Poising Frontline Service Providers for Success: An Integrative Review and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

It has long been understood that frontline employees are a critical marketing tool in hospitality and tourism businesses. In fact, empirical research indicates that consumers often perceive the frontline employees with whom they interact as the company itself (Mohr and Henson, 1996). Due to the pivotal roles of these frontline employees, a growing corpus of research examines how to be select, train, motivate, and manage these individuals. This article synthesizes research from diverse disciplines to provide an up-to-date synopsis of these areas.

KEYWORDS
Customer Service; Frontline; Motivation; Recruiting; Training

Introduction

Consumers often perceive the frontline employees with whom they interact as the company itself (Mohr and Henson, 1996). Thus, the role of human resources in achieving success in the hospitality and tourism sectors cannot be underestimated (Diaconescu, 2011). The purpose of this article, therefore, is to synthesize research from diverse disciplines to provide an informative review on emerging ways by which how to best select, train, motivate, and manage the key frontline personnel.

To achieve this objective, the first section of this article addresses recent advances in selecting and recruiting frontline staff in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Second, a section synthesizing key training issues is offered. After training, the article then turns to discuss advances in the area of frontline motivation. Next, ways in which frontline providers can be armed with customer information are detailed as well as ways in which the role of the frontline provider can be made less stressful.

1. Advances in Recruiting and Selecting Frontline Personnel

A frontline service provider must possess the appropriate set of traits in order to attain success. Therefore, as a first step, success at achieving high levels of customer service at the frontline line is contingent upon recruiting and selecting the proper individuals. With regard to recruiting, the hospitality and tourism firms that have well-liked and distinct brand personalities in the marketplace will possess the top ability to recruit high quality personnel. Stated differently, individuals desire to psychologically identify with a potential employer. Thus, it might prove useful for firms to conduct research to assess external constituent's perceptions of their brand personalities. Qualitative research methods such as sentence completion and word association tasks can be used to elicit brand personality perceptions [e.g. "People visit firm X because…"]. Firms can use findings from these efforts to change, reinforce, or develop their brand's personalities in their integrated marketing

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communications. Again, because attracting top quality applicants is an integral part of success, possessing a distinct and appealing brand personality should aid recruitment. In fact, just as consumers seek self-concept congruity between themselves and their purchases, they also often seek a similar self-concept congruity between themselves and the brand at which they are employed (Wentzel, Henkel, and Tomczak, 2010). It is, therefore, important for service providers to be in possession of up-to-date knowledge of constituencies' perceptions regarding their brand's image.

Further regarding recruiting, non-traditional means of attracting staff will continue to play a key role in years to come. Non-traditional types of recruiting take many forms. First, hospitality managers are advised to always be on the lookout for talented providers in other service settings and drop them a business card when appropriate. Second, talent should be sought from non-typical sources, such as college interns and retirees. Evidently, service managers must remain aware that their best recruiting mechanism is content employees. Well-crafted incentive programs that entice employees to recruit other qualified individuals to the firm can be very useful.

Also in terms of selection, those firms that have effective and refined selection procedures will have a distinct advantage over those that do not. Behavioral interviewing techniques can often assess applicants much better than traditional interviewing practices (Andrews, 2008). That is, posing an applicant with situational questions that are difficult to respond to with pre-scripted replies is helpful in assessing the applicant's communication ability and service orientation. Administering a high quality behavioral interview requires skill; thus, firms should make interviewer training available (either internally or externally). Trained behavioral interviewers can become well-versed in designing interview questions that ask a respondent to detail: 1) a situation; 2) an action; and 3) results (S-A-R) in all responses. Moreover, not only managers, but other frontline staff members can be trained as interviewers in an effort to bolster the firm's capability of judging the suitability of an applicant from more than one angle.

Firms should also implement emotional intelligence screening in the selection process. This emotional intelligence screening is suggested because handling the stress of the frontline requires that providers have the ability to manage their own emotions and recognize the emotions of others. Firms could develop their own emotional intelligence survey items or can adopt an emotional intelligence scale from academic research. There a number of existing scales that demonstrate high reliability and validity (Brackett and Gehrer, 2006; Brackett and Salovey, 2004).

2. Directions in Training Frontline Service Personnel

First, frontline service employees should receive customer service training as soon as possible following their hiring. In other words, the length of time that service workers are permitted to interact with customers without receiving the training is inversely related to the service performance of the firm. The basis for this logic lies with the concept of social proof which contends that individuals look to others to determine how they should behave in a given situation (Cialdini, 2001). In accordance with this logic, if frontline workers exhibit sub-par service habits in the servicescape then it is possible (even likely) that these sub-par habits could be contagious to others transacting at the frontline. In fact, the theory of planned behavior (TPB) goes further to suggest that these sub-par habits could be carried forward into future transactions. That is, TPB supports the notion that future behavioral intentions are, in part, driven by subjective norms [whether person's surrounding the decision-maker participate in the given behavior] (Ajzen, 2006; Rhodes & Courneya, 2003). Thus, permitting frontline workers to transact at the frontline for an extended period of time without having received customer service training increases the likelihood that bad service habits can be exhibited and mimicked.

Second, a customer service training system that stresses the dramaturgical metaphor of service delivery should yield better results than a training system that does not. Specifically, it should be stressed in the service training that actors (the employees), an audience (the customers), and a stage exist in the service environment. As in a theatrical performance, therefore, the actor is considered to be on-stage when the audience can see or hear him or her. This dramaturgical metaphor serves as a powerful metaphor that guides norms of conduct in social interactions (Goffman, 1959) and in service environments (Deighton, 1994; Grove and Fiske, 1983). Service workers who internalize this

metaphor are less likely to engage in off-stage acts and/or conversations while on-stage than worker who do not grasp the concept.

Third, the quality of a service interaction is judged, in part, upon the quality of the verbal dialogue that characterizes the exchange. Thus, verbal coaching should be incorporated into a service training system. Weak verbal communication habits should be identified and discussed – such as asking the customer "is everything OK?" because being "OK" is a low bar to set in a service environment. On the flipside, strong verbal communication habits should also be identified and discussed – such as calling customers be their names and personalizing conversations whenever possible. As part of this verbal communication component, employees can be coached on some of the basic ways of remembering customer's faces and names (Magnini and Honeycutt, 2005).

Fourth, while training pertaining to weak and strong verbal communication is quintessentially vital, it must also be recognized that most human communication transpires through nonverbal cues and gestures (Pease and Pease, 2004; Zaltman, 1997). Knowing what kind of body language to use and not use is fundamental information that a service provider should internalize before engaging in interactions. As Smith (1995, pp. 97) contends, persons have certain expectations concerning specific nonverbal behaviors. Those gestures, expressions and intonations tending toward greater intimacy that can be used with care in a service situation includes such behaviors as "(a) more smiling and positive facial expression; (b) contact, including frequent and longer mutual gaze; (c) more gesturing; (d) forward body lean; (e) direct body orientation and more open body position;(f) more head nods; (g) closer distance or proximity; (h) frequent touch (used with caution); (I) moderate relaxation; (j) less random body movement; and (k) warmer vocal tones. Customer service training that incorporates content on non-verbal communication is critical to service interaction success.

Fifth, when designing a customer service training program it should also be kept in mind that frontline roles in the service sector are more stressful and mentally-taxing than many other lines of work (Furnham 2002; Netemeyer, Maxham, and Pullig, 2005). Due to this stress, customer service training should incorporate content that provides guidance on how to keep composure while transacting at the frontline. Such composure, also termed emotional regulation, is a trainable skill (Bar-On, 2007; Lennick, 2007). Teaching employees to be more emotionally intelligent, for example, bolsters emotional regulation (Grandey, 2000; Totterdell and Holman, 2003). In addition, frontline providers well-versed in the flows and paths of service in their respective areas of the servicescape and the proper pacing of these flows can also aid with composure and emotional regulation.

Sixth, customer service training should emphasize the notion that the happier the customer ➜ the less strain s/he places on the frontline worker. In the literature, this logic is known as the satisfaction mirror that contends that customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction have a positive, reciprocating relationship in service firms (Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger, 1997). Therefore, it should be emphasized to frontline employees that the better the service they provide ➜ the happier the customer ➜ the happier they will be in their roles. More importantly, these relationships loop to form a recursive cycle of top-rate service and satisfied constituents [employees and customers].

3. Insights into Motivating the Frontline Workforce

Even when a provider's ability is maximized through proper selection and training, the provider must remain motivated to perform at the highest possible level. There is no denying that role ambiguity, role conflict, and lack of psychological empowerment are key deflators of employee motivation in the hospitality industry. Thus, moving forward, further examination of the interplay between these three constructs may prove useful in enhancing our understanding of frontline interactions. Under what conditions, for example, does empowerment have positive or negative relationships with role ambiguity and role conflict? Evidently, empowerment can spawn a number of desirable outcomes at the frontline because it expedites problem resolution and facilitates employee ownership of tasks. Nevertheless, there is still sizable room for research to be conducted regarding empowerment's antecedents, consequences and correlates. For instance, does one type of managerial leadership style lend itself better to employee's acceptance of decisional authority than competing

leadership styles? Even the effects of a worker's cultural norms on his/her comfort with empowerment have yet to be fully examined.

Motivating frontline personnel also hinges on the ability to understand their cultural tendencies. Many hospitality and tourism markets throughout the globe employ ethnically diverse workforces. For example, in the United States, by far, the vast majority of frontline hospitality workers are ethnic minorities. Likewise, in another example, ethnic diversity abounds in the European workforce with the common migration of workers from Eastern to Western European countries. Therefore, a key to future success in competing on the tourism frontline is to know best how to manage and harness this ethnic diversity.

As a result of ethnic diversity, firms should adjust their training starting points. While requiring additional training for some ethnic groups as opposed to others would likely ethically and legally unwise, what firms could do is offer brief daily training sessions on a variety of topics. Frontline staff could be invited to join the session if they feel that they can benefit from it or if their performance evaluations indentify weaknesses in the given areas. Since ethnically diverse workers come from disparate backgrounds, such training opportunities would be useful in homogenizing the appropriate service standards.

Service managers should also understand that interest in various forms of motivation can vary by culture. Evidently, for both morale and legal purposes all of a firm's employees should be treated the same, but an understanding of the correlation between certain ethnicities and motivators can be useful in a firm's decision-making. For example, if a hospitality property's staff is primarily Hispanic, management should consider hiring enough workers to rotate Sunday's off since many Hispanic cultures places heavy value on not working on Sunday. Along the same lines, firms that best understand cultural differences in communication will have an advantage in coming years. For instance some cultures have low context, explicit verbal communication styles (e.g. the Swiss) and others have high context, implicit communication patterns (e.g. the Japanese). An understanding of both motivational and communication patterns are needed to effectively manage culturally diverse individuals.

Further, as an effort to bolster cohesiveness among frontline staff, service managers should use training opportunities to minimize ethnocentric attitudes. For a frontline provider to think that his/her own culture knows best how to do things may result in conflict and lack of teamwork. Similarly, a manager will unconsciously use his/her own cultural values and experiences as a basis for decisions – this is known as 'self-reference criterion.' Obviously, such a reliance on one's own cultural background in decision-making can be de-motivating to a multicultural work team; thus, education and cultural training should be employed to reduce the influence of self-reference criterion.

Lastly, in terms of motivation, due to the nature of the industry (e.g. non-traditional shift times; busy holiday periods), hospitality and tourism workers are often prone to face high levels of work-family conflict. If not properly managed, work family conflict can be a critical de-motivator for workers. To circumvent work-family conflict from de-motivating the frontline staff, the current research suggests a number of measures. First, employees' work-family conflict can be reduced if their families understand their roles within your organization (Magnini, 2009). For example, how often does a child really understand what his/her parent does for a living? The child will be more understanding of the separation periods if s/he understands how the parent contributes to the hotel team and to the guest experience. Therefore, families should be invited to events at the hotel so that they can gain a better understanding of the functions of the hotel and how their family member contributes to these functions. Next, in an effort to reduce work-family conflict, firms should consider extending: 1) instrumental support by adding family friendly initiatives such as stress-reduction training [not all initiatives cost money: e.g. invite a local yoga instructor to visit pro-bono]; 2) informational support by clearly communicating the family-friendly initiatives that are available; and 3) emotional support by recognizing and responding to symptoms of work-family conflict. Also, encouraging everyone in the organization to use one calendar to log both work and family commitments helps in the effort to reduce work-family conflict. Thus, work schedules should be provided in a format compatible with the common scheduling technologies.

4. Directions in Fortifying the Frontline with Customer Information

"Drowning" in data, but "thirsty" for knowledge is the sentiment felt by many in the hospitality and tourism sectors since the proliferation of database technologies. Thus, the use of data mining software to detect useful and non-obvious trends in data is critical to making use of the large stores of data (Sharma, Goyal, and Mittal, 2008). For instance, the 'association' task of data mining software can find connections between records in a database; the 'forecasting' task can predict future values of continuous data variables; and the 'deviation detection' task can indentify data anomalies. With the implementation of an effective data mining program, it is possible for frontline associates to be better prepared to accommodate customers upon their arrival. For example, data-mined information can help the frontline staff better predict which customer segments are most likely to request particular offerings.

Arming frontline providers with information in future years will also involve mining textual data. Text mining entails using software to extract patterns from natural language text. A key application of text mining technology for hospitality and tourism firms is in the analysis of textual comments provided on guest comment cards and surveys. Currently, such textual responses are likely read by a select group of individuals within a firm without the information being systematically analyzed or disseminated. Stated differently, most hospitality and tourism firms do not currently have procedures in place to assess if a written comment is an anomaly or if it has sufficient validity. A text mining program, however, can analyze the comments in order to detect patterns or trends in customer sentiment regarding various dimensions of a firm's offerings. Further, such text mining technology can not only be applied to text gathered on comment cards / surveys, but firms can also analyze user-generated text on Internet blogs.

Text mining consumer-generated blogs is particularly germane to the hospitality and tourism sectors because travel and tourism is one of the most popular topics across all topics of internet blogs (Zehrer, Crotts, and Magnini, 2011). While hospitality and tourism providers have struggles for decades to convince an adequate sampling of consumers to complete experience surveys, the opposite appears to be true for blogging: that is, large numbers of consumers regularly post rich narratives on Internet forums detailing their hospitality and tourism consumption experiences. Like with information resulting from data mining initiatives, the text-mined information can be used to ease strain at the frontline by providing a clearer picture of guests' wants and preferences.

The combined use of data mining and text mining technologies would likely provide insight into some interesting consumer behavior trends. In the USA for example, an increasing number of hotels are allowing guests to bring their pet dogs into the hotels to participate in the service experience (Wilson, 2012). Interestingly, however, when consumer-generated blogs are mined, the vast majority of comments regarding dogs in hotels are quite negative. Mining of data should also continue to reveal cross-cultural consumer behavior patterns. For instance, perceptions of justice and fairness following a service failure and recovery likely vary by culture (Patterson, Cowley, and Prasongsukarn, 2006). In summary, data and text mining activities can be used to provide frontline staff with valuable information about guest expectations.

Regarding expectations, certain expected service attributes do not spawn significant increases in satisfaction if present, but might spawn dissatisfaction if not available (Fuchs and Weiermair, 2004). Conversely, other unexpected service attributes may not trigger dissatisfaction if not present, but catapult satisfaction sentiment to higher levels if offered (Fuchs and Weiermair, 2004). Complexity can be interjected into these guest perceptions in many ways. For example, business travelers often return to a given destination (with different needs /wants) with their families on a leisure trip (Marin-Pantelescu, 2011). Hence, text and data mining programs can offer this consumer-centric knowledge to frontline providers. This information can be used to compare the potential returns of those being utilized or considered for adoption because the return on investment (ROI) in service investments need to be estimated in a similar fashion to ROI calculations on tangible (e.g. equipment) investments.

Frontline providers can also be armed with useful guest-preference information through the use of technology-driven guest-preference tracking. Ritz Carlton, for example, has frontline employees carry "preference pads" on which they manually record guest habits that they observe (Michelli, 2008).

These transcriptions are then given to line level managers who enter the information in to the company's guest information system (named Mystique). Information about a guest in Mystique may include the individual's preferred pillow type or even his/her preferred name (e.g. James vs. Jim). To ensure proper use, only authorized individuals can access the Mystique system. Nevertheless, in each of the hotel's departments, pre-shift meetings are held and the appropriate Mystique information about arriving guests is disseminated among the frontline staff. Such a system can yield highly personalized service. While this system implemented by Ritz-Carlton appears very straight-forward, systems such as this one are not commonplace in the industry.

5. Easing the Strain at the Frontline

A guest's satisfaction judgment is a result of a mental comparison between an actual experience and expectations. That is, if the actual experience exceeds expectations then the customer is left satisfied. Therefore, a competitive advantage will be achieved by the firm that knows best how to shape customer expectations in their external marketing efforts. Components of integrated marketing communications can include items such advertisements, website design and content, and public relations initiatives. If expectations are set too low then individuals might be unwilling to try a provider; conversely, communications that exaggerate offerings artificially inflate expectations. Thus, deriving the optimal balance takes the correct blend of customer-focused and competitor-focused research. Firms that can achieve this balance will alleviate strain on the frontline staff because guests will arrive with realistic expectations.

While the concept of blueprinting a servicescape has been found in the academic literature for many years, it has not been widely adopted in practice. A service blueprint should plot: 1) the areas where customers can flow; 2) the areas where customers cannot go, but can see; and 3) the back-of – the-house restricted to employees. The practice of service blueprinting can yield a number of benefits. First, a service blueprint can illustrate to a frontline associate how his/her role feeds into the overall service offering. Second, the practice of blueprinting can aid in identifying inefficiencies in service systems. Third, through blueprinting firms can brainstorm novel ways of serving customers as various contact points (Flieb and Kleinaltenkamp, 2004). While blueprinting is not a panacea for success in the service arena, the potential benefits exceed the costs. Since poor service and low morale at the frontline often stem from inefficient service systems, blueprinting can be very useful.

In addition to blueprinting, the qualitative research technique known as photo-elicitation is underutilized in the industry. The photo-elicitation research technique can be described as an in-depth interview that is guided by a photograph(s). For instance, if a service manager were to snap photos of frontline associates while working (with their permission) the service managers could then use the photos to conduct some insightful photo-elicitation sessions to determine what aspects of the frontline need to be improved. In the photo-elicitation session, the manager would sit down with the associate who appears in the photo and could ask him/her to view the photo and recollect what s/he was thinking at the time that the photo was taken. This is a useful research technique because the photo will likely elicit far more thoughts than an in-depth interview with no photo present (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Also, in comparison to traditional interviews, photo-elicitation sessions are not as heavily influenced by the researcher's questioning style (Loeffler, 2004). Another benefit inherent in the technique is that the service manager does not specify the salient attributes being studied; thus, the frontline provider may comment on job facets not previously considered by the manager. Lastly, vis-à-vis with other interviewing methods, in photo-elicitation the subjects are often more at ease because attention is focused upon the photo as opposed to being on the subjects. Thus, hospitality and tourism firms should consider applying the use of photo-elicitation to gain an enhanced understanding of what improvements can be made at customer-contact points. In fact, just as the sessions can be held with associates, they can also be held with customers – potentially providing some actionable information.

Properly managing atmospheric variables can also make life easier at the frontline Future research will continue to reveal the sizable influence that atmospheric cues play in employee and consumer psychology. The proper use of music, for example, can relax customers and employees, alike, creating better frames of mind in which to interact (Magnini and Parker, 2009). Olfactory cues

can yield desirable outcomes as well (Zemke and Shoemaker, 2007); thus, firms should consider the use of ambient scents in servicescapes. In fact, the same can be said for the sense of touch. Touching various textures can stimulate hedonic pleasure in individuals (Peck and Wiggins, 2004). Likewise, visual cues also play a large role in human psychology. A visually clean and uncluttered servicescape has mood enhancing effects for employees and guests. Thus, service providers should consider all human senses when designing their physical offerings. The testing of combinations and congruencies between various facets in the ambient environment may also hold potential in providing employee and customers with enhanced servicescapes in which to interact (Wirtz, Mattila, and Tan, 2007).

Technologies that can be used on the frontline are rapidly evolving. For example, point-of-sales computer systems are quickly becoming more efficient; GPS devices have many potential applications in tourism settings; and wireless Internet devices can be of service to both employees and customers in diverse locations. This rapid technological advancement puts service providers at risk of being left technologically behind competitors. Thus, hospitality and tourism providers of today (and in the future) must possess the expertise to sift through the ever increasing tsunami of emerging technological devices and to identify the ones that have the best return on investment in terms of frontline efficiencies leading to enhanced employee and customer satisfaction. Equally important, however, is that firms must be aware that technological adoptions can yield negative outcomes (e.g. reduced efficiency and satisfaction) without proper implementation, training, and organizational buy-in. Therefore, those firms that can make the best technologically-related decisions will have an advantage in frontline interactions.

Concluding Discussion

A service offering cannot be patented. Providers should, therefore, continually seek and implement new ways of beating their competitors at the customer frontline. For example, the first firm that offers face recognition and name recall training for its frontline employees will have a sizable advantage over the last firm that offers such training. The same can be said for any customer service innovation – the first firm that implements it spurs customer delight because the customer is pleasantly surprised, but the last firm that implements it is simply providing something that is commonly expected. Since services cannot be patented, the best service innovations typically eventually evolve from unique innovations to basic and expected offerings. For instance, as technological advances cause customer-firm co-production of the service experience to become more commonplace (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003), those firms that develop innovative techniques to serve both the customers who embrace the technology and those who resist the technology will have a competitive advantage over competitors who are slower to move into this area.

Therefore, hospitality and tourism providers to: 1) scan and stay on par with competitors' offerings; 2) derive and implement novel ideas that can delight customers at the frontline; 3) choose the new ideas that have the greatest return on investment; 4) select the service innovations that will likely have the greatest response lag among competitors; and 5) above all else, consistently provide the fundamentals at the frontline.

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