

Shaping the image of a hotel facility in the context of sustainable development

 **Katarzyna Orfin-Tomaszewska**

Stanislaw Staszic University of Applied Sciences in Pila, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0001-9040-0355, e-mail: korfin@pwsz.pila.pl

 **Marta Sidorkiewicz**

University of Szczecin, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0001-7559-7794, e-mail: marta.sidorkiewicz@wzieu.pl

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Abstract: The current deliberations of economists more and more often concern the issue of scarcity of resources and ways to solve this problem. A particular challenge lies before tourism, which faces a major problem regarding the necessity to meet the needs of tourists without adversely affecting future generations. The concept of sustainable development constitutes an answer to the example question of how modern enterprises should function and affect the environment, seen in the light of economic, social and environmental aspects. Moreover, pro-ecological and pro-social activities can be a valuable means of communication with the public, including potential and current buyers. The aim of the article is to develop the characteristics of solutions adopted by the hotel industry in terms of sustainable development, as well as identify these solutions in Polish hotels in the context of creating a positive public image of the entity. The article consists of four substantive parts, as well as the introduction and conclusions. The first and second parts discuss the theoretical aspects of the image and the concept of sustainable development in the hotel industry. The third and fourth parts, which are of an empirical and analytical nature, present the methodology of primary research and its results together with the interpretation. The theoretical-research considerations led to the conclusion that the concept of sustainable development is not popular among the Polish hotels surveyed, and the solutions applied within it are selective and aimed mainly at environmental protection or reducing the operating costs of facilities.

Keywords: sustainable development, image, hotel industry

JEL: A13, M14, M31, O44

Introduction

In an era of strong competition in the hotel market, it is a great challenge to stand out in a given context. In order to achieve this goal, it appears necessary to look for creative solutions in terms of shaping the creative images of hotels and their offers. One of them is to apply solutions that are in line with the concept of sustainable development, which is often associated with a pro-ecological policy constituting a part of the business activities performed.

The aim of the article is to develop the characteristics of solutions adopted by the hotel industry in terms of sustainable development, as well as identify these solutions in Polish hotels in the context of creating a positive public image of the entity. For the purpose of this article,

the following hypothesis was formulated: the implementation of the assumptions of sustainable development by a hotel facility allows it to create a positive public image.

The study was prepared using the *desk research* method, which was applied in the theoretical part, in the form of a critical analysis of national and foreign literature on the subject, as well as industry reports concerning sustainable development, marketing and the hotel industry available on the Internet. The empirical-analytical part is based on the results of original studies performed in hotels using the CAWI method. Moreover, the method of logical operators (mainly deduction and induction) and the method of observation (in particular in the context of practical aspects) were applied.

Image as a marketing category

The concept of image has been characterised in many fields of science [Nawrocka 2012, p. 24], among others, psychology, sociology and management, which explains the ambiguity in defining the term. In psychology, image is understood as visual representation, a reflection of previously perceived components of reality [Przetacznikowa, Makiełło-Jarża 1982 as cited in Stawicka-Tkaczyk 2008, p. 14]. Image is “the result of all past experiences, and can be subject to the process of shaping, i.e. forming a specific psychological shape” [Stawicka-Tkaczyk 2008, p. 14]. Whereas in marketing, image factors relating to consumer behaviour are highlighted [Jenkins 1999, pp. 1-15 as cited in Nawrocka 2012, p. 25].

The root of the word “image” (Latin: *imago*) means representation, likeness, or notion that may refer to a person, company or product [Wieseneder 2008, p. 35]. In the context of *public relations*, image is understood as a reflection of the perception of an organisation by individual groups from its environment, which means image is not an objective, but a subjective factor [Ćwiklińska 2012, p. 34]. According to R. Cohen, image exists in people’s minds, and consists of knowledge, convictions and emotions. Moreover, it derives from social attitudes and value systems. As underlined by P. Kotler and H. Barich, image is the sum of beliefs, attitudes and impressions that a person or a group of people has in relation to a given object [Cohen 1963, pp. 48-63, Kotler, Barich 1991, Cornelissen 2000, Dąbrowski, 2010, pp. 65-67]. On the other hand, W. J. Crissy highlights its diversity, due to the variety of human values, experiences, knowledge and needs. It is essential that an entity may shape it by means of various instruments (including marketing ones). According to S.H. Britt, once an image is shaped, it more strongly affects people’s behaviour than the sum of its elements [Crissy 1971; Britt 1985].

Image may comprise a number of elements, including, [Tkaczyk, Rachwalska 1997, p. 6]: name (proper, trademark, colour, etc.), age, traditions, size and scope of activities (local,

national, international), financial strength and prospects of future development, company mission, product offer, management philosophy, company policy, external appearance and employees' behaviour, market behaviour, or building design (internal and external).

B. Rozwadowska and J. Ćwiklińska point to the concept of a comprehensive image of a company [Rozwadowska 2002, p. 56 as cited in Ćwiklińska 2012, p. 35] understood as a combination of three elements that constitute its basis, namely internal, market and socio-political perspectives (table 1).

Table 1. The elements of comprehensive image

Perspective	Internal	Market	Socio-political
Components	Internal image	Market image	Public image
Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - remuneration - social benefits - management style - respect towards employees - employment security - communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - market position - market policy - company's profitability - management - innovations, including pro-environmental - communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ecological orientation - public involvement - investment policy - entity/product positioning - communication

Source: B. Baerns (1995), [as cited in:] Rozwadowska (2002), Ćwiklińska (2012, p. 35).

As underlined by J. Ćwiklińska, not only positive features of a given entity (varying for different groups in society), but also the way in which these features are communicated to individual groups in society are especially relevant in the process of creation a positive image. The internal perspective refers to the internal image, which is based on, first of all, personnel policy or, more broadly, internal marketing. In this dimension, the key factors will be those concerning employees, such as social benefits, respect towards employees or employment security. The dimension of market perspective and market image is based on the position in society, the company's profitability, communication and implementation of innovations, including pro-environmental initiatives. The image existing in public opinion (the socio-political perspective) includes ecological orientation, public involvement or positioning of the entity or its products in the market [Orfin-Tomaszewska 2016, p. 40 as cited in Ćwiklińska 2012, p. 35].

The elements indicated in table 1, especially remuneration, social benefits, market position, ecological orientation or public involvement, at the same time constitute the key aspects of sustainable development that are more and more often described in the literature. According to the definition coined in 1987, which was included in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the so-called Brundtland Commission) called

Our Common Future, sustainable development constitutes development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The approach to sustainable development adopted by the Brundtland Commission emphasises the need to integrate activities in the field of social and economic development, as well as environmental protection [*The Central Statistical Office in Poland*, 2016, p. 11]. In light of the above, it was especially important to prepare characteristics of the solutions applied in terms of sustainable development, as well as identify these solutions by analysing the case of Polish hotels in the context of creating the positive public image of an entity.

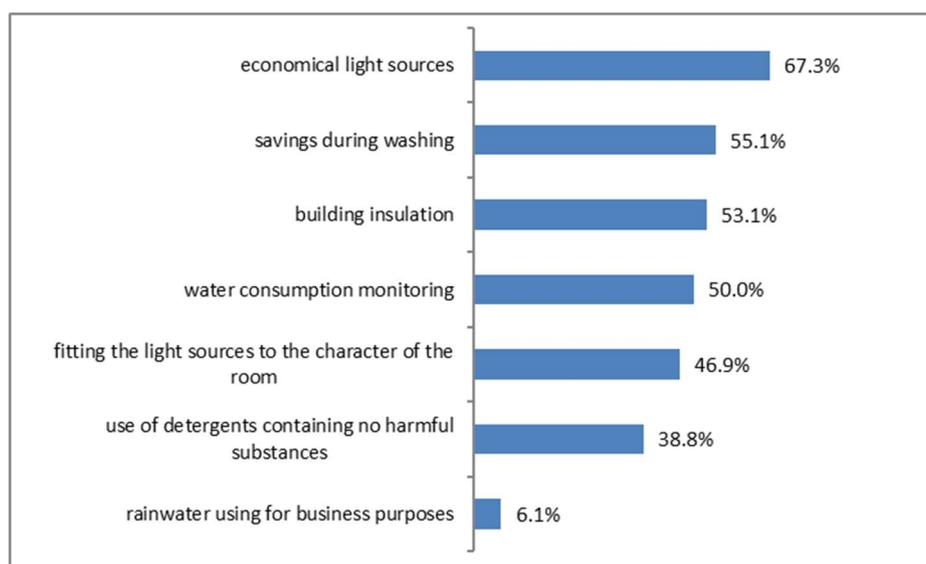
Theoretical aspects of the concept of sustainable development in the hotel industry

Modern literature concerning tourism development in the world more and more often focuses on its sustainability. F. Higgins-Desbiolles strongly voices an opinion stating that modern tourism faces a significant problem regarding meeting the needs of tourists without adversely affecting future generations. In his opinion, the concept of sustainable development is an oxymoron, as sustainability requires some restrictions on development. As the researcher points out, sustainable development is currently directly related to sustainable growth, which is a symbol of imbalance [Higgins-Desbiolles 2018, pp. 157-160]. The goals of sustainable development are also described in the literature as a great challenge that, at the same time, creates specific problems (e.g. limiting tourist traffic, and thus renouncing some income for environmental protection) [Dobrzański, Borkowska-Niszczota, Kiryluk, Szymańska 2010, p. 158]. On 25 September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development resolution. This document is being implemented by all countries and stakeholders through actions undertaken in partnership. The Agenda has 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 related tasks that are integrated and indivisible, as well as balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental [UN 2015, p. 1].

The concept of sustainable tourism means development with due respect for the balance between visitors' needs, environmental protection, and the interest and culture of the local community. Among the mentioned areas, environmental protection is highly important, as natural assets preserved in unchanged form determine the existence of tourism [Świstak, Świątkowska, Stangierska 2016, pp. 133-142]. The development of tourist business in accordance with sustainable development primarily includes aspects forming a coherent whole: economic (financial efficiency), ecological (minimising the negative impact on the environment), socio-cultural (creating new jobs, improving the quality of life) [Kowalczyk 2011, pp. 3-4 as cited in Świstak, Świątkowska, Stangierska 2016, p. 134].

The term “sustainable hotel” was coined by H. Houdré in order to highlight the role of the hotel industry in the creation of public awareness on the subject of sustainable development, especially environmental protection. A hotel facility which operates in a pro-ecological way, especially located in non-urban area, facilitates maintaining the environmental situation, brings financial savings by decreasing operating costs, and generates a direct, positive impact on the local community (e.g. jobs) [Kasprzak 2006, p. 135]. As research conducted by P. Gryszel, D. Jaremeni and A. Rapacz [2008, pp. 365-386] on a group of almost 50 hotels indicates, the most frequently applied ecological solutions were those related to the reduction of costs and environmental protection – figure 1.

Fig. 1. Environmentally friendly solutions applied in hotels



Source: Gryszel, Jaremeni, Rapacz (2008, pp. 365-386).

The most frequently recommended activities (in practice usually in a narrower scope) in the area of ecological solutions applied in hotel facilities, which were partly listed in figure 1 and described in the literature, are [Krupa 2014, p. 11; Sidorkiewicz 2012, pp. 47-56]:

- applying ecological criteria when designing facilities;
- selection of building materials which are environmentally friendly and safe for humans;
- proper water supply and sewerage system;
- rational energy and water management;
- assuring food safety and nutrition;
- serving regional and ecological dishes;
- protection of natural and cultural landscape;
- limiting the use of own transport;

- modern and efficient transport (electric and gas vehicles);
- waste minimisation and its management at source;
- attempting to build small hydroelectric or wind power plants;
- use of solar thermal collectors and heat pumps;
- offering hotel products related to business tourism (e.g. conferences) in accordance with the protection of the natural environment;
- organisation of training courses in terms of pro-environmental activities for the personnel of the facility, suppliers; co-workers and clients.

As highlighted by J. Krupa, the actual activities in the field of sustainable development (or rather narrowed to environmental protection) are limited by the tourism industry to installation of energy saving bulbs and timer switches, solar thermal collectors, water saving devices, computer-controlled heating, air-conditioning and light systems. The most popular ones also include limitation of bedding and towel change (on guests' request), creation of an integrated facility management system and preliminary sorting of waste that facilitates its recycling.

Hotel facilities in Poland and in the world can try to obtain a kind of confirmation for their solutions or pro-ecological attitudes through certification. Certification indicates that the appropriately labelled product, process or service is in accordance with a specific standard or other normative documents. The national certification body in this area is the Polish Centre for Testing and Certification – PCTC. The overwhelming majority of tourism sector representatives (83%) stated that they fully or partly agreed with the thesis that current quality systems for tourism are very fragmented and highly inconsistent [European Commission studies 2012; Walas 2017, pp. 7-16]. In Poland, there are a significant number of certificates awarded by national and international institutions, with many of them having a small number of certified facilities. The most important certificates in the hotel industry, which are available on Polish market, are [Walas 2017, pp. 7-16]:

- SPA Quality Standard (certification of SPA service quality);
- Green Key (certification of tourist facilities that meet the criteria of environmental liability, cooperation with local community, building stakeholders' ecological awareness);
- Złoty Standard (Gold Standard) (a guarantee of the highest quality hotel services for guests);

- Hotel Przyjazny Rodzinie (a Family Friendly Hotel) (a competition that aims at evaluating and promoting hotel facilities which create attractive recreation conditions for families with children);
- Ecolabel (an ecological labelling system that defines the criteria for effective and economical water and energy management as well as waste minimisation);
- Green Globe (certification for a wide range of tourist facilities – hotels, restaurants, organisations, travel agencies and others, which verifies over 300 criteria in the field of sustainable management, effective management of natural resources, environmental protection activities etc.);
- Mercure Quality Guarantee (Accor Group certificate for Mercure hotels);
- Thalassa sea&spa (care for well-being, allows using the services of qualified thalassotherapy specialists and spas located right next to the seashore);
- Green Tourism (recognises hotels that strive to introduce clear changes in the way of running their business, focusing primarily on reducing energy consumption);
- Sustainable Bonn (the aim is to valorise the ecological and environmentally friendly location of conferences in hotels and restaurants);
- Hotel z Pomysłem (Innovative Hotel) (a contest organised by “Hotelarz” magazine – recognising the hotel that presents the best idea for its business activities and presence on the hotel market).

The attempts of the hotel industry to eliminate environmental pollution more and more often concerns green management, green marketing or green innovations [Pawlicz, Sidorkiewicz 2013, pp. 195-207]. The technical and technological solutions available today, introduction of legal standards or restrictions, as well as building pro-ecological consumer awareness, may together positively affect the gradual thinking process in terms of sustainable development in the world [Chen, Lai, Wen 2006, pp. 331-339 as cited in Chen 2008, pp. 531-543].

The methodology for the primary research

The aim of the article is to thoroughly describe the solutions adopted by the hotel industry in terms of sustainable development, as well as identify these solutions in Polish hotels in the context of creating a positive public image of the entity. In order to fulfil the above-mentioned objective, hotels representing all quality classifications (1*-5*) were chosen as research entities.

After determining the research problem, the methods that would provide answers to the research questions were analysed. From among numerous survey methods a CAWI online survey, which was sent to hotel facilities was selected.

According to official data compiled by the Marshal Offices for the Ministry of Sports and Tourism, which is available in the Central Record and Registers in Tourism (turystyka.gov.pl/cwoh/index, date of access: 20.04.2018) (specifically – the Central List of Hotel Facilities) as constituted on 20 April 2018, there were 68 five-star hotels, 419 four-star hotels, 1,584 three-star hotels, 825 two-star hotels and 251 one-star hotels – a total of 3,147 hotels in Poland. The list includes the email addresses of the hotels, which were used to contact the facilities regarding the online survey carried out for the purposes of this research. When analysing the Central List of Hotel Facilities, and the Internet contact details provided by hoteliers, it turned out that 618¹ of such facilities did not provide contact details, and in 492 cases, the hotel's online system did not accept the message sent, which resulted in the request for participation in the survey being returned. Therefore, 2,037 hotels were taken into account in the final survey. Furthermore, the survey was published on social media – in the *Polish Hoteliers* group, which was opened on *Facebook*. *Polish Hoteliers* is an “open group” that brings together the broadly-defined hotel industry.

The substantive scope of the conducted survey concerned, among others, such issues as:

- possessing a sustainable development strategy;
- identifying the solutions used in the field of sustainable development;
- certificates obtained;
- use of pro-ecological solutions for promotional purposes.

The surveys were conducted in April 2018. The survey questionnaire included 13 questions (4 open and 9 closed) and a questionnaire regarding the category of the facility, the location of the facility by region and the functioning of the facility within hotels chain. The message sent to the respondents underlined that the survey questionnaire would be short and not take long to complete. The respondents were also assured that all information obtained during the survey would be subject to data protection, the survey would be anonymous and the results obtained would be processed in aggregated form.

The survey resulted in 56 responses, and so only 2.7% of the research sample was examined. Therefore, the obtained results are purely for reference purposes and cannot constitute a basis for statistical generalisations.

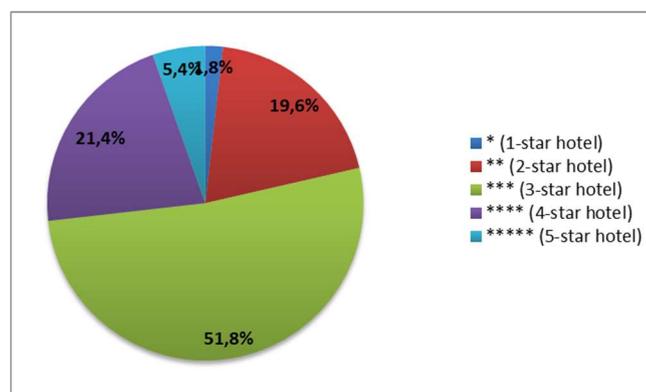
¹ No mail address in the Central List of Hotel Facilities: in 1* hotels – 87; in 2* hotels – 219, in 3* hotels – 263, in 4* hotels – 41, in 5* hotels – 8.

From the experience obtained from the above-mentioned survey, and such a low number of returned filled-in questionnaires, it can be concluded that examination of hotel facilities may involve significant difficulties. One of the arguments explaining such low feedback was certainly the date of the survey. On the one hand, the survey was conducted in the peak season for business hotels, when the occupancy rate of accommodation was high, due to conferences organised and business trips carried out by guests, and hotel staff were preoccupied with various duties. Therefore, devoting even a short amount of time to completing a questionnaire, which did not involve any direct profit, seemed for respondents to be a waste of precious time. On the other hand, the low participation in the survey was also affected by the fact that the message with the request to fill out the questionnaire was sent not to a particular person (a personal account) but to the main address of the hotel – a fact that may have resulted in the message being sent to the wrong person.

Identification of solutions in the area of sustainable development in Polish hotels in the context of creating a positive image

The survey conducted using the CAWI method included 56 Polish hotels located in various regions. As underlined in the methodology, in order to reach the set objective, hotels representing all quality classifications (1*-5*) were chosen as research entities. The structure of these facilities is presented in figure 2.

Fig. 2. Structure of the examined facilities by the quality classification.



Source: own research.

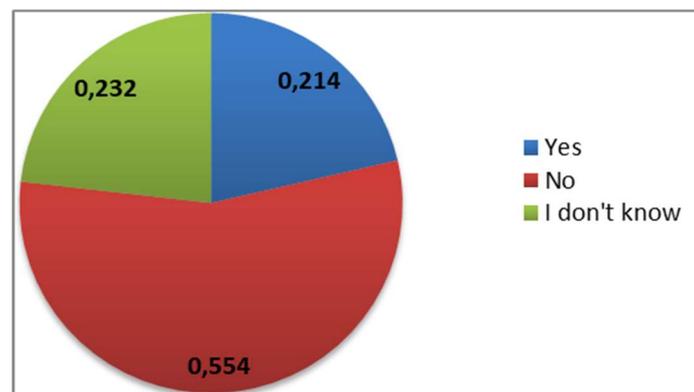
3-star hotels constituted the largest group among all surveyed facilities – 51.8%, followed by 4-star hotels – 21.4%, 2-star hotels -19.6%, 5-star hotels – 5.4% and 1-star hotels – 1.8%. Only 14.3% of the surveyed entities indicated that they belonged to a hotel chain.

The aim of the article was to thoroughly describe the solutions adopted by the hotel industry in terms of sustainable development, as well as identify these solutions in Polish hotels

in the context of creating a positive public image of the entity. The conducted research showed that 42.9% of the surveyed hotels operate in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, 12.5% do not have such rules, while 44.6% lack knowledge in this area. When analysing the research results, it is worth noting that in the case of a large group of hotels, the respondents did not know if any sustainable development principles were applied in the hotel. This lack of awareness among the representatives of facilities, or lack of basic knowledge in terms of the concept is an important area for discussion.

The very narrow scope of sustainable development solutions applied in the majority of facilities implies the lack of strategic documents in this area – figure 3.

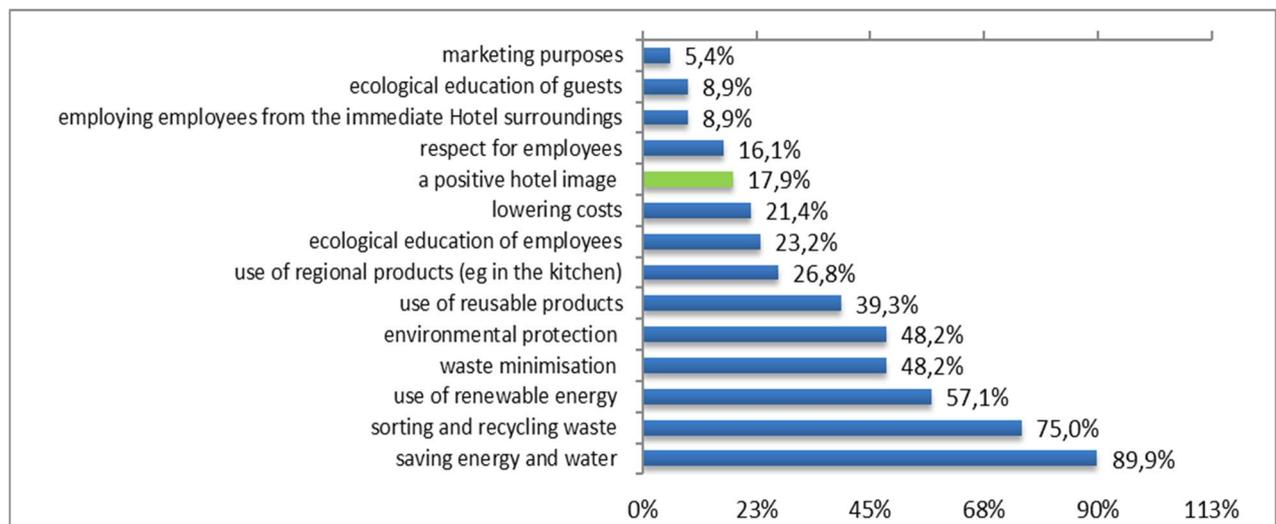
Fig. 3. The percentage of facilities with a sustainable development strategy (including eco-development)



Source: own research.

As seen in figure 3, 21.4% of the hotels surveyed declared that they had a strategic document in the field of sustainable development (network strategies, resource efficiency, waste sorting or eco-products), with more than half of them not possessing such a plan. In the case of 23.2% of the facilities, the respondents could not indicate whether such strategy had been developed in the hotel. Among the aspects which the respondents associated with the operation of the facility in a sustainable manner (the maximum number of answers amounted to 5), the most frequently given answer was saving energy and water (89.9% of respondents) – figure 4.

Fig. 4. Aspects associated with a hotel operating in a sustainable manner



Source: own research.

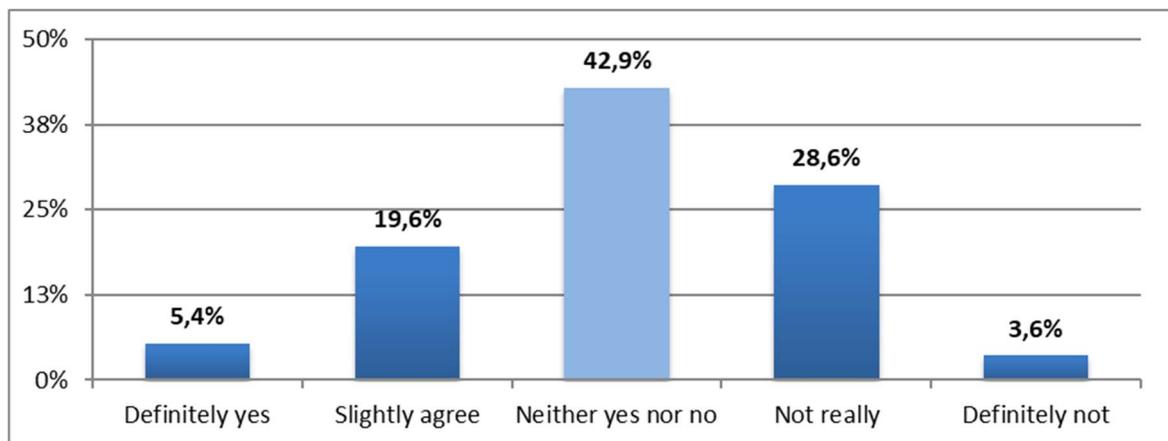
The five aspects that the respondents most often associated with the concept of sustainable development of hotels included:

- saving energy and water (associated by almost 90% of respondents);
- sorting and recycling waste (75%);
- use of renewable energy (57.1%);
- waste minimisation (48.2%);
- environmental protection (48.2%).

The other aspects (figure 4) were less often associated with sustainable development, including building a positive hotel image being indicated by only less than 18% of respondents. Only 17.9% of respondents use activities, especially ecological ones, for marketing purposes. The ways of informing the environment about the implementation of sustainable development aspects (including 17.9% of facilities) included: information printed in rooms about the procedures of changing towels and saving water, organising a conference entitled “Construction towards the global challenges of a circular economy”, information on social media, website and leaflets of the facility.

The fairly low percentage of answers indicating the implementation of sustainable development tasks for marketing purpose, as well as shaping a positive image of a facility, may be dependent on whether its guests pay attention to ecological solutions implemented in a hotel – figure 5.

Fig. 5. Opinion of respondents on the subject of eco-friendly solutions in the hotel



Source: own research.

As figure 5 shows, guests pay little attention (in the opinion of the respondents) to ecological solutions in a hotel or are indifferent to them – 42.9% of respondents indicated the statement “neither yes nor no”. 32.2% of respondents chose the “definitely not” and “not really” answers, which may indicate a rather low level of ecological education of guests. In addition, the respondents were asked to assess whether the fact that the hotel uses ecological solutions was the main reason for choosing a hotel by guests. The answer “not really” was chosen by 37.5% of respondents, “definitely not” by 32.1%, and “neither yes nor no” by 26.8%. Whereas, 3.6% of respondents indicated “definitely yes” and “slightly agree”.

The most important solutions in the field of sustainable development indicated by 82.1% of the examined facilities were:

- energy saving, water saving (e.g. photovoltaics, cogenerator, windmills, ozonisation);
- recycling, waste sorting;
- environmental protection;
- energy-saving bulbs (LED bulbs);
- use of reusable products (including, for example, cosmetics dispensers);
- solar panels;
- use of regional products;
- relations with personnel.

In the case of the vast majority of hotels, the respondents mentioned the solutions used in the field of sustainable development, while in case of the first question in the survey (does the hotel operate in accordance with the principles of sustainable development?) 44.6% of them did not have knowledge in this respect. This may indicate insufficient education of personnel in terms of the concept.

The analysis of the research results made it possible to determine that only 8.9% of hotels have eco-certificates that confirm the level of implemented objectives.

The results obtained so far point out to a relatively low level of education in terms of sustainable development (including eco-development) on both the supply and demand sides of the hotel services market in Poland. The respondents' opinions about the generally understood ecological expectations of guests may negatively affect the implemented solutions and the way they are communicated to the public. The surveyed facilities carry out various activities, but only those which have a direct impact on costs.

26.8% of respondents think that ecological solutions carried out by hotels definitely affect the process of creating a positive public image, whereas 30.4% of respondents answered "slightly agree", 33.9% – "neither yes nor no", and 8.9% – "not really". A positive aspect is that over 80% of respondents indicated that in the future it will become increasingly important to apply solutions in the field of sustainable development (slightly agree – 57.1%, definitely – 26.8%).

Summary and conclusions

The empirical and analytical content presented in this article positively verifies the hypothesis stated in the introductory part, stating that the implementation of sustainable development assumptions by a hotel facility allows it to create a positive public image (57.2% of respondents in favour).

Moreover, analysis of primary research, secondary materials, industry reports and online sources lead to the following conclusions:

1. 42.9% of respondents had knowledge about whether a hotel operates in accordance with sustainable development principles. The insufficient level of information about the concept is indicated by the fact that 82.1% of respondents mentioned the applied solutions in open questions but were not fully aware that these solutions may also be included in a sustainable development strategy.
2. The respondents most often associated the concept of sustainable development with: saving energy and water (almost 90% of respondents), sorting and recycling waste (75%), use of renewable energy (57.1%), waste minimisation (48.2%), and environmental protection (48.2%). The use of ecological solutions for building a positive image was indicated by 17.9% of respondents – a fact that implies an as yet unused promotional area.
3. The most commonly used solutions in the field of sustainable development in the hotels surveyed include:

- in economical terms: saving energy and water;
 - in environmental terms: use of environmentally-friendly cleaning products, proper waste management;
 - in social terms: purchase of regional products (especially catering), building relations with staff.
4. The certification of hotel facilities is not very popular in Poland, due to significant fragmentation and inconsistency. Only 8.9% of the surveyed facilities declared having a certificate. In the near future, possessing a certificate demonstrating a positive impact on the environment, local community and economy will become more and more desirable.
 5. There is a need to educate hotel guests and employees about sustainable development. Guest awareness of sustainable development is relatively low. 28.6% of respondents stated that guests do not notice the ecological solutions used by the hotel, while 42.9% of respondents said they were indifferent to this issue.
 6. Over 80% of respondents indicated that the implementation of sustainable development solutions will become more and more important in the future (slightly agree – 57.1%, definitely yes – 26.8%).
 7. The use of ecological solutions in a hotel is an element building a positive image (in the opinion of 57.2% of respondents).

Theoretical considerations, numerous industry reports, forecasts and global trends clearly indicate that the development of hotel enterprises is heading towards sustainability. The attempt to find a common ground in economic, social and environmental terms will become an essential condition from the point of view of the representatives of supply on the hotel market and the needs and expectations of consumers.

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