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Research note

Quality clusters: Dimensions of email responses by luxury hotels

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Abstract

A growing body of research investigates hospitality Internet use, but usually focuses on websites rather than the most popular Internet application, email. This study uses cluster analysis and the SERVQUAL-P service quality (SQ) model to help address gaps in both academic and applied research of email use in the hospitality industry. The cluster analysis of email responses to a mystery guest survey by luxury hotels identified four hotel clusters. The clusters showed significant differences across all 24 email response variables and support four dimensions of email SQ corresponding to SERVQUAL-P's four dimensions.

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Keywords: Email responses; Internet; Luxury hotels; Cluster analysis; Customer service

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1. Introduction

While it may have been possible last century, it is nigh impossible for hospitality operators to ignore the Internet this century. Although operators seem to emphasize websites, they should also consider the most popular Internet application, email. Email provides a unique opportunity for personalized and intimate interactions with guests, thus enhancing customer relationships. In particular, when current or potential customers email the hotel, the hotel should respond properly. Just as hotels should respond professionally to telephone calls, surface mail and faxes, hotels should treat email as business communication.

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Yet a review of five hospitality email studies showed non-response rates from 18% to 55%, replies within a day from 26% to 81% and other shortcomings in replying professionally (Schegg et al., 2006). A review of dozens of website evaluation studies concludes that hospitality website evaluation is in its early stages (Morrison et al., 2004). Given the dearth of email studies, email evaluation is similarly nascent. Unlike previous studies that test hypotheses on the presence of quality email response features, this Research Note uses cluster analysis to examine underlying dimensions of hotel email responses by clustering hotels on their email response quality.

2. Literature review

For decades, researchers have acknowledged a positive relationship between service quality (SQ) and customer satisfaction, often using the SERVQUAL model of SQ (Coulthard, 2004). Over a dozen studies have adapted SERVQUAL to websites, usually developing about a half-dozen dimensions of electronic service but noting a limitation that people-delivered services dominate extant SQ literature (Parasuraman et al., 2005).

Yet consumers have non-routine encounters with websites, such as service recovery or special requests. This shortcoming led Parasuraman et al. (2005) to develop two scales of electronic service, a main scale E-S-Qual, and a second scale for service recovery, E-RecS-Qual. A small sample however, limited validation of E-RecS-Qual. Furthermore, this scale applied to service recovery rather than email customer service.

Despite the importance of customer service and prevalence of email, to the authors' knowledge no study has assessed the underlying dimensions of email customer service. The few studies of email customer service group the dimensions on an ad hoc basis (Schegg et al., 2006). This paper follows a suggestion in the seminal SERVQUAL paper, to group organizations into clusters of varying quality images. Examining the different clusters should reveal key attributes of quality service (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p. 35).

3. Methodology

This research uses and extends data from a study of email responses by 491 luxury chain hotels (Schegg et al., 2003). Using a mystery guest methodology, a fictitious customer emailed the hotels, requesting information about room availability for a honeymoon weekend, special events and nearby medical facilities. The study found that hotels in North America and hotels affiliated with smaller chains outperformed their South American and larger chain counterparts in a few email response features. A content analysis of email replies in that study (see Table 1 later for the 24 variables) yielded the data for this study. After eliminating hotels that did not respond or had missing email response variables, the data set contained 317 hotels.

Two complementary techniques, multivariate and artificial neural networks (ANN), clustered the hotels on 24 email response features. Comparing multivariate and ANN results reduces the inherent subjectivity of cluster analysis and profits from ANN's flexible data assumptions (Kim et al., 2003; Kohonen, 2001). This study used SPSS for the multivariate clustering and NeuroShell 2 for the Kohonen networks.

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