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SERVICES QUALITY AS A FACTOR FOR BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN EXPECTED AND PERCEIVED SERVICES IN AGENCY BUSINESS

KVALITET USLUGA KAO FAKTOR PREVAZILAŽENJA JAZA IZMEĐU OČEKIVANE I PERCIPIRANE USLUGE U AGENCIJSKOM POSLOVANJU

Abstract: *The paper is based on the assumption that quality service is a factor in achieving competitive advantage and positioning on the tourist market of agency business, and that quality is achieved through a series of relationships in the tourist-employee relationship. If the employee treats the tourist with respect, provides accurate and reliable information and exceeds the tourist's expectations with the service provided, he will get a loyal guest who will, based on the "word of mouth" system, spread positive experiences to the others, so they will also become clients of the agency. If we look at tourism as a "factory" of experiences, it is clear that for an extremely positive experience, it is necessary that every link in the series of providing a complex tourist service is of high quality. The first in a series of links is certainly the tourist agency. The modified SERVQUAL model led to the conclusion that tourists who traveled with the Asturs agency received adequate "value for money", that is, that the service provided by the agency was of better quality than expected.*

Keywords: agency business, quality, service, SERVQUAL model

Apstrakt: *u radu se krenulo od pretpostavke da je kvalitetna usluga faktor ostvarivanja konkurentske prednosti i pozicioniranja na turističkom tržištu agencijskog poslovanja, a da se kvalitet ostvaruje nizom odnosa u relaciji turista-zaposleni. Ukoliko se zaposleni prema turistu odnosi sa poštovanjem, pruža tačne i pouzdane informacije i pruženom uslugom premaši očekivanja turista, dobiće lojalnog gosta koji će po sistemu "word of mouth", širiti pozitivna iskustva drugima, koji će takođe postati putnici agencije. Ako turizam posmatramo kao "fabriku" doživljaja, jasno je da je za krajnje pozitivno iskustvo, potrebno da svaka karika u nizu pružanja kompleksne turističke usluge bude, kvalitetna. Prva u nizu karika jeste svakako turistička agencija. Modifikovanim SERVQUAL modelom došlo se do zaključka da su turisti koji su putovali agencijom Asturs, dobili adekvatnu "vrednost za novac", odnosno, da je usluga pružena u agenciji bila kvalitetnija od očekivane.*

Ključne reči: agencijsko poslovanje, kvalitet, usluga, SERVQUAL model

Introduction

Frenzel (2017) believes that the need for movement, initiated by external motives, directly influenced the creation and development of travel agencies. People were looking for a “safe” way to get the necessary information about tourist destinations, and they found it in the intermediary and organizational way of doing business that is characteristic of this type of tourist organizations (MacCannell, 2001). Travel agencies remained places to visit even when you know where you are traveling to and even when you know which hotel you are going to stay in (Getty, Thompson, 1994). Despite the fact that we live in the era of the Internet and the availability of a lot of information, the free purchase of airline tickets, accommodation reservations and the like, the role of tourist agents in agencies is more pronounced than ever (McCabe, 2005).

Even after collecting all the necessary information, a tourist wants the final confirmation of whether he made a good choice, whether the destination is safe for travel, etc., and there remain numerous questions to which he has not found a concrete answer: how to get to hotel safely, how to move around the city he chose for his vacation, whether he can reserve museum tickets in advance and the like (McCabe, 2005). That is why the role of a tourist agent who does direct sales (working with customers) is still extremely important, in order to provide reliable information but also to give answers to numerous “impossible questions” (Ateljevic, Doorne, 2000). Tourists want to feel that security and to be “confident” in order to make the final decision. Tourists come to the agency with already created ideas about their trips, they have their own vision of the destination itself, what they will experience there. If the trip is disappointing, the tourist will very often blame the agent who sold him the service (Blazquez-Resino, 2013).

That is why it is very important that in the business organization there is an attitude “not to sell a service just for the sake of profit”, but sales must have the ultimate

goal - a satisfied client (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). A tourist service is “imaginary” until the moment it is experienced (Wang, 1999). That is why it is of great importance to present to the client all the positive and negative sides of the desired trip in order to create a realistic picture of what he can expect and whether it meets his expectations (Cabiddu et al., 2013).

The subject of the work is the work of the travel agency Asturs, which in its work is guided by the following principles: providing accurate and truthful information to clients is of essential importance for business and that only a satisfied client is the one that will become loyal. The work was conceived such that, from tourists, was wanted to be obtained feedback from answers on a group of questions before and after the trip, with the aim of achieving a better quality tourist service in the travel agency. The data were processed using the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, 1988). The paper started from the initial hypothesis that quality service is a factor in achieving competitive advantage and positioning on the tourist market of agency business, and that quality is achieved through accuracy, meticulousness, reliability and safety. Tourists were expected to answer the following questions: did they feel comfortable when they entered the agency; were the employees pleasant; whether the employees listened to the demands and wishes of the passengers; whether they received adequate offers; did they get what they expected on their trip; whether the information from the employees was correct; whether the employees reacted quickly to solve the problem; whether the agency together with the employees met their expectations; did they get more than their expectations from the trip.

It was concluded that the gap between the expected and perceived service received in the travel agency is positive, that is, that the agency exceeded the expectations of travelers. The service in the agency and the way of doing business are responsible and sustainable, which indicates a high degree of reco-

gnition on the market. The tourist gets quality service, and the travel agency gets a loyal client who is always happy to return to it.

Methodology

The research was conducted in 2023 among 368 tourists (225 women and 143 men) who traveled with the travel agency Asturs to: Vienna, Rome, Venice, Malta and Prague. The trips were: individual - packages of air transport and hotel accommodation. Trips are individual, created according to the desired dates of travelers as city break trips (2-4 nights), without a guide. Before the start of the trip, each passenger received an itinerary by mail and in printed form, which contains: how to get to the hotel, the exact name of the transport, which line number, where to buy transport tickets and the transport price; the contact of the transfer driver if that service has been paid for; where and how to buy internet cards; recommendations of the main sights and attractions according to expressed wishes when creating and buying a trip; public transport map, which lines to use to the main points, taxi / uber transport prices; ticket prices of museums and locality; on request advance purchase by the agency before the trip; organization of local guides for private tours / upon request; contact numbers of the hotel accommodation as well as the sales agent on duty for additional information while staying at the destination

The SERVQUAL model, which is used in practice to measure the quality of services, was created as a result of research conducted in companies of the service sector (banking, telecommunications, insurance companies and repair and maintenance of appliances), and was designed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). The SERVQUAL model is based on the “expected quality minus perceived quality” algorithm. The determinants of service quality, such as: tangibility, reliability, security, responsibility and compassion, the original SERVQUAL model measures with a 22 attributes. When it comes to researching service quality in the tourism and hospitality sector, most authors modify the

SERVQUAL model. The questionnaire constructed for research purposes is based on the modified SERVQUAL model, and consists of two parts. The first part of the questionnaire was constructed to measure the perception of tourists, i.e. the quality of the service experienced in the agency through which they traveled, as well as the services provided to them in the tourist destinations of Vienna, Rome, Venice, Malta and of Prague, and it consisted of 3 dimensions of quality taken from the original SERVQUAL model (tangibility, reliability, responsibility), contained in 9 questions (Table 1).

The questions from the first part are formulated as follows: instead of in the form: “should”, the questions are asked in the form: “are”, “has” and the like. The second part related to the expectations of the guests, and also, as in the first part, the modified model consisted of 9 questions.

The questions from the second part are formulated as follows: instead of in the form of “are”, “has” and the like, the questions are asked in the form of “should”. So, in that way, the respondents expressed their impressions about the quality of the services provided in the agency and at the destinations in two ways, going from expected to perceived (experienced) relations. Unlike the original questionnaire which has 22 items (Parasuraman et al., 1985) all dimensions of quality (tangibility, reliability, responsibility) had 3 questions each. A five-stage scale was used, which evaluated the attitudes in the range: 1 (completely disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (don't know), 4 (agree) and 5 (completely agree).

Results and discussion

The research was conducted in the tourist agency “Asturs” from Niš. The agency started its business as an intermediary - they sold package arrangements of renowned tour operators. They worked for a commission under the contract. Their travel sales agents dedicated their time to clients, presented offers and found the best options based on requests.

The experience of working directly with clients was of great importance for their pro-



Table 1. Modified SERVQUAL model with questions for researching perceived service quality

	Question scale: PERCEPTION
Tangibility	The interior of the agency we traveled through is visually attractive (arrangement of rooms, appearance of devices and equipment, decorations)
	Prospectuses, brochures, internet presentation of the agency are visually appealing
	The employees of the agency are provided all the necessary information about tourist attractions and destinations
	Question scale: EXPECTATIONS
	The interior of the agency we traveled through should be visually attractive (arrangement of rooms, appearance of devices and equipment, decorations)
	Prospectuses, brochures, internet presentation of the agency should be visually attractive.
	Employees of the agency should provide all necessary information about tourist attractions and information about destinations
	Question scale: PERCEPTION
Reliability	Agency employees provide service in the promised time
	Agency employees show understanding for guests' problems
	Agency employees provide agreed services from the first meeting onwards
	Question scale: EXPECTATIONS
	Agency employees should provide service within the promised time
	Agency employees should show understanding for guests' problems
	Agency employees should provide the agreed services from the first meeting onwards
	Question scale: PERCEPTION
Responsibility	The employees of the agency did fulfill their promises and everything they said turned out to be true
	The employees of the agency are approachable and always ready to answer questions
	Employees respond quickly and without delay to guests' requests
	Question scale: EXPECTATIONS
	Agency employees should keep their promises and everything they say must be true
	Agency employees should be approachable and always ready to answer guests' questions
	Employees should respond quickly and without delay to guests' requests

Source: Autor's research

professional development and gave them the opportunity to feel the change in demand. Clients were increasingly looking for trips - city break trips. Short trips by plane with a maximum of 4 nights, cheaper flights of existing low cost companies and at times that suit them, on weekends or when they could get days off. The agency tried to present this new demand to its fellow tour operators and was literally put a new product in their hands - a package of air transportation and hotels for European cities without a guide, with the desired dates without a group. Busy with the

distribution of their package arrangements, they were not interested in such "small arrangements". That's why the employees of the Asturs agency decided to "break the package deals" and start selling individual services: airline tickets and hotel accommodation. At the client's request, they "chased" low prices for airline tickets and booked hotels. They created a special itinerary for each client. That's how they worked for 6 months – till the deadline they gave themselves to feel if this service product has a big enough demand in order to have a financial basis for ta-

king a license. Sales exploded, word quickly spread about them, calls started coming in, the agency was full of clients who were happy to be able to visit cities and countries for very little money. After the trip, those clients recommended the agency to their friends. E-mails of gratitude for a well-organized trip was arrived, passengers reported that they felt safe at the destination, that they were not in a panic about how they would manage. They sent pictures from the trip that the agency used for advertising purposes. After a trial period with very positive feedback from clients, they took the license because they no longer wanted to depend on the good will of the tour operator to send them offers for hotel accommodation.

The Asturs agency specializes in city break trips to European cities. They sent their sales agents on trips, to get a feel for those cities, to find additional points of interest in order to show their clients what else they can visit. They made a choice of destinations where they “know the terrain well” without wanting to rush into the unknown places, such as the Maldives, Bali. They simply assessed what they know best and stand behind their offer together with foreign partners - hotels they booked for clients, transfer agents, local guides. The Covid-19 period was not easy for them. It took a lot of strength and time, almost two years, to recover all the payments they made for their clients and return them to the clients. They chose to get a refund for all airline tickets, and they returned the money from bookings for hotels that went bankrupt due to the corona, from their own funds because they knew that they would need the loyalty of those customers when it was all over. They continued their work with the same zeal.

As far as clients are concerned, and at the same time respondents who participated in the research, tourists are divided into two groups. Group 1: people aged 25-35 who have enough disposable income to provide for travel, mainly have online jobs and therefore they can work outside their country, they are not yet family people (without children),

people who did not want to spend their time to search for cheap airline tickets and hotels and of course in a technical sense are without fear of not being able to find their way to the destination, available internet or Google maps. Group 2: people aged 45-65 which have sufficient disposable income and their children are old enough to devote time to themselves and are without fear of technical innovations. Those who are used to classic package tours asked for the organization of a transfer from the airport to the hotel, but canceled that for the return trip because they got rid of their fear, enjoyed all the information they received from the sales agents and planned the future trips.

The agency very quickly realized who belonged to its target groups and thus created its offers and educated sales agents in order to provide targeted packages to potential clients. They understood the importance of social networks for promoting content and marketing offers. Through the IG profile they reached group no. 1 and through FB to clients from group 2.

Passengers were surveyed at two points. First, when they arrived at the agency, and then by phone, after the trip. A final conclusion was reached after their answers were summarized.

A look at table 2 gives the results of the researched model. The total SERVQUAL gap is in the positive interval of +0.360, which indicates that tourists who traveled with the Asturs travel agency were positively surprised by the quality of the service, that is, that the service exceeded their expectations. All this confirmed the initial hypothesis that quality service is a factor in achieving competitive advantage and positioning in the tourist market of agency business, and that quality is achieved through accuracy, meticulousness, reliability and security.

The determinant – tangibility: The results of the analysis show that before arriving at the agency, travelers did not have high expectations of what they would see and receive from the employees, but their perception shows that they saw and received



Table 2. Results of the gap between perceived and expected service quality

Perception			Expectation		
Quality determinants	Arithmetic mean of quality determinants for perception M1	Rank	Arithmetic mean of quality determinants for expectation M2	Rank	SERVQUAL gap = M1 – M2
Tangibility	4.650	2	4.130	3	0.520
Reliability	4.500	3	4.340	1	0.160
Liability	4.680	1	4.260	2	0.420
Total SERVQUAL gap	4.610		4.243		0,360

Source: Autor's research

more than expected. In the conversation with them, we came to the conclusion that they were expecting insufficiently lit ambience, vague internet presentations and outdated brochures from previous trade fairs, but in reality they were greeted by desks with comfortable armchairs while waiting to talk with a free sales agents, mobile monitors that allowed them to follow everything the agent recommends, pleasant light and what is the most important, the sales agents provided them with all the necessary information they were looking for about the destination and accommodation and cleared all their doubts about choosing a trip. What was of great importance to them was that sale agents pointed out the positive and negative sides of the destination and recommended suitable offers based on their experience.

The determinant – reliability: As shown in table 2, we also have a positive gap with this determinant, but the numbers show that expectations are higher compared to expectations with the tangibility determinant, which is understandable because they expect the reliability of an agency they trust. Tourists' expectations were that they would have to wait longer for a sales agent to attend to them, that the sales agent would not listen to all their requests, fears and concerns about safety at the destination, accommodation in the hotel, the connection of their destinations with the airport, that exactly the requested service will not be booked at the hotel as and the type of baggage for the plane.

On the other hand, the resulting perceptions are a reflection of what they received in the agency: they were offered juice and coffee while waiting, with an apology for having to wait while sales agents served previous clients; sales agents have carefully listened to all of clients questions and concerns about the trip and gave them an answers with recommendations what is better for them and then immediately showed the type of room, the type of beds on the monitor and reserved those rooms. They also suggested what type of luggage to buy in relation to price and comfort, taking care to stay within the budget but not at the expense of the comfort of their passengers.

The determinant – responsibility: The agency is aware that when selling packages, they must provide accurate and precise information, to reserve for their passengers exactly what they offered. By going to the destination, the traveler who received "false" promises and assurances feels cheated. That is why it is essential to pay special attention to which hotels to cooperate with. Of course, unforeseen problems can always happen, but that's why the quick reaction of the sales agents on duty is very important so that the traveler at the destination feels safe and has the knowledge that he is not left to solve the problem on his own. That's why the results for the determinant of responsibility after perception - completed services are at a high level, because the responsibility of the agency is very important to travelers. The expe-

ctations that travelers have from the agency are that: agents must be approachable, give accurate information and most importantly, react very quickly to solve problems. The perception of the lived experience showed that passengers were delighted with the way their problems were solved. In the conversation with the passengers, there was information about what kind of problems they encountered. In the first example, the hotel in Malta did not have water (it is a technical problem that cannot be solved quickly) - the sales agents, in 30 minutes, booked another hotel of a higher category and accommodated the passengers. In another example, the hotel made a mistake with entering the number of rooms - upon the quick reaction of the agent, the travelers were provided with a room in another hotel from the same chain. In the third example, there was a sudden family problem and urgent return from the destination - new plane tickets were provided. All these are stressful situations for travelers who are in the unknown city and do not speak foreign languages well. But, if they have a contact agent who they can actually turn to for emergencies even during the night, they feel assurance that they are not left and that the sale of arrangements was not just another number in the agency's books. This makes them loyal passengers, and provides the agency with a reputation as a successful agency that cares about its passengers.

Conclusion

For the successful operation of a travel agency that will have satisfied and loyal clients, it is necessary to invest in: employee education in terms of good knowledge of destinations, hotel accommodation and the infrastructure of that destination (Cary, 2004); that there is a good psychological evaluation of each tourist, in order to recommend an adequate offer to him and of course, that this would ultimately result in the satisfaction of the tourist at the destination and upon returning to the home place (Cohen, Cohen, 2012). Gone are the days of sitting in agencies and waiting for clients to come in for brochures, as well as

relying only on "loyal clients" who have already traveled with certain agencies. The informative role of the travel agency is now more than important and expressed. Although many were afraid that it would become just a place that gives advice and does not sell, in practice it has been confirmed that this is not the case. Giving "value for money" is what the customer feels (Frisvoll, 2013). If a travel agent devotes himself sufficiently to each client and with all the necessary information are provided, clients will develop trust (Leiper, 1990). Trust equals successful business.

To survive in today's tourism market, a travel agency must follow technological innovations and trends (Burgold, Rolfes 2013). One of the biggest changes is happening in the field of social networks (Magaš, Basan, 2007). In order to "be in trend" and animate their niche of travelers (group 1), the agency has invested in education in that field: recording of video material, editing, posting on social networks, addressing and attracting its niche with interesting stories and with attractive posts. To create this content, it uses materials from the trips of its sales agents and many videos of satisfied travelers. All this resulted in a positive result when it comes to travelers' perceptions, and for business in the sphere of travel agencies and tour operators, there is nothing more important than a satisfied tourist (Tremblay, 1998).

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