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PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY AND EXPECTATIONS OF HOTEL SERVICES

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ABSTRACT: This work presents the results of a study completed in the Hotel Industry, in the city of Natal, Brazil. Natal receives more than 2 million visitors per year and is also one of the cities with the largest numbers of tourist vacancies in the country, approximately 23,000. The objective of this work is to analyze the level of guest satisfaction from the gaps existing between the expectations and the perception of service received at hotels. Through questionnaires, 1440 guests from 6 hotels of the hotel network, falling into tourist categories, superior and luxury. The sample plan established two collection phases; the first in which guests were interviewed before checking into the hotel and secondly at check out. The study revealed that the majority of respondents traveled by airplane and came with tourism as their objective. The results suggest that there was a slight difference in the ranking of attributes, whether by category, or by hotel. The Spearman test confirmed that the expectations of the guests did not change significantly when the category of the hotel was changed. In the general evaluation by guests, from the gaps calculated, in thirteen of the attributes the performance of the hotels surpassed customer expectations.

Key words: service management, quality of service, hospitality, hotel.

1. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of services has frequently been studied by academics. The service industry occupies a significant place in the world economy and customer satisfaction has been sought out by companies that want to survive in a field of fierce competition. Customer satisfaction is a response to a product or service offered, where the value of the characteristics of the product or service received is evaluated. In this sense, consumer satisfaction is seen as the producer of positive or negative consequences that can determine the weakness or the success of organizations. The tourism sector, formed primarily by services, is currently one of the largest growing sectors. This sector is composed of various interdependent sub-sectors, such as transportation, accommodation, food, leisure, recreation, among others. The hotel market is considered the 'back bone' of the tourism system.

In this sector, Brazil presents very significant numbers in generating employment and income. According to Cavalcanti (2007), tourism currently generates around 2 million formal jobs and 6 million informal jobs. Data from the Central Bank (CB) indicates that 2006 was a year in which foreign spending in the country was particularly high, topping the charts at US\$4.3 billion dollars, surpassing totals obtained by traditional products, such as sugar cane, coffee, chicken, among others. With the hosting of the World Cup, there are projections that these values will surpass 6.3 billion in 2010 to 8.9 billion in 2014 (BRAZIL, 2010).

This work presents the results of a study completed in the Hotel Industry, in the city of Natal, Brazil. According to data from the Secretary of Tourism in Rio Grande do Norte (RIO GRANDE DO NORTE, 2010) Natal receives more than 2 million visitors per year and is among the most sought after destinations in

the Northeast. It has approximately 23,000 beds, representing the fifth largest hotel network in Brazil (ABIH, 2011). Recently, it has sought to attract small and medium-sized events and was named one of the venues for the 2014 World Cup. The tourist attraction is strongly based on the combination of sun and sea, the regional cuisine and particular style of hospitality culture. The characteristics of the hotels, the location, *modus operandi*, the local infrastructure and the purpose of the trip have a strong influence on guest expectations and perceptions in relation to hotel service. Consequently, important issues for the industry research are highlighted:

- What degree of importance do customers attach to different attributes of hotel service?
- Do customers in different hotel categories have different expectations in relation to the attributes of the service?
- Does the service offered by hotels surpass the expectations of customers?
- Are there significant differences in the level of service offered by different hotels concerning the different attributes?

The main objective of this research is to analyze the level of service quality, focusing on the gaps between guest expectations and the actual service offered by the hotel network in the city of Natal. Subsidiarily, to identify the profile of these guests and to assess these gaps in service quality and contrast them with the level of importance attached to the investigated attributes.

The originality and main contribution of this paper was to investigate the perception among guests from different hotel categories (tourist, superior and luxury) in relation to the attributes that make up the mix of service. The study allows managers to establish competitive strategies in tune with their target audience.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) define service quality as the result of a comparison between the customer's expectations before experiencing the services and their perception of the actual service experienced. Considering the differences between hotel categories and between hotels of the same category, it is important to investigate which service attributes are more important to guests and to what extent they are satisfied with the service they receive from the hotel network. Through questionnaires,

1440 guests from 6 hotels of the hotel network, falling into tourist categories, superior and luxury. The sample plan established two collection phases; the first in which guests were interviewed before checking into the hotel and secondly at check out.

Analysis and evaluation of tourism activities - and more specifically in the hospitality industry - are not easy due to the large number of attributes involved, their subjectivity and intangibility. This research represents an exploratory study conducted by one of the basic pillars of the service quality theory in which it can be measured by the difference between expectation (importance) and the actual service (performance). From the manager's perspective, the value of this research is in gaining the knowledge that hotels of a similar or superior category may offer the same service in a different way generating a positive service quality gap for the client. Moreover, the external evaluation provides benchmarking to identify best practices in competing hotels. Therefore, comprehensive understanding of customers' demands on the service quality of different types hotels would contribute to operating management improvement of the Natal hotel industry.

2. THEORETICAL BASE

Studies in the field of operation management show that the production strategies are developed considering the so called competitive criteria, making for better analysis in regard to asset and product positioning within the market /clients demands (KLIPPEL *et al*, 2005). Ward *et al* (1998) demonstrate four competitive priority categories used in the formulation of strategy development: cost, quality, service delivery time and flexibility. Each of these involves multiple items. Individual surveys measure the importance that respondents place on each of these categories. The companies' ability to articulate in a creative way the different attributes related to these priority categories enhances competence to deal with client needs. Paiva *et al* (2004) demonstrate that a companies' competences are only those perceivable for the clients and developed from the combination of operation competences generated through the creative and innovative use of their different resources.

According to Kim and Oh (2004), hotel companies should attempt to build close relationships with their suppliers. Hotel-supplier cooperative relationships in the business-to-business sphere, help reduce costs and improve quality to the end customers. Ho-

tel managers need to understand how their company can achieve an advantage over competitors. Crick and Spencer (2011) highlight that customers do not respond uniformly to specific service initiatives nor do they respond in the same way to service problems. The nature of the incident – that is whether it is of “low criticality” versus “high criticality” also appears to make a difference in the way that the customers in their study viewed the response of the service providers. They argued that it is important to consider what kind of rapport the company has with a dissatisfied customer when initiating the guarantee and the recovery process. To the authors, the foundations of quality service management have primarily emanated from two multidimensional models: (1) SERVQUAL, a product of the North American school of thought (Parasuraman *et al*, 1985); and (2) the Nordic European model, in which the studies of Grönroos stand out. Both have provided the genesis for much of the structured debate about how service quality must be conceptualized and managed.

Grönroos (2004) states that a service is a process that consists of a series of activities more or less intangible, which occurs in the interactions between the client and the service operators. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) highlight the heterogenous character of services and their perishability - the services cannot be preserved, stocked, resold or returned - and they cite intangibility as the main difference between goods and services. Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2005) highlight the aspect of simultaneousness of the service, stating that the services are created and consumed simultaneously. The services are a perceivable commodity and not being used in the appropriate time frame, are lost forever. For Lovelock and Wright (2006), the essence of the services can be represented by two definitions: a) it is an act or performance offered by one part to another; b) they are economic activities that create value and bring benefits to customers at specific times and in places. The performance is essentially intangible and does not result in any form of property.

According to Grönroos (2004), the quality of a service perceived by clients would have two dimensions: one technical dimension, or of a result, and one functional dimension, or related to the process. The technical dimension of quality is not sufficient to explain the service perceived by the customer. It also will be influenced by the way in which the service was provided. The work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) represent significant advances in

the unfolding of service quality has been defined as the result of a comparison between the expectation and what is perceived as received. They state that even service workers and clients of the same service relate different perceptions on the quality of the services rendered. The expectations of the clients comprise an important factor that influences the perception of the quality of service offered. When a client evaluates the quality of a service, he judges it by some standard previously established that is the base for the formation of his expectation. In case there is no important previous experience, the client can base his expectations on the advertising, pamphlets, communication word-of-mouth, among others (LOVELOCK; WRIGHT, 2006).

The classic work of Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1993) establishes a conceptual model that articulates the nature and the determining factors of client expectations in relation to the service. Moreover, they affirm the concepts of the level of service desired and the level of adequate service (the minimum acceptable). The region between the two levels represents a zone of tolerance that the client permits as satisfactory for the service received. The zone of tolerance is fluctuating being able then to vary according to the customer and the circumstances. For the customers, the most important attributes of services has a narrower zone of tolerance. More important attributes have, also, limits expectations close to the maximum of the scale used (ZEITHAML; BITNER, 2003). One of the requirements so that a company can perfect the offer of its services, and position itself adequately in relation to its competitors – is to know the degree of importance conferred by customers to the attributes that comprise them. The majority of studies of services are based on the notion of non-confirmation. This means that the quality perceived is measured with in comparison to the expectations and the experiences of a series of quality attributes.

Customer Satisfaction

Unsatisfied customers with a product or service are customers that can opt for another company or spread negative advertising by ‘word-of-mouth’. Aside from customer dissatisfaction, there are marginally satisfied or indifferent customers that can be drawn to the competition. Customer satisfaction performs a fundamental role in highly competitive areas, in which there is an expressive difference between customers who are just satisfied and cus-

tomers who are completely satisfied (LOVELOCK; WRIGHT, 2006). To know the levels of customer satisfaction, companies must discover how much their current customers are satisfied or unsatisfied. This can be learned, asking them which factors they consider more important for their satisfaction and after evaluating the performing of the service offered in each of them. With this information, the companies can evaluate the gaps in existing quality and adopt adequate strategies to increase the levels of satisfaction of their customers.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) offer a description of the process in which the customers create their expectations in relation to the performance of their providers. They affirm that dissatisfaction in services is caused by existing gaps between the expectations and the results perceived and they identify five potential gaps in services: among consumer expectations and management of perception of expectations; perceptions of management of consumer expectations and specifications of quality in services; between the specifications about the quality of service and the service in fact given; between the service offered to the client and that which is communicated about the service; between the expectations of the consumer and the perceptions of the service received. Bowersox, Closs and Cooper (2006), each, point to the nature of these gaps as being: different perceptions by managers of the true expectations of the customers; standards not uniformly distributed throughout the organization; the real performance is not that which was stipulated by the company; over extending commitments or exaggerated promises that generate high levels of expectations; the perception of performance is lower or higher than the real; and that of satisfaction/quality, added to whatever previous gaps there are.

Hotel Network Services

The technical literature presents various empirical works linked to the quality of services in the hotel industry. Luk (1997), on analyzing the culture of marketing in travel agencies of Hong Kong and their relation with the quality of service, affirms that the culture of marketing must take into account the quality of service, interpersonal relations, the task of selling, organizations, internal communication and innovation; they point out that the high quality in service can be obtained when a tourist company strongly promotes a culture of marketing oriented by the service and interpersonal relations.

Kandampully (2000), in Australia, analyzes the impact of the fluctuation of the demand in the quality of service having in sight that during the high season for hotel occupancies, with the excess in the demand for services, the quality of those services tends to decline. This study suggests that the companies in the sector must strongly consider the needs and expectations of the customers in the elaboration of their strategies in the seasonal periods. O'Neill and Charters (2000), also in Australia, analyze the quality of the service offered by links to attract tourists in that region. The study was done in four companies with the objective of knowing what was the most important to the customer in evaluating the quality of service. Atilgan, Akinci and Aksoy (2003), in Turkey, suggest a new approach for the research of evaluation dimensions in the quality of service in hotels. The research analyzed two groups of tourists from different countries. The results suggested that the operators must consider, in the elaboration of their itineraries and tourist packages, the cultural characteristics that affect the perception of the quality of service received.

Juwaheer and Ross (2003) analyzed the perceptions of hotel guests from Mauritius. They concluded that the quality of services fell short of guests' expectations citing empathy as the greatest gap. Nadire and Hussain (2005) analyzed the quality of service in Cyprus, using SERVPERF, applying the instrument to European customers visiting the site. The results found only two dimensions instead of the traditional five of SERVQUAL and European visitors are very demanding with regard to improving the quality of service. The study by Eraqui (2006), in Egypt, analyzes the tourist services from the point of view of internal and external customers. The internal customer, concludes that there is no tourism business environment that encourages employee creativity and regarding the external customers, there were complaints about the improvement of internal transportation and security.

Chen et al (2008) evaluated the quality of services in the Taiwan hotel industry. The paper divides the hotels into three types: international commercial tourism, holiday and motels and general hotels. The study emphasized the degree gap in service quality between the industry and the customers. Data analysis shows that service quality gap (perceived gap) of different types of hotels exists in several quality aspects; what's more, the perceived gaps, service quality aspects, and its items of different types of

hotel are also different. The analysis involved 43 different attributes. Jönsson and Devonish (2011) examined a typology of competitive strategies, which had not been previously extensively researched in the Barbados accommodation sector. Their study attempted to fill this gap by comparing and contrasting the competitive business strategies employed by hotels in Barbados. More specifically, the relationship between the ownership type, the size, the business structure and category of any given hotel and also the use of various competitive strategies. The results show the perceptions of employees and managers for different attributes of the service within the competitive strategy of the hotels.

In Brazil, Oliveira (2001) can be cited as a work that investigates the services that are considered more important in the choice of hotels in Foz do Iguaçu and concludes that for the guests, in this order, the factors of location, speed and efficiency in room service and in the restaurants were considered the most important. Carvalho (2007) analyzed the factors that influenced the satisfaction of the elderly in Camboriú-SC. He concluded that cleanliness, good service, security and location were the factors that most affected customer satisfaction. Barbosa (2007), in a study completed in hotels in São Paulo, concluded that the authenticity in the care of the guests, based on human values, makes possible the creation of friendly relationships and positively influences their satisfaction.

Gonzalez (2005) studies the factors that influence the satisfaction and generate the loyalty of visitors to Natal. This study concludes that the cordiality of hotel staff, cleanliness of the establishment, safety, restaurant service and the internet were the most important attributes in the satisfaction of the guests.

Wanderley (2004) studies the perception of the business tourist while choosing a hotel in São Paulo. It concludes that the daily rate and the locations are the most important attributes for business guests.

Robazzi (2006) studies the degree of hospitality in diverse graphic elements, of the appearance of the installations, at hotels in São Paulo. The results enable the proof of the tangibility of the hospitality, and the identification of forms and colors present in the reading process. Ferreira (2004) evaluates the factors that affect the satisfaction and the fidelity of north-eastern tourists in Natal who take the bus or car as a means of transportation. It concludes that cleanliness, environment, pool maintenance, bar and restaurant service, telephone service, service on local trips and price were the attributes that determined satisfaction and loyalty of the guests. Duarte (2006) studies the influence of the mood of the staff in the quality of services in a hotel chain in São Paulo. The study concludes that internal customer satisfaction induces satisfaction for the external customer.

Veiga and Farias (2004) evaluate the quality of services of a bed and breakfast in the Northeast of Brazil, through the application of the instrument, SERVQUAL. They conclude that the mode was shown to be very adequate, permitting the indication of factors in the improvement of services. Lima (2008), in research done with hotels in Paraíba, evaluates how the managers of the hotels use the metaphor of the theatre in the presentation of services to obtain customer satisfaction. It was concluded that owing to a gap of knowledge of management theory of impressions, the managers practiced actions in isolated and arbitrary ways. Table 1 shows a summary of the study referred to presenting the main attributes and dimensions related in the study.

Table 1 - Dimensions and attributes used in empirical studies.

Study	Attributes/Dimension
Luk (1997), Hong Kong, China	Solving problems, agreeability of the rooms, promotional deals
Kandampully (2000), Austrália	Service, cordiality
O'Neill and Charters (2000), Austrália	Cordiality, level of knowledge of the staff
Juwaheer and Ross (2003), Ilhas Maurícios	Decor, appearance, publicity material, location, natural areas, service, solving problems, closing the bill, menu
Atilgan, Akinci and Aksoy (2003), Turquia	Solving problems, agreeability of the rooms, promotional material, staff service, appearance external
Nadire and Hussain (2005), Chipre	Installations, appearance, service, promotional material

Eraqui (2006), Cairo, Egito	Cleanliness, accessibility, safety, price
Chen <i>et al</i> (2008), Taiwan	43 attributes in five dimensions: empathy, reactivity aspects, assurance, reliability and tangibles
Jönsson and Devonish (2007), Barbados	Cleanliness, courtesy, complaints, reservation, promptness, comfort, atmosphere, fixtures, sports, business center, room, price and items complimentary
Oliveira (2001), Foz Iguaçu, Brasil	Installations, service, solving problems, location
Veiga and Farias (2004), Aracaju, Brasil	Air conditioning, service, internet, appearance, structure
Ferreira (2004), Natal, Brasil	Service, cleanliness, environment, breakfast, location, solving problems
Wanderley (2004), SP, Brasil	Price, location, business center
Gonzalez (2005) Natal, Brasil	Service, cleanliness, internet, restaurant, bar, breakfast
Duarte (2006), São Paulo, Brasil	Service
Robazzi (2006), São Paulo, Brasil	External appearance
Barbosa (2007), São Paulo, Brasil	Service, solving problems
Carvalho (2007), Camboriú, Brasil	Service, agreeability, cleanliness, safety, location, price
Lima (2008), Natal, Brasil	decor, restaurant, maintenance, natural environment, business center

Source: Literature.

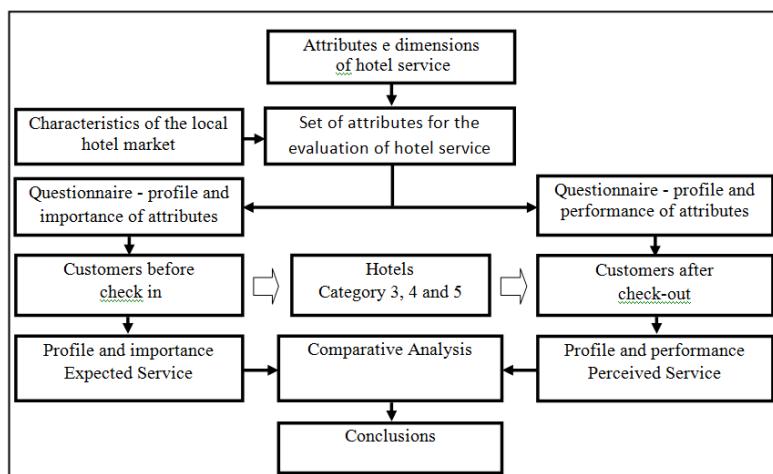
2. METHODOLOGY

The construct

With the objective of making the search for the answers to the basic questions of the research operational, the methodological schema in Figure 1 was adopted. In the first phase a literature review was done on services in general and hotel services. Next, the main attributes contained in the specified litera-

ture were selected. With the selection of the set of attributes to be researched, a research instrument was created through a questionnaire of structured questions. The application of the questionnaire was done in two stages. In the first the questionnaire was applied before the guests checked into the hotel and the second the respondents gave data regarding their socio-demographic profile and attributed degrees of importance to the 34 attributes of hotel services.

Figure 1 - Methodological schema



Source: author

The following phase consisted of applying the questionnaire after the guest had used the hotel services, during or after the check-out procedures. The guests were heard after the check in and at check out they were not the same ones, since the period the questionnaires were applied were different from one phase to another. Finally, a comparative analysis was done, identifying rankings of importance, analyzing the guests' expectations and later the analysis of performance, comparing the hotels among themselves. The gaps in service were established among the expectations and performance. The hotels were compared to one another and put into categories.

The Attributes

The composition of the final set of attributes used in this research obeyed the criteria of completeness, specificity and presence in relevant empirical studies. Some attributes were excluded for being juxtaposed or contained in other factors; others for not being compatible with the characteristics of local tourism, based on the binomial, sun and sea. The attributes were then submitted to the analysis of management of four hotels involved in the study, so that their contributions and adaptations to the characteristics of the local market were taken into account. Table 2 shows the set of the 34 factors used in this research.

Table 2 - List of attributes researched.

Reception and <i>check in</i>	Pool (cleanliness, safety, agreeability)
Hotel Appearance -- external	Offer of Internet wi-fi
Location	Offer of business center
Safety of the surroundings	Offer of service of bar
Safety in all of the installations	Offer of service of restaurant
Availability of promotional material	Menu variety
Staff appearance	Breakfast
Staff service	Ease of problem solving
Pleasant rooms	Ease of access to higher management
Air conditioning (temp., noise, control)	Execution of service in the allotted time
Cleanliness of the rooms	Social responsibility (sexual tourism and minors)
Sheets, towels, pillow cases	Reduction, reuse and recycling of resources
Pleasant bathrooms	Access infrastructure for physically challenged
Cleanliness and hygiene of the bathrooms	Front desk service
Pleasant common areas	Closing the bill and <i>check out</i>
Cleanliness of common areas	Daily rate per room
Maintenance of green areas	Price of services and products

Source: Author

Universe and Sample

The universe corresponds to the customers accommodated in the hotels for 60 days, corresponding to the period of the collection of data, throughout the months of July and August of 2010. The only guests who could respond were those that stayed for a min-

imum of 3 nights in the hotel. In the establishment of the guest universe the average values from hotel occupancy in 2002 to 2007 were considered, the average number of days stay and the average number of people per room for the hotel chain of the City of Natal according to Table 3.

Table 3 - Hotel Index for RN - 2001 to 2007.

Indicators	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Average occupancy rate (%)	49.47	46.86	49.05	56.13	60.38	54.02	52.55
Average stay (days)	3.65	3.28	3.39	3.45	3.46	3.30	3.27
Average number of people per room	2.04	1.97	1.91	1.97	2.03	1.98	1.99
Brazilian guests (%)	86.86	88.29	83.21	81.10	80.10	83.49	85.50
Foreign guests (%)	13.14	11.71	16.79	18.90	19.90	16.51	14.50

Source: RIO GRANDE DO NORTE (2010).

The sample is characterized as non-probabilistic. The guests were chosen for convenience: in the first phase, before check in; in the second phase during or after check out. In the sample plan, there were collected information on 240 guests from each hotel, 120 in each phase, totaling and eighth of the 1440 guests. The choice of size was guided by the balance between the cost of operation and the dimension of

sample error. Table 4 presents the sample error for the level of significance of 95%. A proportion estimated, p , of 50%, was taken, corresponding to the worst case scenario variance. The errors were calculated by STATDISK - 1998 software. Considering that the profile of the respondents is taken in two phases, the sample error for the profile in the categories is less than 5%.

Table 4 –Universe and simple.

Hotel	N. Apts	Universe	Sample size		Sample error %
			Before check in	After check out	
Hotel B – Touristic - 3B	40	749	120	120	8.2
Hotel F – Touristic – 3F	36	674	120	120	8.1
Hotel C – Superior – 4C	136	2.547	120	120	8.7
Hotel D – Superior – 4D	215	4.027	120	120	8.8
Hotel A – Luxury – 5A	395	7.398	120	120	8.9
Hotel E – Luxury – 5E	210	3.933	120	120	8.8
Touristic Category - C3	76	1.423	240	240	5.8
Superior Category – C4	351	6.574	240	240	6.2
Luxury Category- C5	605	11.331	240	240	6.3

Source: Author

The hotel was selected, respecting two for each category, among the ranking of sale by a national tourism operator and found among the twenty hotels most sold in Natal during 2009 (TREND, 2010). For ethical reasons to assure the participation of the hotels, their names are not being published.

Research Instrument

Deriving from the main objective of the research - to examine the quality of hotel service – two other important specific objectives arise: to understand the perceptions of the guests on the importance of the attributes and to evaluate the performance of each hotel within the same attributes. Two distinct questionnaires were elaborated for the application: one in the previous to the guests' entering the hotel; the other during or after check out. Both contained two modules, being one of them in common. In the common module, the questions searched relative information about the socio-demographic profile of the respondents regarding the motives for travel, the means of transportation used, family income, age, sex, main occupation, city and state from where they come. In the first phase, corresponding to the questionnaire applied in the previous phase, the guests' entrance, in the second module, the questions aimed at getting the respondents to give information about their ex-

pectations of the degree of importance of each of the 34 attributes presented in Table 2. The respondents attributed, on a scale of Likert of 11 points, values from zero (not important) to ten (very important).

In the questionnaire applied in the second phase, at the checkout, it was requested of the guests to answer questions evaluating the quality of the services offered at the hotel in which they stayed, related to the 34 attributes presented in Table 2. The respondents manifested their perceptions on a scale of Likert of 11 points, varying from zero (not important) to ten (very important). The questions were elaborated using a clear and understandable language to avoid any ambiguity. Both questionnaires referred to the same attributes. We tried to preserve as much as possible the meaning of the attribute about the service expectation (first phase) and the service received (second phase).

The Data Collection Plan

The data collection was accomplished using the research instrument, elaborated and tested specifically for this research. The questionnaires were validated in previous interviews with hotel managers and 30 guests. Some of the questions were changed to eliminate any type of ambiguity or incomprehension. The questionnaires were applied to the guests in the

months of July and August of 2010, uninterrupted. The researchers were seven students from the Tourism class, previously trained. In the first phase, the researchers addressed the guests from the airport to the hotel, on the tourism reception buses or in the hotel lobby, before the guests checked in. At the beginning of every week the hotels would report the number of guests coming in and the agencies that would be doing the transfers so that the researchers could organize their scales. In the second phase the guests were interviewed during or right after their checkout.

3. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The results presented here reflect 1440 valid answers, 720 of them before the check in and the other

720 after the checkout. From each of the 6 hotels, 240 interviews were executed, half before the check in and half after the checkout. The statistics were accomplished using the Statistical Package for the Social Science – SPSS, version 12.0. The majority of the respondents were women. In the first phase (F1) 60% were female respondents and 40% were male respondents. In the second phase (F2), 58% were female respondents and 42% were male respondents. The respondents were salaried workers with monthly family incomes above 6 wages (one wage is equivalent to approximately US 300 dollars), had more than 30 years, traveled by plane. The Southeast region was the main source of tourists. Tables 5 and 6 detail some of this data.

Table 5 - Profile of the respondents in each phase: age, activity and income.

Age	F1	F 2	Activity	F 1	F 2	Income	F 1	F 2
Less than 30	29.9	33.2	Self employed	17.6	9.9	< 2 wages	2.5	0.7
30 to 40	28.8	31.1	Business owner	16.7	19.6	2 to 5 wages	23.8	21.7
40 to 50	23.9	20.0	Employees	47.6	51.4	6 to 10 wages	38.2	38.8
More than 50	17.5	15.7	Others	18.1	19.2	> 10 wages	35.6	38.9

Source: Research

Table 6 - Profile of the respondents in each phase: origin, motive and means of transport.

Origin	F1	F 2	Motive	F 1	F 2	Transportation	F 1	F 2
North	2.1	2.1	Tourism	88.8	85.8	Car	9.2	6.9
Northeast	15.8	13.6	Business	6.4	4.2	Plane	90.6	88.2
Central West	11.8	17.2	Conferences	3.6	9.0	Bus	0.3	4.9
Southeast	55.5	50.5	Health	0.0	0.0	Ship	0.0	0.0
South	12.1	11.9	Other	1.3	1.0	Other	0.0	0.0
Abroad	2.8	4.7						

Source: Research

Importance of Factors

In the reliability analysis of the instrument used to measure the guests expectations - the importance of each attribute - the Cronbach's alpha was 0.841. In the evaluation, when each one of the variables was deleted, the Conbrach's alpha varied from 0.832 to 0.840. The figures show a set of variables with high internal consistency in the measure of expectations.

The respondents assigned their perception relative to the importance of the factors presented in Table 2, attributing a grade of zero (not important) to ten

(very important). The general nominal averages obtained varied from 6.70 (*offer of business center*) to 9.82, (*cleanliness of the bathrooms*). A preliminary analysis permits the assesment of what the respondents consider the attributes that were presented them, from medium importance to very important. Table 7 presents, in sequence, the average values obtained of the degree of importance of the factors researched. The averages were calculated and ordered in general (G), by category and by hotel. In category C3 (touristic) are the hotels 3B e 3F; in category C4 (superior), the hotels 4C e 4D; and, in category C5 (luxury), the hotels 5A and 5E.

In a third of the most important attributes, three are directly associated to the dimension of hygiene: *cleanliness of the bathroom, bedrooms and common areas*. The safety dimension appears with two factors: *safety of the installations and the surrounding areas*. The dimension responsibility appears with the *solving of problems* and *closing the bill*. The social responsibility and environmental responsibility is noted in the factors of *combat sexual tourism, accomodating unaccompanied minors and selling drinks to minors, waste reduction, reuse and recycle, and access infrastructure for physically challenged*. Still presented are *staff service*,

and *quality and variety of breakfast*; this last, a marked characteristic of the local hospitality.

On the other hand, in the bottom third, the guests gave little importance to the offers of availability of services such as: *the bar, restaurant, internet, business center and promotional material*. *external appearance, maintenance of green areas, access to higher management, and pleasant bathrooms* also were assigned among the least important. The other least important among relevant factors were, *daily rate per room* and *price for products and services*.

Table 7 - Ranking of importance of attributes: general, by category and by hotel.

Attribute	Aver.	Ranking by General, Category and Hotel										
		G	G	C3	C4	C5	3B	3F	4C	4D	5A	5E
cleanliness of bathrooms	9,82	1	1	5	1	3	2	7	3	1	2	2
combat sexual tourism	9,81	2	4	1	2	2	4	4	1	2	1	1
access for physically challenged	9,81	3	3	2	3	1	3	1	2	3	4	
cleanliness of bedrooms	9,79	4	2	3	4	4	1	5	4	5	5	5
staff service	9,69	5	5	6	7	5	5	3	7	4	9	
breakfast	9,67	6	6	7	6	6	8	8	8	7	7	7
safety installations	9,64	7	8	9	5	9	7	11	10	8	3	
waste reduction	9,62	8	13	4	8	8	19	2	5	9	8	8
solving problems	9,56	9	7	8	11	7	10	6	13	15	11	
safety surrounding	9,51	10	12	11	10	11	13	9	14	17	6	
closing the bill	9,46	11	10	15	12	15	6	23	6	16	12	
cleanliness of common areas	9,46	12	14	13	9	21	11	13	18	6	15	
service in the allotted time	9,42	13	18	10	14	14	18	14	11	13	16	
hotel location	9,35	14	9	16	16	12	9	19	12	20	19	
reception and check in	9,35	15	17	14	15	17	15	10	20	14	20	
front desk service	9,28	16	16	12	17	19	14	17	9	19	22	
sheets, towels, pillow cases	9,18	17	11	20	22	10	12	24	16	25	18	
agreeability of bedrooms	9,09	18	15	17	26	13	16	21	19	26	21	
hotel pool	9,04	19	28	24	13	32	23	12	30	12	14	
staff appearance	8,98	20	25	18	20	29	22	18	23	18	26	
menu variety	8,97	21	27	21	19	23	29	15	27	10	31	
pleasant common areas	8,95	22	24	19	21	25	25	20	21	21	24	
air conditioning	8,94	23	20	23	28	22	20	25	15	23	28	
maintenance of green areas	8,89	24	23	22	27	26	21	22	22	24	25	
daily rate per room	8,77	25	19	30	23	20	17	30	26	28	13	
restaurant service	8,76	26	31	26	18	27	32	16	31	11	30	
pleasant bathrooms	8,70	27	21	27	31	16	24	29	17	33	17	
access to higher management	8,69	28	26	25	29	24	27	26	24	27	27	
external appearance	8,64	29	29	28	25	30	28	27	28	22	29	
price for services/products	8,45	30	22	33	24	18	26	33	29	30	10	
promotional material	8,14	31	30	31	33	28	30	32	25	29	33	
bar service	8,03	32	33	29	30	34	33	28	33	32	23	
internet service	7,99	33	32	32	33	31	31	31	32	31	32	
offer of business center	6,70	34	34	34	34	31	34	34	34	34	34	

Source: research

The numbers of the ranking shown in Table 7 reflect the position of importance that the attribute has according to the responses of the guests of each hotel, in each category and in the general set. Visually, it is possible to verify the most significant differences in the ranking of attributes. The attributes are listed by the average general ranking of responses. Thus, the attribute *cleanliness of rooms* was the one with the greatest importance in the general set of answers (ranking 1). This position is maintained when considering separately guests in categories C3 and C5. The same attribute takes the fifth place in importance for guests in C4.

Seen by hotel, the ranking of the attribute changed position 1 (5A) to position 7 (4C). The attribute *offer of business center*, the last in the general ranking

of importance, was considered last also in all of the categories and in five of the six hotels, with the exception of the set of guests in hotel 3B, who put it in position 31. The positions in the ranking were considered from the starting point of the average nominal values. Depending on the level of significance considered, close positions can be statistically considered tied. A good statistic to verify in what way the ordering pointed out by the rankings are correlated is the correlation test by Spearman. Table 8 shows the correlation values obtained by a significance level of 1%. The degree of importance shows the expectations of the customers. The high correlation rates among the columns C3, C4, and C5 reveal that the ranking that the guests do regarding importance of attributes does not differ significantly for the three categories of hotels.

Table 8 - Correlation among rankings by the Spearman test.

	G	C3	C4	C5	3B	3F	4C	4D	5A	5E
G	1.00	0.93	0.97	0.95	0.88	0.92	0.90	0.90	0.87	0.83
C3	0.93	1.00	0.87	0.83	0.95	0.97	0.73	0.92	0.69	0.85
C4	0.97	0.87	1.00	0.90	0.84	0.86	0.92	0.91	0.85	0.75
C5	0.95	0.83	0.90	1.00	0.77	0.83	0.91	0.78	0.94	0.84
3B	0.88	0.95	0.84	0.77	1.00	0.88	0.71	0.90	0.64	0.84
3F	0.92	0.97	0.86	0.83	0.88	1.00	0.71	0.89	0.70	0.82
4C	0.90	0.73	0.92	0.91	0.71	0.71	1.00	0.72	0.92	0.69
4D	0.90	0.92	0.91	0.78	0.90	0.89	0.72	1.00	0.69	0.75
5A	0.87	0.69	0.85	0.94	0.64	0.70	0.92	0.69	1.00	0.64
5E	0.83	0.85	0.75	0.84	0.84	0.82	0.69	0.75	0.64	1.00

All of the correlations were significant to the alfa level = 0.01.

Source: Research

It is possible to compare the findings of this work with others previously published in the same field of research. In this study, the variables, *quality of staff service*, *safety installations*, *service in the allotted time*, *problem solving* and *cleanliness*, were considered to be amongst the most important attributes by the guests. This was repeated in the studies of Hussain and Nadiri (2005) concentrated in the north of Cyprus, also in the studies of Juwaheer and Ross (2003) of guests on the Mauritius Islands and in the studies of Jönsson and Devonish concerning the guests of luxury hotels in Barbados. The attributes, *promotional material* and *external appearance*, were ranked as the least important in this study and this result was repeated in both the studies of Juwaheer and Ross (2003) and Hussain and Nadiri (2005) respectively. It demonstrates that, despite the studies were carried out in different countries, with different samples and guests, the level of what was considered important for them was very similar.

In this study, the attributes, *hotel location* and *daily rate per room* were ranked of medium importance and least important respectively. It is worth highlighting that the respondents were basically tourist guests in Natal. Wanderley' study (2004) concentrated on business travelers in São Paulo city hotels aimed to identify their primary reasons for choosing a particular business hotel. The findings were: *hotel location* and *daily rate per room*. It is important to highlight the difference in the results according to the profile of the guests interviewed. When grouped according to dimensions, using the SERVQUAL model, tangibility and security were the most important attributes. Similar findings were obtained by Veiga and Farias (2005) in research with a particular inn's guests in Aracaju.

Hotel Performance by Attribute

The data presented, which follows, speaks to the average general performance, by category and by hotel.

Tabel 9 presents the averages of performance of the 34 attributes evaluated by the respondents. The averages vary from 1.56 (*promotional material*) to 10.00 (*breakfast, closing the bill and the business center*). Some items, such as *offer of business center, bar, restaurant, menu variety* and *access to higher management*, were not evaluated in two situations: when the hotel does not have these services, in the case of hotel 3B and 3F, or when the guest did not use these services, as is the case of the *access to higher management* in hotel 5A.

Some aspects deserve highlighting, by the rates of performance considered excellent, such as the attributes *cleanliness of bathrooms, cleanliness of bedrooms, staff appearance, quality of staff service, and closing the bill*. However, some attribute deserve highlighting for worst performance, such as the attributes *availability of promotional material, access infrastructure for*

physically challenged. The attribute *availability of promotional material* occupies the thirty first place in the ranking of importance, therefore, it is one of the attributes considered least important by the guests of the hotels in this study. However, the attribute *access infrastructure for physically challenged* occupies the third place in the ranking of importance and the general average of performance was 6.28, reaching the rate of 3.85 for hotel 3F.

The offer of structure of accessibility is not just that provided for the physically challenged, but also for easy access for the elderly. In Brazil, the data of the 2000 census indicates that 14.5% of the Brazilian population has some type of deficiency, totalling approximately 24.5 million people. The same census informs that 8.6% of the Brazilian population is comprised of elderly, and that this number could reach 15% by the year 2025 (BRASIL, 2006).

Table 9 – Averages of general performance, by category and by hotel.

ATTRIBUTES	G	C3	C4	C5	3B	3F	4C	4D	5A	5E
staff appearance	9.51	9.35	9.51	9.68	9.47	9.22	9.62	9.40	9.90	9.46
closing the bill	9.49	9.71	9.71	9.32	9.75	9.66	10.00	9.68	9.43	9.16
staff service	9.44	9.38	9.32	9.61	9.38	9.39	9.62	9.03	9.90	9.31
cleanliness of common areas	9.44	9.45	9.43	9.45	9.49	9.40	9.57	9.29	9.50	9.40
maintenance of green areas	9.44	9.35	9.57	9.37	9.00	9.35	9.75	9.37	9.29	9.44
restaurant service	9.44	-	9.18	9.65	-	-	9.35	9.02	9.95	9.33
cleanliness of bathrooms	9.42	9.42	9.17	9.67	9.60	9.25	9.29	9.05	9.87	9.46
cleanliness of bedrooms	9.39	9.47	9.05	9.64	9.46	9.49	9.20	8.91	9.88	9.40
bar service	9.39	-	9.37	9.41	-	-	9.56	9.01	9.83	8.87
safety installations	9.28	9.11	9.36	9.36	9.53	8.70	9.48	9.25	9.42	9.29
front desk service	9.28	9.20	9.27	9.36	9.46	8.96	9.23	9.30	9.68	9.01
pleasant common areas	9.26	8.95	9.40	9.44	9.40	8.50	9.57	9.24	9.71	9.16
hotel location	9.20	9.40	9.35	8.85	9.50	9.30	9.44	9.27	9.41	8.30
sheets, towels, pillow cases	9.09	9.18	8.86	9.22	9.32	9.05	9.03	8.69	9.70	8.75
safety surrounding	9.08	9.07	9.11	9.06	9.27	8.87	9.07	9.16	8.70	9.41
reception and check in	9.05	9.26	8.56	9.32	9.19	9.34	9.13	7.99	9.80	8.85
hotel pool	9.04	8.39	9.09	9.58	8.92	7.82	9.17	8.98	9.75	9.44
agreeability of bedrooms	9.02	9.11	8.89	9.06	8.94	9.28	9.02	8.76	9.80	8.32
air conditioning	8.99	9.18	9.13	8.66	8.70	9.64	9.18	9.09	9.60	7.71
external appearance	8.96	8.32	9.33	9.23	8.89	7.74	9.58	9.09	9.83	8.63
breakfast	8.96	8.14	9.21	9.53	7.41	8.89	9.24	9.17	10.00	9.06
pleasant bathrooms	8.81	8.69	8.74	8.99	9.20	8.19	8.87	8.61	9.41	8.57
service in the allotted time	8.80	8.46	8.84	8.95	7.66	8.52	9.08	8.25	9.54	8.38
combat sexual tourism	8.80	8.20	9.74	8.64	9.72	6.67	9.77	9.72	8.50	8.83
daily rate per room	8.80	8.95	9.09	8.37	9.54	8.35	9.14	9.04	9.03	7.70
menu variety	8.70	-	8.66	8.73	-	-	8.64	8.68	9.02	8.42
waste reduction	8.57	8.17	9.21	8.46	9.52	6.81	8.68	9.59	8.49	8.41
solving problems	8.10	8.32	8.10	7.88	6.83	8.52	8.38	7.93	9.80	7.05

price for services/products	7.82	7.94	8.14	7.41	9.49	6.52	8.11	8.16	7.34	7.48
internet service	7.77	8.42	6.47	8.17	7.76	8.87	5.69	7.30	7.96	8.61
access for physically challenged	7.70	6.57	8.30	8.25	9.30	3.85	8.91	7.70	9.62	6.82
offer of business center	7.62	-	9.50	6.68	-	-	10.00	9.33	6.64	7.00
promotional material	7.22	9.17	8.21	4.45	9.00	9.33	7.77	8.45	1.55	7.64
access to higher management	6.70	9.16	8.18	2.28	7.00	9.60	8.66	8.00	-	2.28

Source: Research

Table 10 presents the gaps in the perception between the guests' expectations and the performance of the attribute evaluated. Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Bitner (1985) affirm that the quality of service has been defined as the result of a comparison between the expectations (degree of importance) of a service and what is perceived as received (degree of performance). The positive gap indicates that the performance surpassed expectations. Negative gaps would indicate that the quality of service received is below expectations.

The attribute *safety installations* presented negative gaps in all of the hotels. The greatest was in hotel 3F, with -0.71. In the ranking of importance, this attri-

bute occupies seventh place. Other attributes that presented negative gaps in all of the hotel were: *menu variety, combat sexual tourism, waste reduction, access infrastructure for physically challenged*; highlighted is the last where the gap presented was -5.73 at hotel 3F. It is possible to observe that the greatest negative gap occurred at hotel 5E with the attribute *access to the higher management*. This attribute occupies the 27th place in importance in the ranking of this hotel, therefore making it a part of the least important attributes. The greatest positive gap occurred in the hotel 4C with the attribute *offer of business center*, where this attribute occupies the last place in the ranking of importance of the hotel.

Table 10 - Gaps between the performance and expectations.

ATTRIBUTES	G	C3	C4	C5	3B	3F	4C	4D	5A	5E
reception and check in	-0.29	0.07	-0.89	-0.07	-0.11	0.25	-0.52	-1.26	0.33	-0.47
external appearance	0.32	-0.03	0.52	0.47	0.37	-0.46	0.75	0.30	1.04	-0.08
hotel location	-0.15	-0.01	-0.08	-0.35	-0.00	-0.02	0.05	-0.21	0.37	-1.08
safety surrounding	-0.42	-0.31	-0.44	-0.52	-0.30	-0.32	-0.60	-0.27	-0.60	-0.44
safety installations	-0.36	-0.40	-0.24	-0.43	-0.08	-0.71	-0.17	-0.32	-0.26	-0.61
promotional material	-0.91	0.94	0.05	-3.58	0.35	1.53	0.53	-0.61	-6.45	-0.41
staff appearance	0.53	0.69	0.19	0.71	0.81	0.56	0.20	0.17	0.76	0.65
staff service	-0.25	-0.20	-0.40	-0.14	-0.33	-0.07	-0.21	-0.60	0.10	-0.39
agreeability of bedrooms	-0.07	-0.11	-0.45	0.34	-0.49	0.25	-0.30	-0.59	1.55	-0.86
air conditioning	0.04	0.15	-0.04	0.03	-0.49	0.79	0.26	-0.34	1.07	-1.01
cleanliness of bedrooms	-0.40	-0.27	-0.75	-0.17	-0.30	-0.24	-0.63	-0.88	0.13	-0.48
sheets, towels, pillow	-0.09	-0.22	-0.43	0.37	-0.27	-0.16	-0.15	-0.71	1.39	-0.64
pleasant bathrooms	0.10	-0.25	-0.25	0.84	-0.17	-0.34	0.26	-0.78	2.55	-0.86
cleanliness of bathrooms	-0.40	-0.34	-0.61	-0.24	-0.20	-0.48	-0.47	-0.75	-0.02	-0.45
pleasant common areas	0.31	0.26	0.09	0.58	0.52	0.00	0.20	-0.01	0.81	0.34
cleanliness common areas	-0.02	0.18	-0.07	-0.16	0.22	0.14	-0.05	-0.10	-0.24	-0.08
maintenance green areas	0.54	0.58	0.29	0.71	0.15	0.66	0.45	0.13	0.81	0.62
hotel pool	0.00	-0.10	-0.01	0.06	0.48	-0.73	-0.46	0.40	0.24	-0.08
internet service	-0.21	0.48	-1.40	0.02	-0.40	1.15	-1.69	-1.06	0.01	0.25
offer of business center	0.92	-	3.32	-0.12	-	-	5.19	1.79	0.92	-0.90
bar service	1.36	-	0.97	1.00	-	-	0.86	0.91	1.98	-0.09
restaurant service	0.68	-	0.17	0.55	-	-	-0.14	0.47	0.41	0.68
menu variety	-0.26	-	-0.63	-0.35	-	-	-0.90	-0.36	-0.52	-0.20
breakfast	-0.71	-1.41	-0.47	-0.22	-2.29	-0.52	-0.49	-0.45	0.25	-0.73

solving problems	-1.46	-1.19	-1.52	-1.67	-2.87	-0.81	-1.38	-1.54	0.34	-2.59
access high management	-1.98	0.57	-0.86	-6.16	-1.94	1.36	-0.25	-1.15	-	-6.50
service in the allotted time	-0.61	-0.73	-0.72	-0.53	-1.71	-0.48	-0.53	-1.27	0.03	-1.09
combat sexual tourism	-1.01	-1.49	-0.10	-1.26	-0.10	-2.88	-0.06	-0.13	-1.37	-1.10
waste reduction	-1.04	-1.17	-0.58	-1.26	-0.17	-2.16	-1.16	-0.15	-1.17	-1.35
access physical. challenged	-2.11	-3.14	-1.54	-1.62	-0.55	-5.73	-0.97	-2.11	-0.22	-3.08
front desk service	-0.00	-0.00	-0.27	0.25	0.17	-0.17	-0.22	-0.32	0.63	-0.14
closing the bill	0.02	0.29	0.26	-0.23	0.37	0.21	0.79	0.00	-0.01	-0.48
daily rate per room	0.02	-0.20	0.78	-0.48	0.25	-0.67	1.57	-0.01	0.96	-1.93
price for services/products	-0.62	-0.95	0.50	-1.40	0.19	-1.97	1.62	-0.60	-0.63	-2.18

Source: Research

Table 11 presents the greatest negative gaps, the degree of importance and the hotel in question. The attributes, *access infrastructure for physically challenged* and *ease in solving problems* – present in a third of the most important attributes—appeared five times among the greatest gaps which can denote that the

guests confront the same problems in different hotels. The greatest negative gap occurred in the attribute *access to the higher management* in hotel 5E, with -6.50, followed by *availability of promotional material* in the hotel 5A with -6.45. In this set of attributes one can affirm that the quality of service was less than expected.

Table 11 - Greatest negative gaps.

Attribute	Gap	Hotel	Importance Range
Easy access to higher management	- 6.50	5E	low
Availability of promotional material	- 6.45	5A	low
Access infrastructure for physically challenged	-5.73	3F	high
Access infrastructure for physically challenged	- 3.08	5E	high
Combat sexual tourism	- 2.88	3F	high
Easy in solving problems	- 2.87	3B	high
Easy in solving problems	- 2.59	5E	high
Breakfast	- 2.29	3B	high
Waste reduction	-2.16	3F	high
Access infrastructure for physically challenged	- 2.11	4D	high
Price for services and products	-1.97	3F	low
Easy Access to higher management	- 1.94	3B	low
Daily rate per room	- 1.93	5E	low

Source: Research

Table 12 presents the greatest positive gaps, the degree of importance and the respective hotels. The greatest positive gap was the attribute *offer of business center* in hotel 4C, followed by *pleasant bathrooms* in hotel 5A. The positive gaps reveal that the service was performed beyond the guests' expectations.

Table 12 - Greatest positive gaps.

Attribute	Gap	Hotel	Importance Range
Offer of business center	5.19	4C	low
Pleasant bathrooms	2.55	5A	low
Bar service	1.98	5A	low
Offer of business center	1.79	4D	low
Price for services and products	1.62	4C	low
Daily rate per room	1.57	4C	low
Agreeability of bedrooms	1.55	5A	medium
Availability of promotional material	1.53	3F	low
Sheets, towels, pillow cases	1.39	5A	medium
Easy access to higher management	1.36	3F	low
Internet service	1.15	3F	low
Functioning of air conditioning	1.07	5A	medium
External appearance of the hotel	1.04	5A	low

Source: Research

In the presentation of the greatest negative gaps, that is, the attributes with the greatest deficiencies in quality, there are eight instances of attributes with the high range of importance. In the greatest positive gaps, in which the quality goes beyond guest expectations, none of the attributes are found on the high range of importance. The results show that simultaneously there are situations in which hotels err for lack of service and err for excess. The resources that are being spent in excess for some activities can be spared and used on other attributes that are more highly valued by guests.

Analyzing the gaps in quality at each hotel, it is clear that the evaluations of guests vary considerably from hotel to hotel. Table 13 shows the gaps in quality in each category of importance of the attributes. The classification "superior", indicates that the performance of the hotel exceeded or equaled the guests' expectations. The classification of "inferior", means that, in the eyes of the guests, the performance of the hotel was below expectations. The table shows the global performance of hotel 5A as being superior to all of the others. Hotel 5A exceeded the expectations of customers in 22 of the 34 attributes, against just 5 of their competitor (5E).

Table 13 - Gaps in quality by hotel and by importance of attribute.

Hotel	High importance		Medium importance		Low importance		Total	
	superior*	inferior	superior*	inferior	superior*	inferior	superior*	inferior
3B	2	10	5	5	5	3	12	18
3F	2	10	5	5	4	4	11	19
4C	1	11	4	7	8	3	13	21
4D	1	11	2	9	5	6	8	26
5A	4	8	10	1	8	2	22	11
5E	0	12	2	9	3	8	5	29

• performance that was greater or equal to the expectations of guests.

Source: Research

Table 14 shows the best practices in each attribute when confronted in all of the hotels. Hotel 5A was the best in performance in 19 of the 34 attributes researched. In direct confrontation, within the same category, hotel 5A had the best practices in 26 attributes and hotel 5E, in just eight. In the category, "su-

perior", 4C obtained best practices in 27 attributes. In direct confrontation, in the touristic category, hotel 3B attained best practices in 18 of the 30 attributes evaluated. Table 12 presents the results of best practices in the general confrontation and by category.

Table 14—Number of attributes with best practices.

Hotel	General comparison			Total	Comparison within the same category			Total		
	Importance Range				high	medium	low			
	high	medium	low							
3B	1	1	2	4	8	6	4	18		
3F	0	1	3	4	4	4	4	12		
4C	3	0	2	5	10	9	8	27		
4D	1	0	0	1	2	2	3	7		
5A	6	9	4	19	10	11	5	26		
5E	1	0	0	1	2	0	6	8		

Source: Research

4. CONCLUSION

The hotel market in the city of Natal is highly competitive as tourism contributed with 51% to the GDP of this municipality in 2009 (RIO GRANDE DO NORTE, 2010). Moreover, the World Cup in 2014, of which Natal will host, looms large. The results of

a study of this nature can contribute significantly to the improvement of local hotel services and give value to this touristic hub as one of the most important in the country. As an initial objective, it was possible to outline a profile of respondents. As a highlight, the study revealed that the majority of respondents

traveled by airplane and came with tourism as their objective. The origin of respondents, a very important factor for the "commercialization of the hotel", was mostly centralized in the Southeastern States (50.5% to 55%), with São Paulo featured, as well as, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. The Northern region with 2.1% presented the lowest number of guests. Foreign tourists represented a contingency of less than 5%.

The second objective was to evaluate the importance of different attributes from the perspective of the guests. Analyzing the results obtained, it is clear that there was a slight difference in the ranking of attributes, whether by category, or by hotel. However, those that repeat on the highest level of importance, in the six hotels, were: *cleanliness of the rooms; access infrastructure for physically challenged; combat sexual tourism; breakfast; ease in solving problems; safety within the hotel and in surrounding areas*. In general, the Spearman Test confirmed that the expectations of the guests did not change significantly when the category of the hotel was changed.

The nominal values of the performance measured were high. However, it is necessary to note that five of the nine attributes that were in the greatest negative gaps in quality (performance below expectations) are in the group of the most important attributes for guests: *access infrastructure for physically challenged; combat sexual tourism; breakfast; ease in solving problems; and, waste reduction*. The gaps in quality of these attributes vary among hotels and categories. On the other hand, none of the twelve attributes that had the greatest positive gaps of quality (performance above expectations) are in the most important for guests; on the contrary, nine of them are among the least important to guests.

In the general evaluation by guests, from the gaps calculated, in thirteen of the attributes the performance of the hotels surpassed customer expectations. Of these, *closing the bill*, is found among the most important attributes. On the other hand, within the third with the greatest negative gaps (performance was below expectations), six were found among the most important to customers; these being: *cleanliness of the rooms; access infrastructure for physically challenged; combat sexual tourism; waste reduction; easy problem solving; safety within the hotel and in surrounding areas*.

The empirical study contributed in a significant way to the management of the hotels providing a

set of information that revealed the factors most important to customers, the gaps in services offered by the hotels in each attribute and a baseline of best practices in the hotel market. It is fitting, nonetheless, to investigate more deeply to what measure these gaps are significant and through the elaboration of matrixes of opportunities, importance vs performance and importance vs gaps, position each hotel in relation to best practices be they general or within each category. It is important that the companies have an evaluation by their guests and evaluate the services of their competitors, looking for best practices, adjusting conduct and repositioning themselves in the market.

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