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The Importance of the First Impression in Hotel Customer Service

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ABSTRAKT

Efter att många år ha jobbat inom kundbetjäning och inom hotellbranschen, väcktes frågan om hur viktig kundbetjäningen i hotell är, och hur stor del den utgör av kundens sammanlagda uppfattning av hotellet. Därför valde jag att undersöka detta ämne i mitt lärdomsprov. Målet med lärdomsprovet är alltså att ta reda på i vilken utstreckning kundbetjäningen som business resenärer får när de checkar in på ett hotell påverkar resten av vistelsen och deras uppfattning om hotellet överlag.

Teoridelen behandlar kundbetjäningens olika aspekter, vikten av första intryck och går igenom inchecknings-processen. Undersökningen besår av en kvalitativ och en kvantitativ undersökning. För den kvalitativa delen blev några business resenärer intervjuade, och för den kvantitativa delen användes ett frågeformulär som delades ut i några hotell.

Undersökningens kvalitativa och kvantitativa delar stämde väl överrens med teorin, och visar att inskrivningsfasen på ett hotell påverkar kunden mycket, och att första intrycket lätt påverkar kundens uppfattning om hotellet. En kund kan dock gå från missnöjd till nöjd, beroende på hur personalen agerar.

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ABSTRACT

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After many years of experience in customer service and the hotel industry, I started considering what impact customer service has on a hotel guest's total perceived satisfaction. Thus, I decided to research the topic in my thesis. The aim of the thesis was to find out to what extent the customer service that a business customer receives during check-in affects the rest of their stay and their overall image of the hotel.

The research contains both quantitative and qualitative methods of study. For the qualitative study, interviews were conducted with business customers, and for the quantitative part questionnaires were used. The questionnaires were handed out in some hotels in Ostrobothnia.

The results of both the qualitative and quantitative part support the theory, and show how the customer service during the check-in process, the first impression, affects the customer and his/her opinions on the hotel. However, a dissatisfied customer can leave the hotel satisfied, as a result of the actions of the personnel.

Keywords	Customer service, customer satisfaction, hotel, reception

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1   INTRODUCTION

The hotel industry has developed much in the last decades, and the competition is hard. The forms of competition is also changing, and more focus is put on the customer service and well-being of the guests. Hotels can no longer compete only in who has the nicest rooms and facilities, but they have to think about the customer service aspect as well, since it is of great importance for total perceived customer satisfaction.

The aim of this thesis is to find out to which degree the customer service a hotel guest receives when checking-in to a hotel, affects the total hotel experience, and how an unsatisfied guest can be made satisfied before leaving the hotel. This thesis focuses only on the customer service aspect of the check-in and arrival process. When a hotel guest is checking-in, it usually is the first face-to-face service encounter with the hotel, which makes it important. The first impression that a guest receives can often be the last impression, so if the first impression is good, the more likely the customer will also leave the hotel feeling satisfied.

There are many different segments among hotel guests, and all these segments have sligthly different expectations. In this thesis, the focus lies on business customers, an important clientele for hotels. Business customers are used to staying at hotels, so they know what to expect from the hotels, and more important, what to expect from the employees in the reception when checking-in.

The first impression of a hotel experience is affected by many things, such as surroundings, interior and the employees. This thesis is focusing only on the impact of the employees and the customer service the guests receive from them.

The results of this research will give the reader an overall picture of the importance of well perceived customer service at check-in, since the research is being conducted in several hotels in Ostrobothnia, Finland. The research contains both a qualitative and quantitative part. The results of the research will be useful for front-desk employees, in order to being able to give as good customer service as possible, and knowing what the customers expect of them. The research will also be useful for the management in hotels, and helpful for them when training

their employees. It is also of advantage for business customers, since the employees can develop their customer service skills according to the research, and give the guests even better customer service.

2   CUSTOMER SERVICE

"A customer is the most important visitor on our premises, he is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favor by serving him. He is doing us a favor by giving us an opportunity to do so." These words were said by Mahatma Gandhi years ago, it is a major description on the relationship between a customer and a serviceperson. The aim of this chapter is to figure out what customer service is, and how great customer service is achieved.

2.1 Services

There are some features which are specific for services, and thus services cannot be compared to physical goods. Christian Grönroos states in his book (Grönroos, 2009) that there are three main features for services, one is that it is a process. Services are processes that consist of a series of activities where different resources, such as humans, physical resources and systems are used, often in direct interaction with the customer, in a way that tries to create a solution to the customer's problem. Further Grönroos mentions that some parts of the service process are invisible for the customer, and that we should be aware of the fact that the visible parts of the service process are most significant for the customers.

Another feature for services which Grönroos comments on is that services to some extent are produced and consumed simultaneously. This feature is called "the inseparability characteristic," and because a service is produced and consumed simultaneously the quality of it cannot be controlled before it being purchased and consumed. Grönroos says that the customer experiences and evaluates the visible

parts of the service in detail, while the rest of the process, the invisible parts, can only be experienced by looking at the final result. How much of the service that is consumed and produced simultaneously varies depending on the type of service and service provider. The third of the main features for services, mentioned by Grönroos, is the customer not only being the recipient of the service, but also participating as a production resource in the service process. Grönroos writes that the customer has to, at some degree, be present and participate in the process where the service is produced and delivered, and therefore the customer is a co-producer and participant of creating the service (Grönroos, 2009).

Apart from the three main features separating services from goods, there are also other significant characteristics for services. Grönroos mentions the fact that services cannot be stored, so for example, if a plane leaves the airport half full, those seats are lost for that day, they cannot be stored until next day. Another feature, Grönroos indicates, is that services are somehow intangible. Services cannot be tested before they are bought, for example, making a "test-journey" with a travel agency before buying the actual trip is not possible, says Grönroos. He also points out that services are perceived in a subjective manner. Even though services to some extent are intangible, there are also tangible features, e.g. the bed in a hotel, the food in a restaurant, but the core of a service lies in the intangibility. The intangibility is also what makes it hard for customers to evaluate a service, says Grönroos. In addition to these, Grönroos discusses another aspect to services, which is that the service provided to one customer is never exactly the same that the service provided to another customer, even though it is the "same" service. Even if we try to copy a service, it will not be exactly the same, due to human factors, to customers acting in different ways and having different expectations.
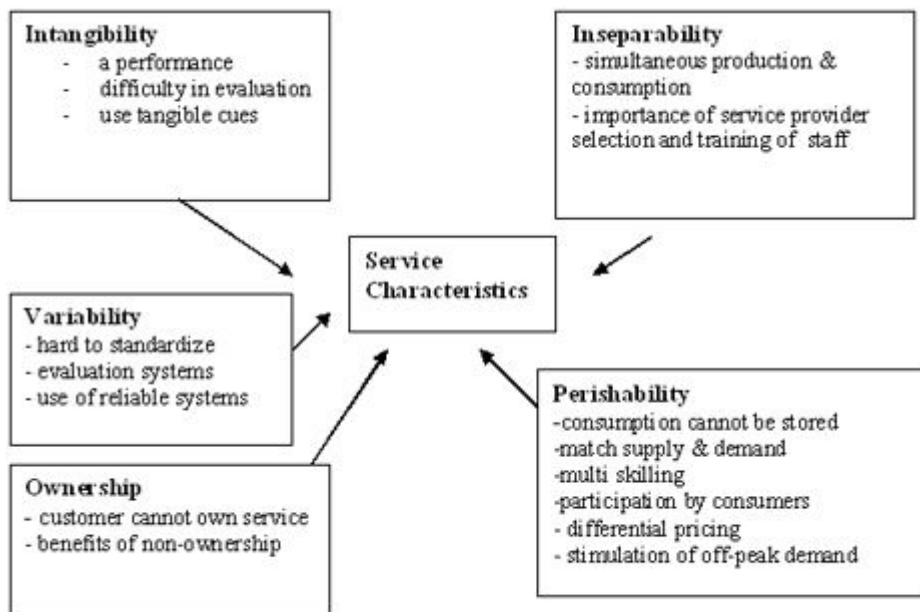
Figure 1. Main characteristics of a service

2.2 Customers

Customers are traditionally considered being persons or organizations outside the company, these are called extern customers (C.Grönroos, 2009). B. Bergman and B. Klefsjö (Bergman, Klefsjö, 2003) describes customers as the people or organizations that are the reason for a company's activities. Further they describe customers as "those for whom we want to create value by our activities and products". This means that without the customers the company would not exist, and that the customer is the most important target for our activities. In all corporate activity, there is always a customer for whom the work is done, the mission for services are, in some way, helping the customers. The customer enjoys the service and the result of the service, and in return provides the company with income, which is essential for the existence of the business (Jokinen, Heinämaa, Heikkonen).

3   HIGH QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE

Every company wants to serve their customers in the best possible way, which means that the level on customer service today in general is good. Since most customer service can be considered "neutral" or "good", superb customer service need to be given in order to stand out. The crucial thing is knowing how outstanding customer service can be achieved. In order to give customer service of high quality, the company needs to know their customers, their needs and expectations.

3.1 Service Quality

Good quality is every service provider's goal and it is a step towards outstanding customer service. A problem is that sometimes the service provider's opinion on good service quality might vary from the customer's opinions. Grönroos defines service quality in his book (Grönroos, 2009) as the quality of a service being what the customer perceives it to be. He also says that "The quality that counts is the quality perceived by the customers". According to this, even though a company or service provider think they are doing everything right and giving good service, they should always listen to the customer's opinions, because from their point of view there might be room for improvements or changes.

Bergman and Klefsjö (Bergman, Klefsjö, 2003) argues that there are many different dimensions which affect the perceived quality of a service, these are different from the quality dimensions of products/articles. One of the quality dimensions of services, mentioned by Bergman and Klefsjö is communication, being able to communicate in a, for the customer understandable way. Other dimensions are responsiveness and courtesy, with responsiveness referring to willingness to helping customers and courtesy referring to the serviceperson's behavior and manners, for example good will and politeness. Further they claim

that empathy also is an important dimension of service quality, meaning ability to understanding customers, their situation and their needs.

As mentioned before, services are subjectively perceived processes where production and consumption occur simultaneously. These processes contain service encounters between the customer and the service provider, also known as "moment of truth", and these encounters play a major role in how the service is perceived. A way to measure quality, brought up by Grönroos, has two dimensions; technical quality (what) and functional quality (how). The technical quality is for example a hotel room, which the customer receives as a part of the process. The technical quality does not itself explain the total quality perceived by the customer, the functional quality is an important part of the total quality. The functional quality perspective in the hotel example is how the service is delivered, how all the service encounters that occur during the stay are managed and how well the production (making a reservation, checking in) and consumption (staying at the hotel) process goes. Previous experiences and expectations also affect the total perceived service quality. (Grönroos, 2009)
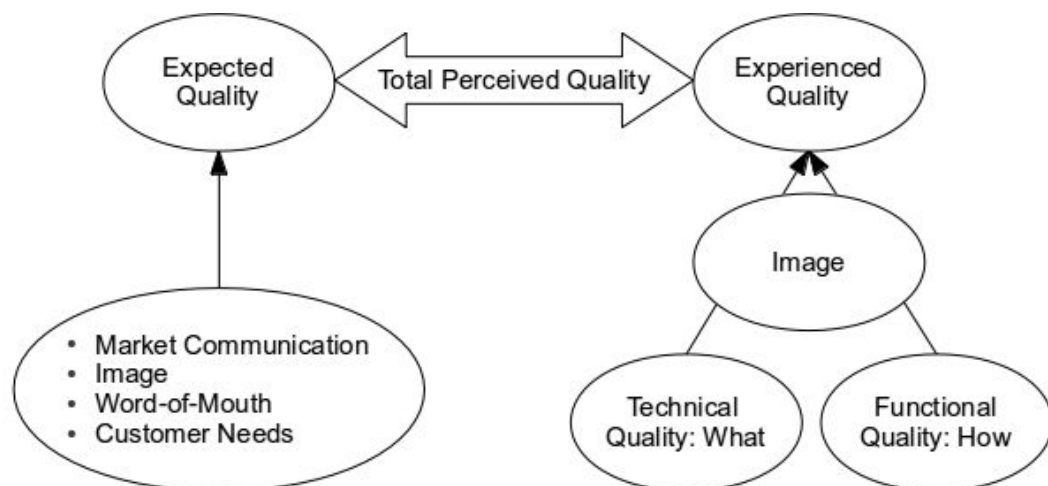

Figure 2. Grönroos model of service quality

3.2 Customer Expectations

Bergman and Klefsjö claims that the customer's expectations are important to know when striving for excellent customer service, because customer satisfaction is related to the needs and expectations of the customer. The expectations and needs are related to the customer's previous experience, the image of the company/service provider, what promises has been made and also to some degree, the price (Bergman, Klefsjö, 2003). In the book "Tervetuloa Asiakas", it is mentioned that the customer always compare expectations and experiences, and each perceived service encounter adds new criteria and new expectations. If the expectations are exceeded and met frequently, the customer's requirements will also get higher. If the expectations are not met more than once, it can cause the loss of a customer (Jokinen, Heinämaa, Heikkonen).

Grönroos describes that if the service quality experienced by the customer meets the expectations of the service, known as expected quality, then the quality is considered good or neutral. If the expectations on the services are unrealistic, the experienced quality will be perceived as bad, even though, from an objective point of view, the quality was good. Too high expectations can be the result of for example a marketing campaign, where the company promises too much and this in turn raises customer's expectations. Therefore, it is better to promise only a little and deliver much, than to promise too much and not being able to live up to these promises (Grönroos, 2009).

In order to give outstanding customer service, the serviceperson must always try to exceed the customer's expectations and give them "that little extra", which makes the customer feel important and makes the service quality better than average. "Always give people more than what they expect to get" – Nelson Boswell.

3.3 "The moment of truth"

In customer service, some parts of the service process are more important and more critical than other parts; one of these is referred to as the moment of truth. "It is particularly important to establish that in many cases, the quality of a service is essentially determined at the moment when the person performing the service, the service supplier, meets the customer. This is often called the moment of truth.." says Bergman and Klefsjö (Begman, Klefsjö, 2003). According to Grönroos (Grönroos, 2009) the expression "moment of truth" in this context was first used by Richard Normann in his literature. Grönroos also points out that the moment of truth refers literarily to that time and place where the service person has the opportunity of showing the customer the quality of their company's services; it is a "golden opportunity". Bergman and Klefsjö indicate that the moment of truth is full of possibilities, because the service provider has the opportunity to demonstrate to the customer the superb quality of their services. Further they mention that if a fault occurs during the moment of truth, it is too late to correct after the customer has left. Grönroos mentions that if a fault has occurred in the moment of truth and the moment is over, there is a possibility of fixing it by creating a new moment of truth, for example by contacting the customer and explaining why a fault occurred and then trying to fix it. This is obviously less efficient than a moment of truth handled correctly in the first place. Grönroos also says that a customer will experience several moments of truth, when choosing a service organization, so the service process must always be planned and performed in a way that leaves no place for poorly handled moments of truth.

3.4 Qualified Personnel

An important factor in customer service is obviously the service person, the employee, who together with the customer creates the service process. Chris Fill (Fill, 2013) argues that employees could be considered, and need to adapt the role as ambassadors for a company, further he says that "this is particularly important in service environments where employees represent the interface between an organization's internal and external environments and where their actions can have a powerful effect in creating images among the customers". This would be the case in hotels, where usually many service encounters occur and the personnel are in face-to-face contact with customers. Fill mentions that it is important for the company to motivate their employees and make them involved with the company in a way that all the employees present a consistent message to customers. The values of the company are then transmitted to the customers through external communication.

A good customer service person is one who is committed to the business, always puts effort into the work and who has the knowledge needed about the business, says Jokinen, Heinämaa and Heikkonen. Further they claim that customer service and selling is like any other talent; it can be learned. They also argue that willingness to learn and to develop always leads to a good result and that the well-educated sellers usually are better than "natural born" sellers. Jokinen, Heinämaa and Heikkonen also talk about important features of a successful customer service person, one of them being believing in one's expertise and skills. The employee must thrust his/her abilities of satisfying the customer and exceeding the customer's expectations. Customers take "neutral" or "good" service encounters as a certainty, but only when the expectations are exceeded, the customer might remember the employee's performance also afterwards.

3.5 First impressions in a service encounter

In customer encounters there are three stages; arrival, the service encounter itself and departure. All of these stages should be put effort into, in order to produce positive service experiences for customers. One of the most important stages of the customer encounter is the arrival; the first few moments are extra critical and have a great impact on how the customer perceives the service (Jokinen, Heinämaa, Heikkonen). There is an old saying; you never get a second chance to make a first impression. This saying could be applied to customer service as well.

An article on the internet, written by Renee Evenson (Customer service training 101) explains the first impression as a foundation for the customer relationship. She says that if the first impression is positive, the foundation for providing major customer service has been laid. If the first impression is not positive, more work needs to be done in order to begin building the foundation. Evenson continues that the customer forms a first impression right away, without even thinking.

According to an article in Wall Street Journal, written by Andrea Petersen (Wall street journal, 2012) hotels are putting more effort into impressing guests, within' the crucial first 15 minutes of their stay. The article contains a quote "If you lose them at the beginning, it is very hard to recover," by Mickael C. Damelincourt, general manager of the Trump International Hotel & Tower Toronto. He continues "in their mind they've decided it is a bad hotel". According to this, the very first moments of the stay are the most critical ones.

Referring to the article by Evenson (Customer service training 101), the surroundings of the workplace affect the first impression, but also how the employee speaks, listens and for example what words the employee uses has an effect on the first impression. The employee should be courteous, since customers appreciate courteous treatment and it promotes a positive first impression. A positive attitude, along with being truthful and acting in an ethical way also helps forming a positive first impression. The employee's appearance and actions also

count, for example; grooming, cleanliness, posture, attitude and tone of voice. An unappealing appearance could be a hindrance for forming a positive first impression, considering this, the employee should wear appropriate clothing for the business, and should also be groomed, meaning that hair and nails should be neat, clothes clean and the overall image should be professional.

4   CUSTOMER SEGMENTS

In every industry, segmentation and choosing the right segments for a business is of great importance. The aim of segmentation is to reach the right customers in order to get a business as profitable and efficient as possible. Further, it means that the segment's needs and expectations have to be taken into consideration in the business practices. There are many ways to segment people, the segments can be made based on for example; geography, demography, behavior and personality. A business should know its most valuable customers, because they bring a great deal of the company's income and as a result they affect the company's financial sustainability. A limited amount, only 20 percent of a company's clientele is said to bring the majority of the positive cash flow (Rautiainen, Siiskonen, 2005).

Different segments within the hotel industry are for example, individuals or groups, loyal- or non-loyal customers and business- or pleasure customers.

Since the thesis is focusing on the segment of business customers, only that segment will be further examined.

4.1 Business customers

Business travelers are "experts" on staying at hotels, and they know what to expect from the hotels and their employees. Since business travelers spend the

majority of their time away from home, it is important to make them feel welcome and feel like home at the hotel.

"The purposes of business travel and the subsequent need for accommodation may be summarized as the need for company management to attend meetings, undertake sales visits, to attend conferences or conventions, to attend trade exhibitions and training or management development courses". This is how Peter Jones describes business travel in the book "Introduction to Hospitality Operations, 2002".

Business customers form a major segment in the hospitality industry. Companies tend to negotiate with hotel chains for special corporate rates by assuring a yearly minimum amount of nights within' the hotel chain. This leads to the employees being obliged to staying in a hotel belonging to that hotel chain. (Jones, 2002)

Jones also discusses the priorities of the individual business traveler, and what affects their choice of hotel. According to a survey that was made, Jones continues, one of the more important priorities was location and its convenience. Transportation possibilities and general comfort of the hotel were also important, these were summarized as "a business setting in comfortable surroundings", according to Jones. Further he mentions that business travelers also regard staff attitude as an important factor.

Ahmed Ismail (Ismail, 2002) discusses the business segment, and mentions that the term "business" is fairly unspecified and can mean anything, and the business travelers purpose is another than relaxation and recreation. Ismail also describe the loyalty programs which are implemented in many hotels and hotel chains. These loyalty programs often have a point earning system, in which repeat guests can receive some kind of reward after collecting a specific amount of points, these rewards are for example free room nights.

Business customers also appreciate small things, which make them feel more like home, such as free water bottles, coffee/tea maker in the room preferably also a bathrobe and slippers.

In terms of customer service, business customers appreciate efficiency, flexibility and politeness, according to Alakoski, Hörkkö and Lappalainen. It is important that everything runs smoothly and that the employees are friendly and welcoming. (Alakoski, Hörkkö and Lappalainen, 1998).

5   ARRIVING TO THE HOTEL RECEPTION

The arrival stage is one of the most important phases of a service process, as mentioned earlier. The stage when the customer arrives to the hotel reception, is often the first time a face-to-face encounter occurs within' the service process. If the booking is made beforehand, on the internet, arriving to the reception will be the customer's very first contact with the employees of the company, since the customer has booked the room without any help from the company's employees. If the booking is made by calling or emailing the company, the customer has already had some direct contact with the company, but still no face-to-face contact. For walk-in customers, the very first contact they have with the company is an actual face-to-face encounter, since a walk-in customer does not have a booking beforehand. The walk-in customer arrives to the hotel without a booking, and if there are rooms available for a price the customer is willing to pay, the customer may book a room straight from the reception and stay at the hotel. The booking method affects to the amount of previous contact between the customer and the hotel, but regardless the booking method, the stage when the customer arrives to the reception for the first time, and the first face-to-face impression received then is important. Alén, Nenonen, Savola and Uusimäki argue that the check-in stage simply is the most important moment shared between the guest and the hotel. Further they mention that during the check-in, the foundation for the entire service process is being built (Alén, Nenonen, Savola and Uusimäki, 1997)

"The registration process is arguably the most important part of the hotel experience for a guest. It is during this time that lasting impressions are made. It has been said that 75 percent of a guest's total satisfaction with a hotel is

determined during this process. A successful hotel must do whatever it can to ensure that the guest is satisfied with every aspect of registration". The importance of the check-in process, described by Ahmed Ismail (Ismail, 2002).

5.1 The stages of the check-in process

"Once a guest has arrived and has made it to the front desk, the registration process begins. It is at this point where most guests have begun to create an impression of the hotel in their minds." (Ismail, 2002)

The first stage of the check-in process is the greeting. When the customer arrives to the hotel it is important that he/she is noticed immediately, even if there is a line or the receptionist is on the phone. Before starting to serve a customer, a proper greeting is essential. After greeting the customer, the check-in process itself starts. The receptionist goes through the most important parts of the reservation with the customer, while the customer fills in the registration card, if not filled in beforehand. At this stage the latest, method of payment should be defined. After the registration card is signed and filled in, the receptionist gives the customer the room key, to the room assigned based on the customers preferences. The check-in stage ends by instructing the customer on finding the room (Alakoski, Hörkkö, Lappalainen, 1998).

Briefly, checking-in guests includes processing their individual reservations, selecting proper rooms for the guests, making sure room preferences are preserved and receiving method of payment, says Ismail (A. Ismail, 2002).

5.2 Rules of greeting

As mentioned, greeting and noticing the customer is important. There are guidelines applied by the hospitality industry, for helping the reception employees

in creating a good first impression when greeting, one of these is according to Ismail the 10 / 10 rule. The first part of the rule states that a customer's impression of an entire stay is, to a large extent, determined by the first 10 minutes upon arrival. The second part describes that the reception should greet a customer 10 feet (approximately 3 meters) before the customer reaches the front desk. Ismail also mentions that "an employee who begins a conversation with a guest at least 10 feet away creates a favorable impression. This makes the guest feel welcome by encouraging his/her approach (Ismail, 2002).

The other rule for greetings that exist in hospitality is written about in several blogs and papers on the internet, it is called the 10 / 5 rule. This rule states that the customer should be noticed within' 10 feet (approximately 3 meters) away, and within' 5 feet (approximately 1,5 meters) the customer should get a verbal greeting (Hyken.com, 2012).

5.3 Communication in the reception

5.3.1 Verbal communication

Speaking is an important method of communication, and it can reveal much about a person. The employee can also get information about the customer by verbal communication. The guest should, when arriving, naturally get greeted by the employee by using an appropriate greeting, for example "good morning" or "good afternoon". It is also important to try to personalize the conversation, by for example using the customer's name, in order to set a relaxed tone. (A. Ismail, 2002)

Thanking and listening to the guest is also important. Thanking the guest after a conversation, for staying at the hotel or after receiving payment should be remembered, since it implies appreciation of the customer. The only way the receptionist can hear the message the customer is sending is by listening. When listening, the employee creates a level of comfort for the hotel guest, the employee

can also sense signals and implications when listening. If the employee is not listening properly or not concentrating on what the customer is saying, it can cause problems. Undivided attention is to be given to the guests, and the employee should always keep an open mind when listening, and also be prepared for sometimes hearing things that are unpleasant to hear. (A.Ismail, 2002)

The customer service person should create a positive atmosphere and good relationships, thus the message the employee sends will more likely receive the customer. In order for creating a positive atmosphere, the employee needs ability to like people, and also the want to like people. The tools for forming a positive atmosphere are; empathy, friendliness, politeness, listening skills, communication skills, honesty, diplomacy, sympathy and an open mind (Jokinen, Heinämaa, Heikkonen, 2000).

5.3.2   Visual communication

Good visual communication is besides verbal communication an important factor for creating a good first impression. Three important things about visual communication are; communicating with a smile, using correct body language and being groomed according to the business standards. An employee smiling genuinely when greeting a guest reinforces the message and also helps creating a comfortable atmosphere. Body language is also important for employees to consider. By observing a guests body language, the employee can get indications on how to communicate with the customer (A.Ismail, 2002)

Perception is an essential aspect as well, and how the guest perceives an employee. The perception of an employee contributes to a customer's overall picture of a hotel, since the employee can be viewed as "the face" of a hotel. Most hotels have grooming standards, because an employee's appearance usually is the first and lasting impression a customer gets on an employee. Employees taking care of their appearance send a message that they are taking care of their work, which in

turn sends the customer a message that the employee is able of taking care of the guest. (A.Ismail, 2002)

5.4 Efficiency and knowledge

"Getting people into guest rooms quickly, efficiently and accurately is the primary responsibility of the front desk", Ismail mentions in his book (Ismail, 2002).

Good product knowledge is one of the most important features of a customer service employee. The guest expects the employee to have good knowledge about the products/services, in order to being able to thrust the information the employee is giving the customers. The employee needs to use the product knowledge right, based on what needs and wants the customer has. It is unnecessary for the employee to bore the customer by explaining about every detail and part of every service. (Jokinen, Heinämaa, Heikkonen, 2000)

C. Dix and C. Baird discuss efficiency in their book (Dix, Baird, 2001) they mention that there clearly is a difference between a busy and a disorganised front desk, however busy it is. Further they comment that the reception must make the guest feel welcome and create a good first impression, but at the same time they must give an impression of efficiency.

Usually a guest arriving to the hotel wants to get the room quickly. Friendliness, flexibility and making sure the service runs smoothly are tools for simultaneously making sure the guests receive their rooms quickly and making them feel welcome (Brännare, Kairamo, Kulusjärvi, Matero, Majoitus, 2005)

5.5 Conflict resolution and service recovery

Sometimes mistakes and faults occur, it could be that, for example, a customer's reservation might not be found, or for some reason the guest's preferences were

not taken into consideration. Whenever a problem occurs, the end result depends highly on the actions of the employee. Ismail argues (Ismail, 2002) that these problems can be caused by the service received from the employees, or then it could be a physical problem. Ismail continues that both the physical aspect and the service aspect need to function in order to provide a problem-free guest experience, and if problems occur in either of these the employee must provide a solution to the problem in order to make the guest satisfied.

A problem caused by the customer service that the hotel guest receives could be for example that the employee does not greet the customer upon arrival which in turn makes the guest feel unwelcome. Another reason could be that the employee is not professional enough or does not have enough knowledge, and thus, for example, the check-in process takes too long, wrong or too little information is given, or the employee is showing that he/she is having a bad day. Sometimes problems occur which the employees cannot control, for instance if there is a problem with the internet connection or some other system needed for the check-in process. It also happens that the guest for some reason do not get the room they hade booked, or that their preferences cannot be taken into consideration, for example if there are only a few rooms left, that can also cause a problem during the first guest encounter.

An important social skill for a customer service employee is the knowledge of dealing with and handling customer's complaints. When an employee receive a complaint from a guest, a normal reaction could be "it's not my fault" or something similar. This in turn leads to further provocation of the guest, and that should be avoided. Instead of being defensive, the employee should listen carefully, to show the guest attention. The guest should not be interrupted when complaining; the employee should let the guest finish talking before saying anything at all. The first thing the receptionist does should be apologizing shortly. The apology should not be followed by an explanation or excuse, and the receptionist must remember speaking normally, without raising the voice. After apologizing, the employee summarizes the complaint. This ensures that it has been understood correctly. After summarizing, the employee should present a

solution; what will be done to solve the problem and how quickly (Dix, Braid, 2001)

When these problems occur, as mentioned by Ismail, the end result depends highly on the reactions of the employee. The employee must be flexible, and depending on the situation and how disappointed the customer is, know what kind of compensation or equivalent would be suitable for solving the problem and making the guest feel satisfied again. For example; is it enough with a sincere apology, or do you need to compensate by giving the guest a gift card? If the employee solves the problem successfully, it can make the disappointed guest a satisfied guest. A good thing for employees in customer service professions to remember is; "Customers don't expect you to be perfect. They do expect you to fix things when they go wrong" – Donald Porter, Senior VP, British Airways.

6   THE RESEARCH

Since the aim of this research is to find out to which extent the customer service at check-in affects the hotel experience, it was decided that both qualitative and quantitative research methods would be used for conducting the research. The research started with the qualitative part, in order to get useful information for the quantitative part.

6.1 Qualitative research

The qualitative research was conducted through interviews where five business travelers were interviewed at different occasions. Two interviews took place in a hotel restaurant, two took place at the hotel breakfast, and one took place in a hotel bar. Five interviews was regarded enough, since the main topics and points

brought up by the interviewees were similar, and even though more people would have been interviewed, the answers would presumably have been comparable with no new relevant information, thus it was considered that saturation had been achieved. The interviews had four different topics that were discussed, these topics were formed as open ended questions. The questions were;

1. Define good customer service and its most important features
2. How important is good customer service when checking in at a hotel, why?
3. How satisfied are you in general with customer service at hotel receptions? Improvements?
4. Do you think that the customer service you receive when checking in to a hotel affects the overall hotel experience? How/ why?

The interviews were recorded on a mobile phone, and some notes were also made during the interview. Since making notes and listening to the interviewee simultaneously was proven difficult, emphasis was put on listening and the recordings.

All of the interviewees were experienced business travelers and therefore suitable for the interviews. Both of the genders were interviewed, four of them were male and one of them female, the age varied from 34 to 65. The length of the interviews also varied, they were between 12,30 minutes to 26,20 minutes long. In the beginning, the idea was to interview more than five business travelers, but since the content and information of these five interviews were proven good and sufficient, five interviews was considered enough. The aim of the qualitative research was to get more detailed answers to the research topic than one could get from a quantitative research. There were some points that in some way were brought up by all of the interviewees and thus considered important; these were then formed into questions for the quantitative research.

6.2 Quantitative research

The quantitative research was made based on the results from the qualitative research, and the research consisted of a questionnaire that contained ten questions plus the possibility to in the end add some own comments on the topic. The questionnaire was made using Googe Docs. The quantitative method was used in order to get a more wide opinion on the research topic, which would have been too difficult to get by only using the qualitative research method.

The questionnaire was handed out to business travelers in a couple of hotels in the Ostrobothnia area in Finland. Mostly the questionnaire was handed out by the employees when customers arrived to the hotel, but in some cases it was also handed out to the customers when they were going to breakfast. Totally 71 questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire was made in Finnish, English and Swedish, but most of the respondents answered it in Finnish.

Most of the questionnaires were filled in properly, and only a few respondents had left any of the questions unanswered. This implicates that the questions were understood correctly. In order to not confuse the respondents, and to make them focus on the customer service aspect of the check-in process, a short introducing text was added in the beginning of the questionnaire; "This questionnaire concerns customer service in hotels – the importance of the check-in process and how it might affect the overall experience and overall picture of the hotel. Take into consideration only the customer service perspective".

6.3 The questionnaire

The questionnaire is added in the end of the thesis, as an appendix. Here in this section, the questions will be explained more detailed. In the questionnaire, the first three questions were such that they would give demographic information about the respondents. Demographic features or qualities are for example; gender, age, income or family size, these are often used for segmentation.

The first question in the questionnaire was about the gender of the respondent, and the second question was concerning the age of the respondent, the options were;

- 20-34 years

- 35-49 years

- 50 or older

The third question aimed to find out how many nights per year the respondent stays at a hotel – Approximately how many nights do you spend at hotels per year? The options were;

- 1-15 nights
- 15-30 nights
- 30-45 nights

Question number four was about important features with customer service, the question asked was; Which are the most important features related to customer service, when checking-in to a hotel? There were five options to choose from, and the respondents were asked to pick only the three most important ones. The options were;

- Fast service
- Enough information about the hotel services
- Feeling welcome
- Friendly/polite receptionist
- Professional service
- Other, what?

Some respondents only picked one of the alternatives, while others picked two or three of the options. Nobody came up with own suggestions even though the option was given.

The fifth question in the questionnaire was; How important is good customer service when checking-in to a hotel (how important is the first impression)? The purpose of this question was to find out how important the customer thinks that

the first impression is, when staying at a hotel. The options to the question were; very important, quite important or not important.

The sixth question in the questionnaire was a follow up question to the fifth; to what degree do you think the customer service at check-in affects the overall picture of the hotel? The purpose here was to find out to what extent the customer believes that the first impression affects the hotel stay in total. The options were that it affects; very much, much, a little or not at all.

In question number seven, the aim was to find out some information about service recovery, and what would make an dissatisfied customer feel satisfied. The question was; If you are not satisfied with the customer service you got at the check-in, how could it be compensated, in order for you to be satisfied when leaving the hotel? Here the customer had the opportunity to choose one or several of the following options;

- Small gift / give away
- Free minibar item / drink voucher
- Clean room and otherwise good service is enough
- Gift card
- Apologies from the employees
- Other, what?

To this question also, some of the respondents chose multiple options and others only picked one of the options.

Question number eight was related to question number seven, and the purpose of question number eight was finding out whether or not the customers are more critical towards the hotels other services and customer service if they had a bad first impression. The question was; "How true is the following argument; I am more critical towards a hotels' other services and customer service if I have had a bad first impression (and if I have had a good first impression I am not as critical)".

In question number nine, also related to complaints and service recovery, the aim was to find out what could cause a bad first impression for a hotel customer. Here the respondents were asked to pick no more than three of the options; the three they thought were the ones that would affect the most to a negative first impression. The question was; which of the following affects most to you getting a bad first impression of the hotel? The options to the question were;

- Slow service
- Not enough information about hotel services
- I was not greeted at when I arrived
- Service was not flexible
- I did not get the room type that I booked
- Other, what?

Question number ten, the last question was; Are you in general satisfied with the customer service you get when checking-in to hotels? The purpose of this question was to get an overall picture of the situation.

7   ANALYSE OF RESULTS

7.1 The qualitative research

The qualitative research was proven very useful, and gave a great deal of information. The interviewees agreed on many points, and they discussed similar issues. The first impression was considered to be of great importance, especially if you arrive to a new hotel. One of the most important things, that the hotel guests pay attention to, is whether or not the employee in the reception is noticing and greeting them, and if they are not, some of the interviewees would get a bad impression of the hotel. They also mentioned that if you are familiar with the hotel from before, then you already have formed an opinion on the hotel, so in case of

difficulties, the previous experiences will affect. If the previous experiences are good, then a difficulty will not be essential.

Considering the check-in process, a common opinion was that the employee in the reception has to be genuinly friendly. One interviewee mentioned that it is easily discovered if the receptionist is not genuinly friendly and polite. Further they argued that a fast check-in process is not the most important feature, but a smooth and flexible process, where the receptionist tells the guest about the hotel services simultaneously as making the room key and swiping the credit card. They also appreciate small talk to some extent, depending on the mood and on the day - the receptionist should know when to use small talk and when not to. One of the interviewees indicated that "some people are born for customer service professions, and some simply are not". Further he mentioned that the processes and polite manners can be taught to anyone, and that there are many who has good knowledge about customer service, but that only a few people has a genuine interest towards the customer, and these are the ones that stand out and the customer will remember many years afterwards.

When discussing compensations and what the guest expects if something goes wrong, most were of the opinion that mistakes occur, and in case it was a small mistake, no compensation is needed. A little extra attention from the employees during the rest of the stay accompanied with a sincere apology would in these cases cover for the mistake. If the start is bad, followed by for example a room that has not been cleaned properly, and the personell doing nothing about it, then there would be a reason to consider some type of compensation. The compensations could be for example a free meal, free parking or in worst case a gift card or refund of the room charge. One of the persons interviewed doubted that something that awful could happen during the check-in, that he would claim a refund.

The last issue talked about in the interviews were how satisfied they are in general with customer service in hotels. One of the persons interviewed said that the quality of customer service in hotels has declined, and that the biggest reason is the attitudes of the employees, they do not treat the last customer of the day the

same way they treated the first customer, the employees should always remember that every customer is individual, and should be treated with the same respect. Most interviewees were satisfied with the customer service they receive at hotels, and said that the level of the customer service is fairly constant.

7.2 The quantitative research

The results of this research were corresponding well to the theory, and to what was anticipated from the beginning. The research problem is finding out to what degree the customer service that the hotel guest receives during check-in affects their hotel stay and how big of an impact it has to their overall image of the hotel, shortly, it is all about the importance of favorable first impressions. Since the overall opinion is the most important for this research, the differences between for example genders and age groups will not be compared much. Also, according to the research, the differences between different groups are minimal, and thus they cannot be considered as of great significance. The qualitative and the quantitative research also corresponded well.

7.2.1 Information on demographics

The results of the questionnaire shows that the majority of the respondents are male. 47 respondents (66,2%) were male, and 24 respondents (33,8%) were female. This result was expected and it reflects reality since most business customers are male. Gender was of interest in this research, in order to find out whether there are differences between the opinions of men and women, the differences caused by gender turned out to not be of significant importance.

The questionnaire shows that 12 (16,9%) of the respondents were between 20-34 years old. The majority, 34 (47,9%) respondents were between 35-49 years old and 25 (35,2%) were 50 years or older. Age is of significance in this research, because it is assumed that the older respondents have more experience, and

therefore it is of great interest to know whether or not experience matters to the respondents answers.
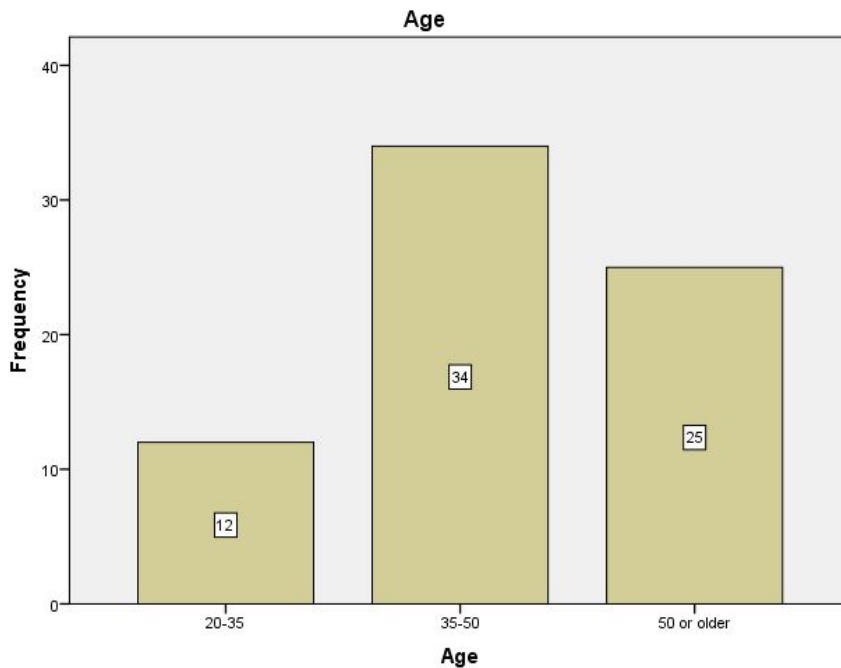

Figure 3.

The last of the questions aiming to find out background information of respondents, was about how frequently the respondent stays at hotels, showed that 26 of the respondents spend under 15 nights per year in hotels, 22 spend between 15-30 nights per year, 14 spend between 30-45 nights per year and 9 of the respondents spend 45 nights or more. Amount of nights per year also indicates how much experience the respondent has from business travel and staying at different hotels, the more nights the respondent has spent at hotels, the more experience he/she should have. Those spending over 30 nights / year at hotels could be considered frequent travelers, whether or not it affects to their responds is to be found out.
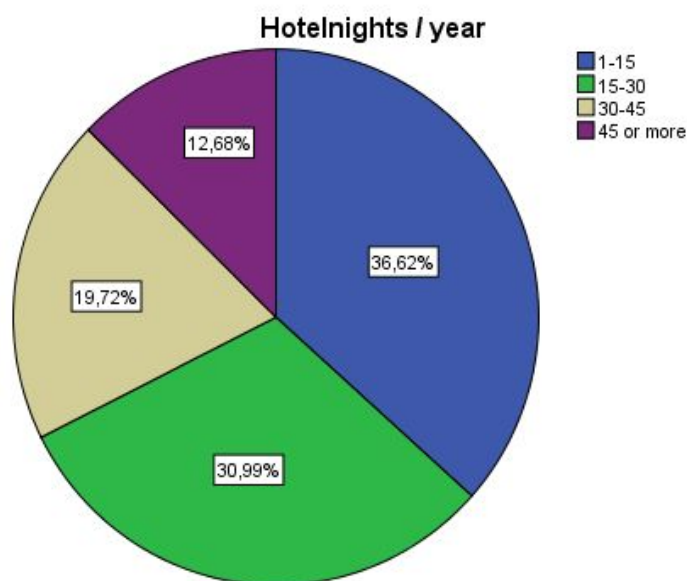
Figure 4.

7.3 The importance of a good first impression

The differences between the opinions of men and women does not significantly vary, according to the research, regarding the importance of a good first impression. Women are slightly more of the opinion that it is important with good customer service when arriving to the hotel than men are, but it could be a coincidence. The differences between age groups does not differ much either, but in accordance with the questionnaire, the younger age groups, 20-35 year olds, consider it more important to get a good first impression than the older age groups. Frequent travelers also saw the importance of good customer service at check-in, more than the less frequent travellers. This could be related to their experience, and the higher expectations that comes with more experience - as mentioned in the theory part, experiences are collected. When getting used to a certain standard of services, the expectations on good customer service will increase.

As seen in figure number five, 49 respondents were of the opinion that good customer service from the beginning and a positive first impression is important,

the rest thought that it is quite important. None of the respondents were of the opinion that it is not important.
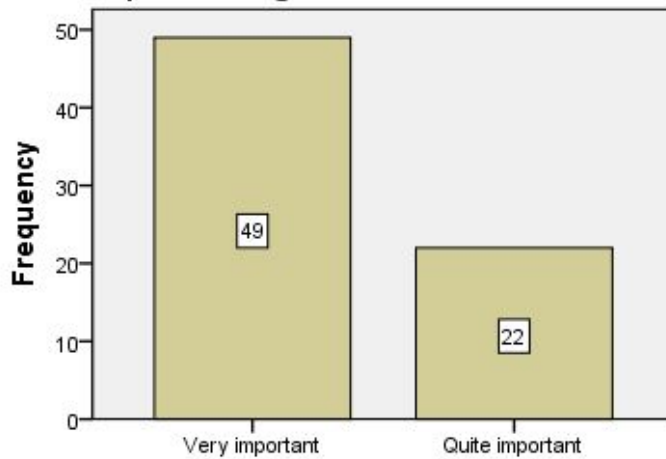

Figure 5 Importance of a good first impression

Both men and women are of the opinion that the customer service they receive during the check-in process has a great impact on their overall image of the hotel, as can be seen in figure number six. Only five respondents were of the opinion that the first impression affects their overall image of the hotel only a little, and 66 respondents replied that it affects "very much" or "much". These results, in accordance to the theory, implies that the check-in process has a significant impact on the hotel guest and it affects the customer's perception of the hotel. Since the check-in process, and the customer service received during it has a great impact on the image of the hotel, it is of significant importance that the check-in process runs smoothly and that the quality of the service is good.
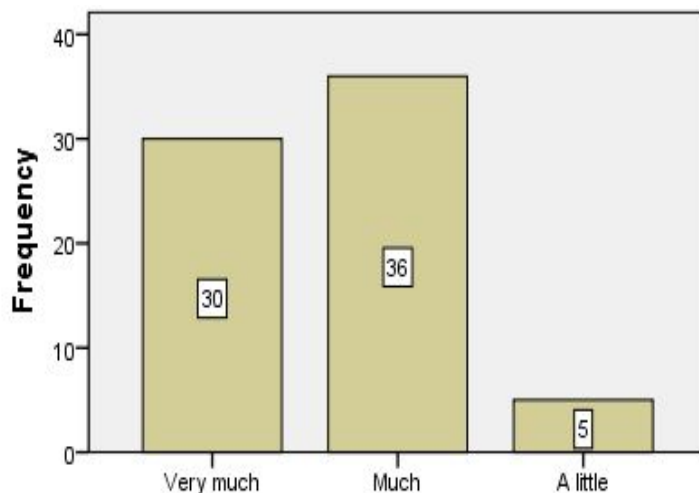
Figure 6   How check-in affects the overall picture of the hotel

7.4 Dissatisfaction and service recovery

As can be seen in figure 7, the research shows, that not being greeted at and non-flexible service are the most common reasons to why a hotel guest would be dissatisfied. The majority of the respondents consider these two a major cause to dissatisfaction. A few respondents added own suggestions to this question, they were of the opinion that a non-polite employee in the reception is worse than anything else. These results respond well to the theory, that state the importance of greeting the guests properly when arriving to the reception, as well as the importance of giving the guests friendly and professional service. From this question a conclusion can be drawn, that the employee at the front-desk is one of the biggest risk-factors, but in turn, also one of the biggest reasons to a successful first impression. The frequent travelers were those most concerned about not getting the right type of hotel room.

As described by figure number eight, the majority of the respondents (56,3 percent) admit that they are more critical towards the hotel in case they get a negative first impression, and less critical if the first impression received was positive. 26 people replied that the argument is somewhat true, and only 5 of the respondents was of the opinion that the argument is not true at all. This result was

somewhat unexpected, in the sense that this many of the respondents honestly agree on the fact that the first impression affects their attitude towards the hotel's other services and the hotel in general. Based on the theory and other conclusions, the result was expected.
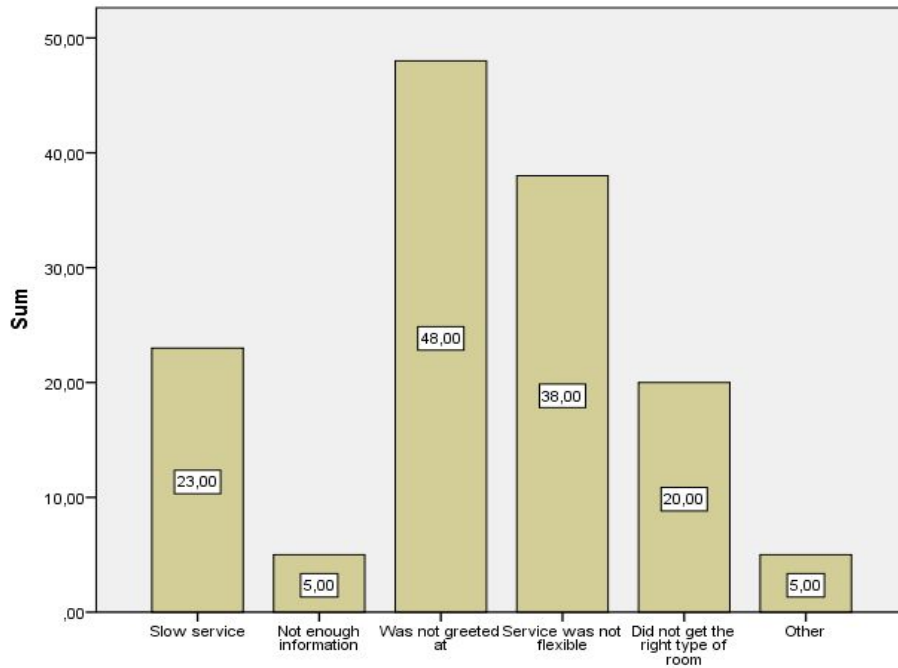

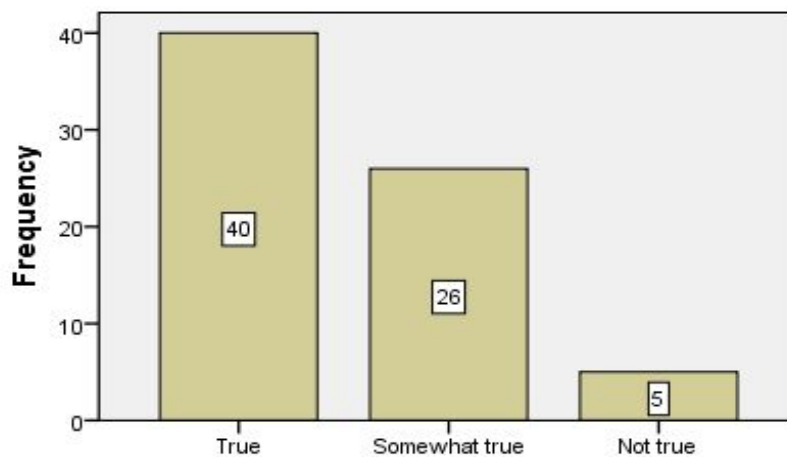**Figure 7. Negative factors affecting the customer**

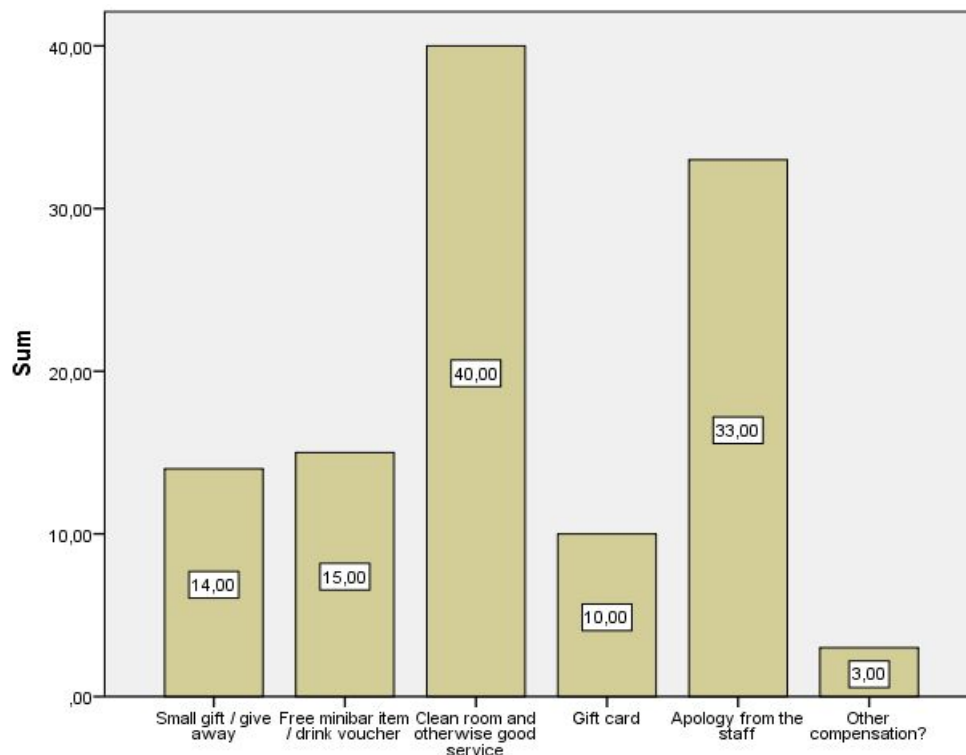**Figure 8. A negative first impression makes the customer more critical**

Figure 9. Compensations expected

The results of the question regarding compensations (figure nine) were also somewhat surprising, these results also indicate that the respondents have responded truthfully to all of the questions. In case that a customer receives bad customer service at check-in, or for some other reason is not feeling satisfied, most of the hotel guests agreed that as compensation a clean room and otherwise good service is enough for them to become satisfied. Many respondents also regarded an apology from the personnel important. Only a few respondents, mostly male, would expect a gift card or some other gift or item from the hotel. One of them who responded "other compensation" suggested that a free meal in the restaurant would be a good compensation. It was expected that the amount of respondents in support of getting a gift card or some other type of "material" compensation would be higher. This question might have been interpreted differently among the respondents, since there, in the questionnaire was not

mentioned what type of problem that would have caused their unsatisfaction, here an example of a problematic situation could have been stated in the question, in order for all the respondents to presuppose the same situation.

7.5 What good customer service is

When asking customers what the most important features are of good customer service, most of them replied what friendly and polite staff is the most important attribute. The importance of feeling welcome got the second most responds, followed by fast service. Information about hotel services was not regarded as really important, and if you compare different groups, the ones who does not travel frequently thought it was more important to get information about the hotel services than those who travel frequently. Figure seven and figure ten correspond well to each other, since both of these figures demonstrate that the employee has an important role in the check-in process and thus a great impact on the customer's first impression.
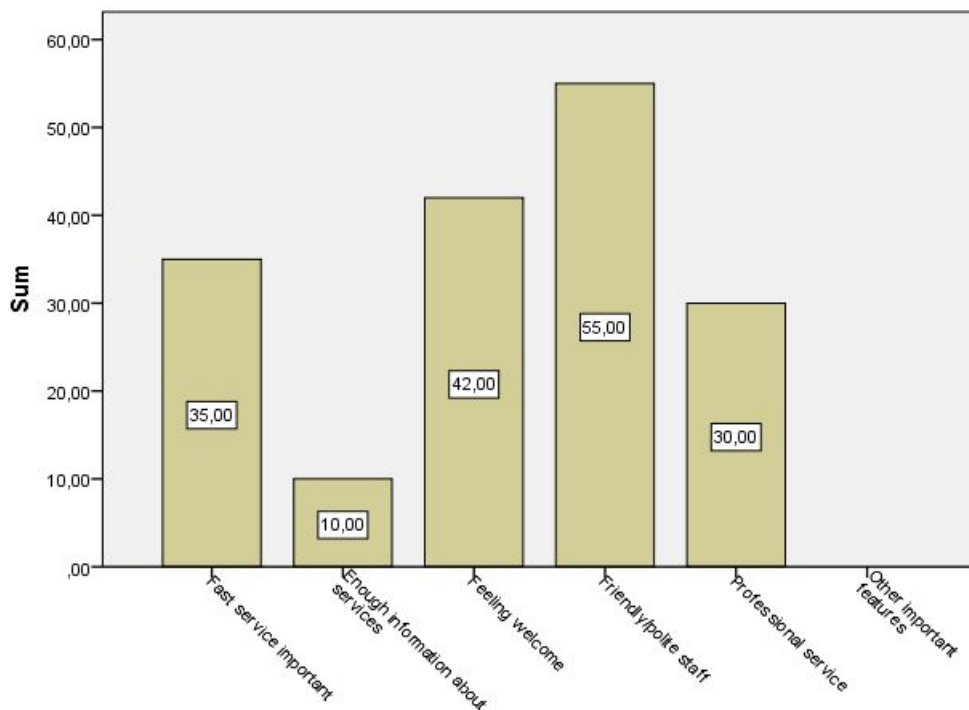

Figure 10 Most important customer service features

To the last question, the majority of the respondents answered that they are "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the customer service they receive in hotels. Only two respondents replied that they are "not that satisfied". This shows that the level of the customer service at hotels in Finland in general is good, and that the employees are doing a successful job.
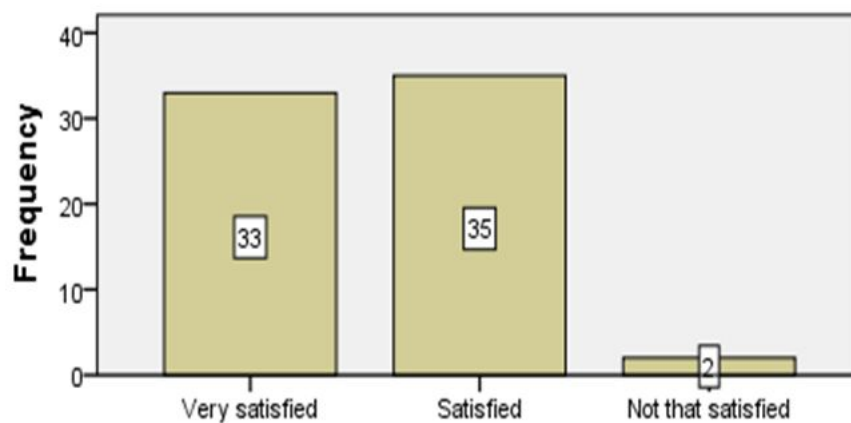

Figure 11. Level of satisfaction with customer service at hotels

8   CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research were good; first a qualitative research was done, in order to get information for conducting the quantitative research, which turned out to be a good idea, since the most relevant questions were added to the questionnaire. The questions were understandable, considering the fact that only few people added own comments or suggestions, the answering options must have been good.

The results of the research corresponded well to the theory and to the expectations from before. As mentioned by Ismail, in the theory part, "the registration process is arguably the most important part of the hotel experience for a guest. It is during this time that lasting impressions are made. It has been said that 75 percent of a guest's total satisfaction with a hotel is determined during this process. A

successful hotel must do whatever it can to ensure that the guest is satisfied with every aspect of registration" (Ismail, 2002). The research showed that customer service received during check-in and the first impression in general has a great impact on the customer's overall image of the hotel and that it affects the rest of their stay either positively or negatively.

When people arrive to a hotel, the first thing they do is form an opinion about the hotel, the employee can during check-in affect to whether the opinion is positive or negative. If the first impression of the hotel is good, the customer will most likely leave the hotel as a satisfied customer. If the first impression is bad, there is still a chance for the employees to make the customer satisfied, they only have to work a little bit more, because like many of the respondents admitted, they will be more critical towards the hotel in general, if they get a bad first impression. The employee needs to be a professional in order to know what kind of compensation is suitable for what situation, if any compensation at all. Most customers accept that everyone makes mistakes, so sometimes a sincere apology and otherwise pleasant stay will cover for a mistake.

The most important feature with good customer service is the employee; most customers appreciate a genuinely friendly and polite employee, who is happy that they are there. This in turn makes the customer feel welcome, which according to the research and the theory is important for the hotel guest.

This thesis and the results of the research can be useful for hotel employees, maybe even more for trainees and employees new to the field. They could get a good overall picture of how important their role in the reception is, and they could also learn about what the customer's expect from them and the service they provide, when they arrive to the hotel. They would also learn about how to handle complaints from the customers. Shortly, it would be useful for employees in a hotel, in order to get a good overall picture of the most important features of the check-in process, from a customer service point of view.

8.1 Validity and reliability

The idea behind reliability is that any significant results must be more than a one-off finding and be inherently repeatable.

Other researchers must be able to perform exactly the same experiment, under the same conditions and generate the same results. This will reinforce the findings and ensure that the wider scientific community will accept the hypothesis (Shuttleworth, 2008)

The research results are quite reliable, both for the qualitative part and for the quantitative part, if the research would be conducted somewhere else in Finland, the results would probably be similar to the ones in this research. The variation of answers combined with the expectations of the responds and supported by the theory, indicates that these results are reliable, even though more respondents would have been desirable. Also, all the respondents in the questionnaire were from the target segment, thus, if the same questionnaire was handed out to business customers anywhere else in Finland, the results would correspond to the results of this research.

Validity tells how well a research measures what it is supposed to measure. "Validity refers to how well a scientific test or piece of research actually measures what it sets out to, or how well it reflects the reality it claims to represent" (Agr.org.uk). The validity of this research is rather good. The methods used were suitable, and using both a qualitative and a quantitative method for the research makes the validity even higher. The research question was answered by the research conducted, which means that the aim of the research was achieved. The answers by the 72 respondents reflect the opinions of business customers in Finland well.

9 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are many things about this topic that could be researched. This research was quite shallow, except from the qualitative part. A qualitative research could be done about for example when compensation in form of gift cards or other items are needed, and when an apology is enough.

Research could also be done about how the check-out process, the last encounter, affects the customer's image of the hotel, since it is the last impression they get of the hotel. It could be studies whether it affects more or less than the check-in process, and in what way the expectations differ compared to the check-in process.

It would also be interesting with a research about the hotel guest's criticism towards the hotel, if he/she gets a bad first impression. For example, what the hotel guest then is more critical about and how it shows to the employees. Maybe the customer then is complaining more easily about the room or other services in the hotel. To conduct this type of a research, qualitative methods should be used, in order to get as detailed information as possible.

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The importance of great customer service when arriving to a hotel

My name is Sandra Högnäs and I am a student at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences, I am doing a research for my thesis and would appreciate if you took the time to help me by answering this questionnaire.
This questionnaire concerns customer service in hotels – the importance of the check-in process and how it might affect the overall experience and overall picture of the hotel. Take into consideration only the customer service perspective
Thank you so much!

Gender

☐ Male

☐ Female

Age

☐ 20-34

☐ 35-49

☑ 50 or older

Hotelnights per year

☐ 1-15

☐ 15-30

☐ 30-45

☐ 45 or more

What are the most important features related to customer service, when checking-in to a hotel?
Pick only the three most importan ones

☐ Fast service

☐ Enough information about hotel services

☐ Feeling welcome

☐ Friendly/polite receptionist

☐ Professional service

☐ Other, what?

How important is good customer service when checking in to a hotel?
(how important is the first impression)

☐ Very important

- ☐ Quite important
- ☐ Not that important
- ☐ Not important

To what degree do you think the customer service at check-in affects the overall picture of the hotel?

- ☐ Very much
- ☐ Much
- ☐ A little
- ☐ Does not affect

If you are not satisfied with the customer service you got at the check-in, how could it be compensated, in order for you to be satisfied when leaving the hotel
Choose one or several options

- ☐ Small gift / give away
- ☐ Free minibar item / drink voucher
- ☐ Clean room and otherwise good service is enough
- ☐ Gift card
- ☐ Apologies from the staff
- ☐ Other, what?

How true is the following argument; I am more critical towards a hotels' other services and customer service if I have had a bad first impression
(and if I have had a good first impression I am not as critical)

- ☐ True
- ☐ Somewhat true
- ☐ Not true

Which of the following affects most to you getting a bad first impression of the hotel?
Pick no more than three options

- ☐ Slow service
- ☐ Not enough information about hotel services
- ☐ I was not greeted at when I arrived
- ☐ The service was not flexible
- ☐ I did not get the room type I booked
- ☐ Other, what?

Are you in general satisfied with the customer service you get when checking-in to hotels?

- ☐ Very satisfied
- ☐ Satisfied

- ☐ Not that satisfied
- ☐ Not at all satisfied

Own comments