# How Staff in the Hospitality Industry Act on Observations of Guests' Visual Signals: A List of Action Outcomes

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## Abstract

*In order for staff in the hospitality industry to properly exercise the role of host, they need to search for clues to be able to decode the needs of the guests and thereby act accordingly. Four focus group interviews with informants working in Danish hotels or restaurants were carried out in order to identify possible actions based on the decoding of guest observations. The data showed that actions often depend on the guest's purpose with the visit/stay, as well as both visible and unstated needs, the latter being left to the interpretation by the staff. The type of actions can range from engaging in conversation, supporting the guest in various situations to not acting at all, depending on the decoding of the needs of the guest.*

**Key Words** *Staff-guest interaction, guest observations, speech acts, host role*

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## 1. Introduction

Staff in the hospitality industry observes the guests' body language, facial expressions, artefacts belonging to the guests, and olfatics (smell) in order to understand/interpret their guests' needs (Authors 2021a). This reflects a non-verbal communication process where staff delivering a service and exercising the role of host, at the first encounter with a guest they typically have never met before, searches for clues as to whom the guest is.

The process is about staff in restaurants and hotels being observant, which appears to be a three-step process: First, being observant of whom the guest is, by observing the guest through sight, sound, and smell (Authors 2021a). Second, making sense of the observations in order to better exercise the role of host, that is, create a bond with the guests (Authors, 2021b). However, after the sense-making process, there is a third step: acting on the insights they have gained.

This paper will examine the third step. The focus is on how staff in the hospitality industry reacts to or acts on the insights they have acquired by first observing the guests' body language, facial expressions, artefacts belonging to the guests, and olfatics, and then makes sense of their observations. All of this represent an important interaction competence, which is likely to positively affect customer satisfaction (cf. Kusluvan et al., 2010).

## 2. Literature Review

It appears that the area of observing body language, facial expressions, artefacts belonging to the guests olfatics (making sense of the observations), and acting upon the resulting insight, is scarcely researched. Islam (2019, p.

i), in a major study, wrote that "Explorations of nonverbal communication in the hospitality industry have been academically overlooked and practically underemphasised". However, Islam's study of nonverbal communication in the hospitality industry suggested that nonverbal communication plays a role in building relationships between staff and guests. Among the findings of the study was that through *their* body language, hotel staff exhibited willingness to help guests and an understanding of the needs and requirements of their guests. In the staff-guest interaction, the guests decoded the hotel staff's body language in order to understand staff motives. The guests perceived a value in the kinesic exchange: the value being, for instance, a sense of safety, confirmation of pleasurable moments, and a deep relationship. The present study has a reverse focus: how staff in the hospitality industries observes guests and how they act on these observations, comprising another view on building relationships between hosts in professional hospitality contexts and their guests.

## 2.1. Service delivery theory

In service theory, service delivery represents a (often) complex process that has been described as an augmented service package, consisting of the accessibility of the service offering, the interaction between staff and customers and interaction between customers and service provider systems, and the customer's participation in the service delivery (Grönroos, 2015). The relationship between the staff and the guest can be analysed by using frameworks that split up the interaction (Holmlund, 1997). Holmlund has created a framework that split interaction up into acts, episodes, and sequences. An act is the smallest unit of analysis in Holmlund's model. Act is a word that indicates actions, tasks, work and similar synonyms, that is, behaviour. An example of an act can be seating a guest at a table in a restaurant in a hotel. Interrelated acts are called episodes; an example of an episode can be a dinner at a hotel restaurant during at stay at the hotel. Interrelated episodes form a sequence, which is defined as a period of time, for instance, the entire stay at the hotel (based on Grönroos, 2015, pp. 108109).

## 2.2. Speech acts and behaviour

It has been pointed out that in the hospitality industry, "service provision has a particularly high proportion of employee-customer interaction that requires an emotional offering, which, in turn, mandates genuinely caring attitudes, emotional connections to guests, warmth, and generosity" (Kandampully et al., 2014, p. 289). The quote refers to the personal interaction between host and guest in commercial hospitality settings, which in services marketing is called interactive behaviour and communication (cf. Grönroos, 2015). An emotional offering is when a host initiates to make an emotional connection with a guest. In a hospitality perspective, interactive communication is about what an employee says and does, and how the employee says and does it (Grönroos, 2015); which in linguistics is called a speech act (Searle, 1969), and which is commonly known as an utterance. Speech acts are an aspect of how we communicate through language (Searle, 1969, p. 16). Some utterances may implicate an action (Schreurs, 2017). Speech act theory is about fundamental aspects of how we speak, for instance, the use of idioms. In analysis, the following three concepts are often used: Locution: the meaning and reference of speech. Illocution: the communicative function of speech (what we actually say). Perlocution: the desired effect of speech. Illocution is what is said in a given context, for instance, a welcome, a promise, a piece of advice. In hospitality, there are illocutionary acts that are typical of hospitality settings, for instance, the speech act of inviting, the speech act of greeting, the speech act of requesting, and the speech act of rejecting (Schreurs, 2017). Speech acts represents certain values, and many illocutionary speech acts are, therefore, culturally defined (Searle, 1969, p. 24). Perlocutionary speech acts are about the specific effect that a speaker intends to create in a receiver; for instance, certain speech acts will make a guest feel welcome.

As mentioned above, some speech acts may be followed by the staff person taking some type of action. The action, or the acts, can be described by behavioural verbs, which can be categorized into categories, such as, for instance: Knowledge/Remembering; Comprehension/Understanding; Application/Applying; Analysis/ Analysing; Synthesis/Evaluating; and Evaluation/Creating (maricopa.edu (2021); Bloom, 1956). Examples of verbs in the six categories are: Knowledge/Remembering: indicate, name, quote, relate. Comprehension/ Understanding: explain, specify, prepare. Application/Applying: locate, provide, schedule, solve. Analysis/ Analysing: contrast, differentiate, question. Synthesis/Evaluating: arrange, improve, invent, manage, organize, plan.

Evaluation/Creating: chose, conclude, recommend (based on source). All of these behavioural verbs would appear to represent well-known staff behaviour in restaurants and hotels.

The aim of this paper to examine possible action outcomes when staff has made sense of their observations of their guests.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Data gathering

This paper is part of a comprehensive study examining hosting in a Danish hospitality context. In this section, the methodological approach will be elaborated, and it will be explained how data has been collected.

As stated, the purpose of this paper is to examine how staff acts according to their interpretations of the needs of their guests. According to Pratt (2009), qualitative research is useful for addressing "how-questions" and allows the researcher to produce in-depth explanations. The aim of qualitative research is to examine meanings and attitudes of the informants in relation to a specific research topic (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Thus, a qualitative approach was chosen in order to generate new understandings of hosting behaviour.

The data collection was carried in two phases. In the first phase, a total number of 17 semi-structured interviews were carried out between April 2019 and December 2019. All the informants had practical experience with working as hosts in either the hotel or restaurant industry. Based on key findings in the first phase we decided to expand our data collection. Thus, four focus group interviews were carried out in October 2020. The purpose of using focus groups was to produce new insights into hosting behaviour through group interaction and discussion (Morgan, 1997). The topics of the focus groups focused on how our informants exercise the role of host and how they decode the needs of their guests. In this sense, the themes to be discussed in the focus groups partly derived from the first phase of data collection. Using focus groups can thus be seen as a way of doing data triangulation (Patton, 1999). The focus groups were video- and audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. This paper builds primarily on data collected through our focus groups.

### 3.2. Analysing data

According to Alvesson (2011), interpretation is the cornerstone of analysing qualitative data. Inspired by Kvale (1997), we analysed the four focus group transcripts using a strategy called meaning categorisation. Meaning categorisation involves that transcriptions are coded with the purpose of reducing and structuring lengthy text material into more analysable parts. Inspired by Larkin et al (2006), we conducted a line-by-line analysis of each transcript. This process consisted of three steps: In step one, transcripts were read as a way of getting a preliminary impression of each interview. Initial reflections were noted in the margins while reading. Secondly, step two consisted of a comparison between transcripts with the purpose of identifying and labelling themes based on what each informant had been saying (Larkin et al., 2006). Finally, in step three main themes identified were written into an empty document, and key quotes from each interview were transferred to the document. The outcome was a document consisting of main themes with a number of interview quotes to support each theme. This enables us to bring interview quotes into the analysis. This is a way of giving voice to the interviewees and to empirically support the arguments being presented (Kvale, 1997).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Profile of the informants

Four focus group interviews with a total number of 17 informants were conducted. The informants were either currently working in the hospitality industry or had previously been working in hotels and/or restaurants. The job functions they held or had held contained extensive guest interaction.

**Table 1: Overview of informants**

| Informant # | Type of company | Function |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Hotel | Conference coordinator |
| 2 | Hotel | Front office coordinator |
| 3 | Hotel | Conference & Front office manager |
| 4 | Hotel | Front office manager |
| 5 | Hotel | Front office & restaurant assistant |
| 6 | Hotel | Hotel manager |
| 7 | Restaurant | Restaurant owner |
| 8 | Restaurant | Restaurant owner |
| 9 | Restaurant | Waiter |
| 10 | Restaurant | Waiter/consultant |
| 11 | Restaurant | Chef/restaurant owner |
| 12 | Restaurant | Hospitality management student/ waiter |
| 13 | Hotel | Front office manager |
| 14 | Hotel | Ass. Front office manager |
| 15 | Hotel | Hospitality management student/ receptionist |
| 16 | Hotel | Receptionist |
| 17 | Hotel | Receptionist |

## *4.2. Analysis of data*

Decoding the needs, wants and demands of guests, even if unstated, by observing and interpreting the different signs and signals is a complicated task, and acting on behalf of the decoding in a sensible manner requires that the staff in hospitality businesses is observant, curious, empathic, and some situations even demands for the staff to be courageous.

Informant #5 explains how she acts based on her decoding:

*"I always take a look at the guests when they arrive… make an assessment. So, when we say hello: Are you young, are you old, do you have a lot of luggage, do you smell of smoke, or similar things. Because I might then need to switch the rooms. If you're walking-impaired and 95, it's not a good idea to send you to the furthest room on $1^{st}$ floor, which was booked originally."*

Or if the guest brings a lot of luggage, she will be likely to switch rooms and tell the guest: "Why don't I move you to a room on the ground floor, so you don't have to walk that far with your heavy suitcases?" According to one waiter:

*"we – as hosts – are responsible for reading the guest carefully enough to know – hey, now is not the time for jokes, or now I can joke, now it's okay to laugh and have fun with you, and now it's time to present the meal in a proper way."* (informant #9).

In some situations, acting based on decoding the guests' needs means not acting at all. Several informants express that they have experienced situations, in which the interpretation of the guests' needs would be to leave the guests on their own. A hotel manager looks carefully at the guest, and "well, if they don't look open, we don't talk to them that way, and we don't approach them. …If a guest is reading a newspaper, I won't approach him to say: Excuse me, where are you from?" (informant #6) Informant #11 explains that "the role of host might mean that when decoding your guests' needs all you have to do is let them be… Because they would like to be left alone."

Informant #13 is well aware that "I don't have to ask, if I can read from the body language that he might not want to" (eds: talk). Another informant (#1) agrees that "I think you can easily tell, if it's somebody who looks away and not really seeks eye contact. Okay, this is then probably somebody being busy, and I won't take much of your time."

Acting based on the decoding takes different directions, which can challenge the role of the host. One of the informants, a waiter, tries to act in a way to be highly supportive to the guests, and his acting is illustrated in the following situation:

*"If it's a business dinner, it's important for me, with everything I got, to ensure that they don't see me, don't hear me, don't remember the food or anything else. I'll help this guy, whom I very quickly decode. His mission is to sell 700 containers to the guy sitting over there. So that's my task this evening. To help him sell those containers."* (informant #10)

Regarding hotel stays, the purpose of the stay often assists in the decoding process. A conference coordinator explains that she often distinguishes between business and leisure guest in her approach to the guests:

*"If they are here for leisure purposes, well, then my experience is that – well, they have so much more time and would really like to chat. ...whereas if the guests are here while attending a conference, then I'm – I'm more hesitant to find out if they have time or seem stressed and such."* (informant "1)

Decoding the guests' needs in order to act accordingly, either as part of a dialogue or entirely based on observations, can bring valuable knowledge to not just the host him-/herself, but also to other departments in the hotel. One of the informants ("5) notes that she and her colleagues not only observes the guest and acts in the direct meeting with the guest, but

*"then we use a lot of time also to pass along information to our colleagues, so they can be prepared for.. those guests, you should spend time talking with them tonight, because they are eager to hear about many things, or..."*

The importance of sharing observations with colleagues for them to act is supported by another informant (#1), who says that in the case of staff in front functions "it is extremely important that we, when handing over to our relief, remember to share pieces of information important for the guests."

Some situations even require staff to pluck up courage to act in an appropriate way. One of the front office managers works at a hotel, which is situated in the vicinity of a large hospital. Very often, patients or relatives stay at the hotel, and for the staff to engage in conversations "if a guest doesn't look happy or maybe even looks troubled, it's important to have the courage to also handle these situations and the courage to ask: Is there anything I can do for you – anything you need?" (informant #4)

Courage in a different sense might also be needed in the interaction with guests refusing assistance despite an obviously unstated need for guidance by the staff, and informant #3 argues that "based on experience you should not be afraid of the guest, not let the guest fob you off. We are here for THEM, and then you must simply pull yourself together."

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Acting based on observations of guests' signs and signals depends on the staff's ability to read and decode the needs, and they use the observations as clues to decide on an appropriate action. Particularly in the first encounter with the guest, the clues are collected via the use of sight, sound, and smell, as guests may not always state their needs directly.

Several factors help in the decoding process and guides the staff to appropriate actions, for instance the purpose of the stay, whether the action relates to the type of stay or is more in support of the guest's personal agenda. But also looking at the guest to find visible clues can help decide on the action needed: if the guest brings a bulky

luggage, reads a newspaper, avoids eye contact etc. Actions can range from adjusting bookings and engaging actively in conversations with the guest to not acting at all, if the clues indicate that the guest would most likely prefer to be left alone.

For further research it would be relevant to investigate if staff in the hospitality industry make use of extensive categorisation of clues in order to decide on appropriate actions, as well as to research if the data collected is valid only in a Danish hospitality context or applies to staff in a broader geographic sense.

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