

Role of Employee–Customer Interaction in Strengthening Customer Relationship Management in Tripura Hotels

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Abstract: *Employee–customer interaction is a fundamental component of effective Customer Relationship Management in the hospitality industry because hotel services are largely delivered through direct interpersonal contact. In Tripura, where tourism is associated with cultural heritage, natural attractions, religious destinations, and growing domestic and regional travel, the quality of interaction between hotel employees and customers can influence satisfaction, trust, loyalty, revisit intentions, and positive word-of-mouth. This review paper examines the role of employee–customer interaction in strengthening CRM practices in hotels operating in Tripura. The review focuses on communication quality, employee responsiveness, empathy, service reliability, personalization, complaint handling, employee competence, and the use of customer information in relationship development.*

Keywords: Employee–Customer Interaction, Hotel Industry, Hospitality, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, Service Quality.

I. INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is characterized by a high degree of interaction between service employees and customers. Unlike many manufactured products, hotel services are experienced through a combination of physical facilities and human encounters. Front-office executives, receptionists, restaurant staff, housekeeping employees, reservation personnel, and managers regularly communicate with guests and consequently become important representatives of the hotel. Customer perceptions of service quality are therefore influenced by employees' communication skills, responsiveness, courtesy, empathy, professionalism, and ability to address individual requirements. Customer Relationship Management provides a systematic approach through which hotels attempt to develop, maintain, and strengthen relationships with existing and potential customers.

In this context, employee–customer interaction represents an important operational dimension of CRM because employees are often responsible for translating organizational relationship strategies into actual customer experiences. In Tripura, the development of tourism and hospitality services creates an increasing need for hotels to understand customer expectations and establish relationship-oriented service practices.

Hotels serving tourists, business travelers, pilgrims, families, and other visitors may encounter customers with different expectations regarding accommodation, food, communication, local information, transportation, and cultural experiences. Employees who interact directly with these customers can identify their needs and provide personalized assistance. Thus, employee–customer interaction should not be viewed merely as routine service delivery; it can function as an important mechanism for creating customer satisfaction, trust, loyalty, and positive perceptions of the hotel.

CONCEPT OF EMPLOYEE–CUSTOMER INTERACTION

Employee–customer interaction refers to the verbal and non-verbal exchanges that occur between employees and customers during the process of service delivery. In hotels, such interaction begins during reservation or enquiry and continues through check-in, accommodation, food and beverage services, housekeeping requests, complaint handling, check-out, and post-stay communication. The quality of interaction depends on several factors, including communication clarity, politeness, listening ability, responsiveness, empathy, product knowledge, emotional control, and problem-solving capability.

Effective interaction allows employees to understand customer expectations and respond appropriately rather than providing completely standardized services. In hospitality settings, customers often judge the organization through the behaviour of individual employees. A friendly and competent employee can create a positive impression even when a minor service problem occurs, while poor communication may negatively affect the customer experience despite good physical facilities.

Therefore, interpersonal interaction becomes an important element of perceived service quality. From a CRM perspective, employee–customer interaction also generates valuable information. Through conversations and observations, employees may learn about customer preferences, previous complaints, frequently requested services, special occasions, and expectations. If such information is systematically recorded and used responsibly, hotels can provide more personalized services and develop stronger relationships.

CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT IN HOTELS

CRM in the hotel industry involves coordinated activities aimed at attracting customers, understanding their needs, improving satisfaction, encouraging repeat visits, and maintaining long-term relationships. It combines customer-oriented organizational practices with information management, communication, service quality, loyalty initiatives, and technology. Traditional hotel management often concentrated primarily on room occupancy and immediate transactions, whereas CRM emphasizes the broader customer life cycle.

A CRM-oriented hotel attempts to understand the customer before, during, and after the stay. Employee interaction is closely connected with each stage of this process. During the pre-arrival stage, employees can provide accurate information and respond promptly to enquiries. During arrival, they can create a positive first impression. During the stay, employees can identify problems and provide personalized assistance. At departure, they can collect feedback and encourage future engagement. After departure, customer information may support appropriate communication and loyalty activities. Consequently, CRM becomes more effective when employees understand that their everyday interactions contribute to the hotel's long-term relationship with customers.

ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

Communication is one of the most visible dimensions of employee–customer interaction. Hotel customers require clear information about room facilities, prices, check-in and check-out procedures, food services, transportation, local attractions, hotel policies, and available facilities. Employees who communicate clearly can reduce uncertainty and improve customer confidence. Listening is equally important because customers may express their needs indirectly. Employees who actively listen can identify specific requirements and respond appropriately.

In Tripura hotels, effective communication can also support tourists who may be unfamiliar with local destinations, transportation arrangements, cultural practices, or regional cuisine. Employees can contribute to the overall tourism experience by providing accurate and useful information.

However, communication should remain professional and respectful, particularly when customers have different languages, cultural backgrounds, ages, or service expectations. Poor communication may result in misunderstandings, dissatisfaction, complaints, and negative online reviews. Thus, communication training should be an important part of hotel CRM strategies.

EMPLOYEE RESPONSIVENESS AND SERVICE RECOVERY

Responsiveness represents employees' willingness and ability to provide prompt assistance. Hotel customers frequently require immediate attention because accommodation services are consumed in real time. A delayed response to a housekeeping request, maintenance problem, food order, reservation issue, or billing discrepancy can influence customer satisfaction. Effective CRM therefore requires employees to recognize customer concerns and respond without unnecessary delay. Service recovery is particularly important when the hotel fails to meet customer expectations.

Employees can reduce the negative effects of service failure by acknowledging the problem, communicating honestly, apologizing where appropriate, taking corrective action, and following up with the customer. A complaint should not simply be treated as a negative event; it can provide information about weaknesses in hotel operations. Systematic recording and analysis of complaints can help management identify recurring problems and improve services. In this way, employee interaction connects individual service recovery with broader CRM improvement.

EMPATHY, PERSONALIZATION AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Empathy refers to the ability of employees to understand and appropriately respond to customers' feelings and individual circumstances. Personalization goes beyond basic service delivery by adapting the service experience to particular customer requirements. For example, hotel employees may recognize returning guests, consider dietary preferences, assist elderly customers, respond to family requirements, or provide appropriate information to visitors seeking local experiences. Such actions can create a sense of recognition and importance.

Customer loyalty is influenced by several factors, including satisfaction, trust, perceived value, service quality, and relationship experience. Employee behaviour can contribute to these factors through consistent and personalized interaction. A customer who feels respected and understood may develop a more favourable relationship with the hotel and may be more willing to return or recommend it. For Tripura hotels, personalized hospitality can potentially complement the state's cultural and tourism resources by creating an experience that combines accommodation with friendly local engagement.

EMPLOYEE COMPETENCE AND CRM EFFECTIVENESS

Employee competence includes knowledge, communication skills, technical abilities, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving capacity. CRM strategies cannot be implemented effectively if employees lack the skills required to interact with customers. Hotel employees should understand room and service offerings, reservation systems, complaint procedures, hotel policies, and customer-service standards. Training should also address emotional intelligence, conflict management, cultural sensitivity, digital communication, and responsible handling of customer information.

Continuous training is particularly important because customer expectations and digital service channels change over time. Management should also empower employees to resolve routine customer problems within defined limits rather than requiring approval for every small decision. Such empowerment can increase responsiveness and reduce customer frustration. A combination of training, supportive supervision, employee empowerment, and performance feedback can strengthen the relationship between employee interaction and CRM outcomes.

TECHNOLOGY AND EMPLOYEE-CUSTOMER INTERACTION

Digital technologies have transformed CRM in the hospitality industry. Hotels increasingly use online booking systems, customer databases, mobile communication, digital feedback platforms, social media, and automated communication tools. These technologies can support employee-customer interaction by making relevant customer information available to service staff.

For example, information about previous stays or service preferences can help employees provide more personalized assistance. However, technology should complement rather than completely replace human interaction. Hotel guests often require empathy, clarification, negotiation, and problem-solving that cannot always be effectively provided

through automated systems. For Tripura hotels, appropriate technology adoption can improve reservation management, customer feedback collection, communication, and customer-information management. At the same time, hotels need to ensure responsible handling of customer data and provide employees with sufficient digital training.

Employee–Customer Interaction and Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is an important outcome of hotel service experiences. Although room quality, cleanliness, food, location, price, and facilities influence satisfaction, interpersonal service can significantly shape how customers interpret these tangible elements. Employees who greet customers respectfully, respond to requests, communicate accurately, and demonstrate willingness to help can contribute to positive service experiences. Conversely, rude behaviour, lack of attention, delayed responses, or poor complaint handling can create dissatisfaction. Therefore, hotels should monitor employee–customer interaction through customer feedback, service evaluations, complaint analysis, and managerial observation. Satisfaction information can then be used to improve training and operational procedures. CRM becomes more effective when customer feedback is not merely collected but translated into organizational learning.

EMPLOYEE–CUSTOMER INTERACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF TRIPURA HOTELS

Tripura offers a distinctive tourism environment characterized by natural landscapes, cultural heritage, historical sites, religious destinations, and interactions between visitors and local communities. Hotels in the state therefore operate within a context where hospitality can extend beyond accommodation to the overall visitor experience. Employees may act as informal sources of local information and can influence visitors' impressions of the destination.

Their ability to communicate respectfully about local culture, food, attractions, transportation, and customs can contribute to customer experience. At the same time, hotels in Tripura may face challenges associated with employee availability, professional training, technological adoption, service standardization, and changing customer expectations. These conditions make employee-oriented CRM practices relevant for hotel development. Building employees' customer-service capabilities while integrating suitable CRM systems may enable hotels to better understand customer expectations and develop more consistent relationship-oriented services.

REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

Author/Study	Major Focus	Key Finding/Contribution	Relevance to Hotel CRM
Grönroos (2017)	Relationship marketing	Emphasized interaction and relationship processes in service marketing	Supports interaction-based CRM
Payne & Frow (2017)	Strategic CRM	CRM requires integration of processes, people, information and technology	Provides a framework for hotel CRM
Rather (2018)	Customer engagement in hospitality	Customer engagement contributes to relationship development and loyalty	Highlights customer-oriented hotel practices
Kim & Qu (2014)	Hotel customer satisfaction	Service experiences and customer perceptions influence satisfaction	Demonstrates importance of service encounters
Kandampully, Zhang, & Jaakkola (2018)	Customer experience	Customer experience is central to building enduring service relationships	Links employee interaction with relationship outcomes
Rather & Hollebeek (2021)	Hospitality customer engagement	Engagement is strengthened through meaningful customer–firm interactions	Relevant to relationship-oriented hotel service
So et al. (2020)	Hotel customer loyalty	Relationship-related factors influence loyalty intentions	Supports loyalty-oriented CRM practices

Rather, Hollebeek, & Islam (2019)	Customer engagement	Engagement can strengthen relational outcomes	Relevant to personalized interaction
Chathoth et al. (2016)	Customer engagement	Interaction and participation influence service experiences	Applicable to hospitality interactions
Tripura-focused implication	Regional hotel context	Local hospitality requires attention to visitor expectations and service consistency	Provides scope for empirical research in Tripura

MAJOR DIMENSIONS OF EMPLOYEE–CUSTOMER INTERACTION

Dimension	Employee Behaviour	Expected CRM Contribution
Communication	Clear, polite and accurate information	Builds trust and reduces misunderstanding
Responsiveness	Prompt attention to customer needs	Improves satisfaction
Empathy	Understanding individual requirements	Strengthens emotional connection
Reliability	Consistent service delivery	Develops confidence
Courtesy	Respectful and friendly behaviour	Creates positive experience
Competence	Knowledgeable and capable service	Improves perceived service quality
Personalization	Adapting service to customer preferences	Encourages relationship development
Complaint Handling	Quick and fair problem resolution	Supports service recovery
Feedback Collection	Listening to customer opinions	Enables continuous improvement
Digital Interaction	Effective use of CRM and communication systems	Supports personalized and efficient service

II. CONCLUSION

Employee–customer interaction is a central mechanism through which hotels transform CRM strategies into actual customer experiences. The review demonstrates that communication, responsiveness, empathy, competence, personalization, reliability, and effective complaint handling can contribute to customer satisfaction and relationship development. Employees occupy a particularly important position because they directly represent the hotel during many stages of the customer journey. For hotels in Tripura, strengthening these interactions can be associated with the wider objective of improving tourism-related service experiences and building sustainable customer relationships. Effective CRM should therefore not be limited to software, databases, loyalty programmes, or digital communication. It should also include employee training, empowerment, customer-oriented organizational culture, systematic feedback, and service recovery. Technology can support these activities by organizing customer information and facilitating communication, but human interaction remains an important part of hospitality. Future empirical research in Tripura could examine the relationship between employee interaction quality and measurable CRM outcomes such as customer satisfaction, trust, revisit intention, recommendation intention, and loyalty across government-supported, independent, budget, and higher-category hotels. Such research could provide evidence-based recommendations for improving customer relationship practices within Tripura's evolving hospitality sector.

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