

Optimization of Hotel Reception and Accommodation Service Management for Guests
with Disabilities
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Abstract: This paper focuses on the requirements expressed by travelers with disabilities in relation to their safety and comfort with reception and accommodation services offered by hospitality organizations, including hotels, motels and guest houses. These findings should open a clearer panorama to hospitality business managers by allowing them to develop better strategies for providing desired levels of friendly assistance and practical facilities. The approach selected is based on statistical methods. The compiled information was obtained via (a) feedback forms given to potential travelers with disabilities, (b) questionnaires given to hospitality business managers, and (c) interviews with hospitality business managers and organizations dealing with people with disabilities in North America, the European Union, Oriental Europe, and countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. However, the results can be easily adapted to other regions in the world. The conclusions are intended to be useful to people with disabilities and, in addition, to provide valuable information for hospitality business organizations that will allow them to improve their management criteria to retain these important guests while gaining new ones.

Key Words: international hospitality, inclusive travel, business management.

Introduction

Travelers with disabilities often have a difficult time finding affordable and accessible lodging. In some countries, such as the United States, there are federal laws that require the travel industry to be more accessible. In other cases, as in most countries of Eastern Europe, there are no visible efforts from either government or the hospitality industry to regulate and provide accessible accommodation. In a global analysis by region or country, there are three main vertexes visible in the interface between hospitality services and travelers with disabilities:

- *The needs of travelers with disabilities.*
- *Governments regulations* related to human rights directed to the hospitality sector.
- *The reaction of hospitality managers* to these needs and regulations in cases where the latter exist.

Each one of the vertexes has a constituency: travelers, government officials and functionaries, and hospitality managers. It is observed that wherever the three constituencies interact closely and evolve together, lodging services more often meet the requirements of travelers with disabilities.

The needs of those travelers are almost the same in every region and country reviewed in this research, but there are remarkable differences in the approach used by

governments and hospitality industry managers. According to a United Nations report published in Argentina's *Los Andes Newspaper*, in August 2004, there are approximately 600 million people with some kind of disability (p. 16). In many countries the degree of "inclusion" of that population into society is very limited, if not degrading.

The following data are the results of a survey carried out between May and October 2004. In this study, 133 managers representing 173 hospitality businesses from 21 countries were interviewed. Accommodation pricing ranged between \$30 and \$300 US per person in a double room. It should be kept in mind that the survey and observations reported here are based on opinions expressed by hospitality business managers and do not necessarily reflect their real behavior.

North America: U.S.A. and Canada

The situation in the United States and Canada for travelers with disabilities can be considered as one of the best in the world. Almost every hotel, motel or other public accommodation priced above \$40 US dollars per person double occupancy, has at least one room for guests with disabilities. The situation in this region tends to be better as a result of the work of a number of well-organized entities such as the Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality and Open Doors.

A study released by the Open Doors Organization (2002), found that adult travelers with disabilities spent more than 13 billion of US dollars per year on trips. In 2001 the lodging industry took in \$ 4.2 billion, resulting in almost 60,000 jobs created to provide services for people with disabilities. The same study also indicated that this population could double their spending if accommodation improvements were made. This is a considerable slice of the hospitality business "pie" to be ignored by lodging managers.

The above-mentioned Open Doors survey brought to the light what is happening in the disabled travel sector and revealed surprises:

- More than half of adult travelers with disabilities had stayed in hotels, motels or inns in the past two years and 22% were frequent hotel users (3 or more times in the 2 years prior to the study).
- Visitors with disabilities spent an average of nearly \$241 per visit
- Improvements in hospitality services, such as nearby room amenities and more accommodating staff could double their stay.
- Almost 85% of travelers with disabilities share their travel experiences with others.

Survey Characteristics and Results

Additional factors were discovered in a new survey among hospitality business managers upon which this research is based:

Form of interview: questionnaire feedback and e-mail

Managers interviewed: 36

Distribution per country: USA 32, Canada 4

Number of hospitality businesses analyzed: 51

Price categories: from \$40 to \$160 US per person double occupancy

Period of interviews: May – October 2004

- Almost 94% of those surveyed do not record the visit of travelers with disabilities. The other 6 % survey their reception staff from time to time.
- Ninety-six per cent of those surveyed offer at least one accommodating service, device or element of accessible infrastructure.
- Ninety per cent of managers surveyed are willing to dedicate one staff person to help travelers with visual or hearing disabilities needing assistance, but just 14 % of these businesses take into consideration infrastructure designs or provide appropriate devices to help these travelers.
- One hundred per cent of managers consulted agree that the best services for travelers with mental disabilities are provided when staff personnel are dedicated to meet their needs, but only 80% of managers are able to dedicate staff personnel to assist these travelers.
- Ninety per cent of those surveyed had at least one room or service for people with mobility disabilities; 20% are planning to make improvements in the coming year.
- Despite the fact that 100% of the managers interviewed believe that investments to improve facilities and services for guests with disabilities would be compensated by an increasing demand from these travelers, only 20% are planning improvements for the coming year.
- The main obstacle reported by managers to dedicating personnel or adequately preparing a room for travelers with disabilities is the lack of prior knowledge of the guests needs.

European Union

The European Union (E.U.) has taken a leading role on human rights issues in the world (Council of the European Union, 2003; European Union, 2004). Its members have been introducing new rules and organizing events like the “2003, European Year of People with Disabilities” as part of their strong human rights defense policies. However, its member states adhere to different administrative perceptions of social policy and thus slow down the process of creating homogeneous rules for all member states. Therefore, no clear and unified requirements for the hospitality industry can be arranged.

On the other hand, the general opinion of hospitality managers is that the European Union must introduce some economic incentives that entice better quality in the services offered to people with disabilities. This lack of coordination between government and hospitality industries appears to be one of the main barriers stopping the development of more accessible and comfortable accommodation for those guests.

Survey Characteristics and Results

Form of interview: questionnaire feedback and e-mail

Managers interviewed: 29

Distribution per country: Germany 6, France 5, Italy 5, Spain 3, England 3, Portugal 2, Sweden 2, Denmark 1, Holland 1, Czech Republic 1,

Number of hospitality business analyzed: 43

Price categories: from \$50 to \$170 US dollars per person double occupancy

Period of interviews: May – October 2004

- These venues do not record the visit of travelers with disabilities.
- Sixty-five per cent of those surveyed offer at least one accommodating service, device or infrastructure element.
- Sixty per cent of those surveyed can assign a staff member to help travelers with visual or hearing disabilities and approximately 10% of them are able to provide special devices or accommodation facilities to travelers with visual or hearing disabilities.
- Eighty-five per cent agree that best services for travelers with mental disabilities rely on special attention from the staff and 30% of those surveyed are actually able to exclusively dedicate staff personnel if reservation is made in advance.
- Fifty-five per cent of those surveyed have at least one room or service for people with mobility disabilities and approximately 5% are planning some improvement in the next year.
- Seventy per cent of managers interviewed believe that investments to improve facilities and services for guests with disabilities would be compensated for by an increasing demand from these travelers but only 6 % are planning improvements for the coming year.
- The main obstacle reported by managers to dedicating personnel or adequately preparing a room for travelers with disabilities is the lack of prior knowledge of the guests needs.
- The introduction of E.U. uniform policies and the lack of economic incentives to accommodate people with disabilities are among the main concerns expressed by hospitality business managers.

Eastern Europe

Eastern Europe has poorly developed the “inclusion” of people with disabilities into society. Therefore, the hospitality industry reflects the situation in the reduced services and facilities offered to those guests. The situation is more a cultural problem of attitude toward people with disabilities than an economic one. For example, many hotels priced at more than \$200 dollars per person per night do not have any service for travelers with disabilities.

Despite regulations provided (Russian Federation Government, 2001), even at constitutional levels, there are no concrete requirements from governments to the hospitality industry to enforce these regulations. Many managers are more concerned with attracting foreign investments than in appealing to travelers with disabilities.

Survey Characteristics and Results

Form of interview: personal, questionnaire feedback, phone call and e-mail

Managers interviewed: 37

Distribution per country: Russia 17, Ukraine 8, Romania 6 , Bulgaria 6,

Number of hospitality businesses analyzed: 44

Price categories: from \$50 to \$300 US dollars per person in a double room.

Period of interviews: May – October 2004

- The venues surveyed do not record the visit of travelers with disabilities or make occasional informal surveys of staff on this market segment.
- Twenty per cent of those surveyed offer at least one accommodating service, device or infrastructure element.
- Fifteen per cent of managers surveyed were willing to dedicate one staff member to help travelers with visual or hearing disabilities, but none of their corporate policies or practices take into consideration infrastructure designs or provide for appropriate devices to help those travelers.
- Sixty per cent agree that best services for travelers with mental disabilities rely on special attention from the staff but only 6 % are actually able to exclusively dedicate staff personnel.
- Ten per cent of those surveyed have at least one facility or service for people with mobility disabilities and none are planning some enhancement for the coming year.
- Almost 15% of managers interviewed believe that investments in facilities and services for guests with disabilities would be compensated by a higher demand from these travelers. None of them are planning improvements for the next year.
- The lack of adequate facilities and trained personnel staff, are the major troubles reported by managers in serving travelers with disabilities.

- Governmental subsidies to the hospitality industry (not for people with disabilities) is the most frequent suggestion among managers for effectively improving their services for guests with disabilities.

Mediterranean Countries

(Note: Since Greek tourism is mainly located at the seaside, it is considered here together with countries sharing similar characteristics, despite this country's location in the European Union zone).

Greece is making good progress toward comfortable accommodations for travelers with disabilities, while in Turkey the lack of facilities is, in most of cases, compensated for by the personal attitude of the staff toward travelers with disabilities. Unfortunately the assigned staff is not always sufficiently trained to do that job. In Egypt and Tunisia most of the hospitality businesses offering some accessible accommodation are international brands of 4 and 5 star rating. The overall situation of Cyprus is a combination of Greek and Turkish characteristics.

Survey Characteristics and Results

Form of interview: personal, questionnaire feedback and e-mail

Managers interviewed: 31

Distribution per country: Greece 9, Turkey 9, Egypt 6, Cyprus 4, Tunisia 3

Number of hospitality business analyzed: 35

Price categories: from \$30 to \$170 US dollars per person in double room.

Period of interviews: May – October 2004

- Hospitality services neither record the visits of travelers with disabilities nor make occasional surveys among their guests.
- Almost 60% of those surveyed offer at least one accommodating service, device or infrastructure element.
- Sixty per cent of managers surveyed are able to dedicate one staff member to help travelers with visual or hearing disabilities, but none of their businesses take into consideration infrastructure designs or provide appropriate devices to help these travelers.
- Eighty per cent agree that best services for travelers with mental disabilities rely on special attentions from the staff and 50% of them are actually able to exclusively dedicate human resources.
- Twenty per cent of those surveyed have at least one room for people with mobility disabilities and 2 percent are planning some enhancement for the next year.

- Seventy per cent of managers interviewed believe that investments in facilities and services for guests with disabilities would be compensated by an increasing demand from these travelers, but only 2% of them are planning some improvements for the coming year.
- The lack of adequate facilities is the main obstacle to serving travelers with disabilities that was expressed by managers.
- Foreign investments and governmental subsidies to the hospitality industry are the way suggested by managers to effectively improve services for guests with disabilities.

Conclusions

More accessible accommodations are found in the North American region (Figure 1), where almost every reviewed venue offers at least one room or service, including the assignment of personnel staff. However, there is a noticeable imbalance between managers' desires for improvements and their real financial capabilities, creating an opportunity for the implementation of a credit system. The introduction of a credit or investment system under special regulations and the introduction of strong federal tax reduction policies for travelers with disabilities could allow more where accessible accommodation for travelers exists and provide additional income for the hospitality industry.

It is expected that better conditions in the European Union should be achieved once their state members apply unified policies toward people with disabilities. Eastern Europe appears to be the least receptive, despite higher prices compared with other regions. Mediterranean countries share a common orientation toward personal attention toward their guests, trying to build up a kind of family environment around them. Managers are not only able but willing to help guests with disabilities which at the same time, partially compensates for the lack of facilities.

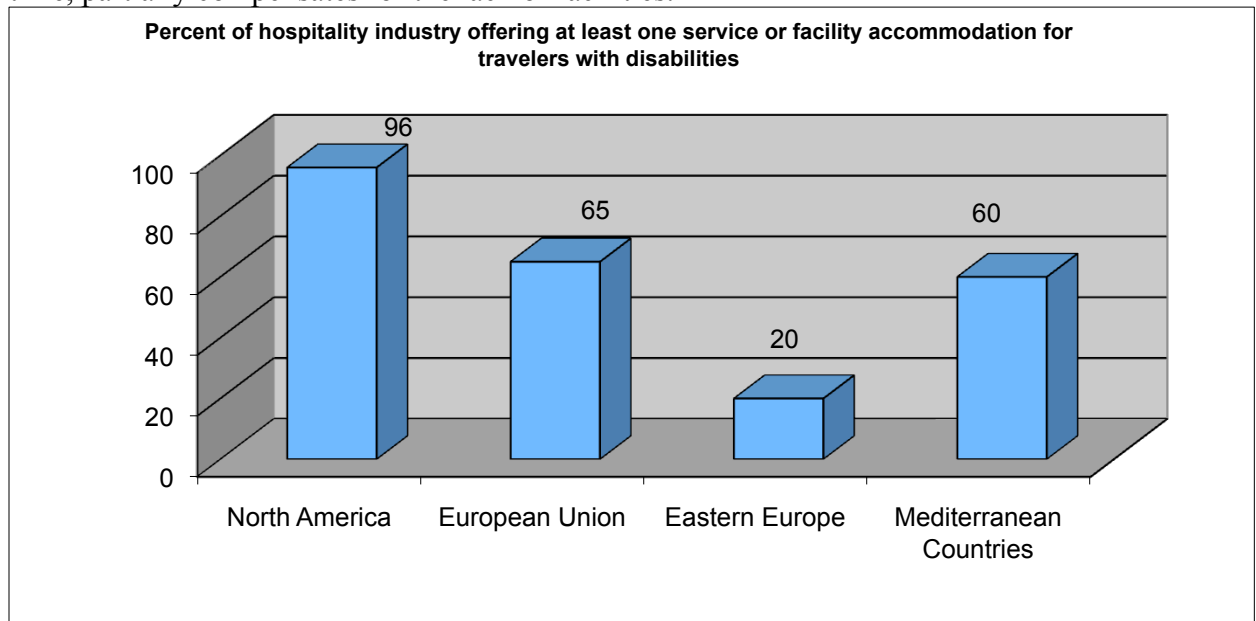


Figure 1

There are different points of views among managers on the best means to enhance services and facilities. These coincide with social behaviors and approaches to human rights issues in the reviewed regions. Additional differences in strategies toward guests with disabilities were observed. For example, while North American managers are making progress using their own funds, managers in Eastern Europe expect financial support from outside. These differences are clearly visible in the graph below of management attitude and projections (Figure 2).

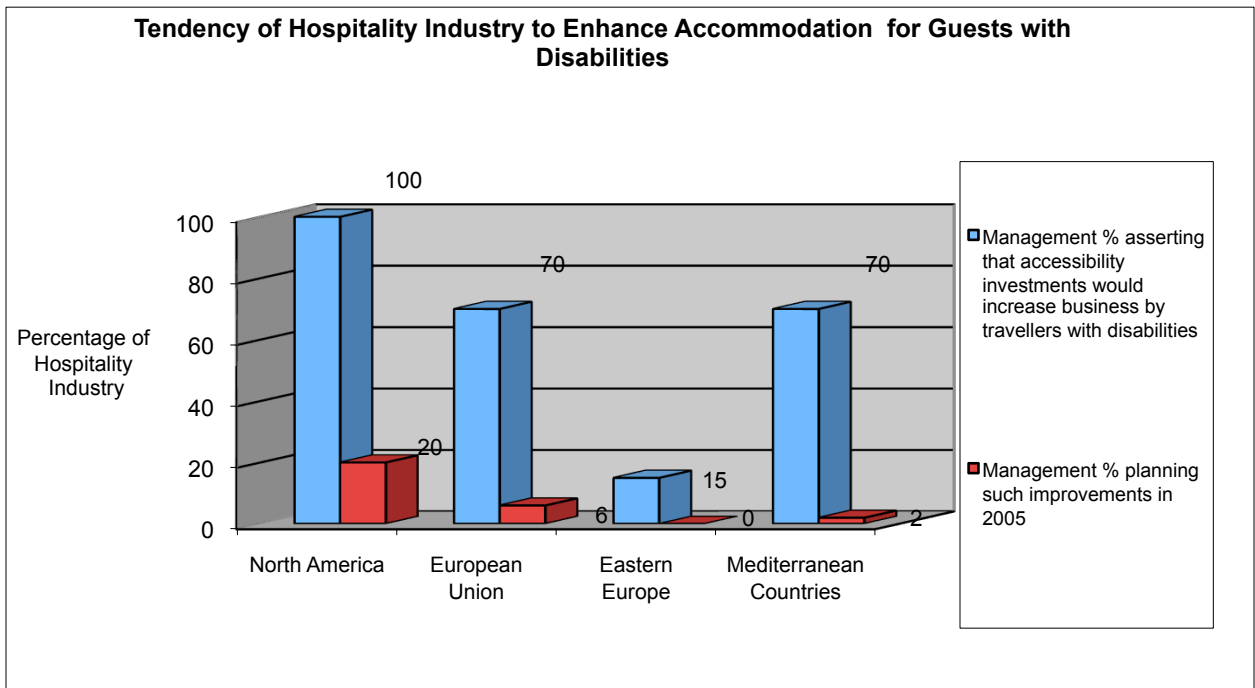


Figure 2

The same considerations of human right perceptions and management training per region are visualized in the next figures showing the trends and behaviors observed in this survey.

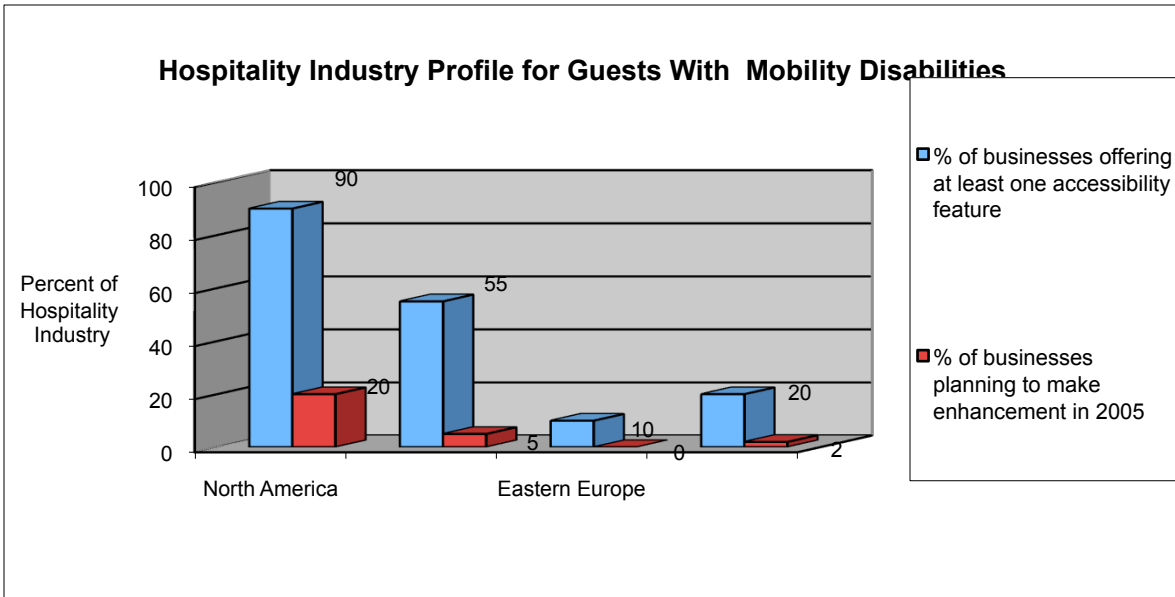


Figure 3

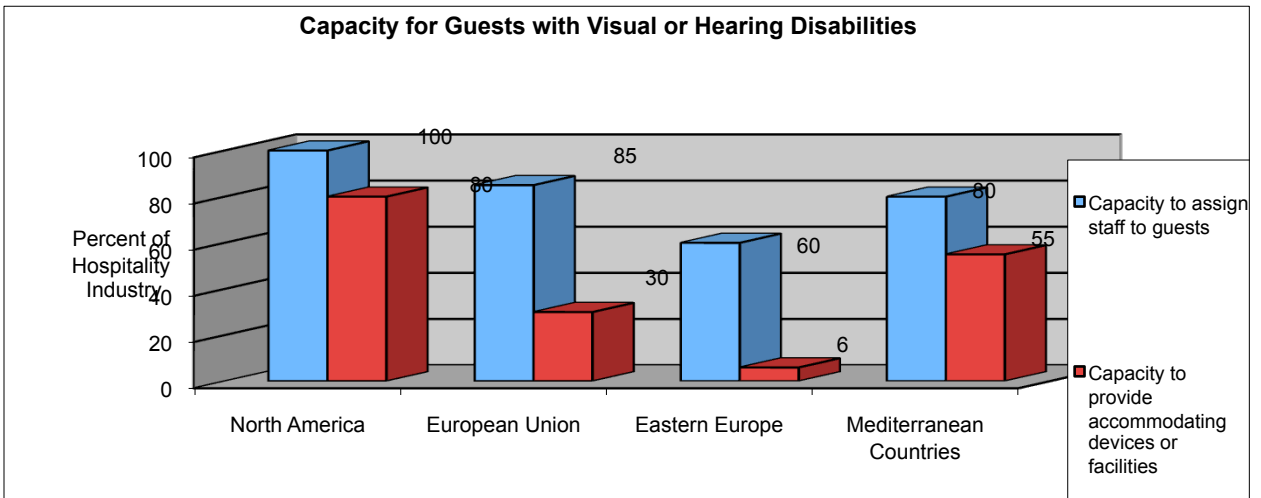


Figure 4

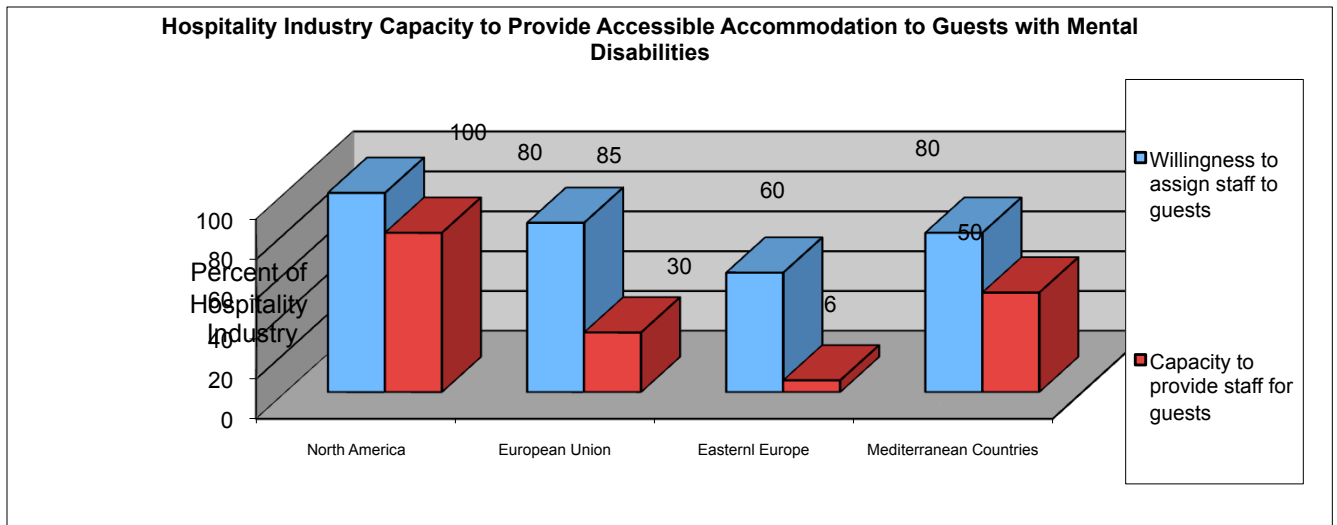


Figure 5

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