

When the Band Crashed the Wedding: A case in hotel service recovery

By Donald G. Schoffstall, Susan W. Arendt and Thomas R. Schrier

Introduction

This case study presents a hotel scenario where multiple groups were booked, each with events on property, for Saturday evening. There are several service failures and service recovery opportunities that occur. The hotel manager on duty has been tasked with ensuring flawless event execution for all customers involved. Presented here is background information on the Spring Grove property, manager on duty (MOD) Steve, and both groups (a wedding party and a marching band). Detailed information about the situations leading up to Saturday night is provided. Finally, the case will end with an explanation of the events and the service failures that occurred on Saturday evening. Several questions are provided to identify the problems and service failures, recovery efforts, and future efforts, if necessary.

Service Failure and Recovery

Service recovery efforts by hotels and other hospitality organizations can go a long way to turn around a customer's negative experience and can also increase the likelihood of repeat business following a service failure. A service failure occurs when, at any time, the service provider (hotel) fails to meet the expectations of the customer including: failure to provide a promised service, failure to meet a specific customer request, or failure by any employee when unsolicited action (or inaction) is taken in the presence of a customer (Swanson and Hsu, 2009). Swanson and Hsu (2009) explained that service recovery is generally the efforts and actions put forth by employees and managers of a specific business in an attempt to resolve a customer's problems (service failure) and, if possible, alter any negative attitudes with the overall goal of retaining the customer's continued patronage. Direct actions by employees, including: acting professionally, providing personalized attention, and communicating effectively with each customer, can support positive service recovery (Kwortnik, 2006). What may be most critical is that the customer perceives the service recovery efforts as equal to or more beneficial than the negative experience or cost associated with the initial service failure. This in turn leads to successful service recovery (Ro, Choi, & Olson, 2013). Hospitality managers need to prevent failures from occurring, address them when they do occur, and

implement positive recovery efforts to minimize the impact of the failure on the current customer and the impact on future patronage.

Influence and Impact

Service recovery takes on many different forms and variables, but one thing is for sure, a failure in service must occur before recovery can begin. Mount (2012) reported hotel brands showed significant financial recovery through various customer recovery responses; higher financial results were shown when more effort (evidenced by excellent satisfaction ratings) was provided. Magnini and Karande (2009) explained that customers with long-term transaction history had greater repurchase intentions than those customers with short-term transaction history (e.g. new customers). If customers perceive service recovery efforts to be stable during their visits, they are more likely to return, regardless of the service failures that occur (O'Neill & Mattila, 2004). Ro, Choi, and Olson (2013) explained that frontline employees were viewed by customers as key contributors to service recovery efforts; these efforts were viewed more positively if customers believed the recovery efforts to be favorable. Though all service failures and recovery efforts can impact a company financially, today's customers have many ways to find out about these failures and recovery efforts (e.g. social networking, blogs, and review sites) and use them to make purchase decisions.

Modern Recovery

Sashi (2012) reported that with the continued popularity and expansion of social networking sites, operations are monitoring these sites as well as maintaining a presence on such sites. This presence enhances customer engagement for both marketing promotion and service recovery efforts. The growth of social networking and review sites has expanded "word-of-mouth" into an instantaneous means for specific or non-specific service failures of hospitality businesses, such as hotels, to be introduced to anyone who may be looking and have the power to influence future booking or purchasing decisions (Sparks & Browning, 2010). Today, more than ever, companies must expand their service recovery efforts toward social networking and review sites, in addition to dealing directly with the customer(s) to promote positive service recovery. Hotel managers need to ensure they are managing their core services, and if problems occur, they respond to customers' complaints promptly because the poor delivery of service and negative comments from reviewers have unfavorable impact on potential customers (Browning, So, & Sparks, 2013). Today, one seemingly small customer

Donald G. Schoffstall is affiliated with Johnson & Wales University. Susan W. Arendt and Thomas R. Schrier are affiliated with Iowa State University.

issue can be spread throughout the world in a matter of minutes and affect future business throughout the upcoming years.

Background Information and Potential Problems

The Property

The Spring Grove Hotel is located in a suburb of Washington, D.C. The hotel was built in 2002 and is owned by the Grove Hotel Group, which operates twenty-eight properties throughout the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The Spring Grove location has 300 guest rooms, an indoor swimming pool, a casual family restaurant, and banquet facilities for up to 200 people. Because the hotel was originally designed for business travelers, the property includes a business services center and small convenience store. The Spring Grove property offers an included breakfast buffet each morning in the restaurant for all hotel guests.

For reasons not fully understood, the Spring Grove Hotel seemed to have a more challenging time during the most recent economic recession period compared to other company properties. After two less than stellar years, the poor financial results led to some changes in management in the latter part of the third year. Though the rooms business has begun to pick up slightly and the restaurant is booming, current management continues to search for new business. The new management team, along with marketers from corporate, began a campaign to increase room sales (attract tour groups) and banquets (promote events and weddings). Although it took a while for the campaign results to increase business, lately both tour group and event bookings have grown steadily.

The MOD

Steve has been employed with the Grove Hotel Group for the past three years and was recently promoted to assistant manager at the Spring Grove Hotel. Steve relocated to the area for his promotion and has been working primarily as the evening manager on duty. Before coming to the Spring Grove Hotel, Steve was hired full-time by the Grove Hotel Group as a front desk supervisor after he completed his internship at the Lake Grove Hotel. He was promoted from front desk supervisor to front desk manager before his most recent promotion. Although quick promotions are common within the company, Steve's promotions have been viewed by some as too quick when compared to others, especially because his work at the other Grove Hotel property did not fully prepare him for all of his responsibilities at the Spring Grove. Specifically, his previous location did not have banquet facilities and only included a small café serving breakfast and lunch on weekdays.

Steve enjoys his new role as an assistant manager, but he has been struggling to fully acclimate to his new role and responsibilities. The banquet manager, on more than one occasion, has

complained about Steve's performance to the hotel general manager. These issues have included a lack of support for banquet staff, rude interactions with banquet guests, and poor organizational skills, which have led to service failures.

The Groups

The Kirkpatrick wedding had been on the calendar for about a year and half and the big day was arriving. On the Thursday before the Saturday event, the engaged couple met with the banquet manager to review all of the last minute details. The final guest count had already been confirmed at 185 guests and some of the couple's friends planned to decorate the tables Saturday morning for the Saturday evening reception. In addition to the wedding reception in the banquet room, a block of 30 hotel rooms had been confirmed, with guests arriving Friday and checking out on Sunday morning.

The South High School Marching Band had checked in on Wednesday afternoon, having previously booked 40 rooms from Wednesday through Sunday, for approximately 145 people. The band would also be holding a pool and pizza party on Saturday evening for the entire group. A tour company handled all of the arrangements for the band; however, due to illness, their representative was unable to make the trip. This left all of the coordination efforts to the band director and his staff, in addition to their normal tasks. Local security guards had been hired to sit and watch the hallways of the two hotel floors where the band members were staying. However on Wednesday, the night the band arrived, the security guards did not show. Though there were no issues during the first night, Steve needed to ensure security was taken care of before the wedding guests began arriving on Friday.

Day of the Event – Initial Problems

Steve arrived early to work Saturday because he had been off on Friday; and he knew it might be a very long day handling all the challenges that might arise throughout the day. Upon arrival, the hotel general manager called him into the office to discuss situations and complaints occurring with the band group. Apparently, Thursday night after Steve left, and despite having security guards on the floors, four of the trumpet students were found wandering around the hotel; one was playing his instrument in the stairwells. The noise and disruption woke several guests who called to complain to the front desk staff.

Another issue that the general manager addressed with Steve was the need to ensure that the Kirkpatrick wedding went as smoothly as possible that evening. Mr. Kirkpatrick, father of the bride, had spoken adamantly with the banquet manager and general manager Friday afternoon to express his displeasure that the hotel had allowed a group of high school students into the hotel the weekend of his daughter's wedding, citing several issues over the previous couple of days. At this point Steve knew the night was not only going to be long, but that he might need to use all of his knowledge and skills just to get through it.

Preparations Continue

Everything looked great and throughout the day the hotel staff moved with a sense of urgency, yet remained under control as they worked. Steve had not had too much time to think or plan his day because he had been running non-stop since his earlier morning meeting with the general manager. Finishing touches for the wedding reception, scheduled to run from 6:00 pm until 11:00 pm, had been completed in the banquet room. The pool was scheduled to be closed at 4:00 pm, with the band reserving that area from 7:00 pm until 10:00 pm. If everything went as scheduled, the shared hallway would be vacated so each group would have it to themselves at the appropriate times. Shortly after 4:00 pm, the maintenance staff was moving equipment from the pool area to the storage closets across the shared hallway when the first (early) guests for the wedding reception began to arrive. Shortly thereafter, Steve received a call that an older wedding guest had slipped and fallen in the hallway near the back entrance. Steve thought to himself, "Oh boy, what next?" as he hurried to the rear of the hotel.

The Event – Problems Continue

By 4:25 pm the ambulance had arrived for the slip and fall incident and paramedics were tending to the older woman (aunt of the bride). As it turned out, the woman was well enough to stay for the reception, and Steve had a comfortable chair brought in from the lounge for her to sit on during the reception. The majority of the wedding guests arrived around 5:30 pm, but the bridal party was running late and did not make it back to the hotel until almost 7:00 pm. As the bridal party entered the hotel, the band was coming off the elevators and heading down to the pool area, causing some congestion in the shared hallway; hotel staff tried their best to control the situation.

Food Service

Because the bridal party was an hour late, the kitchen began to scramble to organize the food service; and several items, for which preparation had been slowed, were now starting to come back together. The wedding reception food was originally set to start at 6:45 pm and it was now closer to 7:30 pm. Additionally, 30 pizzas for the band were to be sent to the pool area at 7:30 pm. The chef, who was already annoyed about making pizza, chose to focus on the reception, deciding the kids would just have to wait because making pizzas was "way too basic and beneath his own arrogant standards". Steve was assisting the banquet manager to organize the staff when another employee came in to pick up the pizzas, which had not yet been placed into the ovens. Steve would now need to go talk with the band director about the food being approximately 30 minutes late. This was not the first issue for the band, who had problems and poor restaurant service during breakfast the past two mornings.

The reception, despite the timing of the food, proceeded without

any additional issues; however, at the same time, the band party had received little attention; and although the students did not seem to mind, the band staff had become increasingly irritated. The pizzas were eventually delivered but due to a mistake with scheduling, some of the hotel employees were working at the reception instead of the pool, thereby short staffing the pool party. As a result, the band party ran out of food and beverages, as the one remaining hotel staff member was unable to keep up.

Hallway Meeting

A few of the band's drummers grew tired of the pool party and were able to sneak out to wander the hotel. As they were coming in through the back door of the hotel, on the side of the reception room, they met the junior bridesmaids of the wedding party and decided they would rather hang out with them than the rest of the band. Before long, the girls convinced the guys (drummers) to go change and join them at the reception. As the pool party began to wrap up, someone mentioned they had not seen the drummers for a while and the band staff began to check rooms upstairs.

At the reception, the new couples (the bridesmaids and the drummers) were dancing and having a good time, but began to gather the attention of their parents, other guests, and a few hotel staff members. A couple of the girls' parents decided to break up the kids' party and asked the guys to leave immediately. After a moment of heated conversation the guys left, but not before a drummer accidentally (or on purpose) knocked into one of the tables near the door of the banquet room. The crashing glasses hit the floor as the guys exited the room and ran into their band director in the hallway.

Case in Review

The Spring Grove Hotel had been trying to increase business by looking to build tour group and wedding business; this particular weekend had brought in business from both. However, one of the challenges when growing new business opportunities is ensuring the staff and managers of the operation are able to:

- Handle the expectations of the guests
- Minimize service failures
- Address and adequately perform service recovery if failures do occur

This proved to be a challenge for the managers and staff of the Spring Grove Hotel.

MOD Summary and Reflection

Early Sunday morning, Steve finally made it to the office to sit down. "What a night," he thought to himself. Steve had been dealing with manager and staffing issues in addition to the band staff and the Kirkpatrick wedding party. So much had gone on that it was hard for him to reflect on everything. However, he knew if he did not sit and

write up the initial reports he may not be able to remember everything in a few days when he would have to address tonight's issues at the management meeting. Steve took a deep breath and began to type, "The night the band crashed the wedding..."

ery, customer switching, and word-of-mouth behaviors. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 26(2), 180-194. doi:10.1080/10548400902864800.

Key Questions

- Explain how Steve might have been better prepared for his role as assistant manager?
- List the problems and service failures that occurred throughout the case study.
- How would preparation or experience have helped Steve handle the situations that occurred Saturday night? Provide at least two specific examples.
- Which group do you believe is more important to the Spring Grove Hotel, the wedding reception or the marching band? Why?
- What planning decisions could have been made prior to Saturday evening that may have helped eliminate the service failures that occurred?
- What service recovery efforts could be made to appease both groups? In the era of social networking, consider how the hotel could be impacted and how managers might address this.
- Consider the other Saturday evening hotel guests, not in either group, and create one additional service failure and an action plan to address it.

References

- Browning, V., So, K. K. F., & Sparks, B. (2013). The influence of online reviews on consumers' attributions of service quality and control for service standards in hotels. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1-2), 23-40. doi:10.1080/10548408.2013.750971.
- Kwortnik, R. J. (2006). Shining examples of service when the lights went out: Hotel employees and service recovery during the blackout of 2003. *Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing*, 14(2), 23-45. doi:10.1300/J150v14n02_03.
- Magnini, V. P., & Karande, K. (2009). The influence of transaction history and thank you statements in service recovery. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 28, 540-546. doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2009.03.001.
- Mount, D. J. (2012). Putting the dollar signs on quality: The benefits of service recovery in the hotel industry. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, 13, 152-163. doi:10.1080/1528008X.2012.643189.
- O'Neill, J. W., & Mattila, A. S. (2004). Towards the development of a lodging service recovery strategy. *Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing*, 11, 51-64. doi:10.1300/J150v11n01_04
- Ro, H., Choi, Y., & Olson, E. D. (2013). Service recovery evaluations: GLBT versus hetero customers. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 33, 366-375. doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2012.10.007.
- Sashi, C. M. (2012). Customer engagement, buyer-seller relationships, and social media. *Management Decision*, 50, 253-272. doi:10.1108/00251741211203551.
- Sparks, B. A., & Browning, V. (2010). Complaining in cyberspace: The motives and forms of hotel guests' complaints online. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 19, 797-818. doi:10.1080/19368623.2010.508010.
- Swanson, S. R., & Hsu, M. K. (2009). Critical incidents in tourism: Failure, recov-