

**PERCEPTIONS OF RESTAURANT MANAGERS ABOUT THE QUALITY OF PRODUCTS AND SERVICES OFFERED TO CONSUMERS.
CASE STUDY: THE CITY OF BRAȘOV**

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Abstract

The present economic crisis has had a powerful impact on the restaurants in the city of Brașov, which have confronted themselves in the past years both with a decrease in the number of consumers, and with a reduction in the consumption of products and public food services. In this context, this survey aims to analyze the perceptions of the restaurant managers in the city of Brașov regarding the quality of products and services they offer to the consumers, by using, in this sense, one of the techniques that are specific to qualitative research that is the semi – directive in – depth interview method.

Key words: *Quality, Developing consumer loyalty, Satisfaction, Public food services, Restaurant.*

JEL classification: *L66, M31*

1. INTRODUCTION

The restaurant industry evolved in the past decades from offering simple services to offering a complex combination of services with different characteristics, in order to satisfy the customers' needs. Customer satisfaction is mainly determined by the quality of services. There is a direct relation between the notion of quality and that of satisfaction (Shaikh, 2009).

Lately, in the hospitality industry, the key of success changed from focusing on locations and facilities to paying special attention to the quality of services (Wright et al, 1994), in which the employees play a very important part in customer satisfaction (Wan, 2010).

The quality of services has been defined as being the delivery of excellent services in relation to the customer's perception (Polyorat and Sophonsiri, 2010).

The customer's satisfaction is a feeling that he/she acquires as a result of the post – consumption evaluation of services. It is recognized as being one of the main factors that determine the development of consumer loyalty. Several surveys conducted in the hospitality industry have confirmed the direct link between customer satisfaction and the development of consumer loyalty (Ho and Lee, 2007).

Developing consumer loyalty represents an important aspect in the services sector, since maintaining customers is considered to be cheaper than attracting new ones. Therefore, developing consumer loyalty plays an important part for the restaurant managers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality is considered, more and more frequently, as the most important factor of competitiveness in all activities, including in the field of tourist services, that is why economic agents are struggling to continuously improve the quality of products and services they offer on the market.

In specialized literature, quality has several definitions, being considered as (Rondelli and Cojocariu, 2004, p.42):

- Satisfying a necessity;
- Conformity with certain specifications;
- Reflecting a trademark in the framework of the beneficiary's needs;
- The ensemble of processes necessary for the realization of a viable product;
- The capacity to fulfil a certain need;
- The conformity with a given model.

According to the international standard ISO 8402 concerning "Quality management and quality assurance - Vocabulary", *quality represents the ensemble of an entity's characteristics, which enables it to satisfy expressed or implicit needs* (Olaru, 2004, p.9).

The definition given to the concept of quality in tourism by the World Tourism Organization is the following: *quality is the result of a process that involves satisfying the consumer's legitimate needs for products and services, his/her requirements and expectations at an acceptable price, in conformity with the quality standards related to the assurance of the tourists' safety and security, hygiene, accessibility, transparency, authenticity and harmonization of the*

tourist activity with the human and natural environment (Rondelli and Cojocariu, 2004, p.47).

Customers have different needs and expectations that is why the notion of satisfaction introduces elements of subjectivity in the perception of quality (Mattila, 2001, pp.73-79). *Customer satisfaction* is considered as being the most important element that determines consumer loyalty (Polyorat and Sophonsiri, 2010, p.66). In the case of restaurants, customer loyalty represents a very important aspect that determines economic stability and growth.

The quality of services in restaurants is determined by the employees' education and skills, of their ability to understand and satisfy the customers' needs (Elmazi, 2008, p.34). The quality of human resources represents an element that is often intangible and, apparently, difficult to evaluate and quantify, in contrast with the physical characteristics of serving spaces, which are subject to quality classification or improvement.

In order to ensure hygiene, the restaurant managers can implement food safety standards, such as HACCP or ISO 22000. HACCP is a preventive control system that refers to ensuring the quality of food products (Banu, 2007, p.571).

According to Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, *service quality is an abstract and evasive notion due to the three characteristics of services: intangibility, variability and inseparability between production and consumption*. Quality represents a dynamic concept in the framework of public food services, in which the subjectivity element plays an important part, which is encountered especially in the personal experiences of customers.

In the services sector, quality can be defined as having two dimensions: a functional and a technical one (Gronroos, 1984). The functional dimension is associated with the interaction between the customer and the processes through which his/her services are delivered, while the technical dimension refers to the quality of the finished service (Sharma and Patterson, 1999). For example, in a restaurant, the functional dimension refers to the employees' performance and the technical dimension refers to the food quality. Several authors have found that the two dimensions of quality perception (service quality and food quality) are directly related to customer satisfaction (Caruana et al, 2000; Namkung and Jang, 2007).

The food quality is one of the most important components of the culinary experience (Namkung and Jang, 2007; Sulek and Hensley, 2004). Several surveys have had as the object of their research the importance of the food quality in different restaurants, namely: Clark and Wood (1999) confirm that the main factor that influences the development of consumer loyalty is the food quality, Susskind and Chan (2000) consider that, from the customers point of view, the food quality is the most important factor that

determines the choice of the restaurant, Mattila (2001) considers that the food quality is a key element that determines the customers' loyalty in the case of restaurants, and Sulek and Hensley (2004) found that, in comparison with other aspects, such as the quality of services and the atmosphere of the restaurant, the food quality is the most important element in order to obtain the customer's satisfaction.

According to Zeithaml, Bitner, Gremler, Mahaffey and Hiltz (2007, p.102-103) the quality of the restaurant's services is determined by the *"customers' perceptions of the meal (technical outcome quality) and on how the meal was served and how the employees interacted with them (interaction quality). The decor and surroundings (physical environment quality) will also impact perceptions of overall service quality."* The quality of the restaurant's services is, from these authors point of view, the sum of the quality of meal, employees' interaction with the customers, decor and surroundings of the restaurant.

3. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

From the multitude of techniques that are specific to the qualitative research, *the semi-directive in-depth interview method* was preferred (Malhotra, 2004, p.147). In this sense, eight in-depth interviews were conducted among restaurant managers in the city of Braşov with the main objective of knowing their perceptions regarding the quality of products and services offered to their customers.

In order to reach the goals aimed by this research, the necessary instruments have been elaborated, namely a *sample questionnaire* of potential respondents and a *list of themes and subthemes of the semi-directive in-depth interview*.

While elaborating the sample questionnaire, it has been aimed to include questions that could allow the inclusion in the research of respondents that are representative for the objectives desired, namely restaurant managers from the city of Braşov. Their opinions are relevant for establishing the dimensions of the quality of products and services offered by restaurants.

The sample questionnaire also contains a factual question concerning the number of years since the restaurant is on the market and an identification question referring to the work experience in the position of General Manager at a restaurant.

The answers of the interviewed persons have been recorded with a tape recorder, being stored in electronic files. These files have been transcribed afterwards, and the information concerned has been subjected to a primary data processing technique called *Content analysis* (Lefter, 2004, p.45).

4. HYPOTHESES AND OBJECTIVES OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The starting point in conducting the qualitative research consisted of the outlining of the following *general hypotheses*:

- The knowledge of the consumption behaviour of the restaurants' customers in the city of Braşov represents a premise for conceiving offers for products and services adapted to the consumer in an appropriate manner;
- Relatively few restaurants in the city of Braşov make consistent efforts to know in depth the expectations of potential consumers in order to offer them a high level of satisfaction;
- The majority of restaurants in the city of Braşov pay fairly little attention to the aspects that underlie the growth of customer satisfaction and developing their loyalty;
- The knowledge of the changes in the consumption behaviour of consumers in the context of the present global economic crisis represents one of the restaurants' priorities, with the purpose of adapting their marketing strategies to the requirements imposed by the conditions existing on the market.

As for the objectives associated to the expected qualitative research, they were established so that they allow a more detailed knowledge of the opinions of the restaurant managers regarding the dimensions of the quality of products and services offered to consumers.

In this sense, the *major objectives* envisaged were the following:

- General aspects related to the activity of the restaurant;
- The quality of products and services offered by the restaurant;
- Perspectives related to the behaviour of the customers of restaurants.

5. RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE MARKETING RESEARCH

The research consisted of conducting eight semi-directive in-depth interviews among the restaurant managers in the city of Braşov. Thus, four of the restaurants concerned serve traditional Romanian food, two of them have international cuisine, one restaurant was built to resemble an English pub, and the last one is a self-service restaurant. The central theme of the discussions with the restaurant managers described above focused on the way in which the dimensions of the quality of the

products and services they offer to the consumers are perceived.

The main subthemes included in the interview guide have been formulated in such a way as to give the managers included in the sample the possibility to describe the quality of the products and services their restaurant has to offer under various aspects. Among these aspects, we could mention:

- The description of the methods of measurement and control of the quality of the products and services offered by the restaurant;
- The identification of the criteria that the managers think the consumers have in view when appreciating the quality of the products and services offered by the restaurant;
- The description of the methods used by the restaurant management in order to increase its customers' satisfaction and/or loyalty.

Asked to describe the elements that define the quality of products and services the restaurant has to offer to its customers, each of the eight managers interviewed placed emphasis on the subthemes presented on the list to a greater or lesser extent, according to the degree of importance given to each of them.

The analysis performed on the basis of the eight interviews has pointed out the existence of two more important criteria (which we may call **primary dimensions**), depending on which the quality of products and services offered by a restaurant is appraised, namely *the quality of the food offered* and *the professionalism of the restaurant's employees*.

5.1. The quality of the food offered by the restaurant

The first and, probably, the most commonly invoked appraisal criterion of the quality of products and services of a restaurant is the quality of the food included in the menu. Furthermore, this criterion is considered by the experts in the field as being the most important factor in obtaining the consumers' loyalty (Clark and Wood, 1999). Also, Namkung and Jang (2007) found that the food quality usually represents a significant component that determines the loyalty of the consumers, namely the fact that they express their intention to come back to the establishment concerned, they transmit positive information regarding the restaurant in question and they are willing to recommend it to their acquaintances.

By referring to this dimension of the quality, the majority of managers have placed special emphasis on aspects regarding: the freshness of the ingredients used at preparing the food, the suppliers' reliability in respecting the contracts aimed at offering high-quality products, respecting the HACCP standard concerning food safety or the prevailing use of

Romanian products, considered to be eco-friendly, in the preparation of food.

It is worth taking into consideration the affirmation of one of the managers, who, noticing a decrease in the importance given to the manner in which traditional dishes are prepared, said: *"I believe it is time that our dishes went through a process of selection and modernization. The contemporary consumer has other requirements and expectations."* On the other hand, while referring to the quality of international dishes, another manager said that, in order to maintain itself on the market, the restaurant that offers them must strictly comply with the recipe, the working technology and the presentation of the dishes on the plate, and not *"embellish"* them.

In order to satisfy the requirements of the customers who cross the threshold of a restaurant, the majority of the managers interviewed believe that the manner in which the food is prepared and presented is decisive. In this context, one of the managers said: *"In most cases, it is not the dishes that make the difference, but the way in which they are served, presented and «wrapped»"*, thus establishing the value of the restaurant in the eyes of the customers.

Another criterion that establishes the quality of a dish is its comparison with the recipe and the standard presented in the photo, so that there are no differences, from an organoleptic point of view, regarding the ingredients used, the dosage, the presentation on the plate and even the temperature of the dish. On the other hand, basing himself on the principle "don't do unto others which you do not want done unto you", another manager placed emphasis on the chef's *"common sense"*, who should prepare the dish so that the result obtained matches the level of his/her expectations.

A dish can be valorised not just through the ingredients used and the presentation, but also through its history/the story that stands behind it, the prestige of the chef who prepared it and the prizes won by the dish in question at different national or international contests. These aspects can be emphasized the most by including them in the restaurant's menu, so that the customers can appreciate the quality of the dishes starting from those criteria.

In addition to the *internal criteria* of appraising the quality of the dishes, the managers interviewed also used *external criteria*, mainly related to the necessity of knowing the consumers' opinions and expectations regarding the dishes consumed. The gathering of information is made either orally, through the direct contact between the waiter and the customer, or in written form, through small questionnaires handed to the customers at the end of the meal. On the other hand, the quality of a dish eaten during a meal is envisaged, being considered that an empty plate at the customer's table is the best method to test the food quality. The communication that exists between the customer, the waiter and the cook is very important, since it can establish why the customers did

not eat the entire dish. In order to fully understand the needs of the customers he serves, one of the interviewed managers said that he consults himself with his employees all the time regarding the requested dishes/beverages: *"We never prepare a dish without discussing with each other. We prepare it, taste it and thus we know what works/what doesn't and why"*.

Finally, another external criterion of appraisal of the dishes' quality and freshness is the restaurant's obligation to send a few food samples to authorized institutions on a monthly basis in order to verify them.

5.2. The professionalism of the restaurant's employees

The marketing literature stresses the fact that the perceived level of the service in the public food field is based on the relationship between consumers and suppliers (Nikolich and Sparks, 1995). In other words, the consumers' perceptions and the appraisal of the quality of the service may be significantly influenced by the supplier's performance. A prompt, reliable and safe service represents intangible elements that influence both the customer's satisfaction and the post – purchase appraisal (Brady and Robertson, 2001). A significant role in establishing the quality of products and services offered by restaurants is thus held by the hired staff: *"It is impossible for an establishment in the public food service field to be successful without paying special attention and offering impeccable services to its customers, through the employees' presentation, kindness and demeanour. All these factors represent the quality of being hospitable. In Romania, and all over the world, hospitality still has a long way to go"*, said one of the managers that appraise the quality of a restaurant's services, mostly from the employees' point of view. In order to stress the importance of the employees in offering high-quality services, the same manager added: *"The expectations of the Romanian consumers increased in comparison with the last years, people do not just want to have dinner and go, but they also expect an irreproachable demeanour from the employee, irrespective of the position he/she occupies in the establishment's organization chart (...) A good employee should provide assistance, should be convincing when making a recommendation, so that the customers make the right decision."*

The attitude and the behaviour of the employees – mainly of those at the front-office -, reflected in the services they should offer to the customers, the attention they should pay on satisfying their expectancies, the manner in which they should welcome the customers, recommend the dishes and beverages according to the customers' expectations and an impeccable dress code represent just a few of the criteria a restaurant that aims to offer high – quality products and services to its customers needs to fulfil. Some of the interviewed managers consider that

there are also other important criteria to obtain the quality of the services offered by a restaurant. From this point of view we could mention: the education level of the employees (high school studies at least), the knowledge of at least one foreign language, a pleasant appearance, the availability to work overtime, experience in the field of public food service and, in some cases, marital status – due to the stability determined by the necessity to support one's family.

Very important for some of the managers interviewed is the waiter's *compulsory general culture* – especially when the customers have to wait more time until the ordered dishes arrive -, general culture that includes, among other things, the knowledge of the tourist attractions that the tourists can visit or the dishes that are about to be served (the ingredients used, the chef who prepared the dish, the medals obtained by that chef for the dish in question etc.). But the most important quality of a waiter should be *empathy*, in other words his/her ability to understand the genuine needs of the customers that cross the threshold of a restaurant, so that the recommendations made can satisfy their desires. All these qualities are essential not just in order to satisfy the customers, but also in order to develop their loyalty.

A superior quality of a restaurant's services is determined, according to what has been said above, by the waiter's attitude, behaviour and education, as well as the relationship between the hired staff of the restaurant and the customers. Although the food quality represents, for the majority of the managers interviewed, one of the major criteria in appraising the global quality of the services offered by a restaurant, only one of them placed special emphasis on the person that prepares the dishes, namely *the chef*. The reasons that justify a greater importance given to waiters when describing the quality of the services offered by a restaurant may vary: it is either considered that the relevant aspects for the appraisal of the quality of a restaurant's services by its customers are mainly related to the serving manner, or the level of chefs education is not as high as it used to be – the managers' expectations regarding this category of employees being lower -, or due to too high costs related to the chef's education compared to the level of the restaurant profit, or the managers' perceptions that the consumers' expectations regarding the food quality is generally lower.

The manager who paid special attention to chefs in offering high – quality services realizes with regret that *the chefs* in our country *are not financially motivated* to develop and improve their skills in such an activity, like in other countries. Due to this fact, they either choose to work abroad, in order to obtain a higher income than the one obtained in our country (without it necessarily implying self – improvement in this field), or they exchange several jobs for a short period of time in our country. For the ones who find themselves in the second category, there are two situations: a favourable one, in which the manager

which hired him/her has specialized training and, recognizing a chef's vital importance in a restaurant, sustains him/her through the participation at different contests, and an unfavourable one, that applies to managers without training, which do not offer a chef the possibility to improve himself/herself in this field and/or does not motivate him/her from a financial point of view. From this perspective, the manager in question added: *"Unfortunately, the chefs come and go due to the fact that **there are very many** [managers] **who do not appreciate this work.**"*

It is worth taking into consideration the tendencies that manifest themselves at present in the attitude and behaviour of young employees of restaurants. Referring to this aspect, one of the managers noticed, in the last few years, among *young people* hired in this field, the lack of motivation, the lack of the will to fulfil the customers' needs in order to satisfy them, wanting only to obtain immediate advantages (i.e. tips).

The main trends observed by the manager in attitude and behavior of young employees of restaurants can be divided into four categories:

- **The state of the mind** of the people who work in that domain, the manager noticing: *"I have no idea why **our people are so sad** though they have no reason (...), **for us it's hard, hard to find that smile**".*
- **Insufficient professional education:** *"In order to have high-quality services, we need to be educated. The education is not enough during college [referring here at the family education] (...) not incidentally we have so many students that study abroad. How come they make it abroad, while **here they have to be forced to learn and are supervised**. I do not get it!"*
- **The lack of concern for obtaining a real feed-back from the client,** the manager noticing that: *"**Promptitude** is one of the aspects that the employees of a restaurant exceed on (...). Unfortunately, what concerns the interest for a more active listening, **not being preoccupied with a real feed-back from the customer:** if the food has been good, if the assistance, the location or the surrounding was good enough. Maybe this reticence of asking for feed-back from clients and being open to any notification from their behalf, led to a **slow progress of improving the quality of the services.**"*
- **The lack of motivation of the employees** in offering high quality services, the manager noticing: *"I do not know why **the young generation is bored**, and I do not know what they are waiting for (...) maybe I am overreacting, think about it: <<Am I getting or not something from these*

clients?, and it is not supposed to be this way, his duty is to offer his services."

The same manager still expresses his wish that the growing number of the Romanians who go abroad in order to spend their holidays, will produce changes in their attitude and behavior, as customers and as employees as well: *"Of course that tourism started developing in Romania and Braşov as well, people started developing, especially the young generation, all the things they have seen should be introduced in our culture, and that smile I was talking about, the quality, whatever the client's behavior is, if he is more generous or not, he must leave satisfied."*

Although food quality and the professionalism of the employees represented criteria which interviewed managers gave more importance to - through the number of interventions related on the two issues during the interview -, there are other dimensions of quality that managers have developed on a lesser extent compared with those previously described, these are included as sub-themes in the interview guide. One of these dimensions (named the **secondary dimension**) that completes the picture of the products and services' quality offered by the restaurants from Braşov refers to *the quality of the physical facilities in restaurant*.

5.3. The quality of the physical facilities in restaurant

Usually, when the customers ask for the services of a restaurant, they first notice the setting. The customers' perception with respect to the setting may influence his reaction concerning the services and the food he will be receiving, after a directly proportional relationship: the more the setting demands are higher, the more the expectations towards food and services are higher (Bitner, 1990; Zeithaml et al, 1993).

Choosing a restaurant isn't determined only by food, drink and the way these are offered/served. Taking into account the physical facilities' attractiveness that complete the restaurant's offer, one of the interviewed managers said: *"Nowadays, customers are not looking for only the products, but the way these are presented, the atmosphere and the interior design."*

Being considered by the experts in the food industry field as "package" of services, the physical facilities of a restaurant represent an important component in determining the quality of its services. The main physical facilities included in this analysis were: the location, the parking, the size of the restaurant, the interior design, the equipment, the ambiance, the brand and the elements of differentiation from competitors.

Asked to describe the attraction elements of physical environment in their restaurants, most managers interviewed put emphasis on the *interior design* and the *ambiance* of the restaurant.

The interior design is described by managers through *the raw material used for internal finishes* – the wood, which gives you a "warm", "relaxing", "welcome" or "old" feeling (in case of restaurants positioning on the market as traditional restaurants), or bricks and stones, to describe the fact that we're talking about a wine cellar. Referring to the tourists that visit our city, one of the interviewed managers noticed that this design is especially appreciated by those who stay in Braşov for at least three days, those who have the time and curiosity to "test" the products and services of more restaurants.

Close related to the interior design, is the *ambiance* of the restaurant. This is described by the interviewed managers through the setting inside, warmth, light and music. For example, in the case of Romanian restaurants, emphasize is put on the orchestra/band and his singers, while the English pub, which addresses to the younger generation, offers karaoke nights, a DJ or youth nights.

The flow of the customers is another attractive element which determines the quality of the offered services, their perception being that the food from the menu is fresh (don't create additional stock) and more qualitative when the restaurant is full. There has to be added the *accessibility of the location*, taking into consideration that the customer flow is dependent on the good custom of the restaurant.

5.4. The satisfaction and loyalty of the customers

The quality of the products and services offered by restaurants is expressed also by the level of satisfaction of the customers and their wish to come back to that location.

The customer's satisfaction refers to cognitive thinking and to emotional reactions (Lin, 2004). Westbrook (1987) stated the fact that the satisfaction includes an evaluation of the emotions coming out from the consumption of a service. Yi (1990) suggested that the satisfaction results from the analysis of the emotional component. Finally, Oliver (1997) considered the customers' satisfaction as a result of his experience, this meaning the extent to which it was pleasant or unpleasant, suggesting that satisfaction reflects the impact of supplier's performance on the customer mood.

Referring to the customer's satisfaction, one of the interviewed managers stated: *"We first want to see what the client wants (...). Than we do very personal things, things that only small restaurants do. Meaning, if they have 20 years of marriage, we arrange the table in a different way, we write with chalk <<Happy Birthday>>, we decorate his dessert differently, and in this way we will certainly surprise him."*

Customizing the services, adapting them to every customer and every type of event, represents, according to the ones mentioned above, one of the most efficient ways of satisfying and even *delighting*

the customer. Choosing this kind of strategy - attracting - satisfying - delighting the customer, is motivated by the fact that the restaurant is of a reduced size and has positioned itself on the market as being an expensive one, addressing itself only to wealthy people who have high claims concerning the and services' quality.

The size of the restaurant, the accessibility of the location, the consumer segments and/ or the evolution of the demand, represent for the other restaurants included in this study criteria which form the basis of specific strategies of increasing the satisfaction. For example, taking into consideration the reduced dimensions of the location and the small number of the additional services (or almost inexistent), the manager of one of the considered restaurants, stated that the satisfaction of his customers is assured by offering them fresh products and by periodically *changing the list of menus*, taking into consideration the number of demands for the food and drinks. Offering his services and goods especially to young people, the manager of another restaurant uses strategies of increasing the satisfaction, offering karaoke nights, a DJ, youth nights and moreover, he advises his employees to try to remember the *customer's names*. Finally, taking into consideration the results of a *very short questionnaire* which the customer should fill in when he finish the meal and of a *computer program* recording the sales evolution, another restaurant uses a permanent adaptation strategy to the customer needs.

The *loyalty of the customers* represents the direct result of satisfying the customers and this is best illustrated by one of the interviewed managers who stated: *"It is necessary for every manager to be aware of the customer loyalty's importance in order to create and maintain a successful business on the market, the target of any restaurant being to offer good quality food, in a pleasant environment, served creatively, through impeccable services"*.

Among the loyalty methods which the managers described as being used by their restaurant we could mention:

- *Informing the customer* with respect to the organizing of a gastronomic event, of a book launch, of a wine tasting where chefs/waiters are invited;
- *Organizing special events* for customers (baptisms, weddings, birthdays), which, although do not bring a large profit to the restaurant, have the purpose of satisfying and rewarding the customers for their loyalty; to these services we could add the *discounts* offered by some restaurants for tourist groups or loyal clients, or loyalty cards for their customers;
- *Offering reasonable prices* for the menus created for students and retirees.

5.5. Prospects of consumption behavior for the citizens of Braşov

Concerning the trends in consumer behavior towards the quality of products and services offered by restaurants, a finding that two of the interviewed managers discovered is the fact that the people living in Braşov, and not only, are more and more demanding and exacting, they have a richer gastronomic culture, and this tendency is mainly determined by their possibilities of traveling to countries with a tourist tradition. *"As each day passes, the customers become more and more exacting, regardless of their purchase possibilities, they are exacting from the point of view of the cleanliness, of the way of presenting the food on the plate, of the kindness of the waiter, they are unforgiving, and this a good thing. They are forcing us to be more attentive."* The food services consumption in the countries with tradition in tourism raised the Romanian customers' demands with respect to the quality of the food and beverages, to the way of offering to them, to the ambiance, to the attitude and behavior of the front-office employees. The same manager stated: *"People travel, many cheap destinations appeared (...), and on their way back, they have claims from all points of view, from the employee's behavior and the offer point of view and from the point of view of interaction with the front-office employees."*

The increasing claims of the people living in Braşov with respect to the quality of the products and services offered by restaurants should be taken into consideration by the managers, when creating or adapting their marketing strategies to their customers.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The quality of products and services offered by the restaurants from Braşov represents the most important criterion on which the satisfying of the customers' demands and their coming back are based on.

The restaurant managers have to be aware of the characteristic features and the evolution of food service market when drawing up the strategies for attracting and satisfying the consumers' demands. The world economic crisis which affected our country had a great impact on the quality of services offered by the restaurants. In order to cope with the reduction of the customers number and their demands, many of the restaurants from Braşov were forced to introduce the so called "crisis menu", at low prices.

On the other hand, among the interviewed managers, there were opinions according to which the consumers' interests in local food has decreased due to the increasing number of fast-foods – as a result of the important number of youths who attend the courses of the university from this area –, which led to a lowering of the restaurant customers number. Finally,

we have to add the assessment of one of the managers who stated that preparing products of good quality is also dependent by the chefs' performance. The same manager noticed that the majority national and international competitions where Romanian chefs participate are no longer financially supported by institutions (The Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism), but by different sponsors.

The main proposal of this study was to analyze the perceptions of the restaurant managers regarding to the quality of products and services offered to consumers. Although the themes and sub-themes included in the interview guide were formulated so as to cover the main dimensions of quality extracted from the marketing literature, the present study has some *limits* which the managers have to take into consideration in formulating the marketing strategies. The main limitations that emerge from this study are mostly connected to:

- *The restaurant's specific, the consumer segments and the different sizes of the*

restaurant included in the analysis, for each of these situations a strategy for product, price, distribution and communication is needed.

- *The one-sided character of the study*, due to the fact that only restaurant managers were included in the sample.

Nevertheless, the results obtained from this study could be highly useful to the managers from this field for conceiving the most efficient strategies of attracting and satisfying the consumers.

Information obtained will be the basis of a quantitative marketing research among final consumers in order to determine their expectations and perceptions about the quality of products and services offered by the restaurants in Braşov. Conceiving a quantitative research will highlight or not the existence of significant differences between managers' perceptions about the quality of services they have to offer to their customers and the particular requirements of consumers.

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