



# THE STANDARD *of* SUCCESS: Guest Satisfaction

BY DERI ROSS PRYOR





## WHETHER USED FOR BUSINESS TRIPS or pleasure

vacations, hotels, motels and everything in between play a significant part in most people's lives. As such, there is a certain expectation of quality, and meeting those expectations is what drives guest satisfaction and revenues.

While there are many factors that go into a guest's experience, some facets of their stay will affect them more than others, and those facets need to be consistently of the best quality to ensure continued success.

One facet that each guest experiences across the board is textiles. While some less tangible services and amenities may or may not factor into a guest's perception of the property, without fail, each and every guest will come into contact with, at minimum, bed and bath linens.

"Besides hotel cleanliness, the sleep and bath experience of a hotel guest is the most important barometer to key guest satisfaction scores," says Greg Eubanks, vice president of Hospitality Sales and Marketing of Standard Textile. "Sleep experience is even more important than the quality of food at a hotel."

Levels of aesthetic design and luxury amenities may vary among properties, but every guest expects a maximum perception of comfort and cleanliness, regardless of price point. In other words, a guest at a roadside motel still expects the clean, comfortable, rip-free sheets as does a guest at a high-end luxury spa resort.

Given the availability of posting very public and almost instantaneous reviews through social media and websites such as Yelp, guest perceptions can drive property reputations up or down. In the past, guests' experience was restricted to a dialogue between guests and the property manager, maybe the corporate office if the guest was so inclined to take it that far. Now, with smart phone apps and the like, guests can broadcast their reviews with a few swipes, and more often will do so with negative experiences than with positive ones. Potential guests often turn to those reviews when deciding where to spend their money.

The challenge for these properties then becomes to deliver that quality on a consistent basis while staying within their given budget. While this might seem a straightforward endeavor, there are many factors to consider when it comes to balancing practicality, costs and guest satisfaction.

Success begins with the textiles themselves. Higher quality textiles are going to yield higher quality results. However, it does not necessarily follow that higher cost will yield higher quality textiles.

Kathy Harris, RLLD, laundry manager at Sea Island Resort in Georgia, says that it is important to keep an eye on the quality of the textiles, even when dealing with long-time vendors that have provided satisfactory products in the past.

"For instance, during the recession," Harris says, "textile vendors started using lower quality materials, which resulted in inferior [end] products that didn't last as long." These vendors may not have even known the materials were different from what they used in the past; it depends on who they buy from themselves.

To ensure consistent quality, Harris says her property always runs a test load of new textiles. These can be from 10 to 30 complete cycles: wash, dry, ironing and any other finishing processes, included all applicable chemical applications.

"These products can look good out of the box," Harris warns, "but may quickly degrade after a few cycles." If a vendor is supplying textiles that cannot withstand the test load while keeping their original quality, she advises: "go with someone else."

This careful eye on quality can become difficult if textile purchasing authorization is spread throughout



the property. For example, the spa manager may want certain towels, or dining wants a particular napkin, but ultimately it is the laundry manager who can determine whether these purchases are financially sound from a quality standpoint.

Along this same line of thinking, Eubanks says, "To a laundry, the textile is not just a production piece that needs to be managed, but rather an investment in the satisfaction of a guest." Therefore, the laundry manager, as the person most responsible for maintaining textile longevity while retaining its quality, is the most qualified to determine if a potential textile will live up to their requirements.

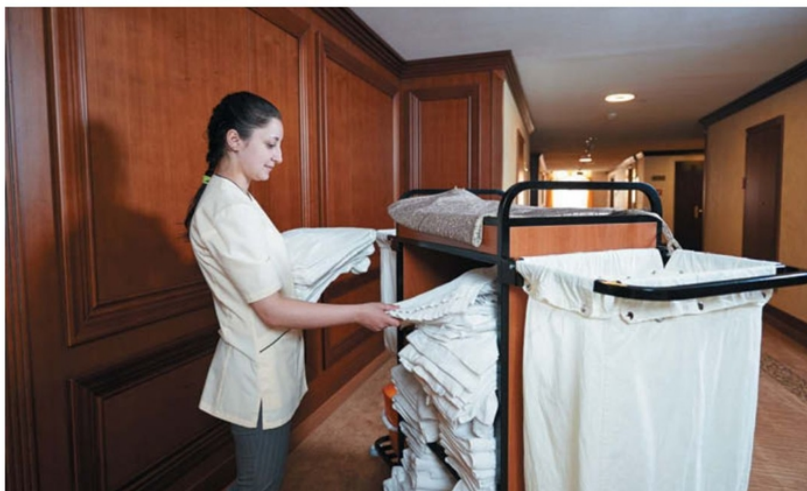
Beyond just purchasing the best quality textiles is ensuring that enough has been purchased. Maintaining par

levels may seem, on the surface, just to be about easing stress on property staff and smooth daily operations, but there are many ways adequate par levels affects guest satisfaction.

In his article on hospitality par levels, Dr. William D. Frye, assistant professor at the College of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Niagara University, writes that "shortages disrupt the work of the housekeeping department, irritate guests who have to wait for cleaned rooms, reduce the number of readied rooms and shorten the useful life of linens as a result of intensified laundering."

When guests have to deal with any shortage in terms of service or tangible items, it lowers satisfaction ratings. In a press release about their 2015 North America Hotel Guest Satisfaction Index Study, J.D. Powers noted that "Hotel guest satisfaction has risen to a record high, while the number of guests experiencing problems during their stay has dropped significantly." It is that lowering of problem incidents that is of interest. While service recovery, that is rectifying a problem quickly, does satisfy guests, ensuring that they do not experience a problem in the first place should be the goal.

The press release states, "Hotels have an opportunity to substantially improve satisfaction by proactively addressing guest needs. While service recovery is often emphasized as a strategy to regain guest loyalty, it's even more important to prevent problems





from occurring in the first place, which is underscored by a 310-point satisfaction gap between guests who say they 'strongly agree' that the hotel staff anticipated their needs and those who 'strongly disagree' with this statement."

In other words, guests who perceive that a hotel has already anticipated and addressed their needs is a good investment of their travel dollars. They will be repeat guests. Those who found it necessary to request service or items, or worse yet, complain when their needs aren't met, may be mollified when they are retroactively cared for, but will not experience the same level of satisfaction.

In terms of par, this goes back to Frye's assertion that adequate par ensures guests are not made to wait on rooms. It also ensures textiles that are furnished have been processed correctly.

Eubanks expands on this thought: "Maintaining appropriate par levels is key to textile longevity. Most linens are manufactured using a high degree of natural fiber, such as cotton. Cotton requires 24 hours after processing to regain natural moisture from the air. If par levels are too low, textiles are processed more quickly and are not given adequate time to rest. Adequate 'down time' for a textile can increase tensile strength which, in turn, increases linen life."

Low par decreases the probability of textiles being processed correctly, which in turn lowers their quality. Low



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par also leaves the housekeeping staff scrambling to take care of the guests appropriately, and in their haste they may end up using less than satisfactory inventory to meet needs. Torn or yellowed napkins, scratchy sheets and stiff bath towels will not result in a pleasant guest experience.

After ensuring the textiles are of high quality and that there is an adequate stock of them, another key factor in ensuring textile quality is the wash process itself. If not done properly, it can undermine any other measure in place.

"The wash process can be pretty intense," says David Chadsey, vice president of sales for TLC Tri-State Laundry Companies. "Depending on the type of fabric involved, machines that are not properly maintained can stain, grey or even permanently damage textiles."

Damaged textiles obviously reduce par levels, requiring additional purchases. If the problem is not correctly identified (i.e., the quality of the textile is questioned rather than how it is processed) laundry managers may find themselves struggling to find

quality textiles when the textiles aren't even the problem.

There are a number of steps in the process that may be at fault. Chadsey warns, "Improper water levels and wash speeds will result in staining and greying of linen. On the finishing side, ironers and presses need to be kept clean and freshly padded. Soiled chests or pads can cause stains on flatwork that are difficult or impossible to remove."

Chadsey also advises to keep abreast of current best practices on the chemical front. Selecting the right chemicals for the right textile and right soiling is essential. Advances in technology on both the mechanical and chemical side means constant awareness as to how that affects current policies and processes.

"There is a difference in the chemistry available and a difference in the hardware," Chadsey says. "Facilities should regularly monitor their system compared to what is available to ensure they are using best practice products and procedures."

All this being said, the most important factor in guest satisfaction is the human one. Property staff is essential to ensuring that all the above factors come together into a cohesive and positive guest experience.

Harris says in her laundry the training and educating of staff is paramount. "The first step is to set standards and put it in writing," she says. Each property may be different; lower price point properties may allow wrinkles on dining napkins, for example, but no property will allow for staining. Harris uses a show-and-tell technique during training, giving the employees hands-on examples of what is acceptable and what is not. They also employ a learning specialist who will watch new employees work while in training, ready to address incorrect actions.

Chadsey adds that while much of the wash process is now automated, the human touch is essential in quality control, especially for such steps as finishing that "requires much more training, practice and skill to perform correctly at high efficiency."

One of the challenges in the human factor is attitude. "Employees can let

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employee who displays the appropriate traits and is trained correctly is less likely to look for employment elsewhere. A valued employee is a loyal one. Employee longevity ensures continuity of high level output and service to guests, whereas high employee turnover runs the risks of gaps in quality.

Each of these factors – quality of linen, appropriate par levels, attention to best practices in the wash process and a strong workforce – work together as a well-oiled machine whose sole purpose is to provide a positive guest experience. Each factor is every bit as essential as the next and requires the same level of attention to produce consistently satisfactory results and guest satisfaction. ●

personal problems affect the quality of their work,” Harris says. Potential issues can be caught in the interview process. Harris says she asks pointed questions about working under stress and attention to detail. Candidates have to show an aptitude for the ability and

willingness to consistently provide quality work in a timely manner, despite any personal problems going on.

Since labor is the highest cost in any laundry, investing in quality employees is just as essential as investing in quality textiles or equipment. An



*Deri Ross Pryor works as a freelance writer/editor while completing her MFA in Creative Writing.*



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