Uncovering the Customer Experience Mystery ….intimate revelations from hotel guests

Susan Edwards-Aisuebeogun, Hester Stuart-Menteth and Professor Hugh Wilson

Cranfield
UNIVERSITY
School of Management

ccmf

Cranfield
UNIVERSITY
School of Management

Contents

The scoop

It has been widely argued that for many industries, reliable products delivered with competent and friendly service are becoming hygiene factors, with differentiation occurring on the basis of customer experience. There is little agreement, though, on what customer experience is, or how it might go beyond decent customer service. Many market research projects seem to use the 'experience' term simply as a fashionable re-branding of tracker surveys which monitor customer satisfaction across all touch-points or customer lifecycle events. More interestingly, some have used focus groups to elicit the factors leading to a strong emotional response, but have struggled to relate this convincingly to brand preference or behaviour. Academic literature is equally obsessed with the 'E' word, but also muddled as to its meaning or how to research it, beyond a vague consensus that emotions must have something to do with it.

We argue that the best people to define customer experience are the customers; that the experiences that matter are those which affect brand choice; and that customers' self-knowledge of how they take their brand choice decisions is sufficiently tacit that the semi-structured interview and focus group may fail to uncover relevant aspects of experience. We suggest repertory grid as a technique which is able to address all three points, and report on a project applying it to hotel customers through 24 in-depth interviews. In our research, we uncover 15 customer experience factors, identify five key factors, and link these factors to the emotions they stimulate.

Are we talking about it or doing it?

Many organisations are starting to face the grim reality that competent service is becoming less of a differentiator. By focusing on how well customers are served, organisations have been accused of separating the service from the customer and ignoring the experiences the customer has with the product[i]. Furthermore, the way in which this service is measured through service quality, is being criticised for focusing on the *process* rather than the *outcome* of service delivery. Since this outcome could be driven by the customer's evaluation of different stages of the consumption process then, a wider, more holistic concept is needed.

Although the resulting concept of customer experience is gaining increasing prominence as the next bar to cross in marketing, no agreement has been reached as to its meaning. While some regard it as entertainment that provides a little extra to customers at a premium fee, others view it as a well orchestrated marketing tool that forms part of an organisation's offering. Still, most of these arguments are theoretical and not based on any empirical evidence. Without a clear definition of customer experience, it would be difficult to develop a comprehensive and consistent framework that could be applied in practice.

The importance of understanding customer experience cannot be overemphasised since it has been said to affect loyalty behaviours[ii] and true loyalty affects profitability[iii]. In the past, this profitability was generated by short term sales strategies such as advertising. Meanwhile, it has been acknowledged that "traditional forms of advertising will not make a dent in revenues if the customer does not have a good experience."[iv] Therefore, companies need to carefully orchestrate those critical factors that contribute to their customers' experiences.

First, these experiences need to be understood. We set out to achieve this by interviewing 24 guests of three hotels within The Eton Collection, a chain of luxury boutique hotels and townhouses in London, Leeds and Edinburgh. The Eton Collection is an innovative player in the upper end of the European hotel industry. Over its nine year existence, it has amassed several recognitions for its excellent service, unique style and award winning French Modern cuisine.

Figure 1: Threadneedles, London –Flagship of The Eton Collection hotels

Part of The Eton Collection's success has been achieved through its strategy of establishing small luxury hotels in prime city centres, using refurbished historic buildings with a story attached to them. Since the city centres tend to be occupied by bigger hotels, this creates an opportunity

for The Eton Collection. However, this also puts them head to head with these bigger chains that have access to global financial support.

At its expansion stage coupled with high prices, demanding clientele, the need for product differentiation and a limited budget, The Eton Collection is unable to afford above-the-line advertising and must find other ways of attracting new customers while retaining existing ones. Realising that delivering competent service is not enough, The Eton Collection management was keen to gain some insight into those factors that will differentiate a great hotel experience from a poor one and how these factors affect their customers.

Figure 2: The Glasshouse, Edinburgh – one of The Eton Collection hotels

Before we unfold the customer experience mystery, though, we will review what has been said about customer experience so far.

What really is the experience economy?

"The curtain is about to rise on the Experience Economy, a new economic era in which every business is a stage, and companies must design memorable events for which they charge admission". Those words were written over a decade ago by Pine and Gilmore, seminal authors on customer experience. Now, in the 21st century, the same authors regard customer experience as a "distinct economic offering"[v]. They maintain that customer experience needs to be engaging, robust, compelling and memorable for it to become effective as a marketing tool. Such robustness suggests a holistic view of experience which will involve simultaneously improving product and service offering[vi].

Other arguments suggest that products or services generate experiences that transcend the offering[vii]. Customers are said to judge a company's offering not by its features, but by the extent to which it gives them the experiences they desire. It is recognised that customers are emotional beings that desire more than functionality. Such emotions are often activated by stimuli that result from experiences. Hence, some view customer experience as a set of cues that includes both functional and emotional components. Such emotions are said to be reactive and powerful, having a strong effect on loyalty behaviours.

This favourable emotional response is widely regarded as arising from any direct or indirect contact with the company across multiple touch points. This view suggests that customer experience occurs at different stages, that is, long before customers transact with a company, during their dealings with the company, and in their assessment afterwards. Some argue that understanding customer experience at every stage of the customer's encounter presents an opportunity to identify new ways of creating value. However, these views are theoretical and lack a clear definition of the elements that make up customer experience.

A few studies, however, have attempted to actually define the concept. Some researchers identified three aspects of customer experience during a river rafting expedition –personal growth, interaction and harmony with the environment[viii]. A previous study for the Cranfield Customer Management Forum highlights five components that make up customer experience: relationship, peer-to-peer, atmosphere, social impact and emotional, but points out that customer experience is context-specific and needs a sector-specific research[ix]. A further study conducted within a retail setting regards customer experience as entertaining, based on factors that are fun. In this study, nine factors were identified as having an impact on entertaining shopping experiences: social, task, time, product involvement, financial resources, retail prices, selection, sales people and store environment[x].

These studies, however, have typically used mailed surveys with pre-defined notions of experience or open-ended questionnaires asking respondents about the meaning of 'customer experience'. A major drawback to this approach is that it assumes customers are able to clearly articulate their emotions, resulting in a high risk of collecting inaccurate or ambiguous information since 'customer experience' can connote different meanings to different respondents. Furthermore, these studies fail to provide a coherent customer experience framework that can be applied by managers as a practical marketing tool. Rightfully, some have recommended an experience audit that will involve understanding drivers of emotions during service experiences from the customer's perspective.

Why not ask the customer?

In order to elicit such tacit understanding of 'customer experience', a special interview technique named repertory grid was used. This technique is an iterative process that involves making comparisons between well-defined elements (in this case, hotels) with the aim of identifying the interviewee's "personal constructs"[xi]. To better understand the way this unfamiliar but highly effective technique works, please get six cards (preferably 5" x 3") or cut a plain sheet of paper in six places and number them individually from 1 to 6.

Write down on cards 1 and 5 the names of any two hotels with which you had a good experience. Next, can you think of two other hotels with which you had a poor experience? Please write their names on cards 3 and 4. Finally, write on the last two cards (2 and 6), the names of two hotels with which you had an average experience. Well done. In our case, although the interviewees were guests of a boutique hotel, the hotels they named also included bigger hotel chains as well as "bed and breakfast".

The first set of two numbers (1, 5) represents a 'good' experience, (3, 4) represents a 'poor' experience, while (2, 6) represents an 'average' experience. Now that you have written down six hotel names, re-order the cards sequentially. Select three cards (called a triad) – 1, 2 and 3. Now, can you think of a respect in which your experiences with two of the hotels are similar, but different from your experiences with the third? Interviewee 4, for example, mentioned that two of the hotels were similar in that they both demonstrated high "attention to detail" whereas the third was "functional". "Attention to detail" is called the construct pole, and "functional" is called the contrast pole, of the "construct" of "attention to detail". Note these on two separate columns on a plain sheet of paper as shown in Table 1.

Next, rate all six hotels against *your* construct on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 represents the highest score and 7 represents the lowest score (the rating is used at a later stage to identify the most important constructs). In our case, interviewee 4 rated all six hotels against their attention to detail or how functional they were (refer to table 1). Try repeating this process using cards 4, 5 and 6, asking yourself whether you can think of a way in which two of these hotels are similar in your customer experience but different from the third, and then rating all six hotels against your second construct. Note that you are not permitted to mention the same construct more than once. Continue this construct elicitation and rating process using new triads each time. You could use the stars in the grid in table 1 as a guide on which cards to compare. The next comparison will be 1, 3 and 5 and so on.

CONSTRUCT POLE	ELEMENTS – HOTELS						CONTRAST POLE
	Hotel 1	Hotel 2	Hotel 3	Hotel 4	Hotel 5	Hotel 6	
Attention to detail	*1	*1	*7	5	3	7	Functional
Personal	1	1	3	*7	*2	*3	Cold and clinical
Friendly	*1	1	*7	6	*2	6	Didn't care
Small Feeling	1	*2	6	*5	*4	6	Nicely laid out
Corporate Image	1	1	5	3	2	5	Individual touch

Table 1: A sample repertory grid elicited from Interviewee 4
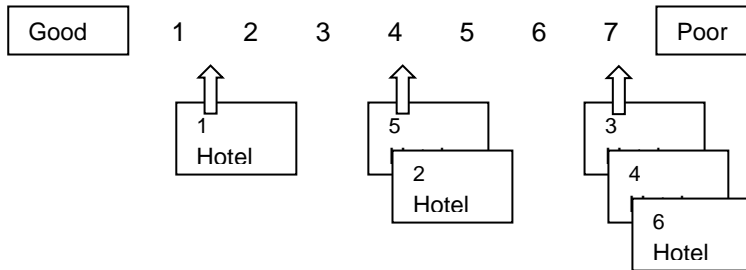
As the process continues, you may find it more difficult to come up with new constructs. You are probably now reaching constructs which you use in your decision-making but which you were not previously consciously aware of. The repertory grid process can reveal these where a straightforward interview or focus group might not. In order to tap into the deeper meaning of these underlying constructs and find any associated emotions, the laddering technique was also employed. This involves asking the interviewee questions such as: "what behaviour describes……? Why? How did you feel?"

> Example: when asked to explain how the construct "personal touch" made her feel, Interviewee 11 explained: "These two put a flower on my bed. I'm quite happy I can choose my pillows. They give us a complimentary biscuit or muffin. It makes me feel very warm. I got a *warm feeling*. Then they say 'thank you', 'good night' and 'have a good sleep'. There's a personal touch."

By the end of the 24 interviews, we had elicited the associated emotions along with 88 constructs of customer experience. Since many of these constructs were repeated by several interviewees, similar constructs were grouped under common categories with a label that provides a comprehensive definition for the constructs within each category. For instance, during the construct elicitation, Interviewees 4 and 16 each spoke of the "individuality" of a hotel, Interviewee 2 independently mentioned "personality, while Interviewee 9 used the term "character". These four constructs, along with other related constructs, were grouped under the category "character". In total, 15 categories emerged that we have termed "customer experience factors".

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes (a total of 14 hours). Over half the interviewees (62%) were aged between 30 and 49 years with none older than 69 years. In terms of gender, 42% of the respondents were female, while 58% were male. The interviewees emerged from 10 countries with the highest influx from the United Kingdom. Figures 3, 4 and 5 picture the sample composition by country, age and gender.
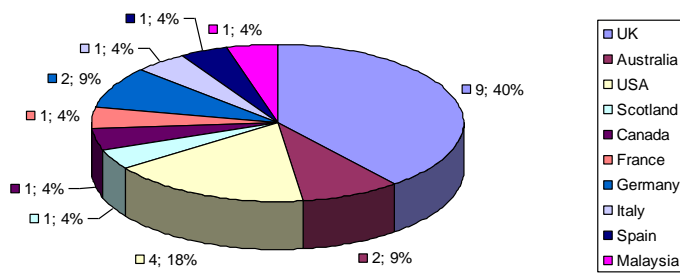

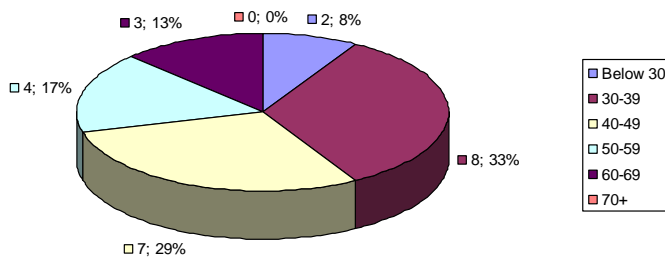
Figure 3: Sample composition by country

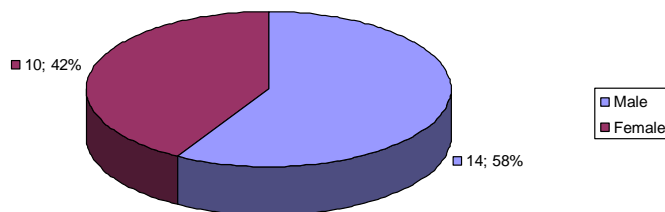*Figure 4: Sample composition by age*

Figure 5: Sample composition by gender

Expand your scope

The results from the interviews reveal that hotel customer experience is a wider concept that includes the way an organisation serves its customers (Service), the physical features of its offering (Functional) and some differentiating, somewhat less tangible features termed Organisational. The service dimension comprises six experience factors, two of which relate to the process of service delivery i.e. "organised service" and "communication", while the other four concerns the attitude of staff i.e. "empathy", "welcome", "recognition" and "helpfulness". Similarly, the functional dimension consists of five factors while the organisational dimension has four. Along with example quotes, each of these 15 factors is defined below based on what the interviewees understood them to mean.

FUNCTIONAL
- Basic Comfort
- Spaciousness
- Maintenance
- Consistent Standard
- Quality of food

SERVICE
- Welcome
- Helpfulness
- Empathy
- Recognition
- Organised Service
- Communication

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

ORGANISATIONAL
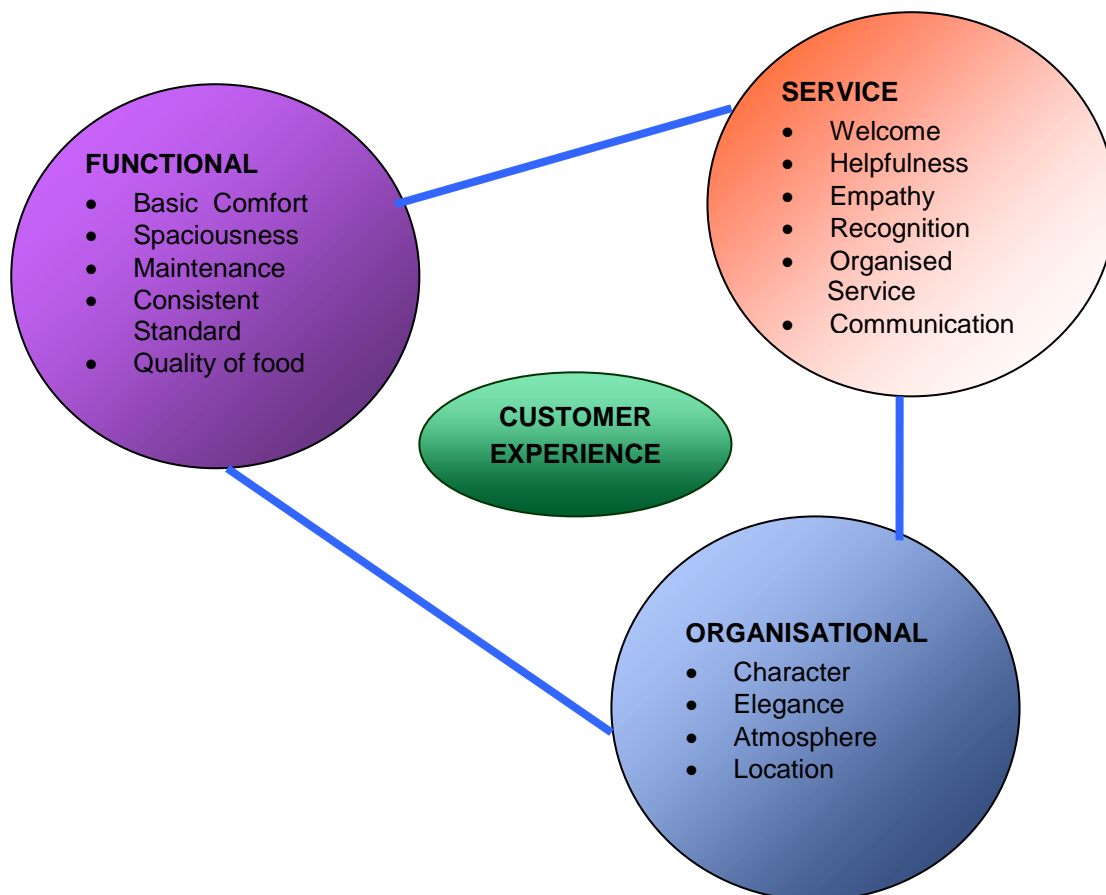- Character
- Elegance
- Atmosphere
- Location

Figure 6: Dimensions of Customer Experience

Elegance

Refers to the tangible aesthetics that make the customer feel special. Examples include colouring, lighting, type of décor, and view.

> Interviewee 3 puts it this way: "When you walk in there is a sense of space and elegance. Even though the room that I've stayed in both times is a narrow room, it has French windows at the end of the room which open on to a balcony overlooking the Thames. Everything in the room fits so that your sense of space, immediately you walk into the room, is drawn out to the waterfront and the boats."

Atmosphere

Atmosphere refers to the intangible ambience that appeals to the senses. Examples include sound and smell.

> Interviewee 21 explains: "The fact that there was a nice entrance as you walk in, very relaxed atmosphere, nice easy chairs, music playing, lots and lots of magazines round the place so that it straight away puts people into their comfy zone."

Character

This means the uniqueness or individuality of the hotel, which can be perceived from the hotel's integration with or adaptation to the culture of its environment.

> An interviewee expresses this view strongly: "If I go to Paris, I want to stay in a Parisian style hotel where I've got the culture and service of the French and if I come to England, I don't want to stay in a Hilton hotel that's like an American hotel that's doing exactly the same as what they do in Chicago and New York. I expect it to be more English."

Location

The proximity of the hotel to areas of interest and to interesting areas.

> "It wasn't safe because it was far from everywhere. It was not central." –Interviewee 5. "If I wanted to have a walk here after eating, it was very nice to have a walk outside. While in this hotel it was not because it was in an industrial place of the town." – Interviewee 22.

Welcome

The extent to which customers feel staff are happy to see them. This is perceived from the smiles on the faces of the staff, greeting customers and asking how their day went, calling customers by name, and maintaining eye contact.

> Interviewee 24 narrates: "When we walked in both receptionists stood up to welcome us to the hotel and we were asked to sit down to sign in. That's just nice. It just makes you feel more welcome. The staff are happy that you're there." Interviewee 19 explains the opposite scenario: "I felt like I was just bothering them every time I spoke to them – body language, poor eye contact or spending a long time to speak to you, fiddling around with their nails and then "oh okay, I'll help you". It's not instant!"

Helpfulness

The willingness of staff to help the customer, which is demonstrated by their quick responses to requests made by the customer, attention to detail, and knowledge about the hotel and the area where the hotel is located. Helpfulness also refers to staff ability to anticipate and solve customers' problems.

> Interviewee 20: "By the attitude of the staff. With a hotel like this, it would never matter whose job it was. The first person you speak to will always solve the problem."

Empathy

This means showing a personal interest in the guests by listening to them and treating them individually.

> "They speak to you. They were present at the breakfast and we could have a little chat about my trip, business and my nutrition, and I asked about the hotel. They told me more about the plans of the hotel." –Interviewee 17. "In this (other) hotel you feel that you are just a number." –Interviewee 2.

Recognition

This refers to knowing the needs of the guests and acting on that knowledge by providing a customised service or by anticipating what the guest wants.

> Interviewee 14 notes: "They know me and they know my needs. If I go to this other hotel, there's a particular white wine that I like,

which isn't technically on list anymore. When I go there, the guys always make sure that it's available in all restaurants in the hotel"

Organised Service

The extent to which the staff get things right the first time. It also means the overall coordination of the staff.

> Interviewee 16 complains: "They make mistakes with the bookings and they say oh we have no confirmation, but they definitely have it. Then they make you pay for your room, and the next day they say: 'Oh yeah, we found it. We got the confirmation', and then they have to refund it again to your card."

Communication

All communication, both internal and external, that the customer receives prior to staying at the hotel. This factor demonstrates that customer experience begins *before* the customer transacts with the organisation.

> Interviewee 26 compares: "With both of these, they were very easy to find information on the web in terms of positive feedbacks from other guests. This other hotel was lacking in terms of online information."

Basic Comfort

The extent to which the hotel is clean and the overall appearance of the hotel. This also means having the basic amenities that guests need to feel at home.

> "The bed is very important as well. The only problem is that the blanket was too short for me and I'm not tall. For a hotel room, that blanket is short" –Interviewee 6. "You have an ironing board and CD player, so that makes it more homely." –Interviewee 19. "They're both very clean, very comfortable." –Interviewee 4.

Spaciousness

Refers to the space within the rooms and the extent to which the hotel feels open, which could be perceived from the furnishings in the hotel.

> Interviewee 6 explains: "The height of the ceiling is very important. I often feel that I am sleeping in a box not in a room." Interviewee 26 adds: "When you have more space, I guess I just feel like I can spread myself out. I don't mind opening my suitcase."

Maintenance

Maintenance refers to the failure of basic amenities within a hotel. This was the only construct spoken of *only* in a negative light by the interviewees. This suggests that hotel guests do not pay attention to a well-maintained hotel but will notice one that is not well-maintained.

> "There was some internet connection but it was disconnecting. The bathroom was bad as well. I had to call someone to fix the pipe." –Interviewee 6. "The furnishings, the carpets, everything, looks very worn, needs renovation." –Interviewee 20.

Consistent Standard

'Consistent standard' refers to the expectations of the guests regarding certain standards that they anticipate from a particular hotel prior to staying at that hotel for the first time. This is different from all the other experience factors in that it is not an experience in itself but rather it has an impact on the type of experience that a customer expects. It occurs *before* the actual consumption process.

> Interviewee 7 recounts: "Usually you're not going to be surprised because they are not going to be horrible places. I expect them to be safe because I know them, it is a chain. I've been there several times and never got surprised." Interviewee 20 expresses this view: "You don't know what you're going to get. Normally you're booking from the internet so, obviously, everything on the internet is geared to look good. Until you actually go there, you're always a little bit apprehensive."

Quality of Food

The freshness, presentation and quality of food offered by a hotel.

> Commenting on variety, Interviewee 2 says: "It's because, probably, it was a big buffet but the same buffet you can find in other hotels in any country. There was nothing interesting, nothing to discover." Interviewee 24 speaks about freshness: "The cheese was tasteless, the salami was bad quality, the bread rolls were stale, the coffee tasted awful!" Finally, Interviewee 19 observes: "Fresh produce, having the option of fresh fruits or local produce, feeling that some care and attention has been put into the food. How it looks and how it's presented."

Orchestrate the key experiences

The repertory grid analysis allowed the 15 customer experience factors to be ordered in terms of their power in discriminating good overall experiences from poor ones, resulting in five key factors. These key factors were identified by a combination of the number of times they were mentioned by the interviewees (frequency) and their weighted variability index. The weighted variability index, or variability for short, is an indication of a respondent's most important construct, as it indicates the constructs that differentiate most strongly between the interviewee's elements.

A low variability with a high average rating, for instance, indicates a construct on which all products are highly rated. This type of construct is not the most significant even if it is one of the first constructs identified by the interviewee. An example is "basic comfort", which was mentioned by 63% of the interviewees, but which failed to meet the cut-off variability index of 28% (derived by 24 interviews divided by 88 constructs). Elegance, on the other hand, featured as having the second highest variability even though it was only mentioned by 21% of the respondents. This implies that the interviewees strongly differentiated between the hotels in terms of their experience of the visual aesthetics in these hotels (see table 2).

Experience Dimension	15 Customer Experience Factors	Frequency (%)	Variability (%)	Key Factor?
Service	Helpfulness	42	28	**YES**
✓	Welcome	38	26	NO
✓	Empathy	38	29	**YES**
✓	Recognition	17	27	NO
✓	Communication	13	25	NO
✓	Organised Service	13	26	NO
Organisational	Character	29	29	**YES**
✓	Elegance	21	29	**YES**
✓	Location	21	25	NO
✓	Atmosphere	21	30	**YES**
Functional	Basic Comfort	63	26	NO
✓	Maintenance	17	27	NO
✓	Spaciousness	13	24	NO
✓	Consistent Standard	13	25	NO
✓	Quality Of Food	13	31	NO

Table 2: Empirical evidence of the components of customer experience

The blue markings in table 2 identify the five key customer experience factors, namely helpfulness, empathy, character, elegance and atmosphere. These five factors meet the frequency-variability criteria. The grey highlights on the other hand, pinpoint factors that meet the criteria of frequency or variability but not both. Of these key customer experience factors, two – empathy and helpfulness – are classic elements of service quality, while the other three – character, elegance and atmosphere – seem more specific to the experience domain. The low variability of 'helpfulness' and its high frequency of mention means that the difference between the hotels compared against this construct is small, suggesting that many of the hotels compared tend to be helpful and pointing to the conclusion that helpfulness as well as the other service delivery processes are hygiene factors that customers expect an organisation to deliver.

Elegance, on the other hand, is an excitement factor that impacts heavily on the customers, who are not likely to demand or expect this feature but are delighted when they do receive it. An optimal experience portfolio, therefore, will focus on creating an experience that includes elegance, highlighting features like special paintings, lighting effects and breath-taking views as well as conveying an image that reflects the culture of the hotel's surroundings (character). This should be combined with the atmospheric aspects such as music, smell and controlled noise, since the results also show that atmosphere is an important part of customers' experiences.

Focus on what your customer wants to feel

Customers evaluate their experiences through the emotions they feel. So experience factors were linked to the emotions they generated - notably, feeling secure, important, relaxed, comfortable, warm and special. See Figure 7. Experiences were also found to be multifaceted in the sense that multiple aspects of the experience tend to produce similar emotions. Elegance and character, for example, make the customer feel special, while welcoming and basic comfort drive the feeling of comfort.

However, the process elements of service – organised service and communication – were found to be inactive as far as the customer's emotions are concerned. In addition to these processes of service delivery, helpfulness failed to have a discernable impact on customers' emotions – the only one of the five key customer experience factors not to be strongly associated with particular emotions. This further confirms that "helpfulness" and the process of service delivery are hygiene factors - a necessary but insufficient condition for excellent experience that every organisation is expected to deliver. By their nature, hygiene factors cause dissatisfaction when absent but do not increase satisfaction with their presence. Therefore, although a helpful attitude towards customers will not affect their emotions, an unhelpful attitude will yield greater dissatisfaction irrespective of a proper management of the other key experience factors.

Contrary to this, the excitement factors were found to drive emotions, causing the customer to feel special, relaxed, comfortable, important or warm. We found that these drivers of emotions are the organisational and service factors. They included four of the five key customer experience factors. "Character" and 'elegance' produce the emotion of feeling special. 'Atmospghere' makes customers feel relaxed. Whereas showing a personal interest in customers by listening to them makes customers feel important.
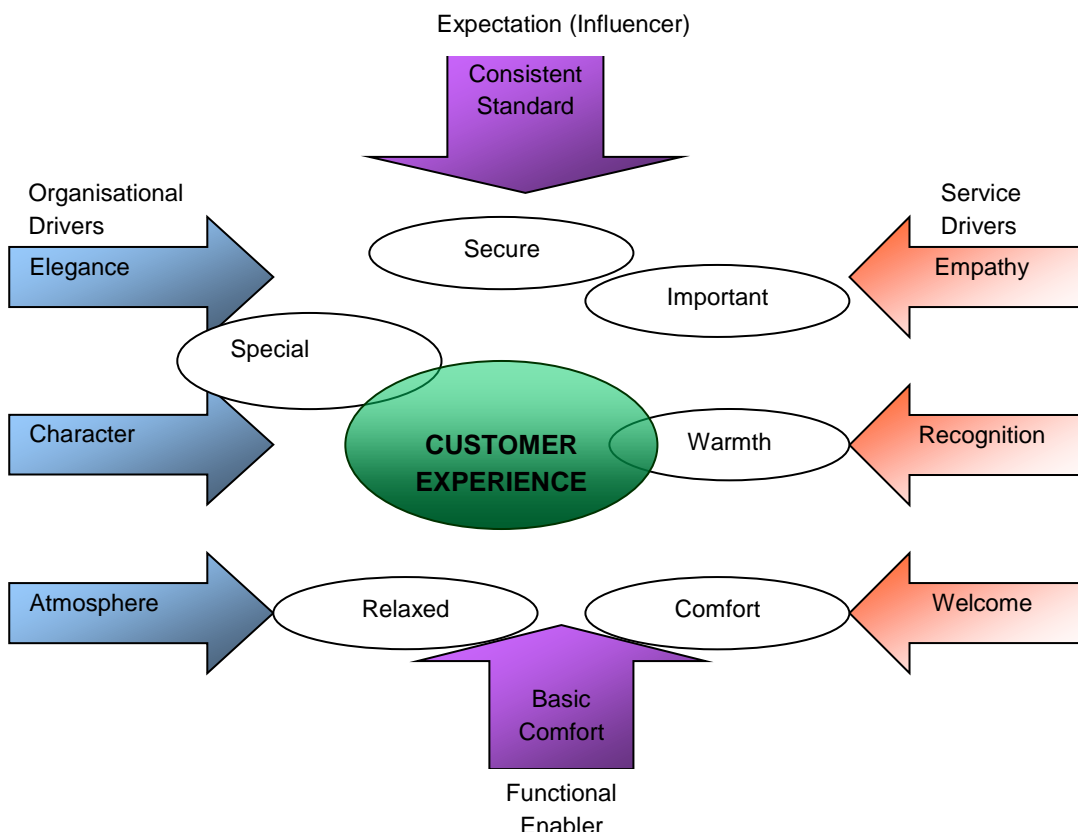

Figure 7: Empirical evidence of emotions stimulated by customer experience

Although "recognition" and "welcome" are not part of the key experience factors, they drive the emotions warmth and comfort respectively. Recognition, which involves knowing the needs of the guests and acting on that knowledge, makes the customer feel warm, which denotes affection. Whereas, "welcome" – the extent to which customers feel that staff are happy to see them – gives customers a comfortable feeling. However, some interviewees viewed staff friendliness as an intrusion into

their privacy. This has serious implications for managers when recruiting staff. Emotional training and professionalism of staff may take priority over an individual's natural friendly disposition.

In addition to these drivers of emotions, other customer experience factors were found to have a more subtle effect on customers' emotions. The expectations of customers regarding certain standards that they expect from a hotel – the consistent standard category – can be seen to influence customers' emotions since this factor is external i.e. begins before the customer actually stays at the hotel. The interviewees mentioned that the confidence they have in a hotel's brand name affects their experience and makes them feel secure since they know what to expect.

The provision of "basic comfort" naturally generates the emotion of "comfort". Interestingly a small percentage of guests referred to the presence of the other guests as making them feel comfortable and indicated that being amongst the same age group gives them a comfortable feeling. While customers will normally expect to enjoy the facilities that make their stay in a hotel comfortable, they will not normally choose a hotel because of these facilities. Indeed the extent to which a hotel is clean helps the guests feel comfortable or relaxed but does not actually *drive* emotions.

Special: *"When you go to those places you want to experience something that makes you feel special, so when you walk into these kinds of space, it's just very beautiful. When you go to a hotel, it doesn't matter if its business or pleasure, you do like to feel special." – Interviewee 25*

Important: *"More frequent, not just attention, but sometimes providing something that's a bit different. The level of attention makes you feel important." – Interviewee 9*

Secure: *"You know what you're going to get from these hotels. You feel secure." – Interviewee 20*

Relaxed: *"From the bedding it's very clean, very comfortable. It helps you to relax." – Interviewee 25*

Comfort: *The fact that there was a nice sort of entrance as you walk in, it was very relaxed atmosphere, nice easy chairs, music playing, lots and lots of magazines round the place so that straight away puts people into their comfy zone." – Interviewee 21*

Where the compass points

Since customer experience goes beyond delivering a good service, the marketing indicator points only to one conclusion – that competent service is now a hygiene factor. What does this mean for practitioners? That satisfaction measures are also hygiene factors. The results show why 'satisfaction' is such an impoverished emotion to concentrate on in surveys. Importantly, though, some factors such as helpfulness were important in brand choice without eliciting any particular emotion. This demonstrates how emotions form part of the customer's appraisal process as to whether their goals from a brand encounter are being met, as opposed to being the end goal of a customer experience in themselves – a conclusion consistent with psychology research, but at odds with much of the recent (and mostly unresearched) practitioner and academic literature on customer experience.

Another key point is that experiences are synergistic and therefore, need to be orchestrated. In order to differentiate themselves from their competitors therefore, companies will need to gear their resources towards orchestrating customer experience as a "distinct economic offering" by providing basic comfort, achieving elegance, establishing character and creating the right atmosphere for their customers, while displaying empathy and a helpful attitude. This, at least, is the set of dimensions of experience which matter with hotels: each sector will need to research what constitutes a perfect experience for their own customers. Such a portfolio of experience drivers should be combined with an emphasis on the emotions that these experiences stimulate and should form the crux of promotional messages across multiple channels and staff training.

These findings demonstrate that a new insight has emerged as a basis for incorporating emotions as a key measure of a wider, more holistic value creation tool – "customer experience". The challenge now rests in developing standard emotional measures that can be applied to each sector in practice.

About the authors

Susan Edwards-Aisuebeogun is a marketing professional and chartered accountant with six years' cross-sector experience in marketing, customer care and business development. Susan recently completed her MSc in Strategic Marketing at Cranfield School of Management and was awarded the 2007 Market Research Society Accredited Masters Prize for producing the best research-based Masters thesis in the UK.

Hester Stuart-Menteth is Group Marketing Director of The Eton Collection. In 2004 she gained an MSc in Strategic Marketing from Cranfield. She has published articles on customer experience in Interactive Marketing and the International Journal of Market Research.

Hugh Wilson is Professor of Strategic Marketing and Director of the Customer Management Forum at Cranfield School of Management. Hugh is listed in the Chartered Institute of Marketing's global 'Guru Gallery' as one of the fifty leading marketing thinkers alive.

References

[i] Schembri, S. (2006), "Rationalizing service logic, or understanding services as experience?" *Marketing Theory,* vol. 6, pp. 381-392.

[ii] Barsky, J. and Nash, L. (2002), "Evoking Emotion: Affective Keys to Hotel Loyalty", *Cornell Hotel & Restaurant Administration Quarterly,* vol. 43, pp. 39.

[iii] Reichheld, F. F. (2003), "The One Number You Need to Grow. (Cover story)", *Harvard business review,* vol. 81, no. 12, pp. 46-54.

[iv] Nutley, M. (2007), "Customer experience is the marketing tool that counts", Marketing Week (01419285), vol. 30, no. 14, pp. 19-19.

[v] Gilmore, J. H., and Pine, B. J., (2002), "Customer experience places: the new offering frontier", *Strategy and Leadership,* vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 4.

[vi] Calhoun, J. (2001), "Driving loyalty by managing the total customer experience", *Ivey Business Journal, London,* vol. 65, Iss. 6, p.69

[vii] Prahalad, C. K. and Ramaswamy, V. "Co-Creation Experiences: the Next Practice In.Value Creation", *Journal of Interactive Marketing,* vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 5-14.

[viii] Arnould, E. J. and Price, L. L. (1993), "River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter", Journal of Consumer Research, vol. 20, pp. 24.

[ix] Lemke, F., Wilson, H., and Clark, M., (2006), What makes a great customer experience?, Cranfield Customer Management Forum (White Paper).

[x] Jones 1999, Entertaining Shopping Experiences –an exploratory investigation, Journal of Retailing.

[xi] Goffin, K. and Mitchell, R. (2005), *Innovation management: strategy and implementation using the pentathlon framework*, Palgrave Macmillan.