A TENTATIVE STUDY ON CONSUMERS PERCEPTION AND IMAGE ON GREEN HOTELS - WITHIN TRICHY DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Hotels have numerous motivations for going green including: a feeling of social responsibility, governmental regulations, and economic benefits. However, as the number of green hotels continues to increase, current research about consumers’ perceptions of them is lacking. The perceptions and images consumers develop of green hotels have not been studied from the perspective of hotel guests until recently (Lee et al., 2010). The present study built upon the findings of Lee et al. (2010) by further investigating consumer perceptions in regards to their willingness to partake in environmental activities while staying in green hotels. To reduce the negative impact on the environment, the hotel sector in India has embarked on a course of implementing environmental management practices or a much formal tool called environmental management systems (EMS), an innovation which has been profoundly promoted to offer additional benefits to its adopters. Lee et al. (2010) employed a survey-based methodology; following in their footsteps this study used a similar methodology. While Lee et al. (2010) conducted an online survey distributed via a marketing research firm, and provided respondents with a description of what a green hotel is, this study sought to collect data through a survey of faculty and staff from one college within Trichy District.
Keywords: Green Marketing, Environmental Management System, Consumer Perception.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, efforts to improve environmental conditions as well as social responsibility in the hospitality industry have grown dramatically among individual hotels as well as the entire hotel sector. Green hotels, also known as environmentally friendly hotels, have become more and more familiar to consumers. The “Green” Hotels Association in the United States advocates that going green will help a hotel’s bottom line, develop the long-term value of a hotel property, nurture repeat customers and reduce staff turnover as the management cares for their health and well-being (“Green” Hotels Association). Consumers are showing increasing expectation for hotels to implement more environmentally friendly practices. However, some customers are reluctant to pay a premium for green hotel rooms (Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007). To promote green hotels, it is important for hotel management to understand what kind of products and services consumers are seeking from a green hotel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN AND GREEN HOTEL PRACTICES

The “greening” of various industries has become increasingly important in appealing to consumers. Although the hotel industry seems to have less visible influence on the environment than the chemical or oil industries, a hotel’s lurid energy and resources consumption and possible contamination (e.g., water and soil contamination resulting from the waste emissions of a hotel) of the environment puts great pressure on the environment (Rada, 1996). Along with the spread of concern for environmental degradation and the recognition of hotels’ impact on the environment, it is increasingly being recognized that the hotel industry also has a responsibility to contribute to the environment (Rada, 1996). The establishment of International Hotels Environment Initiative (IHEI) in 1993 was a catalyst for the green campaign in the hotel industry. The hotel industry has developed a standardized and systematized method for measuring the environmental friendliness of hotels. There are international hotel certification programs in place such as Green Globe and Energy Star, and accreditation schemes such as ISO 14001, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), and GSTC (Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria). Currently, there is no unified definition of the term “green hotel” in the hospitality industry. The “Green” Hotel Associations (n.d.) defines green hotel as “environmentally-friendly properties whose managers are eager to institute programs that save water, save energy and reduce solid waste – while saving money – to help protect our only earth”. Nowadays, the term “green” involves more than environmental issues. It relates to all aspects of sustainability and corporate social responsibility (International Tourism Partnership, n.d.). Kasim (2004) incorporates the social responsibility factor and defines green hotel as a hotel that “operates in a responsible manner towards its employees, the local community, the local culture, and the surrounding ecology”. Hotels’ green practices not only contribute to protecting environmental (e.g., reducing environmental harm and making use of waste streams) (Bohdanowicz, 2006), but also have a direct role in economic benefits (e.g., cost reductions, higher satisfaction and positive word of mouth, attraction of new customers and customer retention, and more motivated employees) (Kassinis & Soteriou, 2009; Lee et al., 2010). Moreover, positioning itself as a “green hotel” can facilitate a hotel to get through trade barriers (Post & Altma, 1994). Attracted by these advantages, hotel
operators believe that green practices could help them to establish a new niche for environmentally concerned customers as well as sustain long-term sales and profits (Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007).

CONSUMERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF GREEN HOTEL PRACTICES

According to Watkins’s (1994) study, the environmentally oriented attributes of hotels that may influence consumers’ decision making include recycling bins, energy-efficient lighting, and changing sheets only when requested, and turning off lights in unoccupied guest rooms. The practices were found to be well received by consumers (Millar & Baloglu, 2008). A study was conducted to investigate consumers’ perceptions of energy-saving manipulations in green hotel rooms. Results showed that consumers were very supportive of these practices (Susskind & Verma, 2011). Selected attributes such as refillable soap and shampoo dispensers, and low flow showerheads were not perceived favourably (Kasim, 2004; Millar & Baloglu, 2008). Consumers perceived these practices as being less sanitary and comfortable (Millar & Baloglu, 2008). While consumers appreciate the contribution green hotel practices make to improve the environment, they do not want to compromise on service quality or living comfort. Regarding the role green practices play in influencing consumers’ satisfaction, studies found that the environment-related attributes of a hotel were regarded by consumers as an integral part of the service offer (Kasim, 2004; Robinot & Giannelloni, 2010). This implied that if the attributes were perceived unfavourably, they would have a negative effect on consumers’ satisfaction. Given this, it was proposed that the hotels should be advised not inform their guests about the environmental practices in place to avoid the risk of being evaluated unfavourably (Robinot & Giannelloni, 2010). However, with more and more consumers aware of the green attributes of hotels, it is unclear whether this advice is appropriate.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As most of the studies on green hotel practices are conducted in the western culture, there is a need to understand consumers’ perceptions of green hotels:

1. To investigate green practices that are most welcomed by consumers as well as consumers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the green practices;
2. To examine perceptions of the benefits and negative attributes of staying in green hotels

METHODOLOGY

This is the first study on green hotels among inbound within Trichy District. Qualitative method is justified in view of its exploratory nature. A draft interviewing protocol was developed based on previous studies. Based on comments received, modifications were made and a final interviewing protocol was used.

PREDILECTION AND PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES IN GREEN HOTELS

The most frequently mentioned perception of what a green hotel should do concerned saving resources and energy. Interviewees described a green hotel as one that conserves

electricity and saves water. Specifically, some interviewees mentioned the use of green energy such as solar energy. This attribute was often mentioned by overseas interviewees. Other ways to save resources and energy were also mentioned, such as not delivering newspaper unless guests requested them, and encouraging guests to take the stairs instead of using the elevator. Using environmental friendly materials was the second most frequently mentioned attribute of a green hotel. Interviewees thought that a green hotel should use materials that pose no harm to the natural environment as well as to the human body.

| Plant lots of trees to provide clean air | 4.7 |
| Set up smoke-free rooms or smoke-free floors | 4.6 |
| Ask guests to sort their waste | 4.2 |
| Cut off the power when the room is unoccupied | 4.2 |
| Put up posters for promoting environmental awareness | 4.1 |
| Reduce the frequency of changing the towels and linen | 3.9 |
| Suggest to restaurant customers that they do not order food excessively | 3.6 |
| Do not provide single-use consumables, or provide them with a fee | 3.6 |
| Use low flow showerheads | 3.1 |

On 5-point scale

Nine environmental practices adopted in green hotels were presented. Interviewees were asked to rate on a five-point scale their liking for these practices and their perceived effectiveness in protecting the environment. There was no significant difference between the variables.

**PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF STAYING IN A GREEN HOTEL**

The most frequently mentioned benefit of staying in a green hotel was contribution to the environment. Interviewees thought that green hotels had less environmental impact than conventional ones. They also believed that green hotels would save resources and energy, reduce waste, and generate less pollution.

| Making a contribution to the environment | 4.2 |
| Uplifting living standards and health conditions | 4.4 |
| Saving energy and resources | 3.6 |
| Better air | 3.7 |
| A better mood due to the practice of environmentally responsible behavior | 3.7 |
| Encouraging myself to practice environmentally responsible behavior | 4.2 |
| Better health because of smoke-free areas | 3.1 |
| More economical with less luxurious products and services | 3.5 |

On 5-point scale

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CONCLUSION

This exploratory study conducted a qualitative methodology to investigate perceptions about green hotels among tourists in Trichy. The study found that consumers in general were supportive of green practices as well as green hotels. Interviewees in this study most frequently mentioned saving energy, use of environmentally-friendly materials, and avoiding single-use consumables as the attributes of a green hotel. Interviewees in general showed appreciation of most of the environmental practices in green hotels and found them effective in protecting the environment. Staying in a green hotel was perceived to benefit both the environment and hotel guests. The most frequently mentioned negative attributes of staying in a green hotel were premium price, lower comfort level, and inconvenience. A majority of the interviewees were willing to pay higher rates for green hotel rooms to support environmental protection.

MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

Based on the current study, we have the following recommendations for hoteliers in designing environmental initiatives and marketing green hotels. First, when constructing a green hotel, hotel managers should employ energy saving measures, use environmentally-friendly materials, and avoid single-use consumables. Various energy saving measures can be adopted, such as using solar energy, cutting off power when guest rooms are unoccupied, and installing dual-flush toilets. Second, green measures should not be perceived as compromising the hygiene conditions or comfort levels of hotel guests. When adopting devices or measures such as a water-saving flow showerhead, it is important that the water flow is adjusted in a way that will not be noticed by most of the consumers. We recommend using low flow shower heads that can save water while the change in water flow remains largely unnoticed. Third, hotel management should pay attention to the physical environment and landscape design of green hotels. Fourth, in terms of pricing, the price premium should be set at below 10% as this is the level that most of the consumers are ready to accept.

REFERENCES
