THE IMPACT OF THE QUALITY OF TOURIST PRODUCTS AND SERVICES ON THE CUSTOMERS OF A TOURISM AGENCY

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Abstract

Tourism capitalises and exploits economically the unique thesaurus made of the richness created by nature and climate, or left by history, folklore and civilisation. In this tourist universe, the consumer's power does not cease to affirm itself, and that is why quality is one of the main requirements. Starting from this idea, we elaborated the paper with the title "The impact of the quality of tourist products and services on the customers of a tourism agency". The purpose of this paper is to find out the degree of satisfaction of the customers of a tourism agency concerning the quality of the tourist products and services offered. We tried to present the problems and the importance of quality in the field of tourism, and to find modalities for its estimation and evaluation, taking into account that the satisfaction of the consumer or of the tourist highly depends in a way on the quality of products and services offered. The research intended to gather, analyse, and process the data, to test the hypotheses, and to make the conclusions.

Key words: *Products quality; Quality of tourist services; Tourism agency; Impact on customers.*

JEL classification: *M19*

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

The consumers are the persons who purchase the package of services or some of its components, in their own name, or in order to offer them to other persons (Draica, 2003, p.11).

The study of the tourists' behaviour is a fascinating trip in the world of human behaviour. The theoretical effort (Coiţa, Nedele, 2006, p.88) should be completed in practice with specific observations, with the experience of the persons who know this behaviour after direct contacts and many years of experience, with the results of research done systematically in order to emphasise changes in tourists' needs, desires, and behaviour, in their life style, in their social contexts, in the technologies used, etc.

Lanquar (2002) deals with the identification of the behavioural model, i.e. the way in which tourists intend to behave during the realisation of tourist consumption: what services they consume, what category of means they use (for accommodation, transport, amusement), the structure of the travelling group, the number of stays, the types of accommodation, the means of transport, the places visited, the use of intermediaries, the tourist services used, the practical activities, the period of the year, the type of stay (weekend, main holiday, etc.). The market research presented a few categories of tourists whom it modelled, in order to assure a higher generality. The four models of tourist behaviour described by the Frenchman Lanquar twenty five years ago are as follows:

- *The sedentary-solitary tourist*. His main motivations are: sea, sun, sun bathing;
- *The sedentary-mobile tourist* combines relaxation tourism with discovery tourism;
- *The itinerary tourist* is looking for the cultural and social escape;
- *The nomad tourist* is looking for the direct contact with nature and local population.

Plog (2003) identified since 1974 two psychological dimensions according to which tourists can be differentiated in *psychocentric* and *allocentric*. Therefore, psychocentric tourists have preoccupations mostly related to their own person, being fearful in what concerns the exterior world, considering that they cannot control it, while allocentric tourists are curious and very concerned about the exterior world, rather independent, and they are looking for new experiences and destinations. Nickerson and Ellis (1999) followed the way opened by Plog, and in 1991 they combined the *allocentric - psychocentric* dimensions with individual psychological characteristics of *introverted* and *extraverted*.

From the combination of these two dimensions: *psychocentric - allocentric* and *introvert - extravert*, Jackson et al (2001) identified four categories: *the explorer, the adventurer, the guided,* and *the grouped*.

Tourist behaviour is determined by a number of psychological, social and cultural variables.

Chaşovschi et al (2011) and Anastasiei (2004) consider that the decision of choosing a tourist

destination has a high risk for any individual. The starting point is constituted by the tourist's needs and desires, which together make the individual's motivation. The individual's desires depend on the cultural values, as well on his specific background. By this segmentation of the consumer's behaviour, we can identify products and services satisfying the desires and the needs of any customer (Szabó, 2011).

Consequently, we consider that a high level of quality for tourist products and services offered by a tourism agency can make the difference in what concerns the choice of a potential customer.

Quality is a notion very largely used, which makes extremely difficult to define it from a scientific point of view.

The standard SR ISO 8402-1991 defines *quality* as being the *ensemble of the characteristics of an entity, which confers it the aptitude to satisfy the needs expressed or implied*. For the consumer, quality is equivalent to *the satisfactions that a good offers in use or in consumption* (Maxim, 2007, p.10). Quality is tightly related to the field of marketing, because the marketing decisions should take into consideration the quality, because *it influences the volume of the demand of services and the structure of the customers* (Niţă, 2004, p.97).

According to Manolică et al (2011), quality is probably the best way to assure the loyalty of the customers and of the employees, to defend against the competitors, and to increase the profits in an increasingly stronger market competition.

Therefore, quality in the field of services has two components (Jivan, 1998, p.90): *the quality of service process,* and *the level of quality of the service*, i.e. the real service offered.

From the point of view of the relationships existing between the quality perceived and the real quality, the evaluation may differ from the customer to the direct provider (Bergman, 1994, Niţă, Butnaru, 2007, Lache, 2002). From the aspects composing the service quality there are (Untaru, Ispas et al 2012) *the personnel's behaviour and attitude, the duration of the service, the possibilities of information, the advertisement, the location of the service unit, the access, the external environment,* etc.

Total quality of a service is regarded as a function with three components (Niţă, Butnaru, 2007): *the corporal image* – the global image and activity of the service company; *the technical quality* – the essential attributes of the services corresponding to the needs satisfied; *the functional quality* – the manner of offering the services;

The tourism company should understand the customers' needs, and the quality of the tourist service should be in agreement with the quality of the professional training of human resources. As a result, the employees and the managers of tourism companies should offer their customers only services of highest quality, at lowest tariffs and prices. In order that the tourism company offers to its customers only quality

services, it is necessary that before their providing, the demands of the customers of tourist services should be fully and correctly acknowledged, and after they are provided, their reactions should be known as well as possible (satisfaction or dissatisfaction). For example, in Romania, due to the increase of the qualitative level of the services offered to customers, the tourist market developed strongly. According to the National Association of Romanian Tourism Agencies (www.anat.ro), tourism agencies are selling in the whole world 51% of the plane tickets, 87% of all the cruises, 81% of all the tours and tourist packages, 45% of the car rentals, and 47% of the hotels.

The tourism agent should understand the customers' needs. As a result, the employees and the managers of the tourism companies should offer their customers only services of highest quality, at lowest tariffs and prices. It is important to emphasise that there is no absolute quality, because quality always depends on the demands of the customers existing at a certain moment, on a certain market. The quality of a tourist service essentially depends on the quality of processes from which it comes. The processes depend on materials, equipment, personnel, methods, environment, management, and measures. Quality management can be optimally realised by the implementation of a system of quality management in the tourism companies from the ISO 9000 group.

In Romania, in order to reach a quality level at the standards required by the customers, it is necessary to accomplish four stages (Rotaru, 2004, p.241): *informing the personnel about the problems related to the quality; selecting from the personnel the ones who wish to study further this information, transforming it in knowledge and habits; designing and implementing the system of quality management in the company; certification of the conformity of the system with a referential adopted by the company, and as a model of good practice, respectively.*

A tourism agency should be more than a tourism seller (www.mytravel guru.ro/cum-alegem-o-agentie-de-tourism). Tourism agents should be close to their customers before, during, and after their holiday, but especially when unpredicted things happen. A tourism agency should add value to a trip or holiday, and should understand that planning a holiday is not reduced only to destinations; it is mostly about the customer.

There is no doubt that tourists have nowadays more options than ever, from tourist destinations, tourist packages and their price range, to reservation methods and the itineraries chosen. This is the reason why one of the most important decisions a tourist should make is the choice of the agent of the tourism agency. Each tourist agency is different, and this is why some are better than the others for a certain customer.

Here are some of the things that should be taken into consideration when customers choose a tourism agency to help them plan their trip:

professionalism, recommendations, asking about the taxes, checking the agents' training, checking the past of the agency.

Quality is only where the product or the service corresponds to the customers' demands.

II. QUALITY OF TOURIST PRODUCTS AND SERVICES – FACTORS OF INFLUENCE OF THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE CUSTOMERS OF A TOURISM AGENCY

2.1. Purpose, objectives and hypotheses of the research

The research done in order to elaborate this paper has the main purpose to measure the degree of satisfaction of the customers of a tourism agency from Iaşi, concerning the quality of tourist services and products offered.

The objectives are as follows: the study of the related bibliography; obtaining the necessary data, by realising a market study using as instrument of collecting the data the questionnaire applied to the customers of Tourism Agency X (from reasons of confidentiality, the authors recommend encoding the name of the tourism agency); the analysis concerning the attitude of the customers of Tourism Agency X towards the tourist services and products offered and their quality, as well as the ambiance; realisation of a correlation of a connection between the customers who asked the services of Tourism Agency X, and their satisfaction concerning the products acquired.

For the present research we formulated the following scientific hypotheses:

H1. *The customers' behaviour is positively influenced by the high quality of tourist services and products.*

H2. *The customers' behaviour is positively influenced by the employees' professionalism and by the ambiance within the Tourism Agency X.*

H3. *There are significant differences between the behaviour of the customers with high social status, and of the ones with low social status.*

H4. *There are differences of gender in what concerns the customers' behaviour: the female subjects express higher levels of behavioural satisfaction towards the quality of tourist products and services as compared with male subjects.*

2.2. Presenting the variables

There are 5 variables used in this research: 4 independent variables, and 1 dependent variable. The first independent variable, *quality of services and of products*, is defined as a positive characteristic of a product or service by which it differs from the others of the class it belongs to. The second independent variable, *elements characteristic to the tourism agency*, is the one represented by the level of quality of the service realised by the employees of the agency, i.e. the real service offered, and it is regarded as a degree of subjective reflection of the ambiance of the tourism agency. The third variable is *the subjects' occupation,* which is divided in two categories: subjects with high social status, and subjects with low social status. The last independent variable is *the subjects' gender.* The dependent variable, which is measured in this research, is given by *the degree of positive behaviour expressed by the subjects.*

The experimental plan has the following aspect:

	High quality of services				Low quality of services			
	High social status		Low social status		High social status		Low social status	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Positive factors of the agency								
Negative factors of the agency								

M (masculine), F (feminine)

In order to test the hypotheses of the two independent variables (*quality of tourist services and products, and the factors related to the tourism agency*), they were distributed on categories, according to the levels of each variable: for the variable *quality of tourist services and products* the categories of low and high quality were formed, and for the variable *factors related to the tourism agency* the categories of positive factors and negative factors were established.

2.3. Instruments and methods used

In the realisation of the research, in order to check the hypotheses, we used standardised instruments applied by the method of the enquiry based on questionnaire.

The standardised instruments used were: *the questionnaire of the behaviour towards tourist services and products* (Part I). The questionnaire contains 14 items with answer variants from 1 to 6, where "1 = not true at all" and "6 = very true".

The total score is obtained by adding the subjects' answers to each item as it follows: *the maximum score at this questionnaire is 84*, bigger scores are obtained by the subjects who consider that the quality of tourist products and services has positive effects on them in what concerns the closeness of the tourism agency, the tourist offer developing their sensitivity and attention towards the products of the agency; *the minimum score at this questionnaire is 14*, the subjects who obtain low scores consider that the tourist products do not have positive effects on them.

In order to evaluate the quality of tourist products and services**,** we made *the questionnaire of the quality of tourist products and services* (Part II). The questionnaire contains 16 items with answer variants from 1 to 4, where "1 = not true at all" and "4 = very true". The questionnaire is structured on two dimensions: *quality of services and products and attitude towards the tourism agency* as it follows: the dimension *quality of tourist services and products* contains 11 items, which are 1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16. The total score is obtained by adding the subjects' answers to each item. The maximum score for this dimension is 44; big scores are obtained by subjects who appreciate the offer of the agency, who are interested in new products, and who enjoy the places visited and the activity of those who provide tourist services, etc. The minimum score for this dimension is 11; low scores are obtained by subjects who do not consider that the offer of the agency is the best, who are not attracted by the services offered; the dimension *attitude towards the tourism agency* contains 5 items, which are: 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8. The total score is obtained by adding the subjects' answers to each item. The maximum score for this dimension is 20; big scores are obtained by persons who claim that they feel well in the tourism agency, they share to the others their positive feelings towards the tourism agency, they ask for the tourist advice offered by the tourism agents, they consider that tourism agents are competent and prove professionalism, that they promptly answer the customers' needs, considering that the tourist agent succeeded to get close to them (if he/she is close, he/she becomes a good adviser and adopts an understanding attitude). The minimum score for this dimension is 5; low scores are obtained by persons who do not have a positive attitude towards the ambiance of the agency, who do not feel well around the tourist agents, who consider that they lack the competence and the closeness towards the customer, and the tourist agent does not succeed to get closer to them by an understanding and advising attitude when (and if) it is the case.

2.4. Development of the research

The questionnaires, which are 50, were applied in different periods of the year 2010, as it follows: after the winter holiday (16th, 19th, 22nd, 26th of January); before Easter holiday (13th, 17th, 25th, 26th of March); after the Easter holiday (10th, 15th, 23rd, 29th, 30th of April);

Some of the questionnaires were also filled within the University Department of Economy and Business Administration by professors and students, customers of this agency.

The questionnaires were offered to the subjects by presenting first the grading system and then questions where the answer variants were not distributed on a scale from 1 to 6 for the questionnaire of *the behaviour manifested towards tourist services and products* (Part I), and for *the questionnaire of the quality of tourist products and services* (Part II), the answer variants were presented by a scale from 1 to 4.

The subjects circled the number corresponding to their answer, and wrote at the end of the questionnaires their age, gender and occupation. The answers to the questionnaires were introduced in the SPSS data base, they were analysed and interpreted.

2.5. Results obtained

In order to test the hypotheses, the two independent variables (quality of products and services and attitude towards the agency) were distributed on categories, according to the levels of each variable: for the variable *quality of products and services,* the categories low quality and high quality were formed (mean value = 38.00), and for the variable *attitude towards the agency* the categories positive attitude and negative attitude were established (mean value = 16.00).

H1: *The customers' behaviour is positively influenced by the high quality of tourist services and products.*

Table 1 - The relation between the quality of services and customers' behaviour

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: comptot					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	363.594a	1	363.594	5.887	.019
Intercept	202323.594	1	202323.594	3.276E3	.000
Quality category	363.594	1	363.594	5.887	.019
Error	2964.406	48	61.758		
Total	205576.000	50			
Corrected Total	3328.000	49			
a. R Squared = .109 (Adjusted R Squared = .091)					

The results obtained indicate an F = 5.887 and a *p* = 0.019, which is significant. This indicates that the subjects belonging to the group with the opinion of a high quality of services and products have higher purchase behaviour, and those from the group considering the quality of tourist services and products as being low have lower purchase behaviour. With the help of these results, we can conclude that the hypothesis is confirmed, because *p* has a lower value than 0.05.

H2. *The customers' behaviour is positively influenced by the employees' professionalism and by the ambiance within the Tourism Agency X.*

Table 2 - The relationship between the attitude towards the agency and the customers' behaviour.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: comptot					
Source	*Type III Sum of Squares*	*df*	*Mean Square*	*F*	*Sig.*
Corrected Model	491.302[a]	1	491.302	8.313	.006
Intercept	201717.782	1	201717.782	3.413E3	.000
Attitude category	491.302	1	491.302	8.313	.006
Error	2836.698	48	59.098		
Total	205576.000	50			
Corrected Total	3328.000	49			
a. R Squared = .148 (Adjusted R Squared = .130)					

The results obtained indicate an $F = 8.313$ and a $p = 0.006$, $p < 0.05$, which is significant. Therefore, it appears a main effect of the variable factors related to the tourism agency. More precisely, there are significant differences in what concerns the level of customers' behaviour.

H3. *There are significant differences between the behaviour of the customers with high social status, and of the ones with low social status.*

Group Statistics					
	status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
comptot	high	26	62.19	8.139	1.596
	low	24	65.12	8.248	1.684

Table 3 - Differences between the levels of social status and customers' behaviour

Independent Samples Test		*Levene's Test for Equality of Variances*		*t-test for Equality of Means*					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
comptot	Equal variances assumed	.371	.545	-1.265	48	.212	-2.933	2.319	-7.595	1.729
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.264	47.570	.212	-2.933	2.320	-7.598	1.733

There are no significant differences, because $F = 0.371$ and $p = 0.545$, so the hypothesis is not confirmed, and we can state that there are not significant differences between the behaviour of the customers with *high social status* **and** the ones with *low social status*.

H4. *There are differences of gender in what concerns the customers' behaviour: the female subjects express higher levels of behavioural satisfaction towards the quality of tourist products and services as compared with male subjects.*

Group Statistics					
	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
comptot	masculine	25	63.56	8.977	1.795
	feminine	25	63.64	7.621	1.524

Table 4 - Differences of gender in what concerns the subjects' behaviour

Independent Samples Test		*Levene's Test for Equality of Variances*		*t-test for Equality of Means*					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
comptot	Equal variances assumed	.212	.647	-.034	48	.973	-.080	2.355	-4.815	4.655
	Equal variances not assumed			-.034	46.767	.973	-.080	2.355	-4.818	4.658

With an $F = 0.212$ and $p = 0.647$, the hypothesis in not confirmed, which means that between the male subjects and the female subjects there are no differences of *gender* in what concerns the customers' behaviour, that female subjects do not express higher levels of behavioural satisfaction towards the quality of products and services as compared to male subjects.

2.6. Interpretation of results

From the 4 hypotheses stated, two were confirmed completely, and the other two were infirmed. The main reasons why the other two hypotheses were not confirmed consist in the fact that the subjects manifested the tendency to show off, for their prestige, and the dishonesty of some of the answers, the ignorance of some of the subjects, the error of mutual opinion, as well as the small dimension of the experimental group.

Some subjects had the tendency to avoid the answers corresponding to their beliefs, and to offer answers which could determine a favourable opinion about themselves. This distortion is frequently included by the methodology in the category of "subject's errors", because we noticed that in most of the cases, the reaction is generated by characteristics of the subject's personality.

Consequently, the tendency of showing off appears when the subjects are not honest when answering the questions of the questionnaire, when they offer answers which do not reflect their own beliefs, principles and values, when they have the tendency to avoid the answers corresponding to their beliefs only to create a good opinion about themselves, to determine a positive evaluation, to situate themselves in a situation of appreciation.

No doubt, the subjects who are more or less conscious can introduce a series of distortions of the truth in order to reach their objective. Such distortions appear especially when they need to introduce specific data in their answers, as the ones referring to certain behaviours, to certain reactions they had, etc.

Though the subjects were told that the answers were confidential, and that they were used only for statistic purposes, being asked at the same time to mention only their age, gender and occupation, without giving their names, they still made such distortions, from fear of lack of confidentiality of the data, from the growing importance of the personal image.

Though they were told there were no good answers or bad answers, adequate or inadequate answers, the subjects masked their personal position behind a common one, shared by the persons from their entourage, from fear not to make mistakes and not to attract negative evaluations, or from fear of invasion of their "bubble". Consequently, the subjects felt protected from possible critics or stigmatisations. They preferred to hide their own thoughts and beliefs in order not to be underestimated.

Another reason why the hypotheses were not confirmed was that the experimental group was reduced to 50 subjects, the main reason being the difficulty to find a big number of persons available to answer the questionnaires in a single tourism agency.

CONCLUSIONS

The social mission of *Tourism Agency X* from Iaşi consists in satisfying the necessities of the tourist market, where the market is the convergence between demand and offer. The intermediate position of a tourism agency between travel consumers, on one hand, and destinations and providers, on the other hand, allows the offering of interesting and diverse services to its customers. In order to accomplish correctly, in both directions, this social mission, *Tourism Agency X* should count on an adequate administrative, technical, commercial and financial structure, which could allow an efficient development. A tourism agency should be more than a tourism seller. Qualified personnel are needed, with a special attention to details, and with a high level of training in order to keep the customers happy, and to determine them to come back.

There is no doubt that present day tourists have more options than ever, from tourist destinations, tourist packages and their price, to reservation methods and itineraries chosen. This is why one of the most important decisions of a tourist is the choice of the tourism agent or agency.

As a result of this research, we can state that Tourism Agency X from Iaşi has customers happy with the tourist products offered and with the services provided.

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