

Customer Satisfaction through Service Excellence:

The Importance of Focused Training

by Elizabeth Martyn and Christopher K. Anderson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Technology has shifted the dynamics of guest interactions in the hospitality industry. Two key elements of this shift are that service providers now have fewer opportunities for direct interaction with guests, and interactions may often be the result of service failures. In these face-to-face encounters, employees' ability to effectively manage the emotional components of the guest interaction can make a major contribution to a guest's satisfaction with the outcome. Intrinsic employee behaviors, namely, employee engagement, communication, and attitude (that is, the "how" in the delivery of service) influence guest's perceptions of service outcomes. In a preliminary study, relatively intense training of hotel front-desk employees, using a blend of online and face-to-face training, changed employee behaviors in a way that guests reported an improvement in staff helpfulness. This study employed modules of the Cornell University Service Excellence On-Demand Training as a tool for improving the work of front-line service providers. Such training can foster improved handling of guest interactions, thereby offering a substantial opportunity for improved guest satisfaction.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Travel and tourism expenditures have reached an astounding 10.2 percent of global GDP at the time of this writing.¹ Despite the customer demand represented by that figure, the hotel industry's front-line employee population has not been growing at the same pace as that demand.² Instead, the industry has been providing expanded service through increased integration of technology into the service-delivery process. One consequence of the growing presence of automation in hospitality is that tools like self-service kiosks, chat bots, and app-based technologies have replaced opportunities for personal interaction that would previously have been commonplace, with a resulting reduction in the overall number of face-to-face contacts between guests and service providers.

¹ Langford, G. and Weissenberg, A. (2018, February 21). Now Boarding: The Future of the Travel, Hospitality Industry. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://deloitte.wsj.com/cmo/2018/02/21/2018-travel-and-hospitality-industry-outlook/>.

² Watkins, E. (2014, July 7). Hotel operators cope with labor shortages. *Hotel News Now*. Retrieved from www.hotelnewsnow.com.

A second consequence of the influence of automation is a change in the content of face-to-face service interactions. With automated solutions now able to take care of some of the more “simple” or straightforward tasks required to deliver a service experience, what remains are the components for which human beings are particularly adept and well suited, including complex interactions or those that involve addressing exceptions or difficulties. These service components require empathy, compassion, critical thinking, creative drive, or the ability to apply non-linear thinking and clever problem-solving.³ For example, when individuals check in for their flights using a self-service kiosk, the only circumstance that would prompt them to interact with a staff member is if some sort of problem or concern arises. In the era of automation, guests generally have to reach out to service personnel only for the needs that remain after they have exhausted technological capabilities, including any issues, questions, problems, or logistics that they could not resolve for themselves using the technology.

As the number of personal service interactions diminishes and the nature of the remaining interactions is altered, we see a corresponding increase in the pressure on service providers to deliver a quality service experience within this new framework. At the same time, we also see one other changing element in the service landscape to consider. Traditionally, the mark of excellence in service delivery has been for employees to memorize and perform according to a robust set of standards.⁴ This approach created a style of service that was highly consistent for the brand or product, but ultimately conformed to the organization’s needs, not necessarily those of the consumer. However, in the world of ubiquitous technology, individuals have become accustomed to highly personalized technology interactions, including digital marketing materials, advertisements, purchase suggestions, and customizable skins on high-use apps. As a consequence, consumers now expect the same level of customization and personalization in the physical world as they find in the

³ Kamenetz, A. (2013, July 19). The four things people can still do better than computers. *Fast Company*. Retrieved from www.fastcompany.com; and Morgan, B. (2017, August 16). 10 things robots can’t do better than humans. *Forbes*. Retrieved from www.forbes.com.

⁴ Susskind, A. M., Kacmar, K. M., & Borchgrevink, C. P. (2007). How organizational standards and coworker support improve restaurant service [Electronic version]. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 48(4), 370-379.

digital world. Service that conforms to the company’s standards alone is no longer enough.⁵

It is imperative that organizational leaders equip front-line service providers to face these challenges head-on. Personnel need to be allowed to think critically during service interactions in order to identify the true issues and correctly process complex situations. This includes the autonomy to “deviate from established procedures and improvise service processes when guests require it.”⁶ Employees need to understand what actions, behaviors, and approaches will ensure a positive guest experience. Above all, employees must be well versed in techniques to handle difficult guest interactions, which are rapidly becoming the primary type of guest interaction they will experience.

The critical issue in all of this is, how can hospitality firms empower their employees to provide this type of specialized service? To address this question, we wanted to assess whether particular types of training would be useful. To explore this matter, we conducted a field experiment that involved two modes of training for front-desk teams at two cooperating hotel properties. The training applied modules of the Cornell University Service Excellence On-Demand Training, a technology-supported online training program designed specifically to focus on the behaviors that improve perceptions of the interactions between guest and service provider. This training program is composed of online training, as well as tools that blend that material with face-to-face training. Both before and after the training period, we analyzed guest perceptions of service provider behaviors, as measured through online survey assessments, the impact of training on those behaviors, and the connection between a change in behaviors and guest satisfaction.

The Employee-Customer Interface

Researchers and operators alike know that customer service experiences and the feelings evoked by those experiences are critical to the long-term success of a hospitality enterprise. It is a goal of any operator to facilitate and improve these experiences. Hartline and Farrell explored the interaction between employees and customers at the point in the customer service process called the employee-customer interface, a

⁵ Hyken, S. (2017, October 29). Personalized Customer Experiences Increases Revenue and Loyalty. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com>; Secchi, E., Roth, A., & Verma, R. (2016). The role of service improvisation in improving hotel customer satisfaction. *Cornell Center for Hospitality Report*, 16(1), 3-10.

⁶ Secchi et al., *op.cit.*

term that embodies the relationship created between the employee and the customer during the service interaction.⁷ Those authors found that the employee-customer interface is the most important relationship in determining customer perceptions of service quality. They further found that this relationship between service provider and guest is more important than either the manager-employee interface (interactions and relationship building between an employee and his or her manager) or the employee-role interface (the relationship that employees create with their responsibilities and their perception of their role as service providers). High employee self-efficacy, confidence, and job satisfaction all increase customers' perceptions of service quality, supporting the notion that improving an employee's confidence and self-efficacy (that is, their belief that they are capable of doing what they are being asked to do) is critical for solidifying the employee-customer relationship. As this relationship develops, employees exhibit specific behaviors, influenced by their self-efficacy. Identifying the relevant employee behaviors and then improving them via coaching or training should improve employees' interactions with customers, which should, in turn, alter the customers' perception of their satisfaction with their experience.

An employee's service orientation, which is a reflection of the individual's personality characteristics, can be a strong measure of an individual's performance in a given service environment.⁸ Guests interpret that performance through both intrinsic performance cues (subjective attributes, such as value or friendliness) and extrinsic cues (objective attributes, such as price or accuracy of task completion).⁹ Of interest to this research are the intrinsic performance cues or behaviors that reflect service orientation, such as listening, responding with sensitivity to context, anticipating needs, and relaying of information.¹⁰

⁷ Hartline, M. D., & Ferrell, O. C. (1996). The management of customer-contact service employees: an empirical investigation. *Journal of Marketing*, 52-70.

⁸ Brown, T. J., Mowen, J. C., Donavan, D. T., & Licata, J. W. (2002). The customer orientation of service workers: Personality trait effects on self-and supervisor performance ratings. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1), 110-119.

⁹ Hartline, M. D., & Jones, K. C. (1996). Employee performance cues in a hotel service environment: Influence on perceived service quality, value, and word-of-mouth intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 35(3), 207-215.

¹⁰ Brownell, J. (2009). Fostering service excellence through listening: What hospitality managers need to know, *Cornell Center for Hospitality Report*, 9(6), 6-18; Menon, K., & Dubé, L. (2000). Ensuring greater satisfaction by engineering salesperson response

In this study, we posit that the following three key behavioral factors influence the employee-customer interaction: employee engagement, employee communication, and employee attitude. Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault conducted research in this area, but their study focused on guests' perception of the results of various service interactions, as well as behavioral observations resulting from those interactions.¹¹

Essentially, the existing literature has largely examined the role of service from the perspectives of the inputs required to facilitate excellent guest service (i.e., the service climate) and the outputs of what great service achieves (that is, customer satisfaction). Far less attention has been given to the "how" portion of the equation, or the process that exists between input and output. Schmit and Allscheid found that perceptions of service climate were "strongly associated with an underlying emotional response," which was "strongly associated with coping responses or intentions."¹² This foundational "underlying emotional response" created by the service provider, rather than specific tasks or actions based on standards, is the focus of this study, with a goal of determining whether improvement in the underlying supporting employee behaviors of engagement, communication, and attitude can enhance the guest's perception of service.

At the core, engagement and attitude both reflect emotions and may be indicative of an employee's individual service orientation, job satisfaction, and perception of service climate. The definition of engagement, in particular, remains elusive due to conflicts in the perception of engagement, or "being engaged" as a state of being, a behavior, or a personality trait.¹³

to customer emotions. *Journal of Retailing*, 76(3), 285-307; Gilmore, J. H., & Pine, B. J. (2002). Differentiating hospitality operations via experiences: Why selling services is not enough. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 43(3), 87-96; Mattila, A.S., & Enz, C.A. (2002). The role of emotions in service encounters. Retrieved February 2016 from: <http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/articles/618>; and Grandey, A., Glenda, F., Mattila, A., Jansen, K., Sideman, L. (2002). Is "service with a smile" enough? Authenticity of positive displays during service encounters. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 96, 38-55. doi: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2004.08.002.

¹¹ Bitner, M., Booms, B., and Tetreault, M. S. (1990). The service encounter: diagnosing favorable and unfavorable incidents. *Journal of Marketing*, 54(1), 71-84. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/125174>.

¹² Schmit, M. J., & Allscheid, S. P. (1995). Employee attitudes and customer satisfaction: Making theoretical and empirical connections. *Personnel Psychology*, 48, 521-536.

¹³ Macey, W. H., & Schneider, B. (2008). The meaning of employee engagement. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 1(1), 3-30.

However, connotations of “involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy,”¹⁴ as well as the idea that “engagement...is about passion and commitment...[and] the willingness to invest oneself and expend one’s discretionary effort to help the employer succeed,”¹⁵ are common threads in both practitioners’ and academics’ view of engagement. That research thread suggests that front-line staff members’ actions reflecting these engaged values are important factors in driving guest satisfaction.

Academic literature typically treats the word “attitude” as a representation of a viewpoint, such as employees’ attitudes about their employer as a reflection of service climate.¹⁶ However, Gronroos discussed the notion of attitude as a behavior in service, finding that service employees’ attitudes are representative of the *how* in service delivery, as opposed to the technical quality and outcome, or the *what* of service delivery.¹⁷ For instance, such survey statements as “the front desk staff was polite, professional, and knowledgeable” and “front desk staff was disorganized, uninformed, and frustrating to work with” are measurement constructs in this research that describe how staff members behaved as the service was delivered.

One of the key reasons why employee communication is so influential is its role in both creating and tempering consumer frustration. Averill introduced the idea of mitigating information and its ability to affect feelings of frustration.¹⁸ That is, during the employee-customer interface, customers will become frustrated if they do not receive appropriate mitigating information relevant to their experience. Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault built upon this theory, illustrating that it is not enough for service personnel simply to provide mitigating information, but the quality of employees’ response affects the role of the information to reduce frustration and improve satisfaction.¹⁹ As

a result, employees’ ability to communicate and the quality of their response can be determining factors in the guest’s feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.²⁰ Additionally, Susskind’s work in this area determined that individuals who are prone to complaining, and therefore self-identify as having experienced a service failure, have an increased need for mitigating information.²¹ Thus, while communication is an important service provider attribute at all stages of service delivery, excellent communication is even more critical for those customers who experience a problem, concern, issue, or special circumstance during their service experience.

Customer service has long been studied for its role in organizational success. The service-profit chain captures the concept that excellent service drives success, as outlined by Heskett and Schlesinger.²² Their approach applies tangible metrics to demonstrate how all elements of an organization’s practices and policies that support the delivery of quality service drive customer loyalty and satisfaction, ultimately increasing an organization’s profitability. Schneider and Bowen argued that customer satisfaction is a function of the customer’s experience and that, similarly, an employee’s ability to deliver excellent customer service is a function of the employee’s experience.²³ Essentially, human resources management practices, including the presence of ongoing professional development and having the right tools for the job (including training) are responsible for creating both the employee experience and the guest experience. Michel *et al.* examined the relationship between supportive workplace practices and front-line service providers’ abilities to deliver quality customer service.²⁴ They reported that effective human resource practices, including training focused on developing high-quality customer-service skills, were linked with increased employee self-efficacy. The increase in self-efficacy was further tied to improved organizational performance.

Schmit and Allscheid’s findings point to the critical importance of a positive service climate that

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Erickson, T. J. (2005). Testimony submitted before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, May 26.

¹⁶ Michel, J. W., Kavanagh, M. J., & Tracey, J. B. (2013). Got support? The impact of supportive work practices on the perceptions, motivation, and behavior of customer-contact employees. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 54(2), 161-173. doi: 10.1177/1938965512454595.

¹⁷ Gronroos, Christian (1984). A Service Quality Model and Its Marketing Implications. *European Journal of Marketing*. 18 (4). 36-44.

¹⁸ Averill, J. R. (1982). Anger and aggression: An essay on emotion. Springer Science & Business Media.

¹⁹ Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault, *op.cit.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ See: Susskind, A. M. (2004). Consumer frustration in the customer-server exchange: The role of attitudes toward complaining and information inadequacy related to service failures. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*. 28(1), 21-43.

²² Heskett, J. L., & Schlesinger, L. A. (1994). Putting the service-profit chain to work. *Harvard Business Review*, 72(2), 164-174.

²³ Schneider, B., & Bowen, D. E. (1993). The service organization: Human resources management is crucial. *Organizational Dynamics*, 21(4), 39-52.

²⁴ Michel *et al.*, *op.cit.*

supports employees in four areas, namely, managerial, supervisory, monetary, and service. These four facets of a positive service climate improve service intentions, or the individual employee's investment in providing good service to guests.²⁵ In turn, employees' excellent service yields improvements in customers' satisfaction and their perception of service quality. In a further examination of service climate, Susskind, Kacmar, and Borchgrevink studied the role of supportive workplace practices in front-line, customer-facing hospitality employees. They found that "when employees become conscious of the organization's goals for service and the role that standards play in that process, they will be better able to direct and influence the service process to meet those goals."²⁶ It is important to note, however, that simple awareness of service standards and goals does not accomplish any productive improvement in service quality. Instead, the Susskind *et al.* findings indicate that standards and goals can only be transmuted into lasting impacts on service climate and employees' individual customer orientation through appropriate guidance and direction.

Simply put, without managerial leadership and education through coaching, development, and training, service goals cannot be effectively realized. In this regard, Mattila and Enz suggested that frontline employees "could be trained to adjust their service delivery styles according to the real-time emotional feedback provided by each individual customer," lending support for a behavior-based training approach to improving guests' perception of service.²⁷ With this in mind, the research we present here posits the following. Providing high-quality customer service training that focuses on driving the behaviors that influence the employee-customer interface will yield improvements in customer perception and, further, the effects of managerial support through face-to-face training sessions may amplify the effect of the training.

The Effects of Training

The objective of this study was to determine whether the influence of behavior-based online customer service training could be measured via changes in guests' perception of the service experience. The steps

²⁵ Schmit, M. J., & Allscheid, S. P. (1995). Employee attitudes and customer satisfaction: Making theoretical and empirical connections. *Personnel Psychology*, 48, 521–536.

²⁶ Susskind, A. M., Kacmar, K. M., & Borchgrevink, C. P. (2001). Customer service providers' attitudes relating to customer service and customer satisfaction in the customer-server exchange. <http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/articles/1068>.

²⁷ Mattila and Enz, *op.cit.*

are as follows: **(1)** confirm that the measured employee behaviors are critical to the guests' perception of their service experience with front-line service personnel; **(2)** examine the efficacy of training in changing employee behavior in a way that is measurable by changes in guest perception; and **(3)** determine the recommended training intervention to elicit the best potential behavioral change. Our goal was to determine whether the resulting behavioral change in employees resulted in an improved experience for the guest.

This research is based on a manipulated experiment that compares the effects on customers' view of employees' behavior based on two hotel properties' customer-service training for their front desk employees. We randomly assigned the hotel properties to one of two manipulated conditions of training implementation (one solely online and the other blended with face-to-face training), as we explain below. Data collection via a survey instrument occurred at two periods of time, first prior to the training intervention, to establish a baseline of service performance and impact of behaviors on service, and then once the training intervention started, to evaluate its impact. All hotel overnight guests with a valid email address on file were emailed a link to the survey questionnaires through Revinat's digital survey platform.

Sample and Procedure

The intervention was conducted at two medium-size hotels in Nevada controlled by the same ownership group. Although the two hotels provide identical core services, including lodging, food and beverage, and leisure activities, they differ in their service tier and additional amenities. Hotel 1 is a 210-room, three-star property that targets modest spenders and leisure travelers, especially families and groups on a budget. This property offers kid-friendly areas, specifically with a focus on athletics. Hotel 2 is a 212-room, four-star property that targets corporate groups and meetings, as well as mid-tier leisure travelers who appreciate luxury services. This hotel also features a full-service casino, with both table games and slot play.

Our training interventions involved all members of the front desk team at the two properties, as identified by the participating hotels' leadership. We chose front-desk workers because they experience a high volume of guest interactions, and because this allowed us to delineate those teams in our survey (leaving aside guests' experience relative to interactions in other divisions of the property). Hotel 1 had nine front-desk employees, who represent 16 percent of the hotel's 55-person staff, while Hotel 2 had eleven

Customer survey response

	Hotel 1			Hotel 2		
	Before	After	Total	Before	After	Total
Survey Invitations	961	1,029	1,990	1,732	2,358	4,090
Survey Responses	128	142	270	283	229	512
% Participation	13%	14%	14%	16%	10%	13%
TripAdvisor Reviews*	39	51	90	64	63	127
	4%	5%	5%	4%	3%	3%

*Note: Reviews collected through Revinate

front-desk employees, representing 2 percent of the casino-hotel's 550-person workforce (most of whom work in the casino). A consequence of the labor size differentials at the two properties is that guests at Hotel 2 are more likely to encounter employees who did not receive training.

During the research period, all overnight guest reservations with an email address on file were sent at least one digital survey via Revinate, a third-party software solution for guest feedback. Participation rates were similar for the two properties. Hotel 1 sent out a total of 1,990 surveys, 961 before the training and 1,029 after. A total of 270 guests responded (13.6% participation). Hotel 2 sent out a total of 4,090 surveys, 1,732 before the training and 2,358 following. This effort resulted in a total of 512 responses (12.5% participation). The surveys contained 24 questions, four of which were demographic in nature, and seventeen of which were specific to the front desk service experience. The final three questions focused on the following measures of guest satisfaction:

- (1) Likelihood to recommend, which can be used to calculate net promoter score (NPS);
- (2) Helpfulness of the front desk personnel in seeking a satisfactory resolution to the problem, issue, concern, or special circumstance; and
- (3) Guest satisfaction with the resolution of the problem, issue, concern, or special circumstance.

In addition, the Revinate software automatically collected data on any guest who completed the survey and then also posted a review on TripAdvisor. This allowed for two additional measures of guest satisfaction: the TripAdvisor overall rating and TripAdvisor service rating categories.

The seventeen questions specific to the front desk service experience used 7-point Likert-type scales to measure engagement, communication, and attitude, as exhibited by front desk personnel. To measure these behaviors, we consulted and adapted a number of scale resources, including scales from the *Marketing Scales Handbook: Multi-Item Measures for Consumer Insight Research*, to focus more closely on engagement, communication, and attitude.²⁸ Exhibit 1 summarizes the number of survey responses and social media reviews collected in the periods before and after training.

Impact of Behavioral Attributes on Guest Perception Outcomes

In addition to net promoter score (NPS Score), TripAdvisor overall rating (TripAdvisor Overall), and TripAdvisor service rating (TripAdvisor Service), the survey measured guest satisfaction variables of (1) employee helpfulness in resolving the problem, issue, concern, or special circumstance (Helpfulness of Staff), and (2) the guest's satisfaction with the resolution of the problem, issue, concern, or special circumstance (Satisfaction with Problem Resolution). However, we must point out that each of these variables reflects different elements of a guest's experience. NPS Score and TripAdvisor Overall, for instance, are reflective of the broad travel experience, of which customer service constitutes just one of many components. TripAdvisor Service and Helpfulness of Staff are the closest to isolating just the service provider's role. Even then, however, TripAdvisor Service encompasses exposure to any member of the staff, while the Helpfulness of Staff variable isolates the guest experience

²⁸ Bruner, G. C. (2013). *Marketing Scales Handbook: Multi-item measures for consumer insight research* (Vol. 7), GCBII Productions.

EXHIBIT 2

Potential impact of employee behaviors on guest perception of service

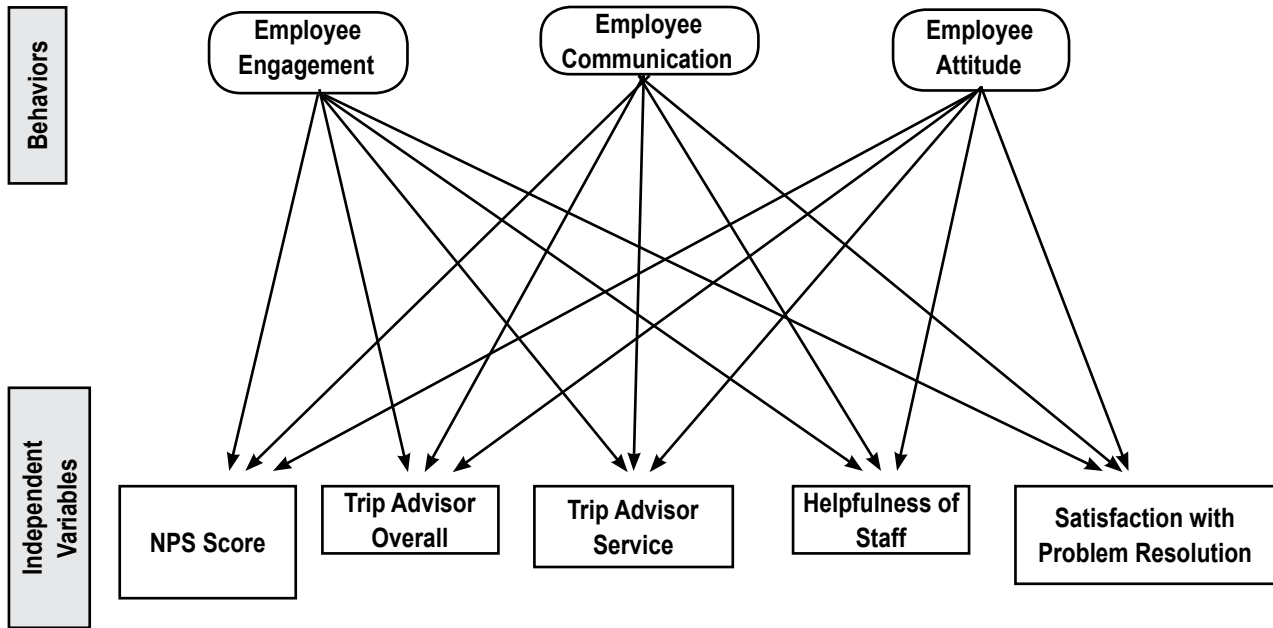


EXHIBIT 3

Relationship between employee behaviors and measures of satisfaction

Model	NPS Score	TA Overall	TA Service	Helpfulness	Satisfaction with Problem Resolution
R-Square	40.00%	49.80%	66.40%	50.90%	49.50%
(Constant)	-0.386	0.761	0.560	0.519	0.185
Engagement	0.963*	0.641*	0.363*	-0.005	0.111
Communication	0.055	0.049	0.072	1.237*	1.218*
Attitude	1.196*	0.180	0.522*	0.020	-0.012

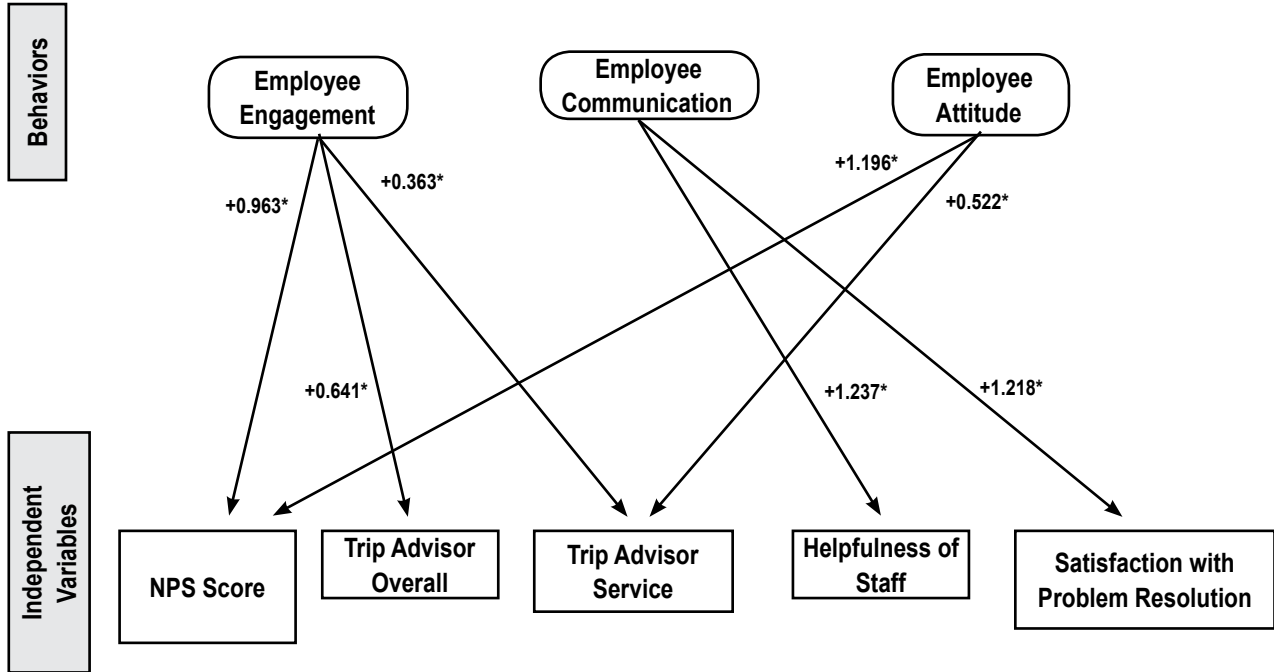
Note: * indicates significant at 0.05 level

with just front desk staff. Satisfaction with Problem Resolution is a reflection of both the problems facing the guests and the processes and procedural structures that exist to empower front desk personnel to solve those problems.

Before training. The model in Exhibit 2 illustrates the potential relationships that exist between the independent variables (that is, service provider behaviors of engagement, communication, and attitude) and the five dependent variables (the measured guest satisfaction variables). During the before-training portion of the study, we applied linear regression to look at

the relationships between employee behaviors and satisfaction, as outlined in Exhibit 2. Those regressions assessed the effects of the three behaviors upon each dependent (satisfaction) variable, as summarized in Exhibit 3. The three employee behavior constructs explained 40.0 percent of the variance in NPS, 49.8 percent of the variance in TripAdvisor Overall, 66.4 percent of the variance of TripAdvisor Service, 50.9 percent of the variance in Helpfulness of Staff, and 49.5 percent of the variance in Satisfaction with Problem Resolution.

Actual impact of employee behaviors on guest perception of service



Employee Engagement proved to have a significant, positive relationship on the following three measures of guest experience satisfaction: NPS Score, TripAdvisor Overall, and TripAdvisor Service. Engagement was a positive behavior, although not significant, for determining Satisfaction with Problem Resolution. Notably, engagement yielded a slightly negative, although insignificant, relationship with Perceived Helpfulness of Staff, suggesting that an employee who presents as highly engaged but is ultimately unhelpful is a turn-off for guests.

Employee Attitude is the strongest behavioral indicator of the overall experience measures of NPS Score and TripAdvisor Service. However, attitude was a positive, but not significant, indicator of TripAdvisor Overall and Helpfulness of Staff. A slight negative relationship exists between attitude and Satisfaction with Problem Resolution, suggesting that there is a strong link between both style and substance for employee behavior. That is, an employee with an excellent attitude but no ability to solve problems will create a more negative impression than an employee

with the capacity to solve problems but who displays a marginal attitude.

It was surprising to see the relationship that emerged between Employee Communication and the different service satisfaction metrics. Although positive, communication was not significantly related with NPS Score, TripAdvisor Overall, or TripAdvisor Service. This suggests that an emphasis on script-like communication standards during training are a misplaced effort, and that more time should be spent on promoting and improving attitude and engagement, as guests are more influenced by these behaviors than by the communication that takes place during the interaction. That said, however, communication becomes not only the strongest, but also the only statistically significant behavioral indicator of positive outcomes when guests are asked about problem-resolution situations. Employee communication is critical for both the perception of the Helpfulness of Staff in resolving problems and Satisfaction with the Problem Resolution. Exhibit 4 illustrates the impact of the various employee behaviors on guest perception of service.

Linear regression for training and employee behaviors

Model	Engagement	Communication	Attitude
R-Square	0.40%	1.20%	0.80%
	B	B	B
(Constant)	4.296	4.422	4.115
Hotel	-0.138	-0.271*	-0.136*
BA	-0.071	-0.104	-0.036
Hotel*BA	0.151	0.192	0.174*

Note: * indicates significant at 0.05 level

Impact of Training

We evaluated two training approaches:

- (1) online-only training, and
- (2) a blended approach that included online and face-to-face training.

For this study, we decided to offer both training interventions, rather than train one group of employees online and have the other group as a control with no intervention or with just face-to-face intervention. In part we did this because the data collection in the “before intervention” stage also serves as a control for the two properties. For the training intervention, all participants were given access to the eight online training modules in the Cornell University Service Excellence On-Demand Training, available through eCornell.²⁹ Each module consists of video segments, graded assessment questions, and a practice activity. Training content focuses on critical thinking skills and strategies to facilitate the understanding and improvement of behaviors that promote positive interactions between service provider and guest. Participants were instructed to work on the training at their own pace for a period of eight weeks, although they were not required to finish the online content. Thus, participants worked with the online training at times and locations that were most convenient for them.

Employees at Hotel 1 engaged in the blended training. In addition to the online material, they met for four regularly scheduled one-hour face-to-face training sessions that allowed them to discuss two of

²⁹ See: <https://www.ecornell.com/> and <https://www.ecornell.com/corporate-programs/service-excellence/>.

the online modules in each hour of training (that is, half an hour dedicated to each module subject). The supervisor hosting the facilitated discussions was given access to the workshop guides that are provided with the eCornell training modules. The guides contain discussion questions, review prompts, and role play scenarios, creating an out-of-the-box tool to guide the live training sessions and foster collaboration. Supervisors could modify workshop guide content to reflect the hotel’s business needs, as well as the amount of time available for discussion.

Employees at Hotel 2 completed all of the online training modules independently with no intervention from an instructor during the training. Instead, these employees engaged in just one discussion with their supervisor, who merely asked them whether they had any thoughts, feedback, or questions about the online material. These supervisors made no use of or reference to the workshop guides.

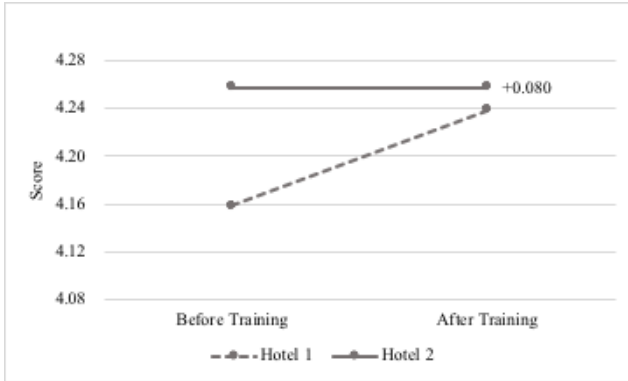
Impact of Training on Behavioral Indicators

Our analysis of the second phase of the study began with a return to the pre-training survey analysis summarized in Exhibit 4, which shows the linkage between employee behaviors and guest satisfaction. We applied linear regression as means to assess whether training can improve these behaviors by looking at the differences in employee behaviors (again, engagement, communication, and attitude) across the two hotels (Hotel), changes in behaviors after training (BA), and any differences in training method (online only versus blended) as measured by the interaction between Hotel and BA (Hotel*BA). Results of the linear regressions are shown in Exhibit 5. Note that the parameter

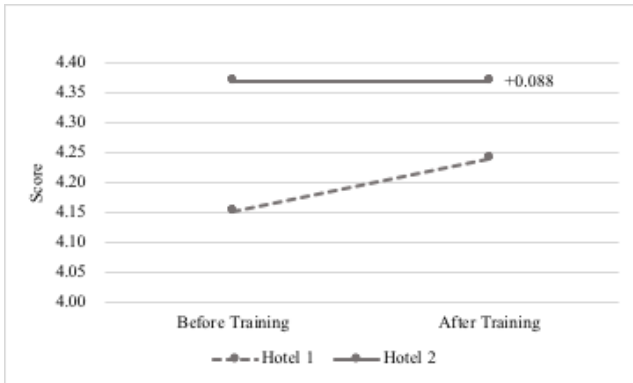
EXHIBIT 6

Linear regression effects

Panel A:
Engagement



Panel B:
Communication



Panel C:
Attitude

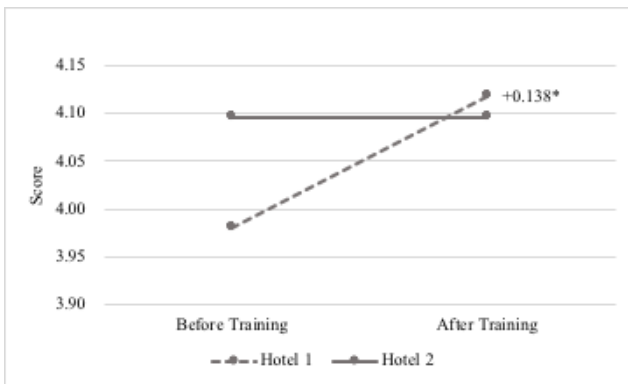


EXHIBIT 7

Change in perceived employee behavior after training

Behavior	Hotel 1 Change	Hotel 2 Change
Engagement	0.080	-0.071
Communication	0.088	-0.104
Attitude	0.138*	-0.036

Note: * indicates significant at 0.05 level

estimates for Hotel and Hotel*BA need to be combined to evaluate the impact of training upon behaviors. These net effects are illustrated in the three panels of Exhibit 6.

As indicated in the panels in Exhibit 6, Hotel 1 saw improvements in all three behavioral attributes, although the improvement in attitude was the only significant change ($p < .05$). By contrast, Hotel 2 saw no significant change in behaviors resulting from training (see Exhibit 7).

A clear lesson here is that the intensity of implementation is an important determinant of outcome. Hotel 1 had both a larger relative population of employees involved in training and a more robust training approach. The more intense blended training methodology afforded Hotel 1 employees a potential total of eight online lessons and four face-to-face training sessions. In contrast, Hotel 2's employees had access only to the eight online lessons. Not surprisingly (considering that managers were supporting Hotel 1's online training), Hotel 1 had an online lesson completion rate of 56 percent, compared with Hotel 2's online completion rate of 45 percent.

Impact of Training on Guest Satisfaction

Given that the training created some positive initial results, but only showed significance for the change in attitude, and also given the small data set, our expectations for changes in guest perception were moderate. Nevertheless, we could assess the impact of training upon changes in guest satisfaction, as summarized

in Exhibit 8. Hotel 1 experienced increases in all five guest satisfaction measures (i.e., NPS, TA Overall, TA Service, Helpfulness of Staff, and Satisfaction with Problem Resolution). Helpfulness of Staff showed significant improvement ($p < 0.05$), an outcome that reflects directly on the training, as this is the only measure that isolates guest interactions with the front desk staff. In contrast, NPS Score and even TripAdvisor Service are framed as an assessment of the entire hotel experience.

Hotel 2 recorded no significant change in front desk personnel behavior following the training (also shown in Exhibit 8). In fact, three of the guest satisfaction measures decreased, albeit not significantly, and the other two, TripAdvisor Overall and TripAdvisor Service, decreased significantly after the training. These results suggest that Hotel 2 may be experiencing operational concerns outside of the front desk staff. To attribute these issues to the front desk staff, one would expect to see a significant decrease in Helpfulness of Staff. Instead, Helpfulness of Staff remains consistent even while other metrics are declining.

And When There's a Problem...

One outcome of note was the change in guest satisfaction measures for the 119 guests who self-identified as having experienced a problem, issue, concern, or special circumstance. This cohort reported notable changes in their satisfaction with the experience, in a comparison of those who reported problems before training and those who reported problems after training, as summarized in Exhibit 9. This category of guests at Hotel 1 ($n = 41$) experienced a statistically significant increase in Satisfaction with Problem Resolution, Helpfulness of Staff, and NPS Score (compared to a significant increase only in Helpfulness of Staff for the whole sample).³⁰ These results suggest positive outcomes with regard to the importance of critical thinking skills when delivering service to guests who are having a difficult or complex experience. It further demonstrates the tremendous opportunity that lies in empowering front-line service personnel to handle difficult and challenging guest interactions.

Training to Improve the Service Experience

Any organization that prides itself on customer service strives to improve the employee behaviors that promote positive guest perceptions of service experiences. This study presents a preliminary examination

³⁰ We don't report changes in TripAdvisor scores, as few guests who identified problems also posted reviews to TripAdvisor.

EXHIBIT 8

Changes in satisfaction after training

Satisfaction Measure	Hotel 1	Hotel 2
NPS Score	0.158	-0.047
TripAdvisor Overall	0.237	-0.404*
TripAdvisor Service	0.273	-0.360*
Helpfulness of Staff	0.380*	-0.168
Satisfaction with Problem Resolution	0.194	-0.215

Note: * indicates significant at 0.05 level

EXHIBIT 9

Changes in satisfaction after training for those guests reporting problems

Satisfaction Measure	Hotel 1	Hotel 2
NPS Score	2.024*	-0.513
Helpfulness of Staff	1.402*	-0.093
Satisfaction with Problem Resolution	1.522*	-0.221

Note: * indicates significant at 0.05 level

of the role that a training program that blends online and face-to-face methodologies can have on teaching, training, and improving those employee behaviors—particularly, critical thinking. Moreover, these results suggest that it is possible that improvements in those critical employee behaviors also have the potential to drive improved perceptions of the experience on the part of guests, especially for consumers who encounter a problem, issue, or concern during the course of their stay.

A chief limitation of this study is the number of employees trained as against the organization size. Choosing the front desk as the trained cohort was intended to clearly delineate a service experience for guests completing the survey. The unintended consequence was that this created unequal ratios of trained employees between the two hotel properties. Moreover, the relatively small percentage of trained employees in Hotel 2 may have diluted the results of their training. On the other hand, the findings from Hotel 1 point to the possible importance of intensity in training. A larger study is required to confirm the ideal intensity level, both in terms of the way in which the training is administered and the cohorts of employees trained. ■

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