

MANAGING A CUSTOMER'S EXPECTATIONS IN TOURISM AS A DETERMINANT OF THEIR SATISFACTION

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The purpose of the article is to expose the necessity to manage the customer's expectations by the tourism supply entities. Since only realistic imaginations of a product may result in tourist's satisfaction and later in their loyalty to the company/place of destination. Features and types of buyer's expectations in relation to a tourist product have been specified. Factors shaping customer's preliminary imaginations of a tourist trip have been indicated, focusing mainly on the role of marketing communication of companies and tourist areas. At the end techniques of managing the customer's expectations have been presented, which may be utilised by the tourism supply entities.

Key words: expectations, marketing communication, satisfaction, tourist product

1. Introduction

A tourist product is a special product for the buyer, particularly due to its service character, hence abstractness i.e. inability to see or try it before the purchase. Additionally, the act of buying and selling the product usually takes place not only in advance in relation to consumption/production, but also in the tourist's place of residence, distant in terms of space from the place of consumption/production. One cannot fail to notice that participation in tourism traffic is something totally different from the "daily grind" and additionally something which occurs relatively rarely (usually one, twice a year) [8, p. 11-12]. These characteristics make a consumer, before using a tourist product, formulate some expectations towards it – it is even said that the tourist does not buy a product, but obtains a dream. What is more, these expectations are usually greater than in the event of other goods or services. Then the tourist compares such high expectations with the reality during the trip and at the place of destination. The result of the confrontation, in the form of evaluation of the finally delivered value, decides, in turn, of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction and, as a consequence, about their loyalty or abandoning the producer/offeror [10, p. 48]. All this makes it possible to conclude that the ability to manage customers' expectations is an extremely important issue in the activities of tourist enterprises and destination areas [2, p. 472]. The purpose of the article is to present this problem. Factors forming the preliminary expectations of a customer tourist have been mentioned, types of those expectations and techniques of managing them by the tourism supply entities.

2. Types of customers' expectations in relation to a product and their importance for the satisfaction from a tourist trip

Expectations are totally subjective presumptions, aspirations, imaginations, hopes, desires, wishes concerning goods or services a consumer buys. Customer's expectations in tourism may concern: the level of fulfilment of specific needs, safety, functionality, comfort, cleanness and climate of the facility or means of transport, politeness, culture and professionalism of the staff, and recently, more and more often, the provision of intense feelings and emotions to the tourist [11, pp. 26-27]. At the same time these expectations may be divided into: situation-outcome expectancies, action-outcome expectancies and self-efficacy expectancies. Whereas self-efficacy expectancies rely on a conviction that the resources possessed by the tourist allow them to perform the intended actions, action-outcome expectancies express the probability that the actions undertaken by the tourist and the service provider will lead to the desired outcome, which is satisfaction from the journey. Situation-outcome expectancies are the opposite, as they are based on a conviction that the outcome of a trip is a consequence of a nexus of external events and does not require taking any actions [cf. 3, pp. 161-162]. All the aforementioned types of expectancies are extremely important and the task of the producer/offeror is to adapt them to their capabilities. Particularly self-efficacy expectancies may create a special problem in this respect as the most difficult task is to convince the customer that the funds they have is not all which is required for the proper preparation of the trip.

From this point of view, the following are differentiated: fuzzy, explicit and implicit expectations. The most favourable for the offeror/producer are explicit expectations as their recognition allows for their appropriate forming. Two other types of expectations pose more problems. The absence of expected effects, even those the tourist is not aware of, i.e. they either cannot specify them (fuzzy expectations), or they are so obvious that the tourist does not think about them at all (implicit expectations), will without any doubt give rise to their disappointment. Thus fuzzy and implicit expectations also require being diagnosed; more – they have to be converted into explicit expectations [5, pp. 100-101].

An important issue is the fact that clients' expectations constitute a point of reference, they function as specific standards to assess the final product's value since the tourists compare them with the quality found at the place of stay (facility, means of transport), with the real value of the offer. It may be said, therefore, that the expectations have an estimating character. Thought arousing of unrealistic expectations may initially generate sales, but at the expense of dissatisfaction, and hence loss of customers, while exceeding of the expectations may bring the tourist into delight and permanently tie them with the producer/offeror/destination area. Hence the knowledge on the customer's expectations, as well as their skilful management, is the key to success of the tourism supply entities.

3. Role of marketing communication in forming the tourist's expectations

The expectations of client tourists are preliminarily formed, above all, by marketing communication of companies and tourism destinations (see Figure 1). In the conditions of

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growing competition in the tourist market, which provokes the supply entities to be ahead of competitors, making unrealistic promises is becoming more and more common.

Whereas, if the transmitted contents do not correspond to actual abilities to satisfy the buyers' needs, i.e. they are not covered by resources and skills, a communication gap appears, which will undoubtedly disappoint the tourist [6, p. 173], give rise to an after purchase dissonance [7, p. 89] and will negatively affect the image of the producer/offeror/destination area.

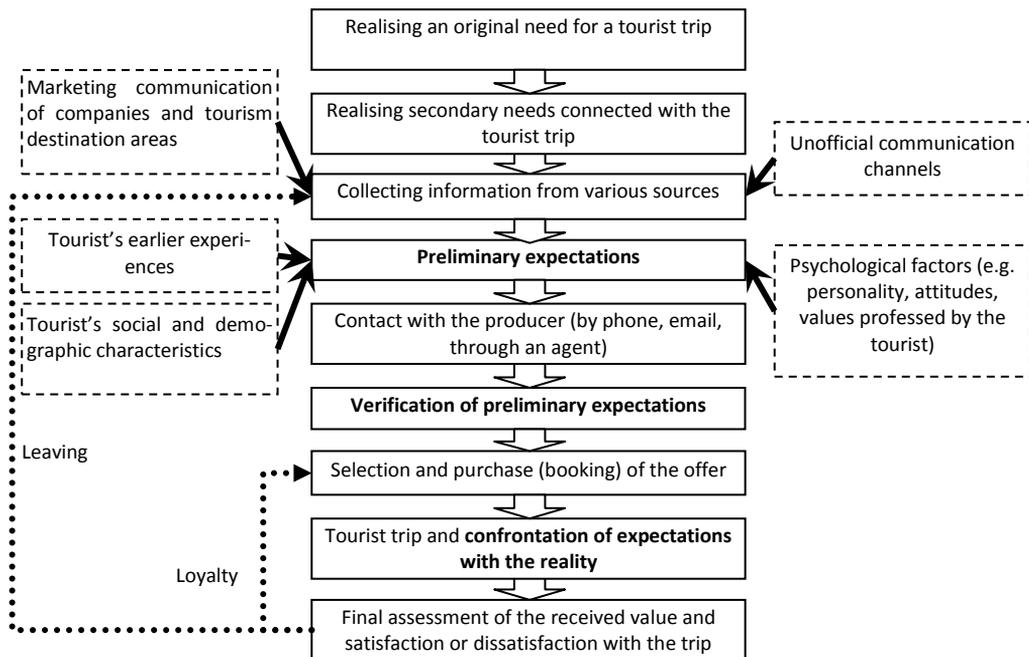


Figure 1 Expectations in the process of tourist consumer's market behaviour
Resource: Own study based on the basis of [12, p. 435].

Customer's dissatisfaction will occur also when the company/tourist destination area informs them in an inappropriate way or too late about changes made. Since the buyers, not possessing current knowledge about a product or possibilities of using them, are simply embittered. Customer's dissatisfaction may also occur in a situation when, although they are informed about a new offer (e.g. in mass media), but the date of its launch is not specified or is unavailable. Also delays and/or restrictions in sending information to the sales and/or customer service staff on products whose launch has already been announced or has already taken place is an expression of improper management of the customer's expectations.

Summing up, it must be stated that a priority task as part of the promise management is to transfer, in due time, coherent, integrated and realistic product information in mass media and by the sales personnel. Since only then it is possible to build proper expectations in relation to the offer. Due to the immaterial character of a tourist product, an im-

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portant issue is also to provide the customer with material conditions of choosing the offer and using objects as symbols of non-material phenomena in order to understand the product better. This reduces the tourist's risk as, because of this type of operations, it is easier for them to create proper ideas of an abstract product. One should also mention the necessity to provide continuity of a promotional motive, supplementing the visualisation of the offer essence and building positive associations with the producer/offeror [4, pp. 52-56]. Furthermore, since the word of mouth is a particularly important channel of communication [more: 9, pp. 175-179], an attempt should be made to maximally use it.

The role of proper marketing communication is so large that the expectations are also formed by internal factors (occurring on the tourist's part – see Figure 1), being decisively less susceptible to actions of companies and destination areas, though also in this case certain techniques may be applied.

4. Customer tourists' expectations management techniques

Preliminarily formed by marketing communication (as well as by internal factors), customers' expectations can be managed i.e. subject them to verification by means of four main techniques: negotiation of unrealistic expectations, offering a possibility of choosing from several products, offering various variants of the product and informing about the methods of using the product and criteria of assessing its quality [13, pp. 53-55]. These techniques can be used, above all, during a direct contact (face to face, via telephone, email, etc.) with the sales staff, and they are to be used even before the sale of the offer [1, pp. 161-162].

In the situation when the customer formulates too high preliminary expectations in relation to the product, the service provider should renegotiate them i.e. clarify inaccuracies, demonstrate real benefits and costs the client has to pay in connection with the consumption (not only financial, but mental, physical or time-related as well). The offeror/producer should also present, as a contrast, a product which will satisfy such high expectations of the buyer, making the customer realise that for such large aspirations they must pay a higher price. While buying a product chosen by themselves, they should expect a decisively lower value.

Another method of forming proper expectations of a customer tourist is to provide them with a possibility of choosing from alternative products (e.g. stay in various places with the same values, in different facilities of the same service standard). When contacting the seller, most frequently the customer has already got a specific offer in mind, but wants to get confirmation that the taken decision was right, based on the confrontation with other products [8, p. 72]. At the same time they want to have a feeling that this is their choice, thus offering them alternatives with simultaneous pointing to the product which will best satisfy their needs is a very desirable solution. Through the confrontation of a selected product with other, the tourist may also more realistically evaluate its features, advantages, disadvantages, benefits and costs coming from its purchase, thereby its value, and formulate proper expectations towards it.

Another technique is to offer several variants of the product to the customer tourist. Since the producer usually has not only an appropriately broad sales range, but a deep one as well. Therefore they can offer not only different products satisfying given needs of the buyer, but also various options of the same product (e.g. HB or all inclusive, plane or bus, room with a sea view or without). At the same time they can offer the tourist a different configuration of services making up a given product (including also a different price of the offer). Clients with smaller needs (and/or budget) may content themselves with the basic set of services, while those representing greater needs (and usually with the larger purchasing power) will be satisfied only with a "richer" package of services. In this way real expectations of a customer tourist may be formed regarding the received value, since by choosing a given option the buyer knows the scope and quality of the product they should expect.

Additionally, a way to manage the expectations of a customer tourist is to educate them. It is necessary, in particular, in relation to the products in which they actively participate, as lack of knowledge of the role they are to play in the process of production/consumption may affect the effectiveness of the entire tourist trip. Equally important is the customer's knowledge about quality assessment criteria of the received services. Since the client, knowing and skilfully using the product assessment indicators, knows what to expect, therefore their expectations are more realistic. At the same time thanks to this technique the producer has greater certainty that their product will be evaluated according to the criteria they have prepared earlier, thereby the customer's opinion will be proper [2, p. 287] and that they will be satisfied and remain loyal. The role of education is greater the more complex product is and the less tourism experience the tourist has, as well as in the situation of an innovative product which is not known to buyers at all (the consumer cannot use the opinion of other tourists).

5. Conclusion

The conducted deliberations confirm the thesis presented in the title of the present article – skilful management of tourist's expectations may result in their satisfaction, while unrealistic aspirations left alone give rise to buyer's dissatisfaction. Moreover, one can deduce that the knowing, defining, creating and forming expectations from the product requires cooperation with the tourist, therefore instruments of traditional marketing turn out to be useless in this respect. While relationship marketing takes on major importance as its idea are interactions between the service provider and the customer, and these, allowing, inter alia, for the recognition and forming of expectations, constitute a specific added value for the customer tourist.

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