

Article

Examination of Operational Strategy of International Tourist Hotels

Tsung-Cheng Lai ^{1,2,*}, Hsi-Lin Liu ², Ryan Wu ², Chu Wu ³

¹ Department of Hospitality Management, Chien Hsin University of Science and Technology, Taoyuan, 32097, Taiwan

² Graduate Institute of Tourism Management, National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism, Kaoshiung 812301, Taiwan; wayne@mail.nkuht.edu.tw (H.-L.L.); ryanwu@mail.nkuht.edu.tw (R.W.)

³ Department of Hospitality Management, Yu Da University of Science and Technology, Miaoli 36143, Taiwan; chuwu@ydu.edu.tw

* Correspondence: yutakalai@gmail.com Tel.: +886-3-458-1196

Received: Feb 23, 2024; Revised: Mar 8, 2024; Accepted: Mar 23, 2024; Published: Apr 30, 2024

Abstract: To gain a competitive edge in the dynamic landscape of the global tourist hotel industry, strategic development is important. Thus, we scrutinized the strategic management plans to diversify hotel business models, focusing on the role of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). We conducted qualitative research with a snowball sampling method and interviewed ten experienced CEOs who were engaged in the industry. All interviewees possessed a minimum of 14 years of expertise and experienced a minimum of two types of business models. They experienced the industry as entry-level employees and various tasks such as room or food and beverage (F&B) management. Four used to work for six hotels and four for globally franchised hotels. The research result revealed that CEOs must have self-learning and a proclivity to undertake challenges in diverse regions and distinct systems. Moreover, CEOs need to align their operational strategies with the eight indices specified by the Tourism Bureau. The business model of the global hotel franchise is attributed to its cost-effectiveness, profitability, and autonomous decision-making capabilities. The management team with industry expertise is advantageous for the hotel. Eight operational strategies were proposed to mitigate potential damages arising from external factors. Franchise hotels exhibited commendable accommodation rates and profitability compared to their independent counterparts. To alleviate interdepartmental conflicts, well-organized supporting systems must be implemented.

Keywords: Global Tourist Hotels, CEO, Business Strategies, Operational Models

1. Introduction

The year 1956 was marked by the development of Taiwan's tourism industry. To generate foreign currencies and for national security, Taiwan started developing inbound tourism. In that year, the number of inbound tourists was 14,974. In 2019, the number had increased to 11,864,105, representing a 792-fold growth over 63 years. However, the tourism industry is inherently susceptible to external factors. The global outbreak of COVID-19 from 2020 to 2022 led to travel restrictions worldwide, causing a drastic decline in inbound tourism. In 2021, the number of visitors to Taiwan plummeted to 140,479. As the COVID-19 ended in the end of 2022, countries had eased entry and exit restrictions gradually. By October 2023, the number of inbound tourists to Taiwan had rebounded to 4,983,081, representing a gradual recovery to 51% of pre-pandemic levels in 2019.

Given that "hotels are the mother of the tourism industry," Taiwan had only four domestically operated hotels with a total of 154 rooms available for foreign guests before promoting tourism in 1956: The Grand Hotel, Friends of China Club, Free China House, and Taiwan Railway Hotel. With the increase in inbound tourists and the growing emphasis on the quality of leisure life by Taiwanese, as of September 2023, there were 73 international tourist hotels with 20,109 rooms, 45 tourist hotels with 6,795 rooms, and 3,315 lodges with 170,562 rooms (Tourism Administration, M.O.T.C., 2023). According to the "2019 Visitor Expenditure and Trends Survey Report," the total revenue in foreign currency was USD 14.411 billion with an average daily expenditure of USD 223.86 per visitor to Taiwan. Notably, expenditures within hotels accounted for the highest proportion at 39.11% (Tourism Administration, M.O.T.C., 2023). This prompted this research through which we explored the manager's roles in tourist hotels, the challenges in related business, external factors affecting the tourism industry, and effective business strategies. By examining those factors, we uncovered how tourist hotels responded to the challenges posed by external factors, leveraging the responsibilities of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and operational models. We also explored how the managers cooperated with MOTC. The

indicators for the operation and strategies for environmental changes were proposed for effective decision-making procedures as a reaction to the ever-changing tourism industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Characteristics of Hotel Industry

The hotel industry is a labor-intensive service industry operating year-round and has to maintain the quality of customer experiences. Its products include tangible goods and intangible services. Given the close interaction between service personnel and customers, product management in the hotel industry differs significantly from that in other industries. Tourist hotels for global customers must exhibit distinct characteristics in terms of the nature of hotel products with their well-organized structures and institutionalized management. The performance of service personnel plays a decisive role, and their roles and significance allow for competitive advantages and create organizational performance (Wu, C. 2007). Such attributes were reviewed and proposed by Alan and James (2008), Wu (2013), Kuo (2014), and Luo & Wei (2023) which helps to understand the industry's distinctive nature. The following is a summary based on their studies.

1. Geographical location has a big impact on the industry.
2. High Market Entry Barriers: Entry into the market poses significant challenges.
3. Easy Imitation of Operational Techniques: Operational techniques are easily imitated, leading to high spillover effects.
4. Limited Short-Term Supply Elasticity: Short-term supply is inflexible.
5. The early entrants do not necessarily possess the advantage of accumulating substantial experience and significantly reducing costs.
6. Early entrants are unable to achieve economies of scale in advance through prior investments in production capacity equipment.
7. Diverse and Influenced Demand: Demand is diverse and easily influenced by external factors.
8. Distinct Peak and Off-Peak Seasons: There are distinct peak and off-peak seasons.
9. Non-Storable and High Disposability of Products: Storage of products is not possible, and the level of disability is high.
10. High Customer Brand Loyalty: Customers exhibit high loyalty to hotel brands.

The hotel industry is influenced by geographical location and requires substantial capital investment with returns for a long time. There are high barriers to market entry as there is no proprietary technology or patents to protect against copycat strategy. Short-term supply is inflexible during peak occupancy, and high employee turnover rates persist. Even with advancements, cost reduction through experience accumulation is challenging, and fixed production capacity limits scalability. The industry faces diverse demands and vulnerability to external factors such as politics, economy, security, transportation, international affairs, natural disasters, and regional conflicts. Autonomy in the industry is relatively low, evident in distinct peak and off-peak seasons, the perishable and non-storable nature of room inventory, and a high level of service-dependent customer loyalty. Consequently, global franchises and independent hotels need to develop and refine distinct operational models to navigate the challenges and tests presented by the business environment. These characteristics shape the unique dynamics of the hotel industry collectively from the aspects of market competition, operational strategies, and customer dynamics. It is crucial to understand these characteristics for hotel management to formulate effective and adaptive strategies in the ever-changing business environment.

2.2. Classification of Hotel Operation Models

1. Independent operation refers to businesses where the owner operates solely with no external involvement in management. The owner bears profits and losses. In this model, the business owner controls operations, trains or recruits talent internally, and acquires the necessary resources through methods such as high-salary recruitment, imitation, independent research and development, trial and error in operations, and acquisitions.
2. Franchise refers to the joint operation of three or more hotels through various forms of collaboration for mutual benefits and development. The American Hotel and Motel Association stipulates that a grouping of three or more hotels is termed a franchise hotel (Jayawardena, C. 2000). In franchise hotel operation, hotels are operated under the same name or trademark, employing standardized management practices, operational procedures, and service methods for collaborative operation (Wu, 2022). A hotel franchise is formed by two or more hotels to create a unified group. In essence, they use the same logo with the same style and standards even in different countries or regions.

In self-assessment and evaluation of market sources, hotel operators choose independent or franchise operational models, each having its advantages and disadvantages. The merits of independent operation are the hotel owner's complete autonomy and immediate effects on management. However, the resources of independent operations are less than those of chain-operated hotels considerably. Franchise hotels benefit from centralized bargaining power in purchasing hotel supplies to reduce costs. Personnel support and the brand's image contribute to increasing hotel visibility and expanded performance. However, franchise hotels must pay an annual franchise fee, joining fee, and operational expenses to the headquarters, potentially posing a heavier burden on financially weaker owners. Additionally, disputes may arise between the chain headquarters and franchisees due to cultural differences or communication issues in operational management and personnel deployment.

2.3. Franchise Operation

The operation of franchise hotels is classified into the following (Chiang, 2005; Alan & James, 2008; Vallen and Vallen, 2009; Lai, 2010; Kuo, 2014; Wu, 2022):

1. Management Contract: The CEO is contracted by a franchise company for the hotel's operations. The CEO has responsibility for daily operations, and the owner maintains ownership of the property.
2. Franchise: In, rights are granted by the franchisor to the franchisee to operate under the parent company's brand. The franchisee benefits from established brand recognition and operational standards.
3. Referral (Joint Reservation and Promotion): In a referral model, hotels collaborate on joint reservation systems and promotional activities, often forming a network of affiliated establishments.
4. Company Own (Building New Hotels): In this model, the parent company owns and operates new hotels directly, ensuring the standardization of branding, style, and service across multiple locations.
5. Purchase: In franchise operation, hotels are included in the brand. The parent company purchases established properties.
6. Lease/Rental: Franchisees can choose to lease or rent land to construct new hotels. In this model, expansion without the full capital investment of ownership is possible.
7. Voluntary Franchise (Business Association Franchise): Voluntary franchise operations involve independent hotels voluntarily forming an association to benefit from collective marketing, reservations, and shared branding without direct ownership or strict affiliation.

These various approaches to hotel franchise operation provide flexibility for companies to expand their presence and enhance their competitiveness in the hospitality industry. The choice of the specific model depends on strategic goals, available resources, and market conditions.

2.4. Operational Indicators

The analysis of tourist hotels' operations is conducted by MOTC. MOTC analyzes data reported by hotel operators to provide data on the status of international tourist hotels. The data and reports are available on the MOTC website as a reference for hospitality industry practitioners and academia for business management and education. The key indicators in the operational analysis include the following.

1. Occupancy Rate: The percentage of occupied rooms in a hotel indicates the utilization of available accommodation.
2. Average Actual Room Revenue: The average revenue generated per room reflects the actual income derived from room bookings.
3. Nationality of Accommodated Guests: Analysis of the nationalities of guests staying in the hotels provides data on the diversity of the customer base.
4. Type of Accommodated Guests: Categorization of guests based on types, such as Group Inclusive Tours, Freely Independent Travel, etc.
5. Employee Headcount Statistics: The number of employees in the hotel provides data on the workforce size.
6. Average Employee Productivity: Calculation of the average value produced by each employee, reflecting their efficiency in contributing to the hotel's operations.
7. Average Employee Salary: The average salary paid to employees offers data on the labor cost of the hotel.

These seven indicators contribute to a comprehensive analysis of the operational performance of international tourist hotels. They aid in benchmarking, decision-making, and strategic planning for both industry professionals and academic researchers in the field of hospitality management.

3. Research Design

3.1. Method

We conducted one-on-one interviews with professional managers in tourist hotels. We explored their strategic decision-making processes and implementation experiences in hotel operations. Given the substantial financial and operational investments required for constructing tourist hotels, owners and professional managers must consider comprehensive business planning in the pre-launch phase. Consequently, professional managers must select the operational model and overcome and mitigate risks. In this study, the perspectives of professional managers in tourist hotels were analyzed by examining the seven indicators of MOTC. The result of this study helped to understand the cognitive processes and strategic utilization patterns adopted by professional managers in operational challenges and varying market conditions within the context of the chosen operational model determined by the hotel owners. The indicators used in analyzing the operational status of international tourism establishments have been widely accepted and implemented. They are entrusted for their reliability. Therefore, using the indicators as a foundation, we designed an interview protocol for senior managers of two operational models, franchise- and independently-operational models. The indicators show managerial approaches for achievement and adaptation to business environment changes for optimal performance.

3.2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research was designed to elucidate the intricate dynamics of decision-making processes and strategic orientations of tourist hotels. The framework was constructed from the following three perspectives.

1. **Determinants of Operational Model Selection:** This facet underscores the multifaceted factors that shape the choice of operational models in international tourist hotels. Key considerations encompass ownership structures, financial capacities, market positioning strategies, and risk hedges. The determinants influencing the selection of operational models are unraveled to understand subsequent cognitive processes and strategic decisions.
2. **Cognitive Processes:** The cognitive activities performed by professional managers are examined, specifically focusing on their perceptions, interpretations, and analyses of information in operational models. The internal and external factors such as industry developments, competitive dynamics, and regulatory environments are examined to understand the complexities of cognitive processes and understand the intellectual foundations of decision-making.
3. **Strategic Decision-Making:** Building upon the cognitive processes, the strategic decisions are executed by professional managers in the selected operational model. Managers conceptualize and operationalize strategies to address challenges, leverage opportunities, and adapt to dynamic market conditions. Strategic decisions are made for marketing strategies, service differentiation, and resource allocation.

This tripartite framework enables the comprehension of the relation of these elements and the exploration of the complexities of operational model selection and implementation. The conceptual framework is required for the systematic analysis of interview content to establish the cognitive processes and strategic maneuvers employed by managers.

3.3. Participant Selection Method

We adopted purposive sampling and snowball sampling to identify participants capable of providing appropriate information relevant to the research objectives. Using such sampling methods, individuals with rich experiential data were recruited. Interview outlines and consent forms were sent to the participants for the interview to obtain their consent to this study. This study was conducted for three months with 10 professional managers.

3.4. Research Credibility and Transferability

We adopted a qualitative research methodology to explore "credibility and transferability" for research quality. Based on the framework, "credibility," "transferability," "dependability," and "confirmability" were assured (Niu, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the triangulation method, data were collected and compared data at different times. This approach was used to enhance robustness by corroborating information from diverse sources or methods. The participants reviewed interview transcripts to validate accuracy and completeness to reflect the participants' perspectives and experiences exactly. The analytical process was referred to previous literature. To secure credibility, two professional managers with over 15 years in the hotel industry examined and validated the data. Their review also allowed for the authenticity and reliability of the interview. The multi-layered validation allowed for the trustworthiness and methodological soundness of this study.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Interviewees

We interviewed 10 professional managers of tourist hotels. They were selected using a snowball sampling method. Seven male and three female managers participated in the interview. Three were general managers, while Three were executive vice general managers or vice general managers. They were specialized managers in the hotel industry. Four participants were senior business managers of the mother company of franchise hotels. One interviewee had the role of owner's representative. The interviewees had a minimum industry experience of 14 years with the longest experience of 36 years. The average interview duration was 87 minutes. The background information of the interviewees is presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Background information of interviewees.

No.	Hotel Code	Location	Hotel Type	Management Type	Number of Franchise Hotels
1	PH Hotel	Taichung City	City Hotel	Local Franchise Operation	3
2	EG Hotel	Taichung City	City Hotel	Local Franchise Operation	10
3	TG Hotel	Taipei City	City Hotel	Independent Operation	-
4	HI Hotel	New Taipei City	City Hotel	International Franchise Operation	1,319
5	IH Hotel	Taipei City	City Hotel	Independent Operation	-
6	SP Hotel	Taichung City	City Hotel	Independent Operation	-
7	TS Hotel	Taoyuan City	Resort Hotel	Independent Operation	-
8	HH Hotel	Hsinchu City	City Hotel	Local Franchise Operation	7
9	WS Hotel	Taichung City	City Hotel	Local Franchise Operation	3
10	AB Hotel	Taipei City	City Hotel	Local Franchise Operation	3

40% of the interviewees had worked for a maximum of six hotels, indicating their familiarity with global franchise brands. Four respondents were employed by Hilton Hotel Taipei, which impacted their personal development as pointed out by Yan (2008). Since the opening of Hilton Hotel Taipei in 1973, Taiwan has had global hotel franchises, introducing diverse concepts in hotel management and cultivating professional hotel managers. Global franchise hotels have systematic training systems (Stanley, 2017; Wu, 2022). Work for the Hilton was crucial for their career advancement into senior positions and in other hotels. The successful transfer of experiences gained at Hilton to other hotels was acknowledged as a notable achievement.

Table 2. Characteristics of interviewees.

Interviewee code	Gender	Age	Years of Experience	Position	Hotel	Main Job Responsibilities	Interview Duration
A	Male	53	20	Group GM	PH Hotel	Hotel development and investment evaluation, interaction with owners	98 minutes
B	Male	57	36	GM	EG Hotel	Overall operational policy formulation and performance management	77 minutes
C	Female	42	18	GM	TG Hotel	Overall operational policy formulation and performance management	72 minutes
D	Male	63	36	GM	HI Hotel	Overall operational policy formulation and performance management, representative of owners of 4 hotels in Taiwan and mainland China	132 minutes
E	Male	60	33	Executive VP	IH Hotel	Overall operational policy formulation and management	85 minutes
F	Male	45	20	DGM	SP Hotel	Overall operational policy formulation and performance management	72 minutes

G	Female*	47	22	DGM	TS Hotel	Overall operational policy formulation and performance management	75 minutes
H	Male*	52	26	DGM	HH Hotel	Overall operational policy formulation and performance management	96 minutes
I	Female*	40	15	DGM	WS Hotel	Overall operational policy formulation and performance management	94 minutes
J	Male	33	14	DGM	AB Hotel	Business marketing strategy formulation and execution in the entire franchise system	70 minutes

(*Note: Female and Male designations include an asterisk to indicate anonymity.)

4.2. Interview Content

The following are the interview content and recommendations of the interviewees in this study.

4.2.1. Owner's Perspectives

It is recommended that owners, not exclusively dedicated to the hotel industry, consider adopting a franchise operation model. This approach alleviates the operational burden on owners by delegating execution responsibilities to senior managers.

The decision should be made by the owner himself. I-P1-L17

Of course by our own internal board of directors. J-P2-L28

The first thoughts to come up are definitely the opinions of the owners, not the professional managers. J-P2-L34

4.2.2. Operational Model

For hotels with a substantial scale, it is advised to utilize the management contract-based franchise operation model. This facilitates autonomy retention while effectively controlling management costs.

In my personal opinion, I prefer to have an international brand as a support, because it will be more convenient and easier to market the hotel, because we all know the international brand you are participating in and your rules. , Your services and your equipment all have certain standards, which will be easier for customers to accept. Especially for our location, being able to carry an international brand is a plus for us. D-P5-L1-5

A brand has a certain identity for consumers. As for joining an international or local brand, it depends on whether the cost is worth it. If you currently have more than 400 or 500 rooms, then I suggest that it is better for him to join an international brand. A-P4-L30-32

4.2.3. Franchise Model

The franchise model is proposed as the optimal choice, characterized by brand influence, rapid profitability, and lower management costs, making it a favored option among senior executives.

It's also a personal preference. If you want to consider making money as your goal, of course it's fastest to start a franchise. J-P6-L28-29

4.2.4. Customer Source Differentiation

- Hotels in the greater Taipei area accommodate international tourists, considering affiliating with international franchise brands is recommended to attract a broader international clientele.

If the location is in Taipei, my suggestion is to join an international brand hotel. B-P2-L23-26

- Regional hotels focusing on the domestic market are advised to affiliate with local franchise brands to better cater to the domestic market.

It depends on which area has the first priority, international tourists or domestic tourists. If they are all domestic tourists, they do not necessarily need to join a big international brand. E-P2-L-15-27

Looking at the Taichung market, when foreign tourists come to Taiwan for sightseeing, business travelers almost always go to Taipei, and not many go to central and southern Taiwan. Therefore, the benefits of entering are not as good as those in Taipei, and they do not necessarily need to join international big brands. I-P11-L29-3

Overall, these recommendations provide an operational strategy that can be adjusted based on the specific characteristics of the hotel and the owner's requirements. This aids in maximizing operational efficiency while ensuring the interests of both owners and senior executives are adequately addressed.

5. Discussion

5.1. Selection of Operational Models of Tourist Hotels

It is important to choose operational models as they influence successful hotel management (Chang & Hwang, 2006; Lin, 2007; Tsen & Hu, 2010). 10 interviewees elucidated the rationale for selecting operational models, the assessment of managerial satisfaction, and the preferences of the future model of decision-makers. The interview content served as a reference for decisions related to operational model evaluations for hotel industry practitioners.

5.1.1. Initial Determinant in Operational Model Selection

Hotel owners hold the main decision-making power of selecting operational models. While owner opinions weigh significantly, evaluations are intensified to be franchise affiliations. Such deliberations require meetings and discussions which are reported to decision-makers.

5.1.2. Manager's Perspectives on Operational Model Selection

90% of professional managers of tourist hotels preferred franchise operations. Their endorsement was substantiated by the perceived advantages of franchise operations including established brand recognition, a cultivated reputation, shared costs for promotional and marketing training, and standardized equipment and services. These attributes contribute to the acceptability of global franchise hotels.

5.1.3. Recommendations for Independent Operational Models

Independent hotels lack operational resources. Thus, they must engage in regional alliances offering similar services. The alliance can be developed into a quasi-member franchise organization. However, each establishment requires its independent operational autonomy. In the independent operational model, their revenue per room can be increased by targeting rich guests through Global Distribution Systems (GDS) participation. This strengthens the convenience of reservations for foreign guests. Independent hotels may join different global reservation systems based on their targeted foreign guests and market segmentation.

5.1.4. Recommendations for Franchise Operational Models

Hotels in the greater Taipei area primarily accommodate foreign guests with enough room inventory. It is advisable to affiliate with international franchise brands. Conversely, for regional hotels with a domestic clientele, it is recommended to join local franchise brands to obtain local customer sources. Besides geographical and scale considerations, the cost is a crucial factor in the decision to join a franchise. The affiliation period, operational expenses, and operational support must be considered carefully. Responsibilities for personnel management, finance, and procurement are also essential to prevent any disruptions in the partnership.

6. Conclusions

The determination of business models and franchise strategies has been made by owners with managers' engagement. MOTC proposes seven indicators for operational guidance and evaluation. The susceptibility and vulnerabilities of the hotel industry are caused by natural disasters and crises, which necessitate a strategic response from managers. We explored strategies to mitigate risks and grow the business in the hotel industry of Taiwan. Managers in tourist hotels were interviewed to deliver their insights and opinions on opportunities and the business landscape. The strategies gleaned from interviews include the following.

1. **Target Customer Transformation Strategy:** In the event of a shift in the primary customer segment, hotels must seek alternative customer sources to offset the transition.
2. **Room Pricing Flexibility Strategy:** To maintain the average room price, the occupancy rate of 50–55% must be assured. This can be a guideline for promotional prices and discounts to attract guests and elevate room occupancy.
3. **Hotel Product Combination Strategy:** Novel products and services must be developed for rooms and dining with convenience and competitive prices. Additionally, in-room services such as housekeeping, food delivery, in-room cleaning, and laundry services must be improved.
4. **Human Resource Utilization Strategy:** Employee layoffs must be decided seriously to prevent the shortage of the workforce.
5. **Vacation Policy Adjustment Strategy:** It is necessary to prioritize annual leaves, pre-scheduled leaves, overtime considerations, and others for vacation policy.
6. **Salary and Benefits Package Strategy:** It is essential to build consensus with employees during short-term challenges such as reducing working hours, implementing unpaid leave, and incorporating hotel vouchers as salary payments.
7. **Preparedness for Opportunities Strategy:** For such risks, owners need to decide on hotel maintenance and staff education and training. Sometimes, it is required to save costs and notify visitors of the improvements to increase the market value.
8. **Outsourcing of Non-Core Business Strategy:** Outsourcing for non-core business processes is necessary for standardization and flexibility to reduce costs.

The limitation exists in this study in terms of the number of interviewees. Due to the snowball sampling method, 10 managers were invited from global franchise hotels. In future research, the number of interviews needs to be increased. Additionally, it is recommended to include quantitative research methods to cross-validate the findings.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: T.C. Lai; Methodology: H.L. Liu & R. Wu; Resources: T.C. Lai; Data curation: T.C. Lai; Writing—original draft: T.C. Lai; Writing—review and editing: C. Wu & H.L. Liu; Visualization: R. Wu. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research did not receive external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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