
Tough guests, smart moves: helping employees navigate challenging hospitality encounters

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to address the growing issue of guest misconduct and fraudulent behaviour within the hospitality industry. It seeks to raise awareness of the negative impact these behaviours have on employee morale, retention and organisational performance, while challenging the outdated maxim that “the customer is always right.” By engaging frontline staff and leaders through workshops and thematic analysis, the research aims to develop practical tools, including a behavioural checklist and RED/AMBER/GREEN model, to empower employees, safeguard revenue and foster safer, more supportive working environments.

Design/methodology/approach – This research adopted a qualitative case study approach across three luxury hotel properties within the same collection, involving 112 employees from multiple departments and seniority levels. Data were collected through structured workshops, where participants discussed experiences of handling challenging guest behaviour and identified patterns of suspicious activity. Narratives were analysed using thematic analysis, generating five key themes related to guest misconduct and payment behaviours. The findings informed the co-creation of a behavioural checklist and RED/AMBER/GREEN guest model, developed in collaboration with a retired senior police officer to ensure operational relevance, legal compliance and practical applicability within hospitality settings.

Findings – The research revealed that challenging guest behaviours, including fraud, intimidation and unreasonable complaints, were significantly undermining staff morale, retention and revenue. Thematic analysis identified five recurring areas of concern: guest interactions and staff awareness, guest identity and behaviour, payment security, booking patterns and high-value transactions. Staff reported inconsistency in handling incidents, lack of confidence and limited managerial support, reinforcing a culture of vulnerability. Implementation of the behavioural checklist and RED/AMBER/GREEN model led to tangible benefits, including reduced fraudulent compensation, improved cross-departmental communication, over £10,000 in revenue protection and enhanced staff confidence, empowering employees to manage challenging encounters effectively.

Research limitations/implications – This study was conducted within three luxury hotels of a single collection, which may limit the generalisability of findings across other hospitality sectors such as budget hotels, independent operators or international markets. The sample relied on self-reported experiences, which can introduce bias and subjectivity. Nonetheless, the outcomes highlight significant industry-wide issues requiring further investigation on a national scale. The practical tools developed – namely the behavioural checklist and RED/AMBER/GREEN model – offer immediate applicability for Hospitality operators. Wider adoption and further research could support the development of a consistent, sector-wide framework that balances guest satisfaction with employee well-being and financial resilience.

Practical implications – The research provides Hospitality operators with actionable tools to better manage challenging guest behaviour while maintaining service standards. The behavioural checklist offers frontline staff clear, consistent guidance on identifying suspicious activity, handling aggressive or fraudulent behaviour

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and ensuring secure payment practices. The RED/AMBER/GREEN model supports decision-making by categorising guest conduct and providing proportionate responses, reducing reliance on managerial intervention. These tools not only safeguard revenue but also improve staff confidence, morale and retention. Adoption across the sector can foster safer working environments, strengthen operational resilience and promote a cultural shift away from outdated service mantras.

Social implications – This research contributes to creating safer, more respectful working environments within the hospitality industry by equipping employees with the confidence and tools to manage guest misconduct. By addressing incivility, fraud and intimidation, the findings support improved staff well-being, morale and retention, reducing the negative personal and professional impacts often faced by frontline workers. A shift away from the culture of fear and silence empowers employees to uphold boundaries without compromising service quality. Wider adoption of these practices can strengthen community trust in hospitality businesses, promote fairness in guest–staff interactions and ensure the industry remains an attractive and sustainable employer.

Originality/value – This research is distinctive in directly addressing guest misconduct and fraud from the perspective of frontline hospitality employees, a group often overlooked in strategic decision-making. Unlike existing policies that focus primarily on harassment or general service standards, this study provides industry-specific, practical tools co-created with both practitioners and law enforcement expertise. The behavioural checklist and RED/AMBER/GREEN model offer a replicable, standardised approach that empowers employees, strengthens organisational resilience and ensures legal compliance. By challenging the outdated maxim “the customer is always right,” the research advances a new, staff-centred framework that balances guest satisfaction with employee well-being and financial sustainability.

Keywords Hospitality management, Employee well-being, Conflict resolution, Workplace safety, Operational resilience, Customer fraud

Paper type Practitioner paper

Background

The purpose of this research, which began in 2024, driven by an ever-increasing pattern of guest behaviours that needed research and solution, was to both raise awareness of, and tackle an ongoing (national) issue of scamming in Hospitality outlets. In today’s challenging hospitality environment and shifting consumer patterns of behaviour, the historic notion that the “Customer is always right” is outdated (Sliter, Jex, Wolford, & McInnerney, 2010; Rafaei *et al.*, 2012; Aslan & Kozak, 2012; Han, Bonn, & Cho, 2015). This stream of research promotes Hospitality as a safe and respectful environment to work in and empowers leaders and employees with the tools to both identify and effectively handle challenging guests. From the initial strategic scanning, it became evident that scamming is as much a national problem as it is a local one. Statistics shared from UK Hospitality (2024) state that a third of Hospitality businesses say they’ve recently experienced an incident of “dine and dash”, a type of scamming where customers eat a meal but refuse to pay for it. Of those affected, nearly 30% say there have been more incidents in 2024 than in 2023. Sacha Lord, Manchester’s nighttime economy advisor, believes the cost-of-living crisis could be a factor, with this financial strain translating into mounting challenges for many households (Clarke, 2024; ONS, 2024).

As previous research suggests, employee retention is dependent on employee satisfaction, which is comprised of four factors: a sustainable positive work environment; sustainable growth opportunities; sustainable and effective communication and sustainable and effective recruitment and selection practices (Ghani *et al.*, 2022.) It was evident that challenging guest behaviour was impacting staff retention and a positive work environment, resulting in higher recruitment and training costs (Chiang & Jang, 2008; Tews, Michel, & Stafford, 2013; Wilson & Holmvall, 2013; Han *et al.*, 2015; Ghani *et al.*, 2022). This was enabling guests to identify that there appeared to be no boundaries and a culture of “fear” among staff. The true essence of Hospitality, was eroded, resulting in the notion of delivering high standards of guest service being mistaken for justifying silence in guest misconduct. There are currently no national operational processes that can be adopted by the Hospitality industry to deal with such issues, despite this being a long-standing problem in the service economy (Ariza-Montes, Arjona-Fuentes, Law, & Han, 2017; Cheng, Guo, Tian, & Shaalan, 2020; Voorhees, Fombelle, & Bone, 2020; Hadjisolomou & Simone, 2021; Mayer, Helm, Barnett, & Arora, 2022).

Whilst many Hospitality outlets hold processes and policies for preventing staff bullying and harassment by guests, and with other influences over changing perceptions of the

“customer is always right” principle, particularly in the sharing economy (Canziani & Nemati, 2021) and through areas of other more serious criminal activity such as anti-terrorism and child exploitation crime prevention/detection initiatives (ACT campaign Gov UK, 2025) which this paper does not cover, there are no training tools in place for frontline staff to effectively deal with incivility without relying on managerial intervention (Madera, Guchait, & Dawson, 2018; Boukis, Koritos, Daunt, & Papastathopoulos, 2020; Gupta, Gupta, & Wadhwa, 2020; Huang & Kwok, 2021; Ahmed, Islam, Ahmad, & Kaleem, 2021). There is a current skills gap in terms of instilling confidence in all service staff to identify effective methods of dealing with challenging guests, knowing how to de-escalate situations involving aggressive or argumentative guests and ensuring an effective, standardised response for all (Kim, Ro, Hutchinson, & Kwun, 2014; Cheng *et al.*, 2020). If such issues remain unaddressed, frontline employees will continue to report feeling “unsupported” by Managers and Supervisors (Huang & Kwok, 2021; Ye, Lyu, Wu, & Kwan, 2022).

This work could significantly benefit the industry and support leaders and employees by addressing the lack of an industry-wide approach, the absence of relevant training materials, limited partnerships between establishments at both local and national levels and the lack of a coordinated strategy among hospitality organisations. The findings and actionable insights within this paper can be readily adopted by Hospitality leaders to influence meaningful change.

Key findings

The case study used for this piece of research covered 112 employees across three properties among the same Hotel collection within the luxury sector. The sample size consisted of 8 senior leadership team members (constituting those who oversee more than one function/area), 36 departmental managers (across all areas of the Hotel operation), 19 Hotel Receptionists, 24 Food and Beverage waitstaff, 15 Sales representatives, 8 Spa team members ranging from Fitness instructors to Therapists and 2 maintenance shift engineers. The following two questions were posed in a series of workshops delivered:

- (1) Review and discuss each other’s experiences of effective and less-effective responses of handling challenging guest(s) and the interventions used to deal with them.
- (2) What type of behaviour/actions can raise suspicion that a guest may not pay for services or goods at the end of their stay OR will be intentionally creating problems and/or issues during their stay.

Narratives from these employees were analysed using thematic analysis by the researchers involved in this study. The analysis yielded five key themes namely:

- (1) Guest interactions and staff awareness
- (2) Guest identity and behaviour
- (3) Payment security and verification
- (4) Booking timing and behavioural patterns
- (5) High value transactions

The themes enabled the researchers to develop a detailed behavioural guide/checklist for establishments to adopt and implement within their respective businesses (see Table 1). The work was conducted in collaboration with a retired senior Metropolitan Police officer and former police consultant. His goal was to examine hospitality practices from a legal perspective while preserving the core objective of the industry, delivering an exceptional guest experience that ensures all guests leave satisfied, or ideally, more than satisfied with the company’s products, services and overall capabilities. This piece of work has already secured the support of industry bodies such as the Innholder Scholars, along with many Hotel General Managers.

Table 1. Behavioural guide checklist

What staff have reported they find suspicious	Actions to take on identification of this
<i>Payment issues and suspicious booking patterns</i>	
Last minute bookings 24/48 hours	Full payment to be taken on arrival for room rate
Ordering and paying on the phone or asking to do so	Payment to be made through a secure payment link only, staff are no longer to take any card not present transactions over PDQ machines
Paying in advance	Payment to be made through secure payment link only, no longer taking any card not present transactions over PDQ's. Should payment not be received in time for the booking, full payment to be taken on arrival
High value bookings	Full payment for room rate to be taken on arrival if booking value is above a certain level (rate to be decided by each individual property.)
No card on file	Full payment for room rate on arrival and any pre-booked extras, communication to be made to wider hotel to take payment as they go for any other extras
Trying to pay cash only with no other means	Advise guests we are now a cashless business, accept cash payment as last resort and only if guest has no other means of payment on them. Do not agree to them leaving without settling for anything
Using delaying tactics when payment is requested	Full payment to be made on departure, no part-payments to be accepted. Report to police for making off without payment. Matter only becomes a civil debt if we agree guest can leave site and delay a payment or make a part-payment now and settle the rest later
Trying to charge to someone else once booked in/ different card details to those on booking	Do not accept card as the card details must match guest details on the booking. Reservation notes to be updated
Different names from that on the booking	Card details must match guest details on booking, otherwise we cannot accept. Reservation notes to be updated
A refusal to provide name and address etc	Check in process to be halted, booking cannot be accepted without these
Excessive spending/large expensive orders, expensive wines in short space of time	Take payment on consumption for excessive spending and unusual high value items
Arrives lacking any personal belongings	Try and establish why guest has no luggage by offering to help collect items for them from vehicle. Inform On Duty Manager
<i>Aggressive or intimidating behaviour</i>	
Using intimidating behaviour and targeting certain members of staff	Contact on Duty Manager. Inform guest that their behaviour will not be tolerated and if they don't abstain, they will be required to settle their bill and leave the premises
General demeanour of guest/attitude, body language, rude, aggressive	Contact on Duty Manager. Inform guest that their behaviour will not be tolerated and if they don't abstain, they will be required to settle bill and leave the premises
Gut feeling something is not as it should be	Discuss with other staff members and inform on Duty Manager. Communicate to wider teams
Making unreasonable or unfounded complaints/ over inflating the issues	Defer for further investigation. Inform guest that resolution and any compensation will have to be authorised by Senior Management who will review and investigate issues raised only after payment for services has been made
Finding foreign objects in room to obtain refund	Defer for further investigation. On identification of a "red flag" (please refer to RED/AMBER/GREEN model) guest pre-arrival, Housekeeping are to take photographs of the bedrooms to be used as evidence in follow up with guest

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

What staff have reported they find suspicious	Actions to take on identification of this
Persistent complainants with a build-up of minor complaints	Defer for further investigation. Inform Guest that resolution and any compensation will have to be authorised by Senior Management who will review and investigate issues raised only after payment for services has been made
More than one guest with couple or group ganging up to prove point	Inform group that we can only deal with one spokesperson and ask that person to accompany them to a safe place with second staff member present
Guest who is not following the rules	On Duty Manager to issue warning and inform guest that their behaviour will not be tolerated and if they don't abstain they will be required to settle their bill and leave the premises
Guest constantly asking how much things cost	Take payment on consumption if you suspect the guest may not have means of payment
Blaming other departments/saying something has been promised by another staff member	Record details of complaint and delay for further investigation, do not compensate without further investigation
Complaining about food after consuming it	If food consumed payment must be made for services supplied. Do not accept part payment and inform customer that any failure to pay may constitute a criminal offence and the facts will be reported to the police for further investigation
Large groups using intimidation	Inform group that we can only deal with one spokesperson and ask that person to accompany them to a safe place with second staff member present
Not willing to accept any solutions	Defer for further investigation. Inform Guest that any further compensation will have to be authorised by Senior Management who will review and investigate issues raised only after payment for services has been made
Loudly voicing negative thoughts or observations	On Duty Manager to issue warning and inform guest that their behaviour will not be tolerated and if they don't desist they will be required to settle their bill and leave the premises
<i>Other</i>	
Guests bringing their own alcohol onto premises	Advise own alcohol can only be consumed in their bedrooms, must not take to other areas of the property and any drinks they bring in themselves to their dinner will be subject to a corkage charge in the restaurants - refer guest to Food and Beverage Management to discuss
Previous guest history	Be sure to circulate information to all departments pre-arrival and "Red Flag" guest (please refer to RED/AMBER/GREEN model) in order to closely monitor behaviour
Allegations of personal belongings being damaged or lost by the hotel	The Operator is not to accept any liability. Record all details and defer for further investigation. Advise guest to report incident to police in terms of making an insurance claim and we will fully cooperate
Persistent calling requesting things from outside the hotel	Please "Red Flag" (please refer to RED/AMBER/GREEN model) guest and report activity as suspicious to On Duty Manager in order to monitor behaviour

Source(s): Behavioural guide checklist co-created by authors, 2024

What makes this research particularly powerful is that the issues addressed were identified directly by the workforce sample itself. The training and workshops were co-developed and delivered in partnership with an experienced hospitality professional and a law enforcement expert, ensuring both industry relevance and legal insight.

Real world example/case

The behavioural guide/checklist and model implemented resulted in the following outcomes for this particular company: reduced incidents of falsely compensating for spurious complaints; reduced acts of compensation; reduced acts of staff intimidation; improving profits by protecting revenue (over £10,000 saved at one property alone between April 24-April 25) and general improvement of staff morale with renewed confidence where employees were empowered with more robust policies and procedures in place, in particular, cross-departmental collaboration.

The results revealed employee lack of knowledge, inconsistency in practice and unreliable communication. There were clear issues among staff in identifying and handling suspicious activity or challenging guests. Low morale stemmed from employees feeling penalised for either overcompensating or undercompensating potential scammers, driven by the conflicting message that “the customer is always right.” This was further compounded by inconsistent management support in decision-making, leading to revenue loss and, ultimately, hotels becoming targets for difficult guests through word-of-mouth. There is evidence to support the issue as a main problem for all hospitality operators and staff (UK Hospitality, 2024). There is also an overwhelming consensus amongst hospitality leaders that participated in this case that the age-old mindset of the “Customer is always right” seemed to be driving and encouraging unacceptable guest behaviour.

Actionable insights

The actions recommended can assist hospitality operators to better protect themselves without compromising on the standard of service given. This guide and checklist serve as a detailed recommendation for all practitioners to adopt in their respective businesses alongside a single agreed process for all staff to follow in the form of a RED/AMBER/GREEN model (see Figure 1) to implement.

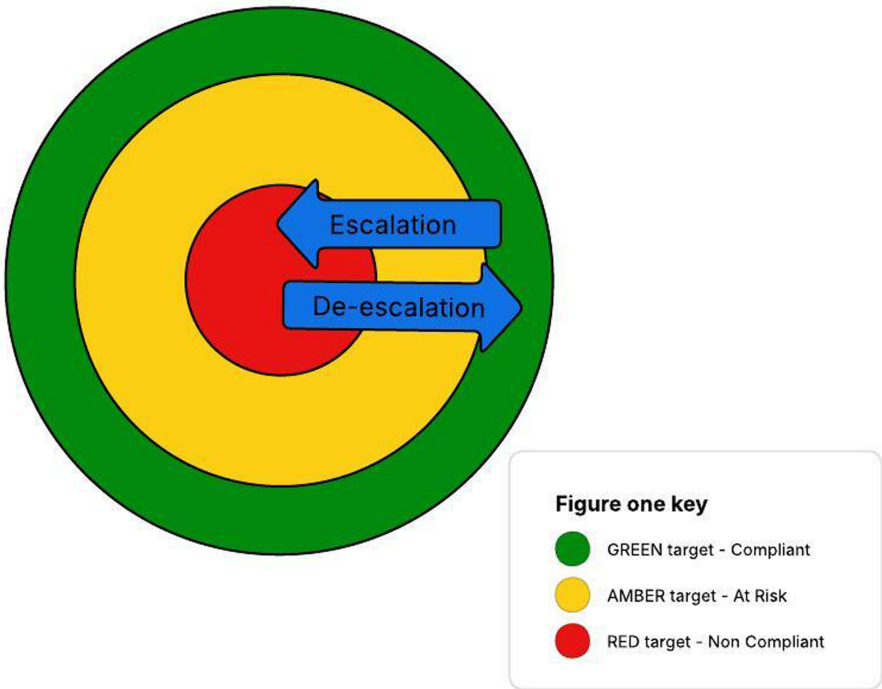


Figure 1. RED/AMBER/GREEN target model co-created by authors, 2024

In addition to the above tool, a RED/AMBER/GREEN model (see [Figure 1](#)) has been devised for operators to adopt to support leadership and frontline team members in identifying where a guest behaviour sits within the model. From the model, discussed further, you will see “Green Target” guests as being where the majority of an Operator’s clientele falls. These are customers that are highly satisfied or more than satisfied with a Company’s products, services or capabilities. “Amber Target” guests are those customers that have moved from the green cohort due to an incident or action that has moved them from being satisfied or more than satisfied with the Company’s Products, Services and Capabilities to dissatisfied. The object of the model is to deal with them in such a way that they return to being within the green area. Those that do not respond positively to the formal interventions will move to a *Red Target Guest*. A red target guest can be defined by two specific categories:

- (1) A guest from the Amber cohort who refuses to accept the proportionate resolution offered by the staff in response to the issues raised and becomes abusive, disruptive or disorderly on the premises or within its grounds.
- (2) A guest who, by their actions, raises suspicion that they may not pay for services or goods at the end of their stay or will be intentionally creating problems and/or issues during their stay.

Note: Perception of suspicious activity can be formed during the initial interaction with a guest either at booking stage or in person, where the individuals (couple or groups) actions, attitude, behaviour or conversation, can be seen as “out of step” with what would reasonably be expected as the norm in such circumstance, generating concern or suspicion that they may not fulfil their commitments to pay for goods or services received whilst at the establishment (in line with the [Equality act, 2010](#), any such suspicion cannot be based solely on a person’s nationality, ethnicity or race as this may be construed as discrimination. Discrimination means treating a person unfairly because of who they are or because they possess certain characteristics.) Such suspicion may also be formed in areas such as anti-terrorism and child exploitation and other more serious criminal activity that the UK Government along with many other countries promote through crime prevention/detection initiatives, areas which this research paper does not cover

Conclusion

This research presents a powerful, practical solution for Hospitality leaders to a growing and often unaddressed issue within the hospitality industry, managing challenging guests while preserving service excellence. By implementing the RED/AMBER/GREEN model and accompanying behavioural checklist, operators can not only safeguard revenue but also foster a safer, more supportive working environment for their staff. The evidence gathered highlights the fact that empowering frontline employees with the tools, confidence and structured guidance to identify and respond to suspicious or inappropriate guest behaviour leads to measurable outcomes – improved morale, reduced fraudulent compensation and significant financial protection.

In today’s climate of economic uncertainty, reduced talent pool and rising operational pressures, the hospitality industry cannot afford to leave such vulnerabilities unchecked. As the data from this case study demonstrate, proactive, staff-led solutions like these can create meaningful change. However, to build momentum and standardise best practices across the sector, broader engagement and further research at a national level are essential. This study should serve as both a call to action and a foundation for the development of an industry-wide framework – one that balances guest satisfaction with staff well-being, legal compliance and commercial resilience. Now is the time for the industry to move beyond outdated maxims like “the customer is always right” and toward a more empowered, consistent and strategic approach to guest interaction and staff support.

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