

English Communication Strategies in Tourism: Handling Guests' Complaints in the Written Reviews of Tourist Accommodation

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ABSTRACT

The advance development in tourism industry is established through interrelated systems. One of which is the online booking platform. Not only for booking, but the online website also becomes the platform for giving reviews that portrays guests' compliments or even complaints. Those compliments are powerful to give the guests positive image about the accommodation; however, the complaints will do in the contrary way. It may lead the accommodation into negative image. Accordingly, it is necessary for the accommodation providers to handle the complaints by giving the responses or reply of the guests' reviews. That action will become the effort to turn the guests' disappointment into satisfaction. In order to achieve it, several English communication strategies in handling complaints were executed. This research takes the responses of 8 accommodation providers towards the guests' review as the subject of the research. It is conducted by using content analysis method. The results yields 4 strategies that exists in the responses, namely: attentiveness that correlates with the hospitality in communication appears 100% of the total responses; explanation that presents the clarification and elaboration appears in 79% of the total responses; effort, that is the presentation of the promising action in the future, exists in 46% of the total responses and the least is apology, that is the action of saying sorry, exists in 25% of the total responses.

Keywords: Tourism, English Communication, Handling Complaints.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The great role of English language in tourism industry has been acknowledged by the major society, which significantly impacts the communication service. In a more specific scope of tourism, tourist accommodation service in particular, demands the proficiency of English language by its workers. Hotels, hostels, motels, guesthouse, homestay, and other type of accommodation service providers require their workers at least to be able to perform Basic English communication.

Furthermore, there are numerous types of basic communication in English for hotelier. One of the most crucial one is handling complaints. When guests' expectation meets the poor service, bad facilities and other shortage, guests raise complaints. Once it happens, the tourist accommodation staffs should take immediate action to turn the disappointment into satisfaction. In this case, the skill in communication holds important role to give respond, offer solution and promise that it will not happen again.

Guests raise their complaints in various ways. Some of them are silent complainer who will just silent but then spread the complaints through words of mouth; but there are also typical of constructive complainers, who will give fruitful suggestions for the improvement of the accommodation. Moreover, wide range of media are utilized by guests in expressing their complaints; some of them are telling the hotel staffs through direct spoken communication, some others prefer to tell their complaints through written communication such as email or reviews in online websites.

Complaints that are delivered through both direct spoken communication and email are still manageable since it can be heard and known only by the tourist accommodation staff; in other words, those kind of complaints are safe because it could be isolated from the other guests. Unfortunately, complaints that appear in the reviews of online website are published for public and anyone can access it; thus, it may affect the future occupancy of the accommodation. In addition, those online reviews becomes the benchmark of the hotel quality since it is presented in numbering score ranging from 0 to 10 or from 1 star to 5 star.

For those significances, the ability of tourist accommodation providers to handle the complaints is strongly encouraged. In particular, the focus should be more pointed out to those that are delivered in English since it becomes the most common language used in tourism worlds. In order to achieve that aims, some English communication strategies should be taken into consideration in handling guests' complaints appeared in the online review.

Research Objectives

The researcher conducts this research with the aims at revealing the tourism written communication strategy in English, particularly in handling complaints appeared in the reviews of online booking website. To be more specific, two objectives are formulated to be able to:

- a. Reveal the English written communication strategies in handling complaints appeared in the guests' online reviews

- b. Provide information about how the English written communication strategies in handling complaints are conducted

LITERATURE REVIEW

Written Communication

Communication is defined as a process to transfer information that enables the receiver to interpret, then act to meet the expectation or intention (Piran and Sheenan, 2009 as cited in Byakutaga *et al.* (2016). Thus, communication may raise subjective information due to the various interpretations of the addressee. Basically, the purpose of communication is to share, give out and transfer information, message, news or any other subjects to others and vice-versa (Hansen and Nora, 2004).

Communication occurs in many ways, one of the most common one is written communication. This kind of communication has several advantages compared to communication that occurs in other media such as spoken, or non-verbal one. Hansma and Elving (2008) said that written communication method becomes the transmission tools that are able to not only deliver information but also becomes the storage. Through written communication media, the information is more traceable. Furthermore, some experts propose that written communication supports the workplace since it holds a role as the reminder for the worker to know what is expected and subsequently give impact to their working performance (Garnett, Marlowe and Pandey, 2008).

English and Tourism

One of predominant tool to communicate is English language; moreover, negotiation and execution of transaction are also other usage of English as the most spoken up language in the world (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2010). Tourism is counted as one of the largest economic activities that involve great movements of the people, leaving one place and leading to other place. Thus, workers particularly in tourism need to master English as becoming the common communication language all over the world

(Richard, 2001). Equally important, English also significant so that workers are aware of the cultural differences that could be a sensitive issue for both guests and workers in tourism industry (Leslie and Russell, 2006).

Website as a Communication Tool

In this recent time, technological advance significantly assists human being to do their activities. One of its usefulness is found in the world of communication. Nowadays, communication occurs a lot easier with the support of technology. Hand phone, computer, and other communication gadget are invented to support the communication. Website is one of which. Website is considered as the top communication tools, as Cook, Bell and Ridge (2013) explains it. Another expert adds that the use of website as media enables company or organization to communicate with clients or other targeted public (Cohen, 1997). Furthermore, the standard of professionalism is also marked by the existence of their website. Thus, it becomes the image builder of the company or organizational profile (Johnson, 1997). In the similar way, tourism industry really needs that media since it becomes the tool to advertise the potential tourism resources, service and any other information that is needed by the tourist.

Handling Complaints

Many tourist accommodation providers are frightened when they have to deal with guest complaints. It is because complaints are usually seen as a troublemaker. However, in order to improve the quality of their accommodation, it is a must for them to switch the way of their typical thinking to be more open, welcoming and provide positive atmosphere towards the complaints raised (Davidow, 2003). Moreover, it is also good to have an ability to turn guests' disappointment into satisfaction (Bell and Ridge, 1992). This kind of skill is well known with the term handling or managing complaints. Some important points are necessary to take out as attention in handling guests' complaints. Ekiz, Ragavan and Hussain (2011) see complaints as an evaluation tool, satisfactory judgment and loyalty intention; moreover, it is really suggested for the tourist accommodation

providers to have well organized recovery system which will be useful to handle the imminent complaints.

To be more specific, there are several important and basic attributes in handling guests' complaints "common attributes are apology, explanation, effort/ facilitation, redress, attentiveness, and promptness" (Blodgett, et.al., 1995). Those attributes hold as the strategies for handling guests' complaints.

Online Guests' Reviews

On the last decade, tourism industry is challenged with the existence of online guests' reviews. This system becomes the benchmark of the quality and services in the tourism accommodation. To be more, the result of the reviews throw impacts on the finance since most of the guests take the review as one of the consideration in choosing accommodation to stay. Thus, the occupancy rate is greatly influenced by it.

There are some factors of the tourist accommodation that influence the scoring review. Naomi (2014) summed up that the top three tourist accommodation factors are the service of the staff, the quality of the room and the value that the guests gain during the stay. Those top three factors determine the satisfaction of the guests so that it is important to be maintained well. The effort of recovery must be prioritized in every single time since it reflects true loyalty brings positive impact for the review scoring.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

In order to extract the data into scientific results, the researcher utilized content analysis method. It is the popular method in the field of communication research (Wimmer and Dominick, 1994). In other words, Content analysis is defined as a method for subjective interpretation, which is done through classification, coding and identification that are systematic (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In order to gain the scientific knowledge, there are common steps that are

executed in the content analysis (Stempel and Westley, 1989):

- a) Formulation of the research question or objectives
- b) Selection of communication content and sample
- c) Developing content categories
- d) Finalizing units of analysis
- e) Analyzing the collected data

The point of the content analysis research relies on the category formulation. The research will fail or succeed depending on its category (Prasad, 2008). Moreover, the analysis of the content is really restricted to its context of communication. In this research, the context is controlled under the context of handling complaints in the tourist accommodation online reviews; thus several things should be taken into consideration in doing the analysis process.

Subject of the Research

The researcher used purposive sampling in selecting the subjects of the research. There are 8 tourist accommodation providers that have review score above 8.5 considered to have good online reviews. Moreover, those 8 tourist accommodation providers give responses towards their guests' reviews that are rarely done by the majority of them. Then, the researcher focuses on the content of the online reviews together with the responses towards it. Those data in the form of written communication are taken to be the subjects of this research.

Setting of the Research

This research is conducted on May 2018. The reviews in the online booking website called as booking.com are recorded to be the subjects. Booking.com are one of online platforms that serves as the tool to book accommodation online. It also provides the guests with pictures, description, score review and also descriptive reviews. This platform provides the guests with score reviews in details. That becomes the underlying reason why booking.com is taken to be the research setting in this research.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique used is documentation. The documentation of the online guests' review content are recorded, the responses from the tourist accommodation providers and also the information about the accommodation provider. The content of the data in the form of written phrases, words and sentences are taken to be the analysis object.

Data Analysis

The data in the form of words, phrases and sentences are analyzed by using content analysis method. The data go into several categories. The categorizations are applied to all data based on the certain classification. Afterwards, each category is described to yield insightful knowledge within the context of the topic being analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Overview of the Tourist Accommodation Providers

There are 8 tourist accommodation providers that are analyzed in this research. The overview of the accommodation name and score review are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Overview of Tourist Accommodations

| Accomm odation | Name | Score | Number of Reviews |
|----------------|-----------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| 1 | Penak Malioboro Hostel | 8.6 | 51 |
| 2 | Yez Yez Yez All Good Hostel | 9.1 | 142 |
| 3 | Abakadabra! Artbnb | 9.2 | 789 |
| 4 | Bring In House Yogyakarta | 9.0 | 274 |
| 5 | Benetta House | 9.7 | 154 |
| 6 | Ngampilan Backpacker Hostel | 8.7 | 105 |
| 7 | The Packer Lodge Yogyakarta | 9.2 | 742 |
| 8 | Garser | 8.8 | 34 |

Source: Recorded from booking.com

All of those accommodations achieved review score above 8.5 that are considered to be good among other competitors. Moreover, those accommodations provider responses towards the complaints of the guests appeared in the review.

The English Language Analysis towards the Online Review Responses

Table 2. Apparent English Errors in the in the Responses towards the Online Guests' Reviews

| English Features | Accommodations (Number based on Table 1) | Errors from 3 reviews |
|-------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| | 1 | 1 item |
| | 2 | 4 items |
| 1. Grammar | 3 | 7 items |
| 2. Spelling | 4 | 5 items |
| 3. Choice of Vocabulary | 5 | 4 items |
| | 6 | 3 items |
| | 7 | 4 items |
| | 8 | 4 items |

Table 2 shows that some errors appear in the responses towards the online reviews. Some of the errors are grammar: "to blocked" should be "to block"; spelling: "no rash" it should be "no rush"; the choice of vocabulary: "gift" should be "give". Those errors give minor impact in the responses since the meaning is still understandable because the sentence is supported by the previous and following phrases or sentences. In the consequence, although some errors exist in the responses, the readers are still able to get the point of the passage.

The Analysis of the Handling Complaints Feature "Apology"

Table 3. The Existence of "Apology" Feature in the Responses towards the Online Guests' Reviews

| Accommodations (Number based on Table 1) | "Apology" feature form the 3 reviews |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | 1 exists |
| 2 | 1 exists |
| 3 | Not exist |
| 4 | 1 exists |

| | |
|-------|-------------------|
| 5 | 1 exists |
| 6 | 1 exists |
| 7 | Not exist |
| 8 | 1 exists |
| Total | 6 out of 24 (25%) |

It is seen in the table above that not all accommodation apologize towards their guests' complaints appeared in the online review. Some of the expressions of the apology feature are "apology for that", "so sorry for that" and "I apologize in advance". There are 6 accommodations that express apology and there are 2 that do not express apology. Although there are 6 accommodations that feel sorry about the complaints, the apology exists in only 1 of the review out of 3. This pictures that the accommodation providers do not prioritize or are not aware on the use of apology feature in the complaint handling.

The Analysis of the Handling Complaints Feature "Explanation"

Table 4. The Existence of Explanation Feature in the Responses towards the Online Guests' Reviews

| Accommodations (Number based on Table 1) | "Explanation" feature form the 3 reviews |
|--|--|
| 1 | 3 exist |
| 2 | 2 exist |
| 3 | 3 exist |
| 4 | 3 exist |
| 5 | 3 exist |
| 6 | 1 exists |
| 7 | 2 exist |
| 8 | 2 exist |
| Total | 19 out of 24 (79%) |

Table 4 illustrates that all accommodations apply the feature of explanation in the responses that they give towards the guests' reviews. It is seen that it exists in 19 reviews among the total of 24 reviews. The accommodation providers put this feature to be the their priority since it can be the media of clarification towards the complaints. Some of the explanation features appeared in the responses are "for the variety of breakfast we have different menu in the weekend", "we are doing all improvement

including the Wi-Fi”, “we will try not to use electricity to support go green”, “it was not chew gums it is cement”, etc. This “explanation” feature becomes the second most used feature by the accommodation providers.

The Analysis of the Handling Complaints Feature “Effort”

Table 5. The Existence of “Effort” Feature in the Responses towards the Online Guests’ Reviews

| Accommodations (Number based on Table 1) | “Effort” feature form the 3 reviews |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | 3 exist |
| 2 | 1 exists |
| 3 | Not exist |
| 4 | 2 exist |
| 5 | 1 exists |
| 6 | 2 exist |
| 7 | 2 exist |
| 8 | Not exist |
| Total | 11 out of 24 (46%) |

Effort is defined as the action taken in managing the complaints. The table presents the existence of “effort” feature in the responses towards the online guest reviews. It appears that not all responses contain “effort” feature. There are more responses that are in the number of 13 out of 24, which do not express effort towards something bad faced by the guest. Those accommodation providers show that their hostel is already good in the way it is. Most of the accommodation providers’ responses indicate that their hostels do not need any improvements; it is seen in the expression such as “ every information and pictures about the hostel is exactly as it is in the real life”, “you shouldn’t worry too much”, etc. On the contrary, there are 11 responses that shows the “effort” feature in the responses such as “we will try to overcome”, “we’ll review the amount”, “I always trying my best to blocked them”, etc. Briefly, the number of “effort” feature is not the mostly expressed feature in handling complaints.

The Analysis of the Handling Complaints Feature “Redress”

According to online Cambridge dictionary, redress means as the amount of money that you have to pay as compensation because you have done something bad towards others. From the analysis of the 24 responses, there is no single response that expresses redress. There is no accommodation that offers money as the compensation of the complaints. On the consequence, it can be summed up that redress is not becoming the strategy for those 8 accommodations in handling the online guest complaints.

The Analysis of the Handling Complaints Feature “Facilitation”

As cited by Karatepe and Ekiz (2004) facilitation is explained as “the policies, procedures and tools that a company has in place to support customer complaints”. From the 24 responses, it is seen that there is no procedural thing that is expressed in the responses. By the result, facilitation does not exist in those 24 responses.

The Analysis of the Handling Complaints Feature “Attentiveness”

Table 6. The Existence of Attentiveness Feature in the Responses towards the Online Guests’ Reviews

| Accommodations (Number based on Table 1) | “Attentiveness” feature form the 3 reviews |
|--|--|
| 1 | 3 exist |
| 2 | 3 exist |
| 3 | 3 exist |
| 4 | 3 exist |
| 5 | 3 exist |
| 6 | 3 exist |
| 7 | 3 exist |
| 8 | 3 exist |
| Total | 24 out of 24 (100%) |

According to Karatepe and Ekiz (2004) attentiveness is the communication that is built between the guests and the accommodation providers. In this context, all of the accommodation providers are trying to establish friendly communication by

expressing “thanks” in every response that they give. It becomes the strategy for the accommodation providers to create friendly tone in giving reply towards the guests’ complaints. Attentiveness becomes the most used feature in handling complaints. All of the accommodation providers use it as it is seen in all responses; in other words the feature of attentiveness exists in all responses (100%).

The Analysis of the Handling Complaints Feature “Promptness”

Online Cambridge dictionary defines promptness as the quality of doing something in a quick time on the certain amount of time without making delay. Since booking.com review system does not show the exact time and date of the written guests’ reviews and the responses given by the accommodation providers, so the feature of “promptness” cannot be analyzed in this research.

CONCLUSION

Complaints are always exists in every tourism accommodation online account in booking.com website. The complaints are so various ranging from the case of staff, cleanliness, value for money, location, comfort, facilities, breakfast and Wi-Fi.

In order to turn the guests’ disappointment into satisfaction, the tourist accommodation providers employ several English communication strategies in handling those complaints. The strategies are presented in the responses that they give as the reply of the complaints appeared in the reviews.

There are 7 English communication strategies in handling complaints. In fact, there are only 4 features that is employed by the tourist accommodation providers and there are 3 features that are not used in giving the responses. The feature of redress that deals with money does not exist, the feature of facilitation that is related with the procedural thing does not exist and the feature of promptness that is correlated with time and date cannot be analyzed due to the limitation of the online website system.

The 4 features that are expressed in the responses are sorted from the most used one until the least used one. First, the “attentiveness” reaches 100%, the “explanation” reaches 79%, the “effort” reaches 46% and the “apology” reaches 25%. In similar way, it shows that the approach of communication, the clarification through detail explanation, the promise as the effort to improve and the willingness to say sorry are the English communication strategies in handling complaints through online written communication.

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