# COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN GREEK HOTEL UNITS

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**ABSTRACT**

The hypercompetitive, globalized tourism industry, has come to heavily depend on the "attention to detail" strategy by the players aspiring to prosper, especially at the level of the Hotel Unit, for which it has become a sine qua non, given today's competitive threats. A Hotel Unit encompasses a diverse set of functions, demanding highly versatile personnel, with a plethora of capabilities and skills, all of which need to be managed in the most efficient way possible. One rather common characteristic of "Customer-Employee" relationships is the occurrence of conflict, sometimes benign in nature, while other times intense. While the customer may freely express his/her complaints, the employee is expected to receive it, whether it's justified or not. Higher level employees typically, abide by the dictum "the customer is always right" a short-sighted view, failing to address issues in an impartial manner. The employees often feel the lack of support by the management, leading them to being alienated from their work, becoming less engaged and reducing their effort, involvement as a result. The answer to these problems is a high quality leadership, which with the help of a powerful coalition will enable employees of all levels to resolve conflicts in ways acceptable to both the employees and the customers. Nevertheless, these leaders' qualities notwithstanding, the organization, in order to secure its prospects of survival and growth will need to formulate and implement the appropriate strategies and organizational structures that will fairly address the issue of complaint handling, regardless of their origin.

**Key-words:** Complaint Handling, Strategic Processes, Organizational Structure, Hotel Unit, Greece

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Each of the developing conditions of the contemporary local and international touristic environment presupposes that the existence and evolution of a hotel unit should be based on its qualitative integrity and its competitive force. A primary role in the achievement of these objectives is played by the provision of goods and services of the highest level by the unit itself, combined with the marketing of these objectives in such a way that will satisfy to the fullest extent the needs, desires and up to a point the traits of a customer (Oktay, 2011: 4239).

But as it frequently occurs, the extent and quality of the offered goods and services are construed with different evaluating criteria and disposition by the customers (Plymire, 1991), it is expected and in short inevitable that complaints will emerge and as a result conflictive situations between them and the staff will arise for which in most cases their resolution requires the arbitral intervention of the senior executives of the Hotel Unit (Ngai et al., 2007; Asimakopoulos et al., 2011).

And although the appearances of complaints on the customers' behalf are often inevitable, the satisfaction of the customer as to the above issue plays a major role in the proper function and survival of the Hotel Unit (Ngai et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2010). If, in fact, we take into account that each customer comes from a different background who views the Hotel Unit as a single and inseparable organization (Defranco et al., 2005 ; Chen et al., 2010), such negative opinions have a harmful impact in all proportions in both its internal and external surroundings (Mayer, 2015).

Therefore, the executives and employees should realize and comprehend the reasons for which these complaints arose and the customers' associated behavioral ways of expression, so that they will be in the position of diminishing or even eradicating them (Defranco et al., 2005). Moreover, every intention to conceal them acts inhibitory in the prospect of undertaking any correctional initiatives on the administration's behalf, while simultaneously hindering any well meaning disposition to convert a dissatisfied customer into a loyal satisfied customer (Oktay, 2011).

It is also worth mentioning that a customer's expression of complaints should not automatically signify that his reaction is justified. In many cases the customer is excessive and even unjust which may expose the employee to undesired situations and dangers; given the common perception of the administration that even the unjust customer prevails over the just of the employee.

Based on the above references, the purpose of this assignment is the development of innovative strategies of customer complaint management in a Hotel Unit, via utilization of appropriate structural

groups and functional processes in an attempt to radically face any of the Unit's members who raise issues that will create and express complaints.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The evaluating process of the "consumption" of a product or a service in a Hotel Unit may be defined as the means of confirmation, questioning and concealment of a value and its utility from the customer's perspective (Oktay, 2011: 4240). In this context, confirmation is realized in situations where the offered product and service satisfy the expectations of the customer, questioning-which is usually demonstrated in the form of dissatisfaction; often as a complaint; appears when there is a clear deviation between expectations and effectiveness of the "consumption" of the product or service from the customer, and finally concealment is perceived intuitively in situations when similar to the former case deviations exist, but for some reason the customer does not wish to demonstrate and much more express them (De Klerk, 2006; Oktay, 2011: 4240).

Research has recorded an inverse relation between the expression of a complaint and the satisfaction of a customer. Therefore, the more the number of the exposed customer complaints towards the administration of the Hotel Unit increases the less the Unit satisfies them and vice versa (Ali et al., 2010; Oktay, 2011: 4240).

According to Oktay (2011) the demonstration and expression of complaints signifies the starting point of diverse behavioral complaints of customers. Chronologically, before and after the expression of the above view, the field of behavioral complaining has been studied relatively well, at least as to why the customer expresses his reaction (Davidow, 2003: 225). Most of the times these behaviors are caused by the perceived dissatisfaction of the customer in relation to the response deficit of the hotel enterprise and its associates in the cost of purchasing their tourist package (Barlow and Møller, 2008; Oktay, 2011). In fact, Jacoby and Jaccard (1981) determine the behavioral complaints of their customers as an individual activity which entails the conveying of negative perceptions and messages to the Hotel Unit or even to the external parts of the Unit.

Particular research significance was given to the form of expression of behavioral complaints of the customers, as well as to the way of determining, classifying and facing the above complaints on the behalf of the Hotel Unit (Singh, 1998; Velazquez et al, 2006; Oktay, 2011) given the fact that they play a significant role in sales and profit, but foremost in the preservation of today's complex and intensely competitive global tourist field (Ngai et al., 2007; Samaraki, 2010; Mayer, 2015).

Similar gravity was given to the thorough examination of the cases of non behavioral replies that are referred to the situations where the customer either forgets or doesn't wish to express his

dissatisfaction (Day et al., 1981). It was clearly found that taking or not taking action, regarding the complaints, customers initially proceed to an intuitive benefit analysis (Plymire, 1991; Blodgett and Granbois, 1992; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002). Therefore if the cost of expressing a complaint and the time spent provide a greater benefit for the customer then he will act accordingly, in the opposite situation he will remain inert and quiet (Huppertz, 2003; Oktay, 2011: 4241).

Recently, extensive research has been carried out on different types and sizes of Hotel Units, on the employee and customer relationships according to the degree of the satisfaction of the latter. In the majority of the cases it was found that that relationship sustains high level satisfaction, a fact that ensures the necessary loyalty and therefore the re-visiting of the same Unit. In some cases, a rupture in the employee-customer relationship was found which was expressed in a form of complaint on behalf of the customer. The most important cause of complaint was attributed to the excessive demands of a customer on behalf of the employees. Most customers have certain expectations regarding the satisfaction of their needs. When their personal experiences coincide with these expectations, they seem completely satisfied.

Otherwise, depending of course on the development of the problematic situation and to the extent of his feeling victimized, the customer is led to the expression of his complaint with the notion that only then will there be a positive reaction on behalf of the Hotel Unit. The customer evaluates positively the offered service and feels the needed satisfaction only if the total value is greater than the total cost which he is asked to pay for. In the opposite case his dissatisfaction is indisputable. (Samaraki, 2010: 9-10).

Unfortunately, less emphasis has been placed on the consequences of the customers' behavioral complaints towards Hotel organizations regarding the human resource; especially when these behaviors are labeled as excessive (Davidow, 2003: 225). In the majority of the cases the employee feels deeply hurt and very often exposed to several dangers that may even lead to his loss of employment. The handling of such situations by management can be superficial and excessively unfair for the employee in order to achieve a positive "reaction" from and/or "impress" the customer.

## 3. THEORETICAL APPROACH

The hotel unit in its full function entails an aggregation of diverse human characteristics and features which it must mange in the best possible way. In the common bipolar relationship "customers-employees" often arise certain mild controversies to intense conflicting situations. The customer expresses these situations in the form of a complaint, while the employee is forced to succumb.

The complaints in situations like this are perceived as "productive" and "behavioral" gaps of the greater organization of the hotel unit, which determine the extent of the customer's trust in his

relationship with the unit and improve its effort to offer qualitative services for the greatest satisfaction of its customers. Under no circumstances should they be considered as the means of restitution, but as the tool used for the improvement of quality inside the unit. The expressing of complaints on the one hand and the improvement of the quality of the services, on the other, constitute initially a "conducive function" which is finally addressed as a "managerial necessity" for those complaints (Somaraki, 2010:10-11)

According to Samaraki (2010:10-11), Complaints Management in hotel units is determined as a strategical procedure whose aim is to successfully deal with "critical omissions and occurrences" that arise from the problematic communicative relationship between the employees of these units and the customers, in relation to restituting the satisfaction of the customer making the complaint and to stabilize the vulnerable customer-employee relationships. It presupposes taking all the necessary measures which the hotel unit is obliged to sustain and which fundamentally have to do with both improving the type and quality of the offered goods and services and the problematic stance of the staff towards the customers and vice versa (Tronvoll, 2007).

As these enterprises have to mostly deal with the human factor and people often make mistakes, the common prevailing notion that "the customer is always right" constitutes a short-sighted perception from which the high rank executives of the hotel units rarely truly wish to be disengaged and alter it. On the other hand, the employees intensely feel the lack of the executives' support and therefore frequently show signs of provocation, occasionally verbal aggressiveness towards the customers while in other cases spiritual alienation behaviors from their work.

For all the above, which function on a "thin red line", the leading figure and the high quality guidance coalition can become the basic factor for the mitigation or even the resolution of these situations completely (Kotter, 1996). But besides human quality, the enforcement of the appropriate strategical processes and organizational compositions for the development of a complaints management model, in a spirit of fairness of any aspect of the above - mentioned bipolar relationship originates.

**3.1 The Procedure of Temporary Management of a Complaint**

Since the moment of expression - statement of a complaint on behalf of the customer, an atmosphere of internal turmoil is created within the hotel organization. The intensity and range of this turmoil depends on both the extent of turmoil the customer wishes to achieve and the resistance of the hotel unit and managerial skills of the unit's executives. In fact, in some special or extreme situations this intensity reaches "epidemic" proportions and is easily spread throughout the whole organization with extremely negative consequences, sometimes even beyond the unit (Mayer, 2015).

As previously mentioned in several cases the complaint issue is blown out of proportion, or even if that is not the customers intention; and as a result an intense atmosphere of dissatisfaction is created this time on the employees' behalf, whose fate depends on the greatness and sensitivity of the hotel unit's administration.

Therefore, the flows and interactions of the created relationships since the moment of making the complaint on behalf of the customer are multidimensional and are expressed in a form of a Complaint Relationship Cycle ***(Figure 1).***

The poles of this cycle are the customer, the employee, who usually bears the greatest burden of the expression of the complaint and the hotel unit itself with its authorized for the matter administrative bodies. A special reference must be made to the formation of two basic forms of relationships during the expression of the complaints. On the one hand, the indirect relationship between the customer and the employee where the hotel unit intervenes conductively and on the other hand the direct relationship between the customer and the employee from which mutual explanations and resolutions are given without the issue reaching harmful proportions for all the involved parties of the hotel organization. Also worth mentioning are the development relationship flows that have a two dimensional physiognomy. One stems from the customer and the other from the employee, in a different form each time.

It is therefore obvious that the exploitation of this circular logic concerning complaint management should constitute the basis and the priority of the hotel unit if it wishes to achieve positive results towards the resolution of the matter of complaints and its consequences for the unit itself and its human factors.

### 3.1.1 Determination and approach of the cycles and cultural web of the customer

The hotel unit usually accommodates customers who come from different countries and therefore different cultures. In this case the added value of a hotel unit is also characterized by the capability of its administrative executives to identify all those particular surroundings variables that determine the individual and total cultural physiognomy and behavior of people from those countries (Hofstede, 2001). These particular variables can be expressed in the form of a range of "cultural cycles", the composition and co-existence of which will develop a web called the "cultural web" (Johnson et al., 2015) ***(Figure 2).***

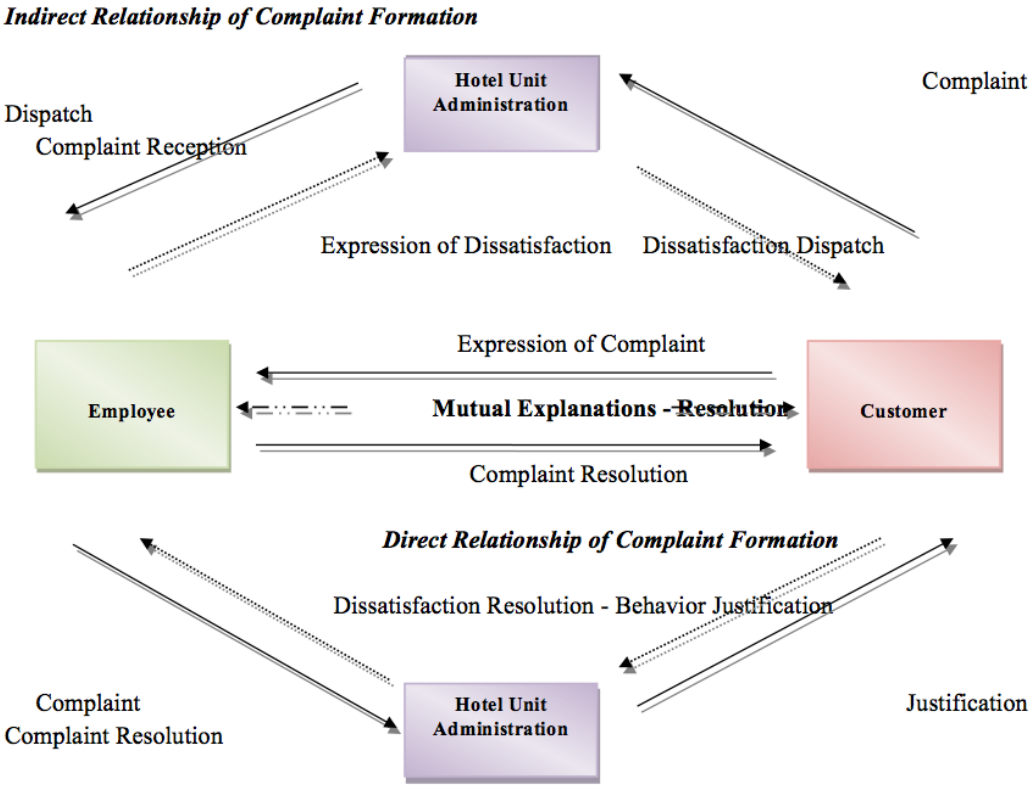


Figure 1: Complaint Relationship Cycle
Source: Own Depiction

Figure 1: Complaint Relationship Cycle

Source: Own Depiction

The “cultural web” as a plan and procedure identifies and records “systemic” a total of specific individual and social variables that co-exist in extensive cultural surroundings and determine the variables and their way of interacting. The more complete the collection and recording of the variables it entails is, the more successful and effective the determination and results of their relationship (Staehle,

1990; Johnson, 1992). In this particular study case, the case of a customer of a hotel unit, this format consists of those forces that act on their goals, expectations, planning, programming, the strategy and their every customer's tactics. Its full comprehension often impinges on the debility to exactly take into consideration all the parameters (here: cultural cycles) that may influence the stance and behavior of a customer.

It is therefore required on the hotel unit's behalf to thoroughly detect, haste and prediction of the cultural format of each customer in other words an "environmental investigation" which as a function of early warning is materialized via a wide ranging and pervasive procedure of detection of the above mentioned parameters that determine even its minimal portion (Brownlie, 1995).

In fact, the same "environmental investigation" will be enabled to predict the possibility of change and interacting that will gradually occur and which indisputably affect the reputation, business and even the existential status of the hotel unit, and on the other hand, its results will guide it to a correct prospect of implementing the necessary procedures for an effective organizational and functional re planning of the unit itself, to diminish or even the permanent resolution of critical situations and omissions, like that of complaint expression on behalf of the customers and the mistaken handling of the administrative executives which expose the hotel organization significantly (Tufts, 2014).

As those variables are deeply engraved in the subconscious of the customer, he bears them in all formats he experiences and reacts accordingly. If suddenly he realizes a series of negative for him modifications towards his awaited expectations in regard to the extent and way of satisfying his tourist needs and mainly he realizes an indifferent and provocative behavior of the hotel unit's staff, it is logical that he will react through expressing a complaint. In this case the administration of the unit should ***(Table 1)***:

- Have plans and alternatives prepared as to how to manage complaints, exploiting the strategical tool of the cultural cycles and the cultural web which are relevant to the complaining customer (Kau et al., 2006).
- To implement the "open door" policy. To, in other words, offer the customer the opportunity of easy access to competent bodies for the direct expression of a complaint. This policy is evaluated as a highly constructive hypothesis, as the content of the complaint is openly discussed and offers of moral or material restitutions to the customer are provided almost immediately (Drigotas et al., 1995).
- To notify the members of the hotel organization and the customer of the consequences that the person responsible for creating this situation will suffer. In this way, on the one hand the customer and his trust are restored and on the other hand the organization itself is protected from the possibility of similar accusations being made (Oktay, 2011).

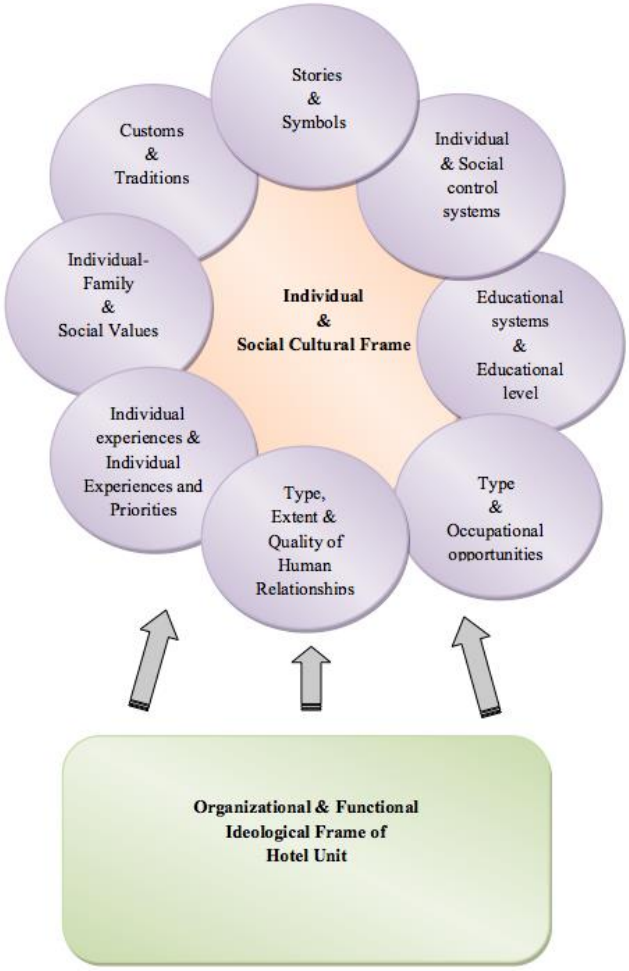


Figure 2: Cultural Cycle and Cultural Web of a customer of a hotel unit

Source: Johnson et al., 2015 & Own Depiction

### 3.1.2 Organizational and functional reformation

Because of the intense competition, the complexity of the internal and external surroundings of the hotel unit and its high operational intensity, the organizational and functional reformations are often necessary. It is also impossible nowadays for this to occur by only one person. Therefore, the creation of a powerful team is imperative, a powerful "guidance coalition" with a great degree of trust and with a common goal and vision (Kotter, 1996). The main duty of this team will be to strengthen the position and reputation of the hotel unit in a broader tourist field, via making vital strategical decisions.

Exploiting the power of its position, leading skills and its members' credibility, it will be able to act promptly and effectively on the significant matters that will occupy the hotel unit. As for the issue of appearance and expression of complaints on behalf of the customers of the hotel unit, the coalition will be in position to:

- Plan and clarify the strategical handling of such critical matters without discrepancies, insinuations and queries.
- Express itself less with austere logic or in some cases complacently and with more soul and emotions.
- Train and incite the employees to undertake behaviors and actions on their behalf that will not expose themselves and the unit to such issues.
- Promote the just and moral even if it causes dissatisfaction to the customer and satisfaction to the employee.
- Pursue the exchange of opinions and ideas with the executives, the employees, but also with the customers regarding the reasons of creation and the ways of handling such issues, emphasizing the significance of a customer's value and the employees offer.
- Systematically examine and face the mental and emotional reactions of the customer, the evaluation of the negative incident which caused the complaint and its expression to the administration. In this particular case, the expression of the complaint creates a stressful situation itself for the customer but he evaluates his skills for the handling of an unpleasant experience and on the other hand the severity of the impending harm which it is expected to bring to the unit (Lazarus, 1991).

### 3.2 The Procedure of Handling a Complaint Definitively

The resolution of a complaint should be considered on behalf of the administration as a temporary procedure. Its definitive resolution will be obvious much later and will depend on the out coming negative consequences for the hotel unit. As such, may be considered the bad reputation and the propagation of negative information from the customer to his family and friendly environment or to the touristic organization that provided him with the touristic package, but also the loss of repeating his preference for the same hotel unit (Kim et al., 2003).

For this reason the administration of the hotel unit should develop a system of collecting and processing actual facts which must be based on the below axes ***(Figure 3):***

- To the point of *degree of satisfaction* on behalf of the customers after they return to their place of residence, so that definitive impressions and views are stabilized during their stay at the hotel unit. The implementation of this procedure can be achieved by sending appropriate questionnaires via e-mail from the executives of the hotel unit or communicating on the telephone with the customers as in this way an element of intimacy is promoted.
- To the extent and degree the customers *repeat* their preference towards the hotel unit.
- To the extent of the size of the hotel's choice of new customers, as a result of their *constitution* by former complaining customers.
- To the extent of *neutrality* of the local and international touristic organizations that cooperate with the hotel unit and to what point this extent indicates indirectly the definitive or problematic adjustment and resolution of the issues that have to do with the expressed complaints of customers.

It is easily perceived that the higher the indicative figures, the less potent these negative consequences are for the hotel unit in relation to the former ways of managing complaints and vice versa.

**4. CONCLUSIONS**

In the contemporary touristic environment, the business prospect of a hotel unit mainly depends on the degree of its structural systems and the functional capabilities. In its full function it contains diverse human elements which must be managed with particular attention and increased effectiveness. In the prevailing ambivalent relationship "Customers- Employees", often arise mild controversies to intense conflicts. The customers express the situations in the form of a complaint, whereas the employee is forced to fairly or not succumb. The prevailing opinion that the customer is always right does not stand and unfortunately the high rank executives of the hotel unit do not always desire to change it. On the other hand, the employees intensely feel the lack of compassion and support from those executives and as a result feel deeply disappointed. The leading physiognomy of the administration, and so the high quality guidance coalition can become the determining factor for the limitation and even the full resolution of these situations. In addition, the implementation of the appropriate development strategies of a complaint management model from whichever side of the bipolar relationship it originates is considered imperative and it should constitute one of the basic priorities of the hotel unit if it wishes to maintain its participation in the touristic market.

Table 1: System of customer complaint management of a hotel unit

| **Methods & Procedures** | **Features** | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *1. Proactive Reaction-*<br><br>*Initiative* | 1. - Frequent communication with the customer to assure that all is well<br><br>- Emission of a constant positive feeling on behalf of the employees of the hotel unit | 1. - The generation of dissatisfaction (complaint) from the customer must be avoided<br><br>- Satisfaction of the customer for the particular interest shown on behalf of the hotel unit's administration | 1. - The negative feeling on behalf of the customer that everything is being done typically and purely out of personal benefit and not out of true human concern |
| *2. "Face to face"*<br><br>*policy* | 2. - Developing communication with the prominent will and the capability of the administrative executives to listen carefully and realize the complaint of the customer<br><br>- Disposing sufficient time and the necessary sensitivity towards the customer to detect the true causes of the creation | 2. - The expressed suggestions comprise essential information (data) for the hotel unit itself<br>- It contributes to the necessary correctional acts that have to be taken on behalf of the administration of the hotel unit<br><br>- It contributes significantly to the enhancement of the | 2. - There is a danger of spiritual exhaustion and internal disappointment, when the customer realizes ,as time goes by, that the suggestions which should have been accompanied with the equivalent solutions are continuously decreasing |

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| *3. "Op door" polic* | of the complaint.<br><br>3. - The door of each managerial executive is open to the customer to express his complaint | actual yield and extent of the expressed complaint<br><br>3. - It encourages the customer to express himself freely, to open communication, conversation and feedback for the matter of the complaint<br><br>- Deviating the supervising, for this issue, employees that could cause delay and distortion of the content of the complaint<br>- Quick adjustment of complaint management for all involved with transparent and effective procedures<br><br>- It contributes to the enhancement and strengthening of the relationships, leading towards mutual trust, cooperation and respect between the administration and the customer | 3. - While the "Open door" policy intends to encourage and instill a sense of transparency and openness, some customers hesitate to speak or to be honest because of fear of being intimidated, criticism or even censure |

Table 1: System of customer complaint management of a hotel unit ***(continuity)***

| **Methods Procedures** | **Features** | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *4.Written expression of a complaint*<br><br>*5. "Balanced arbitration" policy* | 4. - Supporting the will of a customer to submit a written complaint if for some reason he wishes to keep his anonymity<br>- Supporting of the customer on behalf of the administration for the written expression and deposition of his complaint<br>- Written reference and justification of the complaint on behalf of the customer<br><br>5. - Tripartite in the procedure of managing a complaint, the customer, the employee who caused the problem and the authorized high rank administrative executive of the hotel unit. The same framework is applied when the complaint is expressed on behalf of the | 4. - The customer feels that he will be taken seriously into consideration when his accusation is formally registered<br>- The written reference acts as a means of official confirmation for the administration and its employees, as well as a means of control<br>- It ensures a specific and highly responsible accusation on | 4. - The negative consequences of not resolving the issue of complaint can be unpredictably harmful for the hotel unit<br>- In some cases, the official written policies which are supported by the administration are considered as threats by the customers, especially in the case when mistakes or omissions appear, a fact that makes him abstain this initiative<br><br>5. - There is a danger of aberration due to the expression of a single point even if it was not intentional<br>- As time proceeds, it becomes clear as to whose side the "scales tilts" and as a result |

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|---|---|---|---|
| | employee for misconduct from the customer<br>- The administrative executive plays a coordinating and arbitrary role to the positions of the other two sides<br>- Everything concerning the unfortunate incident is described and recorded in the form of a discussion<br>- The definitive formation of its final position by the administration on this matter is not taken at that time, but alone in the direct future | behalf of the customer<br><br>5. - It is probably the most open and just procedure of approach of the underlying causes of the issue of the complaint<br>- Exaggeration is avoided when the managing of the conversation is done in a very responsible and just manner by the authorized administrative executives of the hotel unit<br>- After some time an atmosphere of laxity and relief is created, contributing | certain facial expressions of the involved can be distinguished, some stressful feelings and difficult human situations<br>- In rare occasions, for example, for reasons of emotional preference, haste or gain the danger of unjust managing of the matter on behalf of the administrative executive exists and as a result leads to moral disappointment and personal bitterness of the unjustified party (usually the employee) |

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| | | to the finding of a final solution | |

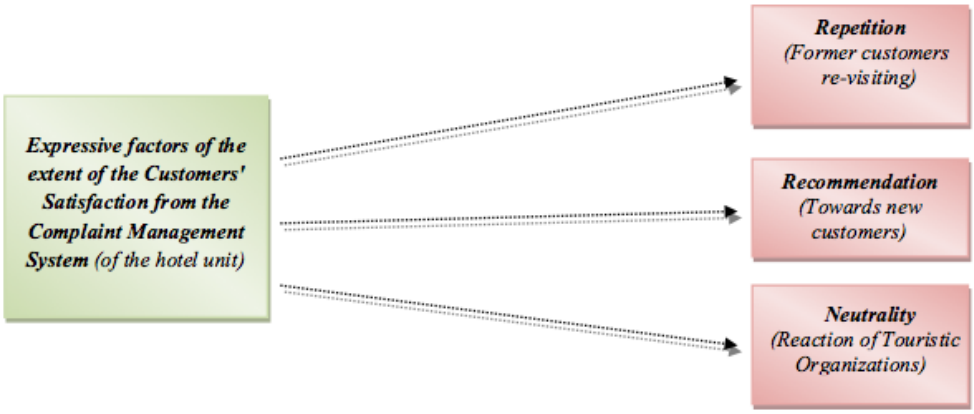


Figure 3: Axes of collecting and processing information System in relation to the complaint

of the customers of the hotel unit
Source: Own Depiction

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