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IMPACT OF SERVICE RECOVERY PRACTICES ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN FIVE-STAR HOTELS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper is on the impact of service recovery practices on customer loyalty in five-star hotels in Nigeria. The paper examined the impact of fairness treatment dimension of service recovery practices on customer loyalty in five-star hotels in Nigeria. The method of study was desk research focused mainly on review of literature. The study drew on the postulations of equity theory to emphasize the role of service recovery practices in enhancing customer loyalty. The study established that effective and efficient service delivery practices anchored on sound grasp of customer needs, matched with outcome fairness, procedural fairness and interactional fairness will enhance customer loyalty. The implication of the finding is that five-star hotels in Nigeria must retrain their staff to adopt and operate with the fairness principles. The paper recommended that management of five-star hotels should develop their service recovery system which must incorporate failure detection, failure analysis and appropriate fairness responses.

Keywords: Impact, Service Recovery, Practices, Customer Loyalty, Five-Star, Hotels, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

A “Five Star Hotel” is the category of hotels ranked based on its level of service, amenities, cleanliness, location and price. This category of hotel places a heavy emphasis on customer service and adheres to a very high set of standards. Hotel services and marketing in Nigeria aims at customer satisfaction, which the industry places as its number one priority. The characteristics of Five-star hostel is that they are designed for personal comfort and styles with several facilities for customer satisfaction; often décor-styles, rooms and the suites are bright with creative artwork; features several different rooms for accommodation, guest rooms, deluxe and executive rooms; and prices varies depending on room sizes and facilities (Chuang & Hoffman, 1999).

Five star hotels provide various services for customers; they sell services to corporate and private persons; they provide booking services, food and beverages, business and leisure; arrange events or occasions such as banquet for corporate or private persons, political clubs, parties, educational, religious groups, government, labour unions and medical groups; provide, cars to pick their guests from the airport to hotel; and accept time of payment and methods of payment from the customers depending on policy.

In delivering services to customers in Five Star Hotels, service failures may occur from time to time. Service delivery failures may cause the defection of customers; hence, understanding the service recovery process is fundamental. Service recovery refers to actions taken by an organization in response to service failure. Service recovery is aimed at rectifying or correcting the errors, omissions, anomalies or mistakes in rendering service which has led to customer's displeasure or dissatisfaction. These actions are expected to reflect outcome fairness, procedural fairness and interactional fairness (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Although service failure has the potential to destroy customers' loyalty, the successful implementation of service recovery strategies may prevent the defection of customers who experience service delivery failure (Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013).

As a result of the nature of services (intangibility, inseparability, perishability and heterogeneity), service failure is certain to happen (Michael et al., 2009). Service recovery systems are the ultimate test of a company's customer orientation as they strive to create satisfactory resolutions to customer concerns (Casado et al., 2011). Conventionally, when a customer is dissatisfied, the company runs the risk of losing all future revenue streams that could be generated through repeat business by the customer. In addition, the company operates at a risk of losing possible revenue streams of customers, friends and relatives who may decide not to patronize the company as a result of negative word of mouth (Tronvoll, 2012). Consequently, effective service recovery not only enhances the likelihood of repurchase, but also that it limits the spread of potentially damaging negative word of mouth.

Effective service recovery increases re-purchase intentions reduces unfavorable word-of-mouth (Bolkan & Goodbry, 2011), a raise on positive word-of-mouth (Geibrich & Roschk, 2010) and may result to even massive customer satisfaction and loyalty than if service failure had not taken place at all (Michael & Menter, 2008; Magnini et al., 2007). Customer loyalty refers to customer behavior that indicates a desire to better ongoing relationship with an organization. It is the customer's willingness to purchase again from a company, having preference for that company's products or services.

Ineffective service recovery increases customers' dissatisfaction and harms a marketer's reputation (Lin et al., 2011). In a service recovery perspective, complaints expressed to the firm can also be seen as an opportunity to strengthen the bond between the customer and the firm (Ballantvne & Varey, 2006).

The management of service organizations' particularly in Five Star Hotels, are required to address the critical issue of service recovery. Effective management of service recovery will enhance organizational customer loyalty. Thus, recognition and adoption of effective service recovery practices by each Five Star Hotel in Nigeria is urgently required. In this study, the focus is made to examine how service recovery strategies of Five Star Hotels relate with customer loyalty. To this end, outcome, procedural and interactional fairness or justice are examined as dimensions of service recovery. Outcome fairness concerns the results that customers receive from their complaints. Procedural fairness pertains to the polices, rules, and timeliness of the complaint process; and interactional fairness focuses on the interpersonal treatment received during the complaint process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation for this study is birthed in equity theory. Equity theory proposes that customer's attitudes and behaviour are influenced by the appraisal of their contribution and the recompense they receive (Adams, 1965; Andreassen, (2000). The assumption of the theory is that individuals are interested in the ultimate levels of outcomes and fairness of outcomes for both parties participating in a business deal (Adams 1965) the proponent of the theory states that, the presence of variation will motivate the perceivers to achieve equity or to reduce inequality; and the strength of motivation to do so will vary directly with the magnitude of inequality experienced. According to Tronvoll (2012) customers' estimation of service recovery can be clarified through equity theory. Equity theory becomes useful in a situation where an exchange occurs and is therefore compatible in endeavors to expound how recovery is arrived at (Blodgett and Anderson, (2000). The perceived justice component of equity theory will direct customers to estimate if they have received a fair recovery strategy or not. Justice theory has been made manifest in many conflict resolution settings that has to do with buyer-seller, employee - management, marriage and legal disputes, and it has indicated vigorousness in construing responses to conflicts which involves complaint (Oh, 2006: Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013; Gruberfirst, 2014). This paper applied the equity theory as the main theoretical foundation guiding it. This is so because it is used to resolve conflicts amicably more so with consumers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

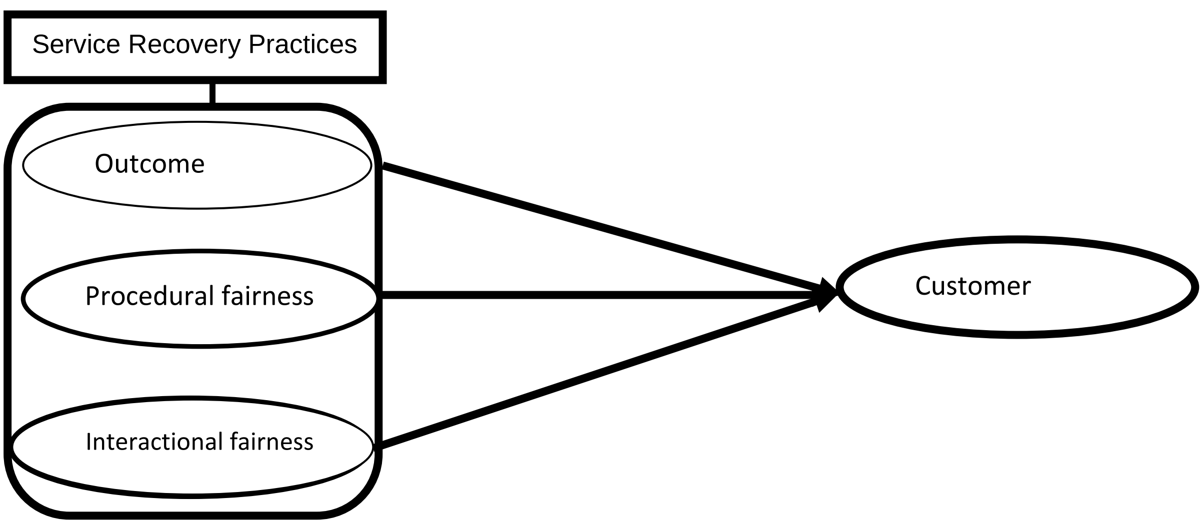

Figure 1: Conceptual and Operational Framework of Service Recovery Practices and Customer loyalty in Five Star Hotels in Nigeria. Source: Desk Research (2026).

Service Failure

Service failure emanates from a situation where services or products do not meet customers' expectations as a result of noticeable faults in associated service delivery chains (Tsai & Su, 2009). Service failures may vary in gravity from being very serious, such as a food poisoning incident to something trivial such as a short delay. Many sectors of the world's economy are under pressure to improve productivity resulting in aggravated competition; there is also pressure from investors for higher returns on investments. There is the pressure of hotel managers to increase productivity by reducing costs, and in most cases, they have to cut down on labour (Reid & Bokanic, 2011). This further worsens the problems of service failures.

Indeed, service fails faster than one contemplates, it is inevitable due to its unique characteristics, and service providers should recognize that the same service failure impact guests differently (McCollough, 2009). In a developing country like Nigeria, inadequate policies and lack of institutional linkages and capabilities, coupled with the general laxity in the systems, have resulted to hoteliers not paying attention to the issue of service failures. Service failures and complaints are unavoidable features in human endeavours (Mack et al., 2002).

Service Recovery

Service recovery refers to actions taken by an organization in response to a service failure. Failures occur for all kinds of reasons, the service may be unavailable when promised, it may be delivered late or too slowly; the outcome may be incorrect or poorly executed, or employees may be rude or uncaring. All these types of failures bring about negative feelings and responses from customers. Left unfixed, they can result in customers leaving, telling other customers about their negative experiences, and even challenging the organization through consumer rights organization or legal channels (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Service recovery is perceived as the process by which a firm tries to rectify a breach in service (Maxham, 2001). This process should be faced by firms as a strategic marketing variable that can culminate in an increase in customer satisfaction and retention. A good service recovery is crucial to enhance the relationship with dissatisfied customers (Maxham, 2001; Tax et al., 1998). It has become a key focus in marketing literature (Dematos et al., 2013), regarding a situation where customers, after a firm's recovery efforts will be as satisfied as, or even more satisfied than those who had not experienced any problem (Mccollough, 2009; Smith & Bolton, 2002).

There is evidence that a good recovery can turn angry, frustrated customers into loyal ones and many create more goodwill than if things had gone smoothly in the first place. Unfortunately, many firms do not employ effective recovery strategies. In a study carried out by Customer Care Alliance (2004) cited in Zeithaml et al. (2006), it was found that 50 percent of customers who experienced a serious problem received no response from the firm. There are tremendous downsides to having no service recovery strategies. Poor recovery following a bad service experience can lead customers who are dissatisfied to become "terrorists", actively pursuing opportunities to openly criticize the firm. When customers experience a service failure, they talk about it to others no matter what the outcome (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Customers' Recovery Expectations

When customers take the time and effort to complain due to service failure, they generally have high expectations. They expect the firm to be accountable. They expected the firm to be helpful quickly. They expect to be compensated for their grief and for the hassle of being inconvenienced. And they expect to be treated nicely in the process (Zeithaml et al., 2006).
Customers expect an apology when things go wrong and a company or firm that provides one demonstrates courtesy and respect; customers also want to know what the hotel is going to do to ensure that the problem does not recur (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Results from a study suggest that when a firm does nothing about a service failure, 86 percent of the consumers are dissatisfied with the "response"; however, if a firm provides an apology to the customer, the percentage of dissatisfied customers drops to 20 percent. Providing customers with an opportunity to vent their frustrations has a similar effect, because doing so reduces customer dissatisfaction with the response to about 33 percent (Gramier et al., 2004).
Customer discontent can be moderated if customers understand why the failure occurred and what specific actions were undertaken to recover. Customers clearly value such communication because these nonmonetary remedies were found to be positively related to satisfaction with complaint process, continued loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth communication (Gramier et al., 2004).

Customers also want justice and fairness in handling their complaints. Service recovery experts Steve Brown and Steve Tax have documented three specific types of justice or fairness that customers are looking for following their complaints: outcome fairness, procedural fairness and interactional fairness.

Dimensions of Fair Treatment to Customers

Based on justice theory, it is revealed that customer satisfaction with service provider's service recovery efforts is conditioned on three dimensions of fairness namely; outcome fairness, procedural fairness and interactional fairness.

Outcome Fairness

Customers expect outcomes or compensation that matches the level of their dissatisfaction. This compensation can take the form of actual monetary compensation, an apology, future free services, reduced charges, repairs, and/or replacements. Customers expect equity in the exchange-that is they want to feel that the company has "paid" for the mistakes in a manner at least equal to what the customer has suffered. The company's "punishment should fit the crime." Customers expect equality – that is, they want to be compensated no more or less than other customers who have experienced the same type of service failure. They also appreciate it when a company gives them choices in terms of compensation. For example, a hotel guest could be offered the choice of a refund or a free upgrade to a better room not being available on arrival.

Outcome fairness is especially important in setting in which customers have particularly negative emotional responses to the service failure, in such situation recovery effort should focus on improving the outcome from the customer's point of view.

Researchers in marketing have shown that service recovery practices that involve tangible compensation in the form of reimbursement, product service replacement, credit, apology, repair, refund, compensation positively affect customers' perception of outcome fairness (Tax et al., 1998; Smith et al., 1999).

Procedural Fairness

In addition to fair compensation, customers expect fairness in terms of policies, rules, and timeliness of the complaint process. They want easy access to the complaint process, and they want things handled quickly, preferably by the first person they contact. They appreciate companies that can be adaptable in their procedures so that the recovery effort can match their individual circumstances. In some cases, particularly in business-to-business services, companies actually ask the customer; what they can do to compensate them for their failure. Many times, what the customer asks for is actually less than the company might have expected.

Fair procedures are characterized by clarity, speed and absence of hassles. Unfair procedures are those that customers perceive as slow, prolonged, and inconvenient. Customers also feel it is unfair if they have to prove their case-when the assumption seems to be they are wrong or lying until they can prove otherwise.

Nakibin et al. (2011) stated that procedural fairness includes the methods a firm uses to handle problems arising from service delivery such as accessibility, timing/speed and process control to adapt to the consumer's recovery needs. Dean (2004) on the other hand, suggested that procedural justice also involves policies, procedures, and tools that companies use to support communication with customers and specifically, the time taken to process complaints and to arrive at a decision.

Procedural fairness or justice includes how decisions are made and conflicts resolved (Seiders & Berry, 1998). Various schools of thought have shown that when the complaint process is lengthy and when it requires customers to explain the service failure scenarios to different company representatives, the procedural fairness is perceived to be poor.

Interactional Fairness

Above and beyond their expectations of fair compensation and hassle-free quick procedures, customers expect to be treated politely, with care and honesty. This form of fairness can dominate the others if customers feel the company and its employees have uncaring attitudes and have done little to try to resolve the problem. These types of behavior on the part of employees may seem strange, why would they treat customers rudely or in an uncaring manner under these circumstances? Often, it is due to lack of training and empowerment is a frustrated front-line employee who has no authority to compensate the customer may easily respond in an aloof or uncaring manner, especially if the customer is angry and/or rude. According Tsai and Su (2009), there are four fundamental elements of interactional justice (fairness):

- Respect: individuals should be treated with respect;
- Truthfulness: the treatment should be free of deception;
- Propriety: supervisor's comments and questions should be appropriate;
- Justification: the treatment should be justifiable.

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty broadly refers to customer behaviour that indicates a desire to better ongoing relationship with a company (Palmatier et al., 2006). The customer's willingness to purchase again from the company, having a preference for the company or recommending the company to others could be indication to customers' desire to remain in a relationship with a company that demonstrates how much a customer is related to a company. Loyal customers are often worth the marketing effort, owing to their willingness to buy additional products and spread positive word of mouth as well as their reliability as a source of continuous revenue (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Customer loyalty is very difficult to be achieved. More and more unique ways are adopted to meet the ever-changing nature of the service industry. Additionally, time constraints are most often a barrier to customer satisfaction. Every organization in the market competes to develop advanced methods to keep on track. Technology, for example affects the service industry, since constantly meeting customer satisfaction over a period of time is the only way to achieve customer loyalty (Teich, 1997).

Service Recovery Practices and Customer Loyalty

Many companies do not pay adequate attention to service recovery effectively (Homburg & First, 2007; Stauss & Scheler, 2004). Nevertheless, few companies recognize the importance of service recovery through the estimate that fewer than 50 percent of complaints receive a reply from the company and those that do often view the organization's response as unsatisfactory. In essence, Tax et al. (1998) posited that enhanced service recovery system contributes to greater customer loyalty. In this sense, based on justice theory, it is revealed that customer satisfaction with a service provider's service recovery efforts is conditioned by three dimensions of fairness as follows: distributive justice, interactional justice and procedural justice. In particular, during service recovery process, customers assess the ultimate result which is received, interpersonal relations with employees throughout complaint incidence and the process employed to fix the problem (Tax et al., 1998). Moreover, tax et al. (1998) study found that previous positive experience with service provider diminishes impact of poor service recovery. Additionally, it is demonstrated that dissatisfaction with service recovery decreases level of commitment, whereas satisfaction with recovery procedure has an immediate positive impact on customer loyalty and trust and this is in parallel with the findings of Andreasse (2000).

A service recovery process emanates with a service failure established by a consumer which clearly put forward (a) interactions of the components and representatives of the company and (b) outcomes (Tax et al., 1998). Customer recovery satisfaction has been taken as a core agent that connects post purchase cognitive architecture, communication and a repurchase intention. Similarly, satisfaction when service recovery is properly executed will be seen as a core component moderating the relationship between assessment embarked upon as it concerns management and post complaint attitudes and behaviour. Ananyi et al. (2024) noted that in the literature on social justice, satisfaction is connected to assessments of fairness in various conflict circumstances.

Distributive fairness or justice is seen as “outcome” justice that lays emphasis on “equity” issues in consumer's mind. Davidow (2003) asserted that service recovery does not derive judgment from satisfaction with the organization's responses, but by post complaint customer behaviour that is noticeable in customer loyalty. Understanding the reasons customers repeatedly buy from a service firm represent an issue of significant magnitude because service research has in these contemporary times identified a number of potential drivers of customer loyalty.

Procedural fairness or justice is primarily concerned with the perceived fairness of the procedures involved in the recovery effort as noted by Gruberfirst (2014) or the means by which the ends were accomplished (Lin et al., 2011). In fact, service recovery literature has suggested that acting fast and offering an apology are often sufficient to make amends (Johnston and Michel, 2008). This suggests that in the case of a service failure, a service firm that takes the shortest possible time to respond and resolve customer complaint is favored for a quick recovery process without additional hassle to the customer; the firm is perceived to be fair and may turn the negative experience around. In both restaurant and hotel settings, customer satisfaction is enhanced with a quick recovery response to a service failure (Gelbrich & Rosclik, 2010).

The interactional fairness or justice strategy emanates from the recognition of propensity of customers to complain when they experience service failure. This stems from a perception of unfairness associated with inequity in the relationship between the customer and service provider. As such the customer expects the company to provide a solution to recover the situation or to compensate for the imbalance. However, to obtain this recompense the customer must invest in time and effort. Geibrich and Roschk (2010) opined that Heider's balance theory is well known that human beings are driven to seek and maintain psychological balance in their relationships. Correcting an imbalance creates a feeling of consistency with customer beliefs and expectations leading to satisfaction (Tan, 2014).

An apology for the failure is also considered important when executing a repeat purchase strategy. Informational justice centers on the perceived appropriateness and adequacy of the information used to explain the cause of the problem during repeat purchase (Gruberfirst, 2014).

Previous researches have established the role of complaint handling satisfaction as the antecedent of word-of-mouth and repurchase intents. The report remains that customers who were satisfied with the service recovery would be willing to repatronize the service provider. Nwibere and Olu-Daniels (2014) indicated that overall firm satisfaction has a strong influence on purchase intent in banking, home construction and service organizations. Interactional justice has direct impact on customer's commitment. In the context of service failure and recovery, justice perception signifies the manifestation of fairness during the recovery process subsequent to a disappointing initial service (Tan, 2014).

Service recovery is perceived as a process by which a firm tries to rectify a breach in the service (Maxham, 2001). This process should be faced by firms as a strategic marketing variable that can bring about an increase in customer satisfaction and retention (Hart et al., 1999). Empirical evidence depicts that recovery practices are the fundamental test for a firm's customer orientation as they try earnestly to bring into existence satisfactory resolutions to customer's concerns (Tronvoll, 2012; Guber, 2011; Casado et al., 2011). Effective service recovery practices do not only intensifies the tendency of repurchase but also restricts the wide diffusion of potentially damaging negative word of mouth. It is evident that hotel service providers need to be directed on how service failure and the process of recovering them through systematic evidence can be done because, whereas the Nigerian hotel industry has over the years developed strategies to manage/minimize the problems, deficiency of precise practice solution remain a major challenge.

Smith et al. (1999) observed that any service recovery response must fix the immediate problem and restore equity on the customer/firm relationship. After fixing the problem through service recovery, firms' tries to compensate customers in an attempt to minimize the damage caused (Hart et al., 1999). From a strategic view point, service recovery can distinguish two service perspectives (Brown et al., 1996), transaction-focused perspective of service recovery and relationship-focused perspective of service recovery. Transaction –focused view is based only on repair of some specific instances of a service failure on a short-term basis (Zeithaml & Berry, 1996), while a relationship-focused standpoint is also the goal of improving services delivery systems in order to avoid undesirable problems with the service and enhance long term relationship with loyal customers (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). These different perspectives indicate that service recovery attempts should play a role, not only in creating customers satisfaction but in improving services and delivery as well (Brown et al., 1996).

Service marketing literature has registered a significant increase in studies related to failure-recovery situations and customer loyalty situations (Wamuya & Gichira, 2015; Sousa & Voss, 2007). For instance, compensation in service recovery and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry in Kenya, revealed that compensation has a significant influence on customer loyalty. Sooares (2014) study on service recovery paradox noted that customer response to a service failure-recovery situation in a mobile telecommunication context confirm the existence of service recovery in this context and indicate critical variables influencing this phenomenon namely, the recovering timeliness. Sousa and Voss (2007) in an empirical investigation of the effects of service failures and recovery on customer loyalty in e-services, found that, service failures have a negative effect on customer loyalty intentions; failure resolution has a positive effect on customer loyalty intentions; satisfaction with the recovery has a positive effect on customer loyalty intentions; and outstanding recovery results in loyalty intentions which are more favourable than they would be, had no failure occurred.

Customer loyalty is considered to be an essential marketing variable for firms particularly in competitive markets (DeMatos et al, 2013). Effective service recovery can retain customers and increase post-recovery purchases. Indeed, it is recognized that a customer who is dissatisfied with a service provider because of service failure can become a loyal customer after an effective recovery (DeMatos et al., 2013). Service recovery must at least meet customers' service recovery expectations and to be more than what the firm should offer (DeMatos et al., 2013). Such phenomenon can enhance firms' long-term profitability and customer loyalty as well (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007).

ISSUES/GAPS AND OUTCOMES

Despite the fact that many organizations treasure the importance of managing complaints, satisfactory resolution of customers' dissatisfaction have not been undertaken. From meta-analysis perspective, service recovery satisfaction is determined by post-complaint customer behavior such as repurchase intentions, WOM activity and loyalty (Gruber, 2011). Continuous research is required in order to bring about a clear line between organization's response to a complaint and the impact of the response on customer loyalty.

Here in Nigeria, studies are not being continuously conducted by hostels regarding the critical issue of service recovery and customer patronage. Many hotels are ignorant and do not embark on the strategic planning of how to manage customer complaints service failure and recovery.

Service recovery is designed to overcome negative outcomes regarding the experience by providing tangible evidence that the service provider is fair. It is considered an important tool to overcome service failure, and can restore equity to exchange relationships or connote association with distributive fairness (Bhandari et al., 2007). Consumers expect compensations for the damages the failure may have caused them and/or the costs they incurred to obtain a solution and is considered the second crucial recovery action. Firms can assign tangible resources to correct problems and restore the interchange with the customer by returning the money, replacing the service or offering discounts on a future purchase (Akbar et al., 2010). Compensation may also include upgrading to a better hotel room, a free ticket, or a free meal (Boshoff, 1997).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effect of service recovery practices on customer loyalty in five-star hotels in Nigeria. Specifically, effort was made to demonstrate how customer loyalty in hotels can be enhanced through delivering the right kind of service recovery practices. By being grounded in existing gaps within literature, we regard this paper as the first systematic attempt to examine the stated relationships not only within the hotel industry but in the entire service recovery literature.

Recommendations

- Management of five-star hotels should develop its service recovery system around three basic constructs: failure detection, failure analysis and failure response.
- Management should tie the three dimensions of service recovery to competitive positioning and post- complaint behavior.
- Hotel service providers should train and retrain their staff to be proficient in showing courtesy, empathy, respect, politeness and concern in addressing customers or in explaining the simplicity of the company`s policies procedures and rules as they relate to customers issues.
- To remain strategic and competitive amidst informed customers, service representatives must anticipate possible errors and timely plan response actions. This can be achieved when service staff are well-trained and empowered to actively prevent failures and where they do occur to respond to them as correctly and as timely as possible.

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