

QUALITY OF TOURIST SERVICES - KEY FACTOR OF COMPETITIVENESS ON THE MARKET

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Abstract: Service quality has become a key factor in customers' decision to choose a travel service unit. If a service company will act according to the concept "always facing the market", the target clientele will be that who, by its needs and expectations, will determine the quality level required for the company to remain competitive on the market. Diversity and quality are the main factors of the competitiveness and, consequently, the fundamental problems facing the tourism industry in general and particularly the international reception tourism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a growing market, especially in Romania, where it began to take increasingly bold wings. This makes room for all, but only the best are desired.

The difference is not given by the hotel offered to the tourist, nor by the program. The customer knows what to ask and appreciates what it is offered to him. Therefore, the difference lies in the attitude, awareness, ability to listen and solve the most relevant wishes of the guest. Only if you know how to offer something more in addition to the paid services, you will have the surety that the tourists will entrust his or others holiday to you again.

Two elements are essential in the tourism industry system¹: product quality and human resources.

2. PROBLEM FORMULATION

In terms of service firms managers, quality expresses the perfection (level of excellence) that a company decided to achieve and maintain to meet the preferences of the target customer. In this way, quality is the extent to which firms will be able to comply with this strategic objective of prime importance.

If a services company will act according to the concept "always facing the market", the target clientele will be that who, by its needs and expectations, will determine the quality level required for the company to remain competitive on the market.

¹ Mazilu Mirela - *Tourism - Revival Factor at Social, Cultural and Economic Levels*, Proceedings of the 4th WSEAS International Conference on Cultural Heritage and Tourism, 2011

By the liberalization of the international trade of value, internationalization and globalization of trade and tourism development, the quality standards always rise.

The continuous trend towards getting an extra quality² is also reflected in the prices at which services are provided. Managers of service firms should be aware that, at an equal price, customers will choose the tourist unit which provides better quality services, and at equal quality customers will prefer the services that are even cheaper.

When a client assess the quality of a service he received, he does not dissociate its different components. For a client it is important the overall impression and not the relative success to "this or that" action part of the services received. Usually, and this is what is worse, the customer tends to stop at that detail of the process that benefits of the worst quality: hence the tendency to generalize a minor deficiency over the entire set of service he benefited. So, it is essential to ensure the highest possible uniformity among the components of the service. The offer, must be considered as a whole, overall; therefore it appears that, in terms of service, the *quality is total or not at all*.

In evaluating the service quality, in consumers' optics usually there appears three aspects which are grouped in the order of the difficulty of their evaluation³: *the sought quality* (services' features that the client can evaluate before consumption); *experimental quality* (services' features that the customer can evaluate after purchase or consumption); *credence quality* (characteristics of the services that the consumer can not evaluate even after their purchase / consumption, but towards which he shows a great trust; eg: religious services). According to this classification, the customers give more importance to the experimental and credence quality of the services.

Overall, from consumers point of view the assessment criteria of the services are roughly similar, regardless of the nature of services provided. The analysts of this field have developed a list of *determinants of assessing criteria of quality service*⁴:

1. *services accessibility*: services must be received (rendered) without difficulty, in due time, without waiting long that would discourage customers and could change their decision of consumption;

2. *communication*: services must be presented accurately and intelligibly in the common language of the consumers;

3. *staff professional competence*: staff responsible for providing the services must have experience, expertise and qualifications;

4. *hospitality*: serving staff must be friendly, helpful and treat every customer with respect and consideration;

5. *credibility of the offering company*: the performing company and its employees shall incite confidence in company performance and be concerned with the interests of their customers;

6. *reliability*: services must be consistent and rendered accurately and thoroughly to gain customer confidence;

7. *staff responsibility*: staff must respond promptly and creatively to customer requests and their problems related to the use of services;

8. *security*: services must be rendered without danger, risk or uncertainty among consumers;

9. *tangibility*: tangible sides of the service must accurately reflect their quality;

² Snak O., Baron P., Neacșu N. – *Economia turismului*, Ed. Expert, București, 2002, pg. 428-429

³ Ibid. pg. 424

⁴ Ibid. pg.426

10. *consumer understanding and knowledge of their consumption behavior*: provider staff must endeavor to understand the needs of consumers and pay due attention to them all the way the serving processes.

Criteria listed above have been drawn from the findings of specialists, which shows that, concerning the services, the customer is more demanding. All analyst studies refer to this aspect, but the findings themselves are insufficient because the perceived quality varies from one client to another and has not the same importance for the buyer and supplier. In addition, the quality of service will be perceived differently depending on whether the service is new or already spread, or if the customer discovers it for the first time or has already used it.

3. PROBLEM SOLUTION

In the 80s, the researchers Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, after an extensive research on service quality, concluded that, compared with the quality assessment of goods provided to clients, evaluating services is a much harder thing. According to the three researchers, the five main dimensions that customers use in evaluating service quality are explained as follows⁵: *tangibles* (equipment, personnel and communication materials appearance); *reliability* (ability to perform the promised service reliably and accurately); *responsiveness* (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service); *safety* (baggage of knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to instill a sense of confidence and security); *empathy* (caring, individualized attention that the service organization provides to its customers).

SERVQUAL analyzes the differences between the expected service and consumers' perception. The analysis of differences defines the service quality as the difference between what it should be offered and customer perception about what the service actually provided. The model identifies the following five differences that can lead to poor provision of a service and how this affects the service industry from a customer perspective⁶:

➤ Difference between customer expectations and perception management: this difference may arise from a lack of understanding of what customers expect from a particular service; for example customers expect the tourist vendor to know details about the tour sights or local services and are disappointed when he can not answer.

➤ The difference between management's perception and service quality specifications: this difference results from the discrepancy between what management believes that customer expectations are and current specifications of service quality (eg. the management does not consider as important the customer desire to know some financial information, but customers really want and need this information).

➤ Difference between service delivery and service specifications: even when there are guidelines or specifications for performing a great service, supply can not meet its standards because of the poor employee performance, leading to this difference.

➤ Difference between service delivery and external communications: customer expectations are set according to the promises made by the promotional messages of the

⁵ Mahdavinia S. H. - *Customer Satisfaction in Four Star Isfahan Hotels. An Application of SERVQUAL Model*, Lulea University of Technology, 2008

⁶ Parasuraman A., Zeithaml V.A., Berry L.L. – *Servqual: A Multiple-Item Scale For Measuring Consumer Perception*. Journal of Retailing, 1988, pg. 158

service provider. By this difference it is measured the consistency between the image of quality built by promotional activities and the real quality of the tourism services.

➤ Difference between the perceived and provided service: appears in tourism when one or more of the previous differences appears among the customers of the tourism service, employees interacting with customers and management of the travel unit.

SERVQUAL has many applications (can be used both in marketing studies or when comparing a service with a similar one offered by the competition), but its most important use is to keep track of the changes in the quality of services provided by an organization, which is done through a periodic survey on customers⁷.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Studies on service quality and customer satisfaction often lead to confusing results because some customers do not show their dissatisfaction in services. The reason is simple: in most cases it is needed the intervention of a person to provide the requested service. In the eyes of the customer, by expressing their dissatisfaction is equivalent to accusing or putting someone in difficulty and therefore, in many cases, customers prefer to remain silent, but not overlook the deficiency. This silence is more serious for the service providing unit, as the number of dissatisfied and undetected customers by the management unit increases, especially if we take into consideration that an unhappy customer with the services provided at his first experience, is almost always lost for the providing unit.

Since in the service industry the productivity, quality and profitability are closely dependent, when consumers will observe differences in quality of the services offered, these differences will surely be reflected in the profits of the economic enterprises providing services for population (tourists).

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