

The Quality of the Online Response Behavior Provided by 4 Star Hotels in Europe

Master Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the Degree

Master of Business Administration

in Tourism Management

Submitted to Dr. Ulrike Bauernfeind and Dr. Astrid Dickinger

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Vienna, 26 July 2010

Affidavit

I, Moira Galić, hereby ensure that:

1. I wrote the present Master thesis myself, "The Quality of The Online Customer Service Provided by 4* Hotels in Europe", (number) bound pages, that I have only used given sources and resources and have not been assisted by an external party that is disapproved of.
2. I neither presented this Master thesis at home nor abroad in a format other than the research paper.
3. This Master thesis is the same as the research paper evaluated by the examiner.

Date

Signature

Abstract

Today, more and more tourists use the Internet to access the needed information directly in order to plan and buy desired travelling products/services. Tourism is an intangible product at its point of sale and, therefore, timely and accurate information offering high-quality and reliable representation and description is the key to the satisfaction of tourist demand. New technologies, including the Internet, are an excellent communication tool for tourism industry in its strive to provide all the necessary information and reach its customers on a global level. Many tourism organizations need to understand the importance of e-mail as a powerful communication tool which is highly interactive, fast, cheap, easy to use and prompt featuring a high level of flexibility and convenience to the user.

Taking into consideration that response behavior in tourism organizations is the central quality element, since most cases are the first contact – the first “moment of truth” with the customers, the main objective of this study is to analyze and evaluate the quality of online response behavior of 110 European hotels in the 4 star category. Online response behavior is to be evaluated through 2 major aspects: the responsiveness and the quality of the response to inquiries and complaints. The online communication behavior of a 4 stars hotel is to be evaluated by applying a mystery study approach, and the analyses are to be done by applying the SPSS software.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who helped me throughout my MBA education and who helped me develop this Master thesis.

First, I would like to thank my company Liburnia Riviera Hotels d.d., especially Mr. Kristjan Staničić, the President of the Board, and Mrs. Mirjana Mogorović, the Board member, who gave me the opportunity to continue with my education and develop myself professionally. Thank you for the trust and support you have given me, and for all the requested information about the company's performance which were needed for my projects.

A big thank you also goes to the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management which allowed me to enter their library and borrow all the literature I needed for my Master thesis. Special thanks to mr.sc. Sanja Raspor who helped me unselfishly with the SPSS software, and who always found time for me and my questions.

I would also like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Ulrike Bauernfeind and Dr. Astrid Dickinger, who always gave constructive comments, evaluations and recommendations and helped me write this paper providing professional suggestions.

During my MBA education I neglected some of my closest friends, but they were always full of understanding and support for me. Thank you!

The biggest thank you goes to my family, my mom, my sister and especially my husband. Without them I do not think that I would have achieved such a success and finished all my MBA obligations on time. My husband's unselfish support gave me the strength to stay up at night and finish all of my work, his words pushed me forward and his love makes all of this even more valuable. Damir, thank you!

“There is only one boss. The customer. He can fire everyone – owner, managing director and employees – simply by deciding to spend his money somewhere else!”

Sam Walton (founder of Wal-Mart)

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Rapid growth of the broadband Internet technology, supported by the increased speed and memory capacity of personal computers, has resulted in significant and dramatic growth of the Internet usage (McCabe, 2009). Today's Internet Big Picture shows a total number of 1,733,993,741 Internet users and an increase of 380.3% of Internet users from the year 2000 to 2009 (Internet World Stats, 2010). All these facts indicate great possibilities and opportunities for all e-commerce businesses, especially for the travel and tourism industry given the fact that the number of travelers using the Internet to purchase exciting traveling packages is also increasing on a daily basis (McCabe, 2009). What all tourism organizations need to realize is the fact that the tourism industry is currently facing two major developments:

1. Changes in the modern information and communication technologies, and
2. Changes in customer behavior (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006).

New technologies and the Internet offer the tourism industry numerous challenges and opportunities in providing better service, delivering up-to-date information, meeting specific demands, reaching its customers globally, and presenting its intangible product at the moment of sale in a more descriptive way bringing it closer to the potential customer. Furthermore, new technologies and the Internet offer customers great possibility of choice, request for tailored holidays, accurate information, unique experience, good price and justified expectations of a good service quality (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006). But, the most important is the fact that new technologies and the Internet enable the tourism organizations and their customers two-directional, modern, prompt and economical communication and information flow.

Existing and potential customers of any service company are aware of the choices they have and therefore they expect more, demand more and complain more, and they very well know that they are able to change the service they might not like. The customer is the most important, and the value of the service is equal to the value customer gives it (Galičić & Ivanović, 2008). There are 3 major tasks that every tourism organization should fulfill regarding their potential, present and future customers:

1. Attract the customer,
2. Retain the customer through long-term trustful relationship, and

3. Increase the number of the customers (Galičić & Ivanović 2008).

In order to execute these tasks many agree that companies are facing an increasingly competitive market where a differentiator, such as good service quality, is of a great importance. The service delivery process is an amalgam of many points of interactions called “the moments of truth”. The relationship with the customers is built on the experiences based on all these interactions, and only one single “moment of truth” can destroy the customer relationship forever. For tourism companies, being a part of a very competitive industry, the customer service is very often the key to success or failure, as the price policy and the range of the product are no longer the only selling propositions. Therefore, the customer service needs to be standardized, communicated, agreed and followed by every office and every employee of the company (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006).

Managing relationships with the customers has become a critical organizational competency, and a proactive Customer Relationship Management (CRM) approach is definitely a necessary tool in order to develop a one-to-one relationship (EC-Council University, 2009). This modern concept of the one-to-one relationship requires understanding, comprehending and accepting individual behavior and needs of each customer separately, but it also implies careful planning, organization, development and maintenance of all required activities and training to provide solutions to the problems at hand and to meet customers' needs (Galičić & Ivanović, 2008). Even though the CRM is implemented in a company and executed by its employees, it does not mean that the service will not fail because even the best services can fail at a certain point (Kolos & Kenesei, 2009).

Service is a performance, not an object. Its intangibility at the moment of sale requires customers' trust in the company and its promises, and it also increases customers' sensitivity to fairness issues. Every customer must buy the service in order to experience and evaluate it, and “trust” is at the heart of the high quality customer service (Berry et al, 1993; Clapham, 2008). Service failures have a negative impact on customers' loyalty, and in the event of failure customers expect effective recovery (Sousa & Voss, 2007). Service recovery is a crucial point at which the company needs to understand the reasons and causes of the failure and hence define a recovery process (Kolos & Kenesei, 2009). But how does the company know about the service failure? According to Technical Assistant Research Program (TARP) 26 out of 27 customers do not complain if

they have experienced poor service, because a common conclusion is that complaining is nothing else but an additional annoyance and a waste of time. Complaining about the service is even less common than complaining about a certain product, therefore the company should consider a complaint as a gift (Barlow & Møller, 1996). Furthermore, according to statistics, satisfied customers tell 4 people about a good service experience while dissatisfied customers tell 9 people (Clapham, 2008). Today, thanks to the new technologies, a negative word-of-mouth spreads faster and reaches wide masses via different customer feedback systems (Sousa & Voss, 2007). Hence, when the customers do send the complaint, the company should not just replay with “thank you for your complaint” because this will not satisfy the customers (Kolos & Kenesei, 2009). The company should provide concrete and serious answers which include full explanation – what went wrong and why, as well as what the company is doing to prevent reoccurrence of the problem in the future. For tourist and hospitality managers credibility provides opportunity to regain the trust of the customers, regain their loyalty and enhance their repurchase intentions (DeWitt & Martin, 2009).

1.1. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

Many companies need to understand the importance of e-mail as a powerful communication tool. Accordingly, they should change their attitude and behavior towards the customer service e-mail because the quality of company’s response to customers’ e-mails influences customers’ satisfaction (E-WRITE, 2010). E-mail communication is highly interactive, fast, cheap, easy to use and prompt, and allows a great amount of flexibility and convenience to the user (Matzler et al., 2003). This is of even a greater importance to the tourism industry. Tourism organizations should treat e-mail as a business communication tool, following all business communication rules and principles, such as addressing the questions promptly, professionally, politely and personally (Gherissi-Labben, 2003). Using the Internet, customers are in a position to contact several hotels simultaneously with the same inquiry at a very low cost, and a slow, unprofessional and incomplete response means a lost opportunity (Matzler et al., 2003). Response behavior in tourism organizations is the central quality element, because most of the time it represents the first contact – the first “moment of truth” with the customers. Quick and complete response will result in customers’ satisfaction and positive expectations towards the hotel, while inadequate response behavior

will result with a loss of a potential guest and dissatisfaction (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006; Matzler et al., 2003). The successful customer service e-mail effort should be based on the quality of the response, and not the quantity of e-mails answered per hour (O'Flahavan & Rudick, 2010). From the customers' point of view the quality of response either to an inquiry or a complaint affects their opinion about the hotel, satisfaction and the decision to make a purchase. Even though the effective handling of e-mails is considered an essential tool for the high quality customer service and CRM, there is still a low level of understanding how customers evaluate the responses to their inquiries and especially complaints (Schoefer, 2009).

1.2. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to measure the quality of the response behavior to 2 inquiries and 2 complaints provided by 110 European hotels in the 4 star category. According to the study of airlines' response behavior, as well as some other preceding studies, it is believed that there is a difference between these two types of corporate communication forms – inquiry and complaint (Bauernfeind & Dickinger, 2009). The quality of the responses to both e-mail types will be evaluated by applying mystery study approach and analyzed from the two perspectives: the responsiveness and the quality of the response.

As mentioned previously, a quick response is a significant element of the service quality. According to several different research studies performed internationally or regionally on different hotel categories or sizes, the results proved almost the same – poor response behavior (Matzler et al., 2003). Therefore the first objective of the study is to analyze the responsiveness of the 4 star hotels to received inquiries and complaints in terms of response rates and response time. The responsiveness is one of the five quality dimensions of the SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman et al. (1993). Based on this first objective it can be expected that the e-mail type influences the response behavior.

The tourism organizations are more willing to answer inquiries than complaints, because it is a less complex task and a more pleasant situation in itself. Each tourism organization is eager to sell its services, a task which can be achieved by replying to inquiries sent by a customer obviously interested in the company's product. Replying to complaints is definitely a more complex and

unpleasant task, therefore it is expected that the response rate will be higher for inquiries than for complaints.

Furthermore, as afore mentioned, complaints require concrete and serious answers which should include full explanations of the reasons and causes, as well as a solution to the service failure, therefore it can be expected that it will take longer time to answer a complaint than an inquiry. Consequently, the response time for the complaint will be longer than the response time for the inquiry.

Since the actual responses, as well as the speed of the response, are not the only elements influencing customers' satisfaction with the response behavior, the other objective of this study is to analyze the quality of the response behavior from the customers' point of view. The quality of the response behavior will be evaluated through the 51 criteria grouped into the other 4 quality dimensions of the SERVQUAL scale: reliability, assurance, empathy and tangibles. Taking into consideration the type of e-mail, it is expected that the quality of the response behavior will be higher for complaints than for inquiries because of a more serious approach to the problem resolution and regain of customers' trust.

1.3. THE THESIS STRUCTURE

The Master thesis "The quality of the online response behavior provided by 4 star hotels in Europe" consists of 5 major sections.

The first section is the introduction to the study. It shortly states the present situation regarding the new technologies and their importance in the tourism industry, the importance of customer service quality and customer relationship management (CRM). Furthermore, it lays out and focuses on the main problem of the study which is the quality of the response behavior as a very important part of customer service quality. In "The objectives of the study" part of the introduction section two major objectives of the study are stated, responsiveness and quality of the response behavior, which have been evaluated and analyzed by applying mystery study approach, the SERVQUAL scale and the SPSS software.

The Literature review is the second part of the master thesis which provides theoretical background of the main concerns of the study. It includes detailed

description of the new technology influences on the e-commerce business, and the importance of the qualitative Customer Relationship Management (CRM). The CRM section is further divided into Customer service quality, Service recovery and Quality of the response behavior in order to fully emphasize the most important streams of the study.

The Research methodology contains step by step description of the whole procedure, from selecting and forming the list of 110 European hotels through mailing 4 e-mail types to them by applying mystery guest approach, to evaluating their responses and collecting the relevant data. It also describes the employment of the SPSS software package. This section contains three hypotheses of the study.

The following section is Results analysis including data presentation and results explanation.

The Master thesis ends with Conclusion, followed by Bibliography and Appendices.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is based on the theoretical background about the influences of new technologies on the tourism industry with an emphasis on the e-mail as a powerful communication medium, and the importance of the customer relationship management divided to 3 main streams: customer service quality, service recovery and quality of the response behavior.

2.1. THE NEW TECHNOLOGY IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

In 1994, the World Wide Web became open to the commercial interchange, and that was the year when the Internet began its explosive worldwide growth. Since 2000 we have witnessed a phenomenal growth of Internet users, online websites and access availability (Sheehan, 2001). This dramatic growth has been fueled by an uptake in the broadband network connections which allows a development of more sophisticated, interactive and richer media applications (McCabe, 2009). The following Table 1 shows the afore mentioned Internet worldwide growth in numbers according to the last Internet usage and world population statistics dated 30 September 2009.

Table 1: The Internet Big Picture – World Internet Users and Population Statistics

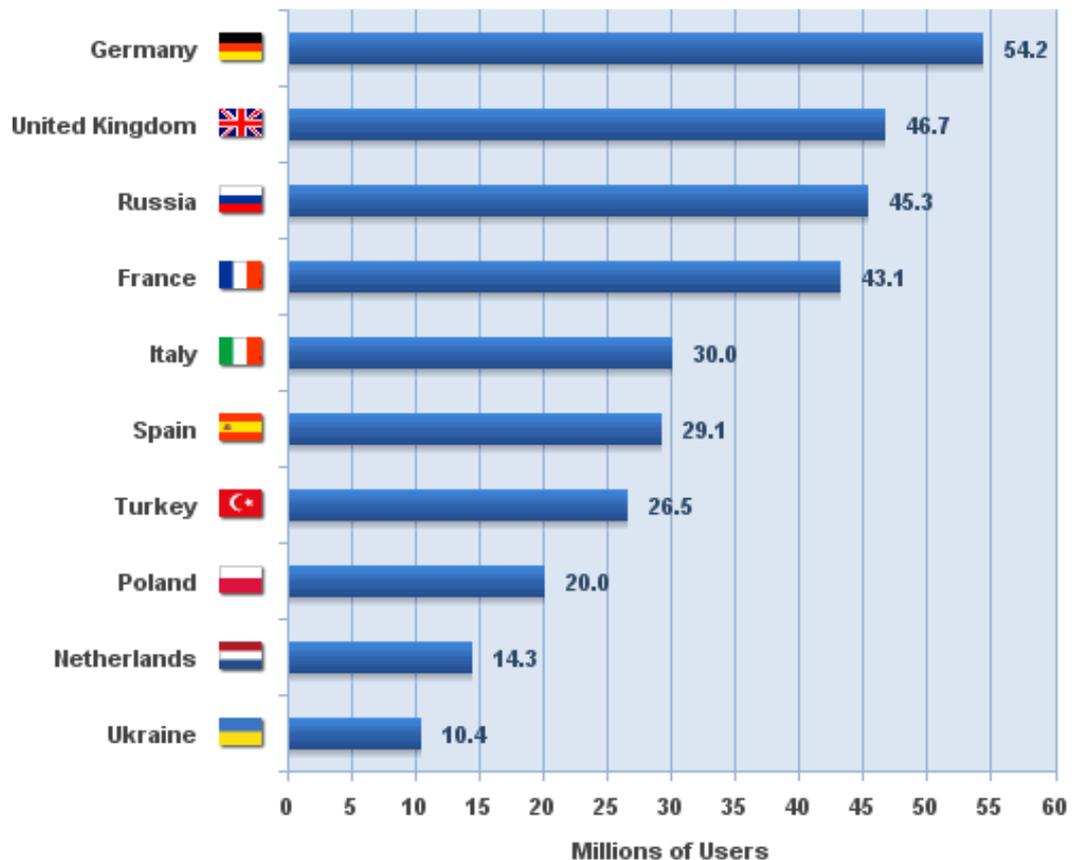
World regions	Population (2009 Est.)	Internet Users Dec 31, 2000	Internet Users Latest data	Penetration (% population)	Growth 2000-2009
Africa	991.002.342	4.514.400	67.371.700	6,8%	1392,4%
Asia	3.808.070.503	114.304.000	738.257.230	19,4%	545,9%
Europe	803.850.858	105.096.093	418.029.796	52,0%	297,8%
Middle East	202.687.005	3.284.800	57.425.046	28,3%	1648,2%
North America	340.831.831	108.096.800	252.908.000	74,2%	134,0%
Latin America/Caribbea	586.662.468	18.068.919	179.031.479	30,5%	890,8%
Oceania/Australia	34.700.201	7.620.480	20.970.490	60,4%	175,2%
WORLD TOTAL	6.767.805.208	360.985.492	1.733.993.741	25,6%	380,3%

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm

If one took a closer to Table 1, it would clearly indicate that there are 1,733,993,741 world total Internet users, and looking at each world region separately, Asia is the number one with the total of 738,257,230 Internet users. Transferring these numbers to percentages, one could conclude that there has

been an increase of 380.3% of world total Internet users since the year 2000, but instead of Asia, the Middle East has experienced the highest growth of 1,648.2%. Since the study research is based on European hotels, looking at the Europe region, the numbers show a total of 418,029,796 Internet users and the growth rate of 297.8%. Figure 1 shows the top 10 Internet countries in Europe.

Figure 1: Top 10 Internet Countries in Europe



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com

Basis: 418,029,796 estimated Internet Users in Europe for September 30, 2009

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In Europe, Germany holds the first place with the total number of 54.2 millions of users, followed by The United Kingdom (46.7) in the second place and Russia (45.3) in the third.

The new technologies have become a strong weapon for the tourism industry, giving it vast possibilities to reach customers globally and to gain competitive advantages (Schegg et al., 2003). The travel and tourism sector is one of the most important sectors of the current Internet activity, since all these advancements of the Internet technologies have resulted in significantly increased number of travelers using the Internet to seek the destination

information and to book their holidays online. According to the Travel Industry Association of America 67% of US travelers have used the Internet to search for destination information, prices or schedules, and 41% have actually booked at least some aspect of their trips via the medium (Litvina et al., 2007). New e-mediaries open a wide range of possibilities to the travelers to book different elements of their travel arrangements separately, to compare and assess prices, create unique tailored-made experiences and choose the quality of the services independently. Thus, travelers can create the travel experiences perfectly tailored to meet their needs, values and wishes (McCabe, 2009).

One of the most popular forms of the new technology is the World Wide Web given its flexibility, interactivity and efficiency, and the hospitality industry is particularly well placed to take advantage of the web. The web, as a marketing and sales point, places the business directly into the “cybermarket” and it can be a major factor in differentiating a company from its market segment competitors. It strengthens business-to-business and business-to-customer relationships by providing continuously updated information relevant to the customers in an interactive and captivating way (Zsidisin et al., 1999). Looking from the hospitality provider’s point of view, the Web is rapidly becoming a powerful tool of choice for making hotel reservations, whether in the form of an early booking, or a last minute option (Gherissi-Laben et al., 2003). Previously, the tourism marketers were the one initiating the one-way communication with their customers, but today, the new technologies and the use of the Internet have given the customers the power to start a dialogue with the hospitality providers. E-mail, as one of the most powerful electronic customer service tools, has become a highly efficient means of communication enabling this dialogue between hospitality providers and their existing and potential customers (Schegg et al., 2003; Litvina et al., 2007).

2.1.1. E-mail as the Communication Medium

Electronic mail or e-mail according to The Free Dictionary by Farlex (2010) is defined as follows:

“1. A system for sending and receiving messages electronically over a computer network. E-mail is asynchronous and does not require the receiver of the message to be online at the time the message is sent or

received. E-mail also allows a user to distribute messages to large numbers of recipients instantaneously.

2. A message or messages sent or received by such a system.“

The definition itself clearly shows the e-mail potentials and its importance as the communication medium which reaches “a large numbers of recipients instantaneously”. But how does it look in numbers? According to statistics there were:

- **90 trillion** e-mails sent on the Internet in 2009;
- **247 billion** e-mail messages sent per day in 2009 (average value);
- **1.4 billion** e-mail users worldwide;
- **100 million** new e-mail users since the year before (Royal Pingdom, 2010).

Besides these fascinating numbers, business organizations using the e-mail communication tool in everyday business must also be aware of the fact that 81% of total number of e-mails are spam e-mails, which results in total of 200 billion spam e-mails per day (Royal Pingdom, 2010).

For the hospitality providers, as well as all other tourism organizations, the website and the e-mail represent the online “customer interface”. The organizational use of the Internet should evolve from having a website and an e-mail address, to answering the incoming e-mails properly, since e-mail is strategically important for the hotel industry as a very effective tool for acquiring and retaining customers, and for managing and improving customer relationships (Schegg et al., 2003).

Today, customers often contact companies via the Internet, and when the customers go online, e-mail is the most preferred Internet communication tool regardless of the user’s age or place of residence. The tourism organizations should treat e-mail as a business communication tool, following all business communication rules and principles. They should apply a simple task of answering e-mails promptly, personally, professionally and politely (Gherissi-Labben, 2003). Most tourism organizations provide online booking functions and e-mail communication which, in turn, results in an increasing amount of communication carried out online, and sending timely response to an e-mail inquiry or complaint is a central element of quality (Sarbaugh-Thompson &

Feldman, 1998). From the customers' point of view response behavior to their e-mails is a critical factor for two reasons:

- directly effects buying decisions, and
- influences customer satisfaction (Matzler et al., 2003).

But why is e-mail such a successful communication tool? According to Nei (2001) e-mail is the leading Internet application because it is highly interactive, easy to use, cheap and prompt, and it applies a large amount of flexibility (Matzler et al., 2003). Furthermore, it enhances business communication since people engaging in electronic mail communication do not have to be even physically or temporally close or, to rephrase, people can be available for communication via e-mail even when they are physically absent. It allows one-to-one and one-to-many interactions, and even though it lacks human interface, many people compensate this inter-personality through the use of language, symbols and format to incorporate emotions, intensity, expressions or a certain intonation (Sarbaugh-Thompson & Feldman, 1998).

E-mail makes eService possible, quick and cost-effective, but most of all it enables active and easy interaction giving companies possibilities to acquire and build up quality relationships with its customers (Gherissi-Labben et al., 2003).

2.2. CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM)

Companies engaged in e-business too often provide poor customer service and support because they fail to properly understand the importance of the Internet era. Procurement, fulfillment and post-sale support can be severely endangered by poor communication. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) explains the circular relationship between companies, technology and customers, which together form the infrastructure for good service quality in an e-business environment. Managing customer relationships has become a critical organizational competency (EC-Council University, 2009). The CRM can be defined as planning, organization, development and support of long-term relationships between a company and its main stakeholders (Galičić & Ivanović, 2008). It is a strategy that leverages advanced technology and perceives the customer as a king or a queen once again. Despite the uncertainty of the economy, the CRM has gone from being an important perimeter in the business world to a 21st century indispensable survival tool (EC-Council University, 2009).

The CRM enables companies to create value for their customers, and electronic communication channels occupy a crucial position in the multilateral communication strategy (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006; Buttle, 2004). The implementation of the CRM enables companies to:

- Develop and access greater individual customer insight,
- Effectively respond to individual requirements, and
- Integrate business processes around individual customer (Knox et al., 2003).

Previous customer relationships had nothing to do with the customers' personalities and, therefore, the results were mediocre, since the most important element –individuality– was missing from the equation. The CRM gives a company the knowledge about its customers, about their individual characteristics, needs and wishes, necessary for the company to achieve one-to-one relationships which give new value to the loyalty and importance to the “life cycle of the customer” (Galičić & Ivanović, 2008).

According to a Financial Times reports, major components of the CRM successful implementation are as follows:

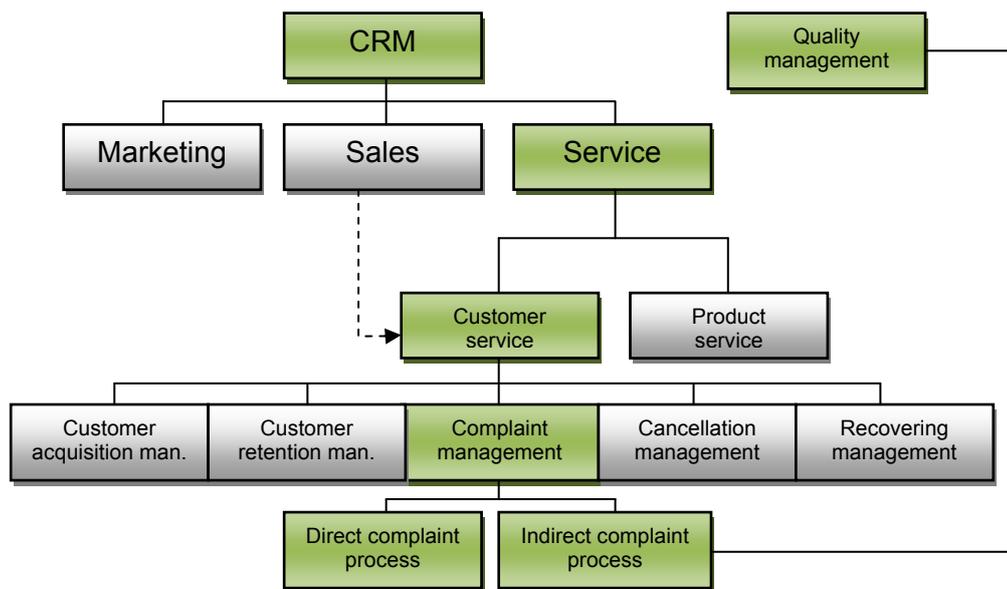
- A data warehouse to store customer information and analytic tools to analyze the data and learn about customers behavior,
- A front office that integrates sales, marketing and service functions across media (call centers, people, stores, the Internet),
- Business rules developed from data analysis to ensure that the front office benefits from the company's knowledge about its customers,
- Measures of performance to enable customer relationships and to continually improve them,
- Integration into the company's operational and support systems ensuring that the front office's promises are delivered (cited by Knox et al., 2003).

There are a lot of good reasons for business to pursue customers' loyalty as a strategic objective (Garrett, 2006). For customers, tourism service equals to the totality of the whole package of individual services and their opinion about the company is nothing more than the sum of their experiences when they come in contact with company's performances (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006). Successful customer service delivers experiences that make customers feel important and satisfied. Satisfied customers are, in turn, loyal customers and this should be the

major focus of every tourism organization. Customers' loyalty is all about making customers feel good about their relationship with a company, meeting their needs and delivering the given promises (Garrett, 2006). Furthermore, companies must be ready to deal with dissatisfied customers, and in this case the CRM system proves to be even more important. Service recovery strategy, therefore, is another significant and crucial part of the CRM system helping companies to achieve overall quality management. Figure 2 clearly represents the whole concept of the CRM system.

As part of the CRM concept, special attention is given to the Customer Service, Complaint Management and Response Behavior as crucial part of both, because the quality of all of them plays a significant role in customers' acquisition, retention, and satisfaction in the tourism industry.

Figure 2: The CRM Concept



Source: Welz (2006): Complaint Management – a short overview

The proactive CRM is definitely a necessary tool to develop a one-to-one relationship, but the implementation of the CRM modern concept in a company and its execution by the company's employees does not mean that the service will not fail (EC-Council University, 2009, Kolos & Kenesei, 2009).

Service is a performance, not an object. Its intangibility at the moment of sale requires customers' trust in the company and its promises, and it also increases customers' sensitivity to fairness issues. Every customer must buy a

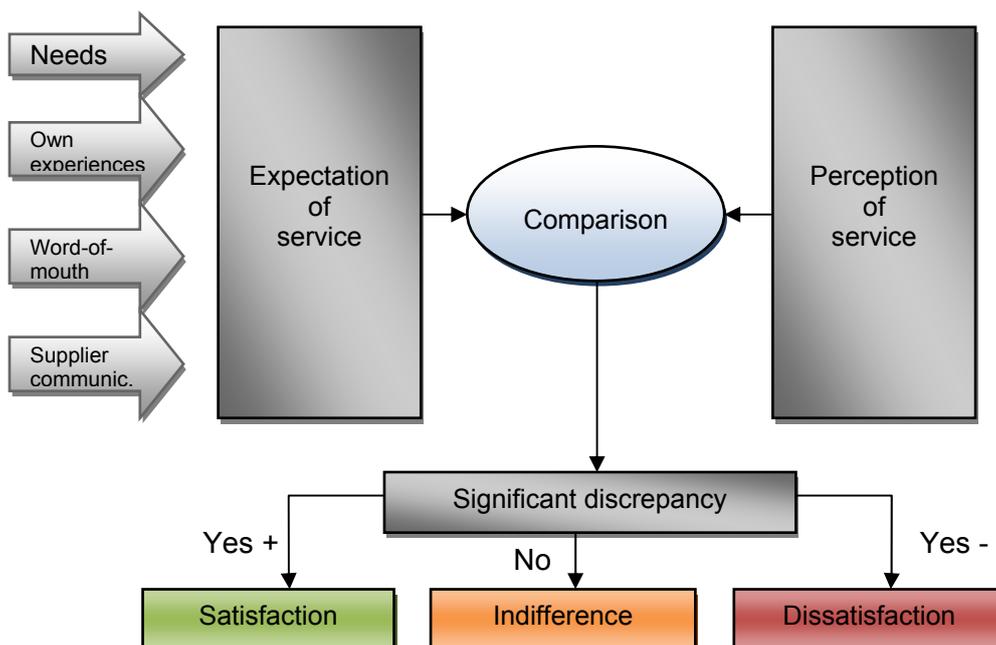
service in order to experience it and evaluate it, and “trust” is at the heart of the high quality customer service (Berry et al, 1993; Clapham, 2008).

2.2.1. Customer Service Quality

It is very important for companies which present and sell their services on the Internet to provide high quality service, but it is also important for them to realize that their competitors are other companies also taking advantages of the web (Sohn & Tadisina, 2003). By standardizing its customer service, a company can measure its quality and improve it. By improving the service quality customers' expectations will grow, but this increase is happening everywhere, so it would be wise to be two steps ahead and not to wait for customers to force for action (Lovelock, 2007). The high quality service basically means pleasing the customers and not just protecting them from annoyance and dissatisfaction. In order to achieve this “pleasing” stage, a company has to design a targeted approach to provide services which go beyond the basic requirements and to develop long-term relationships (Zairi, 2000). The service quality helps the company to maximize benefits, minimize non-price burdens for its customers, decrease customer maintenance costs, and reduce exposure to price competition (Berry et al., 1993; i-Sight by Customer Expressions, 2009).

The service quality is determined by the difference between customers' expectations of service and perception of service they actually receive as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Service Quality – Expectations vs. Perception



Source: Welz (2006): Complaint management – a short overview.

Companies should be eager to provide reliable and high quality service in order to achieve positive significant discrepancy between expectations and perceptions of the service, or simply said to achieve *satisfaction*. No discrepancy or negative one leads to indifference or dissatisfaction which, in turn, lead to complaints and customer loss.

According to the National Roads and Motorists Association (NRMA) there are four major, but simple and clear, principles of service quality:

- Satisfy your customer,
- Continually improve through small steps,
- Involve everybody in the improvement decisions and processes,
- Control through measurement and statistics (Zairi, 2000).

In order to develop a more effective service quality, a company must understand the attributes of the service that customers use to evaluate it. These attributes, according to Parasuraman et al. (1985), are referred to as “**determinants of quality**”. There are 10 identified determinants of service quality:

“Reliability, Responsiveness, Competence, Access, Courtesy, Communication, Credibility, Security, Understanding the customer, and Tangible” (Zsidisin et al., 1999).

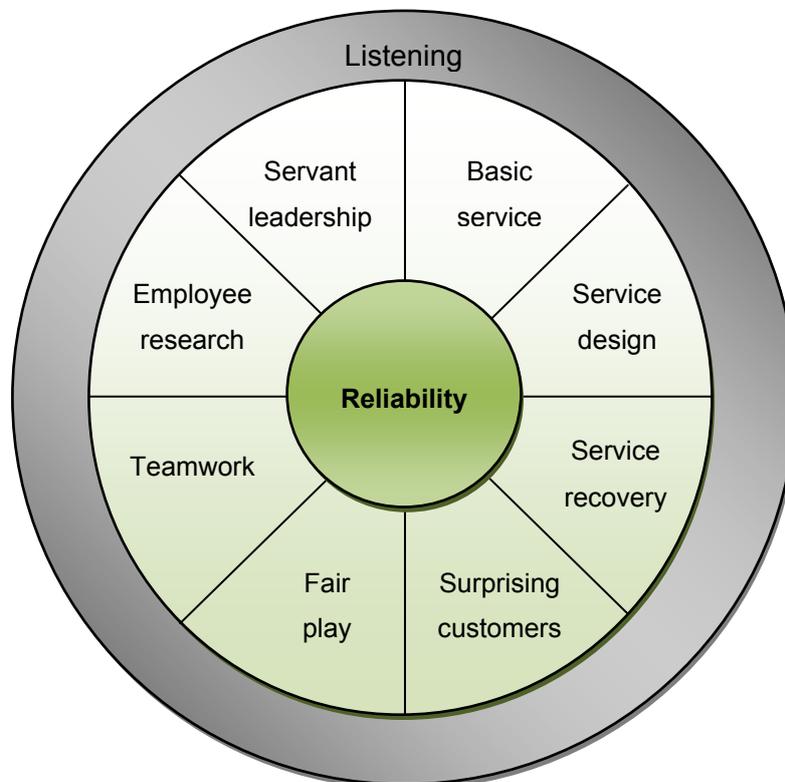
Parasuraman et al. have developed a generic instrument called the SERVQUAL to measure the quality of the service based on five dimensions distilled from these 10 original determinants (Zsidisin et al., 1999). These 5 dimensions, put in order regarding their relevance and importance from the customers’ point of view, are as follows:

- Reliability (32%) – the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately,
- Responsiveness (22%) – the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service,
- Assurance (19%) – the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence,
- Empathy (16%) – the carrying, individualized attention provided to customers,

- Tangibles (11%) – the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.

According to Berry's et al. (1993) study each "determinant of quality" was evaluated by more than 1900 customers of 5 large well-known US companies based on the importance of the determinant when judging the service quality. *Reliability* is the core and the single most important determinant of the service quality with 32% of the votes, because, even though the personnel are friendly and willing to apologize, nothing can compensate for an unreliable service. Besides reliability, customers expect basic service which means that they expect the fundamentals and solid performance, not empty promises, the fact which puts responsiveness to the second place with 22% of points. In the case of a hotel all the customers need as fundamentals are a clean, secure room, being treated like a guest, and keeping the given promises. The knowledge and courtesy of the personnel (assurance) and their empathy share the third and the fourth position, while the appearance and physical elements are the least important when judging service quality (Berry et al., 1993). Figure 4 shows the importance of reliability as well as the complete service quality ring.

Figure 4: The Service Quality Ring

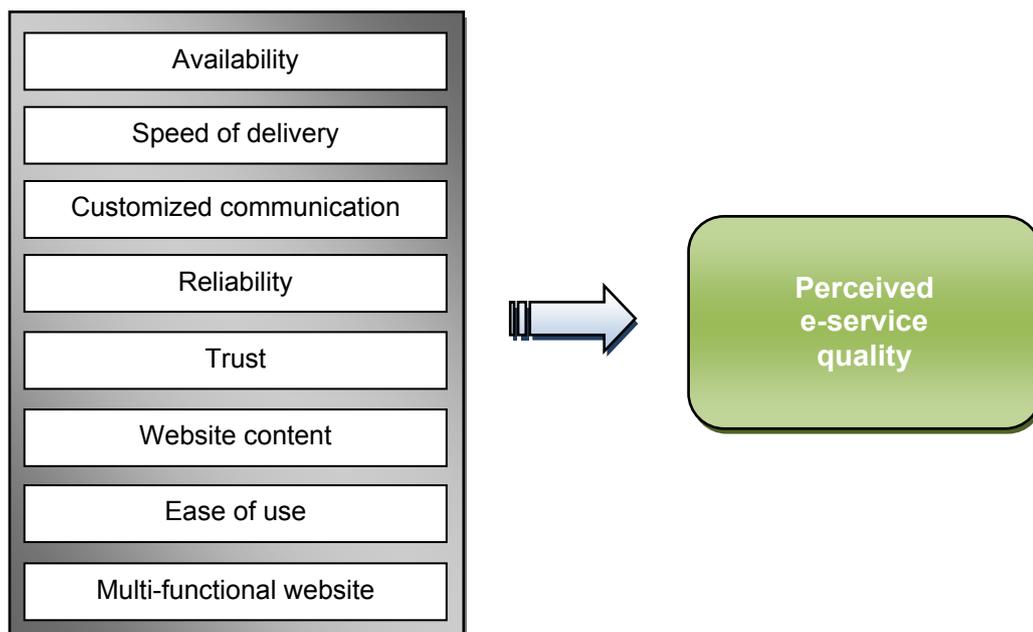


Source: Berry et al. (1993): Improving Service Quality in America: Lessons Learned

Listening is positioned in the outer ring because listening influences all other 9 elements within the service system. The service system should be planned and organized in such a way to excellently deliver the basic service, and where the *service recovery* is seen as an opportunity, to pleasantly surprise customers and to demonstrate fair play. *Teamwork*, *employee research* and *servant leadership* are critical factors of organizational readiness to deliver quality service. *Reliability*, as the core element of the customer service, is positioned in the center of the ring (Berry et al., 1993).

Each industry has different characteristics since it deals with different products and different services, therefore it is not preferable to generalize the determinants of the service quality. There are other models measuring the service quality beside Parasuraman's SERVQUAL that are more e-service quality oriented. One of the studies proposed by Murphy, Schegg, Olaru & Hofacker (2007) evaluates 4 dimensions of the e-service quality as follows: *personalization*, *responsiveness*, *reliability* and *tangibility*. In this model the tangibility refers to the website's interface and its "slickness" which is to attract the customers and invite to interaction with the company through electronic media (Bauernfeind & Dickinger, 2009; Zsidisin et al., 1999). Kaynama, on the other hand, proposes an 8-dimensional model for evaluating the e-service quality presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Perceived E-service Quality Measures



Source: Sohn & Tadisina (2003): Development of E-service Quality Measure for Internet-Based Financial Institutions

Speed of delivery includes quick response to customers' requests and speedy transactions, while *customized communication* indicates personalized communication between customers and companies (Sohn & Tadisina, 2003). In both models, Figure 4 and Figure 5, the central position is occupied by *reliability* as the core dimension of the service quality.

All these dimensions of the service quality have one common goal and that is to build and secure customers' loyalty. Why does a company need to work on building customers' loyalty? It is common knowledge that profit comes from repeat customers, which means loyal customers who spread positive word-of-mouth about the offered products and services. The company can survive and flourish over a longer period of time only if it continually works to improve its products and service delivery which will meet, or even exceed, customers' expectations. Merely satisfied customers are an easy target for the market competitors since they are easily converted (i-Sight by Customer Expressions, 2009). Today's consumers have a large choice of the same or similar products and services to satisfy their needs and wishes, and the Internet allows them to switch from one provider to another at a very low cost and in a short period of time (Lovelock, 2007). It is good to remember that acquiring new customers is very expensive, more expensive than building trustful and long-term relationships with the existing ones based on high service quality.

A true test of commitment to the quality is not company's advertising promises, but the way the company responds when the things go wrong for the customers, and in the service industry things do go wrong (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006). There are 6 categories of e-service failures: 1) *delivery*, 2) *website design*, 3) *payment*, 4) *security*, 5) *product quality*, and 6) *customer service*. Online failures occur when customers are dissatisfied with any of the dimensions of e-service quality (Sousa & Voss, 2007). According to Zeithaml & Bitner (2003) the first rule of service quality is to do it right the first time, and this rule implies an interesting notion – if the service is performed correctly the first time, there will be no need for service recovery (Costello et al., 2009). Is this actually possible even for the premium brands? Not in the real world, because service is all about people and the human factor will definitely cause some type of failure sooner or later. When the service failure happens the company must have planned, organized and implemented good service recovery strategy.

2.2.2. Service Recovery

Customers judge the company on how well it handles problems, and then on its willingness to make sure that similar problems do not occur in the future. They judge company's *service recovery strategy* (Michel et al., 2008).

Service recovery basically means fixing service breakdowns. It has an enormous impact on customers' satisfaction, repeat business, and, ultimately, profits and growth. Companies should understand and accept service recovery as a mission involving three stakeholders:

1. The customers who want their complaints resolved,
2. The managers in charge of the process of addressing these concerns,
3. The frontline employees who deal with the customers (Michel et al., 2008).

Every service (human or technology driven) will eventually fail one day and it will put the customers in an awkward situation (Schindlholzer, 2008). Since many services are heavily people-based, particularly the tourism industry services, it is expected for service failures to occur. In practice, people-based services cannot guarantee a "zero defects" service delivery every time. In tourism there are a number of service providers involved in the whole process, the fact which inevitably leads to occasional service failures occurrence (Ennew & Schoefer, 2003). Once the service problem(s) occur, customers' confidence in the company comes into question. The company has two options in such a situation: make things better or make things worse. Even though the first reaction to such a statement is "of course that the company would do anything to make things better", the actual practice shows differently. There are several reasons why the company more frequently makes things worse:

- There is no encouragement for the customers to complain,
- There is not enough trained employees at the first line to resolve the problems at hand,
- No employees empowerment to handle the situation,
- Lack of investment in communication and information technology (Berry et al., 1993).

Some customers are naturally more demanding than others and the company cannot profitably set the quality standards to satisfy the criteria of its most demanding customers (Goodwin & Ross, 1990). The extent of dissatisfied

customers is not the same for each industry, but it is reasonable to believe that there are at least 25% of the customers unsatisfied with the product or the offered service. Only 1% of them will make a formal complaint (Welz, 2006). Hence, for every 10 complaints there are 250 dissatisfied customers, and statistics show that 1 unhappy customer will tell 10-12 other people about their bad experiences with the service (Lovelock, 2007). Today, the companies must be aware that the Internet gives the unhappy customers an opportunity to reach thousands of people by posting their complaints on bulletin boards, blog sites or even to create the website to talk about their bad experiences with specific and targeted organizations and groups (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006). Therefore, in today's business world a negative word-of-mouth spreads further and faster. The Internet has also increased the complaining frequency for the online service organizations, because there is no face-to-face interaction which makes customers feel more comfortable to complain, and there are always possibilities to immediately use some type of customer complaint platform to file the complaint, which is a time saving option. E-service failures have a significant impact on the customers retaining and their repurchasing intentions, because customers can switch the service provider in a minute of time at very low switching costs (Sousa & Voss, 2007).

According to Karlsson & Horbec (2006) there are 4 main reasons for customer complaints:

1. To obtain compensation,
2. To release the anger,
3. To help improve the service, and
4. Because of the concern for others.

Unfortunately customers do not always complain after the service failure, therefore the companies have to be aware that there are 4 types of customers:

1. *Passives* – customers who take no action,
2. *Voicers* – customers who actively complain and demand for service improvement,
3. *Irates* – customers who complain only to the family members and close peers,
4. *Activists* – customers who complain and believe in a positive outcome (Bauernfeind & Dickinger, 2009).

Usually people in higher social and economic classes are more likely to complain, because their better education, higher income and better social involvement give them confidence, knowledge and motivation (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006).

Customers do not complain for fun. They do it because they actually believe that they have made a bad choice and lost time and/or money (Lovelock, 2007). When customers submit a complaint, the company can be sure that the customers are upset, dissatisfied, unable to find a person to complain to, uncomfortable to complain face-to-face, encouraged to write the complaint, and having some personal reason why they did not make a timely complaint (Barlow & Møller, 1996).

Customers' complaints help the company to collect important information, to learn from them and to acknowledge critical points of service performance (Vos et al., 2008). What companies should start doing is to stop ignoring their customers, provide them the possibilities to voice their complaints and learn all about crucial areas of the service that need to be improved (Schindlholzer, 2007). Complaints are the starting points for analysis, improvement, and even elimination of some organizational practices (Vos et al., 2008). They should be looked at and accepted in a positive way for several reasons:

- Complaints are customers' feedbacks, source of information and a chance to improve the service;
- They are a tool for preventing complacency and harnessing internal competencies to optimize products and services;
- A useful way to measure performance and to allocate resources more efficiently;
- They are the "mirror" for gauging internal performances against the competition; and
- They are useful exercise for getting nearer to customers and understanding them better (Zairi, 2000).

Therefore, complaints should be welcomed and not seen as an attack, and their handling should be a customer-oriented process directly aimed to help customers and to resolve their dissatisfaction (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006, Vos et al., 2008). Good service recovery contributes to the culture of concern over addressing the complaints and fixing the problems which clearly distinguishes a successful company from the unsuccessful one. It gives an advantage over the

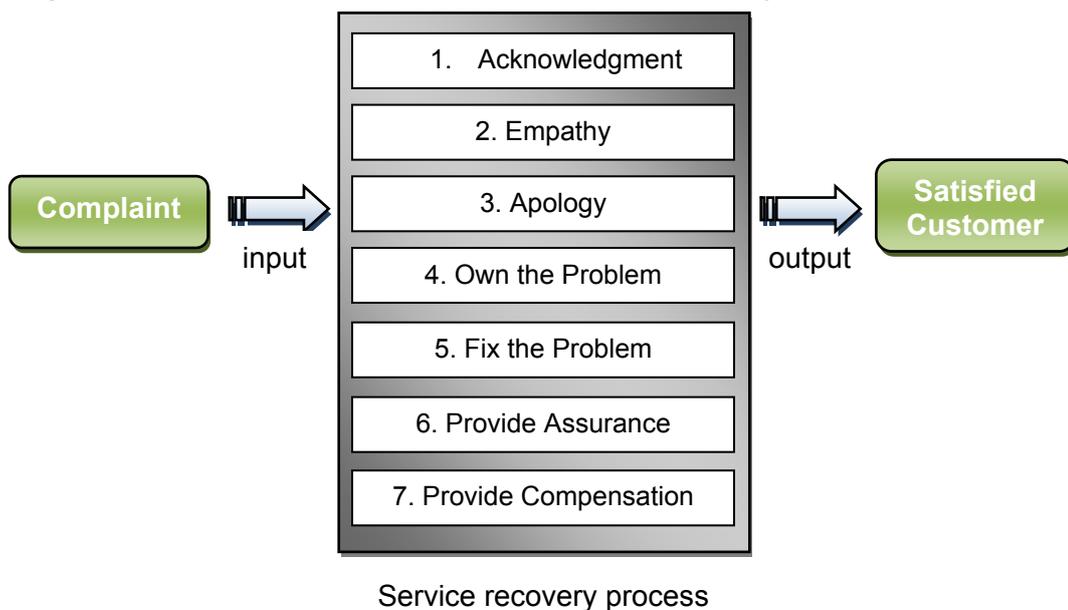
competitor (Amadeus, 2009). Furthermore, service recovery is an opportunity for surprising customers when interacting with them in a way to surpass their expectations and achieve a “wow” effect. An excellent customer service gives competitive advantage and a reputation of a superior service quality. This is the right way for the company to capitalize the opportunity of surprising the customers (Berry et al., 1993).

Even though all these findings are in favor of the good service recovery, there are still several common service recovery mistakes:

- Managers do not believe that the service recovery provides financial return,
- Companies do not focus enough on preventing service failure at the first place,
- Service employees fail to display good attitudes, and
- Companies make it hard for customers to complain (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006).

There are several studies and researches defining the service recovery strategy and its main steps, principles or rules, but for the purpose of this study Schindlholzer (2008) 7 rules have been used as the most applicable solution (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Seven Rules of Successful Service Recovery



Source: Schindlholzer, B.: Strategies and Tactics for Successful Service Recovery. Institute of Information Management, 2008.

But, before the actual application of these 7 rules, every company should encourage its customers to complain by facilitating the complaint procedure (Berry et al., 1993). The use of new technologies definitely makes complaining easier and more accessible, but it can also be used to anticipate problems and avoid the service failures before the customers actually recognize those (Costello et al., 2009). A moment in which the customers contact the company and interact with its employees to discuss the problems is the important “moment of truth” demanding some serious action (Schindlholzer, 2008). Besides serious action, this “moment of truth” requires fast action (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006).

Once this moment of truth occurs, the first rule for a contact employee is to *acknowledge* the problem followed by *empathy* which means that the company has to understand the problem from the customers’ point of view and must be aware that the customers are upset because of the problem. It is essential for the employee to *apologize* in the name of the company, and to take the *ownership of the problem* no matter in what position he or she is in. Even though it is not up to the employee to resolve the problem, he or she should make the customers feel that they are taken seriously and taken care of. The next step is to actually *fix the problem*, because most of the time a simple apology is not enough. This step should be the top priority for the company. Giving the customers a feeling of *assurance* that the problem will be resolved and should not reoccur will leave a professional impression and help rebuild customers’ confidence in the company’s services. At the end *providing compensation*, depending on the severity of the problem at hand, remains to be a powerful method of service recovery (Schindlholzer, 2008).

There is very little progress in understanding how customers evaluate the service recovery strategy, and recent researches have brought attention to the role of “perceived justice theory” as a useful conceptual framework to explain the effectiveness of the service recovery (Ennew & Schoefer, 2003, Schoefer, 2009).

Perceived Justice Theory

It is common belief that customers will not be dissatisfied at the moment of service failure, since most customers are aware of the fact that things might go wrong, particularly in the service industry. What actually makes them angry and dissatisfied is the company’s response, or lack of response, to the service failure and their complaint (del Río-Lanza et al., 2009). In such a situation the

customers' evaluation of the outcome can be described by the concept of *perceived justice theory* (Schoefer, 2009).

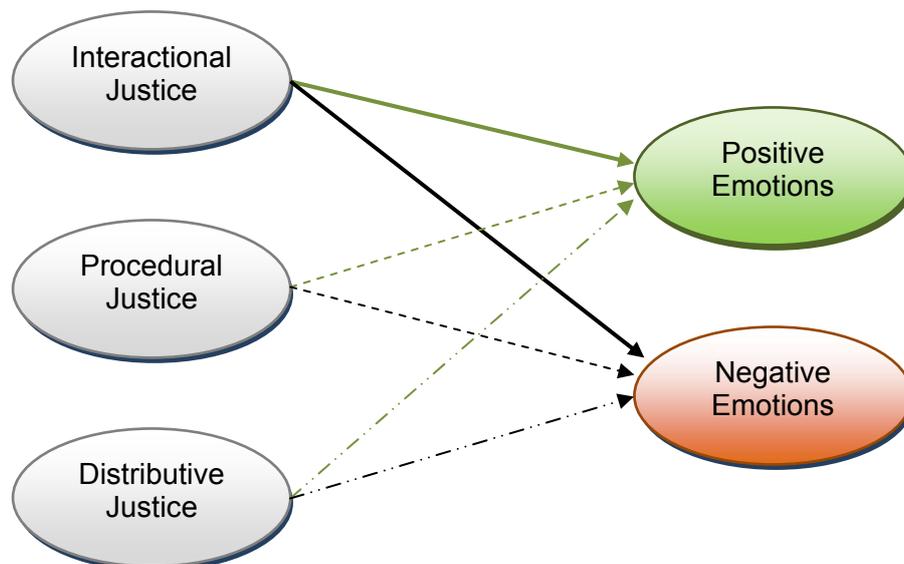
The perceived justice theory is the concept relevant for explaining customers' evaluation of the service recovery. This concept consists of three dimensions:

- Procedural justice,
- Interactional justice,
- Distributive justice (Schoefer, 2009).

Procedural justice refers to the actual procedure of the failure resolution. Customers evaluate the timing or speed, the accessibility, process control, flexibility to adapt to the customers' needs, and the delay in solving their problem. *Interactional justice* is a dimension which includes evaluation of the treatment during the service recovery, such as the evaluation of employees' empathy, politeness and courtesy, effort involved into the resolution of the situation, and company's willingness to provide an explanation of why the problem occurred in the first place. *Distributive justice* refers to a perceived fairness of the outcome and compensation for the occurred service failure (Schoefer, 2009, del Río-Lanza et al., 2009).

Each dimension of the perceived justice effects customers' satisfaction and their emotions during the service recovery encounters based on the level of perceived justice (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Perceived Justice and Cognitive Appraisal Theory



Source: K. Schoefer, C. Ennew: Emotional Responses to Service Complaints Experiences: The Role of Perceived Justice.

The cognitive appraisal theory explains the effect of perceived justice on customers' emotions during service recovery encounters. Each one of the perceived justice dimensions has a different effect on the emotions, and according to McColl-Kennedy and Sparks' (2003, cited by del Río-Lanza et al., 2009) qualitative study interactional justice may have a stronger influence on emotions for the two reasons:

“First, distributive and procedural justice have an interpersonal component that can favorably impact on the effects of interactional justice. Second, an employee's lack of empathy with a customer complaining about a service failure can elicit negative emotions (reducing satisfaction), and cancel out the firm's efforts to improve distributive and procedural justice.”

Low level of any of the three perceived justice dimensions will elicit different negative emotions and dissatisfaction with the service recovery, and the most preferable outcome to achieve a successful service recovery is to perform high level of all the three of them (Schoefer & Ennew, 2009).

Effective service recovery should be proactive, planned, trained and empowered (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006). Customers' satisfaction with the service recovery is positively related to trust and positive word-of-mouth which helps retain the customers and also attract new ones by creating a positive image of the company (Ah-Keng Kau & Wan-Yiun Loh, 2006). Excellent service recovery is the key solution to resolve customers' dissatisfaction, and with the right activities companies can fully utilize the service recovery paradox (Schindlholzer, 2008).

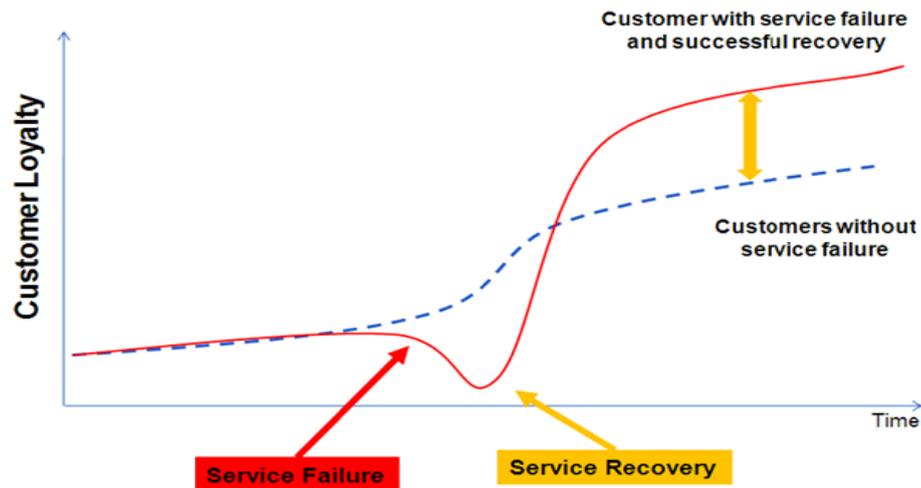
Service Recovery Paradox

The “service recovery paradox” states that with a highly effective service recovery, a service or a product failure offers a chance to achieve higher satisfaction ratings from the customers than if the failure had never occurred (see Figure 8). This basically means that a good recovery can turn angry and dissatisfied customers into loyal ones by creating a higher level of a secondary satisfaction than if the things were executed smoothly the first time (Schindlholzer, 2008).

McCollough and Bharadway (1992) were the first to define the term “service recovery paradox”. They described it as a situation in which customers' second

satisfaction is higher than their first satisfaction with the service before the service failure has even occurred (Magnini et al., 2007). It is important to emphasize that the service recovery paradox will not happen and will not do “the charm” if the service or the product failure occurs for the second or third time with the same company (Karlsson & Horbec, 2006).

Figure 8: Service Recovery Paradox



Source: Schindlholzer, B.: The service recovery paradox: Increased loyalty through effective service recovery. Institute of Information Management, 2008.

The best-practices do not see a good service recovery as an isolated part of business performance, but rather as a coherent part of the good company management. Successful service recovery includes operational improvement, no-blame culture, openness, integration of issues into the specifically tailored training programs, motivational aspects, competitive advantage, good impact on staff attitude, staff retention, customers retention, customers loyalty and, finally, on profit (Johnston & Mehra, 1993). Complaints are expensive, but for this price companies should extract priceless knowledge about their customers. Should complaints be transformed into the knowledge about customers, they can provide a valuable amount of capital for the company. In order to exploit this capital companies should design, build, operate and continuously improve and upgrade their service recovery system (Amadeus, 2009). A fundamental problem in any company is the reluctance to deal with difficult issues, and the tendency to over-focus on what is easy to resolve (Carney, 1999). Companies need to learn the process of amending the things that went wrong, and the following matrix of

possibilities (see Figure 9) clearly shows and sums up companies' actions in 4 possible situations (Barlow & Møller, 1996).

Figure 9: Matrix of Possibilities – Failures vs. Complaints

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No product or service failure Customer does not say anything Company action: celebration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No product or service failure Customer dissatisfied and speaks up Company action: Proactive customer education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Product or service failure Customer does not say anything Company action: encourage customer complaints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Product or service failure Customer dissatisfied and speaks up Company action: service recovery

Source: J. Barlow, C. Møller (1996): A complaint is a gift: using customer feedback as a strategic tool. Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc., USA.

The best situation for the company is the situation number 1. There is no product or service failure, and customers are satisfied. The second possible situation also does not include product or service failure, but customers are dissatisfied and they have decided to complain. In this case the company should proactively learn more about its targeted markets and customers in order to satisfy their needs, retain them, and attract new ones. The third and the fourth possible situations are dealing with product or service failures, but the third situation is a more common one in practice when customers do not say anything about their dissatisfaction, but rather switch to a competitor. This is the most dangerous and the most difficult situation for the company and for the future of its business, and therefore it should take serious actions to encourage customers' complaints by making the process as simple and accessible as possible. Should the company learn about a product or service failure through customers' complaints, it should activate its service recovery strategy and turn the angry customers into loyal ones.

The priorities for each organization in terms of the service recovery will differ according to the provided services and the needs of their specific markets. Good service recovery is essential for a good customer service, but it also raises customers' expectations still further. The most basic failure is the actual communication with the customers, especially when receiving written customers' complaints (Carney, 1999). Hence, the crucial point for the service organizations,

especially tourism organizations, is to provide the high service quality and good service recovery through a high quality response.

2.2.3. The Quality of Response Behavior

Poor e-mail customer service seems to be common in the tourism industry, and, therefore, numerous opportunities to gain an immediate competitive advantage via improved eService are being lost. In most cases the first contact between the customers and the hotel is the crucial point which happens by e-mail inquiries. E-mail should be treated similarly to a phone call, a fax message or a letter (Gherissi-Labben et al., 2003, Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006). Using the Internet potential customers are in the position to contact several hotels simultaneously at a very low cost. Slow and incomplete response simply means a lost opportunity (Matzler et al., 2003). Hence, the response behavior becomes a key factor for the success of the tourism organizations (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006).

E-mail is a powerful and quick communication tool, easy to use and, therefore, the number one application on the Internet. It is important for the tourism companies to think of the Internet as the global communication arena, and if the companies are not able to communicate successfully with existing and potential customers via e-mails someone else will grab the opportunity to do so (Cox & Koezler, 2004). To deliver a good service, each e-mail requires a unique handling. According to Peppers et al. (2001) answering to the e-mails properly is a simple, yet valuable, form of one-to-one interaction that influences the customers' assessment of the service quality (Schegg et al., 2003). Telephone, e-mail and the online forms are the most commonly used forms of the communication in the companies that offer reservations, purchasing and the information online. Very common questions when discussing online customer service are:

“How long does it take to receive the answer? When do the customers receive the correct answers to their questions? And do they receive an accurate response at all?” (Lovelock, 2007).

E-mail customer service can be defined through two dimensions: **responsiveness** and **quality of the response** (Schegg et al., 2003). When writing a response, a company must balance between the time and the content of the response. It is not the most important thing to answer fast, but also to provide a complete answer and explanation as well (DeWitt & Martin, 2009). Hence, it is

important for the companies to provide resources to shorten the response time, provide adequate response, and improve the interaction (Schegg et al., 2003).

Responsiveness is measured by a *response rate* which is calculated by dividing the number of usable responses returned by the total number of sent e-mails. For majority of researches the goal is to reach the response rate of approximately 60% (Fincham, 2008). In real life the response rate is usually lower than these 60%, especially when researching the response rate of the complaints (Barlow & Møller, 1996). It is commonly argued that there is a difference between the two types of the corporate communications – inquiries vs. complaints (Bauernfeind & Dickinger, 2009), and this study will measure the difference in the response rate and the response time between those two types of e-mail forms.

The quality of the response is more difficult to measure or evaluate than responsiveness itself, but there are many studies defining the most important components of a good response (Cox & Koezler, 2004). Potential or existing online customers expect a fast response, but a fast response should never override the basic business communication principles (Gherissi-Labben et al., 2003). A single e-mail message might as well be the only opportunity to leave a good impression and deliver important information, therefore there are several rules to follow when communicating via e-mails:

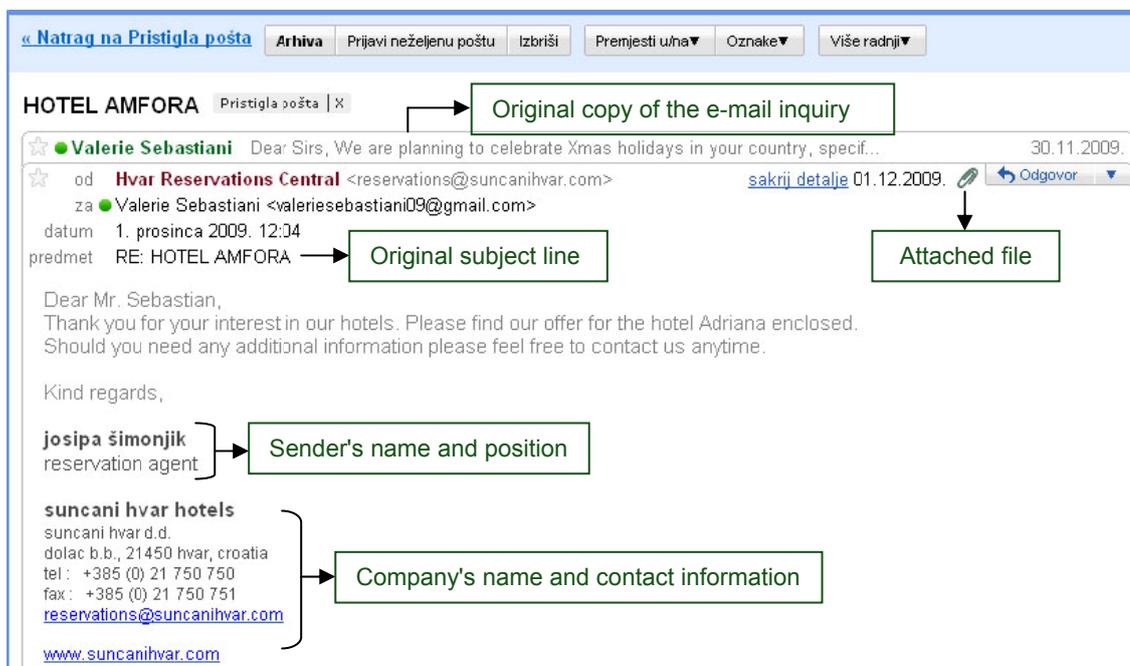
- Keep in mind that an actual person is at the other end, hence write the message clearly using simple language,
- Write the name and the contact information at the end of each e-mail message,
- Always write the title of the message in the subject line,
- Keep the message concise, and use capital and small letters,
- Reread the message before sending it to avoid grammar and spelling mistakes (Cox & Koezler, 2004).

It is important to write clear and unambiguous messages, because this might be the only contact with customers based on which the customers evaluate the sender's knowledge, attitude and professionalism. Too much information can confuse the receiver of the message or it can be too boring for him / her, whether too little information might leave the impression of superficial response behavior (Cox & Koezler, 2004). A technique to speed up the e-mail communication

process is a development of e-mail templates for various situations. These e-mail templates should also follow business communication guidelines such as politely greeting the guest, thanking the guest, addressing the guest's name, answering all the questions, providing additional information and identifying the organization (sender's name, sender's position, organization's name, postal address, phone, fax number, web site address) (Cox & Koezler, 2004, Gherissi-Labben et al., 2003). Contact information is particularly important when making reservations, because customers often use e-mail to gather the needed information, but they prefer to book through more traditional media such as telephone or fax (Schegg et al., 2003).

When replying to an e-mail message it is advisable to leave the original subject line because it provides continuity to the online communication. The message should always include the salutation and the signature to ensure that the comments are identifiable, but it also clearly marks the beginning and the end of the message. It is preferable to leave the original copy intact for the reference purposes, and spelling should always be checked before the e-mail is sent (Flynn & Flynn, 2003). Figure 10 shows an example of the e-mail reply received in this study.

Figure 10: Example of the Replied E-mail Message



Source: Galić, M., 2009. Based on the results of mystery e-mail method of this study.

The replied e-mail taken as an example contains all the afore mentioned variables of a good quality response: the original subject line, polite greeting, addressing the guest, thanking the guest, providing all necessary information in the attached file to keep the message short and less confusing, original copy of the customer's e-mail, polite salutation, sender's name and position, and complete company's contact information. But is this e-mail response form satisfactory when replying a complaint?

As previously stated, dissatisfied customers tell 10-12 other people about their negative experiences, and today even more using the Internet. Therefore if and when the customers complain, they want and expect a rapid response. If the company encourages complaints, then it should be prepared to act on them as quickly as possible to avoid further customers dissatisfaction (Schindlholzer, 2008). Most customers are aware that companies do not pay enough, or even completely fail to pay attention to service recovery, despite its importance, and are very dissatisfied with the way the companies handle the complaints (Amadeus, 2009). Complaining customers are the loyal ones giving the company a chance to acknowledge the problem, regain their loyalty and to show just how valuable the customer is to them, therefore responding to a complaint properly gives a chance to recover customers' good faith (Welz, 2006, Barlow & Møller, 1996). The gift formula to follow when responding to a complaint according to Barlow & Møller (1996) is:

- Thank the customer for sending the complaint and apologize,
- Let the customer know what measures have been taken to resolve the problem,
- Admit that the customer is right,
- Personalize the reply (addressing the customer, full signature),
- Be simple, but specific,
- Exceed the customers' expectations,
- Check customers' satisfaction.

Post-complaint satisfaction is determined by the problem-solving approach of the company, and rapid and satisfactory reply as well as problem resolution will retain 90% of dissatisfied customers (Baurenfeind & Dickinger, 2009, Barlow & Møller, 1996).

The most widely used instrument to measure service quality is the SERVQUAL instrument, already described in the section 2.2.1. Service quality of this paper. Berry, Parasuraman and Zeithaml (1990, cited by van Iwaarden et al., 2002) have developed the SERVQUAL scale to measure service quality by comparing customers' expectations and their perception of company's actual performance. The model has 22 statements grouped in five major dimensions:

1. *Tangibles* – “physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel”,
2. *Reliability* – “ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately”,
3. *Responsiveness* – “willingness to help customers and provide prompt service”,
4. *Assurance* – “knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence – including competence, courtesy, credibility and security”,
5. *Empathy* – “caring and individualized attention that the company provides its customers – including access, communication, understanding the customer” (Iwaarden et al., 2002).

There is some criticism regarding the long-term stability of the SERVQUAL results and on the general applicability of its five dimensions, but regardless of the fact the SERVQUAL scale has been widely used by academics to measure service quality (Lam & Woo, 1997, Buttle, 1996, Crosby & LeMay, 1998, cited by Iwaarden et al., 2002). The SERVQUAL instrument can also be applicable in measuring the quality of the online response behavior. Although alternative models have been described and proposed in this study such as Murphy, Schegg, Olaru & Hofacker (2007) 4 dimensions study and Kaynama's 8-dimensional model, the SERVQUAL model has been used as a point of reference in this paper.

Online response behavior in tourism organizations is a central quality element, and in the majority of the situations is the first contact. Each customer's e-mail is the opportunity to build the relationship with the customers, and each response should be written properly and make the customer feel valued (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2006, O'Flahavan & Rudick, 2009). The management and the employees of the tourism companies must not treat the e-mail as a casual type of communication where spelling and grammar mistakes do not count. E-mail is “a loaded gun”, and thoughtless e-mail can be very harmful. Even though it is a

time- and money-saving communication medium, e-mail can also be “a vehicle for big misunderstanding” and it could prove to be very tricky when using it for problem saving situations (O’Flahavan & Rudick, 2009, Bradburn, 2007). Successful e-mail response behavior requires specialized planning, training and implementation which lead to gaining the competitive advantage and the improvement of a return on the Internet investment (Bradburn, 2007).

Due to the significance of the quality response behavior to the tourism industry, it is the main point of interest of the study at hand. The responsiveness and the quality of the response behavior will be measured separately for inquiries and complaints in order to prove, or to disregard the appointed hypothesis. The following chapter brings a detailed description of the methodology applied in the research.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

E-mail correspondence executed between customers and tourism organizations is in majority of situations the first contact between the two parties. Hence, the tourism organizations have to understand and apply the most important quality parameters of the online response behavior when communicating with their customers in order to gain competitive advantage in a highly competitive marketplace, otherwise customers can simply switch to a competitor at a very low cost. This study focuses on the responsiveness and the quality of replies provided by 4 star hotels in Europe.

The qualitative data for the research were collected by using the mystery guest approach, evaluated by the criteria based on the SERVQUAL scale, and analyzed by the application of the SPSS.

The whole research was conducted in four stages:

- 1) Development of the mailing list of 110 four star hotels in Europe,
- 2) Mystery guest scenario – mailing of 2 inquiries and 2 complaints,
- 3) Collecting and evaluating responses, and
- 4) The SPSS data analysis.

3.2 HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The hypotheses to be generated from the objectives of this study in Chapter 1 and literature reviewed in Chapter 2 consider two most relevant dimensions of e-mail communication with customers – the responsiveness and the quality of the response behavior. There are two main types of e-mails analyzed in this study, inquiries and complaints given the fact that it a common belief that the type of e-mail influences the responsiveness and quality of e-mail communication.

Based on the literature reviewed, there are two criteria considered in measuring the responsiveness in this study: 1) response rate and 2) response time. Previously conducted research studies have shown poor response behavior, therefore the first objective of this study is to analyze the responsiveness of 4 star hotels to inquiries and complaints. Hence, the following hypotheses are being proposed:

Hypothesis H1a: Response rate is higher for inquiries than for complaints.

Hypothesis H1b: It takes a longer period of time to answer complaints than answering inquiries.

According to Zehrer and Pechlaner (2006) the quality of the response behavior is the key factor for the success of tourism organizations. Furthermore, online response behavior in tourism organizations is a central quality element, and in most situations it is the first contact or the first moment of truth. Due to the significance of the quality response behavior to tourism industry, the second objective of this study is to analyze the quality of the response behavior to inquiries vs. complaints by using the SERVQUAL scale as the most widely used instrument to measure the service quality. Taking into consideration the differences in approaching the two types of e-mails, where complaints demand more serious, complete and detailed answer, the following hypothesis is being proposed:

Hypothesis H2: The quality of the response behavior for complaints is higher than for inquiries.

In order to support the proposed hypotheses of this study the following methodologies have been used: mystery shopping technique for collecting the relevant data, the SERVQUAL method for evaluating the data, and the SPSS software for analyzing the data according to the hypotheses.

3.3 SELECTION OF METHODOLOGY

Mystery shopping is a technique which measures discrepancy between the service standards and the reality, pointing out the weaknesses of a company, training needs and also exceptional service performances (Lovelock, 2007). This research method has been mostly applied by organizations in financial services, food services, retail, tourism, public services and direct marketing to give them a clear insight into the real situation in which customers interact with their personnel. Furthermore, mystery shopping provides these organizations with valuable information on service experiences and helps them develop a better knowledge of the quality of their services. According to Miller (1998) mystery shopping has become a mainstream market research technique (Hudson et al., 2001). Therefore, the mystery study approach has been widely used by many

well-known companies such as McDonalds, Disney or Hard Rock Cafe in many different researches on the quality of services based on the company standards of customer satisfaction to evaluate the real performances (Finn & Kayandé, 1999). Recently the mystery study technique has been also used for more specific aspects of the service quality, such as the quality of the online response behavior, whether it is the e-service quality of airline companies, five star hotels, or hotels in different Austrian regions (Bauernfeind & Dickinger, 2009, Matzler et al., 2003, Schegg et al., 2003). Based on the main goal of mystery study approach Horbec (2009) defines several methods of mystery study:

- *Mystery shopping* – the visit of the mystery guest to the restaurant, retail store, hotel, cinema, banks ec.,
- *Mystery calls* – telephone call by mystery guest mostly used to evaluate call center service,
- *Mystery web* – evaluates the quality of the web sites, online purchasing, online booking systems,
- *Mystery e-mail* – measures the responsiveness and the quality of the replies,
- *Benchmarking mystery shopping* – the mystery guest evaluates telephone conversation of the company's competitors and visits the competitors for service quality evaluation. This method is very useful to find out relevant information, but the mystery guest also has strict rules to follow.
- *Business to business mystery shopping* – collecting information on the business market by mystery legal entity.

For the purpose of this study, and according to afore given list of methods, mystery e-mail method was used to collect empirical data for the further analysis.

The Parasuraman et al. SERVQUAL scale was further used to evaluate the data. Even though the SERVQUAL method has been criticized regarding its general applicability and Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Malhotra (2005) have also developed a multi-item scales for measuring the service quality of web sites, the so called E-S-QUAL and E-RecS-QUAL (Parasuraman et al., 2005), Iwaarden et al. (2002) study presented a good application of the SERVQUAL dimensions in relation to e-business for evaluating the quality of e-service. The combination of the mystery study approach and the SERVQUAL scale as the evaluation instrument has been also successfully used in the study "Unmasking a Phantom:

A Psychometric Assessment of Mystery Shopping” by A. Finn and U. Kayand (1999). The same approach of the SERVQUAL scale was used in this study as the point of reference.

3.4 RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The list of 110 four star hotels has been developed in the following order:

- 10 European countries were selected based on the statistics for Total nights spent for the year 2007 provided by Eurostat statistical office ([see Appendix A](#)). The 2007 was the last year with complete data for all the countries in the Eurostat list, and the top 10 were used for further selection of the hotels. Besides the top 10 countries, the sample also includes Croatia (on the 16th position in the table) because Croatia is the origin country of the author of this study.
- Google maps engine was used to select 10 destinations within each country based on the following criteria: the capital city, 5 cities along the coast or 5 big cities, 4 rural destinations or 4 smaller inland cities depending whether the country has got a coast line or not.
- The third step was the usage of www.expedia.com web portal to randomly select a 4 star hotel within each of the chosen destinations. In the search area the following criteria were checked: hotel only, search by a city, select minimum star rating (4 stars selection).
- The last step was using the google search engine by typing „hotel name, destination“ in order to find a hotel web site and within the web site an e-mail address or a direct mail form.

The final table was created by using an excel spreadsheet, and contains country name, hotel ID number, hotel name, city, hotel web address, and hotel e-mail address.

The research of the quality of the online response behavior was conducted by means of mystery guest scenarios. There were 4 different mystery guest scenarios – 2 inquiries and 2 complaints that were mailed out to 110 four star hotels. The first inquiry was related to Christmas family package and Christmas activities offered in the destination, and the second inquiry included questions on cancellation policy and the Internet access in the room. The complaints dealt with a complicated online booking system and the availability of room rates

information ([see Appendix B](#)). Each e-mail was written in English to avoid language bias, and it was sent out individually to avoid spamming. The e-mails were sent from 4 different e-mail accounts created under 4 different common English names (2 female and 2 male) using gmail, hotmail and yahoo e-mail service providers. Furthermore, each e-mail type was sent out to all 110 hotels within the time range of one hour and always within business hours. Out of the total of 440 e-mails sent, only 28 messages were sent via a direct form provided on the hotel's web site and 412 messages were sent via an e-mail address.

The responsiveness and the quality of the actually received online responses was evaluated through 56 parameters defined and based on theoretical background. All 56 parameters can be grouped into the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL scale (see Table 2) if these five dimensions are explained and adjusted to the online response as follows:

- *Reliability* – criteria measuring the fulfillment of the promises meaning “doing the promised action within the promised time”, and the functionality of the appointed web address, telephone number, or the e-mail address to follow;
- *Responsiveness* – one aspect of this dimension is the actual receipt of the answer, and the second aspect is the amount of time it takes to receive the answer;
- *Assurance* – the dimension that measures the knowledge of the employee to answer the questions or to resolve the problem, and the trust in the employee;
- *Empathy* – measures the personal attention of the employee such as greeting the customer, thanking him or apologizing for the inconvenience;
- *Tangibles* – the physical appearance of the e-mail and all its visual aspects (Iwaarden et al., 2002).

Table 2: 56 Parameters Grouped in 5 SERVQUAL Dimensions

SERVQUAL DIMENSION	CRITERIA
1. RELIABILITY	Reply promise, reply time, time OK, follow URL, follow telephone, follow mail
2. RESPONSIVENESS	Date mail sent, answer received, duration, auto-reply, comment on time
3. ASSURANCE	Problem solved, mistake gender, mistake name, mistake text, mistake count, hotel name used, text copied, capital – small letters, abbreviations, forward, sender name, sender position, sender department, sender company, sender phone, sender fax, sender

Table 2: 56 Parameters Grouped in 5 SERVQUAL Dimensions – continued

SERVQUAL DIMENSION	CRITERIA
	address, sender URL, sender gender
4. EMPATHY	Employee name, greeting, name of sender used, formal/informal, I-me used, You-Your used, We-us-our used, personal response, apology regarding complaint, further query by hotel, thank you, customer importance, encouragement, polite end, closing message
5. TANGIBLES	Form or mail, mail type, mail type number, brand mail, subject title, word count, mail size, text type, number of attachments, disclaimer, logo

Source: Galić, M., 2010. Output of this study.

Every e-mail was evaluated throughout these 56 parameters using the predefined numerical values or sets of codes for each parameter separately in order to prepare the data for further statistical analysis. [See Appendix C](#) for a complete description of each parameter and its given values. There were situations in which a certain hotel answered twice to the same inquiry or the same complaint by two different people, or in which the inquiry or the complaint first received an automated reply followed by an answer written by an employee. In the former situation both e-mails were evaluated but only the first one was statistically analyzed, and in the latter situation both messages were evaluated, but the real reply was taken for statistical analysis in order to avoid possible data ambiguity.

The statistical analysis was executed by employing the standard SPSS software package. The SPSS software, which stands for Statistical Product and Service Solutions (formerly Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), is an integrated system of computer programs specifically developed for the analysis of social science data and one of the most popular and most widely used applications for statistical analysis in many social science researches (Ho, 2006). The SPSS package offers several benefits and features such as:

- Great flexibility in the data format,
- Comprehensive set of procedures for data transformation and file manipulation,
- Large number of statistical analysis processes (Ho, 2006).

Therefore, its multiple features in particular cross-tabulations, chi-square test, t-test and descriptive statistics were used for the purpose of the study to confirm or disregard the given hypothesis.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS ANALYSIS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This research study is based on three hypotheses which refer to the literature review and previous research studies on the service quality, especially on the quality of response behavior. According to the previous studies the results were not satisfactory regarding the response rate, response time and the quality of the response, taking into consideration the importance of good quality response behavior in the tourism industry.

Out of 440 sent e-mails using the mystery e-mail method, 299 e-mails were replied to or answered, which gives an overall response rate for this study of 68%. The overall response time is 12.37 hours, whereas in most cases (40.8%) the e-mail was replied within an hour. The following results will show a deeper insight into the responsiveness and the quality of the response behavior.

4.2. RESPONSE RATE AND RESPONSE TIME RESULTS – INQUIRIES vs. COMPLAINTS

Hypothesis 1a states that the response rate for inquiries is higher than the response rate for complaints. The answers to inquiries are expected to be less complex and less unpleasant, therefore the response rate would be higher than for complaints. The e-mail type will make a difference regarding the response rate. Table 3 reports the results.

Table 3: Response Rate by the E-mail Type

			MAIL		TOTAL
			INQUIRY	COMPLAINT	
ANSWER RECEIVED	no	Count	71	70	141
		% of Total	16,1%	15,9%	32,0%
	yes	Count	149	150	299
		% of Total	33,9%	34,1%	68,0%
TOTAL	Count	220	220	440	
	% of Total	50,0%	50,0%	100,0%	

Source: Galić, M., based on a SPSS output.

As shown in Table 3, there are 149 or 33.9% of total received responses to inquiries, and 150 or 34.1% of total received responses to complaints. It is clear

that the response rate for complaints is somewhat higher than the one for inquiries. Chi-square test will determine whether this relationship between these two observed variables (the response rate for the inquiries and the response rate for the complaints) is statistically significant and whether the first hypothesis will be supported or not.

To determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between the two response rates, the Pearson Chi-Square was calculated. The result shows that the relationship is not statistically significant ($\chi^2(df=1, N=299)=0,010$; $p>0,05$) which means that inquiries and complaints have received almost the same amount of responses. Therefore, the hypothesis H1a is rejected. The type of e-mail does not influence the response rate.

The second parameter of the responsiveness according to the literature review in this study is the response time or the duration of the response. This leads to the hypothesis H1b which states that it takes a longer time to respond to a complaint than to an inquiry. The e-mail type will affect the length of the response time. To confirm or reject this hypothesis the Independent Samples t-Test has been applied. Table 4 reports the results.

Table 4: t-Test Results for Variable *Duration*

Variable	n	M	SD	T	df	P
Duration				-0,170	297	0,865
- Inquiry	149	12,11	24,55			
- Complaint	150	12,63	28,12			

Note: n – sample size; M – mean, average value; SD – standard deviation; t – t-test result; df – degree of freedom; p – significance.

Source: Galić, M., based on a SPSS output.

The average response time (M) for inquiry is 12.11 hours, while the average response time for complaint equals 12.63 hours.

The result of the Independent Samples t-Test shows that even though there is a small difference between the response times for the two e-mail types, it is not statistically significant ($t(df=297)=-0,170$; $p>0,05$). This simply means that there is no difference between the response time for inquiry and complaint, or that customer averagely waits the same amount of time for a reply to an inquiry or a complaint. Therefore, the hypothesis H1b is rejected. The type of e-mail does not affect the response time.

4.3. THE QUALITY OF THE RESPONSE RESULTS – INQUIRIES vs. COMPLAINTS

The quality of the response behavior is a more complex dimension to measure. For the purpose of this study, the quality of the response behavior will be measured by the SERVQUAL instrument. Since the first two hypotheses refer to responsiveness, one of the 5 dimensions of the SERVQUAL scale, the quality of the response behavior will be further evaluated through 51 criteria grouped in other four SERVQUAL dimensions: reliability, assurance, empathy and tangibles (see Table 2, pp 37). The SERVQUAL dimensions are put in order regarding their relevance and importance from customers' point of view according to Berry et al. study (1993). The collected data will be further analyzed by the SPSS software package.

The quality of the response behavior is presented by the H2 hypothesis which states that the quality of the response is higher for complaints than for inquiries.

To investigate whether inquiries and complaints differ significantly in regard to these 51 criteria grouped in 4 SERVQUAL dimensions, a chi-square statistic will be used. At this point it should be noted that chi-square requires a relatively large sample size since the expected counts in 80% of the cells should be greater than 5. If one or more of the cells has an expected frequency five or less, the Fisher's exact test should be used. Thus, in this study for large samples the Pearson chi-square value will be interpreted and for small samples the Fisher's exact test will be conducted.

Dimension *Reliability*

Dimension *Reliability* contains criteria measuring the fulfillment of the promises meaning "doing the promised action within the promised time", and the functionality of the appointed web address, telephone number, or the e-mail address to follow.

Therefore, the dimension reliability has been measured through six criteria: „reply promise“, „reply time“, „time OK“, „follow URL“, „follow telephone“, and „follow mail“. The first three criteria are related to automated reply. In this study there are total of 13 automated replies among the 299 replies, whether the other three criteria („follow URL“, „follow telephone“, and „follow mail“) are related to all received e-mails. Therefore closer attention will be given to „follow URL“, „follow

telephone“, and „follow mail“ criteria. Table 5 reports the results for the dimension reliability.

Table 5: Chi-square Analysis of *Reliability* Dimension

Variable	n	Mail type				X ²	df	P
		Inquiry		Complaint				
		Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total			
Reply promise								
- no	6	4	30,8	2	15,4			
- yes	7	4	30,8	3	23,1			
Reply time								
- no	7	5	38,5	2	15,4			
- yes	6	3	23,1	3	23,1			
Time OK								
- no	6	3	42,9	3	42,9			
- yes	1	1	14,3	0	0,0			
Follow URL								
- no	253	121	40,6	132	44,3	2,265	1	
- yes	45	27	9,1	18	6,0			
Follow telephone								
- no	274	141	47,3	133	44,6	4,387	1	
- yes	24	7	2,3	17	5,7			
Follow mail								
- no	275	144	48,3	131	44,0	10,384	1	
- yes	23	4	1,3	19	6,4			

Note: *- significance of Fisher's exact test. **- significant at 0.05 level.

In parenthesis are values of effect size measures Phi.

Source: Galić, M., based on a SPSS output.

Comparing the results from Table 5 between inquiries and complaints, there are some noticeable differences in the criteria. "Follow URL" criterion is more often present in inquiries, while "follow telephone" and "follow mail" are more common in complaints. Applying the chi-square test the following has been determined: inquiries and complaints are significantly different by the criteria "follow telephone" and "follow mail". These criteria are more often used in complaints than in inquiries. The values of the effect size measures for both criteria are small which indicates small strength of association between the variables. This simply means that even though the difference between the two criteria is statistically significant, it is still rather small.

Dimension Assurance

Dimension *Assurance* is the dimension that measures the knowledge of an employee in answering questions or resolving problems, and trust in the

employee. This dimension has been measured through 19 criteria as shown in Table 6. Table 6 reports the results for the dimension assurance.

Table 6: Chi-square Analysis of Assurance Dimension

Variable	n	Mail type				χ^2	df	P		
		Inquiry		Complaint						
		Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total					
Problem solved								4,959	2	0,085
- no	55	25	8,4	30	10,1					
- yes	128	73	24,5	55	18,5					
- partly	115	5	16,8	65	21,8					
Mistake gender								2,439	2	0,295
- no	212	103	34,4	109	36,5					
- yes	11	8	2,7	3	1,0					
- not used	76	38	12,7	38	12,7					
Mistake name								84,057	2	0,000** (0,530)
- no	153	44	14,7	109	36,5					
- yes	64	62	20,7	2	0,7					
- not used	82	43	14,4	39	13,0					
Mistake text								0,557	1	0,455
- no	158	75	25,4	83	28,1					
- yes	137	71	24,1	66	22,4					
Mistake count										
- 1	45	23	16,8	22	16,1	0,093	4			0,999
- 2	46	24	17,5	22	16,1					
- 3	24	13	9,5	11	8,0					
- 4 and 5	16	8	5,8	8	5,8					
- 6 and more	6	3	2,2	3	2,2					
Hotel name used								0,806	2	0,668
- 0	230	112	37,7	118	39,7					
- 1	59	31	10,4	28	9,4					
- 2 do 4	8	5	1,7	3	1,0					
Text copied								9,204	1	0,002** (0,175)
- no	54	37	12,4	17	5,7					
- yes	245	112	37,5	133	44,5					
Capital-small letters								0,012	1	0,915
- wrong	52	26	8,8	26	8,8					
- correct	244	120	40,5	124	41,9					
Abbreviations								2,720	1	0,099
- no	275	132	44,6	143	48,3					
- yes	21	14	4,7	7	2,4					
Forward										0,282*
- no	288	145	49,0	143	48,3					
- yes	8	2	0,7	6	2,0					
Sender name								0,446	1	0,504
- no	23	13	4,3	10	3,3					
- yes	276	136	45,5	140	46,8					
Sender position								0,730	1	0,393
- no	212	109	36,5	103	34,4					
- yes	87	40	13,4	47	15,7					

Table 6: Chi-square Analysis of Assurance Dimension - continued

Variable	n	Mail type				X ²	df	P
		Inquiry		Complaint				
		Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total			
Sender position						0,730	1	0,393
- no	212	109	36,5	103	34,4			
- yes	87	40	13,4	47	15,7			
Sender department						0,034	1	0,853
- no	173	87	29,1	86	28,8			
- yes	126	62	20,7	64	21,4			
Sender company						0,029	1	0,864
- no	63	32	10,7	31	10,4			
- yes	236	117	39,1	119	39,8			
Sender phone						1,314	1	0,252
- no	66	37	12,4	29	9,7			
- yes	233	112	37,5	121	40,5			
Sender fax						0,470	1	0,493
- no	81	43	14,4	38	12,7			
- yes	218	106	35,5	112	37,5			
Sender address						0,987	1	0,321
- no	118	63	21,1	55	18,4			
- yes	181	86	28,8	95	31,8			
Sender URL						3,012	1	0,083
- no	106	60	20,1	46	15,4			
- yes	193	89	29,8	104	34,8			
Sender gender						2,574	2	0,276
- female	205	107	35,8	98	32,8			
- male	72	30	10,0	42	14,0			
- unknown	22	12	4,0	10	3,3			

Note: * - Significance of Fisher's exact test. ** - Significant at 0.05 level.

In parenthesis are values of effect size measure Phi.

Source: Galić, M., based on a SPSS output.

Looking at each criterion separately, it can be noticed that most of the replied e-mails, regardless to the type, contain "sender's name", "sender's company", "sender's phone", "sender's fax", "sender's address" and "sender's URL" which confirms the importance of the contact information in the signature part of the e-mail. In 68.6% of the cases the e-mail was replied by female person, while in 70.9% of the e-mails the sender's position is not known.

The reply to the inquiry or the complaint was complete in 43.0% of the cases, whereas 65 replies to the complaints offered partial solution and 30 replies offered no solution. When replying to an inquiry, 62 e-mails out of 149 contain mistake in customer's name, while 109 replies to a complaint used the customer's name correctly. Mistake in customer gender is less common in both types of the e-mail. Almost 50% of replies contain spelling or grammatical mistakes, out of which 66.5% contain 1 or 2 mistakes. Only 4.4% have more

than 6 mistakes in the text. Hotel name is not used in 77.4% of e-mails, and most e-mails (92.9%) do not include any abbreviations. The text of the original message has been copied in 133 replies to complaints and in 112 replies to inquiries for reference purposes.

Criteria “problem solved”, “mistake gender”, “mistake name”, “mistake text” and “abbreviations” are more present in replies to inquiries, while replies to complaints more often contain “sender’s name”, “sender’s position”, “sender’s department”, “sender’s company”, “sender’s phone”, “sender’s fax”, “sender’s address” and “sender’s URL” criteria.

The statistical significance of these differences has been tested by chi-square test. The results in Table 6 show that differences are random for all criteria except the two: “mistake name” and “text copied”. For these two criteria the difference is statistically significant. As afore mentioned, replies to inquiries have more mistakes regarding gender, name and text, out of which the “mistake name” criterion is statistically significant and it occurs in almost 42% of the replies to inquiries. Effect size values further show that the difference for the “mistake name” criterion is medium large, while for the “text copied” criterion it is rather small.

Empathy Dimension

Empathy Dimension measures personal attention of an employee, such as greeting the customer, thanking him or apologizing for the inconvenience. This dimension has been evaluated through 15 criteria as presented in Table 7. Table 7 also reports the results of chi-square analysis.

Table 7: Chi-square analysis of *empathy* dimension

Variable	N	Mail type				χ^2	df	P
		Inquiry		Complaint				
		Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total			
Employee name					0,196	1	0,658	
- no	24	13	4,3	11	3,7			
- yes	275	136	45,5	139	46,5			
Greeting					0,088	1	0,767	
- no	13	7	2,3	6	2,0			
- yes	286	142	47,5	144	48,2			
Name of sender used					0,177	1	0,674	
- no	85	44	14,7	41	13,7			
- yes	214	105	35,1	109	36,5			

Table 7: Chi-square analysis of *empathy* dimension - continued

Variable	n	Mail type				X ²	df	P
		Inquiry		Complaint				
		Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total			
Formal/informal						11,204	1	0,001** (0,194)
- formal	267	142	47,5	125	41,8			
- informal	32	7	2,3	25	8,4			
I-Me used						11,051	4	0,026** (0,194)
- 0	211	114	38,5	97	32,8			
- 1	43	20	6,8	23	7,8			
- 2	18	8	2,7	10	3,4			
- 3 or 4	19	5	1,7	14	4,7			
- 5 and more	5	0	0,0	5	1,7			
You-Your used						10,277	10	0,417
- 0	17	12	4,1	5	1,7			
- 1	17	8	2,7	9	3,0			
- 2	36	20	6,8	16	5,4			
- 3	41	19	6,4	22	7,4			
- 4	44	20	6,8	24	8,1			
- 5	32	16	5,4	16	5,4			
- 6	31	11	3,7	20	6,8			
- 7	32	17	5,7	15	5,1			
- 8	16	9	3,0	7	2,4			
- 9 or 10	15	5	1,7	10	3,4			
- 11 and more	15	10	3,4	5	1,7			
We-Us-Our used						7,812	10	0,647
- 0	25	9	3,0	16	5,4			
- 1	36	22	7,4	14	4,7			
- 2	50	22	7,4	28	9,5			
- 3	49	27	9,1	22	7,4			
- 4	29	17	5,7	12	4,1			
- 5	18	8	2,7	10	3,4			
- 6	28	13	4,4	15	5,1			
- 7	21	8	2,7	13	4,4			
- 8	14	8	2,7	6	2,0			
- 9 or 10	13	7	2,4	6	2,0			
- 11 and more	13	6	2,0	7	2,4			
Personal response						0,278	1	0,598
- no	16	9	3,0	7	2,3			
- yes	283	140	46,8	143	47,8			
Apology regarding complaint***						-		
- no	74	-		74	49,3			
- yes	76	-		76	50,7			
Further query by hotel						13,493	1	0,000** (0,213)
- no	207	117	39,4	90	30,3			
- yes	90	30	10,1	60	20,2			
Thank you						2,757	1	0,097
- no	104	45	15,2	59	19,9			
- yes	193	103	34,7	90	30,3			

Table 7: Chi-square analysis of *empathy* dimension - continued

Variable	n	Mail type				χ^2	df	P
		Inquiry		Complaint				
		Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total			
Customer importance							0,030*/** (0,143)	
- no	290	147	49,7	143	48,3			
- yes	6	0	0,0	6	2,0			
Encouragement						13,336	1	0,000** (0,212)
- no	211	119	40,2	92	31,1			
- yes	85	28	9,5	57	19,3			
Polite end								0,723*
- no	8	3	1,0	5	1,7			
- yes	290	145	48,7	145	48,7			
Closing message						4,748	4	0,314
- sincerely, best regards	247	130	43,9	117	39,5			
- yours faithfully	23	8	2,7	15	5,1			
- thank you	4	2	0,7	2	0,7			
- salutation and thank you	10	3	1,0	7	2,4			
- other	12	5	1,7	7	2,4			

Note: *- Significance of Fisher's exact test. **- Significant at 0.05 level. ***- criterion "apology regarding complaint" refers only to the complaints, hence the comparison of the results is not possible.

In parenthesis are values of effect size measure Phi.

Source: Galić, M., based on a SPSS output.

The results presented in Table 7 show the following statistics:

- 92% of e-mails contain employee's name,
- more than 95% of e-mails start with a greeting,
- almost 90% of e-mails are written in a formal style,
- in 71.3% of e-mails the form "I_Me" is not used,
- 98% of e-mails do not show any "customer importance",
- Most e-mails (97.4%) have a polite ending, and
- The most commonly used ending phrase is "sincerely / best regards" (83.4%).

Looking at the results of the analysis generally, most replies (136 inquiries and 139 complaints) include "employee's name" in the signature which shows personal attention to the customer. Empathy shown in the responses is also highly represented through an initial greeting (95%) and a polite ending (97.4%) whereas the most commonly used ending phrase is "sincerely / best regards" (83.4%). Opposite to these basic and common empathy criteria, "I_Me" and

“customer importance” criteria show a low level of personal attention where only 2% of the replies include “customer importance” and 28.7% used “I_Me” form.

The results of the analysis also show some visible differences in the use of certain criteria when replying to inquiries and complaints. There is a statistically significant difference between the two types of e-mail for the “formal/informal”, “I_Me used”, “further query by hotel”, “customer importance” and “encouragement” criteria. According to the results, the replies to inquiries are more formal, the formulation “I_Me” is more widely used for complaints, as well as “further query by hotel”, “customer importance” and “encouragement”. Even though the differences for the afore stated criteria are statistically significant, the values of effect size are small which indicates small strength of association between the variables.

For all the other criteria the noticed differences between inquiries and complaints are not statistically significant, which means these differences are random.

Tangibles Dimension

Tangibles Dimension represents the physical appearance of e-mail and all its visual aspects. This last dimension has been evaluated through 10 criteria. Table 8 presents the list of the 8 criteria and the results of the chi-square analysis for each one of them, while Table 9 reports the results of the t-test for the “word count” and “mail size” criteria.

Table 8: Chi-square analysis of *tangibles* dimension

Variable	n	Mail type				X ²	df	P
		Inquiry		Complaint				
		Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total			
Form or mail						0,000	1	1,000
- form	16	8	1,8	8	1,8			
- mail	424	212	48,2	212	48,2			
Mail type number						440,000	3	0,000** (1,000)
- inquiry 1	110	110	25,0	0	0,0			
- inquiry 2	110	110	25,0	0	0,0			
- complaint 1	110	0	0,0	110	25,0			
- complaint 2	110	0	0,0	110	25,0			
Brand mail						0,0,44	1	0,833

Table 8: Chi-square analysis of *tangibles* dimension - continued

Variable	n	Mail type				X ²	df	P
		Inquiry		Complaint				
		Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total			
- no	278	139	46,5	139	46,5			
- yes	21	10	3,3	11	3,7			
Subject title						6,279	4	0,179
- empty	3	1	0,3	2	0,7			
- re:same text	234	111	37,1	123	41,1			
- hotel name	20	9	3,0	11	3,7			
- solution approach	12	7	2,3	5	1,7			
-other	30	21	7,0	9	3,0			
Text type								1,000*
- plain	2	1	0,3	1	0,3			
- html	297	148	49,5	149	49,8			
Number of attachments						3,720	3	0,293
- 0	218	114	38,1	104	34,8			
- 1	59	23	7,7	36	12,0			
- 2	12	6	2,0	6	2,0			
- 3 i više	10	6	2,0	4	1,3			
Disclaim						2,434	1	0,119
- no	223	117	39,1	106	35,5			
- yes	76	32	10,7	44	14,7			
Logo						0,338	1	0,561
- no	204	104	34,8	100	33,4			
- yes	95	45	15,1	50	16,7			

Note: *- Significance of Fisher's exact test. **- Significant at 0.05 level.

In parenthesis are values of effect size measure Phi.

Source: Galić, M., based on a SPSS output.

Table 8 shows that in 96.4% of the cases the e-mail was sent to the exact e-mail address, while only in 3.6% inquiries and complaints they were sent via an online form of the hotel. Contacted hotels still do not possess developed branded e-mails for better visual identification and differentiation. Only 7% of the hotels feature this kind of e-mail. Almost all replies (99.3%) are written in html form, and in most cases (78.2%) the subject line has a repeated text from the original message (criterion: "re: same text"). 74.6% of the e-mails do not contain a disclaim and 68.2% of them do not have a logo of the company included. It is also noticeable that the replies to complaints more often contain disclaim, logo and 1 or more attachments.

The significance of the noticed differences has been tested and it has been determined that all the differences are random and statistically insignificant, except for the "mail type number" variable. The "mail type number" variable

represents e-mail type sent (inquiry #1, inquiry #2, complaint #1, and complaint #2) which purposely differ one from another, therefore it is logical to expect that the difference will be statistically significant. This significant difference is not relevant for the study, thus the results for the “mail type number” variable are marked in lighter color to avoid the misleading conclusions.

The tangibles dimension has also been evaluated through the “word count” and “mail size” criteria. Independent Samples t-Test has been applied to determine differences between inquiries and complaints according to the number of words used (“word count” criterion) and mail size. Table 9 reports the results.

Table 9: t-Test results for variables “word count” and “mail size”

Variable	n	M	SD	t	df	P
Word count				2,531	264,735	0,012
- Inquiry	149	168,95	137,51			
- Complaint	150	134,19	96,20			
Mail size				0,744	121	0,458
- Inquiry	80	34,56	63,03			
- Complaint	43	26,93	31,56			

Note: The t and df values were adjusted because variances were not equal.

Source: Galić, M., based on a SPSS output.

The average number of words in replies to inquiries is 169 word, while the average number of words replying complaints equals 134 words. The result of the t-Test shows that the difference between the word count of inquiries and complaints is statistically significant ($t(df=264,735)=2,531; p<0,05$). This means that the average number of words to reply inquiries is significantly different than the average number of the words in the replies to complaints.

The analysis for the “mail size” has been executed on the sample of 80 inquiry-replies and 43 complaint-replies¹.

Average mail size of the inquiry-replies is 34,56 kB, and the average mail size of the complaint-replies equals 26,93 kB.

The result of the t-Test shows that the difference in the mail size between the two types of the e-mail replies is not statistically significant; it is random ($t(df=121)=0,744; p>0,05$). This means that the replies to inquiries and to complaints do not significantly differ according to the criterion “mail size”.

¹ The analysis has not been executed on all replies, since the „mail size“ option could not be activated in the mystery guest account of gmail mail provider. Therefore the values for mail size have been collected only for the replies received in the mystery guest accounts of hotmail and yahoo mail providers.

Looking at all these results for each dimension separately, it can be determined that the differences between inquiries and complaints exist mostly for the criteria of the empathy dimension. This dimension has 5 criteria that show statistically significant difference between the two types of the e-mails. Only the dimension tangibles has showed no statistically significant differences between inquiries and complaints, while the dimensions reliability and assurance have two criteria each by which the two e-mail types significantly differ. Analyzing further values of effect size measures it is noticeable that only for the criterion "mistake name" (assurance dimension) the difference is medium large and therefore significant. Even though replies to inquiries contain significantly more mistakes in writing the customer's name than complaints, it is not enough to conclude that the quality of the complaint-replies is higher than the quality of the inquiry-replies. Taking into consideration all four dimensions and their chi-square analyses, the quality of the response behavior to inquiries vs. complaints is not obvious and significantly different, hence the hypothesis H2 is rejected. The type of the e-mail does not affect the quality of the response behavior provided by 4 star hotels in Europe.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

New technologies and the Internet allow people to communicate with each other, with different businesses, or with tourism organizations in a way that was inconceivable not so long ago. Nowadays they can communicate fast, with volume, globally, anonymously and at a low cost (Barlow & Møller, 1996). Therefore, poor communication simply means the bottleneck of business performance, and weak and fragile communication practices will not be tolerated and accepted any more in the dynamic and turbulent business environment. Lack of good quality communication performance is the main issue for most companies performing their businesses online, especially within the tourism industry (Connolly, 1996).

Travel is a product that people enjoy reading about and talking about, and at the moment of sale it is intangible. Globalization, in combination with the new technologies, allows customers to virtually see and visit all these diverse beautiful places around the world and contact local tourism organizations for additional information at any time and at a very low cost. By contacting these tourism organizations, customers build their opinions about the products or services based on a set of interactions, also called “the moments of truth” that they pass through while deciding whether to place the final purchase or not. At this point, good quality communication and excellent response behavior to customers’ e-mails is a central and crucial quality element for tourism organizations, since in most cases these are the first contacts with potential customers, or the so called “moments of truth”.

E-mail is the most preferred Internet communication tool and therefore it should be treated as business communication tool following all business communication rules and principles (Gherissi-Labben, 2003). Tourism organizations need to understand the importance of e-mail and its possibilities, hence they should provide good quality response behavior. Fast and complete responses to inquiries or complaints significantly affect customers' opinion about the company, as well as their satisfaction with the company's service performance. These opinions and satisfactions further affect their decisions to make an actual purchase and the development of a long-term relationship. High quality response behavior is the central element of quality for all tourism organizations, especially when applying service recovery strategy.

The objective of this study was to empirically test the quality of online response behavior of 4 star hotels in Europe to customers' inquiries and complaints using the mystery guest approach. Three hypotheses were developed based on the literature review. The first two hypotheses stated that the response rate and the response time differ between inquiries and complaints. The third hypothesis stated that the quality of the response behavior is higher for complaints than for inquiries given a more serious approach and the need to provide detailed answer with a full explanation of the situation, as well as a solution to the problem at hand. After evaluating the responses through 56 criteria grouped in 5 SERVQUAL dimensions and conducting the statistical analyses by using the SPSS software package, this study revealed some important findings.

Overall, the results of this study are somewhat consistent with the previous studies on the quality of response behavior (e.g. Bauernfeind & Dickinger, 2009, Matzler et al., 2003, Schegg et al., 2003). The overall response rate is 68%, and the overall response time is 12.37 hours. Out of 110 hotels, all 110 replied to at least one of the four e-mails sent out to them. These results show some improvement regarding these two criteria in comparison to the previous studies, but analyzing further those two criteria by the type of the e-mail communication – inquiries vs. complaints - the results show no statistically significant difference. The response rate for inquiries equals 67.7% while the response rate for complaints equals 68.1%. The same conclusion goes for the response time whether, even though 40.8% of the total e-mail replies arrived within the first hour, the response time for the inquiries is 12.11 hours and for the complaints 12.63 hours. Responsiveness measured by the response rate and response time does not differ significantly for the two types of e-mail communication. Taking into consideration the importance of the reply to inquiries and complaints, and the importance of its fast realization, given the fact that competitors might get the same e-mail to answer, the results are still far away from satisfactory. The percentage of e-mails replied to within an hour should get higher in the closest future in order to stay in business and improve the service performance.

Tourism organizations have to be aware that customers have the possibilities to simultaneously contact several hotels with the same inquiry and at a very low cost. The completeness and the quality of the response will definitely affect their buying decisions. The response quality, as one of the crucial dimensions of the response behavior, is more complex to evaluate and analyze. According to the

results of this study the overall completeness of the replies to inquiries and to complaints is 43%. 73 replies to inquiries provided complete answer, whereas only 55 replies to complaints had a complete response. 65 replies to complaints provided partial solution and 30 of them provided no solution. Provided solutions to complaints, complete or partial, are of a better quality if written by a receptionist or a sales representative than by an IT employee, because the replies received from an IT person are too technical and very much critical. Such responses cannot satisfy customers; they can only make them feel bitter and not appreciated. These results are definitely alarming, taking into consideration the importance of high quality service recovery approach and all its benefits. Based on these numbers it can be concluded that 4 star hotels in Europe still have not developed a strategy for service recovery, do not appreciate the valuable information given by complaints and do not use these information to improve their service performance. Even though the completeness of the responses to complaints is not satisfactory, these responses showed more empathy and individualized attention than the responses to inquiries by using more “I_me” and “we_us_our” form, writing correctly the name of the customer (only 2 replies misspelled the customer’s name) and providing more follow-up contact details such as follow-telephone and follow-mail. Furthermore, these same responses lack the apology for the inconvenience (only 50.7% replies include apology) and lack the gratitude for writing the complaint (only 60% replies include thank you). In contrast, 62 out of 149 (41.6%) replies to the inquiries had misspelled customer’s name, 103 (69.1%) replies included “thank you” and rather used “we_us_our” form than “I_me”. These findings lead to the conclusion that all parts of the e-mail reply are important and should be written professionally, since the reply can offer a full solution, but if the respondent misspells the customer’s name in the greeting line, for example, all the effort will be worthless.

95% of total replies started with a greeting, and 97.4% ended with a polite ending, where the most popular and commonly used ending phrase was “sincerely / best regards”. All replies showed a very low level of customer importance and encouragement to ask further questions or to continue the conversation. 46.5% of the replies had 1 or 2 grammatical or spelling mistakes. In contrast, most of the replies had well defined signature mostly including the following information: *sender’s name, sender’s company, sender’s address, sender’s telephone, sender’s fax, sender’s e-mail and sender’s URL*. Even though the signature was professionally defined including all necessary

information, it was not enough and could not compensate for the poor answer itself. The two e-mail types differed according to total number of words used in the reply, whereas replies to inquiries had more words but complaints more often had attachments.

The afore given numbers can lead to the conclusion that employees responsible for online communication are still not completely familiar with business communication rules and principles, lack the knowledge of the quality response behavior and either do not have, or do not apply hotel standards for the response behavior. The study results also suggest that the responsiveness, as well as quality of the response, do not differ significantly between the two types of e-mail communication provided by 4 star hotels in Europe and that both dimensions (especially the quality of the response) are still at low level and require some serious improvement. Hotel management and personnel do not fully understand the importance and the benefits of the Internet and, therefore, lack numerous opportunities in every day's practice by providing poor response behavior and giving their competitors an easy chance to win their customers over. Tourism organizations need to develop the CRM system, service recovery strategy and standardized guidelines for response behavior in order to react adequately, improve business performance, as well as to develop a competitive advantage. It takes a lot of effort, but this is the only way to retain the customers, regain the dissatisfied customers and win over new customers.

5.1. LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations that should be taken into account.

The mystery guest approach should be carried out throughout the year, because countries such as Turkey, Greece or Croatia are well known for the high seasonality of their tourism industry. Inquiries and complaints were sent out in November and December when many hotels in these and similar countries were closed. The research carried out for the longer period of time or for 1 year might give better results for the responsiveness.

The second limitation refers to complaints written only based on the experiences with the hotel's web site performance, because otherwise it would be easily evident that the mystery guest was never the guest in the hotel. The

complaints about the actual service in the hotel might receive a better and a more complete response showing better gratitude and empathy.

The author of this study was the only mystery guest in the research which might cause the possibility of a subjective evaluation of some responses and some criteria. Involvement of several people as mystery guests would provide more objective data for the statistical analysis.

The criteria for evaluation of the online response behavior were defined based on the literature review and previous research studies. A suggestion for the future research would be to collect the standards of the response behavior developed by 4 star hotels in order to define relevant evaluation quality criteria more precisely and, therefore, get better results about the discrepancy between the expectations and the perception of the service performance from the customers' point of view.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Nights spent in hotels and similar establishments; Nights spent Total (1000)			
	geotime	2007	2008
1.	Spain	271689	268391
2.	Italy	254329	:
3.	Germany (including ex-GDR from 1991)	214675	218246
4.	France	204269	202280
5.	United Kingdom	169484	:
6.	Turkey	115967	:
7.	Austria	79167	82365
8.	Greece	64086	:
9.	Portugal	39737	:
10.	Switzerland	36365	37334
11.	Netherlands	34159	32619
12.	Ireland	28282	:
13.	Czech Republic	27044	:
14.	Sweden	25416	:
15.	Poland	24307	25240
16.	Croatia	20940	20551

Source: Eurostat.

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/tourism/data/main_tables - retrieved on 14 July 2009.

APPENDIX B**INQUIRY #1**

Dear Sirs,

We are planning to celebrate Xmas holidays in your country, specifically in your city. Therefore I am interested in 2 double rooms with a connecting door or 1 family room, half board, from December 23-28 for my family. We have 2 children, 11 and 5 years old, and I would like to know the following:

- What is the price for the mentioned period?
- Do the children get some discount?
- Do you have any additional Xmas or other activities planned for children?
- Is there anything special to visit and see during the Xmas period in your city? Any traditional events to attend?

Please be so kind to send me your offer. I thank you in advance for your fast reply.

Regards,

Valerie Sebastiani

INQUIRY #2

Dear Sir / Madam,

I want to book a non-smoking, double room in your hotel. However, I am not sure about your cancellation policy. Could you please advise me?

Furthermore, I would like to know whether you have Internet access in the room. Thank you for your response.

Sincerely,

Michael Davies

COMPLAINT #1

To whom it may concern,

My name is Jeannine Fogle and I am trying to book a double room in your hotel via the online booking system on your web site. However, I repeatedly failed to do so. Furthermore, I think your booking system is very complicated, which is precisely why I failed to complete the booking. I wanted to let you know that your system is the reason for some complaints.

Regards,

Jeannine Fogle

COMPLAINT #2

Dear Sir / Madam,

I tried to find out information about prices on your website for a double room from December 30, 2009 until January 2, 2010. However, I was not successful in finding this information on your site. Additionally, I tried to ring you but the phone was always busy. This is really inconvenient and causes a big hassle. It should be easy for the customer to contact your company. Could you please let me know your room rates for the above stated period of time?

Regards,

Josh Smith

APPENDIX C

#	criteria name	value	description
1	ID*	none	
2	Hotel*	none	
3	Country*	none	
4	FormorMail	0 - form; 1 - mail	Contact possibility offered
5	Mail	0 - inquiry; 1 - complaint	
6	EmailType	1 - inquiry#1; 2 - Inquiry#2; 3 - Complaint#1; 4 - Complaint#2	
7	DateMailSent	none	when was the e-mail sent out?
8	AnswerReceived	0 - no; 1 - yes	was there an answer to the e-mail?
9	Duration	1 - 1h; 2 - 2h; 3 - 4h; 4 - 6h; 5 - 12h; 6 - 24h; 7 - 2days; 8 - 3days; 9 - 1week; 10 - 2weeks; 11 - >2weeks	duration till the reply was received
10	AutoReply	0 - no; 1 - yes	
11	ReplProm	0 - no; 1 - yes	reply promised in auto-repla
12	ReplTime	0 - no; 1 - yes	was there a repla time promised?
13	CommentOnTime	0 - nothing; 1 - hours specified; 2 - asap; 3 - in the near future	did they indicate a time frame or asap? Nothing?
14	Time_OK	0 - no; 1 - yes	response time was actually met
15	EmployeeName	0 - no; 1 - yes	employee's name used?
16	BrandMail	0 - no; 1 - yes	is there a branded e-mail address?
17	SubjecTitl	0 - empty; 1 - re:same text; 2 - hotel name; 3 - solution approach; 4 - other	subject line
18	Word_Cou	none	word count total
19	Mail_Size	none	mail size total (including attachments)
20	Greeting	0 - no; 1 - yes	in the beginning - a greeting included
21	NameOfSenderUsed	0 - no; 1 - yes	name in greeting used
22	Formal/Informal	1 - formal; 2 - informal	
23	I_Me	none	times "I_me" used

24	You_Your_Used	none	times "You_your" used
25	We_Us_Our_Used	none	times "we_us_our" used
26	HotelNameUsed	none	times "hotel name" used
27	TextCopied	0 - no; 1 - yes	is the original text I sent still in the e-mail?
28	PersResp	0 - no; 1 - yes	email response from a person
29	ApologyRegardingComplaint	0 - no; 1 - yes	was there an appology for the reason that caused complaint?
30	FurtherQueryByHotel	0 - no; 1 - yes	did the hotel requeste further info regarding the inq/comp?
31	ProblemSolved	0 - no; 1 - yes; 2 - partly	was the problem/inquiry solved - partly - not solved
32	MistakeGender	0 - no; 1 - yes; 2 - not used	typos/spelling mistake gender
33	MistakeName	0 - no; 1 - yes; 2 - not used	typos name
34	MistakeText	0 - no; 1 - yes	typos body text
35	Mist_Cou	none	number of mistakes
36	Capital_Small	0 - wrong; 1 - correct	capital/small letters
37	Abbrevat	0 - no; 1 - yes	abbreviations used?
38	Text_Type	0 - plain; 1 - html; 2 - both	plain vs. Html
39	N_Attach	none	number of attachments
40	ThankYou	0 - no; 1 - yes	thank you for sending the message is included in the mail
41	Cust_Imp	0 - no; 1 - yes	customer importance (our customers are important...)
42	Encourag	0 - no; 1 - yes	encouragement for further questions - to send another message
43	Forward	0 - no; 1 - yes	internal forward
44	Polite_End	0 - no; 1 - yes	polite closing comment
45	ClosingMessage	0 - sincerely, best regards; 1 - your faithfully; 2 - thank you; 3 - salutation and thank you; 4 - other	
46	FollowUrl	0 - no; 1 - yes	follow-up url mentioned
47	FollowTel	0 - no; 1 - yes	follow-up tel genannt
48	FollowMail	0 - no; 1 - yes	follow-up mail genannt
49	Se_Name	0 - no; 1 - yes	signature: sender's name
50	Se_Posit	0 - no; 1 - yes	signature: sender's position

51	Se_Dep	0 - no; 1 - yes	signature: sender's department
52	Se_Comp	0 - no; 1 - yes	signature: sender's company name
53	Se_Phone	0 - no; 1 - yes	signature: phone number
54	Se_Fax	0 - no; 1 - yes	signature: fax number
55	Se_Addre	0 - no; 1 - yes	signature: company address
56	Se_Url	0 - no; 1 - yes	signature: company url
57	Se_Gend	1 - female; 2 - male; 3 - unknown	gender of sender
58	Disclaim	0 - no; 1 - yes	disclaimer included
59	Logo	0 - no; 1 - yes	hotel logo included

* The first three criteria were used only for identification purposes.