

## A DELPHI SURVEY ON HOTEL SERVICE QUALITY FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR APPLICATION

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### **Abstract**

*Hotels have become an important aspect of a destination. It is therefore necessary to carry out evaluation of various studies and underpinning concept of quality models used in creating and sustaining leading service culture in hotels. This paper seeks to evaluate some of these expert frameworks using literature survey as the main source of deriving various expert propositions. Findings from the literature survey were further evaluated by Delphi team discussions to help generate recommendations. The study established that managers of hotels need to recognize the scientific significance of service improvement in hotel operations as a requirement for building their own competitive advantage and that of the destination where they operate.*

**Key words:** *Destination competitiveness, Hotel operation, Service quality.*

**JEL classification:** *L83*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1. Background**

Hotels are now an important aspect of a destination. It is therefore necessary to carry out an evaluation of the various studies and understanding of the concept of quality in hotels and if these have been modeled to build a firm culture of quality in the management of hotel services. In Kenya, the Ministry of Planning and National Development's report that hotels and restaurants accounted for 34 percent or Kenya Shillings 13.483 billion in tourism earnings for 2004 (Republic of Kenya, 2005, p.194) attest to the significance of hotels and restaurants in Kenya's tourism. The accommodation and food component has always formed a large portion of the inclusive tour product and this aspect of the tour is arguably a key consideration in the customer's quality perception of the whole travel experience.

While hospitality supports travel and tourism in sustaining tourists' comfort during travel, it receives back benefits from its commercial approach to this relationship. This profit aspect indicates that hotels must then build a suitable quality framework that could help define success in operations and customer service (Baker et al, 2000, p.2). The main purpose of hotels is to provide accommodation, food and drink to travellers (Lillicrap and Cousins, 1990, p.4; George, 2001, p.18). However, this is usually extended to cover the aspect that people need a clean comfortable place to rest and sleep, to have quality food service, to socialize and meet others and to access stores and shops within a secure surrounding while on travel (Martin, 1998, p.4). This understanding of the product features and benefit structure of hotels should be able to draw out a quality expectation framework.

There are various types of establishments that are used to provide accommodation namely an inn, hotel, motel or motor inn, lodge, tourist home or guest house, bed and breakfast, hostel, condominium, hospital, resort, commercial hotel, conventional hotel or conference centre, casino hotel, health spa, and nursing home or hospice (Dittmer, 2002, p.213). All these provide a general understanding of the scope of hotel business operations or set ups. This spectrum of hotel business forms reveal a very wide range of economic coverage and which should then be a common area of scientific investigations even in Kenya.

#### **1.2. Statement of the problem**

Kenya is one of the leading tourist destinations in Africa. As a result of this, it has attracted a number of hotel organizations which have been motivated as service facilities to the tourists. While hotels have been viewed as an important aspect of a destination, the Kenyan hotel sector has not attracted significant scholarly investigations to help establish structured framework for its operation and industrial assessment.

Tourism which is a sister industry to hotel sector, has otherwise attracted a number of academic evaluations and numerous proposals that have since made it a more guided operation than hotels. Kenyan hotels instead have operated without much scholarly involvement. Most leading managers in the industry boast of good industry experience but with professional training of up to diploma level only. The managers are thus limited to the basic operational training that they were given in tertiary colleges as well as their experiences. This has not augured well for further advanced and structured research to help improve the way its operation should be managed.

It is against this background that this paper seeks to evaluate some of the expert frameworks for hotels that have been developed and documented in various countries or study environment. This survey should be able to provide insight to Kenyan scholars and motivate them to start viewing hotel business operations as a framework that can be ordered by science and improved by further scientific investigations.

### **1.3. Methodology**

This study used literature survey as the main source of deriving various expert frameworks that have been proposed for hotel operations. A series of articles in refereed journals were reviewed and their proposals analyzed for general application. Specific books were also reviewed to help establish hotel operational concepts. Findings from literature survey were further evaluated by a Delphi team discussion group to help generate recommendations.

## **2. LITERATURE ASSESSMENT OF HOTEL OPERATING MODELS**

### **2.1. The guest cycle and its linkage with the hotel product/service**

For a better understanding of the hotel product or service and their significance to the guest, it would be important to review the stages that guests go through in the process of consuming the hotel services to satisfy their needs. According to Baker, Bradley and Huyton (2000, p.44), a typical hotel stay for a guest can be divided into four distinct phases namely pre-arrival, arrival, occupancy, and departure. These authors refer to this as the guest cycle. The cycle is an explication of the framework that should give the real picture of what the hotel product/service should be, starting from the pre-arrival stage where the most important service activity is sales and reservation process. Upon confirmation of reservation, a guest arrives on the booked date and expects to be given a cordial reception and be checked into an appropriate guest room. At this stage, the guest registers, a room is assigned to him or her, a room key is issued and his baggage is handled by hotel staff as he is guided to the guest room.

The third stage in the cycle is occupancy, where the guest takes up a room and begins to appropriate desired products and services. These include the comfort of the room, guestroom supplies, telephone, entertainment, information, transportation, safe deposit, food and beverage, accounts and billing, etc. The last stage of this cycle is the point of departure where the guest's final billing and account settlement is done, the guest is checked out and outbound transportation as well as baggage handling is done. During all these, at the centre of all activities

that surround the guest's stay is the management of coordinating processes and general staff hospitality.

### **2.2. A hotel as product and a service**

A product has been defined by marketers as anything that a person receives in exchange, normally for money (Lamb et al, 2004, p.222). These authors explain that a product may be tangible or it may be intangible such as services received in exchange for a price. However, marketing has evolved its thinking to facilitate customisation of marketing approaches based on product type or form. In this respect, many marketing experts separate the intangible products from those that are tangible and refer to them as services. Davidoff (1994, p.257) defines a service as "anything of value other than physical goods which one person or organisation provides another person or organisation in exchange for something, usually money."

A more descriptive definition of a service is given by Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2006, p.4). They say that "services are deeds, processes and performance" and even add that there are industries or sectors whose market offering is basically deeds, processes and performances meant to satisfy needs of customers. Based on the overview of the hotel product/service and the guest cycle already (Baker et al, 2000, p.44), it can be seen that the hotel product offering is both composed of the tangibles and the intangibles. The reservation process, the arrival procedures, the guest stay and departure activities are largely seen as service in nature. The only parts that reflect tangibility is the physical hotel and room offered to guest, the restaurant food and beverage and the other components of hotel consumables that the customer can see, feel and touch.

Akan (1995, pp.39-44) gives three dimensions of the hotel product/services offering. He says that these include the hotel, the personnel, and the process. Hotel product/service dimensions are largely service in nature and the part referred to as the hotel dimension is the only tangible component. The other two dimensions of the personnel and the process are intangible. In this understanding, this study shall evaluate and discuss hotel product largely as a service offering but not ignoring the fact that it has a physical component such as the hotel design, room décor, ambience, food, beverage etc. As a service, hotels possess certain unique characteristics that may provide challenges to its managers. Some of the pertinent attributes of services include intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability as well as perishability (Zeithaml et al, 2006, pp.21-24).

### 2.3. Establishing hotel quality parameters

Researchers have defined quality in different ways, most of which are basically acceptable (Juwaheer, 2004, p.351). It was earlier defined in this study as “excellence, value, conformance to specification and meeting or exceeding customers’ expectation” (Lee et al, 2001, pp.691-704) and also as “conformance to requirement” or “fitness for purpose and fitness for use” (Crosby, 1991, pp.32-36; Juran, 1988, pp.8-13). Quality experts have thus developed several approaches for improving performance and these are embodied in a set of quality management practices known as total quality management, TQM (Lakhal, Pasin and Limam, 2006, p.625). TQM has been described as a collective and interlinked system of quality management practices that is associated with organisational performance and customer satisfaction (Tornow and Wiley, 1991, pp.105-115; Madu, Kuei and Lin, 1995, pp.621-635). It is also seen as a management technology on which to base organizational competitiveness and the search for excellence (Camison et al, 1996, p.79). However, these authors say that the tourism industry has aroused very little interest as a target of TQM.

The hotel product/service overview revealed that the hotel product/service offering is predominantly service in nature. It would thus be important to narrow the quality argument for this study down to the uniqueness of service quality as well as customer service. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985, pp.41-50) defined service quality as “the gap between the customer’s expectation of a service and the customers’ perception of the service received.” In another later study also by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988, pp.12-40), service quality was redefined as “a global judgment or attitude related to the overall excellence or superiority of the service.” The global judgment referred to in this definition is the perception of the customer versus his or her expectation (Nadiri and Hussain, 2005, p.472). Other definitions of service quality that address quality as process and output as well as technical and functional quality have also been considered (Law and Cheung, 1998, pp.402-406; Boshoff and Gray, 2004, p.27). However, for the purpose of this study, the definition provided by Parasuraman et al (1985, pp.41-50) and which is stated above, are most applicable. In the context of this study, service quality shall be understood as the level at which the hotel customers perceive hotel products and services as a match for their expectation.

Customer service is a critical aspect of what is meant by the term “service” (Zeithaml et al, 2006, p.5). These authors define customer service as “the service provided in support of the company’s core product.” Typically, customer service is never charged and has traditionally been seen as the augmented product offering to the customer. Customer service is a very important determinant of service quality and is

essential in building customer relationships (Zeithaml et al, 2006, pp.5). The concept of customer service has been a generic term used by the industry and academia to describe a set of activities in which a firm engages to win and keep customers (Kujala and Kujala, 1994, p.41). Indeed, it has been accepted that customer service is more than just this definition, but is a variable that expands the image and quality of a product thereby offering the possibility of giving the firm’s products market acceptance, growth and the possibility of market dominance (Wagner and LaGarce, 1981, pp.31-41).

This concept of customer service should not be confused with the services that a company offers for sale like in the example of hotel service. For the purpose of this study, it should be understood that hotels offer services for sales to its customers and also execute customer service to enhance service augmentation, quality as well as customer relationship. As Yasim and Zimmerer (1995, pp.27-32) stated, there is need to match customers’ requirements with the hotel service quality, as customer satisfaction today has a very close link with service quality (Danaher and Mattson, 1994, p.5). This can enable hotels to achieve superior service performance leading to satisfaction and loyalty. In this regard, this study shall address the concept of service both as the intangible product component that hotels sell as well as a customer service that is used to augment the hotel product and service offering.

### 2.4. SERVQUAL and the service quality focus

While looking at the impact of service quality improvement on satisfaction and business profit, researchers have noted that the elements of quality are manifestly impossible to measure when considering that ‘quality’ exist only in so far as it is defined and perceived by the consumer (Eccles and Durand, 1997, p.224). Due to this complexity, service quality has become a very significant area of management study and its apparent relationship with customer satisfaction, customer retention, positive word of mouth as well as cost management adds to this importance (Buttle, 1996, p.8). This author therefore says that one of the most popular models for the management of service quality today is the SERVQUAL model, which provides a technology for measuring and managing service quality. Buttle (1996, p.9) explains that SERVQUAL was founded on the view that customer’s assessment of service quality is paramount and that the assessment is conceptualised as the gap between what the customer expects by way of service quality, and their evaluation or perception of a particular performance after service experience.

SERVQUAL is a shortened form of ‘service quality’ and was originated by Parasuraman and his team (Parasuraman et al, 1985, pp.41-50). It is explained in this text that SERVQUAL is an

empirically derived model used by service organisations to improve their quality. This is done by understanding the expected needs of the customers and their perception of the service received, with the aim of narrowing the identified gaps, by improving service quality. SERVQUAL uses a five dimensional instrument to measure customers' expectations and perception along a variety of service attributes (Parasuraman, 2004, p.46). These dimensions include reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and the tangibles.

These dimensions and attributes of SERVQUAL are pointers to the model's suitability to address hotels' quality issues in a systematic manner. It can first measure the relative importance of the attributes, then measure expectation based on 'excellence' models and then finally measure perceptive performance as well as suggest mechanisms for improvement.

Since its introduction in 1988, SERVQUAL has been used extensively in hundreds of studies, even in hospitality and tourism (Pizam and Ellis, 1999, p.330). Despite the credit that the SERVQUAL model has received over the years, it has generated criticisms which are concerned with the application of the expectation and gap scoring, as well as the nature of its reliability, validity and generic factor structure (Buttle, 1996, pp.8-32; Carman, 1990, pp.33-55; Babakus and Boller, 1992, pp.253-268; Brown et al, 1993, pp.127-139). Indeed Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (1999, pp.205-222) express their criticism of this model and claim that the SERVQUAL model omits the assessment of critical tangible service components, giving hotel examples such as looking at food quality from the perspectives of the customers.

These criticisms led hospitality researchers to propose models with more specific quality scales for the lodging industry. One is referred to as LODGQUAL (Knutson et al, 1990, pp.277-284) designed for hotels and the other one is called DINESERV, which was proposed for the assessment of restaurant service quality (Stevens et al, 1995, p.560). However, the superiority of LODGQUAL or even DINESERV over SERVQUAL has been highly debated in hospitality cycles (Ekinci et al, 1998, pp.63-67). Some hospitality and tourism researchers prefer to use SERVQUAL and its application to evaluate service quality (Juwaheer and Ross, 2003, p.106). For this reason, the highly debatable LODGQUAL model shall be ignored and the highly

acclaimed SERVQUAL model shall be used in the judgment and assessment of service quality arguments, which may be raised by this study.

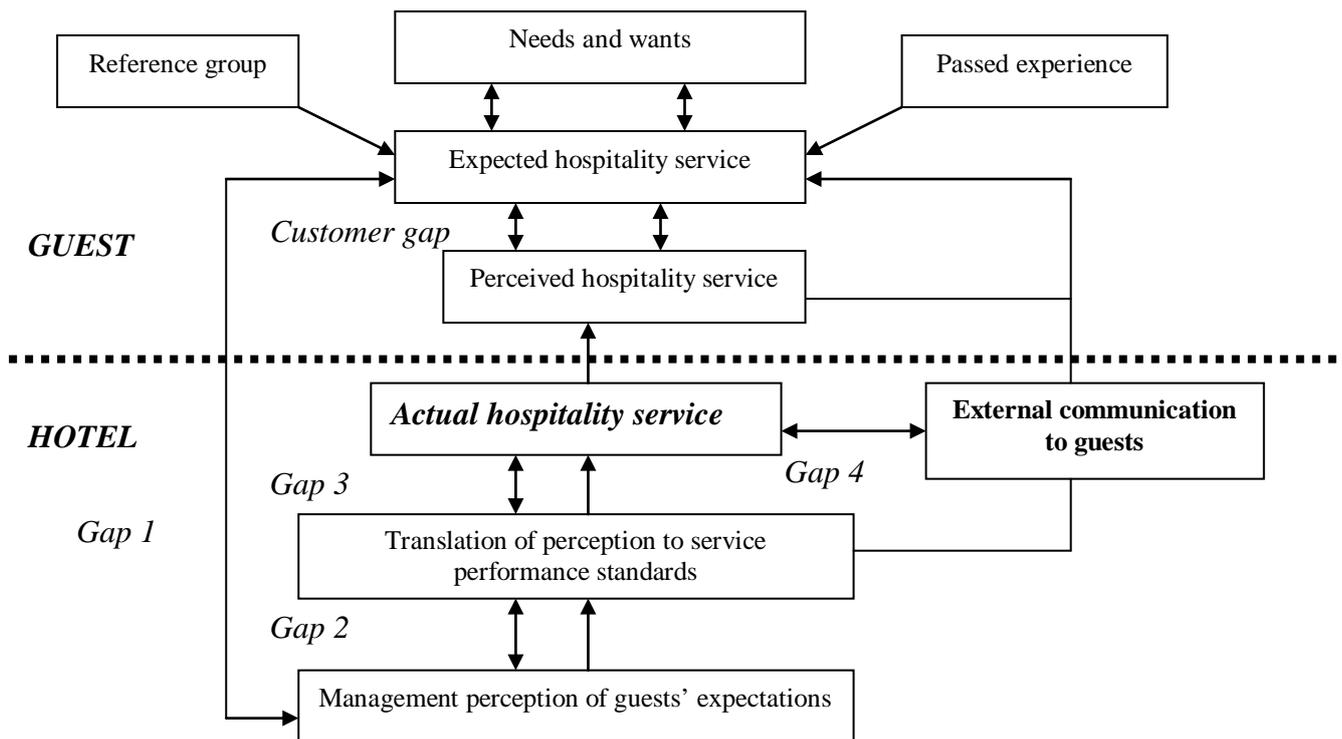
## **2.5. The application of the gaps model to assess hotel service quality**

According to Zeithaml et al (2006, p.33), products that predominantly consist of service must be viewed in a structured and integrated way using a framework referred to as the gaps model of service quality. In the gaps model, these authors give an outline of five gaps that must be addressed in order to ensure an impeccable service quality offering. The first gap is called the customer gap, which is the difference between the customer's expectation and perception of the service. The other four gaps are referred to as the provider gaps, all being the gaps that occur within the organisation providing the service (Zeithaml et al, 2006, pp.34-46). The gaps are listed below.

- Provider gap 1: Not knowing what the customer expects;
- Provider gap 2: Not selecting the right service design and standards;
- Provider gap 3: Not delivering to service designs and standards;
- Provider gap 4: Not matching performance to promises.

The gaps model has been used to assess service quality in various sectors. Pizam and Ellis (1999, p.331) redesigned it to reflect a specific focus on a hotel business as shown in Figure 1.

The gaps model provides an appropriate demonstration of how quality should be assessed and managed in hotels. Similar studies of service quality management using the gaps models and especially with reference to hotels have been carried out (Parasuraman, 2004, pp.45-52; Gabbie and O'Neill, 1997, pp.43-49; Tsang and Qu, 2000, pp.316-326). Gabbie and O'Neill (1997, pp.43-49) refer to the four company gaps as the positioning gap, the specification gap, the delivery gap, and the communication gap. Tsang and Qu (2000, pp.316-326) also refer to five gaps but label them differently as understanding gap, the service standard gap, the service performance gap, the communication gap and finally the service quality gap.



**Figure 1 - The gaps model for hospitality service quality**

Source: Adapted from Pizam and Ellis, 1999, p.331

**2.6. Critical hotel quality parameters**

Although satisfaction shall be measured on the anvil of customer perception and expectation, it is equally important to discuss some of the hotel quality parameters that have in the past played a critical role in influencing choice, satisfaction and loyalty. Juwaheer (2004, pp.355-337) studied nine service quality factors that are known to influence satisfaction in hotels. These include reliability, assurance, extra room amenities, staff communication and additional amenities sought, room attractiveness and décor. Other parameters that determine satisfaction according to the author include empathy, staff outlook and accuracy, food and service as well as hotel surroundings and the environment.

A study by Heung (2000, pp.308-315) on the satisfaction levels of mainland Chinese travellers with Hong Kong hotel services revealed the underlying hotel quality parameters that are significant to tourist travellers. These include service quality and value, food and beverage quality, quality of the augmented product and reliability. The quality of the core product, availability of supplementary services, value added services, as well as convenience are also significant parameters. The author advises that understanding customer's changing desires and expectations from the hotel attributes, may help in improving existing hotel services, developing new services as well as educating the customers (Heung, 2000, p.314).

Another fundamental quality aspect of hotels is security and safety of international guest. Groenenboom and Jones (2003, pp.14-19) say that there should be a fine balance between providing hospitality to guests and ensuring security as some guests consider certain security oriented service procedures as undermining to service quality. They add that security sensitive travellers such as citizens of the USA experience even greater sophistication in matters pertaining to security in their home hotels, and therefore expect to be provided with similar security and safety assurance while travelling (Groenenboom and Jones, 2003, p.19).

The other aspect that is worthy of mention at this stage is the application of technology and satisfaction in service business. Continuous shift in the expectation of modern and international hotel customers, as well as the changing technological applications have had a direct influence in hotel service design. In a study carried out by Lee, Baker and Kandampully (2003, pp.423-432), it is suggested that hotel operators must now make an attempt to adopt high technological service offerings in their hotels such as on-demand personal computers, network computers, TV-wakeup system, voice mail, multiple phone line, TV-internet, TV-check-out system, TV-meal ordering, internet/email and electronic room locking system.

Many studies have been carried out on hotel quality and most of them have been based on the critical assessment of customers' value of service attributes, their importance or significance, and their

expectation of the hotel service versus the emergent perception of the same service upon service experience (Min et al, 2002, pp.302-321; Tsang and Qu, 2000, pp.316-326; Juwaheer, 2004, pp.350-364; Pizam and Ellis, 1999, pp.326-339; Juwaheer and Ross, 2003, pp.105-115). These authors have used various attributes to examine hotel service quality with reference to what they perceive as the critical elements of customer satisfaction in these hotels. Having assessed the various attributes measured by these authors, specific and commonly used hotel product/service quality features have been identified

and shall form the bases for examining hotel service quality in this study.

### 3. A DELPHI CONCLUSION ON HOTEL QUALITY

The literature already surveyed was subjected to a Delphi discussion and 5 member Delphi team categorized hotel quality in four sets. These include the comprehensive product, front office and guest relations, food and beverage as well as guest rooms. A detailed definition of these quality parameters are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1 - Pertinent hotel service quality parameters used in various studies to measure customers' service quality expectations and perception**

<b>The comprehensive product</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hotel design and outlook</li> <li>• Location, accessibility and visibility</li> <li>• Parking space and lighting</li> <li>• Environment and landscaping</li> <li>• Health club and massage parlour</li> <li>• Variety of sports and recreation</li> <li>• In-house security and safety assurance</li> </ul>
<b>Front office and guest relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speedy check in and check out process</li> <li>• Innovation and technology</li> <li>• Communication and information</li> <li>• Staff telephone manners</li> <li>• Speed and responsiveness to requests</li> <li>• Complaints and service recovery</li> <li>• Consideration for repeat guests</li> <li>• Flexibility of policy</li> <li>• Gratis: local calls and airport shuttles</li> <li>• Staff courtesy and professionalism</li> <li>• Convenience and reliability of reservation</li> </ul>
<b>Food and beverage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local/cultural and international cuisine adventure</li> <li>• Quality: visual appeal, taste, flavour, colour and presentation</li> <li>• Health and dietary contribution of food</li> <li>• Restaurant ambience, décor and music</li> <li>• Neatness and presentation of service staff</li> <li>• Creativity in service techniques and styling</li> <li>• Restaurant and bar showmanship and merchandising</li> <li>• Billing and cashiering process</li> <li>• Technology and innovation</li> <li>• Service attention, courtesy and professionalism</li> </ul>
<b>Guest rooms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sufficiency of fixtures</li> <li>• General cleanliness and hygiene</li> <li>• Room ambience, quietness, décor and atmosphere</li> <li>• Level of comfort: beddings and seating</li> <li>• Maintenance of room installation</li> <li>• Entertainment (TV, video, internet)</li> <li>• Guest room supplies and provisions</li> <li>• Convenience of room service</li> <li>• Guarantee for privacy and room security</li> <li>• Room gratis and complimentary offers</li> <li>• Application of modern technology</li> <li>• Courtesy and professionalism of room stewards</li> </ul>

*Source: Adapted and modified by Delphi discussants*

Just as Kozak and Rimmington (1998, pp.184-188) say, hotels are an important element of travel experience and should be treated with a lot of economic concern. Tourism accommodation and the role of service quality at the destination have been cited as hotel aspects that can motivate visitors to a destination (Poon and Low (2005, p.222; Pender and Sharpley, 2005, p.20). In this regard it would be recommended as Nadiri and Hussain (2005, p.260) have asserted that managers of hotels need to recognise the importance of service improvement in establishing a destination's competitive advantage.

The structure of hotel services and business in general pose several challenges to quality management within the sector. This may have made it difficult for the sector to attain the desired product/service quality offering. On top of this pack is the fact that service quality is an intangible element that has proved difficult to control for good quality standardization as Min and Min (1997, p.582) also observed. A hotel business is thus bound to pose the following operational challenges that need to be addressed by managers:

- The intangibility of services makes it difficult to define and standardise the service quality, to design and test services effectively as well as to

communicate the relevant image of the service consistently;

- The intangibility also makes it difficult to set what can qualify as a fair competitive price for various service offerings;

- The perishability of the product makes it difficult for service marketers to manage the fluctuation in demand as could be done with other non-perishable goods;

- The heterogeneity and inseparability makes it difficult to control employees who are a very important part of the service component in service delivery;

- In combination here is the complexity in balancing standardisation with personalisation or customisation of services.

It is therefore apparent that successful implementation of a quality strategy in hotels requires that quality be institutionalised to become core to the organisation. The need to legitimise and institutionalise a national quality strategy is paramount. From this study, the role of government other key stakeholders in the management hotel enterprises has been found to be of profound importance.

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