

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN TOURISM HOW TO MEASURE IT?

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ABSTRACT

Measuring customer satisfaction is indispensable nowadays, for public organizations, to verify if they are doing the right thing. The position of a public institution is not always easy, because of the nature of the client on the one hand and the public, on the other hand. Citizens / customers have different faces and different roles; sometimes they are customers service and sometimes behave as citizens, especially when they have to pay taxes or comply with certain rules. This is reflected also in differences between the provision of public services and the provision of services in the private sector. In addition, most public sector organizations are providing services. Services have some clear characteristics that make them special and different as products, therefore, customer satisfaction measurement is vital for the development and continuity of services, especially in tourism. Service-quality studies in the tourism and hospitality industry are important in identifying the factors that determine visitors' satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The present article focuses on measuring the tourist satisfaction with a destination and the specific methodology.

Keywords: *satisfaction, tourism, hospitality, service quality, perception, measurement.*

JEL Classifications: L83, E01, R40.

Introduction

Service quality and customer satisfaction have attracted considerable attention from many researchers and industry practitioners in a variety of fields. The ultimate goal of maintaining a high service-quality and customer-satisfaction level is to survive in today's highly competitive market. From the tourism perspective, a destination remains competitive only if it provides products and services that offer complete satisfaction to visitors (*Journal of marketing*, 1996, p. 31).

Satisfying a customer is regarded as the cheapest means of product and service promotions because positive word-of-mouth or product and service recommendation from satisfied customers are likely to induce positive post-purchase behavior. To remain competitive in the global tourism market, it is necessary for tourism destinations to assess service quality and identify the factors that influence customer satisfaction.

By measuring customer satisfaction, tourism businesses and firms in related sectors will be in a better position to understand how their service-delivery performance is perceived by customers and identify the areas that need improvement (Wong, J., Law, R., 2003, p. 401).

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Service quality

Satisfying a customer and offering quality service must be the targets of all service providers in the tourism industry. All tourism businesses wish to gain a competitive advantage, increase customer loyalty, enhance corporate image, increase business performance, and retain existing customers. It is argued that to retain a customer, the services offered should exceed what was expected, as this leads to satisfaction. It is also relatively more profitable to retain a customer than to attract a new one, simply because a satisfied customer will become loyal and free spokespersons for the service.

There is a general consensus on the characteristics of service quality. Christian Grönroos (1984) distinguishes two dimensions of service quality that are perceived and valued by customers: technical quality and functional quality (*European Journal of Marketing*, p. 36). The technical quality of service focuses on what is provided by the service organizations: the technical delivery process. Quality function focuses on how the service is provided. Grönroos suggests that functional quality attribute is more important than technical quality products in many markets, the reason being technical competence: it is a qualifying factor for the entry to be service provider in these markets. The model proposed by Grönroos belongs to the so-called "northern schools" on service quality.

2. Quality assessment methods

Aims of the study will determine the choice and use of appropriate methods. There is no research method that is best, although some techniques are better suited for certain types of research than others. Quantitative methods are better suited for summary assessments of experience or establishing benchmarks. Qualitative and participatory techniques are more suitable for developing a thorough understanding of the perspectives and expectations and may promote dialogue with and between users of the service.

Organisations may be more familiar with quantitative methods such as surveys which emphasize that samples of service users must be statistically representative so that it can draw conclusions about the views and characteristics of all service users. Qualitative methods provide a form of information also valid, but different regarding the opinion of service users and. It can provide rich and useful data that can clarify the reasons levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Success or failure stories collected in this way can lose some apparent paradoxes or explain the persistence of dissatisfaction or discontent, even at a relatively small number of customers. Qualitative methods are particularly useful to obtain the views of groups of clients that can be a small numbers in the population, but whose views are important to adapt services to meet their specific needs. It may be appropriate to use a mixture of methods to provide information that is both broad and deep.

Combining methods to investigate the same problem can improve the validity of the results and strengthen the conclusions drawn from this, especially when a method finding are supported by those of other methods. International Standard ISO 9004-2 proposes the following service features:

- * Access to the service quality and availability;
- * Safeness of the service;
- * Reliability and dependability of service;
- * Attractiveness of facilities associated with the service;
- * Delays (characteristic of non-quality), duration;
- * Hygiene and cleanliness of the service providers;
- * Competent and knowledgeable service providers;
- * Courtesy, attention and communication skills of the staff responsible;
- * The amount and types of accessories and material related with the service;

SERVQUAL model is very used in this moment, but the model is criticized for the five dimensions which are so general that may limit their usefulness in certain contexts services. This model developed by Berry, Zeithaml and Parasuraman identified five main dimensions of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility.

- Reliability: the ability to perform the promised service safely and accurately;
- Responsiveness: willingness to help the customers and provide prompt services;
- Assurance: the knowledge and courtesy of the employees and their ability to instill a sense of trust and safety;
- Empathy: the care, individualized attention that the service organization provides to its customers;
- Tangibility: appearance of equipment, personnel and communication materials.

The SERVQUAL model provides, due to its five key factors (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy), a detailed description of the customer needs, perceptions and expectations, the information provided by SERVQUAL being used in order to adapt the services to the customers' priorities. However, there is possible to arise problems linked to the uniform application of this measurement tool across multiple service sectors because the five dimensions are not universal. For many organizations in the hospitality industry, the SERVQUAL model implementation involves many difficulties. It involves such a profound transformation of the organization that there is inevitable the emergence of a strong resistance. For this reason it is necessary to take into account the huge effort that is required to resolve the difficulties in this process (*Measuring Customer Satisfaction*, p. 378).

SERVQUAL model has been used successfully over time in the tourism sector, where there were conducted some important researches, studies which have shown that in different parts of the world, quality is differently perceived by the tourists.

As tourism has a very broad cultural spectrum, it is important for service providers to determine whether intercultural differences play an important role in measuring consumer satisfaction. Consumer satisfaction is not universally valid; over time the researchers concluded that people perceive and evaluate service quality satisfaction differently, depending on: cultural background, previous experiences and other external factors that can not be controlled directly by service providers. It is confirmed that tourists coming from developed countries have higher expectations in terms of quality services at destination, than those from less developed countries that have lower expectations in terms of quality. The ability to determine the needs and desires of visitors from different cultures helps service providers from touristic destinations to be more careful and to anticipate especially the factor that can lead to failure.

When the market is very competitive and customers demand higher quality services, it is essential for destination or service managers to pay attention to what causes service failure and customer dissatisfaction. Zeithaml conducted a study of service-oriented companies that is relevant to the tourism and hospitality sector. In this conceptual model of service quality is suggested that service failure and consequent customer dissatisfaction are caused by five gaps or discrepancies that, to remain viable, service providers in all sectors should aim to close:

- Gap 1: between consumer expectation and management perception: This gap arises when the management does not correctly perceive what the customers want.

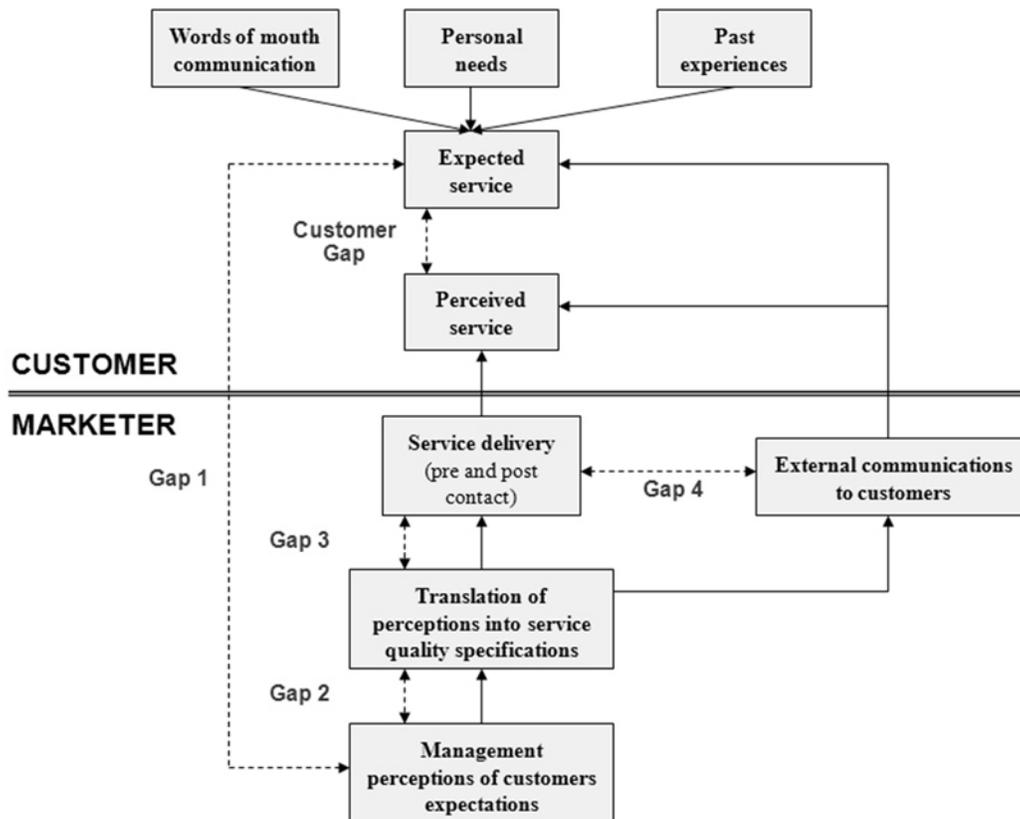
- Gap 2: between management perception and service quality specification: Although the management might correctly perceive what the customer wants, they may not set an appropriate performance standard.

- Gap 3: between service quality specification and service delivery: This gap may arise through service personnel being poorly trained, incapable or unwilling to meet the set service standard.

- Gap 4: between service delivery and external communication: Consumer expectations are highly influenced by statements made by company representatives and advertisements. The gap arises when these assumed expectations are not fulfilled at the time of delivery of the service.

- Gap 5: between expected service and experienced service: This gap arises when the consumer misinterprets the service quality.

Figure 1 Conceptual model of service quality



Source: Zeithaml, V., Parasuraman, A., Berry, L., Delivering quality service: Balancing customers perceptions and expectations, 1990, p. 46.

Analyzing the previous figure shows that there are three main aspects that determine consumer expectations. Consumer expectations are extremely important because service quality evaluation is done in terms of their fulfillment or not. The three aspects are the effect of word-of-mouth communication, personal needs, and past experience.

- Word-of-mouth communication is an important benefit but also a potentially harmful tool for service providers. It is a beneficial marketing tool only if customers are satisfied with the service provided, as they may become agents who promote a destination or service in places that the service providers can not reach (Anderson, E. W., 1998, p.5). However, failure of customer satisfaction leads to negative publicity and for the provider will be harder to convince potential customers that the services

provided by it are really qualitative. This is because customers seem to listen more of their friends, family or people who had already experienced the service than to promotion and advertisements carried out by the provider (Bansal, H. S., Voyer, P.A., 2000, p. 166).

- Personal needs influence the service quality that customers expect at a destination. For example, when a client requests personalized service, any misunderstanding leads to poor appreciation of the service or unsatisfactory service.

- Past experience also influences what customers expect (Parasuraman, A., 1990). For instance, when a tourist visited a destination where previously enjoyed high quality service, he will have at least the same expectations when it returns to that destination.

3. Methodology

It shall prepare a questionnaire with ten attributes for each of the following sectors: hotel, transportation, government sectors, denoted with values from 1 to 5 Likert's scale. Data will be collected from visitors from the tourist destination, whether inside or outside tourists. Questionnaires will apply only to respondents who completed the journey and are about to leave the location. Respondents will be asked to rate the importance of the ten attributes in the three sectors on a five-point Likert scale, where: 1= not important at all, 2= not important, 3= neutral, 4= important, 5= very important. A similar five-point scale can be used to rate the tourists' level of satisfaction with service encounters in the three sectors:, where: 1= very dissatisfied, 2= dissatisfied, 3= neither dissatisfied or satisfied, 4= satisfied, 5= very satisfied.

The questionnaire aims overall response to the question "**Was the destination meeting the expectations of the tourists?**".

The importance of customer satisfaction in tourism is highlighted, on the one hand, of the large number of countries that are concerned with building and introducing customer satisfaction indices (eg: US - ACSI index, Sweden, Spain, Denmark, Germany, England – ECSI index, China, Malaysia, Tawan- HKCSI index, Switzerland - SWCSI index).

The perceived quality of services is regarded with the construction of this concept which is based on the difference between perception (P) and expectations (E) related to the service. SERVQUAL model is one of the models based on the theory of "process of confirmed / unconfirmed expectations". In fact, SERVQUAL model is an operational model based on measuring the difference between "what customers want" and "what customers receive". Moreover, according to the authors of SERVQUAL model, the perceived quality of the service is defined as "an overall judgment or an attitude related with the superiority of the service" (*Journal of Retailing*,1988).

4. Conclusions and suggestions

A big challenge for managers and policy-makers of a tourism destination is to understand the patterns of tourist decision-making processes and identify factors that influence overall tourist satisfaction. Natural surroundings, accommodation, infrastructure and tourism facilities are very important features in choosing a destination and particularly relevant to individual experience. Also, improving the quality of services is recognised as one of the major strategies in consolidating destination competitiveness. In fact, the challenge is often more cultural than managerial. The real challenge is not the ability to use measurement and evaluation tools, but to translate into action the information collected by these methods. This means that the organization has the right and is willing to use such information. So, before choosing the best tools for measuring customer satisfaction, the „satisfaction management” it should be analyzed and clearly defined.

The conclusion in the present study is, therefore, that people act in a rational way due to the fact that they become satisfied (which indicates that their needs are met). Understanding how consumers evaluate the services, it very important to measure their level of satisfaction. To assure positive word of mouth, the industry should focus on improving the services. The rest of the tourist experience seems, to a certain degree, to be provided by the tourists themselves.

The main conclusion is: quality is a goal, an objective which must mobilize all the units of the service organization. Quality shows the direction towards which the action must be oriented.

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