



UNIT-3

Dealing with the Hotel Guests

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Track and analyse every step of the 'guest journey' from start to finish
- ✓ Discuss the role of the receptionist in every guest's experience
- ✓ Deal with difficult customers in an objective and professional manner

Unit 3

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The Guest Journey

Consider a recent time when you were a guest at a hotel. What was the first point at which you interacted with the establishment? Chances are, you'd say it was the moment you came into contact with the hotel directly, perhaps by telephone or in person.

In reality, however, the guest journey begins way before this initial contact. These days, guests begin building an impression of the hotels they stay in, long before they come into contact with them. Online reviews, marketing materials, social media posts, word-of-mouth etc. - all having an influence on the guest experience and the guest journey.

Driving the decision

Which begs the question - why is it that guests decide to stay in one hotel over another? Of course, there's no simple answer to the question, as the decisions we make are driven by different motivations. For some, it's all about how prestigious and exclusive a hotel looks online. For others, the only thing that matters is getting the cheapest room possible for a specific night. But there's still one factor that can be even more influential than our own preferences and motivations - customer feedback and word-of-mouth. Positive and negative reviews have an enormous impact on the decisions we make. Whether it's buying products or choosing which hotels to stay in, we tend to listen to the recommendations of our peers. The occasional disgruntled customer is inevitable, but when there are plenty of negative reviews attached to a hotel, its appeal to the customer can be all but wiped out.

This is why avoiding negative reviews is considered a priority by most hotel owners and businesses. More often than not, there's plenty that can be done to transform a disappointed or dissatisfied guest into a happy customer. The idea being that rather than waiting until they share their negative feedback, you ensure they leave with nothing negative to say about you. However, if a bad review makes its way into the public domain, it's just as important to attempt to make things right...and to do so publicly. Reach out to the customer, respond to their feedback and do whatever you can to bring them back on board.

Once again, therefore, the guest journey starts long before a prospective customer makes contact with the hotel. These days, the vast majority of hotel bookings are made online. This creates various additional challenges for hotel workers, who at the time of the booking have no control over it. If the customer encounters issues while attempting to book online, they may get frustrated and their opinions of the hotel could suffer. Even if it's entirely their fault, due to some kind of misunderstanding with the booking process.

Hence, it's far from uncommon for hotels to receive calls from guests who are already annoyed and impatient. In which case, you need to demonstrate nothing but empathy for their situation and provide them with the support they need. Even if they've made a mess of their online booking through no fault of their own, the customer is always right...as they say!

Email Bookings

Hotel reservations by e-mail can be tricky, given that there is no real-time communication between the hotel and the customer. Confirmation isn't immediate upon submitting the request and nor is it always possible for the hotel to finalise a booking after receiving a single e-mail. Instead, you often have to exchange multiple emails to get things done.

This is why a lot of hotels (and major hotel chains) no longer accept bookings by e-mail. They may share the e-mail address of their reservations department for queries and special bookings (groups, business bookings etc.), but don't allow everyday bookings to be made by e-mail. In which case, a reply should be sent as promptly as possible to the sender, informing them that they will need to make their booking online or by telephone. Or better yet, the recipient can call the sender directly and offer to make the booking for them right away.

As a rule of thumb, it's important to ensure that as many emails as possible are responded to within 1 hour. Even if you cannot answer *every* question in the e-mail within this time, it's always good to send acknowledgement of receipt.

Most hotels have their own pre-set e-mail templates, which will include the name, address and telephone number of the hotel. Hence, this information doesn't necessarily need to be included. Always keep the tone of voice professional yet friendly when writing emails, indicating your name and position in the signature line at the bottom. Of course, this isn't necessary if it is automatically included in the emails you send.

Some hotels require formal confirmation by e-mail or fax regarding the credit or debit card number that should be used to pay for the booking. In which case, it is essential to ensure that the card details received are stored securely and/or destroyed when no longer needed.

Key Note:

With all reservations made in advance, it can be useful to contact the guest approximately seven days prior to their arrival. This call or email can be used to verify the guest's booking details and arrival time, while at the same time upselling additional extras - room upgrades, dinner, breakfast and so on. This is particularly important for internet bookings, as it is not uncommon for guests to make any number of mistakes while reserving rooms online.

Establishing when each guest plans to arrive is important, in order to allow the hotel to carry out a series of checks.

Pre-Arrival Checks

Every hotel has its own unique policy when it comes to pre-arrival checks, though will to some extent carry them out.

In most instances, hotels formally check scheduled arrivals for the next day, three days ahead and seven days ahead - aka 1/3/7 day checks. Exactly which checks are done (or prioritised) for each of these days will vary from one hotel to the next, but will almost always include a combination of the following:

- **Rates**
 - Has the correct rate been quoted for every guest?
 - Are the reservations on the correct rate code for their stay?
 - Does the rate match the booking confirmation or agreed rate?
 - Does the rate match the room type requested?
- **Deposits**
 - Have advance payments and deposits been collected?
 - Do any deposits or payments need to be taken today?
 - Have the deposits been linked with the guest's booking?
 - Have optional extras (like meals) been taken into account?
- **Guest information**
 - Do you have all the necessary information from the guest?
 - Is the guest a VIP? Do they need any special treatment?
- **Room information**
 - Has the guest been assigned the right type of room? Are the required number of beds available?
- **Additional Requests**
 - Is there anything housekeeping or the food and beverage department needs to know regarding guests' special requests?

These checks will involve ensuring that the basic requirements of the guest have been met and any additional comments/requests have been taken note of. If there is any additional information you need from the customer, it is important to acquire it *before* their arrival. Don't be afraid to make a quick follow-up call or send an e-mail, if there's something you need to check.

It's worth remembering that every check carried out has the potential to streamline, simplify and speed up the resulting check-in process. The last thing you want is to find yourself with a huge queue of customers at reception, only to learn that one or more of them has been allocated entirely the wrong type of room. Or perhaps, had their special requests ignored entirely.

In any case, it's inevitable that you will occasionally encounter guests who claim to have been allocated the wrong type of room, when the room they've been allocated is clearly the room they booked. Or perhaps, they simply *expected* something they should have requested, and are displeased it is unavailable.

When this happens, put yourself in the shoes of the guest and do whatever you can to reach an agreeable resolution. Again - and purely for the benefit of the business - the customer is always right.

Allocating rooms

It's becoming increasingly rare for hotels to allocate rooms on arrival. Doing so has the potential to cause delays and congestion at the check-in desk. It's always possible to switch room allocations around when guests arrive, but the standard practice is to allocate all rooms reserved ahead of time.

However, allocating in advance is only possible when the front desk maintains good communication with the housekeeping department. For example, it's essential that the housekeeping department is made aware of:

- Rooms that need additional beds or cots
- Additional extras requested by guests (or offered for VIPs)
- Occupancy levels - i.e. how busy the hotel will be
- All information on early arrivals and late departures

Allocation Crossover

Allocation crossover occurs when the hotel technically has rooms available, but cannot accommodate certain stays due to the way the rooms have been allocated. This can be particularly problematic in smaller establishments, therefore must be taken into account when allocating rooms.

The example below pertains to a hotel with three double bedrooms, which currently has four reservations over three consecutive days. Each of these reservations has been allocated to one of the hotel's three rooms as follows:

Room Plan 1

	01/01/2018	02/01/2018	03/01/2018
Double Room 1	Jones x 2		
Double Room 2		Andrews x 2	
Double Room 3	Smith x 2		Martin x 2

The reservation system for the hotel would therefore show the following availability:

Availability 1

	01/01/2018	02/01/2018	03/01/2018
Double Rooms	1	1	2

In theory, therefore, a new guest looking to make a reservation for two nights starting 01/01/2018 should be able to do so. Nevertheless, this would not be possible as the Andrews party of two would be occupying the room on 02/01/2018.

In order to solve this issue, the Andrews reservation should be moved into Double Room 3 as follows:

Room Plan 2

	01/01/2018	02/01/2018	03/01/2018
Double Room 1	Jones x 2		
Double Room 2			
Double Room 3	Smith x 2	Andrews x 2	Martin x 2

This now frees up Double Room 2 for at least three consecutive nights, enabling the new booking to be made as follows:

Room Plan 3

	01/01/2012	02/01/2012	03/01/2012
Double Room 1	Jones x 2		
Double Room 2	Johnson x 2		
Double Room 3	Smith x 2	Andrews x 2	Martin x 2

Organizing room allocation to accommodate as many guests as possible can be made particularly difficult by special requests from guests. In this instance, for example, there's every chance the Andrews party specifically requested Double Room 2. They may be a regular guest and particularly like this room. The same could also be true for any of the other guests staying at the hotel.

In which case, it's important to remember that hotels are only available to consider special requests as precisely that...a *request* - not a guarantee. Ultimately, it's down to the hotel to determine whether or not it is appropriate to prioritise the requests and preferences of one guest over another. Or for that matter, to potentially pass up an additional booking, as would be the case in the example above. If it's a VIP with 50 previous stays against a one-off the customer, you might want to show preference to the VIP.

Where special requests cannot be fulfilled by the hotel, it's the job of the receptionist to offer an explanation and ensure the guest is satisfied with the outcome.

Key Note:

There is an easy way to avoid complications....

Remember: If someone is departing the room, someone should be checking into it! This will help avoid allocation crossover situations!

The above information and advice regarding allocation crossover is the same for a 300-bedroom hotel as a smaller three-bed property. Across the board, it illustrates the potential benefits of allocating rooms strategically and doing so in advance.

It's far easier to avoid these kinds of issues ahead of time, rather than attempting to deal with them when faced with a queue of impatient arrivals.

How do you allocate rooms effectively?

Even when rooms are allocated automatically (often the case with advanced hotel software), it's important to check the appropriateness of the allocation by way of:

1. **Room location** – Has the room been allocated in a suitable location within the hotel? Will it be quiet enough for the guests? Have you considered accessibility? How about ensuring guests with multiple room bookings are allocated rooms as close as possible to each other?
2. **Room type booked** – Does the room allocated correspond with the type of room the guest booked? Examples of which could include disabled guest rooms, family rooms, smoking rooms and so on.
3. **Additional beds or cots** – If any additional beds or cots are required, is the room allocated large enough to accommodate them?
4. **VIP status** – For VIPs and general guests of importance, it's worth considering the size and quality of the room allocated. If possible, you could also consider upgrading the guest to a higher standard of room.
5. **Booking requests** – Again, special requests are *only* requests, but should nonetheless be fulfilled where possible. Double check all comments and requests to ensure appropriate allocation.

Once again, all information regarding room allocations and special requests must be clearly communicated with the other hotel departments. Housekeeping will need to know how many people are staying in each room, whether there are any special requests, if anyone plans to check-in early and so on. In addition, the food and beverage department will need to know how many guests to expect in the restaurant and bar that afternoon/evening/morning.

Arrival Day

The reservations have been made, the appropriate rooms have been allocated and the hotel is ready to wow its guests. The next step in the process being to prepare the arrivals list - a templated document automatically produced by the hotel's front desk software.

This report will provide you with a snapshot of all guests scheduled to arrive that day, along with their allocated rooms, special requests and additional comments/information you need to know. Rather than waiting until the guests arrive, it's a good idea to once again check this list of reservations in full, in order to ensure nothing has been forgotten or overlooked.

Group Check-In

Every hotel has its own unique group check-in process, which may differ significantly from one group to the next. Rooms will always be allocated in advance and keys made ready for the group's arrival, while the check-in process will usually take place as follows:

- The group leader may take charge, checking the group in at one desk and handing out keys, forms to sign and so on.
- Each member of the group may have been instructed to check in separately, therefore the process will be the same as checking in any other individual guest.
- All aspects of the check-in process may have already been completed, with the guests' keys and registration cards being placed on a table for collection in the reception area.
- It's also possible that individual members of the group may arrive at completely different times, which can cause complications if *other* member of the group are supposed to be paying on their behalf.

So as to not cause significant delays and complications at check-in, it's a good idea to plan ahead for group arrivals. Consult with the group leader (or the individual who made the reservation) and come to an agreement on how the check-in process will take place. Always ensure they understand your hotel's policies on group bookings and payments ahead of time.

In all instances, however, the importance of ensuring every guest completes their registration card cannot be overstated. It is a legal requirement for hotel proprietors to ensure they have a record of everyone who has arrived and is staying at their hotel at any given time. This is an important health and safety responsibility - you need a complete list of guests on the premises, in the event of an evacuation.

Key Note:

Always double-check with the group leader that they and the rest of the group fully understand your policies and check-in processes. In addition, find out for sure whether the group will be arriving at the same time, or at various different times throughout the day. There's nothing more frustrating than arriving at a hotel mid-afternoon, only to be told that your group leader won't be there to check you in and pay for your room until 10pm.

Individual Check-in

Individual check-in refers to smaller bookings - not necessarily those made by a single person. In fact, if it doesn't qualify as a group booking (usually at least five rooms), it is classified as an individual or standard reservation.

It's important to remember that not every guest arriving at your hotel will be familiar with how the process works. In fact, many will have no clue whatsoever what they're doing. It's therefore important to gauge your approach to that all-important initial contact with this in mind.

Every guest should be greeted as quickly as possible after walking through the door. Once they arrive at the desk, you can proceed with a friendly "How may I help you?" or "Are you checking in?". It may be blatantly obvious that they intend to stay in your hotel (carrying cases in from a car or taxi outside), but there's also every possibility they haven't yet made a reservation.

Hence, asking if they are checking in isn't nearly as unnecessary as some say.

Some guests will arrive with printed confirmation of their booking, or a digital copy on a smartphone. These days, it isn't typically mandatory for hotel customers to provide reservation numbers when checking in. Simply by giving you their name and a form of ID, you'll be able to find them in your system. At which point, you can confirm the details of their stay, before checking them in:

"OK, so we have you booked in for two nights on a bed and breakfast basis, two guests in a double room. Is that correct?"

Assuming everything is correct, you can go ahead with the check-in procedure. This typically involves printing a registration card, which must be completed (or simply signed) by the guest. Unless payment has been taken in advance, this may also be the time to take payment for the room. Your hotel may also allow guests to pay on departure, if preferred.

Key Note:

In jurisdictions like the United Kingdom, it is a legal requirement to take full passport details from international guests. This may involve simply making a note of their name, their passport number and its expiration date, or taking a full photocopy of the photo page. Some guests are reluctant to provide such forms of ID (or might not have them available), but it is a legal requirement to request them upon check-in.

Check-in Procedure

The basic process of checking in a guest looks a little like this:

1. Greeting (good afternoon etc.)
2. Confirm the details of the reservation with the customer and ask if they want anything additional, such as breakfast or dinner.
3. Hand the guest a registration card and ask them to complete it as required. It may also be the policy of your hotel to request ID at this stage.
4. If your hotel operates with a payment upon arrival policy, this will also be the time to take payment for the room and any extras.
5. Ask the guest if it is their first time staying at your hotel:
 - a. If this is their first visit, you'll want to provide them with plenty of information regarding the location of the restaurant, breakfast times, check out times, how to contact reception and so on. Give them your name and tell them to contact you if there is anything they need.
 - b. If they have stayed a couple of times before, you don't need to go into quite so much detail. Remind them of breakfast times and tell them to contact you if they have any questions.
 - c. If they are a regular guest, you can skip most of this basic information and simply tell them to call reception anytime if they need anything.
6. If there are any special events taking place or offers the guest might be interested in, this is also the time to present them. Examples of which may include special offers in the restaurant, or if your hotel will be screening any major sporting events on the big screen.
7. When handing over guests' keys (or keycards), provide a few simple directions to their room. However, under no circumstances should you broadcast the room number of the guest out loud when there are other people within earshot. Their room number is confidential information and should be treated as such.
8. Ask the guest if they would like any help transporting their luggage to their room.
9. Close the communication with a friendly sign off, something along the lines of "Have a great stay and let me know if there's anything else you need."

It sounds like a lot on paper, but from start to finish this entire sequence of steps takes no longer than a couple of minutes to complete. It's simply a case of getting into the swing of things, after which the whole thing becomes instinctive.

What's more, every guest check-in is a unique event, so you need to be prepared for anything. With regular guests you've met dozens of times, you'll be able to complete the check-in process in a matter of seconds with just a few personal pleasantries. In other instances, you'll find guests inherent on asking dozens of questions and wanting to know *everything* there is to know about your hotel. In which case, you could spend quite some time chatting with them...and under no circumstances should you hurry them along.

The guest you are conversing with at the desk is always *the* most important guest in the world to you, no matter how awkward they may be!

Post Check-In

By the time a guest has checked in, they are already well into their guest journey. It's important to remember that just because a guest has successfully checked in and is satisfied with everything so far, you cannot then simply forget about them. If they made any special requests during check-in, now's the time to ensure they are actioned, or passed on to the relevant parties. In addition, it's also good practice to contact guests approximately 10-15 minutes after checking in, in order to check everything is OK with their room and to ask if there is anything else they need.

Of course, if you have a queue of people waiting to check in, it might not be possible to make these follow-up calls right away. Nor may you have the time to action all of their special requests immediately. That is why it is of the utmost importance to ensure you have sufficient staff manning the front desk to cope with check-in requirements. Consider how many guests are scheduled to check in during any given shift and always ask for help when needed.

If the guest has requested anything like a newspaper in the morning, a taxi, a wakeup call or a restaurant reservation, try to organize them as quickly as possible to avoid forgetting. If you don't have time to organize them right away, make a clear note of their requests and place it somewhere visible. When a guest has declined additional services like meals and restaurant reservations, do not repeatedly attempt to upsell your hotel's services to them. Rather than gaining their approval, you're far more likely to irritate and annoy them.

In some instances, you may be aware of minor maintenance issues in guest bedrooms that are yet to be addressed. The temptation being not to mention these issues and hope that the guest a) doesn't notice them or b) doesn't care. However, it's polite and professional to ensure that any relevant maintenance issue whatsoever is brought to the guest's attention. Even if it is to simply inform them that you know of the issue and intend to resolve it as soon as possible, it is far better than not telling them at all.

Once the guest is settled in the hotel and happy with their experience so far, it's a case of maintaining the same standards throughout their stay. Depending on how long a guest is staying with you, there's every chance you could encounter them dozens or even hundreds of times before they check out. Each of these encounters representing an important opportunity to enhance their experience and present a positive picture of the hotel you work for.

Whether answering calls from rooms or passing guests in hallways, it's important to know how to conduct yourself and to leave a positive impression behind.

Engaging the guest

The very best hotel receptionists are good communicators, who excel in the art of relevant small talk. This means carefully considering the reason any given guest is staying at your hotel at that time, in order to gauge your subsequent conversations and interactions accordingly. They may be staying for business purposes, to visit family in the area, to attend a concert and so on. All of which could provide good grounds for a conversation, or casual interaction.

Wedding Guests:

Most wedding guests are more than happy to talk about their arrangements and how proud they are of the whole thing. You could ask about their chosen venue for the wedding, how the preparations are coming along and perhaps throw in a story or two from your own wedding day, if applicable.

Leisure Guests:

With leisure guests, you've every opportunity to demonstrate your local knowledge. Ask your guests what they plan to do and how they plan to spend their time, providing your own suggestions as to places to visit and attractions to check out. They'll appreciate and value any local knowledge you share with them.

Business Guests:

Some business guests appreciate nothing more than peace, quiet and being left alone. Others are horrendously bored following mundane meetings and are crying out for pleasant conversation. It's up to you to read the verbal and visual cues of the business guests you encounter, in order to determine whether they are feeling sociable or would prefer to be left alone. If you get the idea they don't want to talk right now, take the hint!

Airport Guests:

Guests travelling to or from airports also provide the ideal opportunity to share local knowledge. If they haven't already organized transfers, you can offer to take care of the arrangements on their behalf. If they're travelling for leisure purposes, you can chat about their destination and wish them a good time.

Guidelines

Every interaction provides the opportunity to further the guest journey and build a positive impression. Conversations and interactions vary from one guest and situation to the next, but there are some rules that apply across all such encounters:

1. Under no circumstances should anything be said that could be interpreted as offensive. The use of vulgar language must be avoided at all times, along with derogatory statements regarding sexuality, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion and so on.
2. Make sure you never cross the line when chatting with guests. There are professional boundaries to be aware of - inappropriate behaviour such as flirting or getting too personal with guests in any way is considered unprofessional.
3. Learn to read the body language of guests and respond accordingly. Again, some guests enjoy nothing more than a good chat, while others would simply prefer to be left alone.
4. If a guest makes a derogatory or offensive remark of any kind, it's wise to avoid expressing agreement - even if you do happen to agree with them. It could come back to haunt you at a later date.

Think of it like this - anything you say to any of your guests at any time could be repeated to both your peers and your superiors. It could even appear online in the form of a quotation in a customer review. Hence, if it isn't something you would like to see publicised, it isn't something you should be saying.

It's therefore a case of learning how to be as neutral as possible in your interactions with guests. Not to such an extent as to become robotic, but rather in a manner that sidesteps strong opinions and potentially offensive/controversial remarks.

Dealing with offensive remarks

Of course, you could (and probably will) find yourself in a situation where a guest makes offensive remarks while conversing with you. This puts you in a rather awkward situation, as you don't want to offend the guest, but you also cannot continue the conversation. In which case, you must remember that you are always within your rights to request that the conversation be brought to a halt.

"I'm sorry but I really can't comment on that."

"To be honest I find those comments a little offensive."

"I'm sorry but do you mind if we change the topic, I really can't have this conversation at work."

In all instances, you're not specifically throwing any accusations at the guest. You're simply stating that you're struggling with the topic of conversation and would prefer to change the subject.

The good news being that situations like these are comparatively rare - most guests you encounter will be perfectly pleasant to deal with. Nevertheless, you need to prepare yourself for a variety of scenarios, which may present themselves from time to time. Perhaps the most common examples of which include:

1. A guest talking to you refers to another guest in a homophobic or racist manner
2. A guest requests not to be served or dealt with by anyone who is non-British
3. A guest insults you personally in an offensive manner

It's worth considering ahead of time exactly how you would react in each of these three scenarios. Would you be able to keep a cool head and stay professional? Would you immediately become defensive and agitated?

There are no simple one-size-fits-all solutions for dealing with difficult guests and situations, but each of the scenarios above could be responded to as follows:

1. Tell the customer that you cannot and will not comment on the subject. Simply state that you clearly have different views on the subject, so it's best to simply change the topic entirely.
2. Inform the guest that a significant proportion of the staff working within your hotel come from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. It will therefore be impossible to fulfil such a request, as to do so would constitute discrimination and would represent a breach of official workplace codes of conduct. In such instances, it is also important to inform the duty manager of the situation immediately, in case the individual in question shows disrespect to the staff they encounter.

3. When a guest becomes offensive or abusive with you personally, you have several options to choose from. You can simply state clearly and calmly “I’m sorry but I’m not willing to continue this conversation” and walk away. You can also call a more senior member of staff to assist you, or you can inform the guest that you will call security if they do not leave the desk immediately. Always remember that you have the right to safe and non-abusive working conditions, therefore can request that any guest be removed from your hotel for disrespectful behaviour at any time.

Once again, you’ll find the specifics and dynamics of each guest encounter are completely different from one to the next. Dealing with everyday guests can be an absolute pleasure and is one of the most enjoyable part of the job. Dealing with difficult customers, by contrast, is one of the most challenging aspects of working in a hospitality environment.

Nevertheless, it’s important to remember that at the first sign of hostility, you are under no obligation whatsoever to continue the conversation, or to tolerate the behaviour of an abusive guest. If you don’t have on-site security, you can always call the police if necessary.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Kensington Press, (2017), Visitors Guest Book.*