Chapter 14
Is Physical Attractiveness More Important than Professional Competency? The Moderator of Self-Confidence

Chien-Wen Tsai
Chinese Culture University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

The international tourist hotel industry that focuses on quality of the “tangible” service is a typical high-contact service. To survive in the recent competitive work environment, many enterprises enhance their competitiveness in the process of service employee selection and emphasize the importance of physical attractiveness. This study uses self-confidence as a moderator which is rare relevant empirical evidence to confirm the relationships between physical attractiveness, professional competence and service attitude. The results show that confidence of the service personnel, physical attractiveness and professional competence have positive significant correlation relationships with service attitude. Service personnel’s “self-confidence” is the most important variable towards service attitude. The study borrows selection and training functions of human resource management to integrate the knowledge of psychology, marketing management to expand the theory.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the rapid changes and developments in our current environment, we are looking for ways to find the best differentiated competitive advantages for enterprises in this competitive world. For the services industry, in addition to hardware facilities (appearance and equipment); the soft service (media); namely, the “front-line service personnel,” has become the most representative means of enterprises and the organizations, creating first impressions of the enterprise for customers. The enterprise being the first-line of services delivered, must maintain the service provided by the service personnel of a high quality (Nickson et al., 2005); in order to gain competitive advantage (Rapert & Wren, 1998). The

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Is Physical Attractiveness More Important than Professional Competency?

The importance of the front-line service staff to the enterprise (Luoh & Tsaur, 2009) is obvious, especially for the international tourist hotel industry, which has a lot of contact with the customers and emphasizes the “tangible” service quality. However, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) believe it is difficult to make an accurate assessment of service quality, due to some of its features such as un-storability and being invisible; therefore, the service quality could be replaced by the service attitude (Parasuraman et al., 1988). During the ‘moment of truth’ in service contact, customers would pre-set their views and expectations of the service staff, as well as presume what situations may occur in the environment (Lockwood & Jones, 1989), thus, forming possible stereotypes and influence the evaluation of the services (Fischer, Gainer, & Bristor, 1997).

Therefore, many industry executives believe: during this ‘moment of truth’ regarding contact, customers would establish their first impressions of the service staff and judge whether the physical attractiveness of the service staff could affect the service provided (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). Previous studies also show that the good-looking service staff may influence the cognition of service personnel’s service attitude (Luoh & Tsaur, 2009). And if the service personnel are neatly dressed, it would motivate customers to generate a positive perception (Sirgy et al, 2000) and make them feel appreciated and respected. Therefore, the international tourist hotel industry believes that to enhance the competitive advantages and increase service differentiation, it could be achieved by the physical attractiveness of the service personnel (Warhurst et al., 2000; Spiess & Waring, 2005).

This is the era of the “professional” certificate, according to the 104 Job Bank survey, there are more than 82.2% of enterprise executives in Taiwan who believe that owning international certificates is helpful to one’s pay rise and promotion. According to AH&LA, a series of professional certificate training courses for hotel professionals, including Certified Hospitality Supervisor (CHS) supervisory staff training, operation and management of customer service, food and beverage management and human resource management courses, has been established to become compulsory certificates for tourist hotel personnel worldwide to enhance their service quality. It is obvious that the professional competence of international tourist hotel service personnel is important for the industry and to enhance the service quality is a vital element of meeting the customers’ expectations. However, could physical attractiveness and professional competence enhance good service attitude of the service personnel? What causes service personnel to believe that if he/she is physically attractive or is professionally competent, he/she could provide a good service attitude? A person’s psychological state and level of self-confidence could influence his/her interpersonal skill performance as well. Jane (2006) believes that if we increase the service personnel’s self-confidence, it would improve the service quality of the service personnel as well as their work efficiency. Li Tien-hsu (1993) also indicated that, especially in the service-oriented industry, if the service staff lacks self-confidence, not only would this affect their work efficiency, but also generate a negative impact on their service objectives. Service staffs that have positive self-esteem tend to perform well at work (Benabou et al., 2003). It also shows that self-confidence plays an important role between the two variables, but few studies have shown how the self-confidence of the service personnel would affect the physical attractiveness, professional competence and service quality when providing services.

Therefore, the objectives of the chapter is to attempt to apply psychology, human resource management selection and training knowledge to cut into the expansion of the marketing management theory and to explore the way international tourist hotel industry’s select their service personnel, which one would be more important, physical attractiveness or professional ability? From the executives’ viewpoint, how would physical attractiveness and professional ability influence the service attitude of the service staff and what is the role of self-confidence amongst these factors? Because the previous literature seldom