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PRO-ECOLOGICAL HOTEL POLICIES AS ASSESSED BY GUESTS

Abstract: The purpose of the research was to learn whether pro-ecological policies are important to guests staying at hotels. It is based on a survey of 274 guests staying at 23 hotels in Poland. Research has shown that 32.1% of survey participants consider pro-ecological issues when choosing a stay at a hotel. Close to 62% of guests believe that hotels should pursue such initiatives which are believed to yield environmental benefits, reductions in hotel operating costs, promotional effects, and a positive impact on a hotel's image. More than 35% of guests would be willing to pay more for a stay at a hotel that pursues environmentally-friendly policies. It is important to emphasize that pro-ecological activity is not used in hotel rankings in Poland.

Keywords: tourism, service, hospitality, environmental attitudes, Poland.

1. INTRODUCTION

The hotel industry is one of the most important branches of the tourist industry. As the industry expands and generates ever larger revenues, it is also increasingly contributing to the destruction of the natural environment. As environmental awareness increases in the 21st century, it has become apparent that it is necessary to counteract negative human impacts on the natural environment in a more organized manner. International organizations have begun to address this issue (e.g. *The U Thant report, Agenda 21*) via a variety of concerted policies at local and national level. The aim of these actions has been to identify key environmental problems and either fully stop, or at least reduce the rate of, environmental damage due to human impact.

1.1. ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

The hotel industry is also paying attention to trends in environmental protection. Many international hotel chains have created sustainable development plans based on pro-ecological programs, which are now often

incorporated into operating strategies. The changing attitudes of major corporate chains are a result of many different factors including an increasing number of environmental laws and regulations, social responsibility issues, real fears of a shortage of vital natural resources, the increasing environmental awareness of vital stakeholders such as hotel guests, a growing ethical awareness among major investors (GOLDSTEIN & PRIMLANI 2012), and the effect of the news media informing society of the negative impacts of the hotel industry on the natural environment (JONES, HILLIER & COMFORT 2013). Pro-ecological programs created by hotels, and especially corporate chains, are often associated with a desire to become more competitive and build a strong brand that would help stand out in a competitive marketplace. This approach is often not appreciated, especially among academic researchers who view such programs as a cynical ploy, often describing them as 'greenwash' designed to appeal to key consumers who are increasingly concerned about the environmental and the social impact of business activity, while effectively ignoring fundamental environmental and social concerns. As such, many corporate commitments to sustainability

may be described as 'green consumerism', which 'has failed to induce significant inroads into the unsustainable nature of consumption and production' (HAMILTON 2009, KAHN 2010).

The academic literature and research by market experts focuses mainly on the benefits and measurable effects of such programs as well as their evaluation from a management perspective. One example is a study by P. BOHDANOWICZ (2006) who studied managers at European hotels; the study found that the level of environmental awareness was not sufficiently high to introduce significant changes, although this depends on the country and corporate policy (BOHDANOWICZ 2006). He analyzed managers in the hotel sector in Poland, Sweden, and Croatia, and discovered that most managers (84.7% of 124 surveys) claim to take part in pro-ecological programs mainly due to the possibility of lowering operating costs. Studies on hotel management views are also available for other countries: Ghana - I. MENSAH (2014); Iran - A. ARMIANIAN (2012); Great Britain - T. KNOWLES *et al.* (2003); Turkey - N. ERDOGAN & E. BARIS (2007). M.J.A. GIL, J.B. JIMÉNEZ & J.J.C. LORENTE (2001) studied the Spanish hotel industry and the various factors that determine the implementation of new environmental management practices; the factors studied included facility age and size, chain affiliation, stakeholder environmental pressures, and the use of operations management techniques. Environmental performance in the hotel sector was discussed by J.R. OREJA-RODRIGUEZ & Y. ARMAS-CRUZ (2012) in the Western Canary Islands and by Z.B. YUSOL & M. JAMALUDIN (2013) in the Malaysian green hospitality industry. While these are very important, it is also quite important to look at the same issue from a customer perspective.

1.2. ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS OF CONSUMERS

The modern consumer is increasingly ecologically aware, which is manifested by correlations between elements such as an understanding of environmental threats and means of protection, adherence to values promoting pro-ecological lifestyles, and a human impact that is actually friendly towards the natural environment (KIEŁCZEWSKI 2001). Many modern consumers believe that the quality of life is more important than the standard of living. While the academic literature does indicate that ecological criteria are not the most important determinants of vacation destination choice for most tourists (MAJEWSKI 2008), it is difficult not to note a growing interest on the part of society in problems associated with environmental protection. The tourist as consumer is beginning to understand that actions - both intended and based on neglect - are directly linked with other areas of

economic and social life (NIEMCZYK 2008). According to M. JEDLIŃSKA (2004), while ecological considerations may come into conflict with others in the service purchasing decision process, this does not necessarily have to happen (JEDLIŃSKA 2004). It all depends on the strength of ecological awareness and how it affects the other main factors related to issues such as convenience or availability (NIEZGODA 2010).

The above model shows that as ecological awareness grows, so does the willingness to make sacrifices in the name of ecological views as well as the level of interest in ecological issues in general. The process of becoming a 'greener' consumer is time-consuming and depends on increases in ecological awareness as well as a desire to change one's lifestyle to reflect more ecological attitudes (ZAREMBA 1997). The level of understanding of ecology in Poland, and the purchasing decisions associated with it, is still lacking. This has been shown by studies where only 47% of Polish consumers were found to have heard of the concept of sustainable development (ZALEJSKI & FASZCZEWSKA 2012). This fact is very important in that this concept applies to the entire economy including tourism and the hotel industry. The issue of customer views on hotel chains in the context of environmental issues is a growing field of inquiry, as evidenced by newer research (de GROSBOIS 2012, GOLDSTEIN, CIALDINI & GRISKEVICIUS 2008, LEE *et al.* 2010, KANG *et al.* 2012, HAN & KIM 2010, MANAKTOLA & JAUHARI 2007, RAHMAN, REYNOLDS & SVAREN 2012, ROBINOT & GIANNELLONI 2010, KOSTAKIS & SARDIANOU 2012). However, the quantity of research on this issue remains rather low. This paper is designed to fill a void in this area of inquiry, which is particularly important in the context of constantly increasing social awareness of ecological issues.

2. DATA AND METHODS

The purpose of the study is to learn whether pro-ecological policies are important to hotel guests in Poland. The following research procedure was followed:

- review of the research literature,
- preparation of a survey questionnaire,
- hotel guests were asked to take part in the survey,
- raw survey results were processed for further analysis.

A survey was conducted between March and June of 2015 and was designed to assess to what degree hotel guests value the pro-ecological policies of hotels. In this study, guests at 23 hotels were asked to participate in an opinion survey. The studied hotels

were selected based on tourist volume with the largest number in Małopolska Province in southern Poland (13%). Most were three- and four-star, which have the most hotel rooms. Each hotel received 15 survey questionnaires. The survey was prepared in the form of a questionnaire both with prepared and free response options consisting of 25 questions, and a total of 274 hotel guests were asked for their opinions. Participants were between 20 and 67 years of age and most had had a university education. The share of surveyed men (53.5%) was slightly higher than that for women. Close to half of the participants per hotel identified their purpose of travel as business. Recreation and sightseeing ranked second and third, while health and other reasons were also listed. A large proportion stay at hotels several times per year (34.3%). Statistical analysis was then conducted in the context of the primary purpose of the study. In cases where this concerned the meaning of selected elements, the frequency of each type of response was analyzed. The statistical significance of differences in frequency were tested using Pearson's Chi Square Test χ^2 . Conclusions were then formulated based on the statistical analysis.

3. RESULTS

Consumers taking part in the survey indicated that selecting a hotel in Poland is based on three main criteria: (1) service quality (65.3), (2) hotel location (61.7%), (3) price per night (59.5%). A relatively large proportion did note that a hotel's reputation is a factor in the selection process. Other factors mentioned less often included a hotel's brand identity and tourist's familiarity with a given hotel. When asked about the role of pro-ecological activity at hotels, 32% stated that such activity is important to them (Table 1) while the remaining 68% indicated that a hotel's pro-ecological stance is not.

Despite earlier responses, most guests (62%) believe that hotels should pursue some type of pro-ecological activity. The following were usually identified: (1) segregation of garbage, (2) energy efficiency in the form of energy-efficient light bulbs as well as magnetic cards and solar panels. Some noted efficient water usage as well as the lack of a need to provide fresh towels and linen everyday. The use of a shower was also proposed as an alternative to the use of a bathtub. Healthy hotel food was also mentioned. Women were found to be more likely than men to favor pro-ecological activity, but this difference lies on the boundary of statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 3.649, p = 0.0561$). Education is a factor in the belief that hotels should pursue pro-ecological activity ($\chi^2 = 12.607, p = 0.0205$) as

guests with a vocational education are less likely to note the need for pro-ecological activity. Such activity was noted by 31% of participants at the hotels they were staying. Close to 14% did not observe such activity while more than 55% did not know the answer to this question or chose not to respond.

Table 1. Compilation of answers

Do guests consider pro-ecological policies when choosing a hotel?		
Yes	88	32.1
No	186	67.9
In the opinion of guests, should hotels pursue pro-ecological policies?		
Yes	169	61.7
No	102	37.2
No answer	3	1.1
Would guests be willing to pay more for a hotel stay knowing that it pursues pro-ecological policies?		
Yes	97	35.4
No	176	64.2
No answer	1	0.4
Do survey participants pursue any pro-ecological policies in their everyday lives?		
Yes	185	67.5
No	87	31.8
No answer	2	0.7

Source: authors.

Survey participants who did notice environmentally-friendly features at their hotels usually mentioned the segregation of garbage and energy efficiency, usually via the use of energy-efficient light bulbs and magnetic cards. The principal benefits were judged to be environmental protection including less air pollution, reduced water usage, and less energy consumption. Other benefits included lower operating costs, improvement in hotel reputation, and promotional effects. Ten noted that a pro-ecological stance helps shape ecological awareness among people in general and serves as a good example while seven listed customer satisfaction as a benefit, along with increased competitiveness in the hotel sector. Fewer participants linked pro-ecological activity with healthy lifestyles. A few mentioned the ability to earn an ecological certificate as a benefit of the pro-ecological policies pursued. Most participants (64%) were found to be unwilling to pay more for hotels that would choose to pursue such programs or procedures but more than 35% would be willing to pay more (Table 1). The study also made it possible to assess the degree of ecological awareness of its participants. A substantial percentage (67.5%) claimed to engage in environmentally-friendly behavior in their everyday lives (Table 1). For the most part, this consists of the segregation of garbage. Individuals who engage

in such behavior in their everyday lives were more likely to note if a hotel engages in pro-ecological activity ($\chi^2 = 10.350, p = 0.0013$).

5. DISCUSSION

An increasing number of hotels in Poland are pursuing a variety of pro-ecological procedures. It is likely that such procedures or programs will increase due to rising customer expectations, although primary hotel selection factors (quality of service, location, and price per night) remain the same. A pro-ecological stance affected the decision of 32% of participants. According to research by Samsung Electronics Europe, almost one third (29%) who make their hotel reservations using popular internet websites in Europe are highly likely to choose a hotel with an 'eco-friendly' posture (European Travellers' Eco-Expectations Unveiled in Pan-European Study by Samsung 2009). Other research by hotel operators themselves suggest that pro-ecological support is even higher. In 2010 Starwood Hotels and Resorts made public new survey data on the ecological preferences of guests staying at six Starwood hotels in Poland – Sheraton, Westin, and Le Meridien Bristol brands. The research showed that 52% of guests may consider a hotel's pro-ecological initiatives when selecting a hotel (*Dziennik turystyczny* 2010). The study shows that 65% of all European hotel guests believe that all hotels should install water-saving toilets, while 54% state that all hotels should obtain their energy from renewable sources such as solar panels and wind turbines, and almost half (48%) suggest that hotels should use more energy-efficient appliances (European Travellers' Eco-Expectations Unveiled in Pan-European Study by Samsung 2009). Pro-ecological ideas yield benefits such as environmental protection, lower facility operating costs, improved hotel image and promotional opportunities. These benefits were noted by hotel guests in Poland, however, research in Podkarpackie Province in southern Poland has shown that hotel owners in the region appear to have not yet noticed the link between pro-ecological activity and the ability to use this fact in marketing campaigns (KRUPA & DEC 2012). Other research (*Ekologia w turystyce...* 2011) conducted in Silesia in southern Poland by the Institute of Tourism in Warsaw indicates that this pattern largely holds true. It does identify benefits of ecological policies, yet, it also notes that there exist a large number of tourists in Poland who remain indifferent towards the natural environment (*Ekologia w turystyce...* 2011). Meanwhile, a large proportion did not observe any pro-ecological activity at hotels. It appears that more effort is needed in order to inform hotel guests of such initiatives, and

it is important to emphasize that pro-ecological activity is not used to rank hotels in Poland. However, some hotels pursue pro-ecological policies in line with their international parent company. Research has shown that it is important to promote hotels using ecological certificates. In the present study, few participants raised the issue of ecological certificates. In addition, some individuals expressed doubts in the survey's comments section about the need for pro-ecological activity by hotels. While there were just a few such comments, this may be a signal that more education is needed to enlighten society about ecological issues. Researchers also noted the relationship between selected demographic characteristics and attitudes towards pro-ecological activity at hotels. Research has shown that women more often than men believe that hotels should pursue some type of pro-ecological activity, although the difference is on the boundary of statistical significance. Research by T.B. CHEN & L.T. CHAI (2010) indicates that there is no significant difference between the sexes in terms of ecological attitudes. On the other hand, new research by I. KOSTAKIS & E. SARDIANOU (2012) indicates that Greek men are more likely than Greek women to pay extra money for accommodation in a 'green' hotel. This suggests that more research is needed.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Consumers increasingly expect companies to become sensitive to ecological issues. In turn, many companies market themselves as engaged in the protection of the natural environment. A hotel must balance its ability to serve tourists, its ability to protect the natural environment, and its ability to compete in the market. In order to accomplish this balance, comprehensive programs are needed and the direction of pro-ecological policies must be established. The training of hotel staff is a desirable first step, as is the designation of a person responsible for pro-ecological policies. Research has shown that while some hotel guests are interested in pro-ecological activity and notice it at the hotels they are staying, more than half do not. This is why hotel owners and managers need to create more effective information strategies concerning pro-ecological activity as well as taking the time to encourage guests to behave in an environmentally-friendly manner. Some guests already admit doing something for the environment in their daily lives. In effect, the hotel industry may play a key role in the propagation of environmentally-friendly lifestyles and the ecological education of its guests. The hotel industry is a pillar of the tourist industry and its role in information dissemination is strong. It is in a good position to

help educate its guests as well as provide a good example to other branches of the economy.

In addition to the broad spectrum of issues analyzed in this paper, there are also some basic limitations. First, the study focused on hotels and omitted all other types of accommodation. Hence, their inclusion may help expand our knowledge base on how travelers perceive pro-ecological activity. Second, the study was limited to Poland where hotel pro-ecological activity remains limited. This issue needs to be explored in the context of other countries in Europe and elsewhere. Third, all the research was done between March and June. It would be helpful to expand the study to cover the entire year.

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Article received:
15 July 2017
Accepted:
19 October 2017