

**WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING
ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES IN THE IRISH
HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY?**

A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

There is an abundance of literature exploring the benefits of implementing environmental practices within the Hospitality industry but unfortunately many hotel managers and owners have not become involved in the green movement for several reasons. As stated by Browne (2006) “The hospitality industry will no longer be able to ignore its environmental responsibilities as it will have to respond to a number of pressures. For example, the “green tourist” will demand “green” accommodation; legislation with regard to the disposal of waste has implications for the hospitality industry; and the continued increase in energy costs will necessitate reduction in usage. “

The purpose of this paper is to examine the literature in relation to the barriers to implementing environmental practices within the Irish Hotel Industry. This paper is based on the literature review of the author’s master’s thesis.

The author plans to carry out primary research through structured interviews with 3 hotel properties and also a questionnaire survey will be sent to all registered members of the Irish Hotel Federation.

The author hopes to expose the barriers of implementing environmental practices within the hospitality industry and to find solutions in order to encourage sustainability. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi “The earth provide enough to satisfy every man’s needs, but not every mans greed.”

INTRODUCTION

This paper will look at the topic of environmental practices in terms of current literature. It is based on the literature review of the author's master's thesis. The paper examines the barriers in implementing environmental practices within the hospitality industry. The paper concludes with an outline of the methodological framework which will make up the next stage in the research.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY?

It must be said that the concept of environmental sustainability is still relatively new for some hospitality organisation and has a multitude of meanings and connotations. As stated by Brackley (2007, p. 40), sustainability is about working in a way that neutralises an organisations impact on the environment. Bell (2007, p.3) believes that sustainability is about not sacrificing the future for our needs today. According to Blake (2007, p.2) eco-friendly, eco-tourism, sustainable tourism and responsible travel share the same principal. He believes that hotels and resorts need to give back more to their community and environment than they take away.

THE ORIGINS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES

The hotel industry, like many others, did not entertain the concept of saving energy for many years, as oil prices were at an all time low in the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s (Hirschland, Oppenheim & Webb, 2008). The chemical and oil industries were the first to come under investigation by environmentalists due to the visible nature of their environmental impact. The service industry took a long time to come under scrutiny and as a result was slow to take responsibility in reducing the impact their businesses were having on the environment. Sloan, Legrand & Chen (2004, p. 179) maintain that the "consumption of resource needs by tourists is creating an enormous ecological, social, and cultural legacy in many destinations around the world, thus the hotel business must carry a large part of the responsibility."

The concept of environmental sustainability has become a very serious and profound topic within the hospitality arena in the past decade. This is primarily due to the accelerated pace in which customer needs and expectations are changing. Bowman (1975, p.74) states that a "series of widely publicised environmental catastrophes signalled the globalisation of

environmental concern and that society has entered the last stage of a process that has taken humans from fearing, to understanding, to using, to abusing, and now, to worrying about the physical and biological world around them”.

Hospitality providers are now been forced to take responsibility for the impact their services are having on the environment. In 1996, Agenda 21 for the travel and tourism industry made hospitality providers aware of the need to enhance sustainability development. It highlighted the fact that the tourism industry relies on the quality of the environment for its survival, and so, need to play a role in environmental preservation. (Tzschentke, Kirk & Lynch, 2008).

There is evidence in today’s literature to suggest the implementation of environmental practices is widespread across the hospitality industry as the benefits are infinite, the most important being financial sustainability. (Pizman, 2009) believes that many hospitality organisations are not interested in environmental sustainability for altruistic or ethical reasons, but are purely investing in environmental practices for selfish, profitable reasons.

(Houdre, 2008 Brown, 2006 and Stark, 2009) have made it clear that the prime reason for implementing environmental practices is geared towards profitability. Cotton (2007) believes that the purpose of running any business is to make a profit and so it is alarming the number of hospitality organisations that are not adopting green practices in order to drive long term profitability. This suggests that there are barriers and obstacles with regard to the implementation of environmental practices in the hospitality industry.

AN OUTLINE OF THE BARRIERS IN IMPLEMENTING ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES

There a number of reasons why many hospitality organisations are not implementing environmental practices. (Post & Altman, 1994) identify numerous barriers to environmental change and classify them as “industry barriers” and “organisational barriers”. Other academics have distinguished these barriers as internal and external in relation to the implementation of environmental management systems. (Baumast, 1997, Biondi et al, 2000 & Hillary, 1998 & 2000).

Knowledge Deficiency

It is clear that there are many benefits to implementing environmental practices within an organisation but is evident that many hospitality operators are still not adopting and

implementing green practices. Kovacs (2008, p.1) makes the point that “hotels are going green but how they introduce cost and energy-efficient programmes that will be beneficial now and in the long term is one issue which many in the industry still struggle to comprehend.” Tzschentke et al (2008, p. 131) believes that “limited awareness amongst small business owners of their environmental footprint has consistently been identified as a barrier to change. This has further been noted through research carried out by (Hillary, 1995 & Smith & Kemp, 1998) who believe many hospitality operators have a limited knowledge of their environmental footprint which in essence, is hampering their ability to implement environmental practices.

Hillary (2000, p.1) maintains that “lack of knowledge in relation to environmental issues and strategies, compounded by a perceived lack of information and support, has widely been identified as a major constraint, particularly in small and medium enterprises, that do not have the necessary expertise to introduce environmental management systems, or the resources to access it”. (Levy & Dilwali, 2000) also believe that lack of knowledge in relation to effective conservation measures is a key barrier to the implementation of environmental practices.

Bergin (2010) makes the point that one of the reasons why hospitality managers are poor at implementing environmental practices is that environmental management is not being successfully delivered through our colleges and universities. He believes that the managers of today are aware and educated on the front end departments of the business such as, bedrooms, food and beverage and marketing but when it comes to managing the equipment within a hotel, the challenges are enormous due to the lack of subject knowledge. Wade (1999, p. 251) believes that “if hospitality management students can be convinced that environmental issues are of fundamental importance, they could be effective change agents”. (Wade, 1999) believes that even when hospitality management students are taught the financial benefits of environmental management strategies and practices throughout their college years, when they enter the world of management, the lack of resources becomes a barrier to implementation.

Owner/ Manager Attitudes

(McDonough, 2008) makes the point that many hospitality developers, owners and managers do not understand the value of adopting a green agenda which leads to a complacent attitude in relation to environmental practices. (Gore, 1992) believes that a distinctive feature and

common obstacle in small organisations is that decision making tends to rest with the owners, and so the need for management to formally collect information with regard to policies and strategies is minimal especially when it comes to the environment.

(Brown, 2006) believes that some hospitality managers still operate in old world mental models and do not truly recognise or appreciate the need and value of the environment in relation to their business. They often see environmental practices as an add-on to their corporate policy, when in fact it should have residence within the organisations strategic policy in terms of profitability and growth. (Kirk, 1995) believes that if a company is to successfully implement an environmental policy, its adoption must come from the top, otherwise it is unlikely to succeed.

A study of London and Irish hotels carried out by (Knowles et al and Donovan & McElligott, 2000) revealed that one of the reasons for the shallow integration of environmental issues in relation to business value is that some managers do not want to involve their owners in active and innovative work and so carry out simple low cost measures that do not require approval.

Many academics such as (Brown, 1996) and (Taylor, 1997) believe that there are several hospitality managers who recognise and comprehend the impact their property is having on the environment but are restricted in implementing environmental practices unless there is a clear tangible benefit such as cost saving attached. Brown (2006) also believes that environmental practices are not part of a control system in many hotels and the requirement by managers to achieve budgets and profitability can restrict the introduction of environmental initiatives. Brown (2007) maintains that until environmental reporting becomes an integral part of the appraisal system of general managers, they will not have the motivation or drive to implement environmental practices. The adoption of these practices is sometimes seen as onerous and requires too much effort to incorporate into their daily routine (Tzschentke et al, 2008).

Human Resources

(Enz & Siguaw, 1999) maintain that special positions within hotels need to be created in the area of environmental management in order for a property to be a true champion in this field, which in essence has implications with regard to additional labour costs for any property.

This is further emphasised by Savage (2007, p.31) who believes “effectively implementing a programme is not about having an environmental policy or management in place; it is about the workforce.”

(Leondakis, 2009) maintains that there are many challenges in relation to successfully gaining employees trust and buy in. Hotel employees may often be change averse and simply uninterested in environmental practices. This problem can be escalated through poor communication and lack of training on behalf of management. (Allen, 2006) believes that an introduction to environmental policy should become a core element in the induction programme of for employee so that the message is reinforced from the beginning. He states that managers and supervisors need to lead by example when it comes to changes in environmental practices or otherwise results will be wasted. This can have a damaging effect on an organisation that is trying to implement an environmental strategy, as without employee support, the desired policy is ultimately going to fail (Baker, 2009).

Finance

A prominent feature in public opinion surveys, is that environmental concern has been labelled as “an extra, affordable in a time of plenty, but disposable when hard times come” (Taylor, 2007, p. 2007). In a recent survey carried out by Lewis (2008), it shows that as the economy is in ongoing economic downturn, it has dented managers enthusiasm for pursuing more eco-friendly policies, with one in five respondents admitting that the credit crunch will mean mission-critical priorities will take precedence over efforts to reduce their environmental impact.

(Vernon, 2003) identified that hospitality operators have a perception that environmental improvement come at a cost and so this becomes a major barrier. He believes that this statement is in line with previous environmental research carries out on accommodation, small businesses and the corporate sector. (Revell & Blackburn, 2006) study of environmental responsiveness of small companies in the restaurant sector identified that the chief reason for resistance to improving their environmental impact was that a clear list of business benefits was not identified.

Ghobadian et al (1995, p. 52) examined environmental practices among a particular number of business and found that “bottom line concerns appear to be paramount” in guiding corporate environmental management and that companies were “seeking shorter term dividends from any proactive measures, rather than seeking longer term benefits.” To overcome this problem Kirk (1995) believes that the introduction of environmental practices and policies does not always have to involve capital intensive projects; it can create low cost, simple projects that can be implemented by employees.

Environmental management practices are often promoted as a cost-cutting opportunity but for many managers this is not a reality. (Tzschentke et al, 2008) believes that the pressure of implementing green practices has been centred around structures such as environmental auditing, impact assessment and accreditation, which has high certification fees attached, thus becomes a deterrent for many hotel managers especially in times of financial difficulty.

In contrast, (The Harvard Business Review, 2009) believes that sustainability is not a burden on bottom lines that many executives believe it to be but in fact becoming environment-friendly will lower an organisations costs and increase revenues.

Customer Attitudes

Butler (2008) maintains that many hospitality organisations are waiting for increased customer demand and lower operating costs before they will fully embrace green initiatives and formal environmental practises. (Barsky, 2008) wonders if customers really care that hoteliers are making efforts to improve their environmental footprint through the introduction of green programmes and whether or not it effects their hotel selection and the price they are willing to pay. The results of a survey carried out by (Barsky, 2008) show that “eco friendly or “green initiatives” were most compelling to luxury hotel guest who could afford to care about green practices, whereas these programmes were least important to customers who look for economy brands. It is apparent that price is still the dominating factor when it comes to hotel selection and that many guest are not prepared to pay extra in order to support green initiatives.

Kirk (1995, p.1), believes that “many individual operators feel that they are too small to have any real effect, that these services are very price sensitive and that the customer would soon

go elsewhere if asked to pay any of the cost of environmental management". This is in contrast to research carried out by (Baker, 1996 & Tynan, 2009), who maintain that some guests are actively seeking environmentally friendly hotel lodgings and are willing to pay the additional costs associated with these services. Barnes (2007) also believes that even though there are a proportion of customers who are price-aware, the conscientious customer understands that sustainable products currently come at a premium and are willing to spend the money to ensure their own role in building a strong future. It is evident that the needs of a particular hotels guest have an impact on whether or not they implement green practices.

Many customers view environmental alternatives in a hotel as a way in which they disguise cost cutting or a drop in standards. (Silano et al, 1997). Small business owners have been noted for taking pride in satisfying their customers and often feel that the introduction of recycled paper, soap dispensers and towel re-usage can be seen to hinder the guest's impression of a "pampering experience" (Getz and Carlsen, 2000). Kirk (1995, p.3) maintains that customers who seek hospitality services "expect to be pampered with lashings of hot water, high pressure showers, freshly laundered linen and an ample supply of towels". He further stated that if hotels are implementing environmental practices, they must do so with the consent of customers or in a way that they do not realise the deterioration in service. This possibility explains why many hotels tended to "dismiss initiatives that may jeopardise customer satisfaction and enjoyment." Vernon et al (2003, p.63)

Research carried out by (Tzschentke et al, 2008) indicates that some hotel owners thought that by having a green plaque actually impacted negatively on their establishment as many guest associated environmental practices with a drop in standards. It demonstrated that managers had a fear of not meeting guest's expectations and infringing on their rights by imposing particular norms of behaviour. Stark (2009) on the other hand believes it is crucial for hoteliers to demonstrate their green credentials to the marketplace in order to remain competitive

Operational

One of the main barriers that hotels face when trying to convert their business to a green hotel is the basic structure. The majority of hotels erected in the last decade were built by developers and managers who did not consider the environment during construction as the cost of greener hotel development was an obstacle. Butler (2008, p. 237) believes that "there

may have been a time when hoteliers faced a 10 or 15 percent cost premium for building a green building”

(Barnes, 2007) makes the point that operational issues such the availability of vendors, contractors, engineers, housekeepers, landscapers and managers that understand environmental systems, procedures and products are inhibiting the development of environmental practices.

The quality of environmentally friendly products has often been seen as a barrier due to their cost, availability and perceived lower quality. This has led to many hospitality organisations having an issue with brand assurance and the role that it could play in damaging their reputation.

Legislation & Accreditation

Kirk (1995, p.3) states that “The European Union has brought a large number of directives which relate to the management of the environment and many of these have been implemented as national policy.” In recent years Irish hoteliers as a result of certain legislation have been hit with high water and waste charges, an annual price increase in energy and the recent introduction of carbon taxes. (Bergin, 2008).

As stated by (Chan, 2008), some hotels have adopted a formal environmental management system or the internationally recognised ISO 14001 environmental management standard but the majority of hotels are still standing at the crossroads in adopting environmental management systems. Maasoud, Fayad, El-Fadel & Kamleh (2009, p. 200) believe that “the lack of government support and stakeholder demand as well as the fact that ISO 14001 is not a legal requirement constitute the most salient factors hindering the adoption of the standard.

According to Failte Ireland, in 2009, there were 907 hotels in Ireland and a total of 57,388 bedrooms of which only 145 hotels with a total of 8000 guest rooms were involved in the Green Hospitality Award, which is the multi-stage accreditation environmental management programme specific to the Irish hotel industry. It also equips hotels with the knowledge and structure to apply for the “EU Flower” which is the European Eco Label. (www.ghaward.ie). Ireland currently has only one hotel that carries the European Eco Label (Hotel & Catering

Review, 2009) which is a shocking statistic considering that Ireland constantly markets itself as a green country.

The green hospitality programme has identified the single greatest reason why environmental practices are unsuccessful in Irish hotels is because general managers fail to support and resource environmental practices which they believe to be a classic leadership issue (Bergin, 2008). According to ISO standards, a formal environmental management system requires a multitude of resources due to the changes required in organisational structure, planning activities, responsibilities, practices, procedures and processes in developing and implementing environmental practices.

FURTHER RESEARCH

To date this piece of research has covered the literature available in relation to the barriers to implementing environmental practices within the hospitality industry in Ireland. There is an increased awareness and publicity within the hospitality arena in relation to this concept of environmental practices but its implementation has not gained widespread acceptance for a number of reasons.

In order to achieve long term profitability, and increases market share as a hospitality operator, it is vital that these barriers are overcome and solutions are found. Therefore, there is a need for research in this area. The next stage of this research is the completion of primary research. This will be executed through semi structured interviews with hoteliers that are currently implementing environmental practices. This will allow the author to gain an understanding of how they effectively implemented environmental practices and the barriers they had they had to overcome in relation to personnel, finance, operations and accreditation. In order to gain an insight into the view of the wider hotel industry in relation to the implementation of environmental practices a questionnaire surveys will be carried out with all members registered with the Irish Hotel Federation.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlined the barriers that prevent hotels implementing environmental practices within their organisations. It is clear from the literature that there are many dominating

factors but resistance by owners and managers is a clearly a problem. The lack of knowledge in relation to the long term financial gain coupled with lack of responsibility with regard to reporting and environmental strategy are key factors for non implementation.

Many owners and managers are concerned with short term profitability and the need to meet budgets and deadlines. The implementation of an environmental strategy requires time and an investment outlay in order to achieve long term sustainability. As stated earlier by Taylor (2007, p. 7) “a prominent feature in public opinion surveys, is that environmental concern has been labelled as “an extra, affordable in a time of plenty, but disposable when hard times come”

There are a number of hotel managers who believe the introduction of environmental practices and policies can often be a deterrent for guests as they associated environmentally friendly hotels as lacking in luxury products and services. It is clear that the price sensitive guest does not want to pay for green initiatives and guests searching for a luxury break do not want to sacrifice their levels of comfort for the sake of the environment.

There is a resistance by managers to undertake formal environmental management programmes. This is due to lack of knowledge and training and also the investment in time, money and resources that is required in order to comply with standards and procedures leading to additional barriers to implementation.

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