

FIVE-STAR TREATMENT? E-MAIL CUSTOMER SERVICE BY INTERNATIONAL LUXURY HOTELS

ROLAND SCHEGG, * JAMIE MURPHY,† and RICHARD LEUENBERGER*

*Lausanne Institute for Hospitality Research (LIHR), Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne (EHL), Switzerland

†University of Western Australia, Department of
Information Management and Marketing, Western Australia

This research used a typical e-mail query to investigate customer service by 491 properties from 13 international hotel chains. These five-star hotels had difficulty providing prompt, accurate, and timely e-mail responses to their customers. The results suggest significant differences in e-mail customer service, based on hotel location and the size of the hotel chain. The poor responsiveness and quality by many hotels illustrate that better e-mail policies and training would give hotels an immediate competitive advantage via improved e-mail customer service. The article closes with practical suggestions to improve e-mail customer service and future research avenues for academics.

Key words: Luxury international hotels; E-mail; Internet; eService; Customer service

Introduction

An April 2003 *New York Times* story argues that e-mail holds the key for survival of the travel industry's downturn wrought by SARS and the Iraq war (Sharkey, 2003). The story quotes Henry Harteveltdt, the principal travel analyst at Forrester Research, asserting that "E-mail is the most important tool in the travel industry's recovery." Harteveltdt contends that "E-mail is no longer an acquisition tool; it is a retention tool, too, to facilitate your relationship with your customer."

Fast Internet development has created a new global marketplace as businesses integrate these tech-

nologies into their daily operations (Kotler, Jain, & Maesincee, 2002; Porter, 2001). Coupled with deregulation of telecommunication markets, this globalism has increased tourism industry competition by giving consumers more information and increased expectations for specialized trips (Bloch & Segev, 1996; Rayman-Bacchus & Molina, 2001). Technology becomes a strategic weapon and competitive advantage in tourism (Buhalis & Main, 1998; Higley, 1998; O'Connor & Frew, 2001), especially as online consumers are big spenders. A study of 80,000 Australian tourists found that wired tourists spent double that of their offline colleagues (Bolin, 2002). Furthermore, business travelers booked an

estimated \$13 billion in online travel in 2002, which should rise to \$27 billion by 2007 (Sharkey, 2003).

Internet technologies are a double-edged sword though. Successful implementation of these technologies benefits hotel companies (Higley, 1998; O'Connor & Frew, 2001) via increased sales, customer satisfaction, lower expenses, etc. Yet poor implementation challenges an industry whose history is built on customer service (Murphy, Olaru, Schegg, & Frey, 2003). How have hotels implemented the most basic of these technologies: e-mail? Building on previous research of hotels' e-mail customer service (Gherissi, Schegg, & Murphy, 2002; Murphy et al., 2003; Pechlaner, Rienzner, Matzler, & Osti, 2002), this field study benchmarks e-mail responses by international luxury chain hotels to investigate relationships among hotel characteristics and e-mail customer service. Given that luxury hotels and chain-affiliated hotels lead in the use of technology (Siguaw, Enz, & Namiasivayam, 2000), how are these industry leaders using e-mail to interact with customers? Do they answer their customers' requests politely, timely, and accurately?

The Hospitality Industry in a Wired World: Delivering Service Online

As Internet access becomes a global reality in developed countries, information becomes increasingly relevant in tourism (Doolin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002; Raymond, 2001), making tourism an inviting candidate for Internet transformation (Bloch & Segev, 1996; Raymond, 2001). Technology, a strategic weapon and competitive advantage in the hospitality industry (Buhalis & Main, 1998; Higley, 1998; O'Connor & Frew, 2001), places information and customer service at the core of business today (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Kotler et al., 2002; Rust & Lemon, 2001; Zemke & Connellan, 2001).

As customers increasingly access the Internet for information, organizations negotiate the dramatic shift of power towards customers (Kotler et al., 2002; Strauss & Frost, 2001). Unlike traditional marketing communication where firms usually initiate contact with consumers, online customers may initiate the dialog (Rust & Lemon, 2001). How well a company responds to this online dialog, such as answering e-mails, subsequently influences customer satisfaction (Strauss & Hill, 2001), which has become

a proxy measure for organizational performance along with traditional metrics such as net profit and return on assets (Lovell, Patterson, & Walker, 2001).

Despite huge customer service and relationship marketing programs, many firms face declining customer satisfaction (Karimi, Somers, & Gupta, 2001). The Internet, though, provides promising electronic customer service tools—the Web, chat, and e-mail—for improving customer satisfaction (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Karimi et al., 2001; Newell, 2000; Reicheld & Shefter, 2000; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). Electronic customer service represents “the key to marketing most effectively to the consumer, for it is the logical continuation of a 100-year trend toward information service in the economy” (Rust & Lemon, 2001, p. 85). Prior to investing in eService, though, firms should balance the promise of these technologies against their limitations. For example, customers expect quality from Internet self-service technologies, but automating quality is difficult (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Bitner, 2001).

The Internet offers a wide range of services from pure sales and little service content to pure services delivered free as part of the service contract. Compared with other media that deliver information, the Internet also offers interactivity (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). New customer service channels profit from this interaction (Zemke & Connellan, 2001). Grönroos' (2000) Net Offer Model highlights the importance of these new “customer interfaces,” which can build and maintain one-to-one dialogues with customers and potential customers (Newell, 2000). For hoteliers, Web sites and e-mail represent this online interface.

The Importance of E-mail in the Hospitality Industry

Siguaw et al. (2000) argue that guest service technologies are imperative for hotels seeking a competitive advantage. Perhaps the simplest of all Internet technologies, e-mail, should be a top priority for hotels. E-mail is already the most prevalent technology for global hotels (Wei, Ruys, Van Hoof, & Combrink, 2001) as well as for consumers of all ages (Anonymous, 2002; Pastore, 2002), at home and at work (Ramsey, 2001). E-mail combines the advantages of traditional communication tools—

telephone's immediacy complemented by posted mail's unobtrusiveness and asynchronism (Hofacker, 2001).

Just as telephones and toll-free numbers pioneered new customer service delivery, e-mail adds another channel. As customers shift from phone to e-mail communication, companies increasingly use e-mail for customer service (Strauss & Hill, 2001; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). Compared with customer service and direct marketing via surface mail, e-mail costs significantly less and is faster to send. While responses to traditional direct marketing messages take weeks, four out of five e-mail replies arrive in a couple of days (Van Hoof, 1998). Furthermore, e-mail's speed and simplicity lets hoteliers test multiple messages, changing the offer or segmentation to improve results (Marinova, Murphy, & Massey, 2002; Sharkey, 2003).

This business use of e-mail means on the one hand hotels gain a powerful tool to manage and improve customer relationships (Gilbert, Powell-Perry, & Widijoso, 1999; Marinova et al., 2002; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). On the other hand, hotels must change their structure to increase communication speed and flexibility. To deliver good service, each e-mail requires unique handling. Companies must devote resources to shorten response times, provide appropriate responses, and improve the interaction (Hanson, 2000). Developers of self-service technologies anticipated such problems, replacing customer-employee interaction with computers to increase response times (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, & Bitner, 2000). But for customer service, people usually like to deal with people—not machines (Barnes & Cumby, 2002; Yang, 2001; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). Most nonstandard problems or personal requests require human interaction (Bonn, 1998; Peppers and Rogers Group & PhoCus Wright Incorporation, 2001); proper e-mail responses are part of that experience (Hashemian, 2000).

Answering e-mails properly is a simple, yet valuable, form of one-to-one interaction (Peppers et al., 2001) that influences the customer's assessment of service quality (Strauss & Hill, 2001; Yang, 2001; Yang & Jun, 2002). E-mail, effective for acquiring and retaining customers, is strategically important for the hotel industry. Yet early results reflect poor e-mail customer service in the hospitality (Gherissi

et al., 2002; Murphy et al., 2003; Pechlaner et al., 2002) and tourism (Murphy & Tan, 2003) industry.

Conceptual Development and Hypotheses

Previous research has shown poor e-mail customer service by hotels (Gherissi et al., 2002; Murphy et al., 2003; Pechlaner et al., 2002) and travel agents (Murphy & Tan, 2003), often explained by diffusion of innovations, "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 1995, p. 4). Two major streams of this research are individual and organizational diffusion. While individuals often make optional innovation decisions, organizations decide authoritatively or collectively.

Factors such as leader characteristics and internal/external structure influence organizational innovativeness (Abrahamson, 1991; Damanpour, 1991; Fichman, 2000; Rogers, 1995). Organizations adopt innovations over a continuum, ranging from awareness of the technology, also known as initiation, to using it effectively throughout the organization, or implementation (Fichman, 2000; Fichman & Kemerer, 1999; Rogers, 1995). Over time, organizational use of the Internet should shift from the *initiation* stage of having a Web site and e-mail address to the *implementation* stage of answering e-mail messages properly.

Internal Adoption Factors

Researchers call for more investigation into assimilating the innovation (Fichman, 2000), bandwagon effects (Abrahamson, 1991; Fichman, 2000), and organizational characteristics related to adoption including affiliation, structure, culture, age, size, type, and strategic orientation (Abrahamson, 1991; Damanpour, 1991; Raymond, 2001; Rogers, 1995; Wolfe, 1994). Studies of hotel characteristics—category, size, product type, linguistic region, Web site features, and brand affiliation (Gherissi et al., 2002; Murphy et al., 2003; Pechlaner et al., 2002; Siguaw et al., 2000)—generally showed that larger, higher-rated, and affiliated hotels adopted Internet technologies faster. Defining e-mail customer service along two dimensions—responsiveness and quality of response (see Methodology for more details)—leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Based on the number of rooms, large hotel properties will have better responsiveness (H1a) and better quality of response (H1b) to e-mail queries than will small hotel properties.

Connolly (2000), however, noted that large hotel companies cited fragmented ownership as a major obstacle to IT adoption. Franchising and management contracts limit ownership and control of IT assets at the property level. Resultant problems include inconsistent applications and technology architectures, making it difficult to implement chain-wide programs and maintain uniform service quality (Connolly). Similarly, staff skill levels also inhibit IT adoption (Connolly). In an industry plagued by high turnover, simplicity and ease of use are important in maintaining a productive workforce. International hotel chains with their complex ownership structure and multinational workforce should therefore have bigger problems coordinating and implementing Internet technologies.

Hypothesis 2: Based on the size of the hotel chain, smaller chains will have better responsiveness (H2a) and better quality of response (H2b) to e-mail queries than will larger chains.

External Adoption Factors

Internet diffusion within a country depends on factors that promote or hinder the technology: infrastructure, government policies and regulations, economic development, culture, language, and IT penetration (Bayarmaa & Boalch, 1997; Maitland, 1998). Norris (2001) found a geographical influence on technology diffusion, dividing the world into societies of technological leaders and laggards based upon resources available for technology development and research.

Economic and market conditions often explain variations in global Internet diffusion, but the addition of culture provides a more robust understanding of Internet diffusion (Maitland, 1998). Past studies suggest that innovations diffuse differently depending on sociocultural factors (Gatignon, Jehoshua, & Thomas, 1989; Helsen, Kamel, & Wayne, 1993) such as individual beliefs, value systems, and attitudes to information sharing (Bayarmaa

& Boalch, 1997). Schegg et al. (2002) found that Internet diffusion in the Swiss hospitality industry related to linguistic regions: Swiss-German Internet penetration was significantly higher than the penetration rate in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Cultural differences among countries may therefore affect the hotel's ability to use new communication technologies.

Hypothesis 3: The responsiveness (H3a) and quality (H3b) of a hotel's e-mail response will differ based on the hotel location.

Methodology

Hotels and restaurants have long used mystery shoppers to analyze their service. Using a similar methodology avoids a common limitation of marketing (Blair & Burton, 1987; Lee, Hu, & Toh, 2000) and innovation (Rogers, 1995) research, relying upon reported behavior rather than measuring actual behavior. The mystery shopper methodology addresses this limitation by investigating actual answers to customers' e-mails, which are a measure of Internet implementation.

Sampling

The population for this research was chain-affiliated luxury hotels in Europe, Asia/Pacific, North America, and South/Central America, listed by Hotlesmag.com as the 300 largest hotel chains. Judgmental sampling selected 13 chains (see Table 1)

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Hotel Chain	Brand	Number
Accor	Sofitel	115
Canadian Pacific	Fairmont	36
Hyatt	Grand & Park	22
Interstate	Independent	5
Millenium Cophorne	Millenium	22
Mandarin Oriental	Mandarin Oriental	18
Raffels International	Raffels/Swissôtel	21
Rosewood	Independent	10
Société du Louvre	Concorde	43
Six Continents	Intercontinental	92
Sol Melia	Gran Melia	15
Starwood	St. Regis/Lux. Collection	52
Tui Group	Riu Grand	10
Total		461

representing 491 properties with an individual e-mail address. To analyze the e-mail customer service of individual properties, hotel chains with a centralized e-mail service system such as Marriott, Hilton, or Four Seasons were omitted from this study. The independent variables, based on data from Hotelmag.com, were hotel size (0–150, 150–300, >300 rooms), hotel chain size (1–30,000, 30,000–100,000, >100,000 rooms) and location (North America, South America, Europe, Asia/Pacific).

Data Collection and Experimental Design

Properties responded to an e-mail that asked about room availability for a honeymoon weekend, additional information concerning special events for that date, and information on nearby medical facilities. A test e-mail request to 35 Austrian five-star hotel properties not in the final sample helped eliminate errors and create a framework for the final research.

Every e-mail was sent individually to override filtering programs that hotels may use to minimize information overload and spamming (Pechlaner et al., 2002). To ensure similar experimental conditions, the e-mails were sent on Monday, April 8, 2002 at 8 a.m. according to properties' local times. To further reduce bias, four different sender names and e-mail addresses were used. Sender addresses were changed along with changing time zone so that an organization's e-mail server would not filter messages from identical senders. A few months after the study, all hotels in the sample received a short explanation of the research and offer of further results upon request.

Pretesting and previous research (Gherissi et al., 2002; Murphy et al., 2003; Murphy & Tan, 2003; Pechlaner et al., 2002; Yang, 2001; Zemke & Connellan, 2001) led to six responsiveness and five quality variables. Six binomial elements, along with their sum as an ordinal variable, measured responsiveness (Table 2): *responded*, did the hotels reply; *day response*, reply in less than 24 hours; answer the room availability question and answer three other questions (*honeymoon*, *special events*, and *medical facilities*).

Five binomial elements, along with their sum as an ordinal variable, measured eService quality (Table 3). Potential guests should be addressed politely and personally, "Dear Mr. Smith" (*salutation*). The e-mail should give the hotel's identity and electronic receptionist's identity (*contact information*). As each e-mail query gives hotels a marketing opportunity, does the hotel provide information on the property (*hotel marketing*)? For the guest's convenience, some hotels block rooms until a release date (*provisional booking*). Finally, some hotels update customers on their reservation or provide more information about the property or location (*follow-up*).

Results

Responsiveness

About 7 out of 10 hotels (71%) responded within 2 weeks, 30 properties (6%) never received the e-mail due to technical errors (delivery failure, wrong e-mail address, server time-out), and 114 properties (23%) failed to answer the query (or did not receive

Table 2
The Six Responsiveness Elements Analyzed

Responsiveness Element	Description
Responded	Did the hotel respond?
Response within 24 hours	Response time was measured in hours. Did the hotel respond within 24 hours?
Room request	Answers to the most basic question should indicate room types and rates or packages. The hotel should also recognize the number of people in the reservation.
Honeymoon	Choosing the hotel for a honeymoon implies that customers trust the hotel. Does the hotel recognize this opportunity by mentioning the honeymoon or congratulating the client?
Special events	Does the reservations representative handle requests (i.e., do you have any special events or offers during that time?) not directly related to the room request? Do they offer other services during the stay?
Medical facilities	This element has two aspects. First, answering this question in a detailed and confident manner creates and provides a basis for successful relationships. Second, hotels generate no direct revenue from this activity and thus have no direct benefit from this service. An example of a satisfactory reply would be the address, name, or e-mail reference of a hospital or a reference to hotel doctors.

Table 3
The Five Quality Elements Analyzed

Reply Quality Element	Description
Salutation formula	A personalized answer recognizes the customers, helps build a relationship, and maintains or increases the quality of reply. "Dear Mr. Smith, . . ."
Hotel marketing	Each e-mail query gives hotels a unique marketing opportunity. Does the hotel provide relevant information on the property such as a description of the hotel and its facilities?
Provisional booking	For the guest's convenience and to show that the organization cares about relationships, some hotels block rooms upon first contact and keep the room on the potential guest's name until a release date.
Follow-up	Some hotels keep in touch with the customer after the first reply, to update them on their reservation status or provide more information about the property or location. Examples of a satisfactory response would be a follow-up e-mail as soon as the release date is over, or if other offers or events arise.
Contact information	Clients should always be able to contact the hotel. Even if the client initially contacted the hotel by e-mail, they might want to phone to make a definite booking or discuss details. Furthermore, customers still fear online payment (Alford, 2000). A satisfactory response would include the address of the hotel and contact person with the surface mail address, phone and fax numbers.

it for unknown reasons). The 75% response rate ($N = 461$) in our sample is similar to the 74% rate of one- to five-star Swiss hotels (Murphy et al., 2003), slightly higher than three- to four-star Austrian and Italian hotels (Pechlaner et al., 2002), and much higher than 45% by Tunisian one- to five-star hotels (Gherissi et al., 2002) and 29% by travel agents in Singapore (Murphy & Tan, 2003).

The 348 respondents answered in average of 34 hours after receiving the room query. More than half of the sample (56%) responded within a day and over three out of four properties (76%) had responded by the second day. The last reply trickled in after 12 days. Compared with 8 out of 10 Swiss hotels (Frey, Schegg, & Murphy, 2003) and 5 out of 10 Austrian/Italian hotels (Pechlaner et al., 2002) replying in one working day, international luxury hotels are failing to set industry benchmarks for prompt replies.

A key element in the information exchange for both the customer and hotelier is information about the core service: the room. The results in Figure 1 show that 328 out of 348 responding hotels (94%) gave the potential customer information on room availability and prices for the dates requested. Not as many hotels, almost three out of four hotels (71%), gave information on medical facilities. Although the willingness to pay for a honeymoon weekend is probably higher than for an ordinary weekend, less than one in three of the hotels (31%) took advantage of this sales opportunity by providing information on special events.

Quality of Reply

Most luxury hotels acknowledged the customer but almost half failed to acknowledge themselves (Fig. 2). While almost 9 out of 10 hotels (86%) addressed the customer in a personalized way, just over half (55%) of the hotels included their contact information (name, phone number) and just over one third (38%) seized the opportunity to market their property by adding relevant information (e.g., short description of the property) to the electronic message. Contact information is particularly important with reservations, as customers often use e-mail to gather information but book through traditional media (telephone, letter, or fax). A minority of hotels (less than 5%) used more advanced procedures such as provisionally blocking rooms or follow-up e-mails.

Hypotheses Testing

Responsiveness (H1a, H2a, and H3a)

Chi-square tests for nominal data and Kruskal-Wallis tests for ordinal data (Francis, 2001) were used to evaluate significant group differences at $p < 0.05$. The results failed to support hypotheses 1a (Table 4). Although hotels with more rooms often had better responsiveness, there were no significant differences in response rate, response time, and answering the questions based upon the number of rooms.

There was partial support for hypothesis 2a. The results (Table 4) showed that hotel chains with more properties usually had poorer responsiveness than

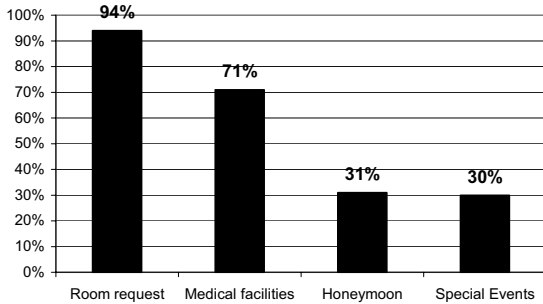


Figure 1. Analysis of the responsiveness elements (N = 348).

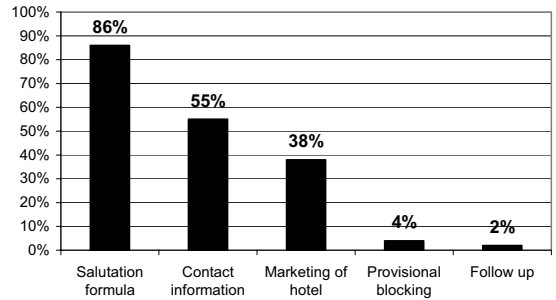


Figure 2. Analysis of the quality elements (N = 348).

smaller chains. Hotel properties belonging to large hotel chains had significantly slower replies times (50% replied within 24 hours for chains >100,000 rooms compared with 65% for smaller chains) and answered questions related to special events significantly less (25% vs. 40%) than did properties of smaller chains.

There was strong support for hypothesis 3a. With the exception of medical facilities and global responsiveness, all other elements showed significant differences according to the continent. Response rates in Europe (77%), North America (71%), and Asia/

Pacific (76%) were significantly higher than in South America (48%). Of those that responded, the North American and European hotels were the timeliest. The average response time in Europe (28 hours) and North America (33 hours) was significantly faster than in South America (46 hours) and Asia/Pacific (46 hours). Similarly, hotels in North America (64%) and Europe (63%) were far better at responding within a day than their Asia/Pacific (42%) and South American (36%) colleagues.

The North American hoteliers, though, failed to address the room request (87%) as often as their

Table 4
Hypothesis Tests for Responsiveness Variables

	N	Responded (N = 461)	Response Time (h)	24-Hour Response	Room Request	Honey-moon	Medical Facilities	Special Event	Global Resp. Factor
Property Size (H1a)									
0–150 rooms	97	73%	36.2	51%	95%	28%	70%	30%	3.73
150–300 rooms	105	75%	34.2	60%	90%	28%	70%	24%	3.71
>300 rooms	146	77%	32.9	58%	97%	36%	73%	34%	3.97
χ^2 (Kruskal-Wallis)/F		0.536	0.225	1.988	4.269	2.461	0.510	3.166	5.382
Sig.		0.765	0.799	0.370	0.118	0.292	0.775	0.205	0.068
Size of Hotel Chain (H2a)									
1–30,000 rooms	91	78%	30.6	65%	91%	34%	70%	40%	4.00
30,000–100,000 rooms	62	73%	30.3	65%	95%	29%	74%	31%	3.94
>100,000 rooms	195	75%	37.1	50%	95%	30%	71%	25%	3.71
χ^2 (Kruskal-Wallis)/F		0.662	1.370	7.781	2.106	0.560	0.321	6.171	4.646
Sig.		0.718	0.256	0.020	0.349	0.756	0.852	0.046	0.098
Location (H3a)									
North America	78	73%	32.6	64%	87%	44%	72%	44%	4.10
South America	36	55%	45.7	36%	92%	39%	83%	19%	3.69
Europe	163	80%	27.5	63%	97%	21%	68%	28%	3.77
Asia/Pacific	71	84%	45.6	42%	97%	37%	72%	24%	3.72
χ^2 /F		20.909	5.381	16.735	10.935	15.703	3.380	10.276	2.376
Sig.		<0.001	0.001	0.001	0.012	0.001	0.337	0.016	0.070
Population (average)	348	75%	34.2	56.0%	94.0%	31.0%	71.0%	30.0%	3.83

colleagues in Europe (97%), Asia/Pacific (97%), and South America (92%). Although they were the weakest in addressing the room question, the North American responses addressed the honeymoon (44%) and special events questions (44%) more often than responses from Europe (21% honeymoon, 28% special events), South America (39% honeymoon, 19% special events), and Asia/Pacific (37% honeymoon, 24% special events).

As these results illustrate, there were significant geographical differences in e-mail responsiveness. Although the North American and European hotels did better on most variables, this was not always the case. Hotels in the Northern Hemisphere had faster response times compared with their colleagues south of the equator. There was no clear trend, however, on how hotels answered the various questions. These geographic and cultural differences, or lack of difference, provide several fruitful research avenues, which are discussed later in the article. For example, why did the South American hoteliers answer the honeymoon question twice as often as the special events question?

Response Quality (H1b, H2b and H3b)

Most elements of reply quality showed no significant differences across the independent variables. Significant differences on providing contact information, though, partially support hypotheses 2b and 3b (Table 5). Hotels of large chains provided contact information less frequently (50%) than did hotels of smaller chains (68%). With regard to geographic region, North American hotels (71%) provided contact information significantly more often than did Asia/Pacific (56%), European (53%), and South American (33%) hotels.

Discussion and Conclusions

At least three qualifications limit the interpretation of these results. This single test of e-mail customer service responsiveness and quality using a judgmental sample fails to generalize to all luxury or international hotels. Although the authors double checked the coding of replies, there was no reliability test as Krippendorff (1980) suggests for content analysis research. Finally, there may be lower English language proficiencies among Latin America hotel employees. Regardless, the results are a snap-

shot of e-mail customer service by almost 500 luxury hotels across five continents.

Theoretical Implications

That these results resemble similar studies of lower category and independent hotels (Frey et al., 2002; Gherissi et al., 2002; Pechlaner et al., 2002) suggests an equality of opportunity. E-mail, a technology with few resource and knowledge restrictions, meets Roger's (1995) criteria for rapid adoption (e.g., relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, triability, and observability), perhaps making e-mail too easy to adopt. As mentioned earlier, e-mail is the most popular Internet application for global hotels (Wei et al., 2001) and consumers of all ages (Anonymous, 2002; Pastore, 2002; Ramsey, 2001). Yet successful e-mail use in e-commerce settings requires specialized planning and training (Wilson, 2002, p. 125).

The e-mail request was handled differently, depending on hotel location. Norris (2001) found that the geographical location of an organization influenced technology adoption, arguing that company resources and country development determine the access and diffusion of technology. She argued that a North-South divide in technology access holds back poorer countries from adopting technology. This research partly confirms a digital divide, showing that hotels in South America were less likely to respond to e-mail than hotels located in North America. Yet there seemed to be no North-South divide with regard to answering the questions. The future research section, later in this article, further discusses the cultural implications of this divide (Franke, Hofstede, & Bond, 1991; Hofstede, 1980; Maitland, 1998).

Hotels showed similar levels of reply quality independent of their location and property size. This suggests two stages of organizational adoption: *initiation* followed by *implementation* (Rogers, 1995; Van de Ven, 1986; Wolfe, 1994). North American hotels may have passed the initiation stage, demonstrated by their significantly higher response rate. But neither North American nor South American hotels have moved to the implementation stage—mutual adaptation of the innovation and the organization—reflected by similar results in the quality of reply.

Table 5
Hypothesis Tests for Response Quality Variables

	<i>N</i>	Salutation Formula	Marketing of Hotel	Provisional Booking	Follow-up	Contact Information	Global Quality Factor
Property Size (H1b)							
0–150 rooms	97	87%	43%	7%	1%	54%	1.92
150–300 rooms	105	83%	33%	3%	1%	56%	1.76
>300 rooms	146	88%	37%	3%	4%	56%	1.88
χ^2 (Kruskal Wallis)		1.566	2.173	3.544	3.663	0.186	1.465
Sig.		0.457	0.337	0.170	0.160	0.911	0.481
Size of Hotel Chain (H2b)							
1–30,000 rooms	91	89%	41%	4%	4%	68%	2.07
30,000–100,000 rooms	62	87%	37%	5%	0%	55%	1.84
>100,000 rooms	195	85%	36%	4%	2%	50%	1.76
χ^2 (Kruskal Wallis)		1.055	0.485	0.234	3.284	8.480	5.599
Sig.		0.590	0.784	0.890	0.194	0.014	0.061
Location (H3b)							
North America	78	83%	35%	0%	5%	71%	1.94
South America	36	81%	28%	0%	3%	33%	1.44
Europe	163	88%	40%	7%	1%	53%	1.89
Asia/Pacific	71	89%	41%	3%	1%	56%	1.90
χ^2/F		2.207	2.454	9.752	3.901	14.793	2.422
Sig.		0.530	0.484	0.021 ^a	0.272	0.002	0.066
Population (average)	348	71%	34.2	56.0%	94.0%	31.0%	71.0%

^aThree cells had expected count of less than 5.

Managerial Implications

To enhance competitive advantage, Siguaw et al. (2000) argue that hotel managers should incorporate more guest service technologies or be left behind. This study shows that e-mail use, even in the top hotel segment, has vast potential for improvement. Management may have adopted Internet technologies such as e-mail due to its simplicity and in an effort to keep up with fad and fashions. Management must realize though that this bandwagon effect can lead to problems in successful implementation (Abrahamson 1991; Fichman & Kemerer, 1999; Murphy et al., 2003) of e-mail as a business communication tool.

Strauss and Frost (2001) describe the business use of e-mail as an implicit promise to customers: “if firms provide email addresses, they must answer incoming mail” (pp. 309–310). Management and staff must appreciate that e-mail is as important as a phone call, fax, or letter (Murphy et al., 2003). Hotels list phone numbers in the phone book and answer their phones. These five-star hotels listed e-mail addresses on their site, yet one out of four properties failed to answer a potential customer’s e-

mail. Furthermore, this research found that over two of three hotels never answered the initial questions about special events or honeymoons. To use e-mail for customer relationship management, hotels must improve their online communication. Customers are using e-mail more frequently in business and private situations; they expect, probably demand, fast e-mail responses that answer all their questions.

Pechlaner et al. (2002) found that hotel managements’ attitudes towards the Internet play an important role in e-mail responses. For legal, marketing, and organizational reasons, hotels should implement e-mail customer service policies (Mills, Clay, & Mortensen, 2000; Stevens & McElhill, 2000; Strauss & Hill, 2001; United Nations, 2001; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). Analyzing current e-mails is a key to this initiative. Based on customers’ frequently asked e-mail questions, hotels should develop a Frequently Asked Questions section on their Web sites. Hotels should also craft template e-mail answers that use basic business communication procedures such as polite greetings, thanking the recipient, addressing the recipient by name, answering the questions, and identifying the hotel—name, postal address, phone and fax num-

bers, and Web site address—as well as sender. Appendix 1 shows a suggested reply.

Depending upon hotel characteristics, some hotels provided markedly better e-mail responses than did their competitors. As this study illustrates, better e-mail policies and training would give hotels a competitive advantage via improved e-Service. For example, after receiving the summary results, one of the chains immediately forwarded the summary to their heads of departments to rapidly improve e-mail management within the chain. Compared with other hospitality industry software, e-mail programs are easy to use. Hoteliers may realize a better return on their Internet investments by focusing on basic procedures to manage a basic technology: e-mail (Murphy et al., 2003).

Future Research

Exploring electronic customer service is a challenge. This research investigated just two aspects of e-mail, responsiveness and quality, based upon replies by hotels. Given the nascent stage of hotels using e-mail for customer communication, qualitative research could add important details on how and why electronic receptionists responded or failed to respond as well as management attitudes towards e-mail. Quantitative research could complement this investigation of management attitudes towards e-mail customer service.

Longitudinal studies and comparison studies with other types of hotels could clarify if this April 2002 snapshot reflects an aberration or generalizable picture. While it is tempting to compare these results by chain, this analysis could unduly penalize chains located predominantly in South America and reward those chains with properties mostly in Europe and North America. This North–South divide opens up a wide range of research possibilities.

Past research has shown that culture plays an important role in economic performance (Franke et al., 1991). Research has shown cultural differences in Web site content (Zhao, Massey, Murphy, & Liu, 2003) as well as how consumers use and perceive Web sites (Chua, Cole, Massey, Montoya-Weiuss, & O'Keefe, 2002). Cultural factors (Hofstede, 1980) and evolving individual and organizational e-mail adoption (Rogers, 1995) may also influence a hotel's e-mail reply. Future analysis of these data using

multivariate techniques (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998) and artificial neural networks (West, Brockett, & Golden, 1997) could help illuminate how the culture, technological infrastructure, hotel chain, hotel size, and hotel location relate to e-mail replies.

Future research methods include using a larger sample and more e-mail response variables. A content analysis by multiple coders should increase reliability (Krippendorf, 1980), while a factor and cluster analysis (Hair et al., 1998) could classify hotel responses based on an amalgam of technographic, geographic, size, and linguistic characteristics. Furthermore, a content analysis of the hotel Web sites—either manual (MacMillan, 2001) or automated (Scharl, 2000; Schegg et al., 2002)—could help explore relationships between a hotel's e-mail response and that same hotel's Web site features (Murphy et al., 2003).

Future research should also move beyond descriptive and towards causal research. For example, would hotels respond differently to a corporate e-mail address than to a Hotmail address or would they react differently to customer requests from traditional communication channels such as fax? Would hotels respond differently to an e-mail asking for the best rate compared with an e-mail asking for a luxury suite? As the hotel's reply should build and maintain customer relationships and increase the company's profitability, future research should investigate the customer's reactions to e-mail customer service as well as the importance that customers place on e-mail service.

Finally, how does e-mail customer service influence a company's costs and revenues? Are hotels adopting technology for strategic reasons (Siquaw et al., 2000)? Alternatively, are hotels responding to the siren's song of fashion and fad (Abrahamson, 1991; Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1993; Peacock, 1994), adopting the Internet due to bandwagon effects or fear of being different (McBride, 1997; Murphy et al., 2003)?

Biographical Notes

Roland Schegg is research associate at the Lausanne Institute for Hospitality Research (LIHR). He earned his B.S. from the Swiss Federal Institute for Technology in Zürich and his Ph.D. from the University of Geneva. His main research interests are the influence of new technologies on the hospitality industry.

Jamie Murphy is an Associate Professor at the University of Western Australia's Department of Information Management and Marketing. He earned an M.S. and a Ph.D. from Florida State University along with a University of Florida B.A. and Michigan State University M.B.A. His background includes teaching and marketing experience in Australia, Canada, China, Western Europe, and the US. He also lectures annually at the Ecole Hôtelière de

Lausanne. His interests include effective tourism use of the Internet.

Richard Leuenberger finished his B.S. at the Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne, where he participated in Lausanne Institute for Hospitality Research projects. After his June 2002 graduation, he moved to Paris where he works for the "Fours Seasons."

Appendix: Suggested Model Response to the Inquiry Sent to 491 Luxury Hotels¹

Subject: your inquiry for a honeymoon weekend in the White Beach Hotel Cancun, Mexico²

Dear Peter Jones:³

Thank-you⁴ for your 20 March e-mail concerning a honeymoon weekend in the White Beach Hotel in Cancun.

Rooms are available for you and your wife from April 13th–16th at a special honeymoon rate of 270 US\$ (=380 Swiss Francs) per night.⁵ Our honeymoon package includes:

- Upgrade to a honeymoon suite of 70 sqm
- Welcome drink & cold towel upon arrival
- Deluxe fruit basket & orchid bouquet in the room
- One bottle of sparkling wine in the room upon arrival
- Buffet breakfast, lunch and dinner at our food & beverages outlets and poolside snacks.
- Unlimited use of sauna and steam room, Jacuzzi & gym equipment in the spa.⁶

Our hotel is five km from the Amerimed hospital, an American hospital chain in Mexico specializing in the care of International tourists. You will find more detailed information on the hospital Web site at: <http://www.amerimed-hospitals.com/index.htm>⁷

Cancun is host to many annual and recurring events, celebrating national and religious holidays with festivals and carnivals. During your scheduled honeymoon weekend, Holy Week and Easter Celebrations take place. You will find more information on our hotel and regional excursion possibilities on our hotel website www.whitebeachhotel.com/events.htm.⁸ We are happy to transport you to and from the nearby Cancun International Airport. Please let us know if you have other questions about your stay in Cancun or with White Beach Hotel.

Sincerely,

Ernesto Oliveira <eoliveira@whitebeachhotel.com>

Electronic Receptionist

Retorno del Rey #36

Zona Hotelera

Cancun, Quintana Roo 77500

Mexico

www.whitebeachhotel.com

Telephone: 52 998 881 0808

Facsimile: 52 998 881 0815⁹

¹The response should be in less than 24 hours, but the sooner the hotel responds, the better. Plain text rather than html e-mail should be used as some recipients may not have e-mail software that reads html e-mail.

²Guests may e-mail multiple hotels. Using the hotel name reminds the potential guest and provides hotel branding.

³Using "Dear" adds politeness and addressing by name, "Peter Jones," adds personalization.

⁴Thanking adds politeness.

⁵This exchange rate provides additional service and information for the guest coming from abroad.

⁶This section provides information on the honeymoon arrangement.

⁷Addressing guest concerns with respect to local medical infrastructures is a value-added service.

⁸This section answers the question concerning the special events.

⁹This section includes the sender's name and full contact details, including the Web site address, for the hotel. This entire section can be automatically inserted as a "signature file" via most e-mail software.

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