



Do ISO 9001-certified hotels get a higher customer rating than non-certified ones?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 February 2015

Received in revised form 14 June 2015

Accepted 18 August 2015

Keywords:

ISO 9001

Business performance

Customer satisfaction

Empirical research

Hotel industry

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes whether customers of hotels that are certified for quality management are more satisfied than the customers of non-certified hotels of similar category and location. An empirical study was carried out with a total sample of 186,769 guest ratings of 828 Spanish and Italian hotels. The findings show that quality certified hotels do not receive a statistically significantly better evaluation or rating from their customers. Indeed, the statistical analysis carried out confirms that certified hotels have a statistically significantly lower rating in terms of value for money than non-certified hotels. The implications for managers, customers and other stakeholders are discussed. The article also discusses the potential dangers in inferring directly that quality certification in the hospitality industry leads to superior customer satisfaction as is frequently suggested in both the practitioner and the scholarly literature in the field.

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1. Introduction

Third party certification schemes are attracting more and more interest in the hospitality industry. Acquiring this type of certification is often discussed in the hospitality literature as an additional marketing or public relations tool to attract customers (Benavides-Chicón and Ortega, 2014; Geerts, 2014). In the hospitality industry, ISO 9001 is the main global standard for quality management, a certifiable standard that has been strongly promoted in all types of industry and all over the world (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2013; Cao and Prakash, 2011; Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2013).

In the scholarly literature there is a plethora of research articles that analyze the comparative impact of the ISO 9001 standard on the improvement of the business and operational performance of certified companies compared with those that are not certified (for a recent review see Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2013). This is also the case for some works that focus on the hospitality

industry, as the specialized literature of the field has concentrated on whether quality certification has an impact on performance using factual data, perceptual data and a combination of both (e.g. Tarí et al., 2009; Ingram and Daskalakis, 1999; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2012). Nevertheless, despite the fact that the ISO 9001 standard to implement and certificate Quality Management Systems (QMSs) has been adopted by more than one million organizations across the world (International Organization for Standardization, 2013), the way it is perceived by end consumers or customers of services remains largely unexplored. Surprisingly, there is a lack of research that analyzes the comparative impact of this standard in improving the customers' level of satisfaction with certified companies. There is a particular lack of empirical studies based on the evaluations or ratings of customers of certified companies in comparison with non-certified companies.

Recent studies underline the fact that customers' on-line evaluations or ratings play a key role in the hospitality industry (Xie et al., 2014). More specifically, on-line hotel reviews are claimed to provide comparative and benchmarking insights about customer satisfaction (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Zhou et al., 2014). Nevertheless, as far as we know, this source of information has not yet been used to analyze whether customers of ISO 9001 certified hotels are more satisfied than the customers of non-certified hotels.

Taking into account this gap in the literature, the present study aims to make a contribution to the specific case of organizations belonging to the hotel industry. In order to do that, this study analyzes whether customers of ISO 9001 certified Spanish and Italian

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hotels are more satisfied than the customers of comparable non-certified hotels of similar category and location. We focus on the Spanish and Italian hotel industry for three reasons. First, the hotel industry is one of the sectors of service activity that has generated most interest in ISO 9001 certification (Tarí et al., 2010; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2012; Tarí et al., 2012; Psomas, 2013). Second, ISO 9001 certified hotels use certification to try to reassure consumers about the quality of the services they offer (Perrigot, 2006). Third, Spain and Italy are two of the most important countries in the world in terms of both the relative importance of their hotel industry (Cortes-Jimenez and Pulina, 2010; Seetaram et al., 2013) and their certification intensity for ISO 9001 (Marimon et al., 2010).

The remainder of this paper is arranged as follows. Following this introduction, the paper presents the theoretical framework and research hypotheses. The next section describes the methodology adopted. The results of the quantitative fieldwork carried out are then summarized. The paper concludes with a summary discussion, the contributions of the study and the implications for further research.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

In their recent integrative review, Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral (2013) proposed a framework built up of the main approaches to the academic study of quality certification. From the general perspective of decentralized institutions and signaling models, quality certification has been claimed to reduce information asymmetries in markets, as certification signals superior performance (e.g. King et al., 2005; Potoski and Prakash, 2009). From this perspective, the value of ISO 9001 in signaling the superior level of service quality of a certified organization has been extensively examined in both the scholarly (e.g. Rusjan and Alic, 2010; Cao and Prakash, 2011; Han et al., 2012) and the practitioner (e.g. Calvert, 2012; Tricker, 2013) literature.

From a more technical perspective – frequently connected to Operation Management and Quality Management – a great deal of research has focused on measuring the impact and benefits of certification, such as ISO 9001, for quality management (Benner and Veloso, 2008 and Sampaio et al., 2009; Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2013). These studies generally use quantitative surveys, which have played a dominant role in the literature on ISO 9001. For example, the benefits of ISO 9001 implementation have been widely surveyed. Through such surveys, ISO 9001 adoption has been associated with superior productivity and effectiveness (Douglas and Glen, 2000; Jang and Lin, 2008), customer satisfaction (Moatazed-Keivani et al., 1999; González-Torre et al., 2001), employee motivation (Kunnanatt, 2007; Santos and Escanciano, 2002), and a range of other outcomes.

Nevertheless, the benefits of ISO 9001 certification have been questioned by the critical literature on this standard. This critical literature has highlighted the cost and bureaucracy associated with certification, the lack of internalization of the standard, its failure to improve quality management substantially and its use as a sort of organizational qualification, primarily intended to improve corporate image rather than to improve internal effectiveness (Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2014; Kumar and Balakrishnan, 2011; Boiral, 2003, 2012a, 2012b; Christmann and Taylor, 2006). Although this critical literature has been supported by various quantitative and qualitative studies, the vast majority of research in this area remains quite optimistic about the positive impact of ISO 9001. In a systematic review on ISO 9001 and organizational effectiveness based on 111 empirical papers, Boiral (2012a) showed that more than 80% of studies found significant benefits. Nevertheless, this systematic review also highlighted important biases shared by most mainstream studies. Those studies remain essentially focused

on self-reporting measurements on conventional indicators and tend to overlook criteria of ineffectiveness, such as the superficial integration of the standard, the lack of internalization and the costs of certification.

Generally speaking, most surveys of the impact of ISO 9001 are based on the perceptions of managers who are supposed to have taken part in the implementation process of this standard. Although perceptual measures are often used in the empirical management literature and are considered to satisfy reliability and validity requirements (Ketokivi and Schroeder, 2004), the results of these surveys tend to be influenced by the self-reporting and social desirability bias related to the position of respondents (Heras et al., 2002; Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2013; Arnold and Feldman, 1981). Moreover, reverse causality bias could be a problem, since the outcomes of the adoption of ISO 9001 may influence the perception of its drivers (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2011).

In order to overcome this type of bias, some studies have tried to shed light on the impact of ISO 9001 on performance based on what the authors describe as “more objective data” about the companies, taken from existing records such as commercial databases containing economic and financial information (Häversjö, 2000; Heras et al., 2002; Dick et al., 2008; Wayhan and Balderson, 2007; Corbett et al., 2005; Benner and Veloso, 2008; Martínez-Costa et al., 2008). The results of these studies are mixed, but in a majority of studies a significant positive relationship is found between the adoption of ISO 9001 and a company’s performance. Nevertheless, although these variables have the advantage of avoiding respondent bias, it is also clear that many other concerns have to be taken into account, such as the need to control for unobserved heterogeneity and the influence of treatment-effects compared with selection-effects and reverse-causality bias, as better performing companies generally have more resources to implement this type of standard (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2011).

As emphasized by Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral (2013), further critical and rigorous empirical studies are necessary in order to analyze the real perceptions of the various stakeholders (consumers, managers, suppliers, intermediary clients, workers, public administrations, etc.) regarding the adoption of ISO 9001 and its effects. As previously stated, there is a lack of work that sheds light on the comparative impact of ISO 9001 in improving the level of satisfaction of final customers of certified companies, especially and specifically a lack of empirical studies based on the evaluations or ratings of the final customers of certified and non-certified companies. And this kind of study is especially important in the service sector as the way ISO 9001 is perceived by final consumers or customers of services remains largely unexplored.

In the hotel industry the adoption of certification for Quality Management practices have been extensively studied (for recent reviews see Tarí et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2012). Nevertheless, as shown in Table 1, the empirical work that analyzes the impact of ISO 9001 in the hotel industry has not been prolific.

As shown in this Table 1, overall the results are mixed, but, as in the general literature on ISO 9001, a majority of studies finds a significant positive relationship between the adoption of the standard and the company’s performance (e.g. the hotel’s image, customer satisfaction). In these cases the surveys were also carried out based on the perceptions of managers who are presumed to have taken part in the implementation process of ISO 9001. In such cases the aforementioned biases may be directly relevant. An alternative, to avoid these biases, could be to use customer ratings that report the quality of service received by final customers at hotels. Generally speaking, although the impact of on-line user reviews and ratings in the hotel industry is increasingly emphasized in the scholarly literature (Chaves et al., 2012; Browning et al., 2013), those reviews and ratings have not been used to evaluate whether ISO

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