

Toward Creating a Framework to Accommodate the Needs of Disabled Hotel Guests

Henry Wade Stonesifer III
Dedman School of Hospitality
Florida State University

and

Woody G. Kim
Dedman School of Hospitality
Florida State University

ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study are three-fold: (1) to identify the perceptions of the guests with disabilities regarding their hotel experiences, (2) to identify the perceptions of hotel executives regarding the feasibility of implementing guest needs in both hotel design and service policies, and (3) to provide a general framework to the industry. Interviews were conducted with leaders of national organizations serving disabled persons. Respondents from the hotel perspective included hotel executives from individual properties. The responses from guests with mobility impairments offered the most suggestions and the greatest need for special accommodations. Responses regarding hotel staff in the mobility disability segment echo those from hearing and visual impairments, with all respondents indicating a need for better staff sensitivity training. A six-component framework to better serve guests with disabilities was created. If adopted by the industry, the implications of this framework extend to both guests and individual hotel properties.

Keywords: *hearing, visual, and mobility disabilities, framework, communication, in-room orientation*

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2000 Census, the number of persons with disabilities in the United States numbered 49.7 million. At the time, this represented 19.3% of the American population. Within the demographic, 21.2 million persons had mobility disabilities, while 9.3 million had visual and auditory disabilities. Men with disabilities numbered 24.4 million, while women numbered 25.3 million (Stern and Waldrop, 2003). This demographic has a discretionary income of over \$200 billion (Burnett and Baker, 2001), with \$13.6 billion being spent annually on over 31 million annual trips (Grady and Ohlin, 2009). It can be assumed that the 2010 United States Census, currently in progress, will report an even higher number of persons with disabilities, due primarily to the aging baby-boomers and their increasing life expectancy. By 2030, the number of persons with disabilities in the United States is expected to double from the Census 2000 report (Lach, 1999 in Burnett and Baker, 2001), which means nearly 100 million people in the U.S. will have some sort of disability.

The rising number of persons with disabilities has a great implication on the hospitality industry. As this demographic increases, more hotel accommodations for the traveling disabled will be required in order for hotels to be in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Act, passed two decades ago in 1990, aims to provide persons with disabilities “equality opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency” (Americans with Disabilities Act). For the most part, the implications of the act on the lodging industry have been in compliance with the Act’s Standards for Accessible Design. These standards outline several architectural components that must be adhered to in the design of any lodging establishment. Such components include hallway and door width; handicapped parking spaces, ramps, and elevators; the use of certain emergency notification devices; and the inclusion of a certain number of accessible rooms in each hotel.

While the Americans with Disabilities Act provides specific facility accessibility guidelines, there is a legal “gray-area” in regards to the overall experience of guests with disabilities. Research into case law led Grady and Ohlin to conclude that “the scope of the ADA is not limited to facility accessibility alone but also equal access to hospitality services” (2009, p.161). In order to provide this equality, they suggest that a comprehensive needs assessment for the disabled market segment be conducted. This suggestion supports the earlier conclusion of Burnett and Baker, who noted “research actions are needed that address the special problems, feelings, perceptions, and actual choice models used by consumers who are physically or emotionally challenged” (2001, p. 4).

The practical implications of the growing disabled market segment, and changes in legal precedents, have been demonstrated in the November, 2010 legal proceedings between Hilton Worldwide and the United States Department of Justice. The proceedings addressed allegations that Hilton “failed to design and construct its hotels after Jan. 26, 1993, in compliance with the ADA, by failing to provide accessible guest rooms with roll-in showers for individuals with mobility disabilities; failing to disperse designated accessible guest rooms across various classes of rooms and amenities; failing to reasonably modify its policies, practices and procedures to accommodate individuals with disabilities; and failing to provide individuals with disabilities the same opportunity to reserve accessible guest rooms using the Hilton telephonic and internet central reservations systems.” In response to these allegations, the company and the Department of Justice filed a Consent Decree to address Hilton’s method of correcting ADA inadequacies (De Lollis, 2010).

Considering the growing market segment, the changing views on the scope of the ADA, and the involvement of a leading hotel corporation in a legal proceeding regarding lack of accessibility, the topic of this research is timely and aims to produce outcomes to assist the industry in better accommodating guests with physical disabilities.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study focus upon both the tangible and intangible components of the service experience. They are as follows:

- 1) To identify the perceptions of the guests with disabilities regarding their hotel experiences, focusing specifically on the following sub-classifications of the disabled market: those with mobility, visual, and hearing disabilities.
- 2) To identify the perceptions of hotel executives regarding the feasibility of implementing guest needs in both hotel design and service policies.
- 3) To provide a realistic, general framework to the industry regarding the ways to yield the highest guest satisfaction from the disabled market segment. This framework will be constructed based on the insights of both disabled guests and hotel managers, as well as the cost and potential return on investment from a hotel management perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on guests with disabilities

Burnett and Baker's 2001 research was an initial attempt to introduce the disabled market segment to the industry, and it concluded that persons with disabilities would travel more frequently if they felt they were more welcome in lodging establishments. Furthermore, Burnett and Baker concluded that lodging establishments would achieve greater disabled customer loyalty if the customers were to receive relevant attention. The study focused only upon the mobility-disabled guests, and the researchers noted that the experiences of persons in other disabled market segments should be investigated as well.

More recent research into the traveling disabled amongst a variety of industry arenas and disabled market segments supports Burnett and Baker's initial findings in the importance of catering to the disabled market segment and its distinct sub-segments (Ozturk, Yayli, and Yesiltas, 2008; Shaw and Coles, 2004; Daniels, Rodgers, and Wiggins, 2005), and the lack of attention provided to persons with disabilities (Darcy, 2010; McKercher, Packer, Yau, and Lam, 2003). However, few studies have been conducted into the overall hotel experience and needs of guests with disabilities.

In a 2006 study, Flores conducted a survey of lodging managers in North America and Europe. Thirty-six managers in North America participated, 32 of whom were from the United States. Of the respondents, 96 percent said their establishments offered some type of service for guests with disabilities, even though 94 percent do not record the visits of such guests. Flores also found that in North America, managers often felt uninformed by the guests about their disabilities, and as such, were unaware of the need to provide additional services.

Most recently, Grady and Ohlin (2009) published research on the various legal issues facing the hospitality industry as a result of the Americans with Disabilities Act. They reference judicial rulings in the 1999 Walker and Adams v. Carnival Cruise Lines, Unique Travel Agency, and Andre's Travel Agency case, which indicates that the scope of the ADA is not only limited to the facility guidelines in the Standards for Accessible Design, but also includes equality in the intangible component of the service experience.

Methods to improve hotel accessibility

With the results of the Walker and Adams case, as well as the implications discussed in Grady and Ohlin's research, the industry must re-evaluate its attitude towards persons with disabilities. Ohlin's 1993 research provides insight into ways to achieve full compliance with the ADA not only in the physical facility, but also in access to service experiences and amenities. Ohlin also discusses a unique disability awareness training program for Embassy Suites' employees. As part of the training, employees are taught to interact with guests with disabilities in a natural manner. Employees also participate in simulations, using "wheelchairs, walkers, weighted gloves, ankle weights, blindfolds, and silencing head phones...designed to simulate common disabilities" (p. 22).

Tantawy, Kim, and Pyo (2005) provide additional insight into service provision methods. The researchers conducted accessibility surveys and panel analysis of nine hotels in Cairo, Egypt, to find suggestions on improving accessibility. The panel identified the need for ongoing disability training programs, maintenance of common disabled courtesy standards such as not invading a wheelchair users' space, and consultation with architects specializing in design for the disabled during hotel construction. Further, the panel offered suggestions for improving disabled accessibility, including wider passageways, attention to bathroom specifications (toilet height, roll-in showers, grab bars, etc.), and an emergency two-way call system connected to the reception desk. Regarding the panel suggestions, the researchers noted adaptations for the disabled might prove to be a profitable business strategy.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

Research into effective methodologies on researching persons with disabilities was considered in the development of this study. Kitchin (2000) notes that while a survey method can be beneficial, it often makes those with disabilities feel "pigeon-holed" to a set list of responses. The use of interviews, on the other hand, provides freedom of expression to the respondent. Another method suggested by Kitchin is the use of consulting groups. By speaking with members of each group studied, participants may provide some influence over the research being conducted, while the researcher still retains full control over the study. This study blended the interview and the consulting group methods in a two-phase approach: Phase One focused on persons with disabilities, and Phase Two focused upon hoteliers.

Phase one- interviews with guests with disabilities

Study respondents were selected using the judgment technique, in which the researcher "actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question[s]" (Marshall 1996, p. 523). The interview questions focused on the service experiences as well as the methods for improvement. The study respondents with disabilities were leaders of national organizations serving persons with hearing, visual, and mobility disabilities. Examples of the respondents include an executive of the American Association for the Deaf and Blind, a National Project Manager of the American Federation of the Blind, and a director from the National Spinal Cord Injury Association Resource Center. By selecting the leaders of disability groups, as opposed to individual persons with disabilities, individual bias can be reduced because the respondents can

provide information regarding the needs and experiences of their group as a whole. Group representation also allows for a smaller sample size to be used. Validity was further enhanced by employing a method suggested by Turner (2010), in which a non-participating researcher reviewed the interview framework and data, and who then provided feedback and suggestions to the primary researcher.

Phase two- interviews with hotel managers

Leaders within the hotel industry were also interviewed regarding the feasibility of implementing suggestions from Phase One of the study. Respondents from the hotel perspective included hotel operations executives from individual properties. Data was again triangulated by the use of an independent reviewer, as well as a varied sample representing multiple categories within the industry (luxury, mid-range, independent, and flagged).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Guest perspective

The interview responses achieved the study objectives of (1) identifying the perceptions of guests with disabilities regarding their hotel service experiences, and (2) identifying hoteliers' perceptions on the feasibility of implementing changes to meet disabled guests' needs and desires. Guests who are deaf or hard of hearing seem to require the least amount of special accommodation. Most of the interviews yielded positive comments in the reservation and room categories. Negative comments from the deaf community related primarily to staff, as all respondents in this category mentioned communication as a major barrier hindering a positive service experience.

Guests with vision impairments appeared to have the second most need for special accommodations, with needs being distributed fairly evenly among all categories. Again, staff training is mentioned as a major issue, with one respondent claiming to have been completely ignored by a front desk agent.

Of the three disabled groups interviewed, respondents with mobility impairments offered the most suggestions and had the greatest need for special accommodation. Room insights from the mobility disabled were quite similar among all respondents. Maneuverability tended to be a common issue, as many times there is not the proper amount of space for wheelchairs to navigate the facility. Responses regarding hotel staff in the mobility disability segment echo those made by participants with hearing and visual impairments; all respondents indicated a need for better staff sensitivity training.

Hotelier perspective

Hoteliers were receptive to all of the comments and suggestions presented to them. In many cases, the responses were positive. Where managers did not like the ideas, they offered alternatives to the guest suggestions. For example, regarding identifying signs in guest rooms, one manager said his property did full room orientations instead. Even with the positive

response, one key theme was found among the hotelier response. Many hoteliers are unable to meet the suggestions due to a variety of issues, including corporate (or flag) policy or financial restrictions. For example, corporate control of property booking practices makes it difficult for the property to address concerns with hotel websites and booking practices. Suggestions with financial restrictions include costs to modify pool facilities or costs to allow for more space to maneuver within room restroom facilities. While identification of these barriers can not be ignored and contribute to the first two objectives of this study, they have been omitted from the generalized framework for service provision.

Framework to improve the hotel experience of guests with disabilities

The third objective of this research was to create a generalized framework to better serve guests with disabilities. Employing the interview results, a generalized, six-component framework to better serve guests with disabilities was created. The rationale and analysis for each component are described below.

1) Evaluate and expand sensitivity training programs

The comments made by guests regarding staff training indicate that training is the number one issue that must be addressed. Every guest interviewed, regardless of disability, was critical of how they were treated by staff members. One guest mentioned a Harris poll that found “47 percent of people fear dealing with people with disabilities, and it is clear that they [the hotel staff] are uncomfortable.” Another guest respondent agreed: “The primary reason for negative experiences is a lack of knowledge, which leads to fear or stupid behavior.” When presented with the issue of staff training, all of the interviewed hoteliers noted that their associates received sensitivity training. One manager said, “Formal disability training for all staff is handled in regular staff training. Unless there is a specific need for additional training, it doesn’t happen.” Similarly, another responded, “In every area we have conducted sensitivity training. Basic training is done in orientation; however, there’s no set standard for continuing education.”

Based upon the comments of both groups, it is clear that training is not producing the outcome of ensuring positive guest experiences. Thus, hotels should re-evaluate and possibly expand their sensitivity training programs. One method may be more frequent or continuous training. Instead of conducting sensitivity training only during orientation, properties could follow the example of one luxury hotel at which the manager says, “[Training] is done during the initial training phase as well as once per year.” Another training method could include the Opening Doors program used at the Lake Buena Vista, FL, Embassy Suites hotel. In this program, associates participate in role playing exercises, such as being blindfolded, maneuvering in wheelchairs, or wearing noise-blocking headphones, in order to experience first-hand what a person with disabilities experiences (Ohlin, 1993). Yet another program could be having members of the disabled community come to the property and participate in a presentation to associates. Whatever the method, it must be a change from the status-quo which is yielding dissatisfaction amongst guests with disabilities.

2) Communication

In order to provide the best service possible, warm lines of communication between the

guests and hotel property must exist. In the pre-arrival phase of a stay, the burden falls mostly upon the guest to make the hotel aware of his or her needs. As one manager noted, “Guests that have never stayed with us can be a problem, especially if there’s no special requests on reservations. The key is letting us know in advance, not at check-in.” He continued, “If we are able to get ahead of it, we can do it right. Sometimes the disabled arrive assuming it would be bad. If pre-arrival is right, everything else will be.” Hotels could enhance communication with their guests through the creation of an ADA specialist position in reservation centers. As one guest respondent said, “ADA specialists at reservations centers in booking are receptive, get the answers, and are fairly helpful.” These specialists would also be able to address other comments made by guests, including familiarity of disability assistance equipment and the use of text and relay systems. The caveat to the specialist position is that it would need to be adopted by corporate and not the individual properties. Even though all managers agreed an ADA specialist would be a worthwhile option to pursue, all but one of the hoteliers interviewed said their reservations (phone and internet) went through the corporate office and systems. The lone exception was the independent, non-flagged hotel, at which a special position just for ADA would not be cost effective. Still, the non-flagged hotel could have an “ADA Champion” who is familiar with accommodations and handles ADA along with his or her other obligations.

3) Provide an escort and in-room orientation

Many guest suggestions could be met by the provision of an escort and in-room orientation. Presented by one of the hoteliers interviewed, this plan was an alternative to identifying signs in rooms and could cater to the specific needs and disability of each guest. For guests with mobility impairments, associates could address the respondents’ claims of inadequate furniture clearances, inability to reach room-features (heating/air conditioning controls, light switches, iron/board, door locks, etc.), and transfer space from wheelchairs to beds. Escorts for the visually impaired could point out the location of room-features and amenities, including remote controls, coffee makers, microwaves, and electrical outlets/switches. Visual escorts could also allow the associate to address any questions that would be answered by non-Braille in-room information booklets (channel guide, hours of operation for hotel features, emergency exit routing, etc). Escorts for persons with hearing impairments would ensure that TTY or internet video relay service connections were functional and understood by the guest, as well as point out key room safety and security features, such as flashing emergency lights and doorbell/door knockers. In short, escorts and orientation are a low-cost service that engage the guests and ensure their comfort immediately upon their arrival at the hotel property.

4) Utilize cut-in room keys

The use of cut-in room keys is by far the most specific component of this framework; however, this simple change could benefit guests with and without disabilities. One guest interviewee with a visual impairment presented the idea. She noted, “Room keys are a problem because we don’t know which way they go into the door. Keys with a missing corner would benefit everyone.” Indeed, while this change would be geared towards a guest with visual disabilities, all guests would find benefit in a more user-friendly key. Even the most frequent business travelers have probably had times when they struggle with their room key for any of a multitude of reasons: being fatigued, lacking eye glasses, or having had too much fun during a

night on the town. When presented to managers, all agreed that a cut-in room key was a good idea for all guests, both those with and those without disabilities. However, the degree to which managers would have the freedom to implement the change varied. One manager said, “We could use them at our property and share them [with other hotels under the flag] as a best practice.” Another liked the idea, “But it needs to be a corporate decision.”

An alternative to cut-in keys not mentioned by interview respondents could be the new Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) electronic lock systems made by major hotel lock corporations. The technology allows for contactless entry to a room, with guest keys containing a unique radio frequency that, when placed near the reader on the door, causes the door to unlock.

5) Consult with guests with disabilities in hotel design

Capital expenditures to improve a hotel for guests with disabilities are a significant investment for a property, and in many cases, they produce a low or negative return on investment. Indeed, many of the suggestions presented by guests can not be addressed. As one manager said, “I think the suggestions are all great. A lot of ADA comes from a construction standpoint and things like that are hard to change...from an ownership standpoint, they want to do the minimum we can because of cost. They’re going to put the least amount of money they need to put into it.” Similarly, the ADA grandfathers structures built prior to January 26, 1992, from most provisions of the ADA Standards for Accessible Design, provided a major alteration to the facility has not occurred since that time (§36.402 U.S.C). Such was the case for the manager of the independent, non-flagged hotel. He said, “Sometimes you can’t make a room meet the standards. One of the challenges of historic hotels is you can’t meet those expectations.”

While capital expenditures are not a viable improvement, hoteliers can still consider their disabled guests in the construction and renovation of properties. By consulting with guests with disabilities, hoteliers can go “above and beyond” the requirements of the Standards for Accessible Design. This allows them to address issues such as rugs “like quicksand,” grab rail placement, and restroom maneuverability. As one guest interviewed said, “If you try to build it [a hotel] in ignorance, it will be wrong. Ask disabled groups in community to consult in design”

6) One-Size Does Not Fit All

Both guests and managers noted the fact that there is no universal approach to service provision for guests with disabilities. For that reason, many of the suggestions mentioned by guests can’t be addressed in this framework, because they apply solely to a specific group of the disabled market segment. Similarly, the target market segments for different types of hotels dictate the accommodations available.

An additional consideration is the term “reasonable accommodation,” which defines the degree to which an establishment must make efforts to cater to the guests’ needs. In many instances, the capital cost of a project outweighs the benefit. For example, the high cost of adding an elevator to reach a second floor room outweighs a guest’s desire to have a second floor room. This is especially true in properties built prior to 1993, as these properties are

grandfathered from many of the ADA provisions. The consequence of a lack of universal service provision is a very general framework that must be tailored to each guest and property's needs. Both guests and hotels need to be willing to compromise to ensure a positive service experience for all. In other words, follow the advice of one guest interviewed: "Smile, be nice, ask if you don't know."

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The framework achieved in this study, based upon both guest and hotelier perspectives, is designed to enhance the service experience of hotel guests with disabilities. If adopted in full or in part by the industry, the implications of this framework would extend to both guests and individual hotel properties. Guests will benefit from accommodations better suiting their specific needs, including better accessibility in physical design, more disability-friendly rooms, and better staff interactions. Hotel ownership and management would benefit from the adoption of this framework, as Burnett and Baker (2001) found being disability-friendly equates to greater customer loyalty, and thus to higher occupancy levels. In addition, hotels may develop marketing strategies to promote advances in disabled accommodation, resulting in a competitive advantage and positive image in the eyes of both the disabled guest and general travelers appreciating the goodwill of the hotel's efforts to accommodate the disabled.

Despite the benefits of implementation, hotels must be careful when implementing the framework, as it requires investments of both time and finances. Some of the changes, as managers noted, would require little investment, while others would be prohibitively expensive. Thus, return on investment, both immediate and long-term, must be considered when selecting the extent to which framework components will be implemented.

Regardless of the degree to which the framework is adopted, simple awareness of the components of the framework, as well as the perceptions of both guests with disabilities and hoteliers, is valuable to persons in the hospitality industry. As mentioned by a guest respondent, 47 percent of Americans feel fear when interacting with a person with disabilities. Persons familiar with this research are less likely to be among that percentage. This is because they have a basic knowledge of the needs of, and have had experience interacting with, persons with disabilities, and as a guest respondent says, "The primary reason for negative experiences is a lack of knowledge which leads to fear or stupid behavior."

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The interviews conducted and resulting framework achieved in this study have provided some of the first steps in the improvement of the service experiences of guests with disabilities. However, it should be noted that this was purely an exploratory study. In order to maximize return on investment and guest satisfaction, academics and members of the industry could use the results of this study to construct a more in-depth analysis of the perceptions of all players in hotel design and operations. This analysis could include interviews of developers, architects, and owners, in addition to hoteliers and guests. Future research in the hotel segment could also focus more intensely on the intangible components of the service experience by, for example, exploring more in-depth the interactions between the hotel staff and the guest with disabilities

and its relative importance in the service experience of guests with disabilities. In addition to potential for future research in hotels, this study has also provided foundations for future research into the overall hospitality experience of guests with disabilities. Related research could focus upon other segments of the industry, including cruises, airlines, tourist attractions, and restaurants.

Regardless of the industry's focus, future researchers should consider the common and distinctive attributes that should be provided for the three groups of disability guests identified in this research (mobility, visual, and hearing), as well as others not addressed here (mental disabilities and other physical disabilities). In addition, future researchers may examine the relative importance of tangible and intangible components for each of these groups. By gaining more specific information about each sub-component of the disabled market segment, hotel operators can better prioritize and market their accommodation efforts in an attempt to gain a competitive edge and higher investment return on these accessibility improvements.

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