

BUILDING BRAND LOYALTY IN INDIAN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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Abstract *Hospitality companies can increase their profit margin by creating and sustaining their brand loyal customers. This is a more profitable approach than other marketing activities for service industry than price cuts or promotional programs. In a mature industry like hospitality, acquiring new customers is expensive because of advertising, promotion, and start-up operating expenses, but it is cheaper to serve existing customers. This paper is an extensive literature survey to bring together the factors that contribute in developing and sustaining brand loyalty and provides strategies to hospitality managers for retaining brand loyal customers.*

Key Word *Brand Loyalty, Hospitality, Frequent Guest Programme.*

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Hospitality Industry is one of the important service sectors of the Indian economy. Riding on the economic growth and rising income levels that India has witnessed in recent years, this sector has emerged as one of the key sectors driving the country's economy. The current market size is US\$ 23 billion, accounting for 2.2% of India's GDP as well as provide substantial employment to the people. Economic double digit growth rate and rising disposable incomes and increase in double-income households have played an important part in the growth of this industry.

On an average, Indian hospitality firms are facing difficulty in bottom line because of high taxes, rising competition, high input cost such as skilled manpower and Terrorism. The marketing literature suggests that firms to increase sales and their market shares has to decrease prices, launch promotional campaigns, and try to retain their existing customers (Cravens, 1994). Customer loyalty would be a more effective tool for a mature industry like hospitality (Jarvis and Mayo, 1986).

According to Reichheld (1996) - When customers are lost, new ones must be attracted. However, replacement comes at a high cost. Capturing new customers is expensive because of advertising, promotion and sales costs, and start-up operating expenses, which is not possible for firms operation in tight profit margin as condition prevailing in India.

Reichheld, in his book, *The Loyalty Effect*, argues that in businesses like auto and life insurance and credit card firms,

attracting new customers often costs approximately five times what it costs to retain current customers. It costs less to serve loyal customers because familiarity with the company's products and services bars variety seeking behaviour and resist the situational factors such (eg. friend recommending alternative brand, information of Competitors' brand and other competitive brand). A satisfied, loyal customer can contribute a great deal to the bottom line of any company. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to emphasize the importance of brand loyalty and to determine factors that contribute to brand loyalty. This paper provides strategies for hospitality managers for retaining brand loyal customers.

HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

Hospitality industry, historically viewed as an industry that provides luxury service (Room and allied) valuable to the people and economy of a country. The Hospitality Industry comprises a major part of the tourism industry.

Consumer Segments

The market for the hotel industry is divided into following key consumer segment based on the duration of visit. Visitors are divided in to two categories: Tourist – who stays one or more night in the place visited, and Same-day visitors – visitors who visit a place and return the same day.

Tourists who stay for one for more night are classified as business traveler, leisure traveler and visiting friends and relatives. This classification is based on the purpose of their visit.

- a. Business Travelers – The Business Travelers are business man or corporate executives traveling for business purpose. This segment include corporate, both domestic and foreign. They stay for the long time period depend upon their purpose.
- b. Leisure Traveler includes foreigner or a domestic traveler, whose purpose of visit is holiday, Visiting friends and relatives and site seeing. These are non business foreign tourist visiting for conferences and conventions and tourist attraction like beaches, wild life sanctuaries, hill resorts etc.

Structure of the Hospitality Industry

Hotels in India are broadly classified into 7 categories (five star deluxe, five star, four star, three star, two star, one star, and heritage hotels) by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, based on the general features and facilities offered.

Premium and luxury segment

This segment comprises the high-end 5-star deluxe and 5-star hotels,, which mainly cater to the business and up-market foreign leisure travelers and offer a high quality and range of services.

Mid-market segment

This segment comprises 3 and 4 star hotels, which cater to the average foreign and domestic leisure traveler. This segment caters to the middle level business travelers. It offers most of the essential services of luxury hotels without the high costs.

Budget segment

These comprise 1 and 2 star hotels referred to as ‘Budget Hotels’. These categories do not offer as many facilities as the other segments but provide inexpensive accommodation to the highly price-conscious segment of the domestic and foreign leisure and business travelers.

Heritage hotels

In the past four decades, certain architecturally distinctive properties such as palaces and forts, built prior to 1950, have been converted into hotels. The Ministry of Tourism has classified these hotels as heritage hotels.

Others

These are mostly unorganized hotel that has to go for identification – evaluation – selection.

WHAT IS A BRAND AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A brand is the product or service of a particular supplier, which is differentiated by its name and presentation, such as Hotel Taj and Oberai for a hotel company. Many hotel and restaurant chains (quick service restaurants) seek to create and fulfill the expectations of specific groups of customers. They want to leave their mark on a given field (e.g. Café Coffee Day, Barista, McDonalds) and set their imprints on a product or service.

Brands introduce stability into businesses, help guard against competitive imitation, and allow consumers to shop with confidence in an increasingly complex world (Aaker, 1991). Once customers have made a decision about a brand and its associations, they are often loyal to that brand, continue to buy it in the future, recommend it to friends, and choose the product over others, even those with better features or lower prices (Assael, 1991).

Brands are natural barriers to new competitors because branding reduces consumer risks associated with the purchase of products or services. Thus, they support premium prices and sustain increasing revenue because of the consumer tendency towards long-term brand loyalty (Ehrenberg et al., 1990).

BRAND LOYALTY

Brand loyalty has been described as a behavioral response and as a function of psychological processes (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973). That is, brand loyalty is a function of both behavior and attitudes. Re-purchase is not sufficient evidence of brand loyalty if the purchasing practice is not intentional. Brand loyalty includes some degree of commitment towards the brand that is a function of both positive attitudes and repetitive purchases. Generally, more than one brand is offered for the same product within a given product category, and a buyer has to choose among the brands, at the time of purchase. Today, many products and services are sold as branded products and services; this shows the great confidence placed in the effectiveness of branding. In general, the brand chosen at many previous purchases has a high probability of being bought again on subsequent occasions (Reichheld, 1996). Taj Hotel resorts and palaces was one of the first to introduce a branded service to the hotel business in India in 1903 as Hotel Taj. By using the brand name to assure travelers of world class service standard, experience, and consistency Hotel Taj was able to capture a repeat customer base. To attract different market segments and respond to a variety of customer needs and budgets, they extended its product line from economy (ginger) to upscale (Taj Vivanta). This branding strategy helped Taj group to increase occupancy and revenue as some of the lodging segments have become saturated.

Importance of Brand Loyalty

Loyal customers are important for every firm because they are easier to serve than non-loyal customers, and they provide higher profitability. Reichheld in his book, *The Loyalty Effect*, explains the advantages of brand loyalty as follows:

- a. *Continued profit* – The advantages of customer loyalty are long-term and cumulative. The longer a customer remains loyal, the more profit a business can get from that single customer.
- b. *Reduces marketing cost* - Businesses have to invest money to attract new customers, such as advertising. For loyal customers, these costs are eliminated or minimized.
- c. *Increases per-customer revenue growth* - Customer spending tends to increase over time. For example, a customer who repeatedly stays at the same hotel becomes more familiar with the hotel's full product line, such as gift shops and banquet rooms. And that customer will be likely to sample other product lines of the company, thus helping the company achieve a larger share of customers.
- d. *Decreases operating cost* - For a loyal customer, the front desk clerk does not need to spend time entering data into the computer, if instead she/he retrieves the loyal customer's existent data. Loyal customers' familiarity with the company's products makes them less dependent on its employees for information and service, thus decreasing servicing cost.
- e. *Increases referrals* - Satisfied customers recommend the business to friends and others. Referrals are a vital source of new customers, and customers who show up on the strength of a personal recommendation tend to stay longer.
- f. *Increases price premiums* - Brand loyal customers pay more for a brand because they perceive some unique value in the brand that no other alternative can provide, and they are less likely to be lured away by a discount of a few Rupees. Many people will pay more to stay in a hotel they know than to take a chance on a less expensive competitor.
- g. *Provides competitive advantage*. As consumers become loyal to a brand, they become less sensitive to a price increase. The company can maintain a price differentiation over the competition because of the product's ability to satisfy their needs.

Factors Contributing to Building Brand Loyalty (Sender Perspective)

In order to increase the brand loyal customer base, a hospitality firm should explore the factors that create brand

loyalty. Then, tactics or strategies need to be developed and implemented by all levels and functions of the organization. The following paragraphs (literature review) summarize the factors that create brand loyalty.

Brand awareness

The first step toward loyalty begins with the customer's becoming aware of the product (Aaker, 1991). At the awareness stage, a potential customer knows that the brand exists, but the bond between a customer and the product is low. At this point, a brand name may provide the awareness of the product because brand names offer value to the consumers by helping them interpret, process, store, and retrieve large quantities of information about products (Aaker, 1991).

Brand awareness lead to brand recognition and brand recall (Keller, 1993). Brand Awareness are enhanced in a variety of ways such as advertising, direct mail, trade press, word-of-mouth communication, and promotion activities (Grover and Srinivasan, 1992). The more the customer is aware of the product, the greater the possibility that she/he will recognize, recall and purchase the product. Hospitality companies need to expose themselves to more consumers to enhance brand awareness to create and increase brand-loyal consumers who will buy their product wherever it is available (Lewis et al., 1995, p. 655).

Reputation

Selling quality products increases the reputation of a firm; thus, developing brand loyalty. In order to build and maintain a reputation, the promised quality of goods or services must be delivered. Having a good reputation increases a firm's sales, attracts more customers because of word-of-mouth activity, and cuts customer departures (Rogerson, 1983).

For a firm expanding its product line, a well known brand can facilitate user acceptance of the new product (Aaker, 1991). Sellers who develop a reputation for high quality can often command premium prices (e.g. Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, Mumbai).

Brand image

One of the first steps in maintaining customer brand loyalty is to build and sustain a positive brand image. Brand Image is defined as the set of brand associations that customer retain in their memory about a brand (Keller, 2003). Brand Image can be characterized by strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand association. A strong brand image is important to brand owners because the brand name distinguishes a product from the competitors' products. The image includes colors, symbols, words, and slogans that convey a clear, consistent message and not simply the name

(Berry et al., 1988). The brand image plays an important role in product choice because consumers attempt to reinforce their self-image by buying products that are congruent with their self-image. For example, a Business Tycoon may visit Hotel Taj rather than a generic brand because of the style and flair that the consumer sees in his or her personality. The consumer may perceive that one brand is more desirable than its competitor's solely because of the difference in image (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991).

Promotion/marketing communication

Advertising plays an important informative role in the economy. It provides relevant information on price and product characteristics. The advertising campaign try to attract consumers by associating the product with attitude or feelings, or it can be persuasive to develop favorable attitude (Chioveanu, 2008). Brand and Product promotion is the biggest reason for consumers' initially trying a product (Grover and Srinivasan, 1992), Advertising campaign promote brand image and brand values. It plays a role in building sub brands and if tied to something positive such as a new or better benefits or a new product/service, it facilitates brand purchase. Advertising can also work to brainwash the customers' of the competitors..

Service quality

Quality means "fit for use", "Conformance to requirement", and "freedom from variation". A brand should represent a credible guarantee of quality to the consumers (Aaker, 1991). Once the consumers are persuaded that the brand offers what they expect, they stay with the brand. Brand names provide a symbolic meaning which assists the user in the recognition and decision-making process. A consumer will choose a familiar name because brand names carry higher perceived quality. Brands generally deliver the quality they promised. Customers feel comfortable with brand versus unbranded products. That is why brand-leading products consistently command a 10 to 15 percent price premium over their competition (Elliott, 1996). Customers may also see this price difference as a quality indication. Keeping the promise is the cornerstone in developing loyalty toward the brand. It leads to developing and sustaining advocate relationships.

Innovation

Innovation leads to differentiation and allows the brand to remain up-to-date and demonstrates an unceasing attentiveness to the changes in customer taste. To keep pace with changes in the marketplace companies should meet and exceed customer needs and wants. Studies show that successful new brands are typically more distinctive, novel and superior in comparison to established brands (Nowlis and Simonsen, 1996).

When companies make innovations to their products they have to consider customers' perceptions and attitudes. Customers may not approve the new ideas or products. If new additions or products are so different from the existing core product, consumers may not make the proper connection between the new product and the mature brand, and thus may not transfer the brand's positive attributes to the new product (Aaker and Keller, 1990).

Branding extension (branding strategy)

Carrying the brand into new categories that fit well with its concept and image will help companies increase customer brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991). When the brand's associations and perceived quality can provide a point of differentiation and advantage for brand extension, the extension will be successful. However, there is a risk that an extension may damage the core brand by weakening its associations or its perceived quality. If customers want to buy a new product, they will prefer a familiar brand. They already know the brand and have the same performance expectations with the new product. If they do not get what they expect, they may switch to the new brand. The reason for the product extensions in the hospitality industry (e.g. Jaypee Residency by Jaypee group) is to better meet more heterogeneous consumer tastes. From a marketing perspective, this is a way to each different market segments. When a company uses a brand name that has already been established, some risk associated with new products may be eliminated. For brand names with high customer value, such as Hotel Taj, ITC, Jaypee in the hospitality industry, brand extension has been a good tool for marketing and growth potential.

Satisfaction

The relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty has been observed in several studies. Satisfaction is a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment that results from comparing a products' or services' performance to their expectation. Fornell (1992) examined 27 different businesses and found strong correlations between satisfaction and loyalty (e.g. 0.66 for television broadcasting).

Hospitality firm should identify the factor shaping satisfaction and make changes in their operations as a result. A highly satisfied customers generally stays loyal for longer. The link between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is not proportional (Kotler, 2009)

Understanding customer background

Customer background characteristics may also contribute to brand loyalty (Morgan and Dev, 1994). Higher income customers may stick to one premium brand because they perceive it as a contribution to their social status. Some

brands carry images or symbolic meanings that may provide social value for them. The higher household income, the less switching is expected because customers can exercise their preferences independently from monetary considerations. For instance, customers with more income can afford to repeat purchase of familiar lodging brands despite limited availability and wide price variation. As previously stated, the reasons for being brand loyal (e.g. brand image) may be different for each customer. Some firms offer trial discounts to attract new customers, whereas others offer loyalty programs to retain their current customers.

Customer relations

Relationship Marketing is whereby a firm gives greater emphasis to the maintenance and strengthens of its relationships with its existing customers. The relationship marketing leads to develop an extremely high life time value. The relationship based approaches brings the advantage of developing loyalty and once loyalty is established it can be reinforced through it.

Loyalty schemes

Loyalty schemes (Taj inner circle of Taj Hotels and Resorts) are the membership programs taken from aviation industry aim to enhance the customer's sense of membership in a unique club that will benefit them from this membership (e.g. free hotel rooms and gifts) these programmes are sufficiently appealing to attract and retain members. Frequent-guest programs like Frequent Flying Program in aviation Industry provide information that can be used to segment firms' customers and to establish relationship marketing. Customers' needs and desires can be identified with these programs. (Sparks, 1993).

Offering Frequent Guest Programme tells customers that they are special. Previous studies found that consumers like to interact with employees and enjoy the personal attention a representative provides (Raymond and Tanner, 1994). A loyalty program allows firms to create a relationship with their customers. Through this relationship, hospitality firms can offer products and services beyond the basics to add value to the customers by continually understanding their needs and anticipating their future desires and strengthens brand loyalty. (Connell, 1992).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In saturated and highly competitive industries such as hospitality, the key to increasing and preserving market share is not just winning customers but retaining them. Brand loyalty is crucial in the hospitality industry because repeat business constitutes a large percentage of room and food

sales. Brand loyal customers resist competitors' price cuts and help hospitality firms maintain high occupancy rates. Since product (and service) knowledge is an important factor in the hotel selection process (Lewis et al., 1995), hoteliers should make their customers aware of their offerings. New customers will try the product based on an initial notion of perceived quality and if their trials result in satisfaction, the perceived value of the product will increase, leading to further purchases. The brand will survive and fulfill its intention if it continuously creates new ideas and attractive choices (innovation). Over time, as familiarity and expertise with the brand escalates, the customer begins to develop a sense of brand loyalty. This, in turn, encourages him or her to purchase other new products under the same brand name (brand extension).

Although building and maintaining a brand loyal customer base is vital for competitive hospitality industry,, it is hard to say that hospitality managers are successful in ensuring customers return to their properties (Lewis et al., 1995). Previous studies showed that customers could easily switch among hotel brands (Warren and Ostergren, 1990). For some customers brand image may be important, for others availability or frequent-guest programs.

Therefore, managers of hotels should investigate their marketing effort, customers' loyalty programme and continually ask themselves, how they can implement these variables to make a loyal customer even more loyal. The strategies (actions) suggested below may help hospitality managers increase their number of brand loyal customers:

- a. **Offering added value features and consistently providing high quality service:** Today's customers are generally more price conscious and are on the search for a better deal. Thus they are knowledgeable of the competitors' products and services. Therefore, the offerings should live up to their expectations. Additionally, consumers' trust and confidence in hoteliers' promises can play key roles in starting the long-term relationship between firms and customers.
- b. **Staying in touch with the customers:** To develop customer loyalty to a hotel or restaurant brand, firms must learn their customers' wishes and needs, and make certain that they meet or exceed their specific requirements. Hospitality firms should keep in touch with customers and provide satisfaction and reinforcement to current and past customers as well. Appreciation of customers' business and acting on what customers' desire can contribute repeat business and word-of-mouth advertisements.
- c. **Segmenting customers by their buying habits:** Hospitality firms cannot offer a "one size fits all" approach to their varied customer demands. Managers should determine buying behaviors across segments (e.g. business and leisure) and provide

products (and services) that best match customers' needs and wants.

- d. *Selecting service-oriented employees:*** Frontline employees play an integral role in gaining loyalty because of high customer and employee contact in the hospitality industry. It is important to select those employees carefully and train them well.
- e. *Using relationship (database) marketing and offering frequent guest programs:*** Database marketing and frequent guest programs enable hospitality firms to understand their customers' attitudes, behaviors, and motivations. Therefore, they can appeal to their customers on an individual basis. When hospitality firms give individual attention and remember their repeat customers, those customers will be more likely to keep their business with the company. Through frequent guest programs, customers should be rewarded and given the best value to make them completely committed for the company (brand).
- f. *Building a system that facilitates organization-wide planning and implementation:*** Many hospitality firms enjoy widespread recognition of brand names (Lewis et al., 1995); however, because of brands' rigid standards, hospitality companies may face difficulties in responding to changing customer demands. Therefore, building a brand-loyal customer base for a hospitality firm is not just the marketing department's job; it requires concerted effort throughout the organization. Managers should build a system that facilitates organization-wide planning and implementation to respond to market changes. Such a system requires a mix of strategic management, marketing, motivation, innovation, training, financial techniques, customer satisfaction, and so on.

In summary, brand loyalty is one of the most important competitive survival tools because loyal customers provide repeat business, higher market shares and profits, referrals, and competitive advantage. Loyal customers are a continuous source of income.

Since retaining old customers requires much less money than acquiring new customers, and since serving old customers is significantly cheaper than serving new ones, hospitality companies that want to improve their market share and profitability must give more attention to current customers.

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