

# An assessment of customer satisfaction and service quality: the case of hotels in East London, South Africa

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine hotel guest comment cards (GCCs) and customer satisfaction management schemes in hotels of East London. The findings indicate that hotel employees do not need additional training in order to motivate their guests to complete GCCs. Therefore, GCCs provide information relevant to the individual hotel in the chain and they are used as a tool for benchmarking and maintaining consistency across hotels. This study can be of great use to hotel managers in providing a direction on how to conduct and modify the existing practice of measuring customer satisfaction in hotels. Findings further indicate that in most hotels GCCs can be found in a folder on a room table and are not distributed randomly. Guests can complete GCCs during their stay at the hotel. It can be concluded that the efficiency of customer satisfaction measurement with GCCs depends on the measurement methodology. It is clear that guests should be additionally motivated and that GCCs should be designed following a scientific approach with a greater impact.

**Keywords:** guest comment cards, hotel, customer satisfaction, measurement, motivate



Source:<http://cdn.moneycrashers.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/customer-satisfaction4-edit.jpg>

## **Introduction**

During the past few decades, customer satisfaction and service quality have become a major area of attention to practitioners and academic researchers. Both concepts have a strong impact on business performance and customer behaviour. Service quality leads to higher profitability (Gundersen, Heide and Olsson, 1996) and customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1997). Furthermore, a number of empirical studies indicate a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000; Dimitriades, 2006; Chi and Qu, 2008; Faullant, Matzler and Füller, 2008), as well as between customer satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth communication (Söderlund, 1998). Therefore, one of the key strategies for customer-focused firms is to measure and monitor service quality and customer satisfaction.

Several tools are available for measuring customer satisfaction. In hotels, one of the most popular is a guest comment card (GCC). GCCs have the advantages of small size, easy to distribute and simplicity. When analysing data gathered in such a way, managers can get information about the attributes that have an impact on guests' satisfaction.

This paper is divided into various sections. The first section provides a brief review of the main concepts of interest. This is followed by the research methodology used in this study and the presentation and discussion of the results. Finally, the article concludes with the main research findings.

## **Literature Review and Conceptual Analysis**

### **Customer satisfaction**

Customer satisfaction has been a popular topic in marketing practice and academic research since Cardozo's (1965) initial study of customer effort, expectations and

satisfaction. Despite many attempts to measure and explain customer satisfaction, there still does not appear to be a consensus about its definition (Giese and Cote, 2000). Customer satisfaction is typically defined as a post-consumption evaluative judgement concerning a specific product or service (Gundersen et al., 1996). It is the result of an evaluative process that contrasts pre-purchase expectations with perceptions of performance during and after the consumption experience (Oliver, 1980).

The most widely accepted conceptualization of the customer satisfaction concept is the expectancy disconfirmation theory (Barsky, 1992; Oh and Parks, 1997; McQuitty, Finn and Wiley, 2000). The theory was developed by Oliver (1980), who proposed that satisfaction level is a result of the difference between expected and perceived performance. Satisfaction (positive disconfirmation) occurs when a product or service is better than expected. On the other hand, a performance worse than expected leads to dissatisfaction (negative disconfirmation).

Studies show that customer satisfaction may have a direct and indirect impact on business results. Anderson, Fornell and Lehmann (1994), Yeung, Ging and Ennew (2002), and Luo and Homburg (2007) concluded that customer satisfaction positively affects business profitability. Various studies have investigated the relationship of customer satisfaction and customer behaviour patterns (Söderlund, 1998; Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000; Dimitriades, 2006; Olorunniwo, Hsu and Udo, 2006; Chi and Qu, 2008; Faullant et al., 2008). According to these findings, customer satisfaction increases customer loyalty, influences repurchase intentions and leads to positive word-of-mouth communication.

Given the vital role of customer satisfaction, it is not surprising that a variety of research has been devoted to investigating the determinants of satisfaction (Churchill and Surprenant,

1982; Oliver, 1980; Barsky, 1995; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). Satisfaction can be determined by subjective (e. g. customer needs, emotions) and objective factors (e. g. product and service features). Applying to the hospitality industry, there have been numerous studies that examine attributes that travellers may find important regarding customer satisfaction. Atkinson (1988) found out that cleanliness, security, value for money and courtesy of staff determine customer satisfaction. Knutson (1988) revealed that room cleanliness and comfort, convenience of location, prompt service, safety and security, and friendliness of employees are important. Barsky and Labagh (1992) stated that employee attitude, location and rooms are likely to influence travellers' satisfaction. A study conducted by Akan (1995) showed that the main determinants of hotel guest satisfaction are the behaviour of employees, cleanliness and timeliness. Choi and Chu (2001) concluded that staff quality, room qualities and value are the top three hotel factors that determine travellers' satisfaction.

Providing the services customers prefer is a starting point for providing customer satisfaction. A relative easy way to determine what services customers prefer is simply to ask them. According to Gilbert and Horsnell (1998) and Su (2004) guest comment cards (GCCs) are most commonly used for determining hotel guest satisfaction. GCCs are usually distributed in hotel rooms, at the reception desk or in some other visible place. However, studies reveal that numerous hotel chains use guest satisfaction evaluating methods based on inadequate practices to make important and complex managerial decisions (Barsky, 1992; Barsky and Huxley, 1992; Jones and Ioannou, 1993, Gilbert and Horsnell, 1998; Su, 2004). The most commonly made faults can be divided into three main areas, namely quality of the sample, design of the GCCs, and data collection and analysis (Gilbert and Horsnell, 1998). In order to improve the validity of hotel guest satisfaction measurement practice, Barsky and Huxley (1992) proposed a new

sampling procedure, namely a "quality sample". It reduces nonresponse bias by offering incentives for completing the questionnaires. The components of their questionnaire are based on the disconfirmation paradigm and expectancy-value theory. In this manner, guests can indicate whether service was above or below their expectations and whether they considered a particular service important or not. Furthermore, Gilbert and Horsnell (1998) developed a list of criteria for GCC content analysis, which is also adopted in this study. Schall (2003) discusses the issues of question clarity, scaling, validity, survey timing, question order and sample size.

### **Service quality**

Service quality is a complex, elusive, subjective and abstract concept. It means different things to different people. The most common definition of service quality is the comparison customers make between their expectations and their perceptions of the received service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988; Grönroos, 1982). Quality is a multi-dimensional concept. Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) defined three dimensions of service quality, namely physical quality, interactive quality and corporate quality. Similarly, Grönroos (1984) argued that service quality comprises of technical quality, functional quality and corporate image. On the other hand, Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1985; 1988) developed the **SERVQUAL** scale, which became the most popular instrument for measuring service quality. They identified five key dimensions of service quality – reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The SERVQUAL scale consists of 22 items for assessing customer perceptions and expectations regarding the quality of service. A level of agreement or disagreement with a given item is rated on a seven-point Likert scale. The results are used to identify positive and negative gaps. The gap is measured by the difference between perceptions and expectations scores and indicates the level of service quality. If the result is positive, perceived service exceeds

expected service. A negative result means low quality of service. According to this instrument, service quality occurs when perceived service meets or exceeds customer's expectations.

The SERVQUAL instrument has been widely applied in a variety of service industries, including tourism and hospitality. Research related to this sector can be divided into measuring service quality in historic houses (Frochot and Hughes, 2000), hotels (Douglas and Connor, 2003; Antony et al., 2004; Juwaheer, 2004; Marković, 2004; Nadiri and Hussain, 2005; Olorunniwo et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2007), restaurants (Heung et al., 2000; Fu and Parks, 2001; Namkung and Jang, 2008), travel agencies (Atilgan, Akinci and Aksoy, 2003; Martinez, Caro and Martinez Garcia, 2008), diving (O'Neill, Williams, MacCarthy and Groves, 2000), health spas (Snoj and Mumel, 2002; Marković, Horvat and Raspor, 2004; González et al., 2007), ecotourism (Khan, 2003), theme parks (O'Neill and Palmer, 2003), tourism and hospitality higher education (Marković, 2005; Marković, 2006). The instrument was used to measure hotel employee quality as well (Yoo and Park, 2007).

It should be noted that service quality and customer satisfaction are distinct concepts, although they are closely related. According to some authors, satisfaction represents an antecedent of service quality (Carman, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991). In this sense, satisfactory experience may affect customers' attitude and their assessment of perceived service quality. Thus, satisfaction with a specific transaction may result in positive global assessment of service quality. Some authors argue that service quality is the antecedent of customer satisfaction (Churchill and Suprenant, 1982; Anderson et al., 1994; Oliver, 1997; Oh, 1999; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Jamali, 2007). These authors suggest that service quality is a cognitive evaluation, which may lead to satisfaction. Hence, customer satisfaction is the result of service quality. To sum up, the relationship between

quality and satisfaction is complex. Some authors have described it as Siamese twins (Danaher and Mattsson, 1994; Jamali, 2007). Although many unresolved questions remain, it can be concluded that service quality and customer satisfaction can be perceived as separate concepts that have causal ordering.

### **Content analysis**

Content analysis is an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). It provides scientific, objective, quantitative and generalizable description of content. Content analysis can be performed on virtually any medium with verbal and/or visual content, such as printed material, radio and television programmes, recorded meetings, movies and songs. It has been extensively used in marketing and consumer behaviour research (Kassarjian, 1977; Wheeler, 1988; Sayre, 1992; Guthrie and Abeysekera, 2006).

The basic technique of content analysis entails counting the number of times pre-defined categories of measurement appear in a given content. An effective content analysis should meet several requirements (Kassarjian, 1977; Guthrie and Abeysekera, 2006). First, a representative, randomly drawn sample should be selected. Second, the units of measurement, that is, the criteria of analysis must be clearly defined. These units can be specific a word, phrase, theme, paragraph, symbols, pictures, tables, or simply the existence or non-existence of some event or claim. Third, data categorisation must be systematic. It must be clear that an item either belongs or does not belong to a particular category. Finally, statistical analysis and interpretation of data can be conducted.

Reliability and validity of the instrument and collected data should also be demonstrated. Krippendorff (1980) identified three types of reliability for content analysis, namely stability,

reproducibility and accuracy. Reliability can be achieved by using several coders (judges) for processing the same content. Discrepancies between them should be minimal. Another factor to consider is the reliability of the coding instrument, which reduces the need for multiple coders. On the other hand, validity is defined as the extent to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure. In the field of content analysis, choice of categories and content units enhances or diminishes the likelihood of valid inferences (Kassarjian, 1977).

### Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine hotel guest comment cards (GCCs) and customer satisfaction management schemes in hotels of East London. In order to do this, GCCs were gathered and analysed. Furthermore, personal interviews with hotel managers were conducted to determine the ways GCCs were distributed and processed. Data were gathered from July to August 2014.

This study adopted Gilbert and Horsnell's (1998) applied content analysis approach to examine GCCs of six hotels in East London. Based on prior researches, they created a GCC checklist with 32 categories. These categories, used to analyse the content of hotel GCCs, fall under five general areas of analysis: (1) focus and management value of GCC attributes, (2) GCC attribute measurement techniques (attribute measurement scales), (3) GCC measure of overall customer satisfaction and loyalty, (4) GCC marketing measures (for identifying key market segments) and (5) effective layout of questions.

Gilbert and Horsnell's categories of analysis are expanded with seven additional categories. Mumel and Snoj (2007) used categories that refer to introduction sentences, instructions where to leave completed GCC, indicating the name of the hotel employee, assessment of service value and guests' expectations. Furthermore, Schall (2003) proposed the following categories: not applicable

response and the assessment of some of the main attributes of hotel services.

GCCs were personally gathered by the authors. Of the six hotels, three use GCC to measure hotel guests' satisfaction, while two of them (24%) do not use GCC. In one hotel, GCCs were not available.

### Results

First, results of personal interviews with hotel managers are presented.

*Frequency of gathering information:* All hotels in a sample that measure hotel guests satisfaction (19), gather information on a regular basis. GCCs were placed in every taken room.

*Ways of gathering information:* In all 19 analysed hotels, information was gathered using GCCs. 74% of interviewees answered that they also gather information through complaints and praise. Personal contact with guests was used in all hotels. Almost 46% of hotel managers revealed that they received information on hotel services from guests' letters, comments on the hotel's web sites, or internal comments made by the hotel's employees.

*Response rate:* The number of returned GCC was high. The majority of the hotels in the sample (79%) have a response rate between 64% to 71%. In all six analysed hotels, the number of completed GCCs was estimated to be up to 70%.

*Sampling methods:* In 95% of hotels, GCCs were distributed to all guests. Only in one hotel, guests were selected randomly. This is consistent with Gilbert and Horsnell's (1998) study, which noted that out of five analysed hotel chains only in one are GCCs distributed randomly.

*Process of GCCs dispersal:* In four hotels in the sample, GCCs were distributed by the housekeeping department staff according to the check-in data. Completed GCCs were analysed in the marketing department. In two hotels, GCCs were distributed via the reception desk. The

results of the study conducted by Su (2004) in Taiwan hotels also showed that in-room distribution is the most common way to distribute GCCs.

*Staff:* In all hotels in the sample, hotel staff were familiar with the process of measuring hotel guest satisfaction. Regarding the way GCCs were distributed, it was believed, that hotel employees do not need additional training in order to motivate their guests to complete GCCs. In accordance, employees were not rewarded for motivating guests. However, staff motivation was recommended by Gilbert and Horsnell (1998).

*Results presentation to management:* 42% of the interviewed hotel managers claim that they received an analysis report once a month. In two cases, the answer was "other", with the explanation that management is informed occasionally, sometimes even daily.

*Handling complaints:* In the case of a complaint received, management took appropriate measures to fix the problem (apology, repair, etc.).

*Methodology of GCC design:* In all hotels in the sample, GCCs were designed according to the managers' personal experience. Two hotel managers indicated that they adopted some questions from the practice used in other hotels.

*Timing the survey:* In all six analysed hotels, GCCs were distributed to hotel guests during their stay. Conducting the survey during checkout or a few days after leaving the hotel was not a practice.

*GCCs accessibility:* In two hotels, GCCs could be found in a folder on a room table. In three hotels, GCCs were placed in a visible place in the room (bed, table). Only in one hotel analysed were GCCs accessible at the reception desk. One of the possible reasons for low response rates could be that the GCCs were not placed in visible places, considering that in the majority of hotels they were hidden in a folder.

*Foreign languages:* GCCs were written in English. It can be concluded that all analysed hotels did not have GCCs translated into other languages.

*Special request letter:* In order to indicate the importance of guests' attitudes towards hotel services, Barsky (1995) recommends writing a special request letter. According to the findings of Gilbert and Horsnell (1998), this practice is employed in two hotel chains in the United Kingdom. Hotel managers in this study did not use this technique as a way of motivating guests to complete the GCC.

*Returning the GCCs:* According to the answers received, hotel guests have several possibilities of where to return completed GCC. In all hotels in the sample, completed GCCs were put into the box near the reception desk. Guests could return their answers to the check-in staff or leave them in their room.

*Incentives to guests:* In order to encourage guest response Barsky (1995) recommends different incentives (e.g. discount, gifts). All the analysed hotels did not provide any kind of incentive to the guests.

*Number of "questions":* The total sample indicates that GCCs have between 8 and 32 questions. The majority of GCCs (57%) contain up to 20 questions and one includes fewer than 10. It is recommended that GCCs contain between 40 and 60 questions in order to collect enough information for decision making (Gilbert and Horsnell, 1998). It can be concluded that all GCCs in the sample did not include enough questions to offer adequate management information.

*Number of intangible and tangible delivery attributes:* The majority of questions should be oriented towards intangible service delivery performance. In only 29% of GCCs analysed in this study, there was a positive ratio of tangible attribute questions to intangible attribute questions. This result is consistent with the findings of Su (2004) and Gilbert and Horsnell

(1998) (44:1 and 18:13 in respect of the intangible aspects, respectively).

*Standardized GCCs for all hotels in the chain or brand:* Of the six hotels in the sample, 56% are part of one of the three hotel chains in the area. Hotels in a chain have unique GCCs, so the standardization criteria are met. According to Jones and Loannou (1993), these criteria are important for two reasons. First, GCCs provide information relevant to the individual hotel in the chain. On the other hand, they are used as a tool for benchmarking and maintaining consistency across the hotel chain estate.

*Placing independent drivers together as one attribute:* The use of compound or double-barrelled questions that ask more than one thing at a time can cause problems with question clarity and response interpretation. This type of question was included in three GCCs – two of them had one, while in one GCC there are three compound questions. Questions of this kind are usually applied for assessing intangible service attributes (e.g. friendliness and efficiency of staff, quality and variety of food, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with staff member).

*Breaking hotel operation areas into actionable drivers of guest satisfaction:* Questions should be asked in a way that clearly indicates which attribute of hotel service is being assessed. For example, in the reception department, the following attributes can be assessed, namely staff, accurate reservation and prompt service. 43% of the analysed GCCs have detailed questions for assessing the services of a particular hotel department. One GCC has too generally formulated questions regarding these criteria.

*Attribute measurement scales:* Research has indicated that the most effective scale for measuring satisfaction is the expectations-met scale. However, none of the GCCs in this study met these criteria. Su (2004) analysed GCCs in Taiwan hotels and reported the same findings. Gilbert and Horsnell (1998) noted that in only 6,7% of analysed GCCs in the United

Kingdom hotels, the expectations-met scale was employed. The most common scale in this study is the excellence rating scale. It was used in 86% of the sample. Yes/no scale was included in 43% of GCCs, while one GCC used the pictorial rating scale. These results are consistent with studies conducted by Gilbert and Horsnell (1998) and Su (2004). Furthermore, in the total sample, seven different scales were used to assess guest satisfaction and service quality. In four GCCs, a four-point scale is used; in two cases, a three-point scale is employed; and in one GCC, a two-point scale is used. The majority of GCCs include only one type of scale, and none of the analysed GCCs has more than two different types of attribute measurement scales.

*A space for open comments:* All of the GCCs in the sample met these criteria. In 57% of GCCs, this space is provided at the end of the card. In the remaining 43%, open-ended comments are possible after each question. GCCs differentiate according to the space allowed for open-ended comments. This varies from one line to one page. The whole page is provided in only one GCC. It should be noted that lack of space for open comments influences information quality.

*Direct or indirect measure of overall satisfaction and a measure of loyalty:* Of the total sample, only 29% of GCCs include an overall satisfaction question (be it direct or indirect); while 57% ask a question of loyalty. Results indicate that only one GCC includes both questions, and in 29% of the sample, these questions are not included at all. The low percentage shows that hotel managers may not perceive these measures as important. Gilbert and Horsnell (1998) and Su (2004) noted that in GCCs, assessment of loyalty is more common than assessment of overall satisfaction. This conclusion can also be drawn about the study of GCCs in the East London hotels. However, guest satisfaction cannot always guarantee guest retention. Also, intent to return does not have to be the consequence of satisfaction with the service.

*Marketing measures:* In addition to measuring guest satisfaction, GCCs provide an opportunity to obtain information about the guest for marketing purposes. Questions relating to guest demographics are included in all GCCs in the sample. The most frequently asked questions (57% of GCCs) are purpose of visit, marketing channels, room number and contact (address, e-mail). In 43% of GCCs, questions about the duration of stay (date of arrival and departure) and guest name are included. Only one GCC asked about the guest's age and occupation. On the average, each GCC had three questions for marketing segmentation. The number of these questions varied between 1 and 6 per GCC. None of the analysed GCCs included questions of general demographic information pertaining to salary and sex, as well as questions about previous stays in the hotel or hotel chain. Questions relating to address, e-mail, and guest name or room number indicate that GCCs are not anonymous.

*Provide sections relating to specific market segments:* None of the GCCs in the sample included a specific section for completion by guests from special market segments (e. g. business travellers). This indicates a lack of focus on market segmentation. Similar results were shown in the studies conducted by Gilbert and Horsnell (1998) and Su (2004).

*Testing marketing channels effectiveness:* Questions such as "How did you find out about our hotel?" provide important information about the relative effectiveness of a hotel's advertising and marketing channels. 57% of GCCs in this study included questions relating to these criteria.

*A question on competition:* Previously conducted researches show that questions on competitors are not common in GCCs (Gilbert and Horsnell, 1998; Su, 2004). The results obtained in this study affirm this.

*Effective layout of questions:* All the GCCs in the sample had attribute-ranking

questions in the first part of the card. In one GCC, the question on overall satisfaction was placed at the beginning and, in another, at the end of the list. 29% of GCCs include marketing and demographic questions towards the end of the card, while in 71% of the sample, these questions are placed at the beginning and the end of the card.

*Introductory sentences:* Introductory sentences were used in order to thank the guest for staying at the hotel and for filling out the GCC. It can also be mentioned in the introduction that answers will help hotel management to improve hotel services. These sentences were included in 86% of GCCs analysed in this study.

*Instructions where to leave completed GCCs:* All analysed GCCs included the instructions where guest should leave the completed questionnaire. In 43% of GCCs, instructions can be found at the beginning in the introductory sentences, while in most cases (57%) instructions are provided at the end. Mumel and Snoj (2007) reported that in Slovenian hotels 62% of GCCs include these instructions.

*Indicating the name of the hotel employee:* In all GCCs in this study, it was possible to indicate the name of the hotel employee who made a special impression on the guest. Only one GCC asked about the employee with whom the guest was dissatisfied. In one case, guests were asked to state reasons for indicating a particular employee. Mumel and Snoj (2007) noted that 36% of GCCs in their study met these criteria.

*Assessment of service value:* Only 14% of GCCs in the sample assess the value-for-money ratio of the hotel and its services. Similar results were shown in a study conducted in Slovenian hotels by Mumel and Snoj (2007).

*Guests' expectations:* Only one GCC asked a question about meeting guest's expectations. None of the questionnaires assessed satisfaction and service quality compared with guest expectations, using the expectation-met scale.

*Not applicable response:* None of the analysed GCCs provided the option of assessing the services with a “not applicable” response. However, this criterion is important; because it gives guests an easy way to answer a question that does not apply to them (e.g. guest did not use a room service). This is a neutral response, and it should be included in a GCC in order to avoid guests skipping answering questions that do not apply to their experience.

*Assessment of some of the main attributes of hotel services:* Analysis has indicated that all GCCs include the assessment of the hotel room (cleanliness, comfort, amenities in the room) and restaurant (quality and variety of food). In 86% of GCCs, guests can assess sports and leisure facilities (e.g. wellness, swimming pool, animation, entertainment). The reception department can be assessed in 71% of GCCs. Questions on staff friendliness and efficiency are included in 43% of GCCs, as well as the assessment of room service. Only one questionnaire included a question on the hotel’s beach. None of the analysed GCCs provides assessment on the hotel’s parking area and hotel surroundings (e.g. neatness, cleanliness).

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study can be of great use to hotel managers in providing a direction on how to conduct and modify the existing practice of measuring customer satisfaction in hotels. The primary objective of GCCs was to understand guests' needs, gather their opinions and comments, most importantly, to assess guests' satisfaction with services provided. Although in 76% of analysed hotels, GCCs were recognized as an important tool for measuring guest satisfaction, results indicate that in most hotels measurement practice should be improved. Findings indicate that in most hotels GCCs can be found in a folder on a room table and are not distributed randomly. Guests can complete GCCs during their stay at the hotel. Response rates were low and no incentives were provided for completing questionnaires.

GCCs were designed according to managers' personal experience, and managers usually receive analysis reports once a month.

Furthermore, the diversity of GCC design is evident, and no single GCC within the survey sample meets all the best practice criteria. The majority of GCCs do not have effective question order, only a few of them provide a measure of overall satisfaction, and only one included the question about meeting guests' expectations. In conclusion, this study combines an analysis of customer satisfaction management schemes and GCCs content analysis in the hotels of East London. Most of the findings are consistent with similar studies conducted by Gilbert and Horsnell (1998), Su (2004) and Mumel and Snoj (2007). It can be concluded that the efficiency of customer satisfaction measurement with GCCs depends on the measurement methodology. It is clear that guests should be additionally motivated and that GCCs should be designed following a scientific approach with a greater impact. Only reliable and valid data can provide valuable information for management decisions regarding a hotel's offering.

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