

THE PERCEPTION OF TOURISTS OF GRAMADO – RS: regarding the quality of services in hotels

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to identify the quality of hotel services in the city of Gramado - RS, according to tourists' perceptions. Considering the importance of tourism to the destination, it is necessary for the hotel services and tourism activities to be carried out with quality, promoting tourist satisfaction. To achieve this objective, exploratory descriptive research methodology was used. Theoretically, this study focuses on the importance of quality in the provision of services in the hotel industry. The data collected was tabulated and transformed into graphs, to enable a better understanding and analyses the results in the light of the theoretical framework. The results showed that there is quality in the hotel services. However, it also showed that some services could be improved, from the perspective of maximizing customer satisfaction and the competitiveness of the tourist destination.

Key words: Hospitality. Quality. Gramado - RS.





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INTRODUCTION

Providing quality services has always been a source of competitive advantage for businesses operating in competitive tourist destinations. Providing such services is becoming increasingly commonplace, as consumers are becoming more demanding of the services, and more aware of the quality of services provided by other companies. Albrecht (1992) states that "the quality of services is the ability of an experience or any other factor to satisfy a need, solve a problem or provide benefits to someone." It should be noted that tourism is always an experience that seeks to satisfy and fulfil tourists' desires.

For Kotler (1998), satisfaction is the customer's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing the perceived performance of a product with his or her expectations, as

Seeking quality is pursuing the maximisation of customer success. Identifying customer requirements, therefore, becomes a major challenge in achieving quality. There are "rational" needs that are clearly and objectively described by the customer and understood by the supplier and the "affective" needs defined with much more difficulty (flexibility, good service, friendliness, etc.) quality will only be guaranteed if both needs are satisfied. (Shiozawa, 1993, p.62).

Parayani et al. (2010) highlight the increased competition among hotels with high-quality services. In tourism, as in any other sector, the managers' concern to offer quality services is indispensable. The hotel industry is an important part of the tourism industry, and exceeding customers' expectations can make a huge difference in tourist destinations.

Studies by Tian-Cole and Crompton (2003), Cobra (2005) and Peters (1987) show a correlation between excellence in the provision of services and customer loyalty. They also show the importance of behaviour studies, customer expectations, and improvement in quality. For Beni (2007), ensuring the quality of the services offered will result in a satisfied customer, increasing their customer loyalty, with positive impacts on the tourist destination. The city of Gramado - RS, located in the South of Brazil, is one of the main tourist destinations in the country. Known for its European characteristics and low temperatures,





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the city receives approximately six million tourists year-round, attracted by the uniqueness of its tourist attractions.

Gramado has sixty years of history, and according to the Tourism Secretariat (2015), a population of 35,000 inhabitants. It is the main tourist destination in Rio Grande do Sul and the fourth largest in Brazil, and its economy is based largely on tourism. Its income is derived mainly on the manufacture of chocolates, its hotel and gastronomic network, furniture, commerce, handicrafts, and decorative items. Promoting its name, Gramado became outstanding in the tourism sector. According to the official website of the City Hall, 90% of the economy of the city is based on tourism activity. Besides being a destination for sightseeing, Gramado is also increasing in popularity for its special tourism, events such as the Christmas Lights and Film Festival.

To host the tourists, the city has a reception infrastructure consisting of 143 hotels and inns, with a total of 9709 beds, 1140 shops, and 112 bars and restaurants capable of serving 10,000 people simultaneously. It also has 7 banks, a hospital with 24-hour emergency service and an ICU, 7 health clinics, and the ER of Unimed (RGSTUR, 2015). Of the existing accommodation options in the city, 90 are registered in CADASTUR, the registration system of the Ministry of Tourism (2015). These businesses generate employment and income for the local population, and tourism is a driving force for the local and regional economy.

According to Beni (1998), hospitality is one of the essential elements in the tourist infrastructure, being essential for the development of tourism in a destination. It is observed that in Gramado, hotel networks are being implemented to meet the consumer demand for quality services and comfort. Recently, with the arrival of multinational networks in the country, the performance has changed to a offer market, in which competition and quality become decisive (Dias; Pimenta, 2005, p.82).

The mission of the hotel industry is to serve its guests through the offer of quality hospitality, with the best the company has to offer, establishing a relationship of trust and

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integrity with the customer that for Castelli (2006, p.118) "constitutes one of the essential foundations of the process of education and training of all employees."

Nowadays, customer service is a factor of competitive advantage between companies, adding value to the products or services. In this context, monitoring the satisfaction and quality of services provided to tourists in the city of Gramado is vital for the promoting the city as a tourism destination.

Quality research is important, to determine the level of satisfaction of customers/tourists in Gramado, through an exploratory descriptive study. This study is therefore justified by the fact that the quality of services is an important for increasing the competitiveness of the hotel industry, and of Gramado as a tourist destination.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Providing quality services has always been an advantage for high-standard projects, focusing on exclusivity and personalisation; these establishments have managed to win the public over. However, such services are becoming increasingly commonplace. Nowadays, consumers are more demanding of the services, and more aware of the quality of services provided by other companies. This element is therefore a prerequisite for the success and permanence of the company in the market.

Albrecht (1992) states that "the quality of services is the ability of an experience or any other factor to satisfy a need, solve a problem or provide benefits to someone." Therefore, the service culture is focused on quality, with the goal of customer satisfaction and overcoming the needs of their customers. In search of competitiveness, companies that operate in the tourism and hotel sector focus on providing a good service, which requires a good relationship with customers, suppliers and employees (Celeste, 1993).





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Loverlock and Wright (2001, p.5) define services as:

An act or performance offered by one party to another. Although the process may be linked to a physical product, performance is essentially intangible and usually does not result in ownership of any of the factors of production. They are economic activities that create value and provide benefits to customers at specific times and places, as a result of making a desired change in or on behalf of the service recipient.

It is through the service provided by the company that the customer forms an opinion of the quality of what is offered. Castelli (2006) adds that quality must be the goal of all those involved in the system, i.e. the organization as a whole, and not only on particular department. It is the dedicated work of all the employees that will result in customer satisfaction. Albrecht (1992) argues that the interaction among the staff, working as a team, is important for concise understanding between the parties, and will enable previously clarified requirements to be met.

Employees within an organization are the basis of the business; they are the ones who contribute to the success of the enterprise. Nowadays, people within many companies have the freedom of choice and the power to express opinions and to innovate. They are offered training and benefits, so that they can feel more motivated, resulting in higher productivity. Thus, the company and the employees work together in pursuit of a single goal: customer satisfaction (Chiavenato, 2004).

In this context, Dias (2000) highlights the importance of the attention the employee must pay to the guest, taking care of all the details; employees should be trained in the solicitude to understand and cater for all, having a sense of satisfaction in serving people, recognition, facilitation, problem-solving, small acts of kindness, and emphasizing human values like honesty, sincerity, trust and ethics.

Quality is seen in the small details, according to Viera (2004). For example, the ability of an employee to perceive and resolve a guest's problem as though it were his own, even where this was not requested.





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Satisfaction is the customer's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing the perceived performance of a product with his or her expectations (Kotler 1998). The level of customer satisfaction will be defined by the performance of the service provider, and will influence the consumer's decision on whether to become a customer. For Peters (1987), all companies must bring about a revolution in quality improvement and ensure that it is always defined in terms of customer perceptions. This revolution means to transpire quality. The obsession and the persistence of the manager at all levels are essential. But passion must be balanced with a detailed process, and the customer must always be the main determining factor when deciding what is important.

Kotler (1998) also states that companies must be concerned with the total satisfaction of the customer, because if they are only partly satisfied, then they are likely to change to another company or service, while fully satisfied consumers are more likely to remain loyal to the company, since trust has been built. Following this line of thought, it is worth stating that:

Seeking quality is pursuing the maximization of customer success. Identifying customer requirements, therefore, becomes a major challenge in achieving quality. There are "rational" needs that are clearly and objectively described by the customer and understood by the supplier and the "affective" needs defined with much more difficulty (flexibility, good service, sympathy, etc.) quality will only be guaranteed if both needs are satisfied (Shiozawa, 1993, p.62).

Hotels should not only be concerned with providing accommodation, but should offer environments where guests can relax, be entertained, take care of their health, or dine on quality cuisine. For this, it is necessary to ensure quality services. A good framework will bno use unless the employees receive proper training, so they can provide such services appropriately and effectively to guests (Flores, 2002).]





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To highlight the importance of quality service for the profitability of the company, a study by Viera (2004) reveals that companies that applied quality service to their clients showed average annual growth of 10%, while those that did not have this concern did not show significant growth.

In tourism, as in in any other sector, the concern of the managers with the provision of services in their companies is indispensable. Knowing that the hospitality industry is an important part of the tourism sector, it is necessary to exceed customers' expectations, ensuring that the product or service is remembered by them. Through direct contact and study of consumer behaviour, having a knowledge of the customers' preferences is paramount, so that the company can be prepared to meet appropriate requests. Displaying quality in the service will result in a satisfied customer, increasing their loyalty to the company (Beni, 2007).

In the hospitality sector there are various types of establishment, and with this variation, there are also different types of guests. This means there are also demands for services, since each branch of the hotel industry requires a certain type of service. However, any service, from the most simple through to the most sophisticated, must be executed with quality.

According to Rodrigues, Leal & Hargreaves (1997) a hotel must know its customers in two ways. The first refers to the knowledge obtained by the company of the factors that led the person to seek that service, and the standards that are used by the customer for this purpose; the second type of knowledge is individual, acquired implicitly through interaction with the customer, through the services provided. Thus to achieve excellence in service, first the hosting service needs to understand its customer base and study their behaviour, in order to segment its target public, then it must be able to meet their demand and gain their loyalty (Cobra, 2005).





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Quality, for Petrocchi (2002) has five dimensions: "intrinsic, cost, service, morality and security." Intrinsic quality refers to the services offered by the hotel, since the cost will depend on the product offered. With regard to service, employees should attend to the guests, be efficient in providing the requested services, and showing manners, friendliness and competence. The moral part relates to an ethical environment, which should be one of mutual respect. Furthermore, the hotel must provide its staff and guests with an environment that safeguards their physical integrity and safety.

For the implementation of quality services, Albrecht (1992) suggests a four-stage quality awareness process: assessing problems and opportunities; prioritising change; redesigning of systems, processes and practices; and training of people, integrating processes and personal behaviour.

The provision of quality services in the hotel industry has become essential. Businesses should always be seeking to exceed customer's expectations; the basic services offered in hotels today are paramount because the guest always walks into a new hotel expecting something more.

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out using exploratory and descriptive research that, according to Dencker (2000, p. 124) enables the researcher to "to improve ideas or discover insights", such as the tourists' satisfaction of the quality of hotel services.

For Thiollent (1998, p. 48), "the exploratory phase is to discover the research field, interested parties and their expectations and establish a first survey (or diagnosis) of the situation, the priority problems and possible actions".

Research, according to Rudio (2011), is where the researcher seeks to know and interpret the reality without interfering in it or attempting to modify it. The researcher is interested

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in discovering and observing phenomena, seeking to describe them, sort them and interpret them.

This study was characterised as a case study of the quality of services provided in hotels in the city of Gramado. This type of research seeks to clarify the decision: the reason why it was taken, how it was implemented, and what the results are.

The case study presents qualitative results. According to Collins and Hussey (2005), it is a more subjective, more characteristic method that involves examining perceptions and reflecting on them, to gain an understanding of social and human activities.

The theoretical framework was based on: Albrecht (1992), Shiozawa (1993), Kotler (1998), Cobra (2005), Peters (1987), Parayani et al. (2010), Cobra (2005), Rodrigues, Leal and Hargreaves (1997), Beni (2007), Viera (2004), Chiavenato (2004), Castelli (2006), among others, coving the topic of customer satisfaction, service quality in hospitality, and customer loyalty.

The period of application of the 429 forms was from September to October 2015. The public approached included couples and families. The forms were applied on weekdays as well as on weekends. The form, as shown in Appendix A, was composed of 8 questions: 2 descriptive and 6 multiple choice questions.

Quantitative research was used for the elaboration and application of the research form with the tourists. According to Oliveira (1999), the quantitative method means quantifying opinions, data, and ways of collecting information, as well as using statistical resources and techniques.

The tourists were asked about the type of hotel stayed at, length of stay, the reason for choosing the hotel, their expectation of the product, whether they believed the service was





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worth the money paid, the level of quality of services and products, and their customer loyalty to the company.

For the analysis of the results, an Excel worksheet was used, with the elaboration of graphs to portray the results of the perceptions of the tourists of Gramado-RS in relation to the quality of the services in the different types of hotel stayed at during the period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

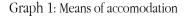
In order to identify the quality of the services provided in the hotels of Gramado, in the perception of tourists to the city, this research was applied to tourists in the city, at the main points of tourist concentration and tourist attractions.

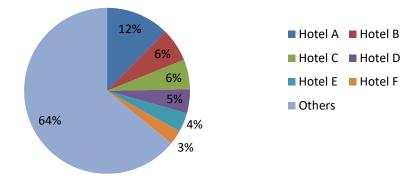
The form presented questions relating to the type accommodation; the length of stay; the reason for choosing this type of accommodation; the consumer's expectations of product, whether they believed the service was worth the money paid, the level of quality of services and products, and their customer loyalty to the company. Letters of the alphabet were used to keep the hotel names anonymous. It should be noted that of the types of hotel stayed at by the tourists participating in this research, most were rated by the SBClass as three star. It should be pointed out that the present study aimed to identify the quality of hotel services provided in the city of Gramado, RS, according to tourists' perceptions.

In relation to type of accommodation, it was found that according to Graph 1, the type that was most used by the tourists participating in the survey was Hotel A (12%), followed by Hotel B (6%), and with the same percentage (6%), Hotel C. With lower percentages were Hotels D, E and F, with 5%, 4% and 3% respectively. It is worth noting that the number of other types of hosting used by tourists was significant, with 64% of tourists staying in other hotels in Gramado and in a very distributed way, representing less than 1% of the respondents.



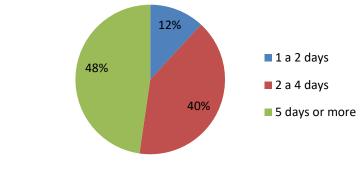






Source: authors, 2015.

Regarding the length of stay, Graph 2 shows that most tourists (48%) spent more than 5 days in the city. Another 40% of tourists stayed between 2 to 4 days, and only 12% of tourists stayed just 1 or 2 days in Gramado. This data shows that most tourists spend a reasonable amount of time in the city, reflecting the fact that many of them choose to spend their holidays in the city, attracted by the coolness of the mountains and other attractions and events. This flow of tourists has a positive effect on the economy of the city, as the tourists spend many days there.



Graph 2: Length of stay in the lodging

Source: authors, 2015

The third question on the form identified the reason why the tourist chose a particular type of accommodation. Many factors are known to influence the choice. Graph 3 shows that the determining factor in the choice of the hotel was the price (25%), as the customer considers

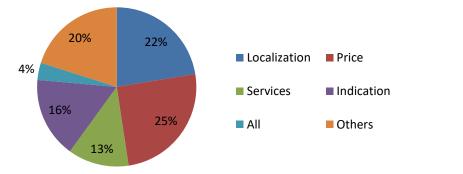




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the cost:benefit ratio. However, it is interesting to note that not far behind price, location was the second item pointed out as the main reason for the choice of the hotel (22%). Thirdly, with 20%, were other items not listed among the options, such as: purchase of a package holiday from a travel agency, travel consortium club, and received the trip as a gift. The recommendation of friends or relatives was the option chosen by 16% of the interviewees. Another 13% chose the type of hotel based on the services offered, and only 4% of the tourists said that they choice was influenced by all the options given.

Graph 3: Reason for choosing the type of accomodation



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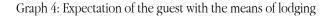
Source: authors, 2015

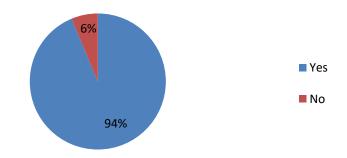
When planning a trip, the client always images that everything will be just as they expect. But often this does not happen, and the tourist becomes frustrated with some situations. Graph 4 presents the responses regarding the customer's expectations of the hotel, and whether these were met; 94% of the respondents stated that their expectations were met, while only 6% said that they were not.





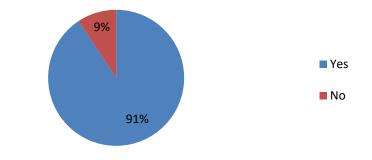
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Source: authors, 2015

This data shows that most hotels are selling a real product. Viera (2004) says that the expectation is initiated through the publicity and advertising done by the hotel, the purpose of which is to attract the interest and curiosity of potential guests. Thus, it is perceived that the publicity and advertising of these types of hotel are being performed very well. As stated in the third question, price is the most influential factor when choosing a type of accommodation. Graph 5 shows the responses to the question on whether they felt they had received value for money in the services offered.





Source: authors, 2015

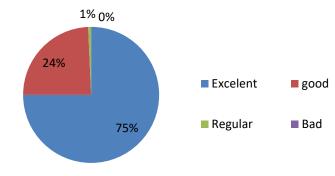
Most tourists (91%) said that despite the relatively high values, the price paid is compatible with the services offered, and only 9% of respondents said they did not find the price charged was fair. Graph 6 shows to the quality of various services offered by hotels. In this





same question, the services were listed and the respondent classified them as excellent, good, fair or poor.

Graph 6: Competence and cordiality of employees



Source: authors, 2015

The first item was related to the competence and friendliness of the hotel staff. It is known that good service makes a difference in the quality of a service. It was observed that the clients left satisfied with the service, since Graph 6 indicates that 75% affirmed the service offered by the staff to be excellent, and 24% of the guests found it to be good. Only 1% of respondents assessed employee competence as regular, and none (0%) found it poor. Castelli (2000) states that in order to have an excellent impression of the hotel, in addition to a nice building, good prices, good food and a nice room, the service must be unique, with the staff being are able to interact positively with the guests and exceed their expectations.

Availability, commitment, friendliness, a courteous attitude and attention are indispensable elements in the service and should prevail throughout the team, involving guests in a welcoming, hospitable and efficient environment (Petrocchi, 2002). This is precisely what makes the difference in quality service; small acts can turn a good service into an excellent one.

The second item in this question was related to the speed of service at the time of check-in and check-out, and of other services such as room service, bar service, cleaning, swimming

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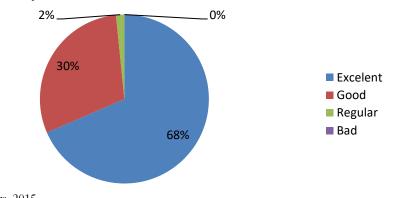




pool, leisure and others. Slow service causes great inconvenience to guests, especially at the time of check-in and check-out.

As Graph 7 shows, more than half (68%) of the guests felt that in terms of speed, the services provided were excellent, 30% found the speed of service to be good, and only 2% found it fair. The cleanliness of the establishment is of extreme importance for the satisfaction of the guest, and is an important factor in the choice of accommodation.





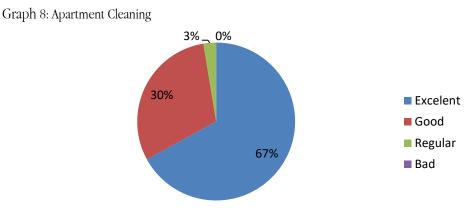
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Source: authors, 2015

Graph 8 shows that 67% of respondents found the cleanliness of rooms to be excellent, 30% rated it good and only 3% said fair. Given that this is a service pointedly judged by customers for the image of the hosting type, the percentage of 67% is relatively low compared to the consumer's requirement. For this reason, it should be an item of concern for the managers of these hosting locations. The cleanliness of a hotel room, from the simplest to the most luxurious, is of vital importance, as a clean and inviting room will result in good opinions about the place (La Torre, 2001).

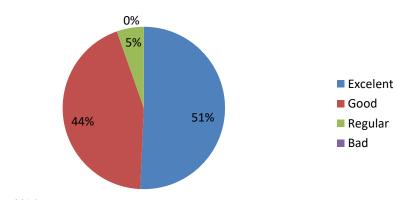






Source: authors, 2015

The fourth item of question six related to the general services offered by the accommodation, and the facilities offered. As shown in Graph 9, almost half of the respondents (51%) rated these as excellent, 44% as good and 5% as fair.



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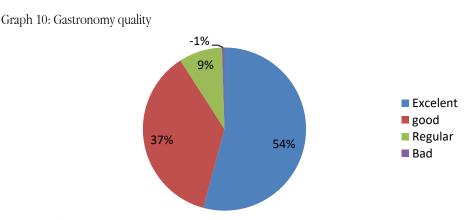
Graph 9: Equipment and services

Source: authors, 2015

The last item in question six sought to identify guest satisfaction with the food at the hotel. The responses were surprising, since the city of Gramado is a reference in gastronomy. The result of this research warned that hotels and inns leave much to be desired in this respect. According to Graph 10, just over half of the respondents (54%) found the gastronomy to be excellent, 37% rated it as good, almost 10% found it to be fair, 1% of the tourists found the gastronomy of the hotel to be poor. It is worth noting that this item (gastronomy) was the only one where the "bad" option was chosen, albeit only by a small percentage.







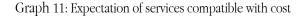
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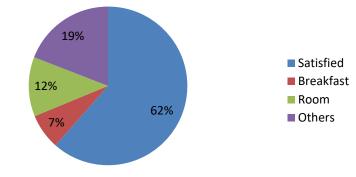
In the second descriptive question, the aim was to find out if the customer would like to find some service or facility in the establishment where they were staying, that would be compatible with the daily rate paid. The result of the survey was interesting, since the customer usually wanted something more than what they really needed, and in this research, as shown in Graph 11, it was noticed that most people (62%) felt satisfied with everything the hotel offered, stating that for the needs of the moment this type of hotel was adequate; 12% of respondents commented that improvements could be made in the room, such as installing cable television, and improvements to the bedding and bathroom and other items in the room. A few respondents (7%) said that breakfast could be of better quality, with more options and varieties, and the rest of the interviewees highlighted other items, but with a lower percentage, such as transfer service, accessibility and improvements to the general infrastructure of the hotel, as well as leisure areas, swimming pool and gym.





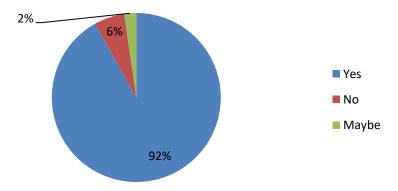
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Source: authors, 2015

To analyse the quality of the services provided and the price paid, the last question on the form aimed to find out if the guest would return to the same hotel, showing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with that establishment. Graph 12 shows that 92% of the respondents said they would stay at the same place again, 2% said maybe, and 6% said they would not return.



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Graph 12: Return to the same hotel due to the quality and price

Source: authors, 2015

These results show that a high percentage of those interviewed felt completely satisfied with the chosen hotel establishment, since for the customer to buy that service again and pay the requested price, their satisfaction is fully taken into account. According to all the information obtained in the data analysis of the research in question, it can be observed that the city of Gramado-RS is a reference in relation to the quality of the services provided in





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the hotel industry, as well as for many other aspects that cause the city to stand out, such as the qualities it presents.

Observing all the data of this research, it was verified that the items that scored best were related to exceeding the client's expectations; value for money; and a willingness to return to same hotel, demonstrating loyalty. However, there are items with relative limitations, as shown by this research, with a greater or lesser percentage of dissatisfaction. This needs to be monitored and analysed by the managers of the hosting locations, to optimize the quality of services provided.

The quality of hotels in Gramado is relatively high, as shown by level of guest satisfaction presented by this survey. But some items can be optimised, such as the qualification of employees. A competent professional is one who is always in search of new knowledge about his work area, global trends, and new languages, as the hotel industry can require all these items in just one service. Also, it is extremely important that employees treat guests with the utmost empathy, professionalism and importance.

With regard to the item service efficiency, Viera (2004) discusses the rules for customer service:

- Clients return where they are received with friendliness, joy and attention;
- The only function of a company that works with the public, directly and indirectly is to provide a quality service, thus guaranteeing the customer's return and the success of the company;
- Most guests do not only observe the comfort of the hotel, but mainly the way they are treated, both by phone and in person.

Another item that showed limitations was the cleanliness of the hotel establishment extremely important issue for the level of quality. It is suggested that managers invest in improving the housekeeping department, focusing on perfection and especially cleanliness. In addition to the cleanliness of the rooms, other related items were cited by the





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interviewees as having room for improvement, such as attention to details and bedding changes.

Food was the most striking issue in the research results. There were some limitations in this sector that should be taken into account. Tourists pointed out that breakfast in the hotel establishments could be of better quality, with a greater variety of foods, including gluten-free and lactose-free products. The city has many excellent restaurants and bars, besides being known for Italian cuisine, chocolate and good wine. These are attributes that add value to tourism in the city, so the tourist already has a gastronomic expectation when arriving in Gramado. Through the research, it was observed that some of them were disappointed by the gastronomic service of the hotel establishment stayed at.

Thus, all the indicators of this research assure that there is quality in the hotel service, but that investments could be made in some improvements to improve the services. Customer satisfaction is crucial to the success of any venture, resulting in a more competitive enterprise. A successful hotel business plays an important role in the tourism cycle, contributing to the economy of the host city.

In the case of Gramado, the city is already a reference for national tourism. Thus, entrepreneurs of the city should strive for quality of hotel services, since this represents a great advantage for hotel companies, enabling them to be more competitive in the market, which is increasingly competitive due to the high demand of customers, who hope to have their expectations met and are always in search of the best service.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Knowing that quality has been gaining more and more space within the competitive hotel market, an hotel establishment that stands out for its quality services will conquer important space among the competition and also in the economy of the city of Gramado.





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It should be noted that successful hotel developments play an important role, contributing to the economy of tourist destinations. Quality in the provision of hotel services must be sought by the entrepreneurs of this city, since this represents a great advantage for enabling hotel companies to be more competitive in the market.

The results of this study showed that the items with greater success were related to exceeding the customer's expectation of the hotel establishment; value for money, and willingness to return to the same hotel, demonstrating loyalty.

For the success of the hosting locations, it is necessary to have a constant concern for training, and to train the employees, so that they can attend to guests with quality, thus generating customer satisfaction and loyalty.

The tourists staying in the city assure that there is quality in the hotel service, and some improvements must occur for the improvement of the services. Customer satisfaction is the success of any venture, resulting in security to compete with the competition. A successful hotel business plays an important role in the tourism cycle, contributing to the economy of the destination.

The hotel industry is important in the tourism sector, therefore it is necessary to strive to exceed clients' expectations in the integration with the other enterprises of the productive chain of Gramado, as a reference tourist destination.

As professionals and scholars of tourism and hotels, the results of this research contribute to the understanding of the importance of a tourist destination like Gramado, but in particular, as pointed out in the theoretical framework, it is necessary to monitor the increased competition between hotels. At the same time, it is important to be aware of the correlation between excellence in the provision of services and customer loyalty. In the hotel industry, as in any other sector, the concern of the managers with the provision of quality in services is indispensable.





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The hotel industry is an important part of the tourism industry, but it is necessary to exceed customers' expectations to make a difference in tourist destinations.

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