

IMPLEMENTATION OF BRAND VALUES IN THE SERVICE QUALITY OF A HOTEL

Sonja McMenamin

Bachelor's thesis
November 2014
Degree Programme in Tourism

TAMPEREEN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU
Tampere University of Applied Sciences

ABSTRACT

Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu
Tampere University of Applied Sciences
Degree Programme in Tourism

MCMENAMIN, SONJA:
Implementation of Brand Values in the Service Quality of a Hotel

Bachelor's thesis 42 pages, appendices 6 pages
November 2014

A high standard service quality is expected by the consumers of today and it is essential for the company to gain compatible advantages over competitors. A brand indicates the qualities of the service. The aim of this thesis was to find out how the Original brand values are implemented in the service quality of the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves.

The objectives of this survey were to provide the hotel with a current insight on the awareness level of the Original brand values amongst the employees and their perception of the level of the service quality that the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves possesses.

The theoretical framework was written based on theories about service, service quality, services marketing and brand as well as on concepts relevant to the topic. The research method of this thesis was quantitative. A structured questionnaire survey was conducted and questionnaires were distributed to the employees of the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. The survey results were analysed with the help of the concepts and theories used in this thesis.

The survey results and analyses can be found in the appendices of this thesis and they are not published due to privacy reasons. Confidential material has been excluded from the public report.

Key words: brand values, service quality, awareness

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the service organizations the usage of brands creates a competitive advantage for the company, but creating a brand is a long-term work. A brand indicates on the qualities the services provide and our culture with high level of consumer awareness demands high standard service quality. The future consumer is more critical and demands quality since services are no longer a luxury product. The world changes and keeping up with fashion is vital, developing in the same base or even one step ahead. With the changing world Sokos Hotels also felt the need to re-brand their hotels to offer their customers more unique and customized services.

Original Sokos Hotel Ilves is a distinguished hotel in Tampere city center. The Sokos Hotel Ilves has existed for 28 years, but the word Original was not added to the name until June 2012 when Sokos Hotels divided their hotels into sub-groups offering more customized services to different customers. The hotels were named Solo, Original and Break hotels. Sokos Hotel Ilves became known as Original Sokos Hotel Ilves.

Original brand and Original brand values are still a new concept for the hotel and its employees. The author, having worked there for the past three years, considered a research on the implementation of the Original brand values could be interesting and beneficial for the company since previous researches of this matter had not been conducted before. The author decided to focus the research on the employee perspective and thus researched how the brand values were implemented in the service quality of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. This research also aimed to indicate the awareness level of the Original brand amongst the employees and in different units of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. The research was conducted on the employee perspective which established the service quality level that the employees experience Original Sokos Hotel Ilves to possess.

The objectives of the research was also to research if there is a difference between the awareness and the service quality levels between recruitment company employees and Sokotel employees. The survey aimed to indicate the sense of community and cooperation that Original Sokos Hotel Ilves currently possesses.

2 CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Implementation of Original brand values in the service quality of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves

The topic of the thesis is ‘Implementation of brand values in the service quality of a hotel’. Sokos Hotel is an 18-storey hotel in the centre of Tampere built in 1986. The hotel has a total of 336 guest rooms and five restaurants. Sokos Hotel Ilves is one of the tallest buildings in Finland outside Helsinki metropolitan area. It belongs to the Sokotel Oy, a subsidiary of the Suomen Osuuskauppojen Keskuskunta (SOK). All the hotels of the SOK used to be a part of one big hotel group, the Sokos Hotels, until June 2012 when they were divided into three different sub-brands: Original, Solo and Break Hotels, each hotel brand providing a more customized service for different customer types. (S-kanava, toimipaikat, Sokos Hotels 2013: Sokos Hotels lanseeraa Break- ja Original-hotellit.)

The author has been working in Sokos Hotel Ilves for three years and has been there when the change took place and it became the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. The aim for the thesis was to research how the Original brand values have been implemented in the service quality.

Original being a new brand, this kind of research had not been conducted on the matter before and the results could provide a valuable insight on the current situation how the brand values have been implemented in the company. The author researched this matter in the perspective of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves employees and through their experiences of original brand. Very precious information was gathered for deciding on future actions within the company. The results offer an insight on issues that may need improvement and also highlight the matters that have had a positive impact on the service quality of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves.

2.2 Service

Service is a complicated phenomenon. The word has many meanings, ranging from personal service to service as a product. There is a variety of definitions made to describe the nature of service. Evert Gummesson, Professor of Service Management & Marketing, forwarded the following definition of service: “A service is something that can be bought and sold but which you cannot drop on your feet.” (Grönroos 2000, 45.)

Christian Grönroos proposed (2000, 46) in 1990 a more detailed definition of service: “A service is a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not necessarily 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”

Grönroos (2000, 47) suggests some common characteristics of services:

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.

Because a service is not a thing but processes consisting of a series of activities, which are produced and consumed simultaneously, it is difficult to manage quality control and to do marketing in the traditional sense, since there is no pre-produced quality to control before the service is sold and consumed. (Grönroos 2000, 48.)

2.2.1 Services marketing

Nowadays competition is intense and even a good service is not enough to guarantee the customer satisfaction. Additional value has to be provided for the customer; something more, better, faster, more affordable than the competitors do. It is not about making things happen once, it is about gaining the trust of the customer each and every day. The future consumer is more critical and demands quality since services are no longer a luxury product. The world changes and keeping up with fashion is vital, developing in the same base or even one step ahead. (Ylikoski 1999, 14.)

The tourism and hospitality sector incorporates both goods and services. Service products are commonly distinguished from goods products by the four unique characteristics mentioned in the following:

1. Intangibility – Service products cannot be tasted, felt, seen, heard or smelt. To reduce uncertainty caused by service intangibility, buyers look for a tangible evidence that will provide information and confidence about the service.
2. Inseparability – The product cannot be created or delivered without the customer's presence. The food may be outstanding, but if the server has a poor attitude, the customer will not enjoy the overall restaurant experience.
3. Variability/Heterogeneity – Service delivery quality depends on who provides the services. The same person can deliver different levels of service, as the day wears on. The lack of consistency is a major factor in customer dissatisfaction.
4. Perishability – Services cannot be stored. Empty airline seats, hotel rooms, daily ski passes – all the services cannot be sold the next day. If services are to maximize revenue, they must manage capacity and demand since they cannot carry forward unsold inventory. (Kotler, Bowen & Makens 2006, 43-45.)

Measuring services provide a greater challenge. The service marketing triangle created by Zeithaml, V.A. and Bitner, M.J. shows the three interlinked groups that work together to develop, promote and deliver services. These key players – the company, the customer, and the service provider – are labelled on the points of the triangle. Between these three points there are three types of marketing that must be successfully carried out for a service to succeed: external, interactive and internal marketing. (Hudson 2008, 14-15.)

External marketing represents the promises that are made to the customer. The interactive marketing is about keeping promises. It occurs on the 'moment of truth' when the customer interacts with the organization and the service is produced and consumed. The internal marketing takes place when enabling the promises. Promises are easy to make, but unless service providers are recruited, trained, provided with tools and appropriate internal systems, and rewarded for good service, the promises may not be kept. (Hudson 2008, 14-15.)

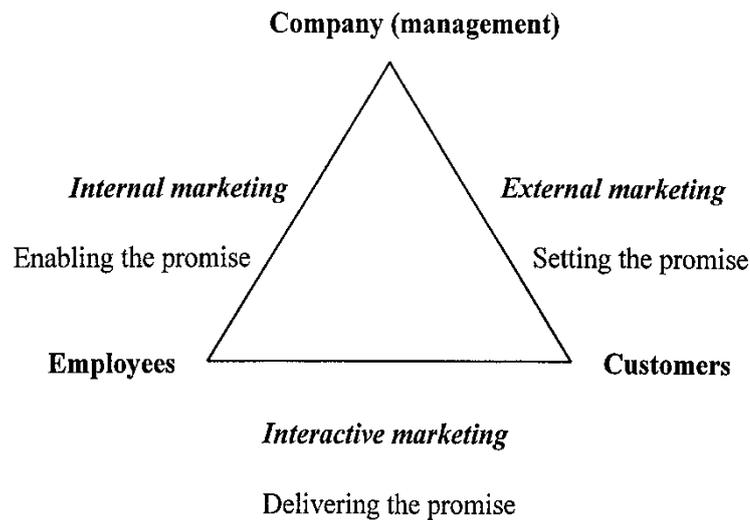


FIGURE 1. The services marketing triangle (Zeithaml & Bitner 2006, 16)

Marketing must ensure that the “making of promises” (brand image with company image) is aligned with the “delivery of the promises” (employee trust and company trust) in creating customer value, customer loyalty and brand value (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, Hansen 2014, 503.)

2.2.2 Service quality

Quality is very important to receive advantage over competitors. This fact comes into a high importance when researching how the Original brand values are implemented in the service quality of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves.

Quality has a direct impact on product or service performance and thus it is closely linked to customer value and satisfaction. According to Kotler, Bowen and Makens (2006, 19) **quality** can be defined as “freedom from defects”. Customer-focused definitions suggest that quality begins with customer needs and ends with customer satisfaction.

According to Tuire Ylikoski (1999, 122), the customer is the interpreter of quality. Customer expectations play a significant role when evaluating quality. Expectations towards the quality are formed from the following factors:

1. Customer needs – They are influenced in by what one expects from the service. The expectations are unique depending on the customer age, gender, education level, personality etc. and vary between different people and can even vary depending on the customer's mood.
2. Price – The customer has more expectations when the price is higher. The customer hardly expects a gourmet meal in a school dinner. The environment also affects the customer interpretation of the quality of the place.
3. Previous experience – A regular customer has a clear vision of what kind of service is provided in the organisation.
4. Experiences of competitors – The services another similar company provides can shape the expectations on what a certain service should be like.
5. Promises given via advertising – Advertising affects directly customer expectations even though the promises given might not be accurate.
6. Opinions by other people – If a place is recommended by another person, a customer expects to get something really special.
7. The client contribution to the service – Expectations are higher if the customer has to contribute to the service, for example self-service checkouts.
8. Circumstances – Different circumstances can affect positively or negatively to the expectations of the quality. For example a client in a hurry might get more anxious than normally if the service is slow. (Ylikoski 1999, 122-125.)

“Promise only what you can deliver and deliver more than you promise” – chief executive at American Express.

Authors Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1996) have created the SERVQUAL that originally identified ten elements of service quality, but in later work, these were combined into five factors - reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness - that create the acronym RATER.

1.	<i>Tangibles</i>	<i>Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communications materials</i>
2.	Reliability	Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately
3.	Responsiveness	Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service
4.	Competence	Possession of the required skills and knowledge to perform the service
5.	Courtesy	Politeness, respect, consideration and friendliness of contact personnel
6.	Credibility	Trustworthiness, believability, honesty of the service provider
7.	Security	Freedom from danger, risk and doubt
8.	Access	Approachability and ease of contact
9.	Communication	Keeping customers informed in language they can understand and listening to them
10.	Understanding the Customer	Making the effort to know customers and their needs

FIGURE 2. Service quality dimensions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1996)

1.	<i>Tangibles</i>	<i>Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communications materials</i>
2.	Reliability	Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately
3.	Responsiveness	Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service
4.	Assurance	Knowledge and courtesy of staff and their ability to convey trust and confidence
5.	Empathy	Caring and individualized attention to the customer

FIGURE 3. SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1996)

SERVQUAL is an instrument for measuring how customers perceive the quality of a service. This instrument is based on the five determinants above (Grönroos 2001,76). When measuring expectations and experiences in the same scale it creates a perception on what the quality should be like on the customers' point of view. All of the determinants are not equally important to the customer but each determinant gets a certain amount of points all adding up to 100. (Ylikoski 1999, 134.)

2.2.3 Criteria of good service quality

As mentioned in the previous chapter, instruments like SERVQUAL are useful starting points for managers to develop a list of attributes that describe a given service. The following seven criteria of good perceived service quality can be viewed as guidelines based on a solid body of empirical and conceptual research as well as on practical experience. (Grönroos 2001, 81):

1. **Professionalism and skills** – Customers realize that the service providers, their employees, operational systems, and physical resources have the knowledge and skills required to solve their problems in a professional way.
2. **Attitudes and behaviour** – Customers feel that the service employees are concerned about them and interested in solving their problems in a friendly way.
3. **Accessibility and flexibility** – Customers feel that the service provider, its operating hours, employees and operational systems are designed and operate to that it is easy to get access to the service and are prepared to adjust to the demands and wishes of the customer in a flexible way.
4. **Reliability and trustworthiness** – Customers know that whatever takes place, they can rely on the service provider, its employees and systems in order to keep promises and perform with the best interest of the customers.
5. **Service recovery** – Customers realize that whenever something goes wrong the service provider will immediately take actions and keep the situation in control.
6. **Servicescape** – Customers feel that the physical surrounding and other aspects of the environment support a positive experience.
7. **Reputation and credibility** – Customers believe that the service provider's business can be trusted and gives adequate value for money.

2.3 Corporate culture

The concept corporate culture describes a set of values shared by people working in the same organization. Corporate culture can be defined as the pattern of shared values and beliefs that give the members of an organization meaning, and provide them with rules for behaviour in the organization. A weak corporate culture, where there are few or no clear common shared values, creates insecurity in responding to different situations. This, of course, damages customer perceived service quality. (Grönroos 2001, 356.)

When the employees identify the values of an organization they are less inclined to quit. This results to minimal employee turnover, service-oriented values and a positive attitude toward service. A strong corporate culture is especially important in service organizations, because the attitude and performance of the employees is so visible to customer. (Grönroos 2001, 358.)

The values shared by people in an organization are the foundation of the culture. The shared values constitute guidelines for employees in performing their everyday tasks. (Grönroos 2001, 359.)

2.4 Brand

The brand concept is well established in marketing. However, the awareness of the importance of branding has only emerged during the last ten years. The American Marketing Association offers the following definition of a brand as "A name, term, sign, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's product or service as distinct from those of other sellers." (Grönroos 2004, 285). A brand image can be based on consumer's experiences, but it also originates from emotions and beliefs. It evolves around the consumer perceptions of the qualities of the products, advantages of the products and attitudes. (Ylikoski 1999, 231.)

A brand indicates on the qualities of the service/product. A brand carries the manufacturer's values; security, status, reliability, a culture's values etc. It can be said that a brand is a personality; it can be modern, conservative, exotic etc. (Ylikoski 1999, 231.) Because services are intangible and people often make decisions and arrangements about them away from the location itself, it is important for the brand to be easily memorized. Easy to remember brand name is critical. Other brand elements like logos, symbols and characters can also help to complement the brand name and build brand awareness and brand image. These brand elements help to make the services more tangible, concrete and real. (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, Hansen 2014, 501.)

The first solution in services is to use the service organization's name as a brand. A strong name is an essential part in a brand even though the brand is not just a name of the organization. A brand name communicates about the product or the service to the consumers and gives a mental idea of the organization. For example "Visa" relates to global accessibility and "Eden" brings a mental image about something associated with paradise. (Ylikoski 1999, 232.)

The word “Original” in Original Sokos Hotels aims to bring out the image of being originally Finnish by heart, the original hotel that has everything a customer needs and respects each location’s roots and history (Original manual 2013).

Creating a brand is a long-term work. Building up a brand must be started with research. The research will point out the strengths which the brand will be based on. Interviews with the management and the staff are at help. The aim when building up a brand is to guarantee the sustainability of the quality and reliability of the brand. (Ylikoski 1999, 233.)

To succeed a brand must create advantages to the customers and be superior compared to the competitors. In the service organizations the usage of brands creates a competitive advantage, especially in the following situations:

- When the customer experiences two companies having similar services and products, a brand can differentiate the organization from its competitors.
- When customers have little experience on using certain organization, they react to the brand with the strongest advertising.
- A brand can be expanded to a new product group.
- When an organization brings out a new, innovative product, the brand will separate this from already existing, similar products. When the marketing strategy is changed, a new brand will indicate the new way. (Ylikoski 1999, 233.)

A successful brand must be authentic, understandable, memorable and usable. If the brand image is not authentic and the reality does not match the expectations the customer is unlikely to return. Potential customers should also be able to understand what the brand symbol and message are communicating. The brand should be clever enough to be memorable, but not confusing. A dull brand message will not be remembered. Finding the middle ground between cleverness and dullness is challenging. When choosing a brand it has to be taken into consideration how the brand will look when it is being used. A successful brand will look good if it is on a billboard or on a T-shirt. (Kolb 2006, 221-222.)

According to Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman and Hansen 2014, a great brand must;

- offer and communicate a clear, relevant customer promise;
- build trust by delivering on that promise;
- drive the market by continually improving the promise; and

- seek further advantage by innovating beyond the familiar

2.4.1 Image

Image of the organization is the general impression a customer has about the organization and having a positive image is a great asset to the organization. Image has a strong effect. It can affect customer perception about the quality and the satisfaction services provide. Customer experiences change the images. A good one will only strengthen the image and vice versa. A good image can provide shelter from any adversity. If the image is generally good a customer can overlook small mistakes made. If the image is negative, just one mistake can feel bigger than it is in reality. (Ylikoski 1999, 137.)

The service organization's image is based on the following matters (Ylikoski 1999, 138-139):

- **The identity of the organization:** name and logo, organizational features (public sector, private, size, age), prices, amount of advertising and quality
- **Reputation of the organization:** reputation of the management, credibility of the service, culture of the organization
- **Overview of the service:** decoration, layout, lights, buildings, parking etc. Also other customers affect to the image
- **Customer service personnel:** friendliness, appearance, attitudes and behavior, customer care and competence

2.4.2 Branding

Branding has been around for centuries as a means to distinguish the products or services of one company from those of another. Branding was commonly achieved through naming, trademarking, packaging, product design and promotion. For branding strategies to be successful and brand value to be created, consumers must be convinced there are meaningful differences among brands in the product or service category. Marketers can apply branding virtually anywhere a consumer has a choice. It is possible to brand goods, a service, a shop, a person, an organization, a group, or an idea. (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, Hansen 2014.)

Branding can be a way of unifying services, which is why it has been particularly developed in hotel marketing. With large hotel companies that have a wide variety of properties, grouping them into brands can:

1. unify them into more easily recognizable smaller groups;
2. enable each branded group to be targeted at defined market segments; and
3. enable product delivery, including human resource management, to be focused on creating a specific set of benefits for a specific market (Hudson 2008, 160.)

2.5 Recruitment company

Recruitment companies rent their employees to work for another employer. The employer works under the recipient's management and supervision and the work most often takes place at the recipient's workplace. Recipient pays compensation to the recruitment company, not to the employee himself. The employee receives a salary from the recruitment company.

According to the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001), the recruitment company is responsible of organizing occupational health care for its employees. The recruitment company is also responsible for informing about the professional skills the job requires and making sure the employee is qualified and has the right kind of experience for the work.

The recipient company is responsible informing the recruitment company the professional and educational skills the work requires before the labour hire. It is responsible for giving all the information that the recruitment company requires to be able to fill its duties. The recipient company has the responsibility for the induction of the work and the work environment and also the health and safety of the workplace. (Työsuojelu, vuokratyö 2014.)

Working for a recruitment company is ideal for students or anyone who is seeking for temporary work, since it gives the freedom to choose the working days and working places. On the other side employees seeking for more stable hours and prefer working in one place might find the labour hire too unstable. The work relationship can end as fast as it has begun.

2.6 Research questions

Research questions which are mentioned below were formulated based on the aims of the research and the objectives. The main research question was the following:

- How are the Original brand values implemented in the service quality of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves?

There were also a few sub-questions that helped to obtain an answer to the main research question. Those were:

- Is there a difference between the way Sokotel Oy employees and recruitment firm employees implement Original brand values in their service?
- What is the awareness level of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves employees about the Original brand values?

The answers to these questions were sought with the help of a survey by using a questionnaire filled out by the employees of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves and with analyses of the theoretical framework.

2.7 Research method and data collection

The data collection technique that was used in this research was quantitative. Questionnaires were distributed to the employees of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves and collected back in a three weeks period. The questionnaires were structured and every respondent was asked the same thing.

The original questionnaire was inspected by the thesis supervisor and before distributing the questionnaire forms they were approved by the hotel management with suggested additions to the questionnaires. The inspection and testing of the questionnaire is essential before taking it into practical use, since it decreases the possibility of errors and eliminates useless questions. The type of research was exploratory which aimed to gather information that would help to define the problem and suggest hypotheses (Hudson 2008, 118).

Altogether 42 employees filled out the questionnaires and the responses were analyzed with the help of the theoretical framework.

3 ORIGINAL SOKOS HOTEL ILVES

3.1 S Group and Sokotel

S Group is a Finnish network of companies in the retail and service trades comprising over 1,600 outlets in Finland. S Group consists of cooperatives as well as SOK and its subsidiaries such as Sokotel. S Group provides services in the trades of grocery and consumer goods, service station stores and fuel, tourism and hospitality, automobile and auto accessories as well as in the agricultural trade. S Group's purpose is to produce services and benefits for its co-operative members. (S-kanava, ryhmän-rakenne.)

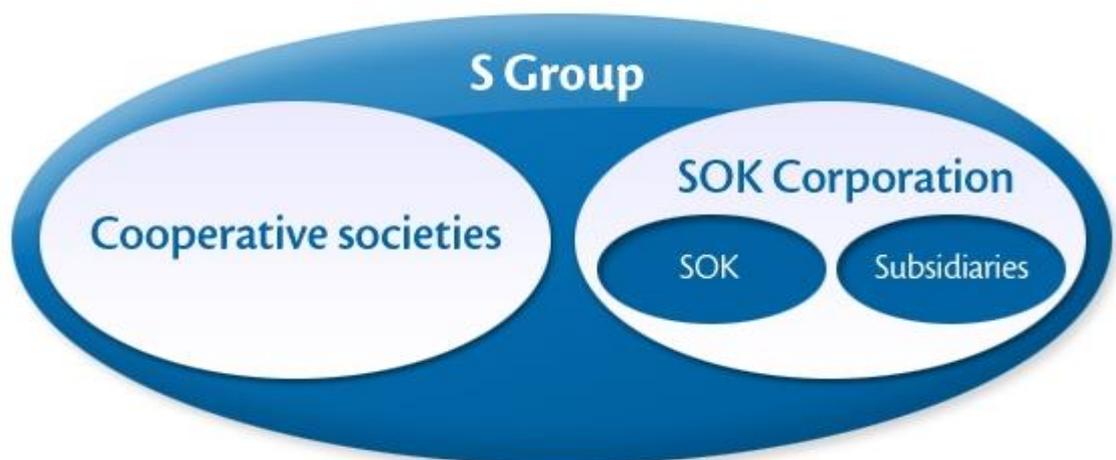


FIGURE 4. S Group structure (<https://www.s-kanava.fi/web/s-kanava-tietoa-s-ryhmasta/en/s-ryhman-rakenne>.)

S Group's travel industry and hospitality business comprises several nationwide restaurant chains and two hotel chains: Sokos Hotels and Radisson Blu Hotels & Resorts. In addition to the chains, S Group has a high number of individual restaurants. In Finland, both the regional cooperatives and SOK's subsidiary Sokotel Oy practice the travel industry and hospitality business.

Employees working in Original Sokos Hotel Ilves are working for Sokotel or through a recruitment company. These two concepts appeared in the research so it is important to understand the differentiation of these two titles. Employees working for Sokotel work for the company itself and are usually in a fulltime position. The concept recruitment company is covered in chapter 2 more specifically. Recruitment company employees

are hired by Sokotel to work as temporary staff when extra members of staff are required. Sokotel hires the staff from the recruitment companies and pays the recruitment company for the services, and the recruitment company pays the employee salaries.

3.2 History of Sokos Hotel Ilves

Suomen Osuuskauppojen Keskuskunta (SOK) had been planning to build a new hotel in the old Verkatehdas area since the 1970's. In 1983 SOK started a project group which was in charge of planning the hotel and in the same year architect Maunu Kitunen started the planning. The inspiration to the shape of the hotel was inspired by a matchbox.

The building of the hotel started in March 1985. The cost of construction rose up to 30 million euros. A competition was organized to select the name of the hotel and the competition got 3858 propositions and 25 of them suggested the name Ilves. The construction of the hotel was completed in 1986 and the official opening was held 21st of July 1986 after being postponed once before because of a strike in the construction business.



PICTURE 1. Sokos Hotel Ilves ([http://www.kokousnet.fi/kokous-ja-juhlatilat/sokos-hotel-ilves/.](http://www.kokousnet.fi/kokous-ja-juhlatilat/sokos-hotel-ilves/))

Sokos Hotel Ilves became Original Sokos Hotel Ilves in June 2012 when all the Sokos Hotels were divided into three sub-brands: Original, Solo and Break Hotels. Original Sokos Hotel Ilves consists of 5 restaurants, conference and meeting rooms, a spa section renewed in 2014, a nightclub, and Koskikeskus mall is connected to the building. Original Sokos Hotel Ilves has its private parking hall for the customers. Ballroom conference room fits up to 300 people for different kind of events and the nightclub up to 600 people. At the very top floor of the hotel there is a scenery cabinet with a sauna for 20 people.

Original Sokos Hotel Ilves belongs to Sokotel Oy which is a daughter company of SOK travel and hospitality business. They operate six Radisson Blu hotels and 15 Sokos Hotels in Finland.

3.3 Introducing the new Sokos Hotels

When it comes to business everyone swears on customer satisfaction, but alone it is not enough. It is not a sufficient way to create a compatible advantage. People require more than just customer service – they require loyalty. The new Sokos Hotels aim to arouse more tense emotions amongst customers and make them fall in love with the hotels.

This starts with small things, but everyone does not love the same things. Sokos Hotels aim to be unique for many people. The aim is to identify the different needs of different people and to understand that one and the same person's needs may vary from one week to another. (Introducing the new Sokos Hotels 2014, YouTube.)

The needs of people vary according to the situations. This is why Sokos Hotels has not one but three different kind of hotels, Original, Break and Solo, for different moments and moods. Original hotels are centrally located and treat everyone as a human being and not as a reservation number. Original hotels are everything that a good hotel should be. Break hotels offer customers joy, time and energy. They are a place where to break out from normal routine and a place to re-charge. Solo hotels are more than buildings. They are classic, unique and have a personal style. Solo Hotels offer a customized hotel experience and use local ingredients. (Introducing the new Sokos hotels, YouTube.)

There is a lack of services that concentrate on customer experiences. The focus is on easy technical solutions, leaving customer service development in second place. The development of Sokos Hotels aims to correspond to this lack and every brand has its own role. (Original brand manual 2013.)

3.4 Original Hotels

The Original Hotels are the largest brand in the Sokos Hotels consisting of 35 hotels. In 2014 there are hotels from Rovaniemi to Tallin and Vaasa to St. Petersburg. Finland and surrounding areas are well represented.

The smallest original hotels are under 100 room hotels, biggest being over 400 room hotels. The selection in services vary between the hotels; the smallest ones serving breakfast and a hotel accommodation – the biggest ones having a large variety of restaurants in use, a gym, a spa, conference rooms, cafeterias and even wellbeing services.

The manual for Original by Sokos Hotel describes the nature of the Original brand more precisely. The customer needs are more demanding and having quality products and offering services simply is not enough to ensure the success of the company. Customers demand alternatives; personality, customized products and solutions for the hunger of experiences and adventure.

To succeed in nowadays competition the companies have to create extra value for the customers. In the competition customers' motivational needs in travel behavior are highlighted. The customer circumstances, needs and desires are different and also depend on the situation. To satisfy the needs of each customer in each situation is not possible anymore in one place.

Customer awareness is a growing trend and people are willing to pay more for products and services that meet their needs. The companies have to come up with a strategy to be able to create a position of uniqueness and to gain loyalty credibility.

3.4.1 Original brand ideology

Original Sokos hotel is original, authentic and a real Sokos Hotel classic. Original is Finnish by heart and it is not a hotel type or a concept, but it has its own ideology – a view of the world. In the era of international and faceless brands the worldview is founded on the cordiality of people and on the hotels' roots - roots, which have Finnish origins. (Original Sokos Hotels manual 2013.)

Sokos Hotels were organized in chains in 1974. The original purpose was to provide good quality, reliable and homogenous accommodation and restaurant services for business and leisure purposes as well as for local people. The aim was to focus the business in central locations and provide suitable chain-business idea combinations for customers in every district. (Original Sokos Hotels manual 2013.)

The aim for Original by Sokos Hotels chain is to respect its roots, history and carry on the story of the valuable Sokos Hotel chain in the changing world. Each Original hotel has the permission to show personality and bring out each department's individual strengths and life of the surrounding area. The mission is to be the best place to get to know the location – place that knows and provides the best tips for happenings in the area and for the local specialities. The aim is to provide unique experiences to the customers. (Original Sokos Hotels manual 2013.)



FIGURE 5. Ilves logo (www.sokoshotels.fi)

3.4.2 Original brand values

Original brand values consist of the Original ideology which is mentioned in the previous chapter and how it is implemented in to the everyday life. The main brand values are stated in the following (Original handbook):

1. From me ♥ to you

Cordiality from one person to another is Original hotels way to express itself. Cordiality, warmth and closeness are values that the Original hotel wants to cherish. Original hotels aim to make people fall in love with the hotel. That only happens by being present, with own name and own face and greeting customers like greeting friends.

2. Originally original

Originality is not easy, but it requires will and passion. The biggest challenge is to be authentically present as a human being. To be original it means bringing out the employees' personality and respecting the customers. It is about being originally original and to be playful, but always in a genuine cordial manner.

3. The responsibility is mine

When encountering a customer the responsibility and power is upon the employee. The employee is the one who is present, no one else. It is not always possible to choose what is going to happen, but what one can choose is how to react to a situation. A fight in home does not justify sulking at work. In service industry the employees have the instant responsibility not only for themselves, but also for their co-workers and most of all for the customers.

4. Develop and evolve

When the world changes, there is no other way than to change with it. Staying still means problems, which will develop into crises and eventually into catastrophes. The responsibility of development is on everyone and everyone changes and evolves together. Participate and meanwhile use the opportunity to evolve.

3.4.3 Original acts

The main ideology of the Original brand is to be personal and offer customized services for different customers. One way of paying extra attention to the customers is by doing Original acts which are based on the cordiality and personality of the hotel. Original acts are small acts, but acts that will create memory imprints and create small surprises in everyday life. The following guidelines show examples of the acts that are implemented in different units:

- Reception: Welcoming customers personally, asking about their day and recommending events and happenings in the nearby area. Every day a VIP customer is chosen who is surprised by an up-graded room. In addition, customers can be delighted with birthday cakes, nameday cards and “Onni Orava” surprises for children. The hotel has giveaway products, for example heartlollipops.
- Breakfast: Wishing everyone good morning and asking how their visit in the Sokos Hotel has been so far. Going from table to table and pouring more coffee and tea and offering newspapers to read.
- Maintenance: Offering waterbottles for customers after the gym or a jog
- Conference and restaurants: The speakers are always provided with water bottles and small candies. During a meeting break the employees offer local snacks and bring for example the nearby area’s own juice for tasting.
- For customers dining in the restaurant vouchers for free desserts can be placed on their chairs.

The basic idea is to “pay it forward” and offer the customers something extra, something they did not expect.

3.4.4 Original coach

Every Original Hotel has named its service correspondent, the Original coach. Their mission is to be the spirit and the ambassadors of the service culture in their hotels. They generate ideas amongst the other units of the hotel about the Original acts and Original services. They attend department meetings to update the newest Original news and go through customer feedback. The Original coach is responsible for the induction for new employees about the Original ideology.

The Original coach has the support of the management team and the authority to operate as a cherisher of the Original values. The Original coach has the right and the responsibility to interfere with any anti-Original ideology activity over department borders. The Original coach of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves is Heini Schubin and every unit has an assistant Original coach who is the eyes and ears of each department's Original activity.



FIGURE 6. Original brand symbol (www.sokshotels.fi)

4 SURVEY RESULTS

The survey was based on informative questionnaire which included 18 questions of which one was an open ended question and there were two open ended questions as a prolongation to the questions to specify the answer. The questionnaire was handed to the employees of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves throughout a three week period and 42 responses were gathered. The questionnaire was designed to contain four parts, each part focusing on a certain area of the research.

The first part of the questionnaire (questions 1-3) was designed to gather the general background information of the employees of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. In the first part information about in which unit the employee worked was received and for how long the employee had worked in Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. As an important information for the analyses the third question was created to indicate how many of the employees worked through a recruitment company and how many of them were working for Sokotel.

The second part (questions 4-9) of the questionnaire focused on getting the general idea how aware the employees of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves were of the Original brand values. This part was also designed to show if the Original training had been provided to the employees of Original Sokos Ilves. This part was an essential part of the questionnaire and showed the attitudes and opinions that the employees had towards the Original brand.

The third part (questions 10-16) of the questionnaire consisted of questions about service quality. This part aimed to find out how do the employees experience the quality of the service in Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. The last part (questions 17 and 18) meant to demonstrate the general atmosphere and sense of co-operation and community that exist in Original Sokos Hotel Ilves.

The survey results and analyses can be found in the appendices of this thesis and they are not published due to privacy reasons. Confidential material has been excluded from the public report.

Service quality in Original Sokos Hotel Iives

According to Kotler, Bowen and Makens 2006 quality is closely linked to customer value and satisfaction. Top companies have realized this and use customer driven quality is a way of doing business. Quality is strongly linked to customer expectations and how the customer experiences the company image (Ylikoski 1999, 118).

Homogeneity of service quality

One of services` unique characteristics includes the heterogeneity of the service. Service delivery quality depends on who provides the service, and the same person can deliver different level of service throughout the day (Kotler, Bowen & Makens 2006, 43-45). If nothing else the social relationship in other situations can be different. The heterogeneity of the service creates one of the major problems in the service management and the lack of consistency is a big factor in customer dissatisfaction. (Grönroos 2001, 49.)

5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of the thesis was to research how the Original brand values were implemented in the service quality of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves. The sub-questions aimed to indicate the awareness level of the Original brand amongst the employees of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves and if there was a difference in how the Original brand values have been implemented in the service quality by Sokotel employees or recruitment company employees. The objectives of the research also aimed to indicate the level of service quality that Original Sokos Hotel Ilves possesses.

The research questions were answered and the research provided new and valuable information about the implementation of the Original brand values and the current awareness level amongst different units in Original Sokos Hotel Ilves and amongst the employees. A further research could be conducted to investigate how aware the customers of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves are of the Original brand and its values and how the customers perceive the service quality of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves.

To build up a brand is a slow and time consuming process and the internalization of the brand values happens with time. The research established that not all of the staff members were aware of the Original brand values, but regardless of this the service quality is on a high standard in Original Sokos Hotel Ilves.

Regardless of the fact that there was some lack of awareness of the Original brand values, the majority of the respondents acted according to the Original brand values. It can be speculated that even though not all of the employees have been trained about the Original brand values the employees have taken examples of the management and long-term employee behavior in service situations and have absorbed the high standard service model as their own. As a suggestion to sustain the high quality of service and to decrease the heterogeneity in the service situations, Original trainings should be organized more often and also be available to the recruitment company employees. Training is the most vital part when it comes to building up a brand and image.

It can be stated that although there was lack of awareness about the Original brand values in case of some employees of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves it has no relation to the

level of service quality, as the service quality was generally in a very high standard in each unit. Each employee of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves is still the representative and the ambassador of the Original brand in and outside of work, thus it is essential for all of the employees to gain more awareness of the Original brand and its values to enable the Original brand in the future to become a strong and well-known brand.

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APPENDICES

KYSELYLOMAKE - QUESTIONNAIRE – Original Sokos Hotel Ilves

Kyselyn kaikkia vastauksia käsitellään luottamuksellisesti. Ellei toisin mainita, valitse kyseeseen tuleva vastausvaihtoehto merkitsemällä se vastaustilaan tai kirjoita vastauksesi sille varattuun tilaan.

The anonymity of all respondents is granted. If not stated differently, please select the number or box according to your answer, or fill in your answer in the available space.

1. Missä yksikössä pääsääntöisesti työskentelet Original Sokos Hotel Ilveksessä?

In which unit do you mainly work in the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves?

- Vastaanotto/Reception
- Ukko-Nooa
- Amarillo
- Masuuni
- Fransmanni
- Ilves bar & night
- Ballroom

2. Kuinka kauan olet työskennellyt Original Sokos Hotel Ilveksessä?

For how long have you been working in Original Sokos Hotel Ilves?

- Alle 1 vuoden/less than 1 year
- 1-5 vuotta/years
- 6-10 vuotta/years
- 11 vuotta tai enemmän/ 11 years or more

3. Työskenteletkö talon kirjoilla/Sokotel Oy vai teetkö töitä vuokrafirman kautta?

Are you employed at Sokotel Oy or at a recruitment company?

- Talon kirjoilla/Sokotel Oy
- Vuokrafirma/Recruitment company

4. Ovatko Original-brändiarvot sinulle tuttu käsite?

Are you familiar with the Original brand values?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No

5. Kirjoita lyhyesti omin sanoin, mitä Original-brändi Original Sokos Hotel Ilveksessä merkitsee sinulle?

Write briefly in your own words what does Original brand in the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves mean to you?

6. Onko Sinulla ollut mahdollisuus osallistua Original by Sokos Hotel Ilves -koulutuksiin?

Have you had the opportunity to participate in the Original by Sokos Hotel Ilves training?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No

7. Ovatko osastokohtaiset Original-pelissäännöt esillä toiminnassanne ja käydäänkö niitä läpi esim. osastopalaverissa?

Do the rules of Original brand in each department show in your operation and are they processed for example in department meetings?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No

8. Oletko mielestäsi toiminut Original-arvojen mukaisesti?

In your opinion, have you acted according to the Original brand values?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No
- En osaa sanoa/ I do not know

9. Miten toteutat 'vastuu on minun' -arvoa? (kirjoita lyhyesti)

How do you implement 'the responsibility is mine' value? (write briefly)

10. Onko palvelun laatu parantunut mielestäsi Original-brändin myötä?

In your opinion, has the service quality improved since the introduction of the Original brand?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No
- En osaa sanoa/ I do not know

Jos vastasit ei, mikä on mielestäsi siihen suurin syy?

If you replied no, what is the main reason for that? (write briefly)

11. Onko mielestäsi palvelun laatu korkealla tasolla omassa yksikössäsi?

Do you think that the service quality is in high standard in your unit?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No

12. Palkitaanko mielestäsi yksikössäsi työntekijöitä hyvästä suorituksesta?

In your opinion, are the employees of your unit rewarded for good performance?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No

13. Oletko sitä mieltä, että palvelu yksikössäsi on tasalaatuista?

Do you think that the service quality in your unit is homogenous?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No

Jos vastasit kielteisesti, nimeä syy/syitä vastaukseesi.

Please name a reason / reasons if your answer was negative.

14. Annatko persoonallisuutesi tulla esille palvelutyössäsi?

Do you let your personality show in your service work?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No

15. Toteutetaanko mielestäsi Original-tekoja Original Sokos Hotel Ilveksessä?

In your opinion, are the Original acts implemented in the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No
- En osaa sanoa / I do not know

16. Koetko, että olet oikeutettu tekemään päätöksiä itsenäisesti vai etsitkö vahvistusta päätöksenteossa muilta tahoilta?

Do you think you have the right to make independent decisions or do you seek for re-assurance from others in making decisions?

- Työssäni rohkaistaan tekemään päätöksiä itsenäisesti ja tunnen oloni itsevarmaksi päätöksiä tehdessäni / *Independent decision making is encouraged and I feel confident in making decisions.*
- Työssäni kannustetaan tekemään päätöksiä, mutta en koe, että olisin kykeneväinen ottamaan vastuuta päätöksenteosta / *Independent decision making is encouraged, but I do not feel that I have the knowhow to take responsibility for making decisions.*
- En koe, että minulla on oikeutta tehdä päätöksiä itsenäisesti, vaan käännyin toisen henkilön puoleen päätöksentekotilanteissa/ *I do not feel that I have the right to make independent decisions, and I seek for re-assurance from another person in decision making situations.*
- Minua on kielletty tekemästä itsenäisiä päätöksiä/ *I have been prohibited to make any kind of independent decisions.*

17. Miten hyvin mielestäsi yhteistyö eri yksiköiden välillä toimii Original Sokos Hotel Ilveksessä?

In your opinion, how well does the co-operation between the units in the Original Sokos Hotel Ilves work?

- Erittäin hyvin/Very well
- Hyvin/Good
- Heikosti/Poorly
- Erittäin heikosti /Very poorly
- En osaa sanoa/ I do not know

18. Koetko olevasi osa Original Sokos Hotel Ilveksen yhteisöä?

Do you feel like being part of Original Sokos Hotel Ilves community?

- Kyllä/Yes
- Ei/No

Kiitoksia kyselyyn osallistumisesta!

Thank you for completing the questionnaire!

THE SURVEY RESULTS