfil them as thoroughly as possible because according to Kotler et al. (2008) the customers "compare the actual value they receive in consuming the product to the value expected, and this affects their satisfaction and repurchase behaviour". Again according to Kotler et al. (2008) these expectations that a customer has are based on "the customer's past buying experiences, the opinions of friends and associates, and marketer and competitor information and promises". Each individual person making the reservation at a hotel reception must have the skills to be able to make a reservation according to the company's standards. (Kotler & Armstrong & Wong & Saunders 2008, 373,375.)

2.2.4 Value chain

The task of any business is to deliver customer value at a profit (Kotler & Keller 2012, 55). Michael Porter proposed the value chain as the main tool for identifying ways to create more customer value (figure 3). Every firm consists of a collection of activities performed to design, produce, market, deliver and support the firm's products. There are five primary activities and four support activities that form the nine value-creating activities that help to understand the behaviour of costs in the specific business and the potential sources of competitive differentiation. (Kotler & Armstrong & Wong & Saunders 2008, 380.)

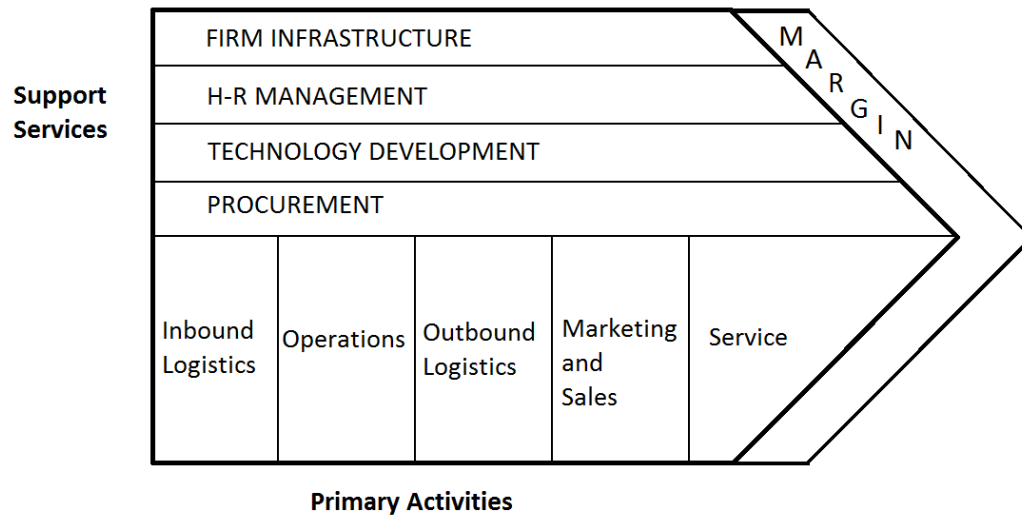


FIGURE 3. Porter's generic value chain (adopted from Michael Porter)

In this value chain, the act of making a reservation at a reception is in at least two of the primary activities: marketing & sales and service. It is crucial that the reservation is made with all the best skills and effort every time and by every employee in order to maintain a high level of customer satisfaction.

Within the value chain a firm should identify its core business process and give more emphasis on its management. Many of these processes involve inputs and cooperation from many functional departments. Out of the core businesses presented by Kotler (2008) there are two processes that are of main interest when talking about a hotel's reception (Kotler & Armstrong & Wong & Saunders 2008, 381.):

- Order-to-payment process: This includes all the activities that are involved in receiving orders, approving them, delivering the goods or services on time and collecting payments for them.
- Customer service process: The set of activities that make it possible for the customer to easily get the service or the answers he or she needs from the right place in a company.

The importance of employees in the value chain is emphasised by Bruhn and Georgi (2006) as they state that a satisfied employee is more willing to act in a company-favourable way when interacting with customers. This, according to them "increases customer satisfaction and consequently organisational value". In addition, satisfied employees work more efficiently and therefore reduce costs. (Bruhn & Georgi 2006, 306.) The guide

book for making a reservation hopefully increases the employee satisfaction at the reception among the more unsure and new workers because it might eliminate some uncertainty factors.

Yet it is not enough that a firm works well in its own operations, the value chains of suppliers, distributors and customers need to be in order as well. When a company is partnered with specific suppliers and distributors they may form a value delivery network which is also known as a supply chain. (Kotler & Keller 2012, 56-57.) For example the hotel in case has a value delivery network with online travel agencies and submitting their reservations manually to the Opera system needs to be flawless so that the value chain is not harmed.

2.3 Research questions

The research questions for this thesis evolved from the wish of the revenue manager of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves to get a guide book for making a reservation in order to get better and more of uniform quality reservations. There was no particular problem area that could be pointed out in the reservations made by the reception so the main questions do not hail from how to solve or avoid a common mistake made by a trainee or a front desk employee but the focus was mainly on how the overall quality of all the reservations could be guaranteed.

The author soon discovered that the research questions to be answered were the following: What types of reservations are done at the reception of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves? What is the most effective way of doing a particular reservation type and if there are many ways of doing it, which one is the most suitable one? The author also wanted to clarify the impact of a well done reservation on a hotel's functionality, especially through revenue management.

2.4 Data and methods

The approach of this thesis is of qualitative nature as the main focus is on the quality of certain specific reservation types and the numerical quantity of them or the persons making these reservations is not noteworthy. In case there were more than one way of doing a reservation by the staff the correct way for the guide book was selected according to the standards confirmed by the revenue manager or a service manager. Clark et al. (2002) use Jary and Jary's distinguishing when separating qualitative and quantitative research methods and in this thesis, as the emphasis is on the qualitative method, the results rely much on the skills of the researcher as an observer in gathering data rather than on the research instruments (Clark & Riley & Wilkie & Wood 2002, 40).

There are two types of data identified for research sources. These are, according to Smith and Taylor (2004), primary and secondary data. Primary data is gathered for a specific purpose for the first time and secondary data is something that has already been gathered by someone else and is now used again by another person. (Smith & Taylor 2004, 129.)

For this thesis the author has mainly used primary data that was gathered orally from the managers of the hotel whenever their expertise or opinions were needed. The author's own and his colleagues' work experience with making reservations at the reception of a hotel can also be considered as primary data. An example of secondary data used is the information provided by the chain about its methods, such as the their internal Opera manual.

2.5 Research process

The thesis has been drawn up in the form imposed by the Tampere University of Applied Sciences. After an introduction to the topic, the theoretical framework is described in chapter two with detailed information about the theories and concepts linked with the topic at issue. Then in chapter three the company is described as well as its focus department, which is the front desk and its main tool for making reservations, which is the Opera system. Chapter four is the guide book which is the end product of this thesis. It can be found in the appendix and it will not be published due to privacy reasons. Chapter five is

the last chapter and it is the conclusion of how well the author managed to succeed in his work.

3 THE CASE COMPANY

3.1 The company and the front desk

Sokos hotels chain is the biggest hotel chain in Finland with over 50 hotels in Finland, St. Petersburg, Russia and Tallinn, Estonia. It has three different main categories for its hotels which are Solo, Break and Original, all of which have their distinctive features. Sokos Hotels chain is a part of the S-ryhmä group. (S-kanava)

Original Sokos Hotel Ilves is a 336-room-hotel in the centre of Tampere, Finland. It has 202 standard class rooms - of which two are equipped for people with physical disabilities -, 125 superior class rooms and 9 suites. There are six different restaurants in the hotel and several conference rooms, the biggest one available for up to 300 attendees. The hotel building itself is a 19-floor landmark by a rapid that runs through the city and it is designed specifically for hotel use. (Sokos Hotels)

Original Sokos Hotel Ilves is a big hotel in Tampere's scale and it is not strictly segmented for a particular customer type. It has features that attract many customer segments, such as several conference rooms for business people, a swimming pool area for families and a very central location for leisure travellers to easily be able to enjoy the services and culture of the city. Generally speaking there are two main seasons that can be pointed out; summer months are the peak season for families and the rest of the year the hotel is attracting more business customers. Shorter holiday seasons and special events in the city also change the clientele for other periods.



PICTURE 1. Original Sokos Hotel Ilves (<http://matkaideoita.com/hotellit-tampereella.html>)

The front desk is the heart and communication centre of a hotel and it has many different operations such as check-in, information point and cash register, depending on the size of the hotel. It is a service area comprised of several physical elements, like the reception desk, customer computers, lounge area and decoration, all of which have a huge impact on how the customers perceive the hotel as a whole. (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010a, 144.)

A person working at the front desk of a hotel needs to have good knowledge of the hotel's different departments and their functions. The most important qualities for a front desk employee are being able to listen to the customer, good problem solving skills and a clear, varied, flawless and resounding voice in interaction situations (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010a, 146). Rautiainen and Siiskonen also remind that in technical performances the service has to be flexible, fast and friendly (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010b, 106). The work at the front desk is not only customer service, it is also personal sales work through solving customer's problems and introducing services at the hotel and furthermore, there has to be hidden additional value in the social interaction in order to maintain a functioning customer relationship (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010b, 174; Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010a, 146). The guide book aims to make the trainees and new employees to be able to give this additional value more quickly at the reception of the hotel as, like Rautiainen and Siiskonen say, a job well done is the best kind of marketing (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010b, 181).

There are always at least two persons working at the reception of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves at any given time of the day. In addition to the paid work force there often is a trainee from a secondary school or university of applied sciences working or following the work

at the reception. There are many duties a front desk employee has to do during his/her work shift depending on the shift but making a reservation is something that can be done in any of the shifts. The reservation that has to be done can reach the reception in many ways, for instance some individuals call the reception asking for a room and some online travel agencies send the reservations made through their websites to the reception by a fax machine and they are typed into the Opera system manually by the front office staff. The same basic information is required in all of the reservations but the additional information required changes from one reservation to another. In addition, the situation where the reservation is done varies as well since sometimes the reservation is done while the customer is present and served and sometimes the reservation can be done without any customer interaction according to received reservation information. An overarching feature for many of the tasks performed at the reception of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves is that the usage of the Opera system is required.

The seasonal changes do not affect the basic work at the front desk even though the clientele changes to some extent. With certain customer types it is more important to know some special details of the Opera system than it is with some other customer types but they are all described in the guide book. The guide book is aimed at trainees but also the more experienced staff members may find it useful even though Powers and Barrows (1999) quite sceptically say an employee who knows one way to do his or her job is unlikely to change his or her ways of doing it (Powers & Barrows 1999, 535).

3.2 Opera-system

3.2.1 General information

MICROS Systems, Inc. was founded in 1977 and is headquartered in Columbia, Maryland, the United States of America. It designs, manufactures, markets and services enterprise applications solutions for food and beverage, hotel, and retail industries worldwide (Yahoo! Finance). Micros-Fidelio subsidiary handles the delivery and maintenance of the products produced by the company. It also arranges the country-specific versions of the programme. (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010a, 324.)

Opera system can be used in all of the functions a resort or a hotel has and it is fully configurable to different types and sizes of companies (Property Solutions). In Finland it is used for example by Sokos Hotels hotel chain and it is the main computer tool when working at a reception. It is not possible to work at the front desk of a hotel without knowing the system and it is definitely among the first things taught to a new employee or trainee at the case hotel as well.

3.2.2 Making a reservation using Opera system

The Opera system requires certain information in order to make a reservation such as the name under which the reservation is done and the time of both arrival and departure of the guest(s). It is possible to change all the details and add more information to the reservation afterwards. (Yahoo! Finance)

Some reservations are typed into the system manually and some are transferred to the system from other computer based reservation systems. The more information there is in the reservation the smaller is the chance of something going wrong due to too little information, and that is why it is important to concentrate on what kind of information is needed in a reservation so that it would work for the best of the entire hotel. (Property Solutions)

Because of the fact that it is possible to make a reservation with incomplete information the reservations of same type might have a different amount of data in them. In the end the person making the reservation makes the decision on how much information is needed and typed into the reservation. This might become a problem because teaching how to do a reservation is the front desk employees' job and when the practises vary so do the results. This phenomenon has been recognised but it has not been fully defeated. The guide book endeavours to eradicate this problem.

The guide book will enable the same information of the basics of a good reservation to be given to everyone and it will also give a solid base for making all kinds of different reservations. Everyone will, in due course, find his or her own personal way of doing

these tasks but before that it is important to know the basic requirements perfectly. The guide book also aims at facilitating the employees' workload by giving them a tool for training new people.

3.3 Revenue management

Revenue management, as we know it today, was born in the United States of America in the late 1970s after the deregulation of the airline industry known as the Airline Deregulation Act. It opened the air travel business to open competition which caused a decline in profitability of the airline companies and an introduction of new airline concepts competing in the market. All this led to the realization of the importance of the different pricing policies according to supply and demand. (Albanese 2004, 18-19.)

Revenue management is, as presented by Erdem and Benvenuti,

“Making the right room available for the right guest, at the right price, during right time via the right distribution channel” (Erdem & Benvenuti).

In practice this means that for example in a hotel a room has a different price depending on when and where it was booked and for whom. This way it is possible to raise the price when the demand is high and on the contrary lower the price during more quiet seasons. In order to be able to predict the future customer figures and comprise the pricing policies according to it the hotel needs to have reports and other reservation information from the past (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2010b, 399). A well done reservation has all the needed information in a correct convention and achieving this is one the main aims of the guide book.

According to Albanese (2004) revenue management is often used in businesses where the products or services are intangible and cannot be stored for later use and where the fixed costs are high. This leads to a situation where it is more profitable to sell the service even at a low price if the other option would be to not sell it at all while the costs still remain high. This has led to the situation where the price is different even though the product or service is essentially the same and in a hotel this means that the reservations are sometimes very different from each other even though the room is the same. (Albanese 2004, 8-10, 19.)

In hotel business revenue management was, as related by Mainzer (2004), adopted quite slowly but nowadays it has become really innovative in this field, especially because of advanced technology and more extensive usage of customer databases. The information gathered to and from reservations helps the computer programs to predict future utilization rates and room revenues more accurately. This convention is seen in practise in the case hotel where the revenue management introduced a wish for a guide book for making a correct reservation in order to have the data gathered from the reservations to be as serviceable as possible. (Mainzer, 2004.)

4 THE GUIDE BOOK

The guide book for making a reservation at the reception of a hotel can be found as an appendix. In the guide book there is a short introduction to the basics of making a reservation and then the different room types are described. After that the guide book includes all the different types of reservations that are normally being done at the receptions and it also includes some information about the features of the Opera system that are closely connected with the making a reservation process.

Due to privacy reasons the guide book will not be published with the thesis.

5 CONCLUSION

This thesis contains a guide book for making a reservation at the reception of a hotel. The guide book was made particularly for Original Sokos Hotel Ilves but it may be used in all of the other Sokos Hotels in Tampere. The guide book was chosen as a topic due to a wish from the hotel's revenue manager because the chain-level guide book for making reservations was, on the one hand, too specific and had too much technical information for everyday use, but on the other hand it did not have enough information on all the different possibilities that a front desk employee needs to know when making a reservation at the reception.

The most important objectives for the author were practicality and usability. There was a need to create a very user-friendly guide book with all the information needed for the deviating reservation types but they had to be presented in a condensed manner. There were some reservation types that had more than one way in which the employees were doing them and in these cases the best way was chosen to the guide book after weighing up the pros and cons with the help of the revenue manager and the reception staff members.

Theoretical background for the thesis was gathered from the principles of good service and technical knowledge in accommodation industry. Adding customer value and therefore gaining better financial results were also key motivators behind the guide book.

The result is satisfying as it fulfils well the basic requirements set for the guide book. It is very visual and has clear step-by-step instructions for each of the reservation types. It has been made keeping in mind that the people reading it are not necessarily familiar with the Opera system and need more thorough briefing to the matter. It is not certain that an individual will find it helpful as some people like to learn by doing things rather than by reading about them but at least there is now a written option at everyone's disposal.

The guide book will be used at the reception of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves where it will be exploited especially in the training of new employees and students doing their practical training periods. If needed, it can also be used at the receptions of other Sokos Hotels without any major modifications having to be done to it. The guide book will be printed

for use and also stored in the hotel's computer system. This way it can be improved and updated whenever needed. The reservation types change over time as do the Opera system which is used for making the reservations so it is crucial that these changes are updated for the guide book regularly. Also the products, in this case the hotel rooms and room service menus for instance, might change so a close eye has to be kept on them as well.

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APPENDIX

The guide book