

Service quality as a fundamental cornerstone for visitor satisfaction: lessons learned from Pretoria, South Africa

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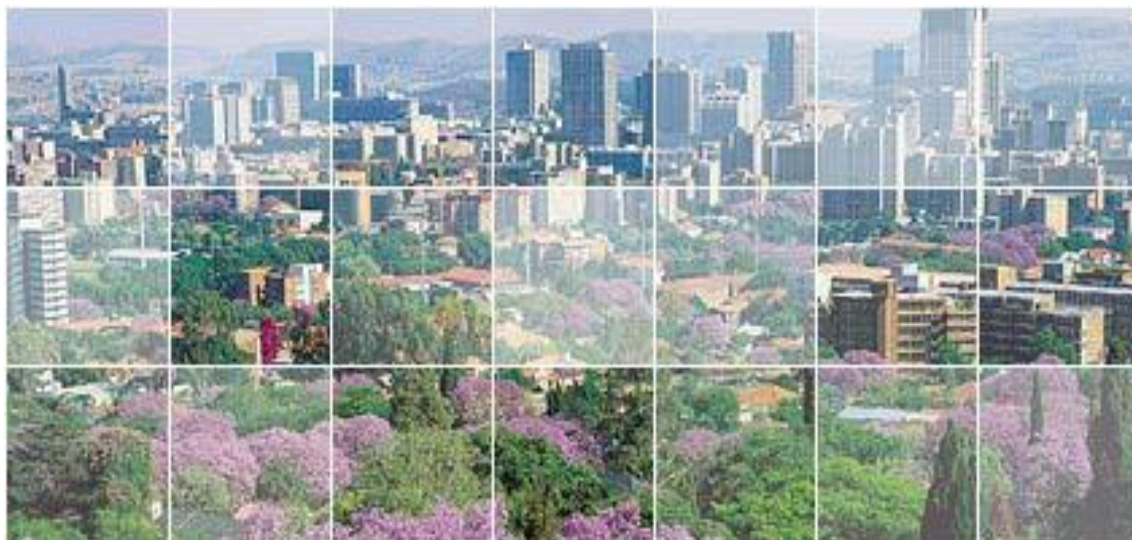
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Abstract

The White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism identified that poor service was one of the challenges facing the South African tourism industry. As the number of tourists to South Africa has increased in the post 1994 era, the return of consuming tourist is paramount to maintain sustainable growth of the industry. Service quality is linked with the ability to satisfy customers with the provision of the tourism product offering, by meeting or exceeding expectations and promised product benefits. Therefore, service quality is imperative for customer satisfaction. With tourism playing such a significant role in the economies of a vast majority of nations around the world, a drop in the quality of service in the industry could sacrifice these nations' opportunities of generating sufficient income. The provision not only of good but rather excellent service is therefore essential for all destinations around the world, let alone the entire country or nation.

Key words: service, quality, destinations, excellence, visitor satisfaction



Source: <http://www.sa-venues.com/maps/features/gauteng-02.jpg>

Introduction

Tourism is important to the South African economy and this has been a result of the continued growth of tourism of tourism as an economic sector. Tourism in South Africa has been adopted as a development strategy that will be able to create jobs, employment, and investment and diversify the economy. The European Commission (2004) acknowledges that the continued growth of tourism is as a result of the following twofold: on the one hand the growth of personal disposable income, a longer and healthier life expectancy in conjunction with a reduced annual and life-long working time; on the other hand, the improved transport infrastructure in response to the evolvement of the airline industry and the use of cars in nearly all income groups. The post-apartheid era was marked by a stagnant economy, low investments, and high population that is poor and unemployed.

According to George & Booyens (2014) the tourism industry is considered a key growth sector in the South African economy after receiving more than 9.2 million visitors and the industry growth by 10.2% by 2012. The tourism more than any other industry, has the potential to create the jobs, and the sharing of economic benefits in South Africa. According to the International Labour Organisation (2010) tourism is extremely labour intensive and a significant source of employment for people with varying degrees of skills. According to the World Economic Forum (2013) tourism now accounts for one in eleven jobs on the planet, a number that could rise to one in ten jobs by 2022. Tourism encourages entrepreneurship according to Oxford Economics (2010).

The tourism industry is also promoted by government because it creates opportunities for small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs). "About 99% of tourism enterprises belong to the group of SMMEs and very few are multinationals" European Commission (2004: 8). According to Saayman & Olivier (2007:118) "SME are also the vehicle by

which the lowest-income people in the South African society gain access to economic opportunities-at a time that distribution of income and wealth in South Africa is amongst the most unequal in the world". According to Saayman & Saayman (2010) the growth rate in tourist arrivals has surpassed that of the world average for more than a decade. Tourism is relevant as South Africa had adopted neo-liberal economic policies that made tourism perfect for export promotion, foreign investment and the attraction of foreign exchange to ignite economic growth.

Since tourism is an export product consumed at the destination area through the attraction of tourists from abroad, it creates immense opportunities for all the value adding on the tourism product offering to be done at the destination area. Tourism is essentially a service product offering that is intangible, and simultaneously produced and consumed at the destination area because it is characterised by fixed location for its production and consumption. Fourie & Santana-Gallego (2011) noted that tourism is one of the leading growth sectors in international services trade. According to Rogerson (2004) tourism is seen as an "invisible export".

Njoya (2013) acknowledges that tourism is now the biggest foreign exchange earner in most African countries. This had increased the political profile of tourism and in the case of South Africa in 2009 a separate Ministry of Tourism was created. South Africa received 10.2% increase in international tourists in 2012 according to Van Schalkwyk (2013). Tourism leads to the taxation of non-residents, which means tourism swells tax coffers, increasing government revenues. The tourism industry creates facilities that are consumed by tourists and locals such as airport infrastructure. A challenge still remains that tourism's contribution to GDP is interwoven into other sector such as transportation, retailing and services according to Jordan (1998). This has the negative effect in that tourism fails to gain the political mileage and public trust

because its classification is associated with the fact that it is a service and not a physical product. Tourism activities are associated with the hosting of the tourism consumer at the local area, because tourism consumption happens at the destination area. According to Divisekera (2010) tourism consumption is categorised into: accommodation, food, transportation, shopping and entertainment. Because the majority of the value adding for the tourism product offering happens at the destination area, this means that the majority of the value adding can be at the destination area, adding backward and forward linkages for the tourism economy. Oludele & Braimoh (2010) noted that tourism is a cross-cutting sector and it involves a big diversity of services and professions, which is linked to other economic activities and policy areas. The growth of the tourism industry can lead to the increased demand for more tourist accommodation which would benefit the construction industry.

In order for South Africa to penetrate the global tourism market and obtain a bigger slice of this massive industry, the country is bound to make service quality (O'Neill, Williams, MacCarthy & Groves, 2000) and the provision thereof top on the list of some of its priorities. Despite the country achieving tourism growth above the global average (SAT, 2012/2013), and contributing significantly to the country's GDP (3.0% in 2010), excellent service standards should be promoted and sustained within the entire industry. In so doing, the country will for a considerable length of time reap far much greater economic and financial gains from the industry. As Wan & Cheng (2011) puts it, the fundamental goal for companies that provide service is customer satisfaction and the evaluation thereof. Therefore suggesting further that, companies that provide excellent service together with a good brand and image (Atorough & Martin, 2012) of the destination, stand a far much greater chance of gaining competitive advantage over those that do not. Recent studies (Ekiz & Au, 2011) on attitudes towards complaining (ATC) have played a very significant role in business's

view towards the provision of service by many providers in the tourism industry. As a result, and also due to strict controls of some governments on service, the tourism industry is to some extent experiencing somewhat satisfactory levels of improvement, although not in all sectors and not at all destinations around the world. Pretoria is but one of the most earmarked destinations and it is for that reason that this research took a study of the service levels and types of services in and around the city. South Africa boasts itself of six major cities namely Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth, Pretoria and East London. Amongst these, Pretoria is one of the largest and most visited in the country. Pretoria, is the seat of the executive in South Africa, and has become the most important diplomatic city in Africa, housing the highest concentration of embassies and consulates. With service levels, requirements and quality being considered the pinnacle of the hospitality & tourism industry, these cities find themselves competing with some of the biggest metropolis in the world such as New York, Sydney and Tokyo. As a result, visitor satisfaction and retention becomes very imperative to ensure that these cities, especially Pretoria, share the larger slice of the global tourism industry.

SERVICE QUALITY

The SERVQUAL Model developed by Parasuraman *et al.* during the mid-1980s, remains a reliable instruments to measure service quality in any field. The SERVQUAL model suggests that for any business or any organisation to succeed the company needs to build a very solid and long lasting customer satisfaction and loyalty relationship the company and clients (Timm, 2011:3). George (2008) identifies two types of quality, namely:

- Technical quality: this refers to what the consumer is left with after the service delivery process has been completed.

- Functional quality: this refers to the process of delivering the product or service, and it includes the interactions that occur between consumers and employees.

The two types of quality reinforce each other, as the final product of the service is as important as the process in the delivery of the tourism product offering, considering that tourism offerings are intangible. Customers are prone to return and consume tourism product offerings which have they accrued satisfaction. On the other hand, customers that are not satisfied are likely not to return, in addition, they will spread bad publicity about their experience. A divergent way of looking at customers is noted by George (2008) that marketers have only to estimate the value of orders consumers place during their 'life' with an organisation in order to realise the importance of keeping a relationship with them. In other words, consumers must be viewed by tourism product owners as having an imaginary South African Rand (ZAR) over their heads, displaying their lifetime financial worth that a company would accrue by satisfying the consumers.

Whereas on the one hand there are questions often raised regarding the systematic and symbiotic relationship between satisfaction and loyalty, Wu (2011) on the other hand, maintains that satisfaction is not the only factor that really drives customer loyalty but rather adds that other factors include such things as locational convenience, interpersonal relationships and commitment. The process of exceeding customer expectations, also called *E-Plus* (Timm 2002) and the knowledge thereof (Zhou, 2012) are but some of the other very basic and significant factors that are in most cases used in various business circles to retain their clients, in this case tourists.

Lo, Mohamed, Songan & Yeo (2012) on the other hand, emphasize the need to explore the perceived and expected

quality of services among visitors by arguing that this helps broaden the understanding of the levels of satisfaction of customers especially upon receiving the service itself. Although not very often cited in literature on service quality, culture and cultural values have been found to play a very significant role in studies related to it. According to Weiermair (2000) when in a new or completely different environment, a tourist may sometimes lack the socio-cultural support system that in most cases mediate the service environments they encounter. At the end, this may affect the tourists' service quality and the entire experience at the destination where they are visiting and this seems to be the case with what tourists could anticipate at or about a destination. Tourists' expectations can be caused or formed by various factors or a variety of issues and could also depend on a number of driving forces.

A study by Del Bosque, Martin, Collado & De Los Salmones (2009) has found that issues such as past experience and word-of-mouth (Pike, Bianchi, Kerr & Patti, 2010) which could affect the tourist' service quality levels, among other things, are in most cases regarded as deciding factors and formations of tourist expectations. These expectations, it is believed, can for instance be generated through images that tourists create about the destination even before the tourist visits such a destination. In other studies, however, productivity has been cited as yet another important matter to highlight when discussing service quality or anything related to it.

The proponents of this phenomenon believe that productivity could offer some perspective on its relationship with quality service and other aspects of quality in general. According to Parasuraman (2002) understanding the relationship between the two could help in the reconciliation specifically of improving service quality and service productivity by increasing the units produced (i.e. output) without necessarily increasing production costs (i.e. inputs).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In South Africa, the provision of excellent service in most of the cities is declining at a fast and unbelievably alarming rate now lately. This is mainly as a result of several political reasons and socio-economic factors. These include, among others, low morale & incompetency within the majority of employees, skills shortage and salaries that are far below internationally acceptable wage levels. In the end, this could thus jeopardize and compromise a country's chances of earning sufficient capital from the proceeds of tourism. The major aim of the study was to evaluate the level(s) of customer satisfaction of visitors to Pretoria with the intention to improve service levels at this destination. 200 survey questionnaires were administered to day visitors visiting Pretoria. The survey took the form of a 15-item self-completion questionnaire which visitors were requested to complete on arrival in Pretoria. The sample used for this study consisted of 200 high school students mainly from three of the nine provinces of South Africa, namely the North West, Mpumalanga & Gauteng. The quantitative data generated from the surveys was analyzed using the SPSS package to determine patterns and deviation among

variables. While this study deals mainly with service quality, the results of the survey also represent a variety of other aspects related to it such as customer satisfaction.

RESEARCH STUDY OUTCOMES

Types of services, levels of service, service quality dimensions (Chowdhary & Prakash, 2007), service expectations (Bunja, 2003) and service areas may sometimes differ from one sector (e.g. tourism) to the other (e.g. manufacturing) and even from country to country. Chowdhary & Prakash (2007), however, suggests that other than that an organization or business offering a particular service could be servicing either a customer or the possessions of that customer. This study focuses mainly on four major service areas offered to tourists while they were visiting or even enjoying their stay in Pretoria, and these are - attitude of staff, traffic congestion, safety and parking. In this study, as shown in Table 1, male students (n=94, 78%) were in the majority than female students (n=26; 22%).

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	94	78
Female	26	22
TOTAL	120	100%

Table 1: Gender of participants

Years	Frequency	Percentage
17	14	11
18	64	53
19	16	13
20	14	11
21	4	4
22	2	2
23	2	2
26	3	3
29	1	1
TOTAL	120	100%

Table 2: Age of participants

In Table 2, represented above, we see the age groups of the respondents in this research. The table indicates that most of the respondents were aged 18 years (n=64, 53%). The attitude of staff at a destination is of at most importance and could have a very serious effect on the satisfaction levels of tourists, and these can be narrated (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010) or captured through interviews or a survey. In Table 3, when asked if they

were satisfied with the general attitude of staff in Pretoria, most respondents (n=105, 88%) indicated that they were quite happy. This high level of customer satisfaction could attract not only local tourists but also international tourists from the PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain) countries despite the fact that their currently their government deficits and their economies in general are shaky and in most cases unsatisfactory Floyd (2011).

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	105	88
No	15	12
TOTAL	120	100%

Table 3: Attitude of staff

In this study, when asked whether they were satisfied with the flow of traffic in and around the town most participants (n=81, 68%: Table 4) indicated that they were satisfied with the manner in which traffic operated and as such no form of congestion was reported.

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	81	68
No	39	32
TOTAL	120	100%

Table 4: Traffic flow

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	100	83
No	20	17
TOTAL	120	100%

Table 5: Parking arrangements

In Table 5 above, a considerably large amount of participants (n=100, 83%) mentioned that parking was never much an issue to be concerned with as sufficient parking arrangements are usually made at most attractions and/or stops in and around the town.

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	106	88
No	14	12
TOTAL	120	100%

Table 6: Safety and security concerns

Fowler, Lauderdale, Goh & Yuan (2012) strongly believe that destinations and venues around the world owe a legal duty to tourists by providing them not only with a safe environment but also to take precautions when foreseeing possible dangers, especially one that is related to

the safety of tourists. In other studies (Levantis & Gani, 2000) it was discovered that low levels of safety at most destinations could pose serious risk for the development of tourism at these destinations. It appears from Table 6, however, that the majority of participants

(n=106, 88%) in this study were somewhat satisfied and felt safe while travelling in Pretoria.

Conclusions

This study predominantly investigated the perceived and expected quality of services among visitors to Pretoria and it is therefore envisaged that it will assist any future research to broaden the understanding of the satisfaction levels of customers (Lo, Mohamed, Songan & Yeo, 2012). On the contrary but adding to this, Correia & Pimpao (2008) also found that the availability of sufficient attractions such as theme parks (Milman, Okumus, & Dickson, 2010) as a service, is key to decision-making (Martin & Woodside, 2012) as most tourists not just demand service but excellence at a destination. This could be yet another area for the destination under study (Pretoria) to consider in order for it to attract and appeal to a broad range of tourists from various parts of the world. As Lu *et al* (2010:) puts it positive experiences, such as excellent quality service, are very likely to live visitors with good memories and can at the same time generate publicity that is favourable for a host destination such as Pretoria.

In order to achieve this Franch, Martini, Buffa & Parisi (2008) further suggest that town management and planners should also offer flexible products and wherever possible new one's (Henderson, 2010) from those that are common and exist already at the destination. These could include, among others, casino resorts (Bowen, 2009), and nature-based tourist attractions Zehrer & Siller (2007).

The results of this study and others similar to it, suggest that all service providers in Pretoria, and the City of Tshwane as a whole, need to constantly re-visit their visitor satisfaction levels in order to improve the quality of service rendered to tourists visiting the town. In so doing, this would ultimately secure such a destination sufficient income from the tourism industry.

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