



Guest Services

by Robert M. Kok

Little failures can lead to loss of guest loyalty: Are you watching the details?

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During a recent business trip to an unnamed hotel in an unnamed city, I experienced a number of “little failures” in the service provided by the hotel I stayed at. As I prepared an email to send to the general manager, whom I met while there, it occurred to me that sometimes we focus on the large problems, while missing the little ones. Many of us are not trained to focus on minutia.

I once had a boss who was the administrator of a major corporate law firm, making a six-figure income. In addition to his normal duties running the firm, he often stopped during his tours of the offices to straighten a picture or wipe dust off a table. He realized that if his firm’s attorneys were going to charge clients \$350 per hour for services, the firm’s offices ought to portray the best possible image at all times. Even if he had to do some of the work himself! It was a lesson I have never forgotten.

A friend reminded me that old-time hotel general managers often had the “GM Stoop” from years of constantly picking things off the floors of their hotels. She wondered if that was no longer true because nowadays they spend much of their time at their computers staring at the hotel’s performance numbers. Perhaps today’s GMs are suffering from “computer slouch” instead?



So, let me share my email to the hotel’s general manager with you:

It was so nice to meet you during my recent stay for the conference. Congratulations on your new position as General Manager. I wish you much success.

As I mentioned to you when I was there, I was very impressed with the friendliness of your staff. They present a strong and positive image for your hotel. Overall, my stay was very good.

Because I’m a college professor in a hotel management school, as well as a nit-picker by nature, I want to mention to you a number of “little failures” that I noticed. I’m sure at this early point you are focusing on big things (as you should), but I wanted to put these little failures on your to-do list for the future.

- 1. Room service dishes sat in the hall near my guestroom for 12-18 hours before being picked up.*
- 2. On Wednesday night at the bar, I asked for Ginger Ale only to be told that they did not have it. I took the bartender’s comment to mean that it was not normally carried, rather than temporarily being out. In over 40 years of drinking in bars I’ve never been in one that did not carry Ginger Ale.*
- 3. On Thursday night at dinner there was no half & half available for my coffee. What ever happened to the idea of going to the local grocery store when something like that happens?*
- 4. The on-demand movies did not work on either of my TVs. I called the front desk on Wednesday night to ask and was told that the satellite was down, but would be up soon. I never had on-demand movies the entire time I was there (through Saturday morning). I did NOT call the desk again about this. One wonders if I was lied to.*
- 5. The clock in my room was 35-40 minutes off from the time I arrived, and was never reset by Housekeeping. Isn’t this standard procedure to check the clock during a room cleaning?*

6. *The light on the clock face provided a night light for the bedroom section (I had one of the split rooms) but it was far too bright. Also, I could NOT read the display at night from the other side of the bed. The blue colored background with black numbers doesn't work. Display needs to be red.*

7. *Despite the excess light (for night lighting) in the bedroom, there was no nightlight in the bathroom. Thus, I had to turn on the bathroom light to see in the middle of the night. Not good! Please add a nightlight to the bathrooms.*

8. *There are no channel labels on the TV screen, just channel numbers. Is it possible to program channel labels with your system?*

9. *The bathroom floor had a number of paint drips on it as well as two blobs of something (tile mortar? gum?)*

10. *The television located in the guestroom sitting area malfunctioned a couple of times. Once I could not get it to turn off. Another time when I turned it on, it went off after 20 seconds or so. This repeated several times. In both cases the TV eventually worked (not sure why) so I did not call the front desk.*

11. *The hallway on floor 9 is a disaster. It may be that you're waiting for a major rehab at a later time. However, it appears that minor, routine maintenance may not have been the standard at this hotel before your arrival. Items for your hotel's attention would include having someone touch up minor nicks in the paint on chair rails and doors on a regular basis, reattaching parts of wallpaper that come loose as they occur, replacing the glass (plastic?) facing on the Exit light near my room.*

12. *Upon arrival on Wednesday I took a pair of slacks to the front desk so that they could be sent to the dry cleaners. I explained to the young man there that I needed them for Friday, and was assured that they would be back by 6:00 p.m. on Thursday night. When I checked on Thursday they had never been sent to the cleaners. I was told that the service did not pick up Thursday morning. True or not? Why weren't they called? Should you change services if they are unreliable? The young man at the desk Thursday night said he would see what could be done (even at that late hour) and would call me. He did not call. Friday evening I again asked for my slacks (and was prepared to argue that I should not have to pay for them to be cleaned) only to discover that they STILL had not been dry-cleaned. So I brought them home and took them to my cleaners.*

13. *The toilet seat in my room is loose.*

Again, these are all minor things, but collectively they add up. I hope that you are able to transform this hotel into a first-class property. Your location near the arena appears to give you a nice competitive positioning, especially because you are priced below the neighboring hotels. Good luck!

What response would you have sent to a guest if they had sent you this email? The response I received was a terse "Thank you for your comments." Is that the correct response? It is important, I think, for every hotel's entire management team to focus on the details of customer service as well as its response to customers who tell you about the hotel's failures. Too few customers provide such information. But once the hotel is provided with the information, management can ensure that these small items are fixed. Perhaps it's time again for your hotel's managers to each spend a night in their own hotel to see what "little failures" they can find.

As everyone deals with this weak economy and the consequent loss of customers, Management needs to be sure that they are not overlooking the small things that add up for the hotel's remaining customers, especially if the hotel wants to maintain their loyalty. While the hotel may not have money today for big changes at its property, operationally it can continue to tweak those aspects that are irritants to existing customers. Hopefully, a similar memo won't be written to you in the future. ✧



Did you know?

On average, it costs seven times more to find and replace an existing customer than it does to retain an existing customer. Hence, treat all guest complaints as gifts rather than nuisances, fix the source of irritation to the guest, and they will remain happy and return as a repeat guest.

(Robert M. Kok is an associate professor and department chair of The International Hotel School at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, RI. He teaches courses in franchising, small lodging property operations, time share resorts, strategic management and human resources. E-mail: robert.kok@jwu.edu.)