How Customer Support Service works for small companies in hospitality industry in Sweden?

A study of a small hotel in Karlstad

Hur Kundsupport Tjänsten fungerar för små företag inom besöksnäringen i Sverige?
En studie av ett litet hotell i Karlstad

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Abstract

Due to the dynamic and competitive business environment around the world, it has become difficult for companies to sustain in the long run. Attracting and retaining customers remains no longer easy. Customer support service is one of the most important tools that help companies to develop long lasting relationships with their customers.

This study will explore the phenomenon customer support in a small hotel named as Best Western-Savoy Karlstad. We emphasized on different aspects necessary for building strong relationships with the customers. For this purpose, the role of the hotel management in providing customer support was studied by conducting interview with the hotel management. Furthermore, interviews with the two customer support representatives at the hotel were also conducted to get a better picture of how customer support is being practiced in the hotel.

Moreover, from theoretical point of view the research has been carried out by current relevant literature like customer support service, service quality and customer loyalty, customer complaining behavior and switching behavior. In order to accomplish the aim of the research we have chosen a qualitative and explorative research approach with the help of both open and close ended questionnaires. Interviews were conducted from the customers through e-mails as they were residing outside Karlstad. The purpose of these interviews was to analyze the expectations of the customers and their experiences related to the customer support service.

On the basis of gathered qualitative information, we concluded that the effective customer support service helps to develop strong relationships with the customers which increase customer loyalty. Moreover, higher the quality of service provided, lesser are the chances for customer switching.

**Key Words:** Customer Support Service, Customer Loyalty, Switching Behaviour, Competitive Advantage.
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1. Introduction

The world has become globalised and dynamic. The advancement in technology has allowed companies to re-think and come up with innovative ideas to make their businesses more successful. Companies are facing competition from their rivals in every aspect of business. This advancement has also increased awareness among customers and other stakeholders.

The businesses cannot be successful without customers. Customers play an important role in every business and can have major influence on the present and the future of any business. Companies can win customers heart by providing best services. So to do this, service providers try to strengthen their relationship with customers by improving the quality of service provided and advancing in customer support service to get competitive edge. *Customer support service is taking as core service to draw a strong bond of relationship with customers* (Roos and Edvardsson, 2008). In order to make a strong long term relationship with existing customers it is necessary to find out the reasons behind differentiation of customer accepted service and experienced service to create a sustainable relationship between old and new customers (Roos and Edvardsson, 2008). Goffin and New (2001) state that a customer support is thought to be a product support, technical support, after sales service or just service.

The first chapter will give an overview on the background of the study, problem formulation and aim of the study, limitations, study structure and an introduction of Best Western hotels.

1.1 Background

In this cut throat competition after economic crises where companies are struggling to achieve success through retaining existing customers and attracting new customers, customer support service plays a vital role to enhance this effect. Businesses are expanding and boundaries seem to be demolished. This increase in businesses has offered customers a variety of options to choose different services and services providers. Companies are paying more attention to customer support service today. According to Gemmel (2003) communication is necessary with customers in services business. Customer support should be practiced in companies, whether they are service providers or manufacturers (Roos and Edvardsson, 2008). Service can be regarded as a
general or company specific (Grönroos, 2006; Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b; Edvardsson et al., 2005). Customers are essential part of any business. According to Zairi (2000) customers give an objective to what we do, we depend on them.

One role of customer service is to provide customer satisfaction. Service quality and product quality can play an important role in customer satisfaction. If service quality is below the standard, then it can increase the rate of switching behavior. Service quality refers to customer’s expectations and needs (Lewis and Mitchell, 1990; Dotchin and Oakland, 1994a; Wisniewski and Donnelly, 1996; Asubonteng et al., 1996). Better service quality increases customer loyalty. According to Oliver (1999) satisfied customers are loyal. Loyal customers will spread positive word of mouth and thus indirectly will provide benefit to the company. Customer relationships will become stronger by increased satisfaction and loyalty (Bolton et al., 2000). According to Roos and Edvardsson (2008) when customers face some problem with the service provider, they contact customer support to resolve their issue.

Moreover, customers can switch on to the other service providers if they are not satisfied with the current service providers. The rise in customer switching behaviour can increase the costs and decrease revenues; similarly it can affect the profitability of a company in a negative way. This has made it difficult for companies to survive in the competitive market. On the other hand, it has given companies more chances to come up with more innovative ideas to attract new customers and retain the existing ones.

It is also vital to see which factors allow companies to build strong relationships with their customers. Marketing literature focuses on retaining customers who can increase the profitability of a company (Reichheld, 1994).

Loomba (1998) defined customer support as a collection of activities which guarantees the product use without any risk on consumer behalf. The study will find out that how customer relationships can be strengthened by focusing on customer support service. Interviews with the hotel management, personnel and customers were conducted in this regard.
1.2 Problem Discussion

In the literature on customer support mostly big companies and call centers are referred to. These companies have clear strategies and mostly automatic handling of customer support. Furthermore, the small companies (hotels) in hospitality industry promise future multidivisional economic growth at developing as well as developed countries (Mummalaneni 1987, Grönroos 1987, 1990, Roos and Edvardsson 2008).

For novelty and newness in our research, we have selected Best Western hotel Savoy Karlstad because it is a small hotel without well documented and clear strategies for customer support. This will provide us a new dimensional study on how the issue of “customer support” is handled by small businesses that have somewhat unclear customer support strategies as related to the big players in the market. Small hospitality businesses are the basis for future socio-economic and business growth with opportunities related to jobs in developing as well as developed countries (Visita 2013, Milohnic and Cerovic, 2007, Duh, 2000; Ibrahim et al., 2003). The factor of concern for small hotels is that they most often face problems related to lack of business management training and customer support (Duh, 2000, Ibrahim et al., 2003).

1.3 Aim of the study

The aim of the study is:

- To investigate customer support service can work for small hotels in hospitality industry of Sweden.

- To explore the obstacles related to customer support service and its effect on overall customer’s service and switching behaviour.

- To employ the concepts of Service Quality, Customer Loyalty, Customer Complaining Behavior and Switching Behavior for support in terms of interpretation and encapsulation of observations in a form that could be generalised and used for further research.
1.4 Limitation

The study aims to explore the phenomenon of customer support service in context of small hospitality companies without giving any notable significance to business formation (family owned). Furthermore, it will give an overall picture without focusing on any type of small hospitality companies or their comparison with big corporations of the field.

1.5 Structure of the study

The introduction chapter includes disposition of the studies and will give an overview of all the chapters and their contents. We will provide all the relative information regarding this study and the conducted interviews in appendix.

Chapter 2

The second chapter of theoretical framework comprises of theories related to the customer support service, service quality, and customer loyalty, customer complaining behaviour and switching behaviour. These theories will be summarized at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 3

The third chapter of research methodology shows the method conducted for data collection and interviews. This chapter will help to achieve the aim of the study.

Chapter 4

This chapter will include all the information collected during the research process. A broader analysis of the data will be presented in connection to the theoretical framework.

Chapter 5

In the final chapter we will come up with discussion and will give conclusion based on the outcome of the study.
2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter contains theories which support the foundation of empirical studies. Gill and Johnson (2010) defined theory as “a formulation regarding the cause and effect relationships between two or more variables, which may or may not have been tested”. We gathered different theories from the previous academic journals published during different time span to be used in this chapter. These theories will help to explain various aspects related to the customer support service, service quality and customer loyalty, customer complaining behaviour and switching behaviour. This will give a clear overview regarding the aim of the study.

2.1 Customer Support Service

The modern world has made necessity for the companies to offer customer service support in different ways despite the nature of their services. It is even more important to retain the existing customer during economic crises where companies are laying off. Old customer can be perceived as gold and service can be simply a general matter or it can rather be viewed as company-specific (Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b; Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Edvardsson et al., 2005; Grönroos, 2006)

According to Mummalaneni (1987) exchange in different forms of assistance such as economic and social contributes a lot to the bond between customer and the service provider. Companies see customer support as a competitive advantage to ensure big share in the market.

There are various models used for customer-support service. One of the early models is Augmented-Service-Offering Model (ASOM). It describes a service framework with three main components: core service, supporting service and facilitating service (Grönroos, 1987, 1990). Roos and Edvardsson (2008) state that this model is suitable for the current study whereas its functional and the breaking down of service into different, determinable element making a complete whole are not well combined with the ones put forward in the current study where customer support service is mentioned not only as an extra service to the core service but may be the vital one in all three from the relationship perspective.
Another model which is developed by Bo Edvardsson has close resemblance with ASOM. The core service is to respond to the needs and wants of the customers, which are divided into two: primary and secondary needs. According to Roos and Edvardsson (2008) the core service and the primary needs share one communication channel while the supporting service and secondary needs share another. Based on the models and literature review, we have chosen different concepts to support our study.

2.2 Service Quality

Service quality is a concept related to the marketing world which focuses on the interaction of people regarding business and customers (Antony et al., 2004). Service quality has gained much more attention since the last few decades because of its major impact on financial performance, costs, customer retention and customer satisfaction (Buzzell and Gale, 1987; Crosby, 1979; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Spreng et al., 1996, as quoted by Athanassopoulos et al., 2001). Service quality has a key role in business success and has given path to the progression of alternative schools of thought (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988; Grönroos, 1990; Reeves and Bednar, 1994, as quoted by Athanassopoulos et al., 2001). This has contributed to the concerns regarding definition and the measurement of service quality.

Quality is a measure of the service level delivered on better scale with customer expectations (Lewis and Booms, 1983). According to Grönroos (1984), service quality is divided into functional, technical and image components and regarded functional quality as the most important factor.

Service quality is a gap between customer’s expectations and level of service performance (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The imbalance between the clients expectations regarding the performance of a service in relation to the perception and usage of the service achieved is regarded as service quality (Asubonteng et al., 1996). Zeithaml (1988) states that customer’s evaluation of service quality relates to the performance delivered by the service.

Service quality can be accessed by ten criteria and dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Berry et al., 1985 as quoted by Mohammad and Alhamadani, 2011). These are tangibility, reliability,
competence, responsiveness, accessibility, courtesy, credibility, communication, security, understanding/ knowledge of customer.

- **Tangibility**: It consists of physical features like physical attributes, personal appearance and equipment.

- **Reliability**: It refers to organization’s capability to perform service within the given time frame.

- **Competence**: It refers to the desired skills and knowledge required for employees to do job in a proper way.

- **Responsiveness**: It relates to willingness to help customers and fulfill their needs.

- **Accessibility**: It relates to easy access to service through different mediums like telephone, internet etc.

- **Courtesy**: It relates to deal with employees in a respectful and gentle way.

- **Credibility**: It relates to the level of confidence and trust on the service provider.

- **Communication**: Having proper communication with the customers.

- **Security**: The level to which service provides security in terms of finance, privacy, risks and errors.

- **Understanding / Knowledge of customers**: It refers to the ability to identify customer’s needs and their problems.

Later on, these ten dimensions were integrated into five dimensions called tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness and empathy by Parasuraman et al. in (1988). Researchers have argued that these dimensions are suitable in sorting the perception and expectations of a customer regarding services (Mohammad and Alhamadani, 2011). The model was named as SERVQUAL where SERV refers to service and QUAL refers to quality.
2.3 *Customer Loyalty*

A business’s strategy revolves around customers. Companies spend a lot of their resources to attract new customers. The success of a company depends on the customers it makes; it is a vital backbone of a company. Without customers there will be no profits and failure to satisfy customers can bring closure of the company.

Customers have an important role in profitability of the company and their loyalty can make companies profitable (Hayes, 2008). It is a key to continuous profit, reducing in marketing cost and increasing number of referrals (Reichheld, 1999).

Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) defined loyalty as “an intended behaviour caused by the service” whereas operational loyalty refers to repeated purchasing intention and to give positive word of mouth. According to Griffin (1995) increase in retention can boost profits by up to 25% or more. Heskett, Sasser and Schlesinger (1997) argued that loyalty is related to customer satisfaction, but for making loyal customers, customer satisfaction may not be enough (Fornell, 1992). Loyalty behaviour may be affected by different factors like buyer’s time and finance, efforts and personal attributes (Mittal and Kamakura, 2001; Lam et al., 2004). According to Oliver (1997) strong loyalty comes from starting point of satisfaction till a strong commitment is made with time. Satisfaction and value can put major influence on loyalty by making relationships stronger (Bolton et al., 2000).

According to Lovelock (1996) customer loyalty is continuous usage of goods or services over a long period. Loyal customers are less likely diverted to another service or product by a discount (Tepeci, 1999). Customers tend to be loyal if they are satisfied continuously by product or service. In competitive market customer satisfaction is the key to the loyalty (Jones and Sasser, 1995). Therefore companies invest so much on keeping customer loyal such as better level of service; quality is one factor that can create customer satisfaction (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003). Ndubisi (2004) argues that companies should put all their efforts to win loyal customers. One loyal customer is like ambassador it can create more through praising of service in front of others. It is assumed that one half of the businesses are made upon word of mouth (Gitomer, 1998; Reck, 1991).
It is clear that customer loyalty bring desirable results to the service provider and maintenance of strong bond with the customers. Oliver (1999) defined customer loyalty as a buyer’s intense commitment to use a product, brand, service or organization for a long time in future regardless of the situation or competition.

Accordingly there are numerous approaches to customer loyalty like behavioral loyalty theory and two dimensional notion of brand loyalty. One perspective of customer loyalty was given by Chitty, Ward and Chua (2007) who argued that loyalty can be assumed of having two dimensions. One is behavioral loyalty which shows ongoing purchase behavior and the other is attitudinal behavior.

The behavioral aspect consists of one’s changing behavior, showing intense desire to repurchase from the current service provider. According to Jones and Taylor (2007) behavioral loyalty is measured by repeated buying desires, switching and buying desires. But this behavioral definition has faced much criticism. The behavioral approach cannot determine the factors which can affect the buyer’s purchase decision making criteria and focuses much on outcomes (Dick and Basu, 1994). Strong psychological commitments do not often result in repeated buying desires (TePeci, 1999). For example, a visitor may come and stay at hotel because of its better location but can move on to some other hotel which offers better service and support. So this behavior cannot be regarded as loyal.

The attitudinal dimension relates to psychological and emotional aspects of the loyalty which shows commitment and loyalty. Moreover, a visitor may like a hotel and recommend it to others but would not stay there because of its high costs.

Jones and Sasser (1995) presented three different criteria of loyalty which are customer’s primary behavior (it relates to cost and quantity of buying), customer’s secondary behavior (it relates to word of mouth, customer recommendation and authorization), customer’s intent repurchases (customer ready to purchase again in future) as quoted by (Ali and Hashmi, 2012).

Furthermore, European customer satisfaction index model assumed that quality is separated into two cores (Kuusik and Varblane, 2009) i.e. hard ware (consists of service features or the quality
of goods) and human ware (relates to the main aspects of customer cooperation i.e. one’s behavior regarding service) (Gronholdt et al., 2000).

Figure 1: General segmentation of customers by loyalty (Kuusik and Varblane, 2009)

The above figure shows that customers are divided into three categories i.e. loyal, dubious and disloyal (Kuusik and Varblane 2009). Loyal customers are further segmented into committed and behaviourally loyal. Committed customers stick with the current service and also recommend it to others while behaviourally loyal customers although stick with the current service but were not willing to recommend it to others. Dubious customers stick with the current service provider but are not sure about the future regarding the service. According to Kuusik and Varblane (2009) they are further divided into reducers and leavers where reducers will continue to decrease the service of a particular provider, being used both in present and future whereas leavers will leave the service provider permanently.
2.4  Customer Complaining Behavior

The complaints of the customers are a source through which a company can learn and correct its mistakes. Customer satisfaction can be achieved through customer complaining behaviors. A successful company may diminish negative word of mouth and impact on customer through identification of customer complaining behavior. Singh (1988) argued that customer complaining behavior has caused much amount of time in literature.

According to Landon (1980, p.337) CCB is “an expression of dissatisfaction by individual consumers (or on a consumer’s behalf) to a responsible party in either the distribution channel or a complaint handling agency”

Broadbridge and Marshall (1995) state that CCB is a process which initiates when customer has experienced the product resulting in dissatisfaction and it concludes with customers behavioral and non-behavioral responses. Singh (1990a) considers CCB as customer dissatisfaction response style, which can be in any form including voice, written, talking to a friend etc.

Most of the complaints are not reported which is a dilemma for a business. The customers who are not satisfied most often share their experience with others which has shown to be of a greater impact on the sales and profitability (Day et al., 1981). In a research by TARP (Technical Assistance Research Programs) in 20 countries in 1990s covering nearly all the sectors, half of the customers complaint about front disk, a rare complaint goes to high management, and informing others about their bad experience is double than informing good experience(Goodman, 1999). A small number of complaints or lack of complaints should be taken as warning signal and reduction in complaining must not be considered as valuable (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990, p. 109). Unhappy customers must be encouraged to complain about their problems (Tax et al., 1998). A complaint gives a chance to a customer who is not satisfied to unleash his frustration build upon dissatisfactory experience (Oliver 1987; Kowalski, 1996).
2.5 **Switching Behavior**

We also want to look at the opposite side of the loyalty concept-disloyalty. Switching behavior is when a customer decides not to buy services or product from a specific organization. Customer switching is one of the challenges for the companies these days and may affect the profitability of the firm. The loss of customers can be very handy for the company in terms of profits. It is necessary for the organization to know what influences customer’s decisions. Today customers are more knowledgeable and there are more alternatives to choose from, thus it makes it more competitive for the businesses. Organization has to develop a competitive strategy in order to retain customers where acquiring new customers is already taking too many resources (Keaveney and Parthasarathy, 2001).

Customer switching is related to satisfaction of customers (Bolton, 1998), the higher customers satisfaction the lower customer switching will be. Customer switching can affect the profitability through reduction, indirect cost related to attracting customers and positive word of mouth (Olorunniwo et al., 2006).

According to (Jones and Sasser, 1995) satisfied customers often develop a strong bond with the company, create psychological effect and prevent customers to switch current supplier (Klemperer, 1995). Bolton argues that long term relationship with customers prevents service failures; constant failures decrease the relationship with customers.

Having a loyal band of customers does not guarantee success of the company. There are different reasons for different customers to switch to others. Everyone is not dissatisfied with the service; they might have felt the need to change. Reichheld reported “on average, 65% to 85% of defectors say they were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their former supplier” (cited in Fortune, 1993). It might be the attraction of other provider or personal service in case of small hotel business or higher quality. The customers would switch service provider even if they are satisfied with (Keaveney, S, 1995).

Psychological feature as a person itself can be a reason for unwilling to remain loyal to the specific organization. According to (Fournier, S, 1998) the lack of diversity in services or products where the customer has fewer options to choose is one of the reasons of switching.
Furthermore, he states that every human wants excitement and the lack of continuous excitement with the service make him to switch to another provider.

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Source: Keaveney (1995)

Figure 2: Service switching behavior (Keaveney, S, 1995)

An early model explaining consumer switching was proposed by Susan Keaveney. In this model, she attempted to establish a general mode of service switching. Her study was about 25 different types of services in six month period. In her study she asked people about the reason of switching and during this study people remembered critical incidents which made them to switch.

All the responses were divided into 8 categories describing the reasons of switching. Study showed that service failure was the biggest reason of switching; involuntary switching came at the end of the list. One third of the customers told at least one person and 85% found new
providers through active search. The study was generalized across different markets and it gives standards why certain customer would like switch to another providers for specific reasons. The study provided information for the business to fix their mistakes.

According to Roos (1999) triggers are behind the customer relationship, which leaves long term effects on customers. Thus these triggers assist customer’s decision to switch. Three kinds of triggers represent the process; situational, influential and relational. The first trigger defines changes in the lives of customers such as change in work situation, demographics, not related to service provider. Influential triggers were related to competitive situations. The most common influential triggers are when competitors try to increase their market share. Unpleasant incidents between customers and service providers are common relational triggers which carry more energy than others.

2.6 **Summarizing the theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework supporting the aim of the study has been collected after a relevant literature review for the customer-support study. These theoretical parts presented in the thesis are interconnected with each other and can affect each other in various ways.

As in this dynamic and competitive era, only those companies can sustain in a long term which can succeed in building strong relationships with their customers. Companies and their businesses are interdependent on their customers. Customer support has a key role in every company, so in order to make their customer support service more effective, companies are always coming up with more innovative ideas. The purpose of the customer support service is to help and provide support to the customers if they are facing some problem regarding the quality or use of the product or service. For the travellers, hotels have always remained a preferred choice for accommodation. So in this era of cut throat competition, hotel industry is trying to improve their customer support service in a best possible way.

We have not ignored the importance of service quality. The globalised economic recession and advancement in technology has placed much more pressure on the hotel industry. This competitive hotel environment has raised the importance of service quality ethics. If service
quality will be up to the level, then it will help to retain customers as well as attract new customers.

Customer loyalty plays important role in customer support service. Customers will remain loyal with the service providers if they are satisfied with the quality of the product or service. This loyalty helps in increasing the profitability of a company and keeping long lasting relationships with the customers. Service providers focus on customer support service because it creates value for the customers which help in customer loyalty. On the other hand, disloyal customers prefer to leave the current service provider

Another aspect in customer support service is to help customers to resolve different issues they face regarding a poor service or product. If service providers can resolve customer complaints within proper time then it helps in retaining and satisfying customers. On the other hand, if customers do not feel satisfied then it results in customer switching. Customer switching can be a result of poor service or issues regarding product. Therefore, service providers try to provide best customer support in order to have better relations with the customers.
3. Research Methodology

This chapter describes the research methods used and the logic behind it. Moreover, the research process, data collection, interviews process and limitations are also included in this chapter.

3.1 Research Design

To achieve the overall objective of the study, it is necessary to have an in depth site into the research problem. Choosing the right methodology helps to find the root cause of the problem. According to Yin (2003) a research design is “a logical plan for getting from here to there”.

According to Holme and Solvang (1997) the two things on which research problem must be based upon are the research question and the aim of the study. Research approaches can be most often categorized into exploratory, descriptive and causal. The differences among these different approaches arise due to the problem nature, research purpose, data collection process and hypothesis formulation (Aaker et al., 2004).

In connection with the above argument, we have used explorative and qualitative research scheme as:

- The topic being studied is not mature, lacks theoretical research and has not been penned down as we have managed to do it.

- Our study design expresses that we will have to gather data from interviews, observations and observe a common pattern to extract better knowledge about the problem that could pave the way for future theoretical work.

3.2 Study Approach

Best Western Savoy is a case to describe and define the unplanned customer support. The idea behind is to find the roots of the customer support mission. We will use exploratory research approach along with qualitative method for the data collection. Qualitative data will collected by conducting interviews with the hotel management, personnel and customers. These interviews
will help us to clearly understand the aim of the research study. Finally, we will analyze the outcomes and give conclusion based on the theories and literature review.

We used exploratory research for this study because it is most suitable when the aim of the study is to find the nature of the problem. This approach is suitable to determine the nature of the problem along with its environment, and the path of the research being used must be in accordance to new insights which can arise (Saunders, 2009). When the researchers have less or no information regarding the research topic or its background, it is exploratory research (Dul and Hak, 2008). The purpose of the exploratory study is to understand a problem, make descriptions and complex environments which are not explored in the literature (Kvale 1996; Marshall and Rossman 1999).

Exploratory research has three different techniques which are finding the literature, conducting interviews with the specialists of the research topic and focus groups. When researchers tend to find the general nature of the problem which helps them to understand various relevant variables needed for the analysis, is explorative research (Aaker et al., 2004). Furthermore, they argued that exploratory research is more elastic, qualitative and formless.

Qualitative research approach is based on interpretive perspective and focuses on words (Bryman and Bell, 2007) and aims to understand and explain the phenomena (Hoepfl, 1997). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) qualitative research method provides a naturalistic and interpretive way to the world, so researchers study phenomena in its natural background settings and then try to interpret its meaning. Data can be collected from different sources such as documents, interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2007) observations and focus groups which help in collecting specific data (Ritchie and Lewis 2003, p. 60). A research problem which seeks to explore a person’s behavior or experience, or where one tries to understand and know the phenomenon about which there is less information, are typical examples of research problems requiring qualitative research (Ghauri P., Grönhaug K., Kristianslund I, 1995, p. 85). As there are always some advantages and disadvantages associated with each particular type of research, so according to Bryman and Bell (2007), the main disadvantage of qualitative research is the accumulation of a lot much information.
### 3.3 Research Process

The research process is a well organized and systematic procedure which interconnects different steps involved in it. The different steps involved in this research process are vital for its effectiveness. We will describe the whole research process diagrammatically. Moreover, the research purpose and its design must be in accordance with each other otherwise the outcomes will be nothing (Aaker et al., 2004).

![Research Process Diagram](image)

**Figure 3: Research Process (Collectively from Creswell, 2009 and Bryman and Bell, 2007)**

There are different steps during a research process as shown in the figure. The starting step of the research approach is the problem formulation and designing research question. The second step is the collection of relevant data by conducting face to face interviews. In this step, we needed a broader knowledge related to theory which was necessary for more work. We gathered the required data by conducting face to face and email interviews. The well structured questionnaires helped us to gather relevant data and information.

The third step in the research process is the analysis and interpretation of data to form categories. The reason for the partitioning of gathered data into various categories was to find for the broad patterns of generalization of the gathered data. The exploratory study provides the basis for
generalization. This generalization helped us to connect the data with the relevant literature and to accomplish the required results. The final step in the research process requires moving from general to more specific. Here it is important to reflect upon the previous literatures in order to achieve the required research results.

In order to get a better understanding and complete the research, we find the appropriate literature from different articles, journals, books which helped us to understand different factors required to sustain long term relationships with the customers. Moreover, before conducting these interviews, we kept in mind concepts like customer support service, service quality, customer loyalty and switching behavior. From the review of theoretical part, we have got a clear image that a customer support plays a key role in building strong customer relationships.

3.4 Company selection

We decided to follow Best Western-Savoy hotel, a small hotel with no outspoken strategies for customer support. On the contrary, all in the personnel as well as the owner participate in the customer-support mission.

The study will explore how customer support service works for a small hotel. Interviews will be conducted with the management i.e. hotel owner, personnel and customers in order to have a broader view of the research study. With the help of these interviews, we will make a connection between the theory and empirical study. Lastly we will present conclusions based on the empirical findings.

3.4.1 Best western hotel

The need for accommodation for people after travelling long distances has been there for a long time. Today there are several types of hotels from small to large continents’. For the last decade large hotels have dominated the scene. In the midst of recent economic crises hospitality industry is cutting cost in order to remain in the business.

Small hotels have to face greater challenges when they set up the business. They often cope with managerial and growth problems which requires special training (Duh, 2000; Ibrahim et al., 2003). For small hotel businesses, developing strong relationship with customers is one of the
competitive advantages such as personalization of services. A better interaction between customers and the business have developed the idea of customer support service.

Best western hotel brand is operated by Best western international, Inc. It’s headquarter is in Phoenix, USA and is the world largest hotel chain with over 4000 hotels in 100 different countries. By the end of 2012, it had 2160 hotels in North America. During 2011 the brand was modified with the Best Western name with addition of Best western Plus and Premier offering improved services (Best Western, 2013).

Best Western has mix of company owned and franchised units. Each hotel is independently owned. It’s operated non-profit membership association with each hotel, where each of its hotels has voting and acting right in association. Each hotel can keep its independent identity but with the addition of Best western signage and identify itself as Best Western hotel. Furthermore, the hotel publishes list of standards annually that each of its hotels has to maintain. Each hotel review itself annually instead of going into long term contracts and its renewal rate is above 90% (Best Western, 2012, 2013).

The hotel provides a family environment to its customers were they can relax and feel secure. The hotel management offers best services to its customers such as concierge service. This means that the hotel management helps customers to make restaurant and theatre reservations, concert and ticket booking, rent a car and gifts delivery. Moreover, they provide the best customer support service any customers can expect (Savoy Karlstad Best Western, 2012).

3.5 Data Collection

For any research study, the main steps comprise different approaches for data collection, observation of available practical cases and conceptualization of the text within the context of the situation or problem (Silverman, 2006). We used both types of data in this research to improve its quality.

3.5.1 Secondary Data

According to Sarantakos (1998) secondary material are the documents which are not specifically created for the research purpose in which they are used. Secondary data can provide suitable methods to handle a specific research problem and on the other hand it can provide advantage by
saving time and money (Ghauri, P., Grönhaug K., Kristianslund I, 1995). We collected secondary data from scientific articles and printed books (Bryman and Bell, 2007) available through online database resources such as Emerald, Business Source Premier, Google scholar, EBSCO, Academic Search Elite and from Best Western website.

3.5.2 Primary Data

The information collected by the researcher from the original source is primary data and the various ways to collect this data are direct observations, surveys and interviews (Sarantakos, 1998). The facts and information gathered by the researcher in the primary data are only for his or her own purpose (Rabianski, 2003). We collected primary data by conducting interviews with the hotel management (owner), personnel (working at the front desk) and customers.

3.5.2.1 Interview Process

Interviews provide in depth information about the research question. By communicating with people, we can know that how people understand their world and lives (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p. 15). There are three interview methods which are structured, semi structured and unstructured interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2007). In structured interviews, interviewees need to follow guidelines, arranged by an interviewer and cannot talk freely. While in unstructured and semi structured interviews, interviewees can talk freely. Unstructured interviews are like conversations, where interviewer asks a question and interviewees answer it freely. In semi structured interviews, although interviewer has a guideline but still interviewees have the option to answer freely (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Semi structured interviews provide the researchers with the ease to make questions on concerned topics formulated in the interview guide (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

For primary data collection, we conducted face to face interviews with the hotel management and personnel. In order to explore customer support in hotel service, we designed descriptive questionnaires with open ended questions for the management and the personnel. Through open ended questions, researchers can get surprising information and can also ask some additional questions, which were not included before but can be of interest (Bryman and Bell, 2007). We got the required information regarding customer support service, service quality, customer
loyalty and switching behavior through these questionnaires. Interviews were recorded by first taking permission from the respondents. We used both open and close ended questionnaires to interview customers. In our study, we conducted interviewed with the customers through emails which were provided by the hotel management. To achieve the aim of the research, we focused on the following perspectives of the customer support:

1. Overall service quality in hotel
2. Overall satisfaction regarding customer support in hotel service
3. Importance of customer retention
4. Customer loyalty
5. Switching behavior
6. Expectations regarding customer support service

In order to reach the depth of the research, it is important to compare views of the management, personnel and customers, with everyone seeing things in their own ways. The table below shows that how data was collected through interviews with the management, personnel and customers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
<th>Customers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1</strong></td>
<td>Face to face interview with the hotel owner by using open ended questionnaires.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Interview process and type of technique for three groups of respondents

3.6 Presenting and analyzing interview results

We recorded interviews from the respondents and then transcribed them. The analysis was made independently by both of us and dissimilarities were discussed and agreed on. The interviews with the management, personnel and customers are attached in Appendix section of the thesis. Furthermore, every interview is summarized in accordance to each question and individual answer.

3.6.1 Level 1: Best Western Management Interview

In this level, we conducted face to face interview with the hotel management. There was only one interview with the hotel owner at Best Western Karlstad Savoy in at this level and the purpose of this interview was to get a better understanding of the management role towards customer support service and how customer support is practiced in the hotel service. The interview got very well and lasted for almost 40 minutes. We got the required information from this interview. The gathered data is summarized in various categories.
3.6.2 Level 2: Personnel Interviews

At this level, we conducted face to face interviews with the personnel. They both work at the front desk of the restaurant and hotel respectively. We decided to conduct interviews with them because they have to deal with different customers daily, have to manage work overload work and their ability to take decisions in tricky situations. From these interviews, we get to know that how customer support service is actually being practiced in the hotel. Moreover, from these interviews, we traced the differences between the management and personnel perception regarding customer support service. The interview went very well and lasted for almost an hour. During this stage we got a broader perspective regarding customer support in a small hotel.

3.6.3 Level 3: Customers Interviews

In this level, we conducted interviews with the customers. The aim of these interviews was to get a real picture of customers’ perception regarding quality of support service in Best Western hotel Savoy, Karlstad. It was not possible to conduct face to face interviews with the customers as they were residing outside Karlstad, so the hotel personnel provided us with their email addresses. We got email addresses of 11 customers and we contacted them through emails. This process lasted for almost 25 days due to the late responses from the customers. Totally, seven replies were got out of 11 customers and based on these responses we concluded our studies. During this stage, we came to know that customer support is of vital importance to the customers. These interviews and their results will be discussed in the empirical chapter.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

According to Patton (2002), qualitative researchers need to be concerned about two important factors namely validity and reliability. Validity and reliability are important to make research more trustworthy and accurate.

3.7.1 Validity

Validity is one of the important factors to estimate the research quality. Validity can be of two types i.e. internal and external. Internal validity is concerned with the research credibility, which means a good relation between theoretical ideas developed by the researchers and his
observations (Bryman and Bell, 2007). External validity refers to the extent to which results can be generalized to other settings (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

According to the nature of the study, we conducted interviews with the hotel owner and customer support representatives at the hotel. The purpose was to ensure validity of the research study. The structure of the interview was simple and questionnaires were designed in accordance with the aim of the research. This was done to eliminate any errors. Furthermore, our target group was those customers who could really provide us with useful information. We were able to get the necessary information from the customers in this way.

**3.7.2 Reliability**

Reliability refers to an extent at which research results can be trusted. It is concerned with the consistency of measurement and the level to which result outcomes can be replicated (Bryman and Bell, 2007). If outcomes of the research are true, they can be trusted. If research would be done again, outcomes will be the same (Jacobsen, 2002).

In order to have more reliability and get rid of errors, we used same questionnaires for each customer. It also happened that one of the customers could not get the real meaning of the few questions being asked, so it was explained to him in a more modified form. This helped us to get more reliable answers from the customers as chances of misjudgement were eliminated in this way.
4. Empirical Data and Analysis

We presented all the empirical data gathered from the interviews in this chapter. Interview questions were designed according to the theoretical framework. Firstly, a comparison of the management, personnel and customers responses gathered from the interviews is presented. Then the outcomes are discussed and finally overall analysis of the chapter is presented.

4.1 Empirical Data

The outcome of all the data gathered from the interviews is presented in this section. Firstly, the outcomes of the interviews conducted from the hotel management, personnel and customers are presented and compared. The main finding of these interviews was that both management and personnel were well aware of the customer support importance and customers were more concerned with the level of customer service they receive at the hotel. Management focused more on providing information while the personnel practically focused on providing customer support service.

4.2 Hospitality industry in Sweden in context of small hotels business

According to the reports and statements uploaded at the official website namely “visita.se”, the hospitality industry has become one of the most promising industries in terms of business growth opportunities. It has gained the status of the “primary industry” as being the reason for:

- Socio-economic development
- Large capacity of jobs for students, locals, European citizens
- Diversity at workplace

(Visita 2013, BFUF, 2013)
The report after multilateral research survey by the Research and Development Fund of the Swedish Hospitality Industry (BFUF) presented that one of the most attractive industry in Sweden in 2013 and afterwards is the hospitality industry (BFUF, 2013).

4.3 Comparison of the management, personnel’s and customers responses

Here we will compare responses of management, personnel and customers as indicated earlier in our research methodology chapter. As according to the figure 3: Research Process (Collectively from Creswell 2009 and Bryman and Bell, 2007), the second stage after research question is to gather required data. Then according to the figure, we have analyzed the gathered data to form different categories which are explained in this chapter.

In order to achieve the best results here we will compare response of management, personnel and customers and will finally present them in a table.

4.3.1 Customer Support Service

According to the management they try their best to satisfy customers. They get response or feedback from the customers through their questionnaires. Then the management reads these responses and tries to fix things which are not going well. There are customers who do not want to give feedback. Overall the management response to the customer support was not so satisfactory.

According to the personnel customer support is about good behavior and helping customers in a best possible way. Their focus was listening to the customers and helping them in a better way. The restaurant and hotel staff meets the expectations of the customers by fulfilling their orders in time so that customers can enjoy their spare time in leisure.

The response of the customers regarding customer support service is very positive. It seems that most of the customers are happy with the customer service they receive at the hotel. Customers suggest that personnel should take time in order to make a good decision. Occasional mishaps happen because of the lack of information.
4.3.2 Service Quality

Management views that Best Western Savoy service is of top notch. Their focus was on the women who feel safe in this hotel. It gives them a feeling of being at home. Their personal service to each customer is their advantage. Each staff member knows customers by their choices and names and it makes easier for them to provide them what they need.

Staff personnel think that in order to achieve high quality it is important to listen to the customers and meet their expectations. Quality can be achieved through keeping quality standards.

The responses gathered from the customers show that service quality is paying them off. They are satisfied with the level of service quality and everybody is happy with the personal service they get at the hotel. Customers view the hotel to be home alike.

4.3.3 Customer Loyalty

According to the management loyal customers are those who will buy the services from the same service provider. Importance of location cannot be ignored because of its location in the center of the city. Mostly the women stay here because they feel cozy over here and their experience make them loyal to us.

According to the personnel if a customer stays for more than once it shows his loyalty. According to them customers are happy with the quality of the service they receive and their switching back to us must be the reason that they did not find the same services elsewhere so they chose to remain loyal to us. According to them both men and women stay at the hotel.

Interviews conducted from the customers show that they have a strong relationships with the service provider. Their repeated visits and stay at the hotel show that they are loyal customers.

4.3.4 Complaining Behavior

According to the management they give importance to the customer complaints and due to simple hierarchy of being small hotel, complaints can reach them in quick time. This saves time in solving customer problems, quick decisions do not hinder all the hassle during complaints which result in loyalty in customers.
Personnel think that being a small hotel, they are well aware of the customers and their expectations. According to them changes in shifts sometimes confuse the staff members which results in not knowing who is staying at the hotel right now. This can result in delays to solve complaints. Still customer problems can be solved by listening to them.

The customers did not show if they have complained about anything except internet connection and sometimes noisy environment in the hotel. Most customers are dissatisfied with the network operator. It shows that there are very rare complaints which occur due to things which are not controlled by the hotel personnel.

4.3.5 Switching Behavior

The management views customer switching as one of the failures of services at the hotel. An unsatisfied customer is dangerous for the health of the hotel. A customer must be satisfied when he leaves the hotel otherwise it may result in their bad publicity and reputation.

Staff personnel think that customer switching can be the result of a failure of specific service. As being a small hotel and having limited staff they cannot be everywhere so sometimes restaurant staff helps the receptionist too. There are many reasons behind it but mostly it happens because of inconvenience rather than competitors because the hotels around them are of higher level.

According to the interview responses gathered from the customers, they never switched except in the case of over-booked hotel. It seems the hotel did not help the old customer to book a room in another hotel which could have been a good way of paying off loyalty.

4.3.6 Customer Retention

Management considers retaining old customers are better than attracting new ones as they are cheaper and can be the reason of publicity. New customers are not ignored as they are good for the growth of hotel.

Staff personnel have the same view of old customers and their view match the management. They think in critical situation old customer has the edge but new customer can be a new loyal customer as well. So they do not ignore the importance of new customers as well.
The entire customers who were interviewed were old customers so it shows that the hotel has a good policy of customer retention. The customers switched from other service providers because they are satisfied with the quality of the service they get at Best Western Savoy hotel.

4.3.7 Customer Satisfaction

Management views that their flexibility in business operations as being a small hotel gives them an edge over others in the market. Customers get personal services and everyone leaves satisfied. In case of unsatisfied customer management reviews its mistake through the customer feedback and compensates customer through different ways such as giving them a free one night stay at the hotel.

The staff views customer satisfaction as treating them in the best way as possible and all the expectations must be fulfilled before their arrival so they can feel cozy. This helps them to build strong relationships with the customers.

Customers are highly satisfied with the services they get at the hotel. Due to a small a hotel, all the old customers are known to everyone and the personal service they get is appreciated by everyone. Although some customers complained about the network system in the hotel yet they are satisfied with the overall service.

It is important to compare views of the management, personnel and customers, with everyone seeing things in their own ways. Table 2 shows the comparison of the management, personnel and customers responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer Support Service</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
<th>Customers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal service. Rely more on the customer feedback online for fixing things.</td>
<td>Staff personnel views that a good behavior, fulfilling orders and personal service.</td>
<td>Thinks that a little information and time will make them better decision maker. Personal service.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Service Quality</strong></th>
<th>Personal service and coziness is the main advantage. Women are the major customers.</th>
<th>The same response they have about service quality. Both men and women stay here.</th>
<th>Home alike environment makes them satisfied.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer Loyalty</strong></td>
<td>Satisfaction is behind customer loyalty but importance of location cannot be ignored.</td>
<td>Satisfaction guarantees customer loyalty.</td>
<td>Customers have been loyal most of the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complaining Behavior</strong></td>
<td>Simple hierarchy makes them solve everything easily.</td>
<td>Same response from personnel.</td>
<td>Rare complaints except internet, heater and noisy environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer Switching</strong></td>
<td>Management ignores the possibility of competition.</td>
<td>Personnel think that competition has a small role.</td>
<td>Customers do not think of switching except in the case of over-booked hotel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer Retention</strong></td>
<td>Old customers are cheaper to use but new can’t be ignored.</td>
<td>Old customers are important but new customer can be a new loyal customer in the future.</td>
<td>Customers interviewed were loyal. The reasons were somewhat customised service and pro-activeness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td>Every customer should leave satisfied.</td>
<td>Strong relationships and personal service brings satisfaction.</td>
<td>Relationship with staff makes it easier to get desired services.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparison of the management, personnel and customers responses gathered from the interviews.
4.4 Discussion based on the customer support interviews and analyses

The importance of customer support service in hospitality industry cannot be ignored. Roos & Edvardsson (2008) state that companies are involved in providing customer support service despite the nature of their type. Customer support plays an important role in building long term relationships with the customers.

Our findings show that customer support service has a very strong influence on the customers. Almost all the customers viewed CSS as an important aspect of the hotel service and think it needs more improvement in some aspects. Competition with other service providers can help to improve the level of customer support service but management seems less concerned about it.

A better service quality is related to the success of a company. According to Reichheld and Sasser (1990) there is a strong relation between service quality and customer satisfaction. Service quality can be evaluated through perception and expectations of customers. As it is assumed that better quality will lead towards satisfaction and poor quality will do the opposite.

Our findings show that CSS has great influence on the service quality. Personnel delivered the services when they were promised to, tried their best to satisfy customer needs and what they might need in future. The management response about quality was that as we are 3 stars hotel but still we deliver a 5 stars service. Response of the customers regarding the perception and expectation of service quality was very positive.

Loyalty is correlated to the business success. Company with more loyal customers decreases its expenses on attracting new customers. According to Reichheld and Sasser (1990) old customers are cheaper for the business. In order to keep these old customers, companies are putting pressure on managers to retain their old customers (Bolton et al., 2000). Most of the customers see customer support as a connection between them and the service providers and to keep that link strong companies tend to keep on satisfying customers. According to Bolton et al. (2000) satisfaction changes the customer’s view about the company and impacts customer’s loyalty.
Our finding has showed that CSS has influenced customers in a way to be loyal. Management is very keen to encourage customer loyalty by meeting them personally. One of our interviewers has been welcomed by the owner herself every time she visited the hotel. She is extremely satisfied with the service which she gets here. According to Jones and Sasser (1995) when a customer is continuously satisfied, he or she becomes a loyal customer.

As being a small hotel, most of the customers get personalized service which further influences customer’s loyalty. Best Western does not have large number of customers’ base and most of the guests are coming through connections with others who stayed here before or someone who has personal contact with the hotel management.

Singh (1990a) states complaining behavior is the response of customer showing dissatisfaction. The response is in different ways, it could be a negative behavior either written or verbal. Complaining behavior can lead to switching but it has also been assumed that all customers do not complain. There is a positive aspect of complaining behavior as it can be used to prevent customer switching. Lack of complaints must be taken as a warning and reduction in complaint must not be considered achievement (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). In a small hotel, there are less chances of complaining as there is a direct contact with almost every customer. A good CSS can prevent customer complaining by handling it right away on the spot.

According to our findings complaints were solved immediately by the personnel as soon as possible. The hotel has used complaining behavior in their favor often by providing extra to the complaining customers. Most of the time complaints were technical related to network problem and some complaints were regarding the noisy environment. Customer support service plays an important role to retain the existing customers. In small hotels it is little easier to retain old customers than the bigger hotels as most of the customers have personal contacts with either the management or personnel.

It is assumed that better customer support service brings higher level of customer satisfaction. Our findings show that hotels personalized service has impacted the satisfaction level of customers. The role of CSS is to build a bridge between customers and service providers. According to Bolton et al., (1998) customer switching is directly correlated to customer
satisfaction. A better CSS team prevents customer switching behavior as we discovered in this study that CSS has kept customers satisfied. It was the reason that customers stayed loyal and never wanted to switch.

4.5 Summarizing the empirical results

Based on the empirical findings, we came to know that customer support service is the most important factor in sustaining long term relationships with the customers. It was found that both the management and personnel give more preference to their old customers. Moreover, they should also focus on different problems which customers are facing such as internet and noisy environment sometimes. By solving these issues they can increase the level of satisfaction with their customers because these small issues sometimes may result in customer switching which will spread negative word of mouth about the hotel. Overall the service quality is great and customers feel satisfied with it but needs improvement in some areas.

The empirical results gathered from the customers show that they were more concerned with the level of customer support they received and are satisfied with the Best Western Savoy services and do not want to switch to other service providers. Most of the complaints were regarding internet service which according to the hotel management is something they cannot control. If customers will have a better internet connection at the hotel, they will be happier and feel it like home. As customers want to stick with the hotel so hotel management can sustain them by resolving their issues instead of ignoring them.
5. Discussion and Conclusion

In the last chapter, we will provide a brief discussion regarding the outcomes of the research study and its findings. Finally, conclusions will be presented that how customer support helps to develop strong relationship with the customers.

5.1 Discussion

According to the outcome of the study, customer support service plays an important role to enhance relationships with the customers. In the first chapter of the thesis, we proposed to investigate the role of customer support in hotel service and how it helps to develop strong relationships with the customers. To achieve the aim of the research study, we developed open and close ended questions for the management, personnel and customers in three different stages. With the outcome of the responses from the management, personnel and the customers, we find out that how customer support helps in building strong relationships.

5.1.1 Customer support and customer retention in small hotel industry

In present challenging economic conditions, the retention of the existing customer is vital for business growth in hospitality industry. It becomes even more important for small hotels as the number of customers and those who are regular drop down significantly. The nature of competition between hotels is how to know what most of the people need to become customers of hospitality industry (Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b; Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Edvardsson et al., 2005; Grönroos, 2006). According to the empirical study, the ones’ that figure it out first and emphasise on it are the trendsetters and leaders. Surprisingly, the ever changing needs of the customers have created a never ending battle between hotels to be called as favourite.

Furthermore, the market survey suggested that the hospitality business is promising as it has opportunity of future growth but customer support services is the indicator that makes things tough for many small hotels (BFUF, 2013).
Mummalaneni (1987) stated that the customer retention is seen by the hotel industry as the relationship between customer and businesses that can be social and economic. Moreover, the customer support service is regarded as the edge if it can be maintained.

In hospitality industry, small hotels have to face more challenges while setting up the business. Building strong relationships with their customers can be a competitive advantage for them. As customer support has a major importance in hotel business so this area needs much more focus and improvement in order to better cope with the challenges. Customer support service can be of vital importance in attracting and retaining customers. If customer support service is good enough in satisfying customer needs and to solve their complaints within quick time then customers will stay with the current service provider. On the other hand, if the customer support department is not functioning well then it may result in customer switching which will negatively influence the overall image of the hotel.

Roos and Edvardsson (2008) worked on this in the dimension of bifurcation of customer support service into core services and supporting services. The core and supporting services actually are communication channels that share primary and secondary needs fulfilment of the hotel customer.

After this, the service quality factor starts to play its role as to which hotels’ communication channel of core and supporting services is superior. The decision has to be made by the customers’ of hotel industry who mostly judge it through the difference in their expectations and actual service observed at the hotel (Parasuraman et al., 1985), an experience that starts from doorstep and surrounding of the hotel.

Generally, giving more emphases on strong customer relationship with regular customers has been mistakenly interpreted by the small hotels’ management as giving more attention to the old customers. This has created a series of events like delay in overall solving customers’ complaints and lack of communication between employees about customers’ state of need. These all factors can be havoc and weaken the relationships with the customers and can lead to customers switching. From the management point of view customer support is about maintaining close, friendly and sustainable relationships with the customers by meeting their expectations.
Our observation of customer retention and support gave us the first hand data for interpretation of BFUF report (Research and Development Fund of the Swedish Hospitality Industry) which depicted us that the small industry is need for training assistance from a source that are much more experienced in the industry. A collaborative effort is needed for competing for future demands and needs of customers. The crux is not to look at small hotel businesses as an entity but as a vital part of national network of small hotel businesses that have capacity to repay the in terms of better customer experience. So this means that the customers of the hotels at Karlstad, in general, play their part for overall campaign of customer retention at Swedish hospitality industry.

5.1.2 Customer's perspective regarding customer support service

The tendency of performance deliverance through the service to the customers is tool that customer uses to rate or analyse service quality (Zeithaml, 1988). It has been also translated as whether the customers’ expectations coincide or surpass the actual experience of usage of the service (Asubonteng et al., 1996). If the expectations coincide or left behind then the customers are retained otherwise the competitor will have them. The switching behaviour of the customers is triggered when relationship between customer and service provider is unclear (Bolton, 1998) which results in customer loss in extreme cases when the customer decides to switch in case of unmet expectations (Olorunniwo et al., 2006). The imbalance between customers’ expectation and actual service being provided may result in leaving customer unsatisfied and ruin the relationship with the service provider. This also shows that the hotel management is not taking this matter seriously as required. Customer complaints can work as a source from which the company can eliminate its mistakes. If a company takes customer complaints in a positive manner then it can result in customer satisfaction.

Furthermore, old customers always perceive that the hotel management is well aware of their needs. Due to this, the old customers’ expectations can be high and difficult to meet if taken lightly. This means that the old customers can become a source of negative words-of-mouth and can have a negative impact on the customer loyalty. According to Oliver (1999) loyalty has positive impact on the service provider and can lead to strengthen relationships with the customers and helps in retaining the old ones.
5.2 Statement of Critique

We found that the management is not so much concerned about competition with its rivals which is very surprising. Whereas, competition is an important factor which can help service providers to improve their service quality and customer support service. Ignoring the importance of competition will result in a big loss for the Best Western hotel Savoy and will allow other service providers to come up and attract the majority of the customers in their favour.

By keeping these points in mind, the hotel can have more loyal and sustainable customers which will open ways to attract new customers by spreading positive word of mouth. The customers may start switching to other service providers if the hotel management would not resolve their internet problem as it is the way customers can keep in touch with the outer world.

By digging into the overall working style, the absence of any pre-planned documentation that could be helpful in tracking the coordination gaps, situation or operation wise, was not taken serious. Furthermore, this also tells us that the employees were not involved in support services improvement up to the extent as necessary. The most visible negative effect related to degradation of support service was recorded on the front desk, sourced from the encounters with customers which were told to us by the personnel members.

5.3 Conclusion

The thing that was learnt from the conclusion of the thesis is that unavailability of any detailed or systematic customer service system can be a disadvantage for any small hotel as it will take away the uniqueness of the hotel that it provides through the flexibility in operations and system.

Furthermore, the personnel are not bound by the system rather encouraged to give personalized service to customers in small hotels. Consequently, better performance by self-driven-customer-care attitude of the personnel who could be local people can be achieved. Thus, adding the twist of local culture and flexibility at personnel level for empowering them to take decision for better customer service. According to our endeavor, this is what was unknown before in hospitality industry theoretical works’ that we have made our effort to add to.
Furthermore, customer support service is much of relationship cycle than a process that has to be communicated throughout the company whether it is written or not. Being well defined does not mean to have an information system or lengthy step-by-step approach manuals but to have a set of thinking and behaving patterns. These patterns can be helpful in one of the trickiest problems that any hotel has to face like customers who are introvert, cannot communicate complains, are not aware of what’s bothering them and cannot give words to their feelings. Having a family like culture while giving much flexibility, personalised service and having a 24/7 attentive listening and observation of the customers can serve as a competitive edge, saver and creator.

Surprisingly, all the factors mentioned before involve one common pattern and that is in how many different dimensions a hotel can have a relationship with its customers. This development of multilateral relationship is the end and start of how customer support service can work for the hotel for having better customer-led-quality-service.

In this way, the customer would help the hotel employees, management and other related businesses unintentionally to improve its services and see through the eyes and think through the brains of the people being the part of the family as loyal customers.

In connection to this, the strength of small hotels’ management is the rate of flexibility at operational and managerial level that they can exercise to do parental leadership. The management should guide the employees towards a target by provocative questions, listen to their suggestions and plan, and let them do what they think they are best in. In this way the employees will enjoy and own their work. Comparatively, this cannot be done that easily at big hotels as they have complex and huge operations.

As far as employees are concerned, they can serve well in small companies by giving personal service to the customers and making notes of the most often needs of the customers who are regular customers (as they are not many and easy to remember). The employees become agents of customers. In short, smash the root cause and consider the customers as the business owners as they are the cause and reason of business.

According to the overall market conditions, the employees of small hotels needs more training to improve their services such as finding new and effective ways to answer and investigate
customer inquiries. The Hotel and Restaurant Training Council (UHR) can be a valuable partner in this regard, as observed from its activities. The Research and Development Fund of the Swedish Hospitality Industry (BFUF) should be spent on customer awareness and strengthening of small hotels’ business segment in hospitality industry as it promises very handsome opportunities of future business growth.

Customers’ are usually observed to welcome the personalized services above all, as it makes them feel that they are being served in the most caring and respectful manner. Interestingly, most of the customers interpreted “pleasant surprise” as the moments when their nonverbal and not-communicated-needs were satisfied by the hotel. Nevertheless, many of them revealed that small hotels have a unique touch of local-hospitality-culture and warmth that is enjoyable if converted into services that are carefully crafted.
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