Giving offense and making amends: How hotel management attempts to manage rapport with dissatisfied customers

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Abstract

Information about the quality of the accommodation services provided by hotels in different cities across the globe can now be conveniently obtained by accessing travelers' reviews posted on various travel websites such as TripAdvisor, Orbitz, and Expedia. These reviews, especially negative ones, can have serious impact on the hotels concerned whose reputation and business are at stake. Hotel management thus needs to address negative comments with an effective response, termed review response genre in this study, to achieve service recovery. Drawing upon the construct of rapport as the analytical framework, this paper focuses particularly on the ways the review response genre serves this communicative purpose while responding to unjust negative comments. It is found that hotel management deals with such comments with denials of the problems mentioned in the comments and attempts to enhance rapport with the dissatisfied customers. The findings should be of practical significance to hotels and the practitioners responsible for writing review responses.
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1. Introduction

The intangible nature of hotel accommodation services renders pre-trial evaluation of the services by potential travelers impossible (Mazzarol et al., 2007). These travelers used to rely on tangible information like the promotional materials provided by hotels through their leaflets and websites, and word-of-mouth comments by previous customers of the hotels. However, with the increasing popularity of e-tourism (Buhalis, 2003) and the wide spread of information technologies in the past two decades, potential travelers can now resort to travel websites for information about the quality of hotel accommodation services (Buhalis and Lawb, 2008). Customer-generated travel information obtained from travel websites like TripAdvisor, Orbitz, and Expedia is widely used as it is regarded as critical, up-to-date, reliable, and trustworthy (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Levy et al., 2013). These websites cater to the needs of both travelers and accommodation services providers. For travelers, these websites provide a platform on which they can conveniently and freely evaluate and comment on the hotel accommodation services they have purchased. For example, they can rate the services as Excellent, Very Good, Average, Poor, or Terrible, and write a positive or negative review of the services. Potential travelers can then make better informed decisions after getting such information and learning the first-hand experience of other travelers who have purchased and used the services (O'Connor, 2010; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

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For service providers, these websites provide them with a channel through which they can gather and monitor the customers' views on the quality of the services they provide (O'Connor, 2010), make available a new channel of communication with prospective customers (Litvin and Hoffman, 2012), and restore the damaged reputation caused by the negative comments (Litvin and Hoffman, 2012; Looker et al., 2007; O'Connor, 2010). The last two options are possible since the websites allow the hotels to respond directly to the reviewers' comments. In other words, travel websites actually provide a platform on which customers and providers of travel accommodation services can interact in such a way that customers can evaluate and comment and providers can monitor and amend.

While prospective customers of hotel accommodation services will find both positive and negative reviews useful during the planning stage of their trips, they are usually influenced to a larger extent by the negative ones (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011). Negative reviews include comments or complaints about such aspects as quality and variety of food, cleanliness of guest rooms, level of guest service, location, and transport to and from the hotel (Vásquez, 2011; Zheng et al., 2009). As these reviews are posted on travel websites with remarkable popularity (e.g. TripAdvisor recorded 350 million monthly visitors in 2015), the effect of the negative reviews is thus potentially significant and far-reaching (Vásquez, 2011). The magnitude of such effect, together with the opportunity for the hotel to reach prospective customers and to amend its relationship with dissatisfied customers, make the response hotel management gives a high-stake genre, termed review response genre in the present study. It can regain customer confidence (Fornell et al., 1996), and increase customer satisfaction (Sparks and Fredline, 2007) and repurchase intention (Davidow, 2003; Yavas et al., 2004). Notwithstanding its value and importance, this genre has not yet received adequate research attention (Leung et al., 2013; Park and Allen, 2013; Sparks and Bradley, 2014). Previous research into this genre has two main focuses. The first one is its components, or moves. These studies have identified a number of moves present in the genre, for example, redress, apology, appreciation, explanation, acknowledgment, account, and action (Davidow, 2003; Levy et al., 2013; Sparks and Bradley, 2014). The other focus is the communicative purpose of the review response genre – service recovery. It was reported that service recovery could be achieved by some of the moves identified: apology, explanation, and appreciation (Levy et al., 2013; Sparks and Fredline, 2007; Yavas et al., 2004). In a recent genre-based study (Ho, in press), the way the genre achieved this communicative purpose was further explained by discussing the role of the obligatory moves of the genre. It was found that the genre contained an interesting obligatory move – Deny Problem – through which hotel management showed disagreement openly with the customers who wrote the negative reviews. Taking the move Deny Problem[1] as the point of departure, this paper aims to further our understanding of the review response genre by specifically focusing on the way hotel management amends its relationship with dissatisfied, critical customers whom it might have offended with open denial.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. From face & facework to rapport & rapport management

It can be argued that the construct of rapport originates from Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of face. Brown and Levinson (1987) put forward their politeness theory which centers around the notion of face that can be seen as comprising a positive face and a negative face. They claim that their notion was based on Goffman's (1967: 5) definition of face, which is "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line *others* assume he has taken during a particular contact". The two expressions *others* and *during a particular contact* indicate that the key to the interpretation of the concept of face is interaction and relation. Brown and Levinson (1987), however, emphasized the individuality of face and overlooked its interactional and relational components (e.g. Arundale, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 2006; Matsumoto, 1988). It thus deviates substantially from Goffman's (1967) conceptualization. From their dichotomous notion of face, Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that people would need to demonstrate respectively positive politeness and negative politeness to attend to their interlocutor's positive and negative face before and/or after the performance of face threat during an interaction. To do such facework, they would need to use positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies. Their concept of facework also deviated from the one proposed by Goffman (1967) who defined facework as "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face". That is, Goffman's (1967) concept of facework is a broader one encompassing more than positive or negative politeness strategies intended to mitigate the face threat performed or to attend to the face needs of one's interlocutors. Seeing the inadequacies of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, scholars like Locher and Watts (2005) and Spencer-Oatey (2008) have proposed alternative frameworks to account for the politeness phenomena observed in everyday interaction, both social and professional. Locher and Watts (2005) put forward their relational work

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[1] The first letter of the moves and sub-moves are capitalized to distinguish them from the rest of the text.