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Hotels & Resorts

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# Destination Ambassadors: Examining how Hospitality Companies Value Brand Ambassadorship from Front-Line Employees

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## A Case Study of Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts

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### Abstract

This case study examines how Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts develops brand image, brand reputation, and customer loyalty through the interactions that front-line employees have with guests. It sets out to define employee brand ambassadorship within the organization, understand how Four Seasons trains employees to communicate effectively with guests, and research the metrics used to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of its employee communication strategy. What emerged from interviews and an examination of media coverage indicates that Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts considers the interactions between employees and guests to be the most important factor in delivering the brand promise. Furthermore, hiring employees who are most aligned with the company's culture and values is an important factor in the ability to develop brand-supportive behaviours within the workforce.

*Keywords:* Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, brand image, reputation, customer loyalty, brand ambassador

# Destination Ambassadors: Exam- ining how Hospitality Companies Value Brand Ambassadorship from Front-Line Employees

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## A Case Study of Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts

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### Background

**B**rand management for service companies is heavily dependent on employee-customer interactions. In the hotel industry, a customer pays for the rental of a room. However, the perceived value for the product is highly influenced by the service that the guest receives. The guest is not paying simply for a bed and a pillow; he is buying an experience. Delivering the expected experience requires that employees become ambassadors, facilitating the relationship between the customer and the brand.

Vacation travel is a highly emotional purchase for most people, as it represents the calculated use of two very precious commodities: leisure time and money. Travel is often shared

with family and friends, heightening the expectations that need to be met by hotel companies. Business travel represents a highly emotional purchase as well, as travellers are removed from their regular daily experience. It may represent time away from family and friends or displacement from the comforts of home and one's regular work environment. The emotional context of travel experiences complicates the communication process between the customer and a hotel, requiring employees to possess strong emotional intelligence and communication skills to meet and exceed customer expectations.

Most hospitality companies understand the importance of customer-service, as each employee-customer touch point influences the customer brand experience. However, delivering on the brand promise communicated by the marketing department goes above and beyond customer service.

An internal brand management strategy is required because the way in which customers experience and perceive the brand is dependent on their interactions with employees (King, 2010). In an industry such as hospitality, where consumer expectations are high, and interactions with front-line employees are frequent, there is a critical need to empower workers to become brand ambassadors.

Brand management can be further dissected into brand image, which represents the perception of the customer, and brand identity, which is how the brand is represented by the employee (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005). The understanding that there are two sides to brand management reveals the importance of communication between the customer (i.e. image) and the employee (i.e. identity). In the hospitality industry, this connection usually happens through a conversation between the customer and a front-line employee.

The need for brand ambassadors is further supported by Grunig's landmark study on organizational excellence (Grunig, 1992). The study concluded that marketing is responsible for external brand management, front-line employees are responsible for supporting the customer-brand experience,

and human resources is responsible for hiring for and training brand-supportive behaviours in employees.

What are the proper communication skills and behaviours required to support the brand identity of a company or individual? How can we train front-line employees with limited professional experience to hone these skills and behaviours?

This case study is aimed at answering these questions by learning from one of the worldwide leaders in customer service, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. In the J.D. Power 2014 North American Hotel Guest Satisfaction Study, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts received the number one ranking in the Customer Satisfaction Index Luxury Segment, ahead of The Ritz-Carlton, Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts, and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts.

An important finding from the J.D. Power study is that Millennials (i.e. Generation Y) are more loyal to hotel brands than other generations (J.D. Power, 2014). Defined as those born between 1980 and 1997 (Timmerman & Yu, 2014), Generation Y will surpass Baby Boomers as the largest living generation in the United States in 2015 (Quenqua, 2015). The percentage of Millennials who rated themselves as highly committed to a hotel brand in the J.D. Powers survey was 27%, compared with 25% of travellers from all other generations (Trejos, 2014). The importance of hotel employee interactions with guests will only increase in the near future as this generation becomes the target demographic for hotel companies in North America.

For this case study, the researcher interviewed executive officers from various departments of Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts to examine the importance of hotel-employee interactions with guests in establishing brand image, brand reputation, and customer loyalty.

Many academic studies have focused on brand promotion, though little research has been conducted to examine how brand promotion is affected by employee-customer interactions within the hospitality industry. This case study initiates the scholarship of examining how hospitality employees learn

the communication skills needed to become brand ambassadors for their companies. Customer service is dependent on communication, but how do hospitality leaders like Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts ensure that employees are effectively communicating in a way that promotes the company's brand and reputation while developing customer loyalty? Hotel companies advertise their luxurious properties and commitment to service, but the delivery of their products and services is the ultimate determinant of customer satisfaction. The proliferation of customer generated reviews and content on the web, including sites like TripAdvisor.com, highlight the importance of brand image, reputation, and customer loyalty, especially among the sizable and tech savvy Generation Y. Understanding how hotel employees can communicate most effectively with hotel guests will be critical knowledge for any hotel company wishing to succeed in the current and future economic environment.

## Definition of Concepts

### *Brand Management*

According to Burmann and Zeplin (2005), external brand image refers to the perception that a customer develops in their mind of a company or product. All measures of public relations and communications provide information to the pool of knowledge in which customers, competitors, and other publics view the operations and contributions of an organization. This case study is aimed at further understanding the importance of customer perceptions as influenced by direct interaction with the company.

Brand reputation can be defined simply as what customers say to others about a company, product, or service (Selnes, 1993). Brand loyalty is a measurement of the likelihood that a customer will repeatedly purchase from the same company (Selnes, 1993). Brand image is the view that a customer holds in his or her own heart and mind regarding a product or

service. It is common for a customer to be subconsciously aware of the brand image they create for a specific product or company. Purchases are often made on instinct or “gut feeling” as opposed to conscious evaluation of a brand. Both conscious and subconscious perceptions of a product, service, or company make up the external brand image that a customer possesses (Selnes, 1993).

### *Brand Ambassadors*

This case study addresses the role of employees as brand ambassadors. In contrast to a paid spokesperson providing external support for an organization, an employee is perceived by customers as an authentic representative of a company. Employees are perceived as brand ambassadors because they work inside the business facility, may wear a uniform, and identify themselves as representatives of the organization in most business conversations.

Employee brand ambassadors must be able to communicate brand-supportive information and services to customers of the organization in an effective manner. According to King (2010), three things are required to do this. First, managers must effectively disseminate brand knowledge to front-line employees. Brand knowledge includes accurate information about the products and services offered, as well as the history and culture of the organization. Front-line employees must also clearly understand their role within the organization during customer interactions. Management is responsible for establishing role clarity for its employees. The third component of employee brand ambassadorship is an employee’s brand identity: the feeling of alignment and commitment that an employee has with the attributes and values of the brand.

### *Brand-supportive Behaviors*

Brand ambassadors must behave in a way that supports the brand. It is one thing to know the information and another

to communicate it effectively during employee-customer interactions. Employees who excel at brand ambassadorship exhibit strong brand-supportive behaviors. In an attempt to identify these behaviors specifically, Burmann and Zeplin (2005) considered seven previously-acknowledged dimensions of organizational citizenship behavior: voluntarily helping other employees, organizational compliance, individual initiative, tolerance of inconvenience, promoting the organization to outsiders, self-development, and civic virtue (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) further developed these seven dimensions to describe brand citizenship as illustrated in the table below:

1. Helping Behaviors	Positive attitude, friendliness, helpfulness, and empathy towards internal and external customers; taking responsibility for tasks outside of own area if necessary – for example, following up on complaints.
2. Brand Consideration	Adherence to brand-related behavior guidelines and reflection of brand impact before communicating or taking action in any situation.
3. Brand Enthusiasm	Showing extra initiative when engaging in brand related behaviours.
4. Sportsmanship	No complaining, even if engagement for the brand causes inconvenience; willingness to engage for the brand even at high opportunity costs.



5. Brand Endorsement	Recommendation of the brand to others also in non-job-related situations – for example, to friends – and passing on the brand identity to newcomers in the organisation.
6. Self-Development	Willingness to continuously enhance brand-related skills.
7. Brand Advancement	Contribution to the adaptation of the brand identity concept to changing market needs or new organisational competencies – for example, through passing on customer feedback or generating innovative ideas.

(Burmam & Zeplin, 2005, pp. 283-284)

As described earlier, vacation and business travel are highly emotional purchases for many people. Communicating effectively in the hospitality industry requires a high level of emotional intelligence, as the guests are not always in their most open and receptive mental or physical states during interactions with employees. They may be frustrated, exhausted, annoyed, and anxious, and while hospitality workers may be feeling the same emotions, they are not permitted to act upon them or mirror the emotional states of their customers. Hospitality workers must recognize and manage their own emotions while actively sensing the emotions of others to manage the relationship between the customer and their company. Combining self- and social awareness with empathy, the ability to understand the feelings of others (Goleman, 1995), is a critical brand-supportive behavior necessary for effective brand ambassadorship in the hospitality industry.

## Research Problem

Keeping in mind the importance of employee-customer interaction in the hospitality industry, how do hospitality companies cultivate brand-supportive behaviors and make their front-line employees excellent brand ambassadors? Management can communicate the brand attributes to employees and can encourage employees to “live the brand,” but when it comes down to demonstrating brand identity, how are behavioural communication skills developed within the employees?

By studying Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, one of the world’s most respected hospitality companies, this case study will seek to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by marketing and communications managers in developing their front-line employees into brand ambassadors. The findings of this case study will be evaluated to determine the role of communication skill development in brand ambassadorship. How much emphasis is being made to increase the communication tool kit of the front-line employees responsible for reinforcing the customer brand experience?

## Research Questions

*RQ1: How does Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts train front-line employees to become effective brand ambassadors?*

The purpose of the questions in this section is to develop a baseline understanding of how Four Seasons defines brand ambassadorship. The intention of framing the questions around training is to understand how front-line employees learn brand-supportive behaviours.

*RQ2: From the perspective of senior management, how does this training prepare front-line employees to support the brand in their direct interactions with guests?*

This question will directly address the question of how employees are expected to communicate, which should complement information provided regarding what employees are expected to communicate that was shared in response to the first question.

*RQ3: How do you track and analyze the success of this training?*

Establishing how the company evaluates the return on investment in these training programs will clarify the value that the company places on employee ambassadorship.

### Question Justification

The questions in each interview fall into the Level 2 category outlined by Yin (2014). The questions remained consistent for each interviewee to obtain the most accurate data for comparison across different levels and departments within the organizations (Yin, 2014). The research and interview questions are grouped and ordered specifically to inquire (1) how important is brand ambassadorship to Four Seasons, (2) how does Four Seasons cultivate brand ambassadorship, and (3) what value does brand ambassadorship bring to Four Seasons.

### Organization to be Studied

This case study examines one of the leading hotel chains of the world, Four Seasons Hotel and Resorts. Since 1961, Four Seasons has been constantly raising the level of customer service and luxury in the hospitality industry. Currently, Four Seasons operates 95 hotels around the world and is represented on every continent except Antarctica. The total number of properties operated by Four Seasons is expected to reach 100 in 2015 (Four Seasons Hotel and Resorts, 2014c).

Headquarters of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts are located in Toronto, Ontario. Founder, Isadore Sharp, is the

current chairman of the organization. Mr. Sharp is committed to innovation, and for the past fifty-three years, he has continuously developed the hospitality industry through exceptional service and leadership in luxury travel. In 2014, Four Seasons introduced its first luxury jet, intended to provide a seamless luxury travel experience from start to finish. The Four Seasons brand has evolved beyond luxury and exceptional service to become a quality of life for the guests who frequent its hotels and resorts around the world (Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, 2014c).

Forbes Travel Guide (formerly Mobil Travel Guides) has recently awarded two new Four Seasons Resorts with their esteemed Five-Star award (2014). This brings the total number of Four Seasons Five-Star properties to eighteen, more than any other hotel chain in the world. FORTUNE Magazine also recently named Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts one of the Top 100 Best Companies to Work For in 2014.

In a corporate press release (Four Seasons, 2014a), Christopher Hunsberger, Executive Vice President Product and Innovation, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts credits the recent accolades in Forbes magazine to the company's service culture and commitment to the employees who serve the hotel guests.

Our prominent placement within the Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star Awards results reflects Four Seasons deep commitment to service excellence and our focus on the guest experience. We are focused on harnessing the company's culture – commitment to our people, a passion for service, and customer-focused evolution through innovation, to ensure we continue to position ourselves as industry leaders as we continue to grow. (Four Seasons, 2014a)

Ellen du Bellay, Senior Vice President of Learning and Talent Management, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, believes that the ability to recruit top talent for customer service is a major contributor to the prominence of Four Seasons in recent hospitality industry rankings (personal communication, January 15, 2015). Top on the list of the best employee benefits at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts are complimentary stays at properties around the world, employee of the month and year recognition and prizes, and a wide variety of development programs, training, and mentorship initiatives (Hackett, 2015).

Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts has an aggressive growth plan, with 50 new hotels in some level of planning and development. Within the next decade, Four Seasons will likely operate over 140 hotels across the world. In 2015, new hotels under development in Ko Olina, Hawaii, Casablanca, Morocco, Seoul, Korea, Kingdom of Bahrain, and Surfside, Florida are scheduled to open (Four Seasons, 2014b). Additionally, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts has recently taken over the management of two luxury hotels in Bogota, Columbia (The Canadian Press, 2015). These two properties, the Four Seasons Hotel Casa Medina Bogota (formerly Hotel Casa Medina Bogota) and Four Seasons Hotel Bogota (formerly Hotel Charleston Bogota) have been closed for renovations since December 2014. It will be interesting to see how this aggressive growth schedule affects the service culture for Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts during the next decade.

The background provided establishes Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts as a leader in exceptional customer service within the hospitality industry.

### Case Study Method

This case study provides a comparison of employee ambassadorship evaluation across the marketing, communications, guest recognition, and human relations departments within the Four Seasons organization. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the organisation that would not

otherwise be possible with other forms of more quantitative research such as surveys or experimentation (Yin, 2014). The questions asked of each interviewee focus on “how” and “why” answers that allow interviewees to explain and elaborate on their experience within both the organization and the hospitality industry (Yin, 2014). These questions limit the control of the researcher to influence answers. They reflect current knowledge and perceptions from leaders in the hospitality industry.

Individual responses will create a mosaic of brand ambassadorship within the organization. They will be reviewed and compared to draw organizational conclusions (Yin, 2014).

### Data Collection Procedure

This case study will include two forms data collection methods: interviews and documentation. The data collected from each of these methods allowed the researcher to compare evidence with the literature reviewed in an effort to corroborate the findings (Yin, 2009).

Interviews were arranged with four executives of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. These officers are as follows: Elizabeth Pizzinato, Senior Vice President of Marketing and Communications; Michael Minchin, Senior Vice President of Marketing; Nicole Scavuzzo, Director Guest Recognition and Relationship Marketing; Ellen du Bellay, Senior Vice President of Talent and Learning. The interview format is a useful method of data collection in this case study because of the behavioural analysis that is being researched (Yin, 2014). Likewise, the case study format is a useful way to compare and contrast the varied perspectives from different branches of the organization.

Documentary evidence includes press coverage related to Four Seasons’s efforts to improve customer service, retention, and loyalty. Documentary evidence compared with data collected from interviews (Yin, 2014), identifying consistencies and/or inconsistencies that may affect the development of

brand ambassadors on the front-line of service in the hospitality industry.

### Data Analysis Technique

This case study analyzes the implementation of communication training provided by Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts as it relates to brand citizenship behavior (Burmah & Zeplin, 2005), as well as the relationship between marketing & communications (Grunig & Grunig, 2013). This case study explains how brand knowledge is disseminated and how brand-supportive behaviors are developed within front-line hospitality workers at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. The explanation-building method is used to understand the responsibilities of both the marketing and communications departments and to gauge the success of the system employed by Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts (Yin, 2014).

### Results

*RQ1: How does Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts train front-line employees to become effective brand ambassadors?*

“Employee brand ambassador” is not a term used frequently within Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. Ellen du Bellay, Senior Vice President of Talent and Learning, acknowledged that she was not previously familiar with the term, but she demonstrated a keen understanding, as she described someone who could communicate what the company stands for, both externally and internally, to either a customer or another employee. The term was more familiar to the interviewees established within the marketing and communications departments. Michael Minchin, Senior Vice President of Marketing considers everyone within the organization, “from marketing to food & beverage” to be a brand ambassador (personal communication, January 15, 2015). These comments were echoed by Elizabeth Pizzinato, Senior Vice President of Marketing

and Communications. She explained that a brand ambassador knows how to behave when they have the ability to impact the customer's perception of the brand. From a service perspective, Nicole Scavuzzo, Director of Guest Recognition and Relationship Marketing, identified brand ambassadorship as the embodiment of the culture of the brand. From a relationship perspective, the term refers to an employee who understands the full scope of what Four Seasons is trying to achieve. A brand ambassador, said Scavuzzo "can follow the lead we are setting" (personal communication, February 2, 2015).

All four interviewees agreed that every employee-customer interaction, or "touch point" as Minchin identified them (personal communication, January 15, 2015), had an impact on the brand. While advertising, social media, magazine articles, and the website all promote the brand of Four Seasons, Pizzinato emphasized that "ultimately, the payoff happens at the hotel when the guest arrives" (personal communication, January 26, 2015). The customer books a reservation based on reputation, and the experience must deliver on the brand promise.

While every employee-customer interaction has influence on the Four Seasons brand, according to the four interviewees, two specific types of interactions possess special abilities to affect a customer's perspective and loyalty: glitch recovery and unscripted moments.

The term "glitch" is part of the Four Seasons lexicon. It refers to an instance where a guest experiences something that does not meet his or her expectations. While every employee strives to meet or exceed the expectations of each guest all the time, Four Seasons employees understand that moments of dissatisfaction are sometimes inevitable. There are times when employees cannot say "yes" to a customer request for legal, ethical, or physical reasons. "We teach people to say yes," explains du Bellay. "Every employee wants to say yes. It can be intimidating. It can be upsetting when an employee has to say no" (E. du Bellay, personal communication, January 15, 2015).



Mistakes due to human error also occur. Minchin believes the ability to recover from these glitches are special opportunities to support the Four Seasons brand. Furthermore, Minchin recognizes that when front line employees are able to absorb the anger and screaming of a dissatisfied guest and still provide help, the positive effect on the brand is enormous. “When a guest is not happy,” Scavuzzo shared “how do we recognize that guest? If we do not recognize, it [brand support] stops right there. Our goal is to make the guest feel like they are known” (personal communication, February 2, 2015).

Pizzinato explained that employees are inclined to be able to solve a problem in a way that leaves guests feeling valued. She recalled a quote from a former President of Operations at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, “it’s not the glitch, it’s how we deal with the glitch that is important” (personal communication, January 26, 2015). According to Pizzinato, glitch recovery creates more affinity.

Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts offers employees training programs on how to handle complaints and recover from mistakes, according to du Bellay. The interviewees from the marketing and communications departments were not as familiar with the formal training. “It comes down to hiring the right people,” du Bellay added, “and role modeling. A lot of times, the general managers [of the hotels] will deal with those sorts of things [challenging customer interactions]. Managers will come running to rescue an employee” (personal communication, January 15, 2015). Employees learn by modeling the brand-supportive behaviors of their managers.

The second type of interaction that has a special ability to support the Four Seasons brand are what Mrs. Pizzinato refers to as “unscripted moments,” when actual human connections “from-the-heart” occur (personal communication, January 26, 2015). The example she shared is of a guest who was sick as they checked-in. The front desk employee who assisted the guest, and noticed the guest suffering from a cold, called room service to have a bowl of soup delivered to the room shortly after the guest arrived. The front desk employee was

not obligated to do this by a company standard, nor had the guest requested this service. The employee simply considered what might make them feel better if they were in the same situation. This is the service mantra of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts; *do unto others as you would like others to do unto you*. Each of the corporate executives of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts interviewed for this case study referred to the “golden rule” multiple times in their responses.

Employees at each Four Seasons property are trained on a variety of core standards according to du Bellay. However, there is no specific training on how to promote the brand. “The word ‘brand’ is never used (in training),” du Bellay explained. “The word ‘service’ is used. You could argue that service is our brand and therefore we train people on service, and by osmosis we train people on the brand” (E. du Bellay, personal communication, January 15, 2015).

Du Bellay further explained that core standards come in two categories. “Get it right” standards are technical in nature and describe what procedures an employee should follow in certain situations. For example, check the guest in within a 4 minute period. “Get me right” standards encourage employees to look for a way to make a special touch for a guest. Notice the guest’s mood and try to do something above-and-beyond their expectations. It is the “get me right” standards that most often rely on the employee to consider the golden rule.

*RQ2: How does senior management think that this training prepares front-line employees to support the brand in their direct interactions with guests?*

The list of brand-supportive behaviors shared by the collection of interviewees are as follows: caring, using intuition, anticipating, being knowledgeable, maintaining integrity, and showing empathy for others. “Behaviors are very unique to the individual,” shared Scavuzzo (personal communication, February 2, 2015). Following the golden rule provides employees the freedom to act in a personal way that is appropriate to their

role as a Four Seasons employee. “Give people the integrity and opportunity to do things as they seem best,” she added. “Every employee has the opportunity to do what they think is right, with support from their managers” (personal communication, February 2, 2015).

Du Bellay feels that relying on employees to act in the way they feel is best allows them to deliver a “highly personalized, customized experience” (personal communication, January 15, 2015). She offers an interesting perspective on the effect that employee-customer interactions have on the brand: “You could argue that our brand comes about by the way our employees serve our guests, rather than the other way around” (personal communication, January 15, 2015).

Formal training programs focus on how to deliver service, according to du Bellay. Core standards are department specific, and this training increases job knowledge while also helping to clarify roles for employees throughout the organization.

According to Minchin, the service culture of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts begins with hiring the right people. “Employees start with a high level of understanding,” he said, “and continue building because it is part of their nature and our culture” (personal communication, January 15, 2015). He added that employees learn about the service culture during initial training and orientation. Pizzinato believes that reinforcing the golden rule empowers employees to be themselves. “There are no service scripts,” she said. “Within the construct of treating people respectfully, employees can be themselves” (E. Pizzinato, personal communication, January 26, 2015)

“The golden rule is front and center,” Pizzinato adds. “No matter where you go in the world, our employees will be able to describe the notion of the golden rule to you. The interactions [between employees and guests] reinforce this cultural value we have” (E. Pizzinato, personal communication, January 26, 2015).

Scavuzzo explained what effect the golden rule has on guests as well. “Guests feel special. They open up and share.

This allows employees the opportunity to behave in a way that shows we understand and acknowledge them” (N. Scavuzzo, personal communication, February 2, 2015).

Scavuzzo recognizes that as Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts grows, they may need to “put guardrails on how we operationalize the culture” (personal communication, February 2, 2015). One of the biggest challenges ahead is how to scale with the growth; to “grow with freedom” (N. Scavuzzo, personal communication, February 2, 2015).

Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts offers employees the opportunity to experience the service culture as a guest by providing complimentary room stays as a benefit of employment. Though not formally considered a training opportunity, du Bellay believes the “comp” rooms help employees better understand the service culture of the company. It also helps employees develop brand identity with Four Seasons. According to du Bellay and Minchin, pride is another factor in how employees develop brand identity. Employees “want to work for the best,” says Minchin. “Employees are motivated by being #1 in the market. Their internal sense of caring for others is renewed and rewarded” (M. Minchin, personal communication, January 15, 2015).

*RQ3: How do you track and analyze the success of this training?*

According to Minchin, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts uses a Medallia survey to measure a variety of guest satisfaction metrics. Medallia is a Palo Alto, California based customer experience management firm that offers companies the tools to survey, track, and analyze a variety of metrics related to customer satisfaction (Medallia, 2015). One of the most useful statistics for Minchin is the net promoter score, which reports how likely customers are to recommend the hotel property in which they stayed to a friend. Pizzinato believes that customer recommendation is the most powerful thing to drive brand loyalty and awareness. Pizzinato, who has been with Four Seasons for 15 years, remarked that from the time before

social media until now, guest recommendations have always been one of the top measurements of brand loyalty. “The sources and volume have changed,” she noted, “but not the importance. ‘If your reputation was on the line, would you recommend...’ It is a powerful measurement” (personal communication, January 26, 2015).

Employee engagement surveys also offer valuable metrics for Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts to measure the effectiveness of its training programs. According to du Bellay, employees rate their experience working at Four Seasons. Employees are asked to rate how strongly they agree with statements such as “I am proud to work for the company,” and “I understand the mission and vision of the company.”

Scavuzzo and Minchin mentioned that marketing metrics like *revenue per available room (RevPAR)* and *share of wallet (SOW)* are also used to evaluate the effectiveness of employee performance as it relates to the service training they provide. RevPAR is a calculation of the average daily rate (ADR) multiplied by the occupancy rate (i.e. the percentage of rooms filled). SOW is the total amount of money that a guest spends on all goods and services within the hotel, not just the room rate. The better the service, the more money the customers spend while on property, and the more often they return, the theory goes.

“Metrics are changing now,” states Scavuzzo (personal communication, February 2, 2015). Part of her job is to discover new ways to measure the quality of relationships that Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts is developing with guests. Four Seasons does not issue loyalty points like many other hotel chains, “where certain levels are treated differently than others,” according to Scavuzzo (personal communication, February 2, 2015). She is developing ways to measure how *recognized* guests feel and if they believe they have received a customized service. “We need to put a more guest-centered approach to how we rank and rate our success. How do you put metrics around each initiative?” she asked herself in the interview. “We don’t know, and we are trying to figure it out” (personal communication, February 2, 2015).

Du Bellay explained that hotel general managers understand, analyze, and manage their employees based on all of these metrics. In the case of employee engagement scores, general managers are given the results by their regional vice president. Most corporate goals and property goals are tied to these metrics. Bonuses and incentives are tied to the metrics as well. Du Bellay concluded her comments on metrics by saying that “everybody is driven by customer satisfaction” (personal communication, January 15, 2015).

In addition to goals and incentives, Minchin mentioned that employees are motivated to develop and improve their brand-supportive behaviors every time they hear their own name included in positive guest comments. Du Bellay cited employee relations activities and formalized appreciation programs as additional ways to motivate employees to continually improve their performance.

## Discussion

This case study examined the degree to which hotel employee interactions with guests affect the brand image, brand reputation, and customer loyalty for Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. The topic of employee behavior and, more specifically, training for desired behavior seems to fall predominantly in the domain of the human resources department of Four Seasons. The development of brand communications is predominantly a responsibility of the marketing and communications departments. Despite the cross-department differences, the theme of treating guests as one would wish to be treated themselves was consistent throughout the interviews, supporting the importance of helping behaviours, like empathy (Burmah & Zeplin, 2005) in brand building. A number of conclusions can be made about how Four Seasons is able to develop and cultivate the service culture for which they have become well-recognized.

First, promoting the golden rule as the guiding principle in providing service empowers employees to act in the way

they feel is best to complete their jobs within the confines of what is appropriate for their role. This freedom to choose encourages guest service that is personalized and customized for each individual guest. This approach neatly combines two elements of identity-based brand management for the tourism & hospitality industry: role clarity (King, 2010) and brand commitment (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005). The unscripted moments have a special ability to connect customers and employees to the Four Seasons brand. The absence of service scripts allows each employee's personality to become part of their interactions with guests, adding a level of authenticity that can lead to trust and brand loyalty.

Each of the marketing and communication executives interviewed in this case study deferred to du Bellay when asked about training, leading the researcher to believe that they have little direct influence on the content or execution of training for front-line employees. Meanwhile, du Bellay suggested that the marketing and communications departments probably had a more comprehensive definition of the Four Seasons brand than she could articulate. She surmised that *service* could be the brand, saying, "you could argue that our brand comes about by the way our employees serve our guests, rather than the other way around" (personal communication, January 15, 2015). Perhaps the Four Seasons could improve each employee's ability to promote brand image, reputation, and customer loyalty if the marketing and communications departments worked proactively with human resources to develop training that influences brand-specific behaviors. This would align their internal brand management strategy more closely with Grunig's theory of organizational excellence (1992).

Second, the most important factor contributing to the creation and successful management of a culture based on the golden rule is hiring the right people. Four Seasons has an elaborate screening process in which they evaluate which prospective employees are likely to embody the service culture and values of the company. This is a proactive approach to building a workforce of brand citizens, as described by Burmann and

Zeplin (2005). Being the top hotel in most markets in which it competes is a competitive advantage for Four Seasons when it comes to hiring new employees. Applicants are attracted to the prestigious brand and aspire to work for one of the best hotel chains in the world. The potential for complimentary hotel stays at Four Seasons properties around the world is also a powerful draw for prospective employees. These two draws increase the likelihood of Four Seasons to find and hire employees with the potential to develop strong brand commitment, a key driver of brand-supportive behaviors (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005).

In markets where the Four Seasons is not the leading hotel property, it may be more difficult to attract the employees who best align with the service culture and values of the company. Overreliance on hiring people who already align with the service principle of the golden rule could become a competitive disadvantage in markets with limited human resources available to fill jobs. This could become an issue for Four Seasons, considering the aggressive growth expected in the coming decades. Nicole Scavuzzo recognizes that as Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts grows, they may need to “put guardrails on how we operationalize the culture” (personal communication, February 2, 2015). One of the biggest challenges ahead is how to scale with the growth; to “grow with freedom.” Training programs that develop character based skills and brand-supportive behaviors may help Four Seasons ensure that they will be able to preserve their service culture where and when human resources are scarce (King, 2010).

Third, motivating employees to improve their brand-supportive behaviors is achieved through a combination of goal setting, incentives, recognition, and employee relations activities. Effective goal setting requires accurate measurement of key performance indicators and other metrics for success. Four Seasons is comprehensive and innovative in their pursuit of valuable metrics to analyze and utilize for goal setting. Four Seasons retains employees through a generous benefits package and the opportunity for upward mobility and international



relocation. An extensive variety of formal training programs provide professional development opportunities and also contribute to the quality of service provided by Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts. Employees develop brand identity by experiencing the products and services firsthand through complimentary stays and by feeling pride for the company and facility. Each of these methods of motivation are consistent with King's assertion that measuring the effects of internal brand management should reflect the recognition of employees exhibiting brand-supportive behaviours (King, 2010).

### Conclusion and Limitations

This case study has offered some revealing insights into how hospitality companies develop brand image, brand reputation, and customer loyalty through employee-interactions with customers. Additional research possibilities can elaborate on the challenges and opportunities that hospitality companies face in an industry that is so heavily reliant on employees to deliver the brand promise to customers. A study on how hotels outside of the luxury segment recruit employees and cultivate a culture of service could uncover innovative training programs that develop brand-supportive behaviours. An exploratory case study that compares and contrasts the service culture development between hotels, restaurants, activity providers, and other hospitality segments could be valuable for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and chambers of commerce.

Research focusing exclusively on applicant screening and hiring procedures across various hotel chains could provide valuable insights into the potential competition for human resources in a particular market.

This case study focused exclusively on one-on-one interactions between hotel employees and guests through direct communication (e.g., in person, over the phone, and email conversations). Further research conducted on the more dialogic communication that occurs in social media and through

customer review websites, such as TripAdvisor.com, could be extremely insightful as hospitality companies embrace communication strategies tailored to the Millennial generation.

Finally, using the evidence collected in this case study as a foundation, further examination of the collaboration that occurs between human resources, marketing, communications, operations, and other departments within Four Seasons as it relates to brand-supportive communication may offer insight into opportunities for further development of brand image, brand reputation, and customer loyalty. The opportunity to study and document Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts's strategy to communicate their brand through employee-customer interactions could set a benchmark for other hospitality companies around the world.

Every effort has been made to remain objective and avoid all bias in the compilation and analysis of this case study research. However, limitations do exist. Representatives from the communications, marketing, and human resources departments were interviewed as part of this research. The conclusions cannot and should not be assumed to have examined every communication scenario in which employees interact directly with guests at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. Generalizations about how operations departments communicate brand-supportive behaviors were not examined in detail as part of this case study. To fully evaluate and analyze the effect that interactions between hotel employees and guests have on brand image, reputation management, and customer loyalty, additional research should include general managers of individual hotels and representatives from various operational departments within the Four Seasons corporate structure.

Lastly, it should be disclosed that the researcher has spent the past 21 years in the travel, tourism, and hospitality industries. He has first-hand experience in the following areas: sales, marketing, hotel operations, and communication training. He is also married to the Director of Worldwide Residential Operations at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. While he

has made every attempt to remain objective in his line of questioning and interpretation of results, he does maintain relationships with individuals and partner companies that have ties to Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts.

This case study serves as an important launching point for future research into the economic effects of interactions between hotel employees and guests. Brand management in the hospitality industry is heavily reliant on the ability of employees to communicate effectively with guests (King, 2010). Success and global competitiveness lie in the ability to innovate communication strategy throughout the organization. Understanding the importance of communication is a vital first step in the development of a highly personalized service culture. Advancing and adapting a service culture to new markets, new customers, new environments, and new technologies will require hotels to effectively train and retain employees who embody the company's culture and values.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### *Introduction*

My name is John Morgan. I am an independent communications consultant who works with hospitality companies in the United States and Canada. I am currently pursuing a Master's degree in Communications Management at McMaster University and Syracuse University. It is in this context that I would like to interview you in order to complete a case study research assignment. I would like to ask you several questions to help me determine how and to what extent direct communication between hotel employees and guests influences brand image, brand reputation, and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry. Your answers may provide insight into the degree to which various departments within your organization support and promote the Four Seasons brand during hotel employee interactions with guests. With your permission, I would like to record our interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### *Interview Questions*

1. When you hear the term “employee brand ambassador” what immediately comes to mind?
2. Explain how the interactions between front-line hotel employees and guests affect the Four Seasons brand image, its reputation, and customer loyalty.



3. In what types of employee-customer interactions do you feel front-line employees are best able to promote brand image, reputation, and customer loyalty?
4. What information and training does the Four Seasons Corporate Office provide to hotel employees so that they may effectively promote the Four Seasons brand during interactions with guests?
5. As you consider employee interactions with guests, describe what brand supportive behaviors that you would like hotel employees to exhibit.
6. Please describe one or more customer interaction scenarios are the most challenging for front-line employees to exhibit brand supportive behaviors.
7. How does Four Seasons encourage hotel employees to exhibit brand supportive behaviors during interactions with guests?
8. How do front-line employees of Four Seasons develop their brand identity with the company?
9. What specifically about customer interactions helps front-line employees align with the company values and culture?
10. How do you measure the effectiveness of brand ambassadorship within your company? Please respond specifically to metrics influenced by employee-guest interactions.

11. How does Four Seasons senior management provide feedback to hotel managers regarding the effectiveness of their employee-guest interactions in promoting the brand?
12. To what extent are company goals based on brand ambassadorship and/or employee interaction with customers?
13. Please explain how front-line employees are motivated to improve brand supportive behavior during employee-customer interactions.

### *Conclusion*

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today and for participating in this case study assignment. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to add anything else that comes to mind. Likewise, may I please contact you if I have any follow-up questions regarding our discussion?