

INFLUENCING TOURIST BEHAVIOUR THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS MARKETING

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Abstract. *Relationships are an extremely important resource for organizations, no matter their activities. This resource can and should be used efficiently in order to reach the organization's goals. Especially for tourism the relations established by the organization are essential because of the peculiarities of the "product" offered to the clients, as well as of the particular needs and wants of the customers (i.e. tourists of all kinds). For instance, because the product (e.g. a sejour) cannot be tried and effectively evaluated before the purchase and the risks perceived by tourists are significant and various, the relationships established between the selling tourism organization and their tourists influence the latter's perceptions on the offer, therefore the final decision of buying. It is also particularly important for a company to know which are the lifestyle, the consumer behavior and the decisional process of its clients, actual or potential. Knowing these, the company can offer the right product and services, the right way to the right persons. The decisional buying process and the way the clients/tourists consume the products/services could be influenced by the tourism company, but also by other parties and stakeholders, more or less voluntarily.*

Key words: *relationship marketing, tourist behavior, tourist experience*

Tourist behavior

Swarbrooke and Horner (1999) investigate the tourist behavior and the decisional process undergone by the tourist. Analyzing the way tourists obtain, consume and dispose of product and/or services is a useful tool in order to better design the offer. This process has to occur not only before the vacation, but also during and after the tourist was in holiday.

Generally, companies pay more attention to their clients before purchasing products, in order to convince them to buy. In this context, there is common interest in clients' motivations and determinants for buying travel packages (Swarbrooke and Horner 1999). The processes a tourist undergoes after purchasing and consuming the "services" is increasingly more important, and companies should pay more attention to these aspects. The rate of the return of the tourists to buy another package depends on their previous experiences related with that company.

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Understanding the behavior of clients is extremely important to ensure quality. As Berry *et al* (1991) debate, there is a close relationship between quality of the service provided and the inputs into the marketing strategy. One of these inputs is related to the characteristics, needs, desires and behavior of clients. The authors stress the importance of pre-sale efforts of delivering quality, pointing out the increased effectiveness of the marketing and business processes. We consider that equal attention should be paid to pre-sales relationships. These could be properly designed only by taking into account the complex personality of the client.

The investigation of the tourist behavior is a complex process. It has to take into account also various relations with and attitudes regarding other tourism agents, the environment, the local community, as well as other parties, which could be involved (e.g. the government or mass media). But mainly the tourist behavior is influenced by the motives and different determinants, some of them permanent, others circumstantial, some known by the tourist, others unacknowledged.

Different studies and researches analyzing tourist behavior show that the rational decisional process is a myth. This fact complicates the way clients/tourists can be influenced. One of the main conditions in order to succeed in shaping tourists thoughts and reactions is to better know the organization's clients through continuous research and communication. In order to make things easier, Swarbrook and Horner (1999) have developed more models which highlight the decisional process, as well as the main weaknesses.

Even if the decisional process is not very clear and it varies a lot from tourist to tourist, some tendencies are obvious. For instance cultural tourism as well as ecotourism have more appeal to the public. Everyone is more concerned with the sustainability of the tourism. Another increasingly more important issue for tourists, who tend to be more informed and experienced, is the authenticity and sincerity of the parties involved, or at least the perceived ones. All these factors influence the marketing activity of any organization involved.

Not only tourism companies can influence the tourist behavior. Some of the factors are in the tourist's every-day environment (e.g. family, friends, mass media), while others are active during holidays (e.g. local communities, personnel at the destination). For instance Currie points out that a tourist might act differently in the home environment compared to being on vacation (Currie, 1997). Expectations also influence the behavior and the purchasing

attitude. Gnoth (1997) analyzes the relationships between the two (see also Gnoth et al, 2000). He also implies the impact on satisfaction levels (Gnoth, 1997).

A tourist company has limited possibilities of influence, but it can carefully design its offer so as to limit the potential negative occurrences at the destination. For instance it can develop good relationships with its destination partners, so as its tourists to be privileged and specially taken care of. The information at the destination (Dipietro *et al.* 2007), or the facilities also influence the attitude and behavior of tourists. The way attractions at the destination are marketed, both locally and at the home of the tourists, also influence the success of a certain destination, therefore the tourists behavior (Litvin, 2007).

Other actors in shaping the tourist reactions to a certain offer can also be mentioned. Among them, some of the most important are the positioning of the destination. Bigne *et al.* (2001) point out the importance of image of the destination. They show how the tourism image influence the quality perceived and generate a certain level of satisfaction (Bigne *et al.* 2001). Other authors, such as Ibrahim and Gill (2005), Pritchard and Havitz (2006), Beerli *et al.* (2007) have analyzed various aspects related to the role and the processes related to the positioning of a destination.

Relationships marketing in tourism

The organization - tourist relations are not the only important ones. A tourist product optimally satisfies the client's needs only when a full cooperation exists among the suppliers of different services, which form the tourist package. Because these relations are developed finally for the full benefit of the tourist-client, they are an important part of the marketing policy and activity of a tourism organization (Kotler, 1996). The tourism service satisfaction is ensured only by cooperation of all the actors involved (Middleton, 1994; Noe, 1999).

Mainly by means of communication, marketing reflects the organizations' values. These values influence the relations and interactions of the organization. Relationships marketing refers primarily to questioning the current or potential clients so as to better know their expectations, needs, ideas of happiness, life, leisure etc., in order to respond to them better. Gummerson (1998) suggests a broader definition, referring to the concept of relationships marketing as being not only the totality of the organization's relations (with clients, as well as with any other person), but also the nets and interactivities developed through marketing actions.

Healy and others (2001) further develop relationships marketing into a network theory. The number of participants and parties involved increases continuously and the context (economic, social and political) varies from situation to situation. The network theory considers the market as being formed by dynamic interdependent entities, connected on various levels (e.g. resources, aims, activities). This situation has/should have profound implications on the company's strategic management and marketing activities.

Because of the permanent evolutions on the market, of the economy and even of the clients (their needs, mentalities etc.), the relationships are continuously changing. Some of these changes are/should be influenced by the organization, too, through its marketing activity. Relationships refer mainly to the communication process between the organization and the others, its public: clients, consumers, other organizations involved in tourism, governmental institutions, ONG-s etc. This marketing communication is primarily a practice of information transmission, receiving, analyzing and processing. In order to be effective and efficient the communication should be bilateral and continuous. Gummerson (1998) highlights that the relations established more or less deliberately are very complex, some of them of economic nature, others non-economic.

In tourism, as well as in other services sectors, a well designed and developed interactive marketing (Olteanu, 1999) is essential. The accent lies on the employee-customer relation. The former should know the perceptions and expectations of the latter and, through the marketing-mix offered, eliminate the disparity expectation-evaluation. For the client, the future tourist, expectations are not only depending on subjective factors, related to its own inner self, but also they are strongly influenced by the messages the tourist agent has sent to him/her (or even by the statements other organizations involved have launched, or even by third parties messages and actions). The evaluation, during and after the "consumption", is tied to the actual process and satisfactions induced by that, as well as by the initial expectations. So the relations established and developed in time between the client-tourist and all the other organizations involved are very important in the delivery of the tourist product.

The peculiarities of tourism have led to such a state. Among these various characteristics are the immateriality of the product, the fact that it cannot be tested before the purchase and consumption. The tourist package has more components, each of them being generally performed by another organization. Another important fact the travel agent should take into account is that the

client-tourist is traveling sometimes long distances in order to benefit from the bought “product”, so his/her expectations and demands are higher. All tourists see holidays as a very important event in their life, the more so as the time available for tourism is short (generally two limited periods of time every year); consequently the need to plan a future holiday carefully is paramount, as are their expectations.

These needs can be better responded through building a climate of trust and cooperation between the parties involved. Relationships marketing can influence tourist behavior both directly and indirectly. The advantages of building relationships with clients are various, such as: customer retention, good image and credibility, increased effectiveness in operations, avoidance of transaction and quality costs. The direct and induced benefits are multiple, both economic and socio-cultural, for the company, and other parties as well (e.g. the local community).

Some of the main goals of relationships marketing are: to influence the acquisition of certain products and/or services; to induce a specific behavior regarding the relations between tourists and the host community or the environment; the development of long-term relations; the enhancement of a favorable network surrounding the company; an increasing positive image; to obtain the support of the local community for various activities; etc. In order to achieve the set goals, each company should design and implement specific marketing strategies.

Guidelines for tourism organizations to influencing tourists

The activities of relationships marketing a tourism organization can undergo are various: information, charity, sponsorships, round tables, and different events, even symposiums etc. We recommend some efficient approaches to relationships marketing in tourism:

- **The tourist wants to be heard, listened, understood**

The needs and expectations of tourists change in time, over decades. They want the organizations to be aware of these evolutions in order to have a positive reply to them. Basically each tourist has specific priorities and expectations from a holiday, referring even to the slightest details that better suit his/her desires. The travel agent should not only continuously track its tourists' needs in order to better understand and satisfy them, but also to make its clients aware that they are listened, are considered to be very important, consequently the company spares nothing to satisfy them. The tourist increased satisfaction generated by listening to his opinion has positive

impacts on the tourist organization. The tourist would respect the company, would present it favorably when talking about the holiday experiences, would be open to company's suggestions and future offers and even would be more understanding if problems would occur.

- **The client expects the company to act morally and to be socially involved, to have virtues**

The tourist expects the organization not only to have good economic results, to satisfy his/her needs, but also not to harm (them as well as the society, environment etc.). The travel agent should be and should be perceived as being a fair partner for everybody, business associates and general public as well. Tourists also expect that the residents to be listened, understood and protected by the agents that develop their activity in a certain place.

Murphy (1994) stresses the difficult relations not only between tourism agents and communities, but also between tourists and residents. Sometimes uncontrolled tourism and tourists harm the host-community. In general tourism is an important revenue source for the residents but, at the same time, it is perceived as a threat to their cultural values and/or environment. The relationships marketing has to positively influence the attitude of the residents, to assure them that their way of living and values are respected and even enriched. Simultaneously the marketing activity should target tourists, in order to inform them on the host-community and to educate them to respect its values and heritage. Community involvement is not plain charity, it is good business.

As we have already suggested, the potential customers more and more appreciate the social involvement of a company, so the community involvement would improve and increase the company's image. Tourism is by excellence an activity that involves interaction between people with various cultural heritages, so the tourists are very sensitive to the problems others face. This could influence some tourists when they choose their travel-destination. Anyway all of them would prefer a tour-agent with a better (including social) image. So they would feel that they are, at least a little, involved in these charities and social activities.

White and Mazur (1998) analyze how the community involvement creates sustainable wealth and builds the social environment. The direct positive result for the company is that the work atmosphere, the internal relations, as well as those between the organization and the employees improve. The indirectly affirmative consequence is that the image of the company at the "destination"

area and with the host community improves also, so the tourism organization would better collaborate with and be sustained by the locals. Public relations are a useful marketing tool in this process. They are a social practice, helping organizations fit into their social environments and to help in completing social tasks.

- **Tell the truth**

Telling the truth and being honest are always tightly related with the company's image and the trust its clients, its partners and the general public have in it. The tourists can hardly check the information about different destinations and services, so they have to trust completely their travel agent. If the clients consider that they have being misled by the company, they would be very angry and, at least, tell everybody about their unfortunate experience, with negative results for the travel agent.

To tell the truth is an ethical and legal necessity. Still the way the truth is presented is also very important and has a great influence on the public. Originality, imagination and choosing the right message in the suitable context are significant.

- **The relationships marketing, together with other marketing activities, aims to replace customer satisfaction with customer delight**

Payne (1993) considers that the essence and main target of the relationships marketing activity is the customer. The central goal is to change the customer not only into a supporter for the organization but also into its advocate. So as to do this, the client has to be completely convinced of the quality of the product offered as well as of the company's profile (meaning its social and cultural involvement, its honesty etc.). One of the necessary conditions to achieve that is to offer a product that exceeds expectations. The tourism organization's image is strongly developed through societal involvement. This involvement has to be known and recognized by the public, relationships marketing having an important role in this process.

- **Ensure complete tourist experience**

In order to overcome tourists' expectations, offering a complex and unexpected experience, the travel agent has to build the customer's profile. The company should consistently investigate the aspects that influence its clients both before purchasing, and during the holiday. It would be suitable to define certain audit frames, using criteria suitable both to the characteristic of the tourists and to those of the offer. Evaluation of the tourist experience is also vital for improving company's offer.

Gronross (1990) points out the difficulties in monitoring clients' satisfaction. Analyzing an integrated tourist experience implicates also to evaluate other organisms involved, such as service companies at the destination, local communities, and other tourists at the destination. It also involves analyzing natural environment and other resources at the destination.

Besides monitoring and improving tourists' experiences, it is also important to let the customers know you make all the efforts to provide the best quality.

- **Building of a proper destination image**

The destination image is one of the most important criteria for tourists when choosing their destination. This is one of the main reasons local authorities as well as other interested organisms want to develop place-brands. Travel agents and other organizations involved in tourism in a certain area, should cooperate in order to impose an attractive and powerful image. Amirou (2000) points out that this image has to be set also in cooperation with the local community. A place-brand is also about the residents, the local communities that inhabit that geographic space.

Local communities also influence tourists while they are in a certain place, both in terms of experiences they have during their holiday, and in terms of image developed and retained after the visit. Locals could influence certain beliefs, ideas and the behavior of the tourists.

- **Customer service is the business of everyone in the company**

Tourists return to a certain tourist agent not only if they experienced a nice retreat, but also if they have profitable and pleasant contacts with the company's personnel. In order to accomplish such a desired encounter, the company has to control the interactions between customers and personnel, even if they are not in a marketing context. The contacts are very important because they could add value or damage the relations and the image of the company. Good relations between personnel and clients have to be promoted by organization's culture and by its marketing approach. It is recommended to integrate the marketing activity with all the other activities of the company.

The relations between company's representatives and its clients have to be permanent and positive. Connecting to visitors should be a priority for a travel agent. In order to reach this goal, the company and its employees have to be flexible and to personalize not only their offer, but also the ways they interact. They have to take into account each customer's desires, needs, personality traits and history with the company.

- **Integrate internal marketing in the policy of customer satisfaction**

This is a direct consequence of the previous “rule”. Because personnel influence the degree of customer satisfaction, special attention should be given to internal marketing. Gronroos (1990, 10) indicates two main directions in the marketing activities of a travel agent: internal marketing and relationships (external) marketing. The first aspect targets the employees in order to make them better satisfy the customers. The latter concentrates especially on 3 audiences: tourists, business partners and host communities. Business partners are important because better cooperation would not only generate increase incomes. It would also lead to increased customer satisfaction. The locals are also important because the contacts the travelers have with the residents of a tourist destination also influence the quality of the tourist package, i.e. the tourist experience, therefore the degree of the clients’ satisfaction.

- **Respect and present positively cultural differences**

Increasingly more tourists are interested in the otherness, promote concepts such as openness, tolerance and respect. Tourists expect to have real encounters with the residents of a certain place, they are eager to know the culture of the host community. Culture is communication, and it gives the tourists the sensation of being integrated in a certain space. Therefore when designing the offer, travel agents have to include cultural components. They have to make familiar to the tourist the local customs and beliefs, in order to make easy tourists-locals encounters.

In the same time, travel agents have to facilitate the communication processes from the residents’ perspectives. They have to understand cultural differences, they have to explore la similarities and to eliminate possible barriers between customers and local communities.

These are just some of the most important aspects a tourist organization should take into account when designing its marketing activity and the way these actions can influence the consumers. The relations developed with the customers and other audiences as well are very important for the promotion, the employees’ efficiency, the cooperation with others, and the image of the travel agent. These aspects are central nowadays; when travel patterns change, when needs, expectations and exigencies of the tourist-customer also shift. In this context we suggest that relationship marketing not only to ensure the fidelity of the clients but also to become one of the keys to the success of a tourism organization.

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