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## Enhancing Competitiveness Through Guests' Experiences: A Typology of Customer Experiences in Upscale Hotels

Antoneta Njeri Kariru<sup>a</sup>, Oscar Ouma Kambona<sup>a</sup>, and Edwin Odhuno<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Ecotourism, Hotel, and Institution Management, Maseno University, Kisumu, Kenya;

<sup>b</sup>School of Business Economics, Mount Kenya University, Kigali, Rwanda

### ABSTRACT

This study sought to develop a marketing model that can enhance the competitiveness of four- and five-star hotels in Kenya. The main factors generating guests' expectations and delight were investigated after focusing on managers' and customers' opinions since these perspectives have generally been underexplored. The voices and viewpoints of these stakeholders were therefore incorporated and analyzed in determining an appropriate marketing model, which was based on the experiences of guests in hotels after examining what they considered important.

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## Introduction

The tourism sector employs thousands of people in Kenya and contributes to about 10% of the country's gross domestic product. In the year 2012, there were roughly 1.8 million tourist arrivals in Kenya that saw approximately 96.02 billion Kenya shillings being generated from the trade (Ministry of Tourism, Kenya, 2013). Nevertheless, Kenya still has room for increasing its tourist arrivals and overall earnings (Kenya Vision 2030, 2013). The Kenyan Vision 2030 aims at making the country a leading international and long-haul tourism destination by the year 2030 through adoption of among other strategies international marketing strategies. Such strategies include targeting high-end tourists in traditional and new markets such as Scandinavia, India, South Africa, and Japan. Subsequently, the vision further seeks to raise hotel/bed capacity in the country in line with the projected increase in tourist arrivals. This growth of tourism has moreover attracted many investors including international hotel chains who have mostly invested in the cities of Nairobi and Mombasa. This trend of international hotel investment is also expected to continue in the coming years in line with the projected growth in tourism. All of these call for the adoption of effective marketing strategies by both local and international hotels in the country.

It is apparent that Kenya's current tourism marketing strategies are not competitive. Accommodation and dining are elements of the tourism product; this

**CONTACT** Antoneta Njeri Kariru, PhD  [antonetanjeri@yahoo.com](mailto:antonetanjeri@yahoo.com)  Maseno University, Ecohim, Private Bag, Maseno 40105, Kenya.

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then means that the tourism and hospitality industries and their affiliates including hotels are not performing to their full potential. This potential can nevertheless be achieved if the hotels increase sales and business by satisfying their customers through successfully meeting their needs (Mohajerani & Miremadi, 2012) and informing them of their commitment to do so. This is because the customer should be the focus of their marketing activities (Bowie & Buttle, 2004) and not the product (Tsiotsou & Ratten, 2010). According to Knutson et al., (2006) as cited by Bharwani & Jauhari (2013, p. 824), “the hospitality industry, the world over is transforming from a product-focused, physical asset intensive business to a customer-focused, experience-centric one.” In light of this, efforts to identify and meet customers’ expectations have been the heart of research in service marketing. In addition, no tailored marketing model has been proposed and developed for the hotel industry in Kenya, which can be considered unique. Most models have been created for developed countries and so they may not truly reflect the best strategies for hotels in a developing country. This study therefore intended to develop a customer-driven marketing model, which could improve the tourism performance of four- and five-star hotels in Kenya by answering the following questions:

- (1) Which marketing strategies can be adopted by four- and five-star hotels?
- (2) Which dimensions make up guests’ experiences in these hotels?
- (3) Which customer driven marketing model can enhance the competitiveness of the hotels?

Marketing strategies that could be used by these hotels were therefore identified, after investigating the perceptions of managers and guests, based on the desires of customers visiting the hotels and on the marketing strategies pursued. These helped bridge any gaps that would have otherwise made them less competitive.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Guests’ Experiences***

Understanding and meeting guests’ needs can be effective marketing strategies that can increase market share (Juwaheer & Ross, 2003) and improve market image (Victorino, Verma, Plasehka, & Dev, 2005). Studies conducted outside the hospitality field such as that undertaken by Smith (1995) hint that world-class companies become leaders by listening to and addressing their customers’ needs, which are then turned into distinctive products.

The guest’s experience is a valuable yet underexplored marketing concept (Tsiotsou & Ratten, 2010). Experiences should augment products and services

(Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011, p. 11). Wall et al. (2011) quoted other scholars who described what experiences were. For instance, they cited Mossberg (2007) who explained that an experience is “a blend of many elements coming together and involve the consumer emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually”; Oh et al. (2007) who described experiences from customers’ views as “enjoyable, engaging, memorable encounters for those consuming these events,” and Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) who posited that:

Experiences are a distinct economic offering that are as different from services as services are from goods; successful experiences are those that the customer finds unique, memorable and sustainable over time, would want to repeat and build upon, and enthusiastically promotes via word of mouth.

Guests’ experiences can enhance organizational performance by satisfying customers through giving them memorable experiences created via themes such as atmosphere, services, communication, and products (Williams, 2006) thus influencing their emotions, generating competitive advantages (Tsaur, Chiu, & Wang, 2007) and repeat business.

According to Yoo et al. (2011) as quoted by Torres and Kline (2013, p. 645), “consumer behaviour is a topic of increasing interest as academia and industry constantly seek to better understand customers and devise strategies to retain them.” Torres and Kline (2013, p. 647) further stated that “knowing what constitutes outstanding service in the eyes of a customer and designing strategies based on such information is important” in order to improve service. They additionally posited that customer delight can arise from exceeding customer expectations, meeting the customers’ human needs, or even successfully triggering the customers’ emotions; these are called the confirmation, human needs, and affect-based theories towards customer delight, respectively. The authors added, “the hotel is an overall experience that engages guest emotions, attitudes and motivations” (p. 656).

Schmitt (1999, p. 53) explained that:

Marketers can create for customers’ sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), creative cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (ACT), and socio-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE).

He expounded that “experiences provide sensory, emotional, cognitive behavioural and relational values that replace functional value” (p. 57) evolving around sight, sound, touch, taste, feel, feelings, emotions, creativity, lifestyles, interactions, and exploration. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) held that the firm, market, and customer can act together to generate value through creating a variety of personal experiences which actively involve customers. Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) also noted that customers nowadays buy memories and experiences rather than service delivery and quality. Knutson, Beck, Kim, and Cha

(2009) identified four dimensions of these experiences (benefits, convenience, incentives, and environment), and further contended that experiences in hotels go beyond the physical evidence. Torres and Kline (2013, p. 648), on the other hand, found that “delighted customers are those who have had an extraordinary experience in a hotel: making their stay memorable—that is making their stay an experience.” The two authors revealed the most frequently mentioned attributes of customer delight to include “catering to guest needs, staff friendliness and professionalism, exceeding expectations and high quality food and beverage with aspects such as lobbies, entertainment facilities, pools, use of guest name and creativity in service delivery being less important” (p. 642).

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Study Population and Sampling***

Kenya has 162 star-rated hotels (The Kenya Gazette, 2003), employing thousands of managers and catering to over 6 million domestic and foreign tourists annually. These facilities are also located across the country. As a result of and due to time and financial constraints, the participants chosen were limited to managers in four- and five-star hotels in Nairobi and Mombasa and their customers. However, since almost all four- and five-star hotels that have been gazetted are located in these regions and the same criteria is used to classify them (meaning that these facilities share similar quality and service levels), the findings were generalized to all four- and five-star hotels in the country.

The Creative Research Systems’ formula (Creative Research Systems, 2013) was used to calculate the managers’ sample size. The 102 managers who filled in the self-administered questionnaires and 9 managers who were interviewed were purposively selected because the researchers were targeting key informants. Consequently, respondents included marketing executives, sales managers, marketing managers, communications managers, directors, general managers, assistant general managers, resident managers, operations managers, human resource managers, business development managers, public relations managers, guest services managers, guest relations officers, departmental heads, and supervisors who felt that they were knowledgeable and informed enough to complete the questionnaires and respond to interviews.

A convenience sample of 224 guests who had spent at least one night in a four- or five-star hotel in Kenya during the study period was selected using the census technique. This implies that the findings be generalized with care; however, the guests were of different nationalities meaning that the results reflected local, national, regional, and international populations. The guests were approached at the hotels and at tourist attraction sites such as beaches, heritage sites, game reserves, and national parks in Mombasa and Nairobi.

## **Research Instruments**

The managers' questionnaires and interviews asked them to discuss hospitality marketing and the extent to which the marketing strategies of excellent hotels addressed the following factors: quality of rooms and meals; nutritional content of menu items; variety of menu; food safety; cleanliness of restaurants and rooms; room amenities; business hours of operation of restaurants; room services; benefits given to guests; prices; value of meals and stay; service speed; level of automation of processes; the reliability, knowledge, skills and courtesy of staff; parking availability; accessibility of the hotel; location; security; appearance of staff; appearance of the hotel's exterior; crowding; other customers; layout and decor; atmosphere; experiential marketing; relationship marketing; advertising; Internet marketing; corporate social responsibility; personal selling; and public relations. These indicators were generated after review of literature and previous analysis of guests' interview transcripts. The customers' interviews explored the main determinants of their purchase decisions whereas the questionnaires had open-ended questions on their most memorable experiences while in the hotels.

## **Data Analysis**

*T* tests were calculated to explore how managers and guests perceived the marketing strategies. The proposed model was explored using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) which allowed for the exploratory analysis of constructs and relationships thus providing an advantage over regression and correlation by giving a complete picture of the inter-relationships among constructs. Exploratory SEM (ESEM) unlike confirmatory SEM does not need theory in advance and is therefore often used to generate theory. ESEM using SMART PLS entails the construction and testing of formative and reflective models which comprise of inner and outer models that respectively show the relationships and indicators of latent variables (Wong, 2013). Reflective models have indicator variables that point away from the latent variable, while formative models have indicator variables that point into the latent variable.

Wong (2013, p. 16) stated that:

Being a reflective model, the following should be reported; variance for endogenous variable, inner model path coefficients and their significance, outer model loadings and their significance, indicator reliability, internal consistency variability, convergent validity, discriminant validity and structural path significance in bootstrapping.

Relevant measures of validity and reliability including individual items reliabilities (internal consistency reliability), reliability for the composite of measures of a latent variable (composite reliability or CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) were computed. Discriminant validity can be calculated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion in which the square root of the AVE should be

greater than the correlations among the latent variables. The recommended cut-offs for the factor loadings are  $\geq .63$  (Wong, 2013), for indicator reliability are  $\geq .40$ , CR  $\geq .60$ , AVE  $\geq .50$  (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell, 1992), and the  $t$  statistics of inner and outer models are  $> .196$  for .05 confidence levels (Wong, 2013) and  $.165$  for .10 confidence levels. Wong added that collinearity issues including variance inflation factor (VIF);  $F^2$  effect, which indicates the contribution of an exogenous variable to an endogenous variable and indirect; and total effects and their significance in case of mediations should be investigated.  $F^2$  effects of .02, .15, and .35 depict small, medium, and large effects, respectively, while VIF values equal or greater than 3.33 show collinearity issues (i.e., “some indicators are redundant”; Peng & Lai, 2012, p. 471).

Blindfolding is a procedure that is used to determine the predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) and validity of the inner model (Gorondutse, Hilman, & Nasidi, 2014). Cross-validated redundancy and cross-validated communality are the most common methods of generating the Stone-Geisser’s  $Q^2$  though cross-validated redundancy is preferred.  $Q^2$  scores greater than .00 show predictive relevance (Peng & Lai, 2012; Yusr, Othman, & Mokhtar, 2012) with  $Q^2$  values of .02, .15, and .35 revealing small, medium, and large relevance, respectively.

Qualitative data on the guests’ memorable experiences and the marketing strategies was analyzed and presented using thematic analysis and the NVIVO 10 software. All patterns, themes, and categories were identified. The data was coded and then noded, and later arranged into themes that were later presented as narratives.

## Discussion

### *Characteristics of the Hotels, Managers, and Guests*

Only top-, middle-, and lower-level managers completed the self-administered questionnaires. A total of 58 (56.90%) of them worked in four-star hotels while the other 44 (43.10%) were employed in five-star hotels. The nine managers who responded to in depth key informant interviews were top- and middle-level managers. They were assigned the codes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I. All the managers worked in hotels that targeted local, national, regional, and international markets.

Most guests were male and between the ages of 20 and 80, with the oldest being over 70 years old. The sample was predominantly Kenyan with a few Europeans, Asians, Americans, and other Africans. A majority of the 198 guests who filled in self-administered questionnaires had visited for business and leisure while others were on tour or attending conferences, seminars, workshops, retreats, or functions. Many visited the hotels annually. However, a number had frequented for the first and second times. Most had stayed for one week with a few having been accommodated for up to three months.



Whereas 74 (37.40%) learned about the hotel through word-of-mouth (WOM; from friends, relatives, and coworkers), 34 (17.20%) from travel agents, 19 (9.60%) from the organization they worked for, 18 (9.10%) from advertisements, 17 (8.60%) from the Internet, 5 (2.50%) from a tourism expo, 5 (2.50%) from the Internet and friends, 4 (2.00%) from the media, 3 (1.50%) from WOM and advertisements, 2 (1.00%) from a travel agent and a tourism expo, 2 (1.00%) from TripAdvisor, 2 (1.00%) walked into the hotel, 1 (.50%) from a magazine, 1 (.50%) from the hotel's expo, 1 (.50%) from WOM and a tourism expo, 1 (.50%) from a business expo, and 1 (.50%) from the media and the organization for which she worked.

### ***Descriptive Statistics: The Marketing Strategies of Excellent Hotels***

Table 1 reflects the mean scores and standard deviations (SD) on managers' and customers' expectations of the marketing strategies of excellent hotels. All the scores were above 5, showing that all the items were very important.

### ***Structural Equation Modeling: Developing a Customer-Driven Marketing Model***

As shown in Figure 1, a seven-factor marketing model that reflected the marketing strategies and their indicators was developed using PLS-SEM. The seven strategies were labeled Ambience, Communication, Destination, Hospitality, Product, Service, and Value. As illustrated in Table 2, these factors also had significant loadings.

The ambience strategy was represented by four items: "atmosphere of the restaurant," "atmosphere of the rooms and lobby," "layout and decor of the restaurant," and "layout and decor of the rooms and lobby." These items had factor loadings of .86, .88, .88 and .83, respectively, and squared loadings of .74, .79, .78, and .69, respectively.

The communication strategy had six indicators: "advertising," "experiential marketing," "Internet marketing," "personal selling," "relationship marketing," and "sales promotion." These variables had factor loadings of .76, .76, .82, .88, .75, and .91, respectively, and squared loadings of .58, .58, .68, .77, .57, and .83, respectively.

The destination strategy was represented by six variables: "accessibility," "appearance of the hotel's exterior," "business hours of operation," "location," "parking," and "security." These items had factor loadings of .79, .83, .80, .69, .86, and .78, respectively, and squared loadings of .62, .69, .64, .47, .73, and .61, respectively.

The hospitality strategy had six items: "courtesy of front desk staff," "courtesy of restaurant staff," "knowledge and skills of front desk staff," "knowledge and skills of restaurant staff," "reliability of front desk staff," and "reliability of



**Table 1.** Mean scores on managers' and customers' expectations of the marketing strategies of excellent hotels.

Factors addressed by the marketing strategies of excellent hotels	Managers' expectations		Customers' expectations		Gap	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Variety of menu	6.33	.84	6.44	.88	-.11	.298
Nutritional content of menu items	6.22	1.13	6.55	.93	-.33	.012
Food safety at the restaurant	6.55	.72	6.78	.58	-.22	.008
Quality of food and beverages	6.52	.68	6.73	.58	-.20	.012
Quality of rooms	6.56	.68	6.70	.57	-.13	.093
Cleanliness of restaurant	6.59	.67	6.77	.48	-.17	.022
Cleanliness of rooms	6.59	.64	6.76	.53	-.16	.029
Room amenities	6.53	.65	6.48	.78	.05	.526
Room service provided at the hotel	6.42	.77	6.48	.84	-.06	.527
Service speed at the restaurant	6.56	.68	6.55	.93	.01	.862
Service speed at the front office	6.59	.66	6.63	.76	-.03	.667
Level of automation of processes at the restaurant (e.g., order taking, payment)	6.30	.87	6.20	.84	.10	.329
Level of automation of processes at the front desk (e.g., during check in, check out, payment)	6.29	.83	6.23	.79	.06	.531
Courtesy of personnel at the restaurant	6.48	.85	6.66	.66	-.18	.063
Courtesy of front office personnel	6.57	.73	6.68	.65	-.10	.217
Reliability of employees at the restaurant	6.50	.74	6.66	.77	-.15	.104
Reliability of front office employees	6.48	.68	6.65	.70	-.17	.039
Knowledge and skills of staff at the restaurant	6.49	.68	6.59	.72	-.10	.242
Knowledge and skills of front office staff	6.41	.78	6.62	.70	-.20	.025
Price of menu items	6.15	1.11	6.50	.99	-.34	.007
Price of rooms	6.24	1.00	6.49	1.03	-.24	.047
Value for money derived from the meal	6.28	.87	6.44	1.06	-.16	.191
Value for money derived from staying in the hotel	6.27	.98	6.51	1.09	-.23	.070
Benefits given to repeat customers	6.31	.91	6.18	1.21	.13	.334
Atmosphere of restaurant (e.g., noise, music)	6.46	.76	6.59	.69	-.13	.152
Atmosphere of the rooms and lobby (e.g., noise, music)	6.36	.71	6.67	.66	-.31	.000
Layout and decor of the restaurant (e.g., furniture, color scheme, furnishing)	6.30	.81	6.38	.70	-.08	.352
Layout and decor of the rooms and lobby (e.g., furniture, color scheme, furnishings)	6.25	.88	6.42	.70	-.16	.096
Other customers in the hotel (e.g., appearance, behavior)	5.86	1.37	5.53	1.20	.32	.035
Crowding at the hotel	6.08	1.21	5.08	1.66	1.00	.000
Appearance of staff at the hotel (e.g., uniform)	6.35	.91	6.58	.77	-.23	.030
Appearance of the hotel's exterior (e.g., landscape)	6.26	.90	6.45	.77	-.19	.064
Business hours of operation of the restaurant	6.22	.96	6.55	.89	-.33	.004
Location of the hotel (e.g., convenience, views)	6.49	.89	6.63	.76	-.14	.104
Accessibility of the hotel	6.46	.74	6.69	.65	-.23	.008
Security at the hotel	6.60	.70	6.78	.55	-.18	.026
Parking availability at the hotel	6.26	.90	5.31	1.37	.95	.000

Note. 1 = to no extent at all to 7 = to a very large extent.

restaurant staff." These variables had loadings of .89, .91, .85, .87, .89, and .93, respectively, and squared loadings of .80, .83, .76, .80, and .87, respectively.

The product strategy had four indicators: "food safety," "quality of food," "quality of rooms," and "room amenities." These variables had factor loadings of .86, .90, .88, and .92, respectively, and squared loadings of .73, .82, .79, and .85, respectively.

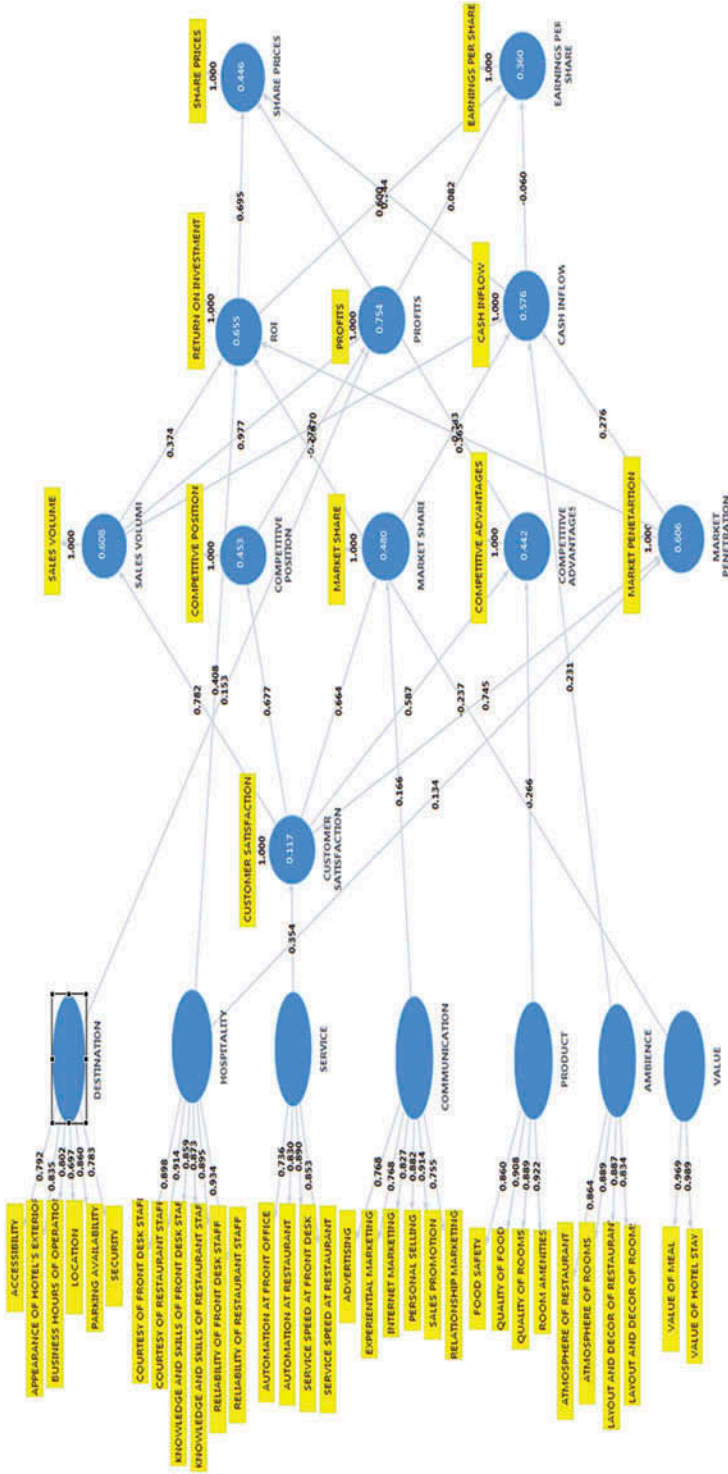


Figure 1. A customer-driven marketing model for enhanced competitiveness among four- and five-star hotels in Kenya: Outer loadings, path coefficients, and R<sup>2</sup> values.

**Table 2.** *t*-Statistics of indicators of latent variables in the new model.

Factor loading	<i>t</i> statistics	<i>p</i> values
Accessibility ← Destination	4.30	.000
Advertising ← Communication	5.82	.000
Appearance of Hotel's Exterior ← Destination	4.85	.000
Atmosphere of Restaurant ← Ambience	13.73	.000
Atmosphere of Rooms ← Ambience	13.52	.000
Automation at Front Office ← Service	3.38	.001
Automation at Restaurant ← Service	4.37	.000
Business Hours of Operation ← Destination	5.70	.000
Courtesy of Front Desk Staff ← Hospitality	13.30	.000
Courtesy of Restaurant Staff ← Hospitality	21.56	.000
Experiential Marketing ← Communication	6.84	.000
Food Safety ← Product	9.22	.000
Internet Marketing ← Communication	7.15	.000
Knowledge and Skills of Front Desk Staff ← Hospitality	15.96	.000
Knowledge and Skills of Restaurant Staff ← Hospitality	20.25	.000
Layout and Decor of Restaurant ← Ambience	10.12	.000
Layout and Decor of Rooms ← Ambience	7.71	.000
Location ← Destination	3.15	.002
Parking Availability ← Destination	5.60	.000
Personal Selling ← Communication	7.97	.000
Quality of Food ← Product	9.58	.000
Quality of Rooms ← Product	8.54	.000
Relationship Marketing ← Communication	5.21	.000
Reliability of Front Desk Staff ← Hospitality	21.05	.000
Reliability of Restaurant Staff ← Hospitality	24.61	.000
Room Amenities ← Product	9.81	.000
Sales Promotion ← Communication	9.02	.000
Security ← Destination	3.94	.000
Service Speed at Front Desk ← Service	6.28	.000
Service Speed at Restaurant ← Service	5.49	.000
Value of Hotel Stay ← Value	10.38	.000
Value of Meal ← Value	10.89	.000

The service strategy had four variables: “level of automation of processes at the front desk,” “level of automation of processes at the restaurant,” “service speed at the front desk,” and “service speed at the restaurant.” These items had factor loadings of .73, .83, .89, and .85, respectively, and squared loadings of .54, .68, .79, and .72, respectively.

The value strategy was represented by two items: “value of the stay” and “value of the meal.” These variables had loadings of .98 and .96, respectively, and squared loadings of .97 and .93, respectively.

As presented in Tables 3 and 4, the CR scores of the ambience, communication, destination, hospitality, product, service, and value strategies were .92, .92, .91, .96, .94, .89, and .97, respectively. The AVE from the ambience, communication, destination, hospitality, product, service, and value strategies was also .75, .67, .63, .80, .80, .68, and .95, respectively. All the constructs were hence reliable and valid with loadings, indicator reliabilities, CR, and AVE values above the suggested cutoffs of .63, .40, .70, and .50, respectively. In addition, the

**Table 3.** Reliability and validity of constructs.

Latent variable	Indicators	Factor loadings	Indicator reliability	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Ambience	Atmosphere of the restaurant	.86	.74	.92	.75
	Atmosphere of the rooms	.88	.79		
	Layout and decor of the restaurant	.88	.78		
	Layout and decor of the rooms	.83	.69		
Cash inflow	Cash inflow	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Communication	Advertising	.76	.58	.92	.67
	Experiential marketing	.76	.58		
	Internet marketing	.82	.68		
	Personal selling	.88	.77		
	Relationship marketing	.75	.57		
	Sales promotion	.91	.83		
Competitive advantage	Competitive advantage	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Competitive position	Competitive position	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Customer satisfaction	Customer satisfaction	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Destination	Accessibility	.79	.62	.91	.63
	Appearance of hotel's exterior	.83	.69		
	Business hours of operation	.80	.64		
	Location	.69	.47		
	Parking availability	.86	.73		
	Security	.78	.61		
Earnings per share	Earnings per share	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Market penetration	Market penetration	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Hospitality	Courtesy of staff at the front desk	.89	.80	.96	.80
	Courtesy of staff at the restaurant	.91	.83		
	Knowledge and skills of staff at the front desk	.85	.73		
	Knowledge and skills of staff at the restaurant	.87	.76		
	Reliability of staff at the front desk	.89	.80		
	Reliability of staff at the restaurant	.93	.87		
Market share	Market share	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Product	Food safety	.86	.73	.94	.80
	Quality of food	.90	.82		
	Quality of rooms	.88	.79		
	Room amenities	.92	.85		
Profits	Profits	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
ROI	ROI	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Sales volume	Sales volume	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Service	Automation of processes at the front desk	.73	.54	.89	.68
	Automation of processes at the restaurant	.83	.68		
	Service speed at the front desk	.89	.79		
	Service speed at the restaurant	.85	.72		
	Share prices	Share prices	1.00		
Value	Value of the stay	.98	.97	.97	.95
	Value of the meal	.96	.93		

Table 4. Discriminant validity of constructs.

	Ambience	Cash inflow	Communication	Competitive advantages	Competitive position	Customer satisfaction	Destination	Earnings per share	Hospitality	Market penetration	Market share	Product	Profits	ROI	Sales volume	Service	Share prices	Value
Ambience	.86																	
Cash inflow	.32	SIC																
Communication	.19	.10	.82				.80											
Competitive advantages	.17	.60	.17	SIC			.26											
Competitive position	.17	.51	.15	.70	SIC													
Customer satisfaction	.12	.65	.10	.62	.68	SIC												
Destination	.64	.39	.19	.32	.18	.22	.80											
Earnings per share	.15	.45	-.03	.21	.16	.30	.26	SIC										
Hospitality	.55	.33	.18	.39	.26	.21	.79	.29	.89									
Market penetration	.16	.58	.09	.65	.83	.77	.28	.32	.29	SIC								
Market share	.10	.37	.23	.31	.59	.68	.19	.15	.12	.65	SIC							
Product	.61	.26	.28	.34	.18	.12	.77	.26	.73	.17	.02	.89						
Profits	.11	.72	.14	.51	.38	.58	.32	.47	.23	.55	.53	.17	SIC					
ROI	.27	.76	.09	.57	.59	.61	.33	.61	.42	.71	.43	.27	.72	SIC				
Sales volume	.11	.69	.12	.61	.64	.78	.22	.31	.19	.67	.67	.15	.84	.69	SIC			
Service	.63	.42	.25	.41	.34	.35	.72	.19	.79	.34	.20	.72	.28	.40	.31	.82		
Share prices	.21	.50	-.02	.20	.21	.38	.23	.94	.30	.34	.28	.20	.48	.64	.36	.19	SIC	
Value	.59	.11	.18	.14	.11	.07	.64	.09	.71	.08	.16	.57	.08	.09	.02	.62	.16	.97

Note. SIC = single item construct.

correlations among all the constructs were smaller than the square roots of their AVE thus reflecting discriminant validity.

The potential relationships between the seven strategies and competitiveness were further established. As reflected in [Figure 1](#), most path coefficients were significant and all the strategies can directly and indirectly influence competitiveness.

The results indicated that the ambience strategy can directly increase cash inflow ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $t = 3.47$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $F^2 = .12$ ), the communication strategy can directly increase market share ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $t = 2.23$ ,  $p = .025$ ,  $F^2 = .05$ ), the destination strategy can directly increase profits ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $t = 2.09$ ,  $p = .036$ ,  $F^2 = .09$ ), the product strategy can directly increase competitive advantages ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 2.80$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $F^2 = .12$ ), the hospitality strategy can directly increase market penetration ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $t = 1.99$ ,  $p = .046$ ,  $F^2 = .04$ ), and ROI ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $t = 3.32$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $F^2 = .21$ ).

Customer satisfaction can fully mediate the relationship between the service strategy and competitive positions ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $t = 2.01$ ,  $p = .044$ ) and indirectly mediate the relationships between the service strategy and competitive advantages ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $t = 2.08$ ,  $p = .037$ ), market penetration ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 2.21$ ,  $p = .027$ ), sales volume ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $t = 2.11$ ,  $p = .034$ ), and market share ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $t = 2.14$ ,  $p = .032$ ).

The value strategy can directly reduce ROI ( $\beta = -.23$ ,  $t = 2.09$ ,  $p = .036$ ,  $F^2 = .07$ ) and that ROI can indirectly mediate the relationship between the strategy and share prices ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t = 2.00$ ,  $p = .045$ ).

Sales volume ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $t = 8.26$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and market penetration ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 8.26$ ,  $p = .000$ ) can partially mediate the relationship between customer satisfaction and ROI and that sales volume ( $\beta = .75$ ,  $t = 8.46$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and competitive positions ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t = 8.46$ ,  $p = .000$ ) can partially mediate the relationship between customer satisfaction and profits.

Market penetration can directly increase ROI ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $t = 3.19$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $F^2 = .20$ ) and cash inflow ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $t = 2.04$ ,  $p = .041$ ,  $F^2 = .08$ ), market share can directly reduce cash inflow ( $\beta = -.28$ ,  $t = 2.92$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $F^2 = .09$ ), sales volume can directly increase ROI ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $t = 3.62$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $F^2 = .23$ ), cash inflow ( $\beta = .67$ ,  $t = 4.95$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $F^2 = .50$ ) and profits ( $\beta = .97$ ,  $t = 14.02$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $F^2 = 2.30$ ) while competitive positions can directly reduce profits ( $\beta = -.27$ ,  $t = 4.04$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $F^2 = .18$ ).

ROI can indirectly mediate the relationships between market penetration and earnings per share ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $t = 3.48$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and sales volume and earnings per share ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 2.10$ ,  $p = .036$ ). It can also fully mediate the relationship between market penetration and share prices ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $t = 2.91$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

The adjusted  $R^2$  values were as follows: customer satisfaction was .11, competitive advantages was .44, competitive positions was .45, market penetration was .60, market share was .48, sales volume was .60, cash inflow was .57, profits was .75, ROI was .65, share prices was .44, and earnings per share was .36. In addition, most indirect,  $F^2$  and total effects were significant.

The  $Q^2$  (cross-validated redundancy) values were as follows: cash inflow was .55, competitive advantages was .40, competitive positions was .44, customer satisfaction was .05, earnings per share was .35, market penetration was .59, market share was .48, profits was .75, ROI was .62, sales volume was .59, and shares prices was .43. This showed that all the latent endogenous constructs had predictive relevance since all the values were above .00.

Furthermore, collinearity issues were investigated using variance inflation factor (VIF) analysis. All the constructs had acceptable VIF values below the recommended cutoff of  $\leq 3.33$  thus indicating that there were no multicollinearity issues.

### ***Thematic Analysis: Guests' Memorable Experiences***

In order to develop customer-driven marketing strategies that centered on hotel experiences, the guests had to answer open-ended questions on their most memorable experiences while in the hotels. As depicted in Table 5, their unforgettable experiences revolved around the amenities, food, hospitality standards, service levels, atmosphere, environment, entertainment, activities, and prices. However, a majority ( $n = 103$ , 52.50%) consisted of 19 (9.59%) who remembered the atmosphere; 18 (9.09%) who remembered the hospitality standards and environment; 16 (8.08%) who remembered the hospitality and atmosphere; 12 (6.06) who remembered the hospitality levels; 10 (5.05%) who remembered the food; 9 (4.54%) who remembered the atmosphere, environment, and hospitality; 8 (4.04%) who remembered the entertainment and food; and 7 (3.53%) who remembered the hospitality, atmosphere, and entertainment.

A number of guests kept in memory the accommodation and unique amenities such as spacious rooms, spas, Jacuzzis, saunas, bath tubs, steam baths, swimming pools, extra large beds, comfortable beds, satellite TV service, and free Wi-Fi, which they held were impressive and of high quality.

I love the artistic bathtub that my daughter and I enjoy; the ambience of the beautiful resort with soothing sights and sounds of pools and fountains scattered throughout the hotel. Not forgetting the high speed WI-FI and latest TV technology.

Many identified the food, which they felt was diverse, unique, delicious, wonderful, superb, excellent, exciting, enjoyable, well cooked, balanced, nutritious, good, and fresh—particularly the international delicacies, African dishes, cultural foods, cocktail dinners, candle dinners, breakfast, dinner, and luncheon buffets.

I remember the buffet restaurant that provided a variety of food for one to choose from; it catered for the pickiest eaters in my family. It also had lots of local dishes like fish, sweet potatoes and the famous irio, which to a large extent made me appreciate the Kenyan culture.

Most could not forget the hospitality standards, which they described as being high, superb, and excellent along with the warm receptions that they received



**Table 5.** Guests' most memorable experiences in the four- and five-star hotels.

Most memorable experience in the hotel	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
No response	5	2.52	2.52
Atmosphere	19	9.59	12.11
Hospitality and environment	18	9.09	21.20
Hospitality and atmosphere	16	8.08	29.28
Hospitality	12	6.06	35.34
Food	10	5.05	40.39
Atmosphere, environment, and hospitality	9	4.54	44.93
Entertainment and food	8	4.04	48.97
Hospitality, atmosphere, and entertainment	7	3.53	52.50
Food and atmosphere	4	2.02	54.52
Hospitality and entertainment	4	2.02	56.54
Amenities	4	2.02	58.56
Entertainment	4	2.02	60.58
Environment	4	2.02	63.00
Service and food	4	2.02	65.02
Hospitality and food	4	2.02	67.04
Hospitality, entertainment, and food	4	2.02	69.06
Service	4	2.02	71.08
Activities and entertainment	4	2.02	73.10
Environment, entertainment, and hospitality	4	2.02	75.12
Hospitality, entertainment, and activities	4	2.02	76.63
Making friends	3	1.51	78.14
Service and atmosphere	3	1.51	79.65
Hospitality	3	1.51	81.16
Environment and entertainment	3	1.51	82.67
Atmosphere, hospitality, and activities	3	1.51	83.68
Entertainment, food, hospitality, and atmosphere	2	1.01	84.69
Entertainment, food, hospitality, and activities	2	1.01	85.70
Hospitality, atmosphere, and food	2	1.01	86.71
Activities and food	2	1.01	87.72
Entertainment, food, atmosphere, environment, and hospitality	2	1.01	88.73
Hospitality, environment, and food	2	1.01	89.74
Hospitality, atmosphere, and activities	2	1.01	91.85
Service, environment, and atmosphere	2	1.01	92.35
Activities	1	.50	92.85
Entertainment, food, and environment	1	.50	93.35
Environment, entertainment, and service	1	.50	93.85
Hospitality, food, and activities	1	.50	94.35
Entertainment, atmosphere, environment, and hospitality	1	.50	94.85
Entertainment, food, and activities	1	.50	95.35
Atmosphere, environment, hospitality, and service	1	.50	95.85
Environment and atmosphere	1	.50	96.35
Hospitality, entertainment, environment, and food	1	.50	96.85
Service, amenities, and meals	1	.50	97.35
Hospitality, environment, and amenities	1	.50	97.85
Service, hospitality, and prices	1	.50	98.35
Prices, service, and activities	1	.50	98.85
Activities and amenities	1	.50	99.35
Activities, food, and atmosphere	1	.50	99.85
Entertainment, environment, atmosphere, and activities	1	.50	100.00
Total	198	100.00	100.00

from both humble and friendly Kenyans and hotel staff who were genuine, reliable, generous, hospitable, welcoming, warm, orderly, well mannered, experienced, and highly skilled. Many further recalled the impressive service

particularly from the waiters and room service, which they thought was very high, nice, hospitable, and good.

The informed, courteous and prompt service by the front office staff set the tone for that hotel. The room was well cleaned and maintained with very comfortable beddings. The food was delicious and I mainly enjoyed our lunch by the pool. The fitness centre was spotless and the air conditioning was excellent. It was an experience of a lifetime.

Several built their memories around the atmosphere, theme, and ambience, which they felt was unique, glamorous, beautiful, attractive, cool, wonderful, serene, relaxing, fun, private, confidential, conducive for work, and very comfortable with soothing and relaxing music, appealing landscapes, good ambience, appealing themes, appealing layout, attractive restaurant setups, attractive rooms, peaceful resting rooms and quiet rooms, and lecture halls: “The environment with wild animals made us feel like in the safari all the time. The traditional atmosphere, African touch of colonial British with beautiful carpets, ancient paintings and that unique touch that makes it so unique.”

Many were impressed by the environment, more so the beautiful, superb, and wonderful ocean views, ocean breezes, seashores, beach views, landscapes; the serene and supreme sandy coastal beaches and the beauty of Kenya, which they further described as being fabulous, spectacular, amazing, comfortable, friendly, cool, relaxing, marvelous, and conducive for work:

I love the fact that the hotel offers a variety of conference and meeting rooms in the immense compound offering privacy and confidentiality when holding meetings. More of interest, I love the vastness of the compound landscaping with water streams which give me the opportunity to enjoy the glamorous nature.

The tight security as all visitors go through a scan security check and there were security guards on every floor of the hotel, made my greatest memory. This made me to have peace of mind amid the insecurity cases that were being experienced in the country. I also loved the location of the hotel. It is convenient for a person who does not have a car.

Some remembered the entertainment for both kids and adults, particularly the fireworks displays on New Year’s Eve and Easter, the Christmas carols, African nights, Maasai nights, observance of Maasai traditions, cultural nights, and other cultural entertainment, which they believed was inspiring, very nice, beautiful, good, wonderful, fabulous, impressive, exciting, and excellent.

I was impressed by the enchanting evening entertainment from the X dancers and the spacious rooms with nice balconies which gave an excellent view of the amazing and well maintained gardens. They also had a variety of African dishes. I personally enjoyed the nyama choma for dinner.

Many created memorable experiences out of the activities that they participated in including candle lit dinners, swimming, beach volleyball, scuba

diving, steam bathing, sauna treatments, massages, sunbathing at the sea-shore, tours of wild life parks such as Tsavo national park, games like *ajua*, and the opportunities to relax and make friends.

The location of the hotel has made my holiday fabulous. I enjoy the spectacular ocean view from the hotel. The water sporting options are amazing. I personally love scuba diving and the swimming bit. I also enjoy the fast WI-FI connectivity and satellite TV.

A few could not forget the high prices and bills, while others were impressed by the negotiable rates.

### ***Thematic Analysis: Managers' Opinions on the Marketing of the Hotels***

The nine managers who were interviewed believed that the hotels should adopt marketing strategies that addressed the needs of guests:

The hotels should address the needs and wants of customers in different segments, the tastes and preferences of customers, and the competitive advantages of the hotel which include the USP [unique selling points]. (Manager A)

Many marketing strategies work if the demographic elements of the targeted group or place are put into consideration. (Manager D)

All of them talked about internal marketing strategies, which they felt should be implemented before external ones. The value of qualified employees then arose: "but marketing strategies should start internally whereby staff should be trained on how to give professional services and satisfy the guests" (Manager B).

They explained that excellent services, quality, amenities, atmosphere, and ambience should be embraced since they increase guest satisfaction. By responding to their desires and creating memorable experiences, existing and potential clients can be attracted and retained, with the service standards being the major determinant of these experiences: "good customer service, quality of products and services, delivering what was promised to the customer, knowing your customers' needs and anticipating your customers' needs are important in marketing" (Manager C).

The following extract demonstrated a manager's view on market shares, which he felt could be increased by focusing on quality and subsequently generating positive word-of-mouth (PWOM): "Quality service, managing service quality and ensuring everybody who comes to the hotel thinks and talks about the hotel positively out there is important. Quality service definitely does bring about market share growth" (Manager F).

The managers thought that they could also increase profits, sales volumes, competitive advantages and positions through pleasing the customer, building a good reputation, and increasing marketing efforts:

To make profits, the marketing activities must be very active. The hotel's high quality of services improves the customer loyalty and the promotions, attracts new customers and consequently increases the sales volume thereby resulting to high profits and giving the hotel many competitive advantages. (Manager G)

A brand hotel with a good reputation gives the hotel a high competitive position. (Manager H)

Aggressive marketing ensures that customers are aware of the hotel and this creates an interest to visit and enjoy the services offered as well as spreads the experience to others thus improving the levels of profitability. High profits all the same have a good correlation with good customer service and competitive positions. (Manager E)

Hence the value of competitive marketing strategies was highlighted: "As a result of the marketing strategies, the hotel gets a high level of competitiveness among other hotels as most of its products are well marketed to the clients" (Manager I).

## Discussion

### *Customers' and Managers' Expectations of the Marketing Strategies of Excellent Hotels*

*T* tests were calculated to examine managers' and customers' expectations of the marketing strategies. The results indicated that managers and customers equally felt that the hotels should pay a lot of attention to the variety of menu, quality of rooms, reliability of staff at the restaurant, knowledge and skills of staff at the restaurant, courtesy of staff, service speed, room service, room amenities, level of automation of processes, value for money, benefits, atmosphere of the restaurant, layout and decor, appearance of the hotel's exterior, and location. Although a concurrence was observed on the aforementioned elements, the managers had slightly in certain instances underestimated and in other instances overestimated some of the customers' expectations. For instance, the managers' expectations on the nutritional content of menu items, food safety, quality of food and beverage, and cleanliness were below the customers' expectations. On a similar note, the managers' expectations on parking availability, other customers, and crowding were above those of customers. The varying perspectives can be effectively utilized by the hotels to enhance their marketing strategies.

### *The Relationship Between the Proposed Marketing Strategies and Competitiveness of the Hotels*

Seven strategies were developed using PLS-SEM. These were the product, service, hospitality, ambience, destination, value, and communication strategies. The results showed that the ambience strategy can directly increase cash

inflow—focusing on the atmosphere, layout, and decor can help attract more guests and encourage spending. This affirmed that guests are often willing to pay for unique ambience and further illustrated the value of the physical appearance of the hotel as an outer reflection of quality and prestige. Ariffin and Aziz (2012) also viewed the physical evidence as a media for attracting and retaining guests.

The destination strategy can directly increase profits meaning that the location, accessibility, appearance of the hotel's exterior, hours of operation, security, and parking can increase revenue by attracting visitors, encouraging them to spend, and adding value and convenience despite the associated costs and expenses.

The product strategy can directly increase competitive advantages meaning that the hotels can deliver more value by offering excellent meals, rooms and amenities, which meet and exceed customers' expectations, all in safe environments, hence generating delight and building guest confidence. Goodman likewise (1996) recognized gourmet and food as sources of competitive advantages.

The hospitality strategy can directly increase market penetration and ROI, suggesting that investing in employees who are competent, knowledgeable, hospitable, and business oriented can guarantee excellent service, thus delighting guests and boosting their esteem and trust hence generating positive WOM (PWOM), customer lifetime value, and high returns. Kandampully (2006) equally found that employees in the hospitality industry greatly determine the quality of service in a challenging environment in which the product and service are consumed simultaneously thus making frontline staff marketers.

The communication strategy can directly increase market share suggesting that advertising, experiential marketing, internet marketing, personal selling, relationship marketing, and sales promotion can attract existing and potential customers from competitors perhaps by attractively informing them of products and services, persuading them to try out the facilities and creating customer lifetime value. Suttle and Akpabio (1988) alike identified sales promotions as effective tools for attracting guests. Lin, Chang, Lim, Tseng, and Lan (2009) further picked experiential marketing as an important element of the marketing mix and moreover linked it to higher value, satisfaction and loyalty. Williams et al. (2012, p. 125) quoted Ozor (1999) who declared that “producers of goods and services are presently aware that promotion does not only inform and persuade, but can strive towards profit making through increased sales.”

Customer satisfaction can fully mediate the relationship between the service strategy and competitive positions meaning that satisfying the customer can be the only way for the hotels to stay ahead of competitors when adopting technology and speed as means of enhancing service delivery.

Torres and Kline (2013, p. 649) similarly established that service contributed a lot to customer delight as compared to physical evidence and hospitality as reflected by staff “friendliness, problem solving skills and professionalism.” Poon and Low (2005) also argued that good service increases customer satisfaction thus generating PWOM, competitive advantages, and repeat visits.

Customer satisfaction can indirectly mediate the relationships between the service strategy and competitive advantages, market penetration, sales volume and market share meaning that delighting guests can be the only way to tap their preferences, favors, numbers, spending, and repatronage when embracing service efficiency. These findings are consistent with those of Gupta, McDaniel, and Herath (2005), who acknowledged that satisfaction arises when customers are guaranteed quality service. Pandey and Joshi (2010) also found that service quality particularly reliability and confidence enhances customer satisfaction. Chi and Gursoy (2009, p. 252) also purported that customer satisfaction can lead to growth through “offering exceptional customer service by exceeding customers’ expectations.” Pandey and Joshi (2010) felt that service quality can affect customer satisfaction, market shares, and competitive advantages. Kandampully (2006), as well, asserted that customer focused services are an antecedent to increased market shares and profits. Wiley (1991, p. 117) moreover stated that “high quality customer service can be used to increase market share.” Victorino et al. (2005) nevertheless recognized IT as a source of competitive advantages.

The value strategy can directly reduce ROI meaning that increasing the worth of the hotel experience can be an asset, investment and financial sacrifice because benefits given to repeat guests can directly reduce profits. Xie and Chen (2014) however explained that loyalty programs which focus on functional, psychological, externality and financial values are linked to customer loyalty and increased market share. Slater (1997), as quoted by Kandampully (2006, p. 180), further stated, “customer value contributes to superior market performance and profitability and can be a source of competitive advantage.”

ROI can indirectly mediate the relationship between the value strategy and share prices meaning that value for money may reduce returns, however these returns alone may be sufficient to boost shareholders’ and publics’ perceptions of the companies’ success. Some guests challenged the hotels to reduce their prices and rates showing that prestige pricing can reduce guest turnover, spending, purchases and earnings. Yet, prestige pricing can be the best strategy since the uniqueness of the four- or five-star experience needs to be preserved and some guests too associate high prices with value and quality. However, some managers were for flexible pricing including negotiable prices in order to lure guests while others advocated for the targeting of

high spenders such as holiday makers. Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (2003) equally viewed prices as tools for creating and managing demand. Hence, prestige pricing can complement value experiences whereas, as is currently the norm, negotiable rates can increase occupancy more so during periods of low demand such as off peak seasons when the domestic market fills in the gap left by other tourists who are willing and able to part with more money.

Sales volume and market penetration can partially mediate the relationship between customer satisfaction and ROI meaning that meeting guests' expectations can increase their purchase, retention, and earnings. These findings correspond with arguments by Chi and Gursoy (2009), that customer satisfaction and financial performance in terms of profitability and net profit are positively related leading to higher sales and ROI.

Sales volume and competitive positions can partially mediate the relationship between customer satisfaction and profits meaning that the hotels can please guests in order to increase revenue. Making the guest happy can however be another strategy of staying ahead of competitors though these leadership positions can increase the costs that are associated with maintaining the lead. Yet Torres and Kline (2013) and Dortyol, Varinli, and Kitapci (2014) viewed customer satisfaction as an avenue to greater profits and high revenue.

ROI can indirectly mediate the relationships between market penetration and earnings per share and sales volume and earnings per share meaning that the only way for the hotels to use their existing customers to enhance the value of the company in terms of dividends can be by increasing returns although ROI can also fully mediate the relationship between market penetration and share prices showing that they can only enjoy high share prices after retaining loyal customers.

The trickling effects of the seven strategies were identified. For example, the hospitality strategy can increase market penetration, ROI, share prices, and earnings per share. Furthermore, the hospitality strategy can simply increase ROI, share prices, and earnings per share. It can also improve market penetration, ROI, and share prices. Meanwhile, the service strategy can increase customer satisfaction, sales volume, and ROI. Alternatively, it can increase customer satisfaction, sales volume, market penetration, ROI, and earnings per share.

### ***Customer Driven Marketing Strategies for Enhanced Competitiveness Amongst the Hotels***

Several managers felt that guests should be given good experiences that were also memorable since hotel experiences extend way beyond purchase and consumption. Open-ended answers on guests' most memorable experiences were therefore used to develop and explore the customer driven marketing



model which highlighted the product, ambience, hospitality, service, destination, value, and communication strategies.

### **Product Strategy**

The product strategy was portrayed by the levels of food and beverage sanitation and safety, quality of food and beverages, quality of rooms, and room amenities. Quality has been defined as exceeding customers' expectations, doing things right the first time and every other time, doing the right thing, at the right time, and the right place or even as being the total effect of the product or service, people, environment, and processes. Numerous studies (Claver, Tari, & Pereira, 2006; Heung, 2000; Juwaheer & Ross, 2003) have been conducted on service quality in the hospitality industry, ranging from simply investigating service quality to developing models such as the SERVQUAL and gap models.

Most managers agreed that high quality products such as food, amenities, accommodation and function halls (well maintained rooms) attracted guests consequently making experiences like the dining, meal, accommodation, and meeting experiences crucial aspects of the offer. Then meal experiences can be enhanced by offering enough, diverse, well presented, unique, fresh, appetizing, delicious, superb, hygienic, and balanced menus that are excellent and exciting, serving cultural foods, organizing cocktail dinners, having candlelit dinners, and opening specialty restaurants or offering special menus for health conscious guests. Pizam and Ellis (1999, p. 334) similarly identified "material product reflected by quality, variety, portion size, consistency, temperature, appearance, price, availability, range of tastes, textures, aroma and colours" as one attribute of the meal experience.

Some guests were concerned about the freshness of menu items. Lack of food safety can increase costs due to negative publicity, loss of business, legal, and medical claims. Yet fully adopting the hazard analysis critical control point (HACCP) and ISO 22000 food safety management principles can guarantee quality and safety adherence throughout the food cycle. Efficient demand forecasting and management too can help manage the quantity of food prepared. Providing a variety of meals including those that have not been over spiced can also convince guests that menu items are fresh. Furthermore, live displays of items such as fish as done with lobsters before food preparation can help create perceptions of fresh offers. An alternative can be taking up gueridon service where guests will be able to witness the entire meal preparation process.

Rooms which are clean, well maintained, spacious, and fully equipped with adequate guest accessories, supplies, and unique and artistic amenities such as Jacuzzis, hot baths, steam baths, cold baths, large comfortable beds, dryers, safes, air conditioners, mirrors, sockets, wardrobes, microwaves, mini bars, and balconies with impressive views can be used to enhance accommodation

experiences. Good examples of complementary items that can further boost accommodation and meetings experiences include reliable room service, entertainment, satellite televisions, audio-visual equipment, and information technology (IT) like free and stable Internet connectivity and Wi-Fi. Victorino et al. (2005) felt that hotels ought to adopt technologies which are most beneficial to both the guests and hotels. The two researchers (p. 559) further quoted Reid and Sandler (1992) who listed:

A wake up system, electronic door locks, in room pay-per-view, multiple phone lines, video cassette players, video library, personal computers, voice mail, computer modem connections, video check out, electronic in room safes and software library as the most beneficial technological innovations.

### ***Ambience Strategy***

The ambience strategy was depicted by the atmosphere, layout, and decor. Some managers felt that guests paid for the unique ambience and well furnished environment. Since most guests also favored ideal atmospheres, creating peaceful, serene, beautiful, relaxing, wonderful, cool, nice, friendly, comfortable, and conducive environments can enhance ambience experiences which will guarantee positive images and give the prestigious looks that are often associated with excellent hotels and that consequently attract and retain customers.

Constant refurbishment and renovation of the facilities can be the first step towards enhancing ambience experiences. Moreover, the following aspects are closely tied to atmosphere, layout, and decor and should therefore form the focal point of operations; the orderliness, uniform, grooming, hygiene, health, and physical fitness of employees; seating arrangements; air conditioning; service linen; layout of furniture and equipment; acoustics and noise levels; furnishings; center pieces; tangibles; furniture, lighting, walls, paintings, and floor finishes; decorations; restaurant and bar set ups; and food and beverage service equipment and presentation. Ariffin and Aziz (2012, p. 341) equally acknowledged some of these items as being necessary for dining experiences and guest satisfaction especially when “innovative, unique and different from the typical hotels.” According to Walls et al. (2011) smell, color schemes, and appearance too add to the physical experience.

Controlling the appearance, behavior, dressing, and distance of employees and other customers through outlining dress codes and installing signage on parking, noise, smoking, gambling, and admission of children in bars can moreover help manage social experiences, which also contribute to the atmosphere. Hospitality and nonhospitality studies have shown that customer to customer interactions (CCI) affect experiences (Walls et al., 2011) by generating positive and negative emotions which subsequently affect future purchase decisions and WOM recommendations

(Slatten, Krogh, & Connolley, 2011). These findings support Grove and Fisk (1997) and Nicholls (2011) who posited that CCI can generate positive or negative experiences and suggested that hotels use consumer education, specific market segmentation and targeting and employee training to manage the interactions. Hence looking out to guests such as drunkards who may cause trouble and designating areas like floors, restaurants, and bars for each type of guest so that they do not mingle unnecessarily can further enhance social experiences (Grove & Fisk, 1997). Investing in convenient architectural designs, which observe the ergonomic needs of both guests and employees by providing ample spaces for meetings, working, entertainment, walking, sitting, dining, and relaxation can also contribute positively.

### ***Hospitality Strategy***

The hospitality strategy was reflected by the courtesy, reliability, knowledge, and skills of employees. The hotel industry is service oriented with the contact between employees and customers affecting experiences. The managers mentioned the importance of internal marketing, teamwork, and trained personnel for staff motivation, professional service delivery and guest satisfaction. Poon and Low (2005) likewise posited that internal marketing is important in delivering quality. Kandampully (2006) similarly felt that hospitality firms have to go beyond product focus and instead build on service aspects too since the modern consumer is service oriented. This taken together with the fact that it is the hospitality of employees who first greet and welcome guests to hotels that matters, after which the guests can enjoy the product, calls for enhanced hospitality experiences by investing in employees and making sure that they are knowledgeable, skilled, polite, courteous, reliable, friendly, well mannered, helpful, respectful, accurate, genuinely welcoming, humble, and warm especially when receiving guests, responding to requests, handling complaints, and solving problems. Encouraging them to treat all guests equally, implementing the first come/first serve policy, allocating equal time to all guests, and using equitable effort and approach in handling and solving their problems can help change the perceptions of residents being ignored.

Employees who are familiar with tourist attractions, the hospitality industry, and the hotel's surroundings, products, and services will not make guests feel as if they are being misled. Further, since training employees contributes to positive human interaction experiences (Walls et al., 2011), employees who are experienced and informed enough to answer questions and provide professional services during meal service, hotel stay, and check-in/check-out will be assets especially when they are enough in numbers, equipped with excellent communication skills, proficient in the relevant languages, neat, tidy, quiet, and highly trained to offer good, superb, high quality service, and hospitality.

### ***Service Strategy***

The service strategy was represented by service speed and level of automation of processes. Most managers believed that good, high quality, and excellent service was the key to enhanced competitiveness since it leaves behind satisfied customers, increased business, and further triggered PWOM to friends and relatives therefore generating customer loyalty, competitive positions, market share growth, and profitability. From the guests, it was apparent that service speed mattered and that crowding particularly at the front desk, bars, and restaurants could act to slow down service. Consequently, offering slow personalized services to leisure guests and fast services to business and conference customers can enhance service experiences. For example, leisure hotels can spend reasonable time in preparing and attending to meals because most of their guests feel that quality and value are worth waiting for. In this way, the guest will perceive quality. But switchboard operations, check-in/check-out, problem forwarding, enquiry, and follow up are areas that often demand prompt services and therefore deserve greater attention.

Room service provides an alternative to table service though with added benefits such as reduced operational and staffing costs for the hotel and more personalized service and individualized attention for the customer. It provides an additional source of income for the hotel thus increasing sales away from the traditional sales points.

Considering the impact of IT, its adoption can boost service quality and delivery while keeping the tech-savvy customer in mind. Tavitiyaman, Zhang, and Qu (2012, p. 143) likewise believed that IT was a source of competitive advantage and it improved service as “IT can distinguish market offerings, help firms to meet customer expectations, deliver service standards and performance and mobilise employees and business partners within the organization.” Technologies that can enhance service delivery thus include automated check-in and check-out, self-service vending and dispensing machines, personal digital assistants for order-taking at restaurants, and electronic/online/Internet self-service booking, confirmation, and bill settlement for rooms and restaurant tables.

### ***Destination Strategy***

The destination strategy covered accessibility, the appearance of the hotel's exterior, business hours of the operation, location, parking, and security. A few managers highlighted the significance of security during periods of political instability and threats such as terrorism. Poon and Low (2005) found that due to events like September 11, factors such as responsible security personnel greatly determined customer satisfaction. It is very unlikely that guests will patronize insecure premises. They will therefore need assurance that they will be safe from terrorists, abductors, and kidnappers. Beefing up security through establishing clear policies; investing in inspections, surveillance, and security equipment;

hiring reliable employees; conducting employee screening; training staff; having adequate checkpoints; and ensuring efficient guest registration, screening, privacy, and safety (Branson & Lennox, 2008) can for these reasons enhance destination experiences.

Location and activities such as festivals, events, clubbing, shopping, sightseeing, touring, camping, game drives, sauna treats, sunbathing, swimming, scuba diving, surfing, sports fishing, and kiting; beautiful views and appealing landscapes and scenery such as supreme beaches, oceans, shores, game parks, cities, central business districts and built environments; nice, impressive, inspiring and exciting entertainment experiences such as Christmas, Easter, and New Year's Eve celebrations, fireworks displays, animations, traditional, cultural and African dances and nights for adults and kids, games like *ajua*, sports such as beach volleyball; and soothing, relaxing and inspiring music will contribute to enhanced destination experiences and ideal atmospheres. Law, Cheung, and Lo (2004) had similarly reported that these activities were necessary for superior destination experiences and should subsequently guide marketers.

Areas adjacent to the beaches provide opportunities for relaxation, beach games, and water sport activities such as sport fishing, scuba diving, surfing, kiting, and volleyball. They also provide beautiful sceneries and views that can contribute to the atmosphere. The central business district, on the other hand, offers opportunities for tourist attractions, business travel, shopping venues, entertainment centers, business facilities, and accessibility to transport amenities such as airports.

Well-furnished and maintained buildings, walls, walkways, grounds, live walls and flower beds, adequate parking, ease of access by public and private means, and convenient hours of operation are of added value too. These confirmed the notion from Walter, Edvardsson, and Ostrom (2010) that the physical environment, which also covers the exterior, landscape, view, built environment, staff uniforms, distance from other guests, and music, contributed to customers' experiences.

Flexible and extended hours of operation if coupled with appropriate merchandising and promotion can moreover ensure constant business for the hotels while satisfying the customer.

The hotels should also be accessible by all means. Where road travel, which is the most common form of travel, fails, then air, rail, and water travel can be valuable alternatives—more so at the Kenyan coast where the hotels are located adjacent to the Indian Ocean.

Some customers mentioned that the price would not be a major concern, especially when someone else was paying for the stay. Conference tourists attending training and team-building activities are rarely worried about high rates since the conferences are often sponsored by the organizations they represent. Several managers were also for the idea of building an events and conference center in Mombasa similar to the Kenyatta International

Convention Centre in Nairobi that would attract customers particularly during off-peak seasons when the weather at the Kenyan coast works against beach and leisure tourism. Thus embracing conference tourism as a destination strategy can work for the hotels.

### ***Value Strategy***

The value strategy highlighted the value derived from the meal and stay. Walter et al. (2010) posited that price and payment affect customers' experiences. Most managers felt that their customers should enjoy value. Because the guests also appreciated this value, offering maximum value for money through exceeding their expectations and delivering quality, efficient, personalized services that are tailored to their needs, all in unique ambience and convenient locations, can enhance value experiences. Most hotels used discounts and special offers. Poon and Low (2005) similarly recommended adding the value of offerings so as to get competitive advantages. Consequently, discounts, souvenirs, gifts, and value adds such as flexible room rates, extended check-in/check-out, free nights, laundry, meeting rooms, business venues, newspapers, magazines, Internet connections, breakfast, drinks, babysitting, tour guiding, and transport to and from venues such as airports can be used to appreciate the loyal guest, initiate and maintain successful customer relationship management, and effectively apply some of the best sales promotion tools (Suttle & Akpabio, 1988).

### ***Communication Strategy***

The communication strategy highlighted relationship marketing, experiential marketing, Internet marketing, advertising, personal selling, and sales promotion. Some guests mentioned that they were attracted to the hotel by its attractive appearance in the promotional material. Others felt that these materials should be of high quality. A few called for more promotional efforts particularly among the locals.

Some managers held that the right messages should be delivered to guests because marketing plays a great role in attracting, introducing, and familiarizing them with the product. Communication and overall hotel experiences commence the moment the guest is made aware of the product or service on offer, often via promotion media and tools. The managers went on to identify Twitter, Facebook, online guest comments, bookings.com, TripAdvisor, Ecotourism Kenya, the Kenya tourism board, expositions, client visits, advertisements, WOM, flyers, promotional rates and exhibitions such as wall market in London and ITB (Internationale Tourismus-Borse) in Berlin as being powerful promotional tools. Building long-term relationships with customers and adopting sound customer service management practices through listening to them and effectively solving their problems were more-over mentioned.

Prasamma (2013) proposed the following list of marketing strategies for standalone hotels: online marketing, Facebook, Twitter, online videos, and blogs. Whilst it remains important to move with changing times, the traditional tactics such as printed media, electronic media, travel agents, tour operators, sales promotion, personal selling, and public relations are still appropriate with modern tools like the Internet, TripAdvisor, bookings.com, social media, and WOM having being used the most by the guests. A majority also indicated that they learned about the hotels from friends, relatives, business partners, travel agents, advertisements, and the Internet, showing that marketers should focus on these media.

Torres and Kline (2013) equally described WOM as a powerful cost-free marketing tool in the hospitality industry, particularly among loyal customers. Longart (2010) believed that though underexplored, PWOM can cut on promotional expenses. Bowen and Chen (2001) similarly highlighted the crucial role of WOM and claimed that it is the preferred tool for most customers since it increases their confidence especially when positive.

Internet marketing is priceless for several reasons. First, Woodside, Vicente, and Duque (2011) argued that e-tourism sales have been predicted to grow enormously with time due to discounted rates and offers, a trend which marketing firms can take advantage of by improving the quality and content of their websites. Second, Palmer and McCole (2000) already posited that the Internet can be used to develop a niche in the marketplace by increasing the market share and satisfying the customer more so in destination marketing. Third, Heung (2003, p. 374) found that international travelers use the Internet to make bookings in hotels or to search travel information because it is “convenient, fast and offers better service quality despite being insecure and at times inaccessible,” and further reported that most Western travelers particularly Americans use online means for communication and tourism product transactions. Lastly, Ramanathan and Ramanathan (2011) believed that guest ratings on the Internet have an impact on the hotel’s reputation since they reflect customer satisfaction.

## Conclusion

Since there was room for improving the existing marketing strategies, a model which was based on guests’ memorable experiences of the amenities, food, hospitality, service, atmosphere, environment, entertainment, activities, and prices was proposed.

The model presented in Figure 2 pinpoints the product, hospitality, service, destination, ambience, value, and communication strategies. The proposed marketing strategies are suitable for four- and five-star hotels, which are expected to deliver the highest standards of products and services in the industry. The strategies can satisfy the needs of local, national, regional and





**Figure 2.** A marketing model for four- and five-star hotels in Kenya.

international guests. The model can moreover be used to establish unique selling points and delight customers because memorable experiences are created when marketing is used to enhance outstanding products, services, and values. And since unique products and services can be the focal point of public relations activities (Kotler et al., 2003), the concept of meeting guests' needs can be turned into public relations strategies that will enhance communication experiences. This will demonstrate commitment, therefore sustaining relationships and positively contributing to organizational performance.

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