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Hotel Fees, the Guest Experience, & Preferences

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Abstract

Hotels in various locations around the globe are studied, in order to determine the criteria most effective in determining profitability. Along with these criteria, and what travelers who stay there most frequently find most important, the goal is to find out what impact those values, and hotel attributes play the most pivotal role in their hotel choice. It is also a hope that research can shed light on how their hotel choice and preference is impacted by knowledge of extra fees they will incur, and how different amenities offered at hotels of different quality level will affect their comfort, and likelihood of repeat travel to those locations and hotels.

Introduction

When there is a higher demand for hotels, more rooms can be sold, and rates generally increase. The opposite can also be true. When it's not as busy, and demand is lower, rates come back down. This idea was presented in the periodical, Meetings & Conventions. The article said, "The U.S. lodging market enjoyed record levels of **demand** in the first half of 2012, with those high occupancy gains responsible for surging revenue" (Shapiro, M.J., 2012). Additionally, the author writes: "According to **hotel** data provider STR, though, we're now seeing a shift, in which hotelier revenue per available room increasingly is driven by **rate** growth as opposed to occupancy" (Shapiro, M.J., 2012). In other words, in the early 2010s, people were traveling a lot. There were expectations for hotels in large numbers. Due to the high demand, hotels in the industry responded by raising their rates. The increased rates, also were a result of a higher

amount of revenue to be charged for each room, as opposed to more rooms being booked. This seemed like an opportunity to introduce resort fees. This demand is not necessarily indicative of demand specifically by travelers, but perhaps as their *needs* change. As travelers get older (from early college age to young adult professional, and beyond), or they change from single, to dating, to married, to married with children, their needs and likes are adapting with them. According to the American Society of Transportation & Logistics' Transportation Journal, "Trends affecting the travel industry generally include changing customer demands (such as interest in exotic destinations, or travel by seniors), increased expectations in terms of value and convenience, and increasingly knowledgeable consumers who are themselves users of IT" (Lewis, I., & Semejin, J., * Talalayevsky, A., 1998, p.1). Furthermore, "The travel industry is being fundamentally altered by IT" (Lewis, et. al, 1998, p.1). As the travel industry has grown in response to the changing needs of its customers, new locales become available to travel to, and new ways to book become available (like on your tablet or smart watch). Since there are apps for booking through third parties or otherwise, in as much as a simple swipe, there is a significant impact on travel agents and agencies. In short, the progression of technology and means is infinitely, and perpetually changing the hospitality and travel agencies.

Hotel Resort Fees, Guest Perception, & the Hospitality Industry

These compounded the advertised nightly rate for a room prior to taxes and incidentals. While resort fees did bring in extra money for hotels, a problem was presented. The advertised rate for the room any traveler books does *not* include these resort fees. This makes guests upset. Again, hotel guests were unaware of resort fees prior to booking. Now, this begs the question of

the following hypothesis: does the awareness of these fees impact hotels and the hotel industry?

Also do they affect the guests' preferences and experiences at hotels they stay at?

Literature Review

Resort fees have been around over 20 years. Viewed as an opportunity to increase revenue, such fees were administered for specific hotel attributes. This practice was started by resorts. In the research presented by Toni Repetti, and Susan Roe in the *Journal of Hospitality Management & Marketing*, it's revealed that,

“Fees and surcharges for amenities began to appear in the lodging industry in 1997 and were first described as an ‘amenities tariff’ charged for services provided by resorts (Grimaldi, [15]). These daily charges are often referred to as resort fees and may include services such as Internet access, the use of fitness facilities, local calls, newspapers, or bottled water (“FTC urges hotels,” [13]).” (Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014)

At the end of the previous millennium, hotels instituted resort fees as a charge for a myriad of hotel and resort services like bottled waters in the room, internet access, parking, Et cetera.

What Hotels Charge

Different hotels meet different needs and specialize with different unique amenities that differentiate them from others, allowing them to surpass their competition and perhaps dominate their markets and market segments. A multitude of factors go into what someone will look for when booking a hotel. Is it family-friendly, does it allow pets, is it near an airport, does it offer smoking rooms, and others. Typically, a hotel makes money by charging a rate for each night

one stays there. On top of that, there is usually some taxes, whether they be sales or occupancy tax, or *both*. Then, according to the Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing:

“To the extent that food, beverage, or ancillary facilities and revenue generate additional room revenue (not merely additional total revenue), through the attraction and accommodation of new, additional segments of lodging demand, such as groups desiring these ancillary facilities, it supports this profitable business model.” (Matilla, A.S., & O’neill, J.W., 2007, p. 134)

Food and beverage would be another segment that has been introduced over time during the development of Hospitality. It is also an indicator of guest preferences; a determinant in a traveler’s hotel choice, and part of what helps hotels make money.

Influences on Guest Hotel Choice

Researchers in the Hospitality industry in Tehran took a closer look into what factors influenced travelers’ hotel choices. What they found was conclusive and based on concrete research. A research model was created by Irani Hospitality research professionals based on cost and comfort levels. When this model was implemented, it was discovered that these two variables had a big impact on how travelers chose which hotels to stay at on business and on leisure. Researchers hoped to reveal “...a set of practical indicators in order to help them design and implement realistic systems based on the deeply studied indicators and factors of hotel selection” (Babak, S., & Kaveh, S., & Raesi, V.I., & Safar, F., 2012). Furthermore,

“Such supportive systems can be directly presented to the tourists requesting a mechanism for selecting the most appropriate hotel but lacking enough information about

the important indicators and factors and also to the managers of hotels who are trying to make strategic decisions regarding the most optimized investments on the indicators of selecting a hotel.” (Babak, K., et. Al., 2012)

In other words, researchers sought to identify trends in hotel selection. To do this, their goal was to identify commonalities in choice indicated by trends, and common factors travelers looked at when picking a suitable choice for lodging accommodations. Throughout the research process, they discovered that a model upon which they could base their choice could be made available through whatever media they booked. But the researchers didn’t know what criteria travelers used that was most important to them. What they *did* know was that in order to be the most likely choice for a traveler to make, managers of those hotels wanted to maximize their hotels’ appeal by accentuating the most palatable features, while at the same time downplaying the areas where there were the most deficits in quality. Succeeding in this goal would allow them to deliver the most to their guests, while making their hotels the best they could be, and the most profitable. These seemed like a good *initial* attempt to create a research tool that would help determine how potential guests chose their lodging. However, it seems that not enough was known about their guests needs, allowing them to cater the instrument to be the most effective. This would hinder them from making the hotel the most appealing to make travelers want to book their stays there.

Legal Trouble Over Resort Fees: A Lack of Transparency

Regarding resort fees and similar items, an article in China’s Tourism Tribune discussed reforms and legislation involved in tourism law. This specifically looked at contracts through which tour packages assembled by tour companies for groups of tourists. Certain fees were deemed

necessary in this facet of the tourism industry. The law in question maintains that, fees should be paid by the party that breaks their contract. This is only the case as it is what the contract *stipulates*. (Xuekan, L., 2015)...Again, tourists should pay the necessary **fees** if they dissolve a contract. “These necessary **fees** consist of two parts: one refers to the payments that a travel agency has made, while the other relates to reasonable profit from the services the travel agency has provided”. Also, The law of course needs to be clearly understood and communicated, to ascertain what constitutes essential fees (Xuekan, L., 2015). In other words, the “necessary fee” is made to compensate the company for what it delivers on, and help it make money after expenditures are accounted for. The problem for the guests is not generally the resort fees themselves.

The Guest vs. Resort Fees

Resort fees create problems for the guest. According to Lee and Lee’s research, of the larger sample size, a small portion was made aware of the hotel resort fee. This was mainly because those guests educated themselves by going to the website of [either] the hotel, or the portfolio the hotel’s brand fell under (2017, p. 6). The reaction was to be expected, due to the lack of transparency. The problem exists because the hotel doesn’t disclose the resort fee when quoting a rate. Essentially, “After guests learned about the resort fees, at least 20 guests commented on the procedural problem” (Lee, H., & Lee, J., 2017, p. 6). Additionally, “Some guests felt that since a resort fee is mandatory, the fee should have been included in a room rate even if it means a higher room rate and suggested hotels to get rid of the resort fees”(Lee, H., & Lee, J., 2017, p. 6).). Additionally, resort fees are typically “... buried in the small print on the registration card at

check in. Guests felt like they were ripped off, especially when they were not properly informed about the fee” (Lee, H., & Lee, J., 2017, p. 6). In other words, bundling fees into the rate is encouraged, despite the fact that rate quoted would increase. That was preferable to a lower rate first and finding out additional fees would be charged. Ideally, guests would prefer hotels not charge resort fees at all, or at least advertise them explicitly when discussing the hotel amenities, and then quoting the rate.

Studies

Shapiro looked at statistics on foreign and domestic travel, obtained by travel agencies (AmEx Business Travel, Carson Wagonlit, Egencia, Ovation Travel Group). The data was then summarized by two industry data providers (STR and PKF). The way the data was organized, allowed both providers to project room rate increases from 2012 to 2013. “Previous studies suggest heads of organizations should be particularly careful when determining whether to assess fees or change prices. Manning ([23]) contended in increasingly competitive business environments, companies need to have a strong understanding of how responsive customers are to changes in price” (Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014). It was understood that certain criteria must be established prior to introducing new fees. “Fee assessment should also be assessed on the value the customer places on the amenities and services included. Campbell ([5]) suggested companies could minimize consumer discontent with fees by better understanding how consumers perceive the fees” (Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014). Determining rate increases based on the needs of the guest would involve looking at psychographics (what they prioritize most, what their values are, and what transparency they prefer when rates are quoted). Roe and Repetti revealed that resort fees present many obstacles. The reasons these fees are introduced must be

explicitly clear. They would have an advantage if they knew what guests thought when they were told certain fees are charged. Failure to do so would upset the guest. Lewis, Semejin, and Talalayevsky examined the media available; both current and its predecessors, to make reservations. The previous media are being phased out due to the convenience and easy access of the new media that has become so widespread and popular among many travelers. With less paper and less cost, the convenience coupled with speed and ease overshadows the plight it creates for the travel agents. O'Neill and Matilla, in the pursuit of profitability statistics did an analysis on several studies. This allowed them to see what attributes they had in common. They then drew conclusions based on those trends, about what makes a hotel most profitable (O'Neill, J.W., Matilla, A.S., 2007). Looking at occupancy, REVPAR, and ADR, O'Neill and Matilla learned that "Our findings also clearly demonstrate the impact of branding on the bottom-line. In our sub-sample, hotel brand was strongly linked to NOI percentage, i.e., all brands are not equally profitable" (O'Neill, J.W., Matilla, A.S., 2007). Essentially, even though the same formula considered the same variables among multiple hotels and brands, they are not all capable of making a lot of money. Authors Babak, Khavi, Raesi and Safar were curious why travelers picked certain hotels over others. They sought to find what criteria those subjects looked at when selecting a hotel. There were two studies presented in their article that looked at ranking of importance of hotel attributes like convenience, et cetera. The results came from an intersectional population of travelers. The author looked at Chinese tourism law in order to ascertain what part of the law covers tour package contracts. A package for a tour includes airfare, a hotel room at a bare minimum. Lee and Lee looked at resort fees, as well as what they covered. They also delved into the reactions of guests upon learning of such fees at check in, as they were not apprised of them upon booking their rooms.

Methodology

Shapiro spoke to representatives at American Express Business Travel, Carson Wagonlit, Egencia, and Ovation Travel. Upon receiving their statistics on travel frequency from various parts of the globe, they synthesized projected rate increases for midscale and upper midscale hotels in the first half of the year, and then the remainder. Based on the 2012 average corporate travel rate, and average hotel rate for the continental United States as well, 2013 hotel rate increases projected [together] by Shapiro and the travel agencies, were presented by STR and PKF, both industry data providers. Roe and Repetti clearly defined what resort fees would entail, allowing them to appeal to the guest and maximize profitability for the hotels charging them. Any data found was due to a *quantitative survey* designed by the researchers themselves that were distributed to various customers. First, “A pilot study was conducted to test the design of the survey. As a result of the pilot study, one question was revised to include additional amenities and one demographic question was modified to include country of residence” (Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014). To see if a survey would work, a random set of questions was put together and disseminated to a group of people that would yield results indicative of the survey’s intended purpose. “Three Las Vegas Strip locations were selected because 85% of overnight visitors to Las Vegas stay on the Strip and downtown (GLS Research, [14])” (Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014). It would allow the researchers to know where to give out the survey to get most helpful data. Such locations were chosen as most of the travelers frequented those parts of the country. Additionally, “After the pilot test was concluded, it was determined that survey data collection would occur at a location with high visitor traffic yet away from any specific hotel to increase representation from visitors of several lodging properties” (Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014). Lewis, Semejin and Talalayevsky discovered that technology has its place in the

hospitality industry as it facilitates convenience in making reservations. It also reduces the resources used. With the advancement of technology, more business transactions could be completed online. The products available are compatible with the media used to book reservations. Costs are down, but travel agents are worried about becoming obsolete. There is greater difficulty with growing technology to reach their customers directly (Lewis, I., & Semejin, J., Talalayevsky, A., 1998). They sampled some of larger number hotels and looked at those occupancy, REVPAR, and ADR in each one over a 12-month period. The data was provided by Smith Travel Researchers (O'neill, J.W., Matilla, A.S., 2007). For the Chinese tourism industry, the author looked at what makes up a tour group contract, and what kind of obligations are involved for both parties who sign it. The authors who did the comprehensive analysis of hotel attributes and selection surveyed people of various demographics and asked which attributes of hotels they found most important that influenced their decisions. This was done through qualitative research methods.

Additionally, a case study was created and executed on Orlando, as it is home to Universal and Disney, two resort locations where "Lee and Lee surmised the overall and individual guest perceptions on resort fees from a secondary source, TripAdvisor. In addition, they looked at reviews affiliated with third party booking sites. Ranking order of hotels on these sites, including Medallia; the way hotel surveys are distributed, and results are tabulated, was considered" (Lee, H., & Lee, J., 2017, p. 6). Given the large volume of business, this was a good location to have the case study.

Findings

According to Shapiro: AmEx Global Business Travel projected a reliable increase in upper scale hotels, and consistent increase across the board for hotels in Europe, despite of economic constraints. “According to Ovation Travel Group, proposed 2013 **hotel rate** increases from **hotels** in major global metropolitan areas average 6 percent, based on pre-negotiation proposals” (Shapiro, M.J., 2012). This would mean the highest increases would be in areas such as San Francisco, followed by Boston and Palo Alto. There would be slightly smaller increases in Manhattan, LA, and Atlanta. But San Diego would have the smallest increase. For Carson Wagonlit’s numbers: “**Hotel rate** increases should be highest in Brazil, where CWT expects spikes of 13.3 to 14.8 percent in the first half of the year and 13.1 to 14.5 percent in the second half” . Latin America and Middle Eastern numbers would increase exponentially. CWT's forecast also calls for significant **rate** growth in Chile, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico. Brazil's **rate** growth, in particular, will be driven by surging **demand** that is expected to outpace supply growth for the next few years.” Larger rate increases are projected for these countries in particular. Also, “According to CWT's Meetings & Events supplement to its 2013 Travel Pricing Forecast, European meeting costs will remain flat or rise by 2 percent or less next year” (Shapiro, M.J., 2012). In other words, European travel costs will grow ever so slightly. For the continental United States however, rate increases will be somewhere in the middle of those projected for Europe, and Latin America and the Middle East. “There is a trend towards a dichotomy in the structure of the travel agent industry. Large agencies are emerging that are focused on major corporate clients and that have the market power to negotiate compensation structures with airlines. Travel agencies which leverage IT can also provide services such as travel cost management for corporations, and ensure compliance with corporate policies for employee travel. For example, Rosenbluth Travel, a large Philadelphia-based agency, provides Wal-Mart

employees with desktop access through the Wal-Mart Local Area Network (LAN) to air, hotel, and rental car reservations” (Lewis, I., & Semejin, J., Talalayevsky, A., 1998). Bigger travel firms are able to partner with larger corporations. This allows them to forge partnerships with airlines and increase their repertoire to include lodging *and* airfare reservations. The convenience that IT facilitates, helps the travel agencies bring the customers directly to the airlines by getting them the lowest flight fares. As a result, the airlines can count on their business. Additionally, they are consistently paid and have a bolstered reputation. O’neill and Mattila concluded that different brands influence the bottom line in not so similar fashions. While there is a correlation between branding strategies and a company’s bottom line, not all branding strategies make a hotel profitable (O’neill, J.W., & Matilla, A.S., 2007, p. 134). It was determined that “tourists should pay the necessary fees if they dissolve a contract. Paying these fees arises out of the contractual obligation rather than from a compensation liability. These necessary fees consist of two parts: one refers to the payments that a travel agency has made, while the other relates to reasonable profit from the services the travel agency has provided”. Not being clear on what the law means might make it difficult to see what constitutes “essential fee” as delineated in the contract. Lee and Lee found that hotels “...with resort fees (n = 47), the share ranged from 1 to 19% with an average of 5 percent. For hotels without resort fees (n = 53), the share dropped, ranging from 0 to 10% with an average share of 1 percent (see Table 1)” (Lee, H., & Lee, J., 2017, pp. 3-4). In Xuekan’s article, it was found that the law needs to be easy for everyone to understand. Otherwise, it’s not clear what makes a fee essential.

Limitations

The problem with Shapiro's research is, he took specific regions across the globe and then looked at a few popular cities in those areas. He looked at travel numbers according to 4 different travel agencies. At the end, he only projected rate increases for one year. It could have been more effective if he didn't look at just the mid-range and upper-range hotel categories. If he picked more locations, foreign and domestic, and specific hotel chains that were more popular and reflective of what those countries' travelers picked, the data could have been catered to those particular regions. It would be a little more authentic and perhaps even more precise and accurate. As far as looking for consumer perceptions of resort fees, a sample size of 318 is not too small at first. "Of the 318 individuals approached to participate, 210 surveys were completed, and 108 individuals declined" (Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014). However, when determining what size sample to distribute your surveys, it should be considered that some might decline. Of the completed surveys, 49 were identified as incomplete or unusable, resulting in 161 valid surveys. The overall response rate was 59.9% ($N = 161$) with a margin of error of plus or minus 7.8%" (Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014). Some surveys could be tainted or have questions that were not answered in complete honesty. Having 32 states and 14 countries being looked at for survey results is a good start. To repeat the study, the search parameters should be expanded. It seems that there were enough demographics the current data came from. The answer choices for each question had various distributions. Lewis, Semejin, and Talalayevsky did not have a questionnaire or any type survey they distributed in order to obtain their findings. Instead, they looked at the periodic changes in technology available to book reservations, as well as the products available for the online travel and tourism market. The problem with not having a survey is that there is more of a general conclusion drawn. If there were to be a survey with a number of questions; each with several answers, and distributed to multiple travel agents, online

travel booking employees and travelers across different demographics, the data could indicate more clearly the exact effect the advancement of technology and increasing in media available to book reservations has had on travel agents. There is an accurate picture of how airlines control costs, and how easy access makes it more appealing for travelers to book rooms online. It also paints a clear picture of the barriers this poses for travel agents and agencies. Reviews on TripAdvisor may not be entirely consistent [if written after]; with precisely what the guests thought that inspired the review. It might be more conducive if guests were surveyed sooner after checkout, or if they were asked directly by the person checking them out how they enjoyed their stay or not. Roe and Repetti found that

“Because of the limited research in the area of customer perceptions of hotel resort fees, this exploratory study intends to gather fundamental consumer awareness of these mandatory charges. The following research questions were developed to provide descriptive information for hotel operators:

- Are hotel guests aware of resort fees charged at the property they are staying?
- Do resort fees impact travelers' hotel selection decisions?
- When charged a resort fee, which amenities do consumers value being included?”.

(Repetti, T., & Roe, S.J., 2014)

While it's important to gauge guest's knowledge of resort fees by seeing if they were made aware of them prior to check in or when a rate was quoted, there is not enough information to have an ample number of questions used to find out these answers. So, not enough data can be gathered to help hotels overcome any obstacle that resort fees present. In O'neill and Matilla's research, it said, “When we removed the effects of branding, hotels with higher ADRs had lower bottom-line percentages” (O'neill, J.W., & Matilla, A.S., 2007, p. 134). Also”...hotels with

higher revenue, and particularly room revenue, have a higher NOI in dollars, they do not necessarily have a more profitable business model in terms of NOI percentage” (O’neill, J.W., & Matilla, A.S., 2007, p. 134). The authors indicated that with or without parameters, the numbers change, as do the conclusions. The parameters have no bearing on the consistency of the results whether the methods are repeated or not. A sample size Babak, Khavi, and Raesi used (1548 hotels in 18 brands) seems to be a large enough pool that would yield a wealth of data conducive to help the industry obtain some kind of benefit. It didn’t seem that the research on tourism travel Xuekan did had enough of a focus on hotels and resort fees specifically to help hotel workers better communicate to guests what fees they should expect to pay after they check into the hotel.

Implications

Based on the trend, and popularity of certain locales over others, rates could potentially rise steadily, exponentially, or not at all. It seems that as more media enter the market that allow people to book their travel more convenient, it will be more difficult for travel agents and agencies to collect commission. The data compiled from O’neill and Matilla’s research isn’t significant enough, as indicated later in the article, for them to make recommendations on how the hotel companies present themselves, or maintain their images” (O’neill, J.W., & Matilla, A.S., 2007, p. 134). Even though the authors don’t have enough data to make those recommendations, it’s worth it for them to conduct more research in the hopes that what they find *could* facilitate making recommendations for hoteliers. The research found in Babak, Khavi and Raesi’s article says a lot about the hotel industry in Tehran. It also shows a lot about what hotel characteristics are deemed most important among travelers. However, not much is mentioned as an attribute regarding resort fees, and or how they impact travelers’ hotel choices. More in-depth research is

required to yield more appropriate data. The research would have to be more focused on the hotel portion of the tour packages. This would involve thinking of questions that would find out how, when, or what guests heard about hotel *resort* fees. It could also gauge their overall feelings, knowing those fees would be charged.

Conclusion

The research found revealed a lot of data regarding what destinations are most popular to visit around the globe. Statistics presented, showed that there are various factors that must be considered when picking a hotel, creating and instituting extra fees, determining what makes a hotel profitable, and trying to see how a guest feels about extra fees. The data could allow someone to imagine how knowing about these fees, and what the guest finds important influences their choice of hotel. However, due to the difficulty of narrowing a search to one or two central tangents, it seems that there is not enough research present to answer the hypothesis. Further research is recommended at this time.

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