

ISSUES REGARDING E-SERVICE QUALITY MANAGEMENT – CUSTOMIZATION ON ONLINE TOURISM DOMAIN

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Abstract: This article was written in order to provide an overview of the significance of e-Service quality management; this subject was approached because today's products and services are radically shifted to digital form and delivered through the Internet. The author chose to make a customization on tourism domain because travel industry has been significantly revolutionized by Information communication technologies in the last decade. Given the importance and boost of the Internet in services' and companies' internationalization, this article aimed at identifying the conceptual issues concerning service quality management -in services provided via the Internet- and at emphasizing the importance of e-Service quality in customer's life. In the first part of the paper work were mentioned general aspects regarding e-Services and quality management; the author also tried to determine the factors which have the biggest impact on this area; the second part of the work paper contains issues regarding quality of e-Services in tourism sector, while the third part of the article intends to draw your attention over some aspects regarding eTourism and the importance of quality management in services provided via the Internet in tourism domain.

Keywords: e-Service, quality management, touristic services

Introduction

With its rapid growth, Internet has become the biggest and one of the best information source for the people; it can be also perceived as a global and critical medium in which business activities are generated due to e-commerce and e-supply chain management. Because of the spread of electronic networks, business and consumer behaviour have been lately transformed. E-Services, which have risen to the border of two separated business domains of study (e-commerce and services) represent one feature of this transformation [8].

Information communication technologies, used in the field of tourism, creates new opportunities for retailers but, at the same time, represents new challenges: on one hand, the Internet offers the potential to make information and booking facilities available to large numbers of tourists at lower costs than usual; on the other hand, considering that e-Service quality determines competitiveness at its highest level, the companies dealing with services provided via the Internet must build resource capabilities and customer satisfaction.

This paper emphasizes some aspects regarding online tourism domain because nowadays tourism represents a tool for sustainable development; it generates, how statistics have shown, 11% of Global gross Domestic Product (GDP), employs 200

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million people and transports nearly 700 million international travellers per year – a figure that is expected to double by 2020.

In this context, *the Internet has stimulated the emergence of a new type of tourism, with travel consumers being more independent, and preferring to search for information and tourism opportunities online by themselves (consum-actors). The Internet is already the primary source of information on tourist destinations* [18].

Conceptual delimitations and general aspects regarding e-Services

E-Services have been defined by different authors during time: Javalgi & Co. said that e-Services are “those services that can be delivered electronically”, while Boyer & Co. defined them as being “interactive services that are delivered on the Internet using advanced telecommunications, information and multimedia technologies”.

All these have been said, is a sure fact that an e-Service is characterised by being delivered via the Internet; being web-based does not require person to person communication, but still requires *interactive in nature, act as an information service providing quality by better information and content and, lastly, the facilitation for self-service where the user effectively does work previously done by the service provider* [3].

Considering the differences between traditional service and e-Service, three aspects which stand out must be mentioned. These are [11]:

- 1) the absence of sales staff. In e-Service, there is no service encounters between the customers and the sales staff as in the traditional service.
- 2) the absence of traditional tangible element. In e-Service, service process is almost completed in the virtual environment with some intangible elements.
- 3) self-service of customers. In e-Service, customers conduct self-service in purchasing and realize control in business process.

Tacking this into account, the benefits provided by using e-Services should be mentioned. For better understanding, the next table (Table no. 1) identifies additional benefits -differentiating between internal and external factors- which influence e-Services.

An important reason for consumers to use online services is the convenience offered. First of all, the authors mentioned the *product differentiation*: by using the web, consumers can easily compare characteristics and prices of various products without the need to travel and thus the supply of e-Services reduces their search costs. The Internet provides technologies and methods for product differentiation, which is a powerful instrument for companies to increase switching costs for the consumer; this can increase the barriers for new entrants and increase the value for the costumers [9].

Table 1. Benefits of IT investments

External benefit	Mechanism	Creation of service	Creation of a product	Creation of a distribution channel	Additional concepts
	Example	Claim management Relationship marketing	Flexible creation of products Fast reaction due to monitoring	Reservation via WWW	Electronic catalogs
Internal benefit	Mechanism	Creation of information	Reduction of costs	Reduction of serv. Costs	Operational advantages
	Example	Int. Management Information	By means of communication and cooperation	Direct e-mail contact	Access to information, controlling

Source: [12 p. 24]

In the literature is also mentioned that “lower search costs for price and product offerings in the Internet promote price competition among sellers” [8], fact which leads to *price discrimination*. According to Bakos, in order to overcome the threats caused by this, companies have to employ appropriate pricing strategies for selling products in the online environment, fact which would reduce the transparency of the market and would make difficult for buyers to compare the prices of alternative product offerings. Transparent price comparison, variable product aggregation, easier access to information – all of these contribute to the lowering of search costs.

Mentioning *product distribution*, “value can be created and extracted by enhancing value to customers, reducing distribution costs and improving the match between consumer preferences and products”, as M. Gratzner and W. Winiwarter sustain.

By using e-Services, commercial units have the opportunity to achieve more detailed information about their clients; in traditional services, this fact would need higher costs, to increase consumer loyalty –by providing quality e-Services-, to experience cost reductions regarding transaction and administration costs etc.

We can also mention the fact that e-Services are available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fact which allows the customer to access it whenever he wants. This fact leads to efficiency in using time, which also represent an important matter for client.

E-Services quality

The main task of service quality management is ensuring that services are provided at the quality standards requested or expected by the clients. Quality service means a whole range of activities and issues that influence a customer satisfaction: accessibility, timeliness, explanations offered to clients about what they found, what they did and why.

Regarding quality management in the area of tourism –in the context of traditional services (person-to-person)-, its importance ensues from the fact that for a unit, to achieve and to maintain the quality wanted by the client -in conditions of efficiency- represents a necessity for its existence. Reaching this desideratum is conditioned by the planned and efficient use of the human, material and financial resources. [1]

Specialists consider that e-Service quality is very different, because it involves person-to-technology interactions; its dimensions do not perfectly overlap with “offline” service quality dimensions. E-Services’ key goals are to provide reliable and responsive support, personalization, efficiency, credibility and ease of use.

Currently, studies on e-Service quality have been conducted in different context, including online retailing, online shopping, online financial services etc. Over the past years, researchers have attempted to discover the attributes of a service that are important to the customer and that contribute to customers' quality assessment.

SERVQUAL was originally measured on ten aspects of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding or knowing the customer and tangibles. It measures the gap between customer expectations and experience. [19]

By the early nineties the authors had refined the model and, since then, five of the service quality attributes constitute the basis for measurement of service quality. This “scale” is called RATER: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness.

The literature emphasizes some characteristics adapted to e-Service quality field (Table no. 2).

As Oliva, Oliver & MacMillan were cited in *Consumer perception of e-Service quality: from Internet purchaser and non-purchaser perspectives* written by Minjoon J., “[...] not all service quality dimensions have the same effect on consumers' perceptions of service quality. The key is to find, among various service quality attributes, which dimensions are more crucial to enhancing the level of service quality and to what degree they do so. In this manner, an organization can understand what service areas should be emphasized to most effectively improve quality while avoiding investing valuable resources in providing service quality attributes that may not pay off”.

Table 2. Dimensions of quality in services provided via the Internet

Author(s)	Dimensions
SERVQUAL	Reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding, tangibles
RATER	Reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, responsiveness
Alawattagama and Wattagama (2008)	Factual information, business information, general information, consumer-related information
Bauer et. al. (2006)	Responsiveness, reliability, process, functionality, enjoyment
Bienstock and Collier (2006)	Ease of use, privacy, design, information accuracy, functionality, order condition, timeliness, order accuracy, interactive fairness, outcome fairness, procedural fairness
Black and Kaynama (2000)	Content, access, navigation, design, response, background, personalization
Cox and Dale	Intangibility, simultaneity, heterogeneity, perishability
Cristobal et al. (2007)	Website design, layout, attractiveness of selection, information, ease of use, technical quality, reliability, functional benefit, emotional benefit
Dabholkar (1996)	Website design, reliability, delivery, ease of use, enjoyment, control
Donthu and Yoo (2001)	Ease of use, aesthetic design, processing speed, security
Fang and Yang (2004)	Responsiveness, reliability, credibility, competence, access, courtesy, communication, information, responsiveness, website design
Fassnacht and Koese (2006)	Graphic quality, layout, attractiveness of selection, information, ease of use, technical quality, reliability, functional benefit, emotional benefit
Field et al. (2004)	Website design, reliability, security, customer service
Gilly and Wolfenbarger (2003)	Fulfillment, reliability, website design, privacy, security, customer service
Janda et. al (2002)	Access, security, sensation, information, content
Jun and Yang (2004)	Reliability, access, ease of use, personalization, credibility, security (Internet purchasers), security, responsiveness, availability
Madu and Madu (2002)	Performance, features, structure, aesthetics, reliability, serviceability, security and system integrity, trust, responsiveness, service differentiation and customization, Web store police, reputation, assurance, empathy
Parasuraman et al. (2005)	Efficiency, availability, fulfillment, privacy, responsiveness, compensation, contract
Santos (2003)	Ease of use, appearance, linkage, structure, content, efficiency, reliability, communication, security, incentive, customer support
Surjadaja et al. (2003)	Security, interaction, responsiveness, information, reliability, delivery, customization
Zeithaml et al. (2002)	Security, communication, reliability, responsiveness, delivery

Source: Selected references

A number of researchers adopted SERVQUAL in various service industries; some authors, like Rosen and Karwan (also cited in the paper mentioned before) identified the significant attributes in four different service industries, such as: "understanding the customer" for restaurants, "assurance" and "reliability" for health care, "reliability" and "tangibles" for lecture teaching and "assurance" for bookstores.

eTourism: the importance of quality management in services provided via the Internet in tourism domain

Tourism is often regarded as a luxury good with high price elasticity, so that it is quite sensitive to economic fluctuations. Consequently, there can be observed an increasing competition among tourist destinations, but also among the providers of touristic services.

Recent studies have shown that e-Services have boomed in the last decade. Many public actors in the tourism sector have recognized the great socio-economic potential of the supply and use of e-Services, but the great variety in e-Services renders it difficult to design a consistent strategy (see also Bruinsma F., Kourtit K., Nijkamp P.).

eTourism or online tourism domain involves those technological elements and information entities related to travel. For better understanding of this concept, is necessary to understand its characteristics in terms of complexity, as well as the nature of entities and their relationships.

As Xiang Z., Wöber K. and Fesenmaier D. affirm in their paper, *Representation of the Online Tourism Domain in Search Engines*, the fact that the properties of the online tourism domain are formed based a mixture between the following perspectives [10]:

- 1) the *industry perspective*, which focuses on what constitutes the supply of tourism and thus, the organizational entities that comprise the online tourism domain;
- 2) the *symbolic representation perspective*, which describes the representation of tourism products and related experiences by the industry;
- 3) the *travel behavior perspective*, which includes the activities and the supporting systems at different stages of the travel experience;
- 4) the *travel information search perspective*, which is related to the nature of the information sought to support travel experiences.

As M. Gratzner and W. Winiwarter say in their study, *A framework for competitive advantage in eTourism*, the importance of new information and communication technologies for the travel and tourism industry has increased enormously over the past few years. Nowadays, tourism is among the most important application domains in the World Wide Web and specialists estimate that within the next ten years, 30% of business will be Internet based.

According to Werthner H. and Klein S., the structural changes of tourism market - related with technological development- have an increasing impact on different

tasks and business processes in tourism. The structure of the tourism market can be summarized as a new level of competition with the following features [13]:

- new competitors, competing either on classical ground, such as new destinations or new levels, such as new entrants by means of new infrastructure;
- further differentiation of products with respect to market segments as well as distribution channels;
- more attractive presentation of products, featuring interactive multimedia on-line presentations;
- fierce price competition, where especially financially powerful newcomers are able to initiate price wars;
- linkages with other products (travel products are used for client networking in other areas such as the publishing sector);
- differentiated and direct access to the final consumer, leading to an intensive channel competition.

Considering this, actors in the tourism sector want to enhance their international tourist profile - not only by improving their image, but also by popularizing the heritage of the zone where they activate; in order to do this, they need to provide more accessible information through the use of e-Services regarding touristic attraction, offered services, prices etc. [see also 5].

Processes will be supported or automated by the means of IT applications, reflecting, in this way, the network character for the industry [13]:

- product creation, taking into account the very complex product aggregation process and individualized consumer needs;
- adding of new product and service elements, leading to new type of products;
- improved product descriptions, especially by multimedia applications;
- easier market access by means of new distribution channels;
- dealing with permanent innovation as well as differentiation, leading to new pricing strategies;
- supporting dynamic cooperations between companies;
- performance evaluation and resource utilization (both on an enterprise level, as well as on a regional level);
- providing a flexible, worldwide and also mobile user access along different channels;
- planning and forecasting;
- maintaining long term relationship with costumers, enabled by identification of individual needs and the integration of costumers already in the product definition phase.

The central purpose of a firm which activates in tourism sector –and not only- is the improvement of those aspects of quality which are more important to customer. Regarding touristic services, three out of the five attributes that compose RATER can be mentioned as being key-attributes, which form a strong “foundation” for

providing high quality services. These are “reliabilty”, “emphaty” and ”responsiveness”.

This three were chosen because, even if the touristic product and its quality depend to a large extent on the professional ability of the service staff, aspects related to professional ethics are seen by the consumer as inseparable from the quality of a service. In tourism, the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately could be the most important attribute of all. Even if consumer’s demands are changing permanently, there is a fact which will never change: they want consistent, excellent performance. What matters most is that reliability of an entire organisation depends upon the attitude of the employee. That is why I also choose “emphaty” as being one of the key-attributes in provifing quality services in tourism sector. Quality cannot be provided unless emphaty is present among staff, fact which leads to care and individualized attention that must be provided to customers.

At the same time, tourist's perception on the quality of the received service depends on the level of performers' involvement, which requires responsiveness. Having this, employee will do their work energetically and enthusiastically, will help costumers and will provide prompt and quality services.

Safety and security, which are vital to providing quality in tourism, cannot be omitted, also. More than any other economic activity, the success or failure of a tourism destination depends on being able to provide a safe and secure environment for visitors. The same thing has valability for providers of e-Services: studies have shown that the trust in the security of e-Services has increased, so consumers are more willing to use them.

Talking about e-Services in touristic domain, consumers may judge quality along both objective quality or perceived quality; a perceived e-Service quality construct is proposed in the literature, which consists of the dimensions from both online companies’ and customers’ perspectives. This model involves nine dimensions, as is emphasized in Figure no. 1:

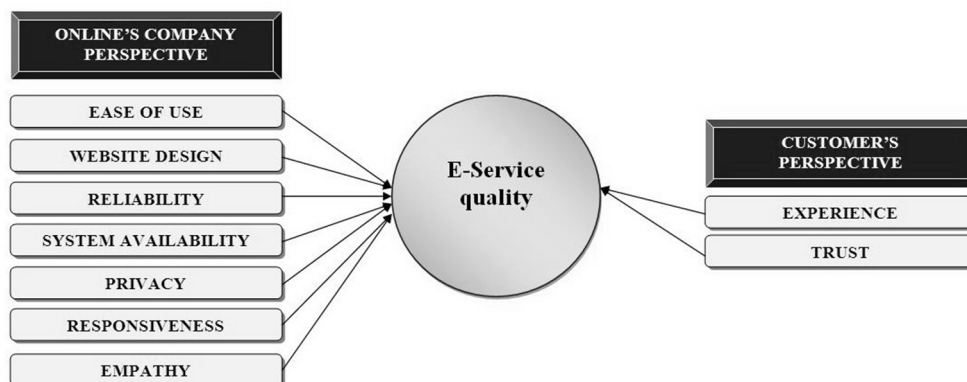


Figure 1. E-Service quality model for tourism domain

Source: Adapted from [9]

Ease of use - in order to improve e-Services accessibility, different authors recommend: design for accessibility from the outset of website's development, involve users with disabilities in the testing of the site, focus on the benefits of an accessible Web site to all users.

Website design – is important, considering that studies have shown that first impression count in website design and the aesthetic of the design is thus an important factor in the success of an online business.

Reliability - the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Customers require online companies to have the ability to perform the promised service accurately. It has been also proved that they also prefer to have increasing access to information regarding the progress of their order. As Minjoon J. affirms, “[...] in reality, product and service fulfillment still remains a big challenge for online suppliers and most online consumers feel frustrated with the poor service reliability provided by virtual stores. The primary reasons reside in the lack of strong internal and external collaboration. Internal collaboration includes tight integration of Web sites with customer service operations and communication among different functional departments, while external collaboration means integration of supply chain partners” [14].

System availability: e-Service can be regarded as information-driven service process. In e-Service, information is vital for customers to make their decision since they can not physically examine what they want to purchase and how about the company.

Responsiveness - the willingness to help customers and provide prompt services. Even if customers expect to be responded to their inquiries promptly and they want to find desired information quickly and accurately, unfortunately, companies which activate in online environment usually lack real-time interaction with their clients.

Empathy - the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in their situation. Even though there is no direct human interaction in the virtual e-Service process, some human contacts are involved in e-Service, for example e-mail communication. Providing customer individual attention shows empathy to customers. Regarding the attributes of empathy dimension, there can be mentioned: good personal attention, adequate contacts, address complaints friendly and consistently courteous.

Experience - the process of getting knowledge or skill from doing, seeing or feeling things. The initial customer experience might be positive if their queries are solved promptly. When it comes to actually solving customer problems, agents should be given all the help they can get. This fact, together with familiarity with a website and the degree of perceived usability, will lead to loyalty of the customer.

Trust - talking about it, many persons would think about a brick wall. Apart from having a good rapport with employee, it is imperative for firms which develop their activity online to have a strong and trusting relationship with their customers, because they are the pillars of the business. In this way, after having repeated

positive experiences, costumers trust a particular service and the particular firm that offers it; once trust has been gained, loyalty comes naturally.

Summary

The tourism area is one of those industries which can gain huge synergy effects from the use of the Internet. Regarding the “trends” of this *industry*, which are applicable to most of countries, there can be mentioned the increased number of tourists -which is expeted to be growing-, their increased expectations and preference for performance and value and the continuously changes in their’s demands.

Online touristic services form an industry which is going to be quite competitive, considering the new entrance of global players coming from abroad; even if automated technologies will be needed in order to develop and improve it, we must approve the fact that tourists are getting knowledgeable due to information sharing and accessibility to a platform that enables direct booking, easy payment for end-user, business-to-business trading for product providers, travel agents and resellers. Even if we speak about online services, quality becomes a “must” in order to gain the trust and loyalty of costumers. This is due to the fact that service quality has strong impacts on costumer satisfaction. In this context, improving e-Services quality -in order to satisfy and keep costumers, to have a competitive advantage and to make a business successful- is becoming a challenging issue.

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KWESTIE DOTYCZĄCE ZARZĄDZANIA JAKOŚCIĄ W E-USŁUGACH - DOSTOSOWYWANIE ON-LINE W DZIEDZINIE USŁUG TURYSTYCZNYCH

Streszczenie: Ten artykuł został napisany w celu zapewnienia przeglądu znaczenia zarządzania jakością e-Service, temat ten został podjęty ponieważ, dzisiejsze produkty i usługi przeszły radykalną zmianę do postaci cyfrowej i dostarczane są za pośrednictwem Internetu. Autor zdecydował się wprowadzić dostosowanie w domenie turystyki, ponieważ branża ta została zrewolucjonizowana w technologiach informacyjnych i komunikacyjnych w ostatniej dekadzie. Biorąc pod uwagę znaczenie i zwiększenie umiędzynarodowienia Internetu w usługach i firmach, artykuł ten ma na celu identyfikację zagadnień koncepcyjnych dotyczących zarządzania jakością usług świadczonych za pośrednictwem internetu oraz podkreślanie znaczenia jakości e-usług w życiu klienta. W pierwszej części artykułu zostały wymienione ogólne aspekty dotyczące e-usług oraz zarządzania jakością, autor próbował również zidentyfikować czynniki, które miały największy wpływ na ten obszar, druga część referatu zawiera zagadnienia dotyczące jakości e -usług w sektorze turystycznym, a trzecia część ma na celu zwrócić uwagę na niektóre aspekty dotyczące e-turystyki i znaczenia zarządzania jakością usług świadczonych przez Internet w domenie turystyki.

电子服务质量管理中的问题-在线定制旅游服务

摘要: 本文旨在提出电子服务质量管理的重要性概况。这一主题之所以进入我们的视线是因为产品和服务正在想数字化，网络化趋势发展。因为今年来旅游业通过信息技术产生了深远的变革，所以作者选择了这一主题。考虑到互联网在服务和企业的国际化的发展和重要性，本文目的是确定通过互联网提供服务的服务质量管理，以及强调面向客户的质量管理的重要性。在本文的第一部分中我们提出电子服务和质量管理的大体方面。作者同时努力提出这一领域的关键行因素。本文的第二部分中阐述旅游领域电子服务质量问题。第三部分对电子旅游方面和旅游业通过互联网提供服务的质量管理的重要性进行了阐述分析。