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Empowering Front Office Professionals with Understanding of Guests' Personality Psychology

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Abstract- *Purpose:* To become a successful front office professional, a person needs to be comfortable with interacting with strangers and dealing with various hotel-guests issues. To do so effectively, a front office manager needs to understand and apply appropriate findings of psychology. Personality psychology is a branch of psychology that studies personality and individual differences. For years, practitioners of applied psychology have tried to help companies identify personality types of customers and teach them how to handle each of these. By understanding the personality styles of guests, front office managers can easily accommodate the needs of each type. This conceptual paper analyses some of the findings of personality psychology which have direct implications for front office managers and professionals.

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Empowering Front Office Professionals with Understanding of Guests' Personality Psychology

Mr. Rajiv Mishra [α] & Dr. Kulwinder Pal [σ]

Abstract- ***Purpose:*** **To become a successful front office professional, a person needs to be comfortable with interacting with strangers and dealing with various hotel-guests issues. To do so effectively, a front office manager needs to understand and apply appropriate findings of psychology. Personality psychology is a branch of psychology that studies personality and individual differences. For years, practitioners of applied psychology have tried to help companies identify personality types of customers and teach them how to handle each of these. By understanding the personality styles of guests, front office managers can easily accommodate the needs of each type. This conceptual paper analyses some of the findings of personality psychology which have direct implications for front office managers and professionals.**

Design/methodology/approach: **The types of personality and the principles discussed in the paper are arrived at through review of related literature and by interacting with the successful hospitality professionals and practitioners of applied psychology.**

Findings: **Along with the notable Big Five model of the personality, the paper enlists the characteristic of various sub-categories of the guests after broadly classifying them into various heads in relation to their planning, booking, pricing, lodging and complaining habits and discusses their implications for front office professionals.**

Value: **The knowledge and understanding of various personality types of guests would guide the front office professionals to plan their strategy to deal effectively with different types of guests in all of their job functions.**

Keywords: front office professionals, personality psychology, guests' personality types.

I. Introduction

The front office is the heart of any hotel organization. According to H.E. Heldenbrand (1944), "To the guest, the manager is largely represented by the front office, and the unseen head will be judged favorably or otherwise by the guest treatment there." As such the duties and functions of a front office manager or professionalare very much crucial since he/she is responsible for overall customer service, reservations, billing, and personnel management. To become a successful front officeprofessional, a person needs to be comfortable with interacting with strangers and dealing with various hotel-guests issues. To do so effectively,a front office professional need to understand and apply appropriate findings of psychology. Applied psychologists have developed principles and methods for dealing with human behavior at all of the following levels: people as individuals, people as interpersonal entities (in leadership and team roles), and people as the key to understanding the way organizations look and behave (Schneider, 1991).So much research work has been done in studying the personality characteristics of the people that it has resulted into the creation of a separate branch of psychology known as Personality Psychology. Personality psychology is a branch of psychology that studies personality and individual differences. Its areas of focus include - constructing a coherent picture of a person and his or her major psychological processes (Bradberry, 2007); investigating individual differences, that is, how people can differ from one another and; investigating human nature, that is, how people's behavior is similar (Wikipedia, 2010).For years practitioners of applied psychology have tried to help companies identify personality types of customers and teach them how to handle each of these types. By understanding the personality styles of guests,front office managers can easily accommodate the needs of each type. The central idea is that one can relate and work with people well if one knows them well. This paper analyses some of the findings of personality psychology which have direct implications for front office managers/ professionals.

II. Personality Defined

The word "personality" originates from the Latin word 'persona', which means mask. In the theatre of the ancient Latin-speaking world, the mask was not used as a plot device to disguise the identity of a character, but rather was a convention employed to represent or typify that character (Wikipedia, 2010). Although the term "personality" has different meanings to different people, one definition describes it as a set of characteristics or traits that are relatively enduring and differentiate one person from another (Guilford, 1959). It represents an

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individual's distinctive psychological characteristics that lead to relatively consistent responses to his or her environment (Reid and Bojanic, 2010). Itmayalso be defined as dynamic and organized set of characteristics possessed by a person that uniquely influences his or her cognitions, motivations, and behaviors in various situations (Ryckman, 2004).

The various types of guests with whom front office professionals interact on a regular basis, are psychologically programmed in a highly similar fashion. This means that people analyze and use certain types of information in very predictable ways. This "every day" predictable elements of people constitute their personality, the understanding of which can help front office professionals toknow and work with others personally and professionally much more effectively (Houran, 2009).

III. Using Principles of Personality Psychology for Building Customer-Centric Mindset in Front Office Managers

Hospitality is about a "customer-centric" mindset (Houran, 2009). Knowledge and practice of relevant principles of personality psychology can help front office professionals to live this mindset. The types of personality and the principles discussed in the paper are arrived at through review of related literature and by interacting with the successful hospitality professionals and practitioners of applied psychology.

a) "Big Five" model of personality

We will start our discussion with the famous "Big Five" model of personality given by Lewis Goldberg who proposed a five-dimension personality model, nicknamed the "Big Five" (Wikipedia, 2010) and can be easily remembered by the acronymn OCEAN. These dimensions along with their implications for front office managers as given by J.W. Santrock (2008) and Jim Houran (2009) are listed below:

1. *Openness to Experience:* This dimension represents tendency to be imaginative, independent, and interested in variety. People like this are eager to learn more and ask many questions. They are motivated to seek stimulation and to learn things in general. While dealing with these guests, front office professionalshould emphasize hotel's new, novel or innovative approach, as well as leading-edge and proprietary information that gives it a competitive edge.
2. *Conscientiousness:* It represents the tendency to be organized, careful, and disciplined. People like this are very cautious, deliberate in word and deed, pragmatic, non-committal and sometimes downright skeptical. They are motivated to understand details and practical application of products and services. To deal with them,front office professional should emphasize detail in reports and presentations and explain how that detail is derived from careful and authenticate information. Also, they should be precise in their language leaving nothingvague or irresolute for guests.
3. *Extraversion:* It reflects the tendency to be sociable, fun-loving, and affectionate.People like this make small talk and are very friendly. Their motivation is relationship-building. While responding to these,front office professionalcan emphasize the ongoing relationship the hotel organization has with client's company, e.g., past projects hotel organization has done for the company, success stories about collaboration and partnership, testimonials etc.
4. *Agreeableness:* Thisis the tendency to be softhearted, trusting, and helpful.People like this are good listeners, respectful, polite and amenable to the suggestions. They are motivated to avoid conflict and to please others. Front office professional while interacting with them should emphasize the powerful reputation hotel organization has in the market, along with mentioning how much he/she enjoys talking with them and wants to continue the discussion. Front office professional must act fast with highly agreeable people, because their views can easily change over time as they attempt to please the person of authority at the moment.
5. *Neuroticism:* It represents the tendency to be calm, secure, and self-satisfied. People like this are quick talkers and thinkers, who can come across as dominant, passionate, and narcissistic persons. They want to control circumstances, establish authority and assert their own expertise. While dealing with them, front office professional should emphasize the reputation and high standards of the guest's company and how hotelorganization complements that brand and fits in with their innovative agenda or plans.

The way that people express themselves is related to their personality make up. Often one of these five traits will be dominant in a specific person.By listening to them and observing their mannerisms one can comprehend the dominant dimension of one's personality and respond to itaccordingly. Information will be better understood and received by a guest when information is messaged in a way consistent to the guest's dominant personality (Houran, 2009).

b) Guests' personality types in terms of their planning habits

Irina von Bentheim (2009) has reflected upon the significance of the hotel choice and what it says about the character of the hotel guest. She has categorized the guests into following four types

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depending upon the accommodation planning done by them:

The cautious guest: The cautious guest plans their accommodation right down to the last detail weeks, and even months, in advance. They maintain daily email contact with the hotelier. They belong to the most fearing yet adorable set of people. To build a good customer relationship with one of these types, front office professional should never dodge their endless search for perfection. Playing a tolerant partner at their side, front office professional can let them happily experience harmony.

The cunning guest: The cunning guest compares prices, furnishings and locations months in advance, and rings up their chosen hotel every day under a different name to ensure their hosts will still welcome them even if their demands are unfair. As these types of guests are generally in possession of the strongest of egos, front office professionals should be mentally prepared to face more confrontations and act according to the situation keeping their cool.

The lucky beggar: These types of guests do not doany planning, but always manage to have luck on their side and end up in a top hotel. They enter into every relationship with "Yes I can" attitude but their loud self-appreciation doesn't always result in as much as it promises. They like others to indulge more often in self-criticism which should be kept in mind by the front office professionals while interacting with them.

The jinxed traveller: The jinxed traveller never plans ahead, always seems to encounter bad luck and does not have sufficient self-belief. The front office professionals dealing with them must be well organized and accustomed to taking matters into their own hands. (Bentheim, 2009)

c) Guests' Personality types pertaining to booking/reservation process

Bryan Eisenberg (2009) categorizes the personalities into four groupson the basis of theirqueries while making bookings. The characteristics and aspirations of each group as explained below should be kept in mind by the front office professionals while handling their bookings:

Competitive personality: This type of person is decisive and looks for the bottom line. This personality asks 'what' questions. Regarding the hotel, this person will want to know location, comparison to other hotels, and star rating systems.

Humanistic personality: A person with this type of personality appreciates a hotel with friendly, helpful and polite staff. This personality asks 'who' questions. He/She wants to feel good about a hotel and values learning about the experience of others who have stayed there.

Spontaneous personality: A person who has this personality is impulsive and appreciates a personal touch. This personality asks 'why' questions. He/She avoids cold, hard facts and wants to know if the staff will help him/her, or if there is a restaurant or nightclub. This personality type will be impressed by silky sheets, quality toiletries and special touches.

Methodical personality: A methodical person likes to see the hard facts and wants to see the information presented in a logical manner. This personality type asks 'how' questions. He/She is not impressed with the personal touch and will look for things such as check-out times, prices, and what comes with the room. (Eisenberg, 2009)

d) Personality variables relevant for understanding consumerbehavior related to pricing and currency usage

Front office professionals should also be familiarized with the pricing and currency usage related behavior of the guest as a consumer. Two personality variables seem to offer a great deal of promise in understanding consumer behavior (Haugtvedtet al., 1992). These personality variables are: need for cognition and self-monitoring. The understanding of these variables would help front office professionals to be more insightful and considerate while dealing with guests in pricing related matters.

i. *Need for Cognition*

According toCacioppoand Petty (1982), need forcognition refers to an individual's tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitiveendeavors. Based on need for cognition, individuals can be divided into cognitive spenders and cognitive misers.

a. *Cognitive spenders:* Individuals whopossess high need for cognition are more highly motivated to think about the giveninformation than individuals with low need for cognition (Cacioppoand Petty, 1982). In other words, individualswith high need for cognition are viewed as cognitive spenders, and they report greater enjoymentof complex tasks.They are morecurious, enjoy mental activities, seek out additional stimulus information, differentiatebetween strong and weak arguments, and recall more information from an event (Hu, 2005).

b. *Cognitive misers:* Incontrast to cognitive spenders, low need-for-cognition individuals are viewed as cognitivemisers (Taylor, 1981), and they dislike effortful cognitive activities.

The results of the study by Imman, McAlister, and Hoyer (1990) demonstrated that for cognitivemisers, promotion signal alone represent a sufficiently significant change in the choicecondition to induce a shift in choice behavior toward the promoted brand. For cognitivespenders, however, a concomitant price cue is needed. This implies that cognitive misersmight employ less complex decision rules than do cognitive spenders.Chatterjee and Basu-Roy (1998) investigated

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the role of need for cognition onconsumers' reactions to price-matching offers. Cognitive misers are unlikely to devotemuch thought to any situation. Hence they are more prone to use price-matching signalsas a heuristic to simplify choice. Cognitive spenders, on the other hand, are more likely toconsider both the competition as well as the collusion aspects of price-matching offers,and base their choice on more substantive cues. Whereas cognitive spenders arepersuaded by price reduction, cognitive misers are persuaded by discount signals evenwhen the price of the promoted brands is not actually reduced (Immanet al., 1990 and 1997). The study byBurman and Biswas (2004) suggested that the cognitive spenders scrutinize the information more and thereforeenter the correction stage to either reject or discount an implausible reference price. On the other hand, cognitive misers remain in the characterization stage due to their lack of motivation to assess the information thoroughly and therefore will be more vulnerable to implausible reference price claims.

Since need for cognitionappears to be a primary individual-difference variable identified as influencingmotivation to think, it should also influence individuals' preference ofcurrency usage. Cognitive spenders may prefer to usecombined currency at high-end restaurant to maximize their savings. To avoid thecomplexity of dealing with two or more currencies, cognitive misers, in contrast, are mostlikely to pay with a single currency while visiting restaurants of their choice (Hu, 2005).

ii. *Self-Monitoring*

According to Snyder (1979, 1987), people differ in theextent to which their behavior is susceptible to situational or interpersonal cues, asopposed to inner states or dispositions. With regard to the level of self-monitoring, individuals can be classified as low self-monitors and high self-monitors.

a. *Low self-monitors:* Low self-monitoring individuals are especiallysensitive and responsive to inner dealings, attitudes, andbeliefs. Thebehaviors of low self-monitors reflect their feelings and attitudes without regard tosituational or interpersonal consequences of those behaviors (Snyder, 1979; Ajzenet. al.,1982).

b. *High self-monitors:* In contrast to low self-monitors, high self-monitors are much less sensitive to internal beliefs and values. Instead, they view their behaviors as stemming primarily form a pragmatic view of whatexternal, situational cues define as socially appropriate action (Snyder, 1974).

High self-monitors tend tojudge a product's quality higher if it is advertised with an image orientation (DeBono andPacker, 1991).Low self-monitors, on the other hand, tend to be influenced by advertisements thatstress the performance of the product. Empirical evidence has shown that high self-monitoring individualsprefer brands in congruence with social situations while self-image congruence andutilitarianism dominate the brand preference of low self-monitors (DeBono, 2000; Hogget al., 2000). Also, high self-monitors respond more favorably tostatus-oriented advertising claims while low self-monitors are more sensitive to thequality and functional performance of products (Shavittet al., 1992; DeBono, 2000).

Individuals' preferences of payments (currency usage) may also be influenced byself-monitoring (Hu, 2005). High self-monitors view their behaviors as stemming primarily from apragmatic view of what external and situational cues define as socially appropriate actionand use these cues as guidelines for monitoring their own verbal and nonverbal self-presentation (Snyder, 1979). Since combined-currency price is a signal of price discount,high self-monitors may be less likely to use it in contrast to low self-monitors and hence may choose single currency to show their social status (Hu, 2005).

e) Guests' personality types in terms of lodging habits

Embassy Suites Hotels (2000) commissioned a proprietary surveyof more than 300 frequent travelers and found that there are two distinct personality types in travelers: Upstairs andDownstairs guests. This classification provides good insight about the lodging habits of the guests.

Upstairs guests: These personalities are defined by actions andcharacteristics of more introverted people who spend less time in public areasand prefer private spaces such as bedrooms over more social spaces such aslobbies and lounges. While the findings indicate that nearly two out of threefemale respondents generally classify themselves as extroverts, more than halfof these same women travelers changed attitudes when traveling for business,describing their behavior as more upstairs and introverted on a businesstrip. For example, female business travelers might opt for room service, in-suite wet-bar, and the spaciousness of a two-room suite that allows aseparation of work and sleep areas.

Downstairs guests: Unlike their female counterparts, men overwhelming maintained the downstairs personality when traveling for business or pleasure. Travelerswith downstairs personalities are considered to be more extroverted and tendto use concierge services more often, dine out of their rooms and prefersocial spaces to private areas. Downstairs personalitiesmight enjoy a nightly manager's reception, dining in the on-site restaurantand relaxing in open lobby areas.

The survey also found that while upstairs personalities enjoy staying upstairs, downstairs personalities also appreciate a spacious hotel room like a two-room suite. Depending on their personality, travelers seek specific comfortzones which front office managers should aim to provide.

Early View

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f) Guests' personality types in terms of their complaints

Amy Bradley-Hole (2008) believed that the best way to please a guest is to understand his/her needs and motivations and the psychology behind their complaints. In her effort to better understand the psychology behind complaining, she began studying disgruntled customers, and noticed certain "types" of complainers.

People with ruined dreams: The seare the people who have been dreaming of the most breathtaking vacations for years. They have got this perfect vision in their head of exactly how the entire trip, including hotel experience, should be. This type of persons may complain because they have major problems, but they often complain about minor things that may not really matter, simply because they are facing the reality that there is no such thing as a perfect vacation.

Face-savers: Face-savers complain because they think acting irate will camouflage their shortcomings. For example they knowthat they only made their reservationsfor two nights but insist it was three.Face-savers can often be identified by their low self-esteems and their beliefs that belittling other people makethem look good. They are the one who complain really loudly.

Freebie-lovers: These people love bargaining. They complain even when nothing is wrong just to get a lower rate or a refund. Freebie-lovers have one motivation: saving money

Wounded warriors: The wounded warriors once had everything going for them. But then many unfortunate incidents happened in their life. They often complain because it's the only way to regain control of their life and become masters of the situation, if only for a brief shining moment.Instead of standing up for themselves and taking control of their life, they may also complain as they feel forced to do so by someone else.

Martyrs/passive-aggressives: Martyrs and passive-aggressives are the worst complainers because they don't complain at all, at least not to the hotel. These are the people who have the worst stay ever, and yet never breathe a word about their numerous issues to hotel staff. Instead, they wait until they return home to tell everyone they know and the local news station about how horribly they were treated. In fact, martyrs love to be mistreated, because it gives them something new to complain about.

The loyal customers: The loyal customers don't really complain at all. Instead, they provide constructive criticism. They let managers know when things are wrong simply because they love a hotel or chain and they want to make sure it's a nice place to stay for a long time. This type of complainer is the one who becomes good friends with the staff members at various hotels and gets all kinds of perks when he/she comes to stay.

The truly injured: The truly injured guests complain for a valid, important reason. They do so calmly, rationally and politely. They understand that no one is perfect, and that mistakes happen. They do not place blame or pass judgment. They ask for appropriate compensation for their problems, and are never demanding.

Categorizing complainers seem to help the front office professionals better please these customers, because they better understand what each guest want. (Bradley-Hole, 2008)

IV. Conclusion

Front office professions are always at the frontline to face all types of customers with their diverseattitudes, needs and aspirations.The knowledge and understanding of various personality types of guests would help them to plan their strategies to deal effectively with different types of guests in all of their job functions. The process of analyzing the guests in terms of their personality characteristics assists the professionals to know their guests in a better way. Once you know the prominent dimension of a guest's personality and their temperament in terms of their planning, reservation making, spending, lodging and complaining habits, you can very well devise the apt strategies to meet their expectations and increase the customer satisfaction. The hotel organization can use the findings of personality psychology to apply innovative strategies for boosting their trade name. One such strategy is adopted by OPUS Hotel, Vancouver where the guest rooms are grouped by "room personality". Room types are assigned randomly unless guests make a specific request. The hotel's website has a feature to help guests determine their personality type, and if a guest lets the hotel know which "type" they are, the staff will kick in with specific local dining and other recommendations (Travel &Leisure, 2010). The concept like this would definitely add more personal touch to the comfort of the guests leading to greater customer satisfaction and increased business.

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