



Front Office

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The perfect check-in: Using 'touch points' and 'operational excellence' to deliver a great total customer experience

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Within a hotel, providing the 'perfect' check-in is an ideal that all hotels strive to achieve. Many hotels, however, believe the essence of a 'perfect' check-in falls solely on the interactions that take place at the front desk. Conceiving check-in as an "event" is too limited. Check-in is actually a series of events. The 'perfect' check-in is a *process* that begins when the customer arrives at the hotel and continues until the guest enters the guestroom and is satisfied with the accommodations.

In most situations the first impression of the hotel occurs before the guest arrives. The reservation process is actually the first interaction that sets guests' expectations. As the old saying goes, "You don't get a second chance to make a first impression." This is very true for the reservation process. The reservation process, although not part of the check-in process, is actually the first guest-hotel interaction. How the hotel handles that reservation is critical to a successful beginning of the hotel-guest relationship.

About touch points

A 'touch point' is a crucial moment when a guest interacts with a representative of the hotel. These moments are crucial because the service provided at that point have a major impact on the customer's experience. According to *Hotel & Motel Management* magazine, 80.9% of all hotel guests will choose a hotel known for its quality service over chain affiliation. Combining touch point analysis with operational excellence is the best way for a hotel to continuously improve quality assurance during the check-in component of a customer's arrival.

The following identifies the critical touch points for a 'perfect' check-in process. These examples apply to a full-service hotel, but many of these touch point examples also apply to the midlevel and limited-service hotel guest experience.

TOUCH POINT #1: PRE-ARRIVAL

✘ **Problem(s):** Phone call/reservation call not answered quickly; Operator not fully informed to answer questions; and/or poor attitude displayed by hotel representative.

▣ **Customer Expectations:** Phone call answered quickly; no more than one transfer; Hotel employees have pleasant and helpful attitudes at ALL times.

▶ **Current Hotel Standard:** Answer phone in 3 rings.

* **Primary Tools for Success:** Properly staff the department; train operators to *talk with a smile*; ensure that operators have *ample resources* to answer customer questions and to *reduce transferring* inquiries.

Pictured below: 'Touch points' such as this one are crucial moments when a guest interacts with various staff members of the hotel.



TOUCH POINT #2: VALET PARKING ATTENDANT

- ✘ **Problem(s):** Having to wait for attendant upon arrival.
- ▣ **Customer Expectations:** Attendant is always standing at the front of the hotel and is prepared to assist customer in a professional manner. Car is handled in a safe manner.
- ▶ **Current Hotel Standard:** Attendant greets customer, provides first name to customer, opens the car door, assists with removing luggage from car, and is responsible for parking and securing the guest's car.
- * **Primary Tools for Success:** Train staff in proper *appearance, posture, and duties*. Be sure *expectations* of performance are outlined to staff. If parking attendant serves as doorperson as well, provide *extra support* with proper staffing levels.

TOUCH POINT #3: DOORPERSON

- ✘ **Problem(s):** Unprofessional manner will set the tone as the customer enters the hotel.
- ▣ **Customer Expectations:** An individual dressed professionally, standing at the entrance and ready to welcome the customer with a friendly smile and greeting.
- ▶ **Current Hotel Standard:** Attendant greets customer, assists with luggage until bell staff arrives, opens door for customer to enter the hotel and offers assistance as needed.
- * **Primary Tools for Success:** Train staff in proper *appearance, posture, and duties*. Be sure *expectations* of performance are outlined to staff. Prepare attendant to answer a *wide variety of questions* regarding the hotel and surrounding areas.

TOUCH POINT #4: BELLPERSON (UPON ARRIVAL)

- ✘ **Problem(s):** Not available to assist with bringing luggage from car to inside the hotel.
- ▣ **Customer Expectations:** Someone holds luggage while guest checks-in at front desk. Guest expects bellperson to be every careful handling his/her items.
- ▶ **Current Hotel Standard:** Staff is alert and monitoring front drive for customer arrivals. Properly tag each luggage cart and move luggage with caution and care.
- * **Primary Tools for Success:** Bell staff serves as *goodwill ambassadors* for the hotel. *Adequately equip* hotel staff to serve this function well, including proper uniforms and professional nametags. Train staff to be *knowledgeable about the hotel and surrounding area*. Teach staff professionalism with *good eye contact, positive attitude* (friendly, courteous, and helpful), and to *acknowledge the presence of all customers* (e.g., when passing in corridors).

TOUCH POINT #5: FRONT DESK REPRESENTATIVE

- ✘ **Problem(s):** Guests waiting in line for a slow check-in.
- ▣ **Customer Expectations:** Quick & efficient check-in process lasting no more than 3-5 minutes.
- ▶ **Current Hotel Standard:** Check-in customer and have him/her moving toward a guest room within 5 minutes.
- * **Primary Tools for Success:** Train staff on computer and process of asking the right questions to accurately assign guestroom and accommodate preferences. *Repeat training* every 4-6 months. *Educate* staff on service recovery procedures if guest is dissatisfied. *Properly staff* the front desk to accommodate number of arrivals.

TOUCH POINT #6: BELLPERSON (ONCE CHECKED-IN)

- ✘ **Problem(s):** Not having bellperson available to deliver luggage causing a delay in receiving luggage in room.
- ▣ **Customer Expectations:** Have pleasant bellperson available to escort him/her to room.
- ▶ **Current Hotel Standard:** Immediately after check-in is complete, greet the guest. Immediately room the guest quickly and efficiently ensuring that the customer is satisfied with the guestroom before the bellperson departs.
- * **Primary Tools for Success:** As previously stated, the bell staff serves as *goodwill ambassadors* for your hotel. Train staff to keep luggage carts clean and have necessary tools to complete the job efficiently (e.g., door stops). *Outline expectations* for proper procedures when entering guest room (e.g., open curtains).

TOUCH POINT #7: HOTEL SECURITY, HOUSEKEEPING, AND CONCIERGE

- ✘ **Problem(s):** Seeing hotel staff not acknowledging or offering assist-ance.
- **Customer Expectations:** Every representative of the hotel provides a friendly acknowledgement. Looks for consistency among service within the hotel.
- ▶ **Current Hotel Standard:** Utilize the “five and ten rule” throughout the hotel. Acknowledge guests/employees ten feet away with a smile and eye contact. Offer a friendly greeting when the approaching guest/employee is five feet away.
- * **Primary Tools for Success:** Educate staff about the “five and ten rule.”

TOUCH POINT #8: CHECK-IN PLUS

- ✘ **Problem(s):** Customer is not fully satisfied after bellperson departs the room.
- **Customer Expectations:** Be able to call the front desk and have a positive resolution to the guest’s dissatisfaction/request.
- ▶ **Current Hotel Standard:** Provide accurate hotel information in the guestroom compendium. Programmed telephones allow customers to place a quick telephone call to the front desk.
- * **Primary Tools for Success:** Con-stantly ensure *information is accurate* to avoid further guest dissatisfaction. Be sure telephones are *correctly programmed*. Re-member this is not a physical touch point but completes the essence of a ‘perfect’ check-in.

Tips for Front Office Managers

As a front office manager, one can see the importance of training and communicating expectations to their staff. The following is a list of tips and general guidelines to remember when creating the ‘perfect’ check-in process at one’s hotel.

- Identify the touch points at the hotel.
- Constantly train staff members on guest-service skills.
- Train staff to be patient with difficult customers and work through any problem with diligence.
- Train employees in each applicable touch point area on service recovery techniques when things do go wrong. They will then be equipped to save a customer’s loyalty with the ability to fix things quickly.
- Management must exhibit to their staff the importance of exceptional customer service through their actions—EVERYDAY.
- Hire the best.
- Remember that the customer is in control; hence, employees and management will have to adapt to guests’ changing desires.
- Give employees a sense of ownership and let them help management decide upon the best process within each of their respective areas.
- Remember that building trust in one’s employees will help to build trust and loyalty with one’s customers.
- Put yourself in the customer’s shoes and then design the process that best suits your hotel.

Remember that the check-in process is more than the interactions at the front desk. Today’s customers want an exceptional experience from the reservation stage up through room occupancy. The framework in this article sets the stage for delivering an outstanding check-in experience. Persistence and hard work will enable management, with the help of its staff, to create the customer experience that many companies struggle to provide today. Delivering a great total customer experience in any hotel begins with the ‘perfect’ check-in. Now you have the tools to get started! ✧

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