

QUALITY OF SERVICES AND THE ROLE OF SPECIALIZED STAFF IN TRAVEL AGENCIES' BUSINESS

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Abstract: The globalization of the world market, development of information technologies and their application in tourism companies have influenced the emergence of competition, and thus the placement of goods and services. Competition on the global tourism market is based on a new form of competition, related to the quality of service. For this reason, quality improvement is a priority for all tourism companies, and the quality of service, as a critical indicator of future economic activity, is essential for keeping consumer. The business of tourist companies, especially travel agencies, in the modern tourist market, is characterized by numerous and complex business operations. Successful business implementation depends on the complex staff structure, which contributes to the quality of services. Tourism human resources have a direct contact with consumers, i.e. tourists. The paper relates to the category of specialized tourist staff (tourist guides), as the last in the chain of tourist services sales.

Key words: tourism, quality of services, human resources in tourism, travel agencies

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the service sector of the economy, which is in continuous expansion, takes significant place in the development of the world economy. In the last two centuries, the service sector has influenced the growth of global economic, employment increasing, foreign exchange income and the improvement of the balance of payments of most economically developed countries [1, 2]. The service sector participates with about 70% in the gross national income of the world economy, with a constantly present increasing trend in the absorption of the working population [3]. Economically developed countries have a high percentage of employees in the service industry, which is one of the indicators of the level of economic development. Of all the activities of the service sector, tourism, and real need and necessity of modern mankind, is a complex phenomenon [4] and rapidly growing segment of the economy. The development of the tourism industry in the XXI century has led to the emergence of a new kind of global market - "tourism market", which represents the ratio of offer and demand, which is established in a certain area in a certain time, in order to exchange goods and services [5]. The basic elements of every tourist market are: demand, offer, object of exchange and price.

In the modern tourism market, there are many tourism and catering companies, whose business is based on the quality of services provided, i.e. the satisfaction of consumers and their retention as permanent and faithful users of services. Modern trends in tourism indicate that quality has become a basic precondition and an important means of successful business, achieving competitive advantage, and survival on the market [3, 6]. Competitiveness on the market is one of the most important strategic priorities of carriers of the tourist offers or "tourist business systems" [4], in order to achieve the highest quality of the offer, i.e. the quality of products and services. This means that in the 21st century quality is a manner of businesses/commerce of the carriers of the tourist offers, and the quality of service aims to satisfy and meet the requirements, wishes and expectations of consumers, i.e. potential tourists. It represents the key to retaining existing and attracting new tourists [6].

2. THE TERM OF SERVICE QUALITY IN TOURISM

The concept of quality has been known in scientific circles from long ago and is one of the most controversial concepts of today. It is often associated with perfection, sophistication, elegance, and sometimes luxury [2]. Approach to the concept of quality over time evolved and changed. During the XXI century, it influenced the world economic exchange and business/commerce, and in the 21st century it represents the business policy of modern economic tourism entities, which is achieved by respecting the general principles, principles and standards of quality, as well as the system of total quality management (TQM) [7]. Today there are many definitions and new paradigms of the concept of quality. Multi-disciplinary concept of quality, on which numerous orientations to quality approaches have been developed is linked to

the last decades of previous and the beginning of this century [4]. Modern approaches to the concept of quality are based on two orientations: 'eastern or Japanese' and 'western or American'. Defining the concept of quality has not been concretized. The word 'quality' is in everyday use, but it is not clear what exactly it implies. The word 'quality' comes from the Latin word 'qualitas', which means quality, feature, trait, or characteristic value. It can be concluded that the concept of quality has very wide meaning, and that itself suggests to 'something good and positive' [3]. On one hand, quality is usually defined as a set of features or services that have the ability to satisfy expressed and implied needs, and from another aspect quality means production and provision of services that fully satisfy the requirements, wishes and expectations of consumers [6].

Until the 80s of 20th century, managers tied the quality to the finished products and production processes. Production activities are related to tangible products, but services are related to intangible products. In the theory of marketing the product is considered as the sum of certain components (services, packaging, individual product, product line, production mix) [4, 5]. The dynamic and intensive development of the tourism industry at the beginning of the 21st century has turned attention to the tourism product, the quality of its intangible elements, but also on satisfaction of consumers as a key element of loyalty. According to the Law on Tourism of the Republic of Serbia, a tourism product is defined as 'a set of interdependent elements organized in practice as a separate value chain that consists of material goods and services, natural values and cultural assets, tourist attractions, tourism suprastructure and tourism infrastructure' [8]. Under tourism products the latest standards for quality include 'a combination of physical products and services'. The service is usually a combination of material, non-material and interpersonal relationships [9]. According to their characteristics, services differ from material products. Services can not be registered by senses, so we are talking about the intangibility, heterogeneity, simultaneity (inseparability), the perishability (untenable) and the inability to own the service in the marketing of tourist products.

The market of services is very competitive and is related to the realization of consumer income, which has led to the creation of a process of competitiveness based on quality service, whereby it has become an important element of overall development [9]. The quality of the service can be defined in two ways, from the aspect of service providers or service users. For the management of business entities in tourism, the perception of service users in assessing its quality of it is very important, because there is not only one type of service user. Has the quality of service been achieved; whether the satisfaction of the consumer has been achieved; how consumers perceive the quality of the services they use are questions on which managers of the carriers of tourism offer can get responses through interactive communication with consumers and through market research. Knowing the needs of consumers, their habits, social environment they come from, lifestyle, living standard, etc. are very important factors for the management of business entities in tourism with the aim to identify loyal consumers and consumers in general, because the ultimate outcome is raising service quality to higher level [10].

The concept of such designed services should increase the volume of sales, increase the number of consumers, customer satisfaction, increase customer retention, word of mouth, reduce employee fluctuation, reduce operating costs, increase market share, increase profitability and improve business. The main goal of each TPS on the tourism market is to achieve image, its recognition and sustainability.

3. AWARDS FOR QUALITY SERVICE IN TOURISM

The Total quality management system (TQM) is widely present in tourism practice. In establishing the system of TQM and its successful management, quality standards are of great importance [18]. Reaching of a certain level of quality standards is achieved by the application of certain standards or regulations that give instructions on achieving a certain characteristic of a tourist product [17]. TQM aims to provide the managers the goal of achieving the quality of an integrated tourism product in a way that suits consumers. In achieving this goal, the companies that are awarded for the achieved success and quality of business are distinguished.

Today, there is a great number of quality awards that have been established in the world. The best known are Malcom Baldrige (Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award - MBNQA) in the United States, the European Foundation for Quality Management (European Foundation of Quality Management - EFQM), the Deming Prize in Japan, the Duran Prize in Australia and others. Quality Award (Business Excellence) is designed on the model of EFQM and is awarded annually. It is known as the 'Oscar of Quality'. The award was established by the magazine 'Quality' in 1995, with support of the Ministry of Science and Technology of the Republic of Serbia, the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and other relevant institutions and associations. No industry entity from Serbia in the field of tourism and hospitality has applied for this prestigious award so far.

Besides the Oscars Quality Award, following awards are present in the Republic of Serbia: 'Success Gate', 'Tourist Flower', 'Belgrade Quality', 'YUTA Quality Plus' and 'Tourist Prism'. The 'Success Gate' award was awarded by the Chamber of Commerce of Vojvodina since 2000 with the aim of encouraging and promoting services in the catering and tourist industry of Vojvodina [3]. The prize is awarded for the best quality service in the following categories: categorized accommodation, restaurants, travel agencies and since 2008 for uncategorized facilities. Second-placed candidates receive the 'Poster for Quality' award. The prize is awarded every second year, at the end of December. First and second placed prize winners can not twice consecutively obtain the prize. So far, this prestigious award has been received by the following companies from the territory of Vojvodina: 'Villa Breg' - Vršac, 'Elite - Palić', restaurant

‘Majur’ - Kelebija, ‘Majkin salaš’ - Palić, ‘Salas 137’ - Čenej. The poster for quality so far has been delivered to: Aleksandar Hotel - Novi Sad, ‘Vila Milorad’ - Palić, ‘Family Pension’ - Kanjiža and ‘Cvejin salašu’ - Begeč.

The Tourist Flower Award is awarded by the Tourist Organization of Serbia (TOS) for significant achievements in the field of tourism, but also for contribution to development, improvement and promotion. There is a wide range of categories for the award of this prize. The winners include: tourism organizations, special events, restaurants, rural tourist households, wineries, travel agencies, presentation of Serbia as a tourist destination, low value souvenir, high level souvenir, innovation in tourism, arrangement of tourist ambient units, tourist guide, organizations and / or individuals for contributions to the advancement of tourism of the Republic of Serbia [3]. Proposals for awarding prizes can be submitted by legal entities and natural persons with detailed explanation. Proposals are submitted in writing to TOS. This prestigious award so far have received: Hotel ‘Aquastar’ - Kladovo, in the category of catering facility and villa ‘Djordjevic’ for the best tourist rural household.

‘Belgrade Quality’ is a prize awarded by the Belgrade Chamber of Commerce since 2002. The prize is awarded for the best achieved quality of services: hotels, restaurants and travel agencies. Award criteria, for getting the ‘Belgrade Quality’ trademark, are strictly defined for all three categories. There are three sets of criteria for hotels and restaurants, while criteria for tourism agencies are much more stringent. It is estimated: space, technical equipment, membership in international and national organizations, passenger insurance, human resources, marketing and product [2]. The best of these categories get the privilege to use the trademark ‘Belgrade quality’". In the category of hotel award was brought by Best Western Hotel "M"; in the category of the restaurant ‘Pastuv’, ‘Franche d Esperay’, ‘Dušanov grad’, ‘Peking’, ‘Tri šešira’, ‘Kalemegdanska terasa’, ‘Daka’, ‘Que Pasa’, ‘Villa club 69’, ‘Royal-Knez’, Business club ‘Jelena’, ‘Rubin’ i ‘Zvezdara theater’; in the category of tourist agency ‘Glob Metropolitan tours’ and ‘Kon Tiki’. Association of Travel Agencies - YUTA, once a year awards the ‘YUTA Quality Plus’ award. The prize is awarded to the most successful in the field of tourism, for the following categories: travel agency (tour traveler), travel arrangement, hotel (accommodation provider), carrier (service provider) and travel guide.

4. QUALITY OF SERVICES OF TRAVEL AGENCIES

The emergence of travel agencies (TA) in the economy market is linked to the middle of the 19th century. From the initial intermediary to the current organizational functions the changes in the tourism market in mid-twentieth century affected the direction of development of tourist-agency activities. The organization of complete travel trips is gaining in importance. Offer of own ‘product’ - a package of arrangements, created by combining several individual services, becomes the basic service of the travel organizer [11]. Modern trends on the side of tourism demand have led to the application of business ethics in the process of work of TA, because its implementation reduces the risk of losing their own reputation [12].

The business of TA in the modern tourism market is under conditions of very strong competition. Survival and success in business is determined by two important factors: good agency management and high quality of service [13]. The high quality of services contributes to satisfaction of travelers (tourists) and is a basic principle of marketing approach to TA business. Managing and designing the quality of services as a continuous process involves management, guidance and supervision [9]. Forming the image and recognizability of the agency on the tourism market, in addition to the above, will depend on the success of TA management to respond to the demands, desires and expectations of market segments with quality services. Continuous TA communication with the market is important for the collection of accurate, relevant and feedback [14]. Only this way new consumers can be acquired and retained by loyal ones retained. In accordance with the above, the quality of TA services should be approached in an organized, systematic and planned manner [15]. In other words, it is necessary to define the service strategy, to determine the quality standards of services and work on their improvement, through continuous education of employees, because the quality of the service depends on the interaction between the service provider and the customer [16].

For this reason, training of employees in order to achieve the quality of services should be an active process, because only by working and learning have acquired certain practical skills can be acquired, and it is necessary to improve them on daily basis. The quality of the workforce in agency business can be achieved with high standards of formal and informal education. Informal form of education means acquiring and innovating knowledge and skills through attending professional courses in order to acquire the necessary licenses required for TA business in accordance to the rules of the profession and current laws [16].

The specificity of the service as an integrated product, in TA business, includes the assessment of its constituent entities at the destination level [17]. Service users (tourists) think about quality of services before they travel, during the trip, during their stay at the destination and upon return from the destination, i.e. after using the service. The satisfaction of the tourists by the agency's service is achieved under condition that the tourist product fulfilled the user's expectations, i.e. satisfied their expressed or presumed requirements [14]. Accordingly, satisfaction with a service is based on the quality of the tour program and its performance, where the tourist guides play special role, as the last in the chain of realization of the tourist arrangement.

5. TOURIST GUIDES AND QUALITY OF SERVICE

In the realization of tourist arrangements, tourist agencies rely on the role of specialized staff in tourism: tourist guides, tourist escorts, agency representatives at the destination and animators. Without these human resource, the operation of a tour operator and travel agency, but also individual travel that is increasingly represented on the market can not be imagine today [19]. Although they have an important role in the realization of tourist arrangements and affect the quality of the tourism product, specialized staff are usually qualified seasonal workers, and a workforce that is committed to the needs of travel agencies. In contemporary business conditions, the aforementioned occupations are closely related [20]. Also, the use of the term ‘tourist guide’ and ‘tourist escort’ in practice is often misunderstood, causing some disagreements and misunderstandings. Often, a ‘tourist escort’ is said to be a ‘travel guide’, which is wrong. Practical examples indicate that ‘tour guides’ are mainly engaged in emission arrangements for cities in Europe, or in incoming receptive arrangements. Also, during the summer tourist season, ‘tour guides’ are those who perform the work of agency representatives and animators, and ‘tourist escorts’ are engaged for emotive tourist transfers or incoming tourist transfers in foreign destinations.

Of all specialized staff in tourism, the Law on Tourism of the Republic of Serbia recognizes only the ‘tourist guide’ and ‘tourist escort’. For these two professions and persons wishing to engage in this profession, the rules and procedures for acquiring and obtaining national license have been laid down by law. According to this law, the tourist guide is ‘a physical person who provides services of guidance, demonstration and expert explanation of natural, cultural, historical, archaeological, ethnographic, economic and other sights’; tourist escort is ‘a physical person who follows tourist groups and performs operational technical tasks from the beginning of the journey to the destination and back’ [8]. We can conclude that the tourist guide service belongs to the sphere of receptive tourism, and the tourist accompanying to the sphere of emitting tourism.

Tourist guides as part of the human resources engaged by the TA, should have the appropriate knowledge, skills and attributes that are important for the job [19]. Experience plays a major role in the quality of tourist guides, but the knowledge is acquired during education and the lifelong learning process. The course of training for this type of profile varies from country to country (Table 1).

Table 1: European Models of Touris Guides Training

Country	Duration of the course	Theoretical teaching	Lecture at sites	Practical work
Greece	2,5 years	1070 hours	110 hours	260 hours
Scotland	2 years	128 hours	does not have	280 hours
Austria	1,5 - 2 years	750-900 hours	does not have	has
England	1 years	200 hours	does not have	every weekend
Island	1 years	444 hours	does not have	has
Turky	7 months	240 hours	does not have	has
Romania	6 months	indefinitely	does not have	does not have
serbia	6 months	indefinitely	does not have	does not have

Source: Ćuruvija, I., Ćuruvija, M. (2017)[19]

Based on the Table 1, we can conclude that Greece has the most serious system for education of this profile. In addition to theoretical and practical work, students gain knowledge of history, archeology, history of art, geography, geology, folk creations, tourism laws, business travel agencies and hotels, consumer psychology and first aid [19]. As far as our country is concerned, the tourist guide education system is the same as it was 30 years ago. Certain changes in the way of application, in the system and the elimination circles (psychological assessment of candidates and knowledge of foreign languages), as well as the exams for both tourist guides and the tourist escort are made. The essence is that the candidate independently prepares the theory for the exam, based on the literature obtained. The acquisition of practical knowledge, i.e. management techniques necessary for this complex and responsible job is what is lacking in the preparation of candidates for taking the exams. Therefore, a logical question arises: What quality of knowledge they have after they complete the course of a tourist guide? Can such staff contribute to the quality of TA services, or tourism products?

Practical experience indicates that the contribution of tourist guides in keeping consumers within the overall marketing mix is very significant [21], because in contact with guests they play a decisive role in achieving quality of service, so that their behavior affects the perception of the guest about quality of service [18]. Research on consumer satisfaction as participants in different types of tourist guidance (daily excursions, group arrangements for bus / air transport, etc.) about the quality of tourist guides / accompanying groups is different [20]. The most of respondents (consumers) agree that the personal characteristics of service providers have the greatest impact on its quality. What is logical, because the interaction and time guides spent with consumers are crucial for the manifestation of their personal characteristics, which consumers perceive as an integral part of the quality of the service. Enthusiasm, openness and cordiality, self-confidence, creativity, determination, sensitivity, flexibility, intelligence, knowledge, awareness, organizational abilities, vigor, honesty and charisma are just some of the personal qualities that, in the opinion of consumers, should adorne professional and experienced guides.

In assessing the quality of the service of tour guides / group followers, there are no precisely determined parameters that are measured. Most contemporary researchers point out that those attributes that have a decisive influence on quality should be evaluated. These attributes are so-called 'critical attributes'. A tourist product is an integrated service. Its assessment depends on its type and the type of performance. We can conclude that in addition to the basic parameters that are evaluated, which refer to the program of the tourist arrangement, there are different parameters that evaluate the role of tour guides / followers of the group. Their role in the realization of the tourism product differs greatly, and therefore their role in the quality of tourist services is different.

6. CONCLUSION

In modern tourism business, quality has become a crucial factor of success and competitiveness. Good business results come from consumer satisfaction and loyalty, which primarily comes out from the quality of the tourist service. High level of service quality is the base of successful TA business. Quality management for managers of TA becomes the base for decision making, providing information and support. Quality of service of TA is rated by consumers, while on management should work on quality improving, based on feedback and system research. Tourist guides as 'extended tour operators' are the ones who provide feedback and are most often responsible for consumer loyalty. Much more attention should be paid to these personnel, both in theory and in practice, at least in the Republic of Serbia, or try to legally regulate their status in the system and the process of permanent employment, because for most of these staff, 'tourist guiding' is the main source of income, rather than additional interest.

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