

Eco-Friendly customer engagement Practices in hotels: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Hospitality industry especially hotels consume a good amount of natural resources and results in waste generation. Hotel Industry is considered as main customer oriented industry, where there is huge consumption of energy resources. As we know that limited availability of energy resources on planet earth has made it an essential feature of every industry and hospitality industry is not untouched to go for energy conservation. To contribute effectively, hotels have started exercising green practices which include reusing linen practices, natural temperature control techniques, 3R's principle and many more. There is huge significance of environment related issues that continues to rise in hotel industry because of increased knowledge about environmental issues. Keeping this information in mind, the current study stresses on exploring the eco-friendly customer engagement practices with respect to hotel location, hotel design exercised in hotels of Gulmarg, Kashmir as well as its impact on repurchase intention of services in hotels. A checklist was developed to receive data from the hotel managers/ supervisors. The outcome specified that some environmental friendly practices like plantation drives, walking through the wilderness, waste water management tools, linen reuse, horse riding as means of transportation, trekking through the green forests, use of natural light and installation of well designed ventilation and LED lighting etc are mostly exercised practices in the hotels of Gulmarg, Kashmir. The study revealed that eco friendly customer engagement practices involve customers effectively and leaves an ever lasting impression on the customer and attracts them again towards the destination.

Key words : Hospitality Industry, Eco- Hotels, Green practices, Design based practices, Location based practices

Introduction

Green or eco-friendly hotel is defined as the hotel which provides services and amenities focusing on conserving the environment, energy saving and reduction of carbon emissions (Lee and Cheng, 2018). Green hotels generally exercise environmental guidelines and procedures and implement sustainability in their daily operations (Green Hotels

Association, 2018). There are many factors which inspire the hotels to take on environment-friendly practices like legal guidelines and policies, general environmental organisations and legal concerns (Zhu and Sarkis, 2006; Setthasakko, 2007; Kasim and Ismail, 2012). Eco friendly hotels following different practices in their normal operations presents a positive image on customers in the market place in comparison to their competitors (Iwanowski and

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Rushmore, 1994). The unprecedented use of natural resources by hotels like water and energy, resulting in a heavy amount of waste. Thus, it becomes important for hotels to be more environment friendly as part of their corporate social responsibility (Chand and Garge, 2017). There are enormous reasons to implement green practices that include financial benefits, strengthening employee commitment, improved customer loyalty and goodwill of the organisation (Gan, 2006; Juholin, 2004).

Tremendous change have occurred in the hotel industry for in the last ten years regarding their eco friendly approach. The highly followed eco friendly practices in hotels comprises water and energy-conservation measures, recycling of products and acting on air pollution (Dangelico and Pontrandolfo, 2010). The application of eco friendly practices by hotels like water and energy conservation, air quality improvement and reducing water and land pollution by following 3R's principle in the product consumption leads to green hotel category (Saini, 2013). Hotel offerings like smoking rooms, landscape development, green open space are sustainable practices and are directly linked to customer satisfaction and revisit intention of the guest (Supriadi *et al.*, 2017). Hotels' use of durable service items in place of disposable products by hotels makes the customers aware of product recycling and encourage linen reuse programs. Hotels are increasing plantation for improved air quality, usage of natural fibres for linen and special bins for recyclable items in guestrooms. Other measures include use of energy-efficient lighting systems and recycled paper products/ furniture, eco friendly cleaning supplies and room fragrances with less use of harmful chemicals and high consumption of locally grown organic produce free from pesticides or fertilizers (GHA, 2011; Han *et al.*, 2009, 2011). Green hotels reduce the operational cost as well as benefits the environment also. The marketing of eco-friendly methods implemented in hotels can generate a rapport among the customers and attract them to purchase products and services and also help to bring in new customers who are also interested in eco-friendly practices. Hotels exercising sustainable green practices perform efficiently than their competitors and have more chances of long term success (Amandeep, 2017).

Chain hotels implement more environmental-friendly practices than independent hotels due to strong economic back-up, effective training to their

personnel and exposing them to latest green practices where as small and independent hotels have budget constraints (Rahman *et al.*, 2012). Hotels are required to be made aware about the potential financial and non-financial benefits of green practices and should be encouraged to develop an appropriate recycling and reusing system. "Hotels may further improve their waste management system by having effective systems for recycling. Waste management and recycling of products must be done effectively to contribute towards better environment" (Singh *et al.*, 2014).

Literature Review

Yusof *et al.* (2017) stated that customer satisfaction and revisit intention has a close relationship with environmental-friendly practices offered in the hotel industry. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the hotel operators whether they belong to green or a non-green status, must take part in saving the environment by implementing environmental-friendly practices to operate in a commercial environment. Can *et al.* (2014) in their research paper concluded that the compatibility of hotels architectural design with natural environment and energy saving electronic key cards and recycling products are some of the green practices which leads to customer satisfaction in hotels. Noor and Kumar (2014) in their paper expressed that guest having environment friendly behaviour and attitude are more willing to stay in green hotels and this study also indicated positive relationship on eco-friendly activities and guest revisit intention. Nowadays customers are becoming more aware about the benefits of engaging in eco-friendly practices in the accommodation industry. The positive attitude towards the environmental friendly practices has a strong relationship with customer choosing green hotels (Jauhari and Manaktola, 2007). "Gagiæ *et al.* (2013) stated that hotels sustainable operations helps to get the attention of the guest and also concluded that energy-efficient technology initially might be expensive but in the long run reduces the daily operational cost of the hotels. Huh and Chang (2017) indicated in their study that Generation Y consumers are more concerned about recycling and waste disposable programmes". They also stated that hotels green certification and visible green advertising are the main two motivators for their revisit intention. Berezan *et al.* (2013) pointed out that sustainable

practices framed in the hotels should be convenient and comfortable to the customers and stated it has a positive relationship on customer satisfaction. Secondly the study also stated that importance of green practices varies according to the nationality of the guest. Manaktola and Jauhari (2007) mentioned that hotels green practices should include recycling programs like linen reuse, renewable energy and use of eco-friendly products in different departments of the hotel to encourage practices on sustainability.

Singh *et al.* (2014) stated that hotels must exercise recycling practices more rigorously not only to help the environment, but it also has monetary benefits. Satchapappichit *et al.* (2020) explained that the important aspect to the implementation of green practices is believed to be seriousness in the attitude and behaviour of the owners and managers towards environmental awareness and competitors in the market which has highly influenced the adoption and implementation of green practices in hotels daily operations. Government of India must frame policies and schemes in favour of green hotels and lodging accommodations to encourage the green practices (Amandeep, 2017). Erdogan and Baris (2007) explained that hotels must follow environmental conservation programs and practices, such as waste management and energy consumption by installing efficient lighting system, air conditioning, and water use, by making purchasing decisions on green appliances. Martinez *et al.* (2018) explained that green customer perceptions of green practices have a direct positive effect on a hotel's green image, and image has direct positive effects on customer behavioural intentions toward certified green hotels. The researchers also stated that more environmental concerns of customers, more their intention to stay, to share positive word-of mouth and to pay a premium for environmentally certified hotels.

Mensah, (2006) stated green activities which are generally practiced by the hotel industry are use of energy-efficient light bulbs and not changing used linen and towels daily. Alexander *et al.* (2002) expressed that hotels should formulate operating procedures and tracking systems to inspect the usage and wastage of natural resources and must implement practices like switching off lights and taps when not in use. Ogbeide *et al.* (2012) in their study revealed that water and energy conservation practices are considered to be one of the most significant and prominent practices in the hotel industry. For maintaining healthy air quality, it is recommended

to have green landscapes and natural vegetation in the hotel premises (Dangelico and Pontrandolfo, 2010; Supriadi, 2016). The above statement is also facilitated by (Nafi, 2017; Kaur, 2014 and Albino, 2009). Supriadi *et al.* (2017) in their research stated that in order to raise the efficiency of the hotel, it is important to suggest sustainable practices such as recycling programs, water and energy saving methods.

“Chan (2013) stated that to promote sustainable green initiatives hotels should emphasis on various certification programs like ISO 14001, LEED certifications (Leadership in energy and environmental design). Muñoz and Rivera (2002) pointed out that significant share of the tourist market is willing and able to pay for accommodation services that go beyond standards in environmental terms and therefore hotels must go for green certification from the established environmental agency. Jhawar *et al.* (2012) stated that hotels must undergo for green certification programs and must promote their eco-friendly practices for guest awareness as it helps to build a positive image and attract potential customers (Mensah, 2006)”.

Objective of the Study

After a comprehensive review of literature, following objective have been formulated:

- To explore the Eco-friendly customer engagement practices pertaining to hotel location and hotel design offered in Hotels of Gulmarg, Kashmir

Research Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected from the managers 'of hotels of Gulmarg, Kashmir. A survey was conducted based on checklist in Hotelss of Gulmarg, Kashmir. An in-depth interview was conducted with the hotel managers, supervisors of Hotels's of Gulmarg, Kashmir. The checklist was divided into two sections. The first section consisted of the demographic profile of the managers. The second section consisted of various questions pertaining to eco-friendly customer engagement practices followed in hotels pertaining to hotel location and hotel design offered by the hotel. Hotels were identified through various important sources like Ministry of Tourism website, FHRAI website and rankings given by Online Travel Agen-

cies and Department of tourism Kashmir. The responses received has been analysed by using thematic analysis, coding has been done. The processed codes has been arranged in themes by using manual coding, axial coding and selective coding.. The secondary sources of information were from published research articles, theses, books, websites, magazines, newspapers, national and international journals and government reports etc. The checklist included the following questions (1) *what do you understand by eco friendly practices.* (2) *What are various eco friendly customer engagement practices followed by the hotel.* (3) *what are the various eco friendly customer engagement practices followed by your hotel in view of hotel location.* (4) *what are the various eco friendly customer engagement practices followed by your hotel in view of hotel design.* (5) *Do you feel that eco friendly customer engagement practices has an influence on repurchase intention of services in hotels.*

Results and Discussion

Customer engagement in hotels

As evident from the literature, the customer engagement is an emotional relationship between the company and its customers, based on involvement and participation opinion shared by the customers (Vivek *et al.*, 2009). In addition the literature supports the definition of customer engagement as quoted by (Shiri *et al.*, 2014) stated that customer engagement is the power of customer involvement and connection with the company's products and activities. So it has become imperative for the hotels to engage customers positively so that no or less burden is exerted on environment. As the degradation of environment at a rapid pace has led the current world to sit back and think on procedures which will lower the impact on energy consumption and focus for more sustainable practices. The hotel's are considered as centres of limitless energy consumption in order to provide more luxury to the customers. This unprecedented consumption of resources has very bad impacts on the environment. The awareness programme and campaigns run by the government, NGO's and other stakeholder's has lead to implement practices with least negative impact on the environment. The hotels had come up with engagement practices which impacts the environment positively and involves the customer and hence leaves an ever-lasting memory on the cus-

tomers. The received responses from the stakeholders has been segregated into two major themes like (i) Location based Eco friendly customer engagement practices. (ii) Design based Eco-friendly customer engagement practices.

Location based Eco friendly customer engagement practices: These contain factors which are closely related to the specific location of the hotel. It contributes a lot in the involvement of customers and offers them avenues to celebrate, enjoy and memorize moments in a hotel. The desirable items with which a tourist engages may include tourism products, sites, destinations, or service personnel (Hollebeek, 2011a). The Gulmarg also called as meadow of flowers, surrounded by oak, fir and Deodar trees from all sides. The attractive attributes of the place acts as centre of attraction for people all round the world to explore the place and enjoy in different seasons of the year. The unique seasonal variations helps to bring in thousands of tourists around the year. Which makes it important for the hotels to include practices with respect to location, which are environmental friendly. The uniqueness of the place like high altitude, low temperature, green cover of coniferous forests, snow capped peaks, cable car ride, horse riding facility for travelling within the valley contributes tremendously in engaging the customers and help them to re visit again. The respondent says and I quote: *"The horse riding in Gulmarg is an essential tourist service provided or sometimes managed by hotel. it is sometimes a reason that prevents the motor vehicles pollution in the area and acts as an essential transportation tool. The trekking through the Oak trees is full of thrill. An early morning walk through the valley with best air quality around gives a feeling of real heaven, soothes mind and soul for long"*. Thus location of the hotel plays a paramount role in involving the customer, brings them a feeling of joy, excitement and helps them to create an ever-lasting impression on the customer.

Design based Eco-friendly customer engagement practices: The design of the hotel, both exteriors as well as interior attracts customers towards a hotel. The uniqueness in hotel design and the use of locally available material, art and crafts, friendly approaches in between different service areas is engaging customers and compelling them to re visit the hotel again. The efficient use of natural light in guest rooms and corridors during day decreases the amount of total energy needed. The appropriate ventilation concerns and applying suitable designs

so that maximum circulation of air is ensured for free flow of fresh air in the property. The use of locally made handcrafted carpets for furnishing, installation of hand painted paintings and wall hangings attracts the customers and involves them for long. The handmade waste paper artifacts called as paper machie and their use in interior designing of hotel public and private areas have close bonding with the engagement of customers. The use of wood panels for wall decorations helps to balance the internal temperature of the hotel as wood tends to retain the temperature of the room during winter and helps to maintain the interiors warmer and also gives a rich feeling to the décor of the room. One of the respondent has revealed that:

The artifacts and decoration items placed inside guest rooms look more classy. The interesting part is that these articles are made from waste paper and locally made. We feel proud to be part of such effort directly or indirectly in order to safeguard the environment. The handmade carpets like Kaleen furnished in guest rooms compels customers to interact and get more information about the product.

The desire to stay in a service setting and their patronage intention the atmospheric elements and interior design influence customers' (Joseph *et al.*, 2009). Johnson, Mayer, and Champaner (2004) echo Kotler (1973), describing atmospherics as "the endeavor to design buying settings to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability". Kotler (1973), the four dimensions assessed by the customer include physical environs: visual, aural, olfactory and tactile. Such components and their perception by consumers has ripened into distinct forms which include furniture, lighting, style, artefacts, and colour. Ambient conditions are environment background stimuli that impact human sensor.

Table 1 discusses about the various eco-friendly customer engagement practices followed in Hotels in Gulmarg, Kashmir. All the practices has been followed by the hotels as per the customer demand, but some of the practices are frequently followed by customers like view photography, trekking through green forests, horse riding, installation of handmade carpets, décor items, paintings in rooms, use of natural light for energy conservation etc.

Conclusion

The results of the above findings reveal that there

Table 1. Eco-friendly customer engagement practices in hotels.

Location based eco-friendly customer engagement practices	Walking through the wilderness	Trekking to green forests around	Horse riding as means of transportation in the area	Sledging and snow skating on prescribed sledging routes	Offering reusable picnic baskets to trekkers with provisions of trash collection during the day	Plantation drives and assistance	Installation of RO water plants around the hotel landscape	Bio gas plant	View-photography
Design based eco-friendly customer engagement practices	Use of natural lighting in rooms and corridors	Proper ventilation for best air quality inside the hotel	Use of wood panels for room interiors for maximum heat retention during winters	Handcrafted locally made carpets made from animal wool.	Use of Hand-made artifacts and décor items	Energy efficient appliances	Easy approachable service areas for minimum usage of elevators and energy	Electronic key card	Solar panels

are set of eco-friendly practices followed in Hotels of Kashmir which justify our first objective of study. These practices include location based Eco friendly customer engagement practices which include Horse riding as means of transportation in the area and Sledging and snow skating on prescribed sledging routes, walking through the wilderness, trekking into the green forests etc. The design based eco friendly customer engagement practices which include natural lighting, proper ventilation for best air quality around, using wood panels for interior for better heat retention, recommending hand made carpets originated from animal wool etc. The findings suggest that these eco friendly practices in addition to retaining the environment also helps to involve the customer for long and results in their repurchase intention of hotels. As it becomes quite evident from the study that staying in a hotel with attractive natural settings and following eco friendly practices leaves you much contented. The results also reveal that design based eco friendly customer engagement practices engages customer more effectively and helps hotels in cost reduction and more profitability.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Since the research has been conducted in the Hotels of Gulmarg, Kashmir and mostly data has been collected from 3, 4 and 5 star hotels, therefore the results cannot be generalised for the other category of hotels of Kashmir. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct research on other hotel Grades of Kashmir. The study further suggests that the research can be conducted in other hospitality segments such as local restaurants, retail shopping mall etc.

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