

GUEST SERVICES QUALITY ASSESMENT IN TOURISM, USING AN ATTRIBUTES SCALE

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It is considered that a weakness of the Romanian tourism offer is the quality of guest services. In this paper we established as an objective to examine in detail the importance given by the consumers to the components of guest service quality and their perceived performance, based on the three pillars of service quality: the material base (equipments), staff training and staff behavior. The emphasis is on the investigation regarding staff training and behaviour, taking into account the multiple attributes SERVQUAL scale. On the basis of this work lies a survey done in March-April 2010 on the population of Oradea, on a sample of 1060 people. Results confirm the importance granted to staff in ensuring quality of tourism services and their perceived relatively weak performance.

Key words: service, quality, tourism, evaluation, Romania

JEL Classification: M21, M31

1. Introduction

Human resources in tourism has a key role in ensuring the quality of tourism services. Interaction between employees and consumers of services is recognized as a critical factor in determining consumer satisfaction²³⁸. Interaction time is the moment of truth. Of meeting the consumer's expectations depends its retention and loyalty, reason why this is one of the important sources of competitive advantage of a destination.²³⁹ The pleasure to be served completes and sometimes overcomes the pleasure of the actual products consumption³.

2. Challenges of guest services work

Service staff has a major role in ensuring service quality.

- The most important difference from the productive sphere is that among the duties of service workers is the interaction with customers²⁴⁰.

The contact between employees and customers is a co-participation in the service experience. The employee must not only be task oriented but also able to interact, to oversee the customer while he is consuming the services. Thus, the employee must be able to motivate the client to assume the role of co-producer of the service, to instruct and to correct, to monitor and help the consumer to assess their own performances²⁴¹.

Employee relationship with customers is an interpersonal experience²⁴², with everything it implies: communication, knowledge, relationship.

²³⁸ Suprenant, C.F., Solomon, M.R., 1987, *Predictibility and personalization in the service encounter*, Journal of Marketing, 51 (April), 86-96.

²³⁹ Cejas-Martin, R.R., 2005, *Tourism service quality begins at the airport*

²⁴⁰ Bowen J., Ford, R.C., 2002, *Managing Service Organizations: Does Having a Think Make Difference?*, Journal of Management, 28(3), 447-469, p.460.

²⁴¹ Idem.

²⁴² Idem.

- A specific aspect of the service employees is that in the definition of the ideal employee, positive personality has a dominant role. A category of service positions requires specialized training and high-class preparation, but for the majority emphasis is on personality, energy and employee attitude. Selecting a suitable employee for customer interaction is „like a casting for a movie”²⁴³, because it means hiring for various roles.
- Service employees may be harder to follow when interacting with customers. Intervention in the interaction between employee and customer would disrupt the service process on one hand, and on the other hand, the employees have freedom to find specific solutions for specific problems.
- Working in the first line of service involves a certain emotions management. Emotions management means the effort of controlling the body language, to build a side that conveys the desired message. An employee in guest services should be a perfect actor (no matter how cynical this sounds). If he is not a good actor he is not a good professional. The way in which a doctor delivers a diagnosis is more important than the healing prognosis. A teacher must show interest in a student, in his needs for knowledge.
- The employee in guest services, who is in direct contact with consumers is called front-line staff because he is in the conflict zone. The employee is the interface between the company and the client and any complaint, any unsatisfied expectation is transmitted to this staff, although it usually has little power of decision. This employee receives all complaints though is often not empowered to resolve them. Depending on consumers' exaggerated claims, the causes of conflict are: unreasonable customer requests, claims against company policy, unacceptable treatment of employees, violation of social norms, particular needs of clients and drunk clients²⁴⁴.
- Front-line employees can reinforce and promote the company offers and the company itself or - on the contrary - they can undermine it, there is no middle option.
- The perception of service employees on the organization working climate influences consumers' perception of service in regards to the services they received²⁴⁵. By this we understand that the working environment/climate is leaving a mark on the employees, which is reflected in their work.

3. THE SERVQUAL INSTRUMENT- research and applications

Quality in guest services is evaluated from two perspectives, namely the quality standards of the service provider and the consumer's quality standards. The quality of service will be given by the extent to which service providers offer meets consumers' expectations. Lewis and Booms say that: "service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customers' expectations".²⁴⁶

Researches on service quality have been focused initially on the way of offering high quality services.

The studies conducted by Parasuraman et.al in 1985, 1986 and 1988 resulted in a quality assessment tool. This instrument called SERVQUAL is a scale with multiple attributes that allows measuring expectations and perceptions of service quality²⁴⁷.

SERVQUAL was initially applied in banking and later on it was applied in tourism services²⁴⁸.

²⁴³ Idem, p.52.

²⁴⁴ Fitzsimmons, J.A., Fitzsimmons, M., J. (1994), *Service Management for Competitive Advantage*, McGraw-Hill, Inc., pp.168-169.

²⁴⁵ Baker, D.A., Fesenmaier, D.R. (1997), *Effects of service climate on manager's and employees' rating of visitor's service quality expectations*, Journal of Travel Research, 36(1), pp.15-22.

²⁴⁶ Lewis, R. , Booms, B. (1983) , *The marketing aspects of service quality*, in Berry, L., Shostsck, G., and Upah (eds), *Emerging Perspectives of Services Marketing*. Chicago: American Marketing, pp.99-107.

²⁴⁷ Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A. and Berry 1988, L.L., *SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality*, Journal of Retailing , 64, Spring, 12-37.

²⁴⁸ Fick, G.R., Ritchie, B.J.R. 1991, *Measuring Service Quality in the Travel and Tourism Industry*, Journal

The assessment of service quality is made by comparing the expectations regarding the service quality and the perceptions regarding the performance of received services (importance-performance analysis). When expectations exceed perceived performance, services are assessed as having low quality and performance, but when expectations are exceeded by the perceived performance, the level of service is considered high. A critical point of service consumer satisfaction represents the construction of expectations that through reality-check do not subclass the reality. Initially, in 1985, SERVQUAL had 10 categories of attributes, which were then reduced to five categories with 22 items.

The five dimensions of service quality, SERVQUAL scale components are²⁴⁹:

Tangibles: Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel;

Reliability: Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;

Responsiveness: Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;

Assurance: Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence;

Empathy: Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.

SERVQUAL experienced improvements in several directions made by the creators themselves²⁵⁰. Thus they attempted to clarify further their conceptualization regarding satisfaction as a component of quality service.

Carman was among the first researchers who gave a reply to SERVQUAL and proposed improvements and adjustments in order for the instrument to be applied in retail.²⁵¹

Fick and Ritchie²⁵² extend the use of SERVQUAL instrument in tourism services, for four categories of services. It regards services provided by: airlines, hotels, restaurants and ski slopes.

4. Empirical research study for quality tourist services

During March-April 2010 a survey was conducted among the population of Oradea, Romania. The sample was composed of a total of 1060 people, sampling method chosen was the stratification method²⁵³ (margin of error of 3%). The criterion used was age. Distribution criterion was chosen as follows: 150 people aged 18-24 years, 234 people aged 25-34 years, 208 people aged 35-44 years, 192 people aged 45-54 years, 152 people aged 55-64 years, 124 people aged 65-80 years. The respondents were persons who received accommodation services at least once since 2007 till presently.

Research goal was to investigate the level of Oradea inhabitants satisfaction, with the quality of tourism services and the performance of service personnel.

The research instrument was a questionnaire with 21 questions, plus some questions related to socio-demographic aspects.

The respondents were investigated on three dimension of tourist services quality, respectively: the material base (equipments), staff training and staff behavior. It was investigated the importance given to these dimensions and their perceived performance for tourist services in Romania.

and Travel Research, 30, 2.

²⁴⁹ Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A. and Berry, op.cit.

²⁵⁰ Zeithaml, Valerie A., A. Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry (1990). *Delivering Quality Service*. New York: The Free Press.

²⁵¹ Carman, J.M. (1990), *Consumer perceptions of service quality: An assessment of the SERVQUAL dimensions*, *Journal of Marketing* 665(1), pp.33-35.

²⁵² Fick, G.R., Ritchie, B.J.R., op.cit.

²⁵³ Studiu realizat în colaborare cu ActiveJob Consulting

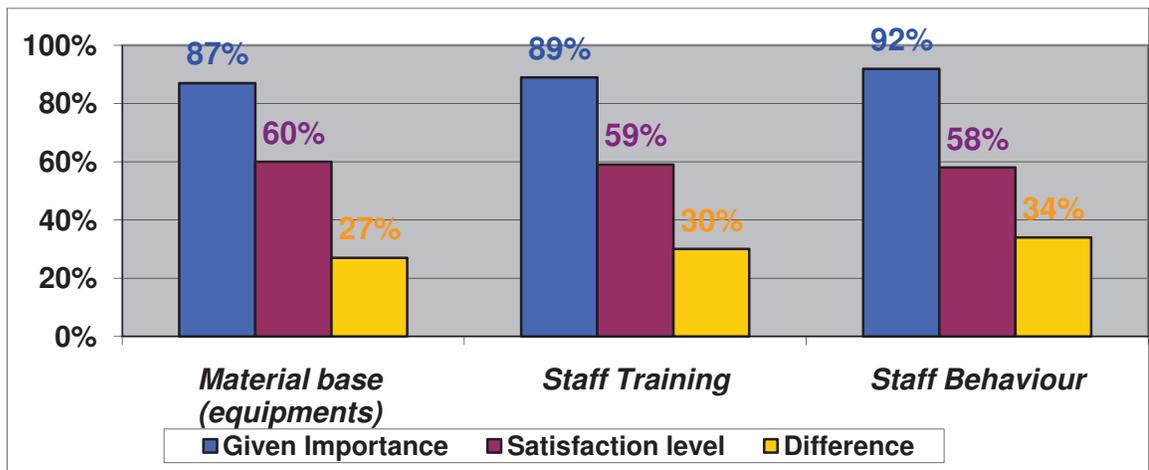


Figure no.1 Importance / performance dimensions of tourist services quality and their relationship

The results reflect that out of the three dimensions of service quality the utmost importance is given to staff conduct, which is also evaluated at the lowest level in terms of performance. A discussion should be the extent to which high expectations lead to a more severe performance evaluation. Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman argue that expectations are dependent on the consumer's background experiences²⁵⁴, therefore a richer experience leads to more realistic expectations. Next place as level of importance is the *Staff training*, also on second place as perceived level of performance.

Guest services staff in general, but tourism staff in particular has a crucial role in ensuring quality of provided services.

There were 19 attributes chosen for tourism staff, in correspondence with SERVQUAL, for which it was done the analysis of the importance given by respondents and the analysis of the perceived performance of the staff from Romania (Table no.1). A scale with five steps was used in this research, from "unimportant" to "very important".

The results show that a great importance is given to all attributes. Situated on the first places, with values over 4.5 are attributes of Staff Kindness (Courtesy) and Responsibility, Communication and Timeliness. Also, from another study by Ban²⁵⁵ among customers of six hotels situated on the Black Sea seaside, it resulted that the characteristic Politeness of staff is the most important from clients' perspective. The lowest values were obtained by the attributes Anticipation and Enthusiasm of staff, the reason being maybe the insufficient definition of these attributes or misinterpretation. (Figure no.2)

In assessing the performance it was observed a decrease for all attributes. The best values, although all were average level, were obtained for *Physical Appearance* and *Staff Communication*.

Interesting correlations were highlighted by identifying the links between the education of the respondents and the importance given to *Staff Kindness (Courtesy)*, the education of the respondents and the importance given to *Professional Knowledge* of staff and education of the respondents and the importance given to *Communication*.

²⁵⁴ Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, Berry, L. (1993), *The nature and determinants of customer expectations of service*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 1-12.

²⁵⁵ Ban Olimpia, *Synthetic measure of the quality of service taking into account the client s perspective in the hotel industry*, Economia Aziendale Online-International Business Review, N. 1/2008, Special Issue ISSN 1826-4719 Reg. Trib.Pavia-n.685/2007 R.S.P., pp.1-7, www.ea2000.it.

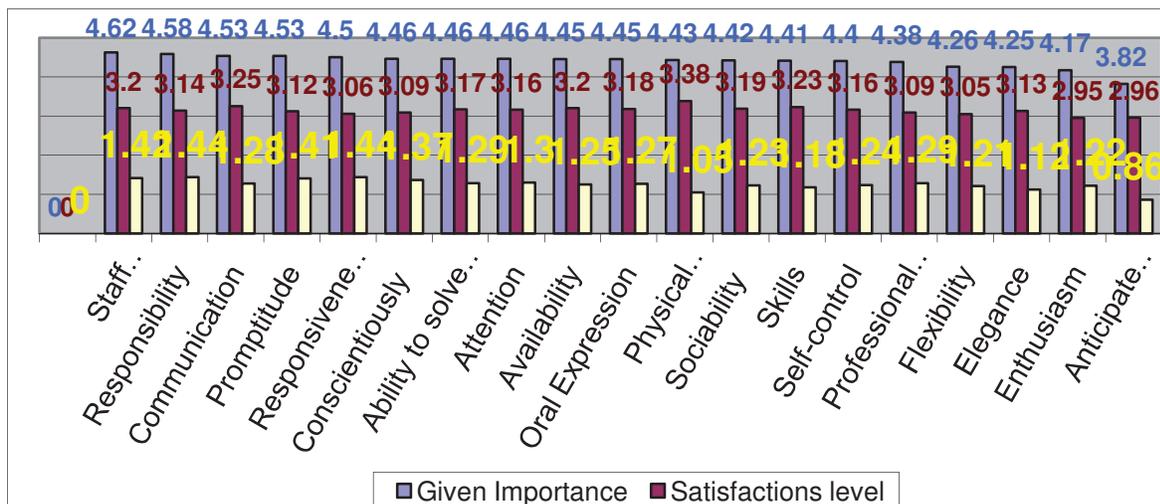


Figure no.2 Importance / performance of the attributes of tourism personnel and their relationship

An analysis of the investigated attributes, divided into groups, as proposed by SERVQUAL, shows that Oradea inhabitants are giving the highest importance to *Trust* and *Responsiveness* categories. Highest level of satisfaction was expressed for the *Tangibles* category. (Table no.1) In research done by Fick and for all four categories of services provided by: airlines, hotels, restaurants and ski slopes, resulted that it is given utmost importance to *Confidence* and *Assurance*.²⁵⁶

Table no.1 Correlation between service quality dimensions (SERVQUAL) and the studied aspects

Nr.crt.	Service quality dimensions (SERVQUAL)	Studied service quality dimensions	Given Importance
1.	Tangibles	Appearance and hygiene of personnel Elegance	87%
2.	Reliability	Conscientiousness Skills Responsibility	90%
3.	Responsiveness	Attention Promptitude Availability Responsiveness to problems Staff Kindness / Courtesy	90%
4.	Assurance	Professional knowledge of staff Ability to solve problems Self-control Communication Oral expression	89%
5.	Empathy	Anticipate desires	83%

²⁵⁶ Fick, G.R., Ritchie, B.J.R., op.cit.

		Flexibility Sociability Enthusiasm	
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If we analyze the histogram for the importance given to *Confidence* and the histogram for the importance given to *Elegance* of staff, we observe a relatively large dispersion, suggesting a relatively broad range of responses.

5. Conclusions

Tourism service staff has an essential role in ensuring quality of tourism services. Research done on Oradea population showed that between the three components of quality of service, the utmost importance is given to staff conduct, and then staff training and material base (equipments). This view is reinforced by the important attribute of tourism staff located on 1st place: *Staff Kindness/Courtesy*. Staff Kindness is an attribute which is difficult to define and standardize, however service quality is often measured by Staff Kindness by the Romanian customers. After Staff Kindness, *Responsibility* is much appreciated by the Romanian tourism consumers. We can see there is need of (re)gaining trust in the tourism services employees in România.

In regards to the perceived performance, evaluations reflect an average level of consumer satisfaction, the most appreciated attributes being *Appearance*, *Communication* and *Staff Skills*. Divided into the five dimensions of service quality, according to SERVQUAL, we see that Romanian consumers give the utmost importance to *Confidence*, followed by *Receptivity*.

We observe a sensitivity of the Romanian tourism consumer towards service staff behaviour, also because of some negative past experiences.

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