

The Quality of Information and Related Sources of Information as an Assumption for Effective Decision-Making Process for Tourists to Travel in the European Tourism Market

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Abstract Assumption of effective decision-making process for tourists on a trip is based on quality information. In order to gain insight of the source of information about tourists' decisions related to travel and to the European tourist market, a secondary research was conducted. Subjects-tourists, who participated in the survey, were asked to indicate which sources of information they use when making decisions about travel plans, by valuing different sources of information as very important to less important ones. Survey results indicate highly prevailing sources of information such as "recommendations of friends and colleagues," and the Internet as a new technological solution tourists use when making decisions about their travel resort. The most important sources of information, according to the demographic characteristics of respondents in all 27 EU Member States, were also analyzed. In this paper, preliminary results are brought in connection with the timeframe and poor economic condition determining the behavior of consumers and their capabilities related to travel, and hence the frequency of travel, tourism trends and alternative travel destinations which are a result of most acceptable solutions to these conditions. Classical sources of information, such as travel agencies with the exception of "the recommendations of friends and colleagues", have new challenges and additional responsibilities on how to effectively implement stated technological solutions into new business processes.

Keywords: quality of information, sources of information, demographic characteristics of tourists, dynamic market environment, crisis

1. Introduction

Time is a very important resource and component of services provided, when it comes to realizing as well as informing about services. Therefore, it logically follows that timeliness and efficiency in phases of realizing, informing and obtaining services; a new dimension is added to services when tourists perceive services with quality. It is a fact that tourists, with such characterized services, tie themselves to certain service providers and tourist agencies, even when choosing other goods and services from the same area. This helps with quality verification of services offered whereby the providers of destination services benefit by gaining value. In forthcoming activities, past behavior of tourists tied to value of services is observed, encouraging further loyalty of customers in relation to tourist subjects.

2. Meaning of quality in services

The business philosophy towards which the time lost is equivalent not only to an opportunity for success, but in much greater losses which bring into question the possibility of even renowned market subjects continuing the business. In practice, this started new trends and affected intermediaries and service providers' efficiency reviews in the segment of their tourist offers.

The expression "concept of quality" is not determined; it can relate to quality of activity, quality of process, quality of goods, or some combination of qualities mentioned. In the full definition of quality, the dimension of a firm's quality of servicing and providing goods needs to be highlighted. Diversification of goods, in sync with clients' interest, maintains quality from aspects designated to tourists, while from aspects of tourist intermediaries and service providers, quality is tied with configuration, production, and placement of tourist goods and services. The main assignment of service providers and intermediaries is to create tourist goods and services in order to satisfy the needs of clients – tourists. According to Stevens (1989, p.589), quality represents capability of products which satisfy the needs or exceed the expected needs of clients. Guaranteed quality draws attention to the market and affects the perceived risk of clients.

Quality of service is multidimensional, abstract and a concept which is hard to define. Quality of service is evident in relation to the five dimensions by which quality of service is defined: visible elements such as physical elements, faithfulness such as ability to provide timely and reliable service, responsibility, professionalism through knowledge and expertise of staff and expressed empathy transparent through interest for the specific needs and interests of tourists (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988, p.13). The tourist service provider and intermediaries have to direct their business towards improving performance with diversification and higher levels of service dictated by market conditions, such as competition running in the same demand circles of tourist services. Between quality of services and loyalty of clients, there is strong bond which has been proven by many researches. Results show quality stimulates interest of clients, thereby facilitating placement of services, and finally -- it influences the satisfaction of clients who consume those services. This is the method which establishes loyalty of clients to service providers. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) strongly influenced development of tourism and travelling in the last 50 years, especially in placement of tourist goods and services, in the area of distribution automation, in creating new distribution channels, and in areas of marketing and informing tourists about services (Golob, Regan, 2001, p.96).

3. Specificity and quality of information sources on the European tourist market

The development of information and communication technology has greatly eased the availability of tourist information; however, it has also brought a vast area of information, which can complicate the tourists making a right choice. Because of the sophisticated possibilities contained in the way of implementation of communication between users, reported in the benefits on the World Wide Web, Internet affects the efficiency of the service delivery process, no matter what "stage of serving process" or service is in question. Therefore, Internet web sites verify their quality through satisfying the tourists' expectations in way of being informative, interactive, and attractive (Chu, 2001, p.96). With their contents, web sites need to support and encourage the interest of clients, and attract the continuum cooperation and booking service. Baloglu and Pekcan (2006, p.173) give recommendations for hotels to constantly evaluate contents on their websites to guarantee useful, appropriate and effective website to its clients. Research shows that poor web site content does not give quality information and can result with 50% loss of potential sale and create a negative impression on clients, while 40% of potential users will not access the web site (Cunliffe, 2000, p.321). Quality of web site services is evident in six dimensions: ease of use, usefulness, content, safety, responsibility, and personalization (Kim, Cavusgil & Calantone, 2006, p.49). In that context, especially from the aspect of individual perception of the process, Internet constantly proves itself in tourism, if not by elimination then by correction of certain lacks determined by the nature of contacting – prevalent the same ones, while perfecting opportunities focused towards personalized service, making the service more acceptable with effective processing - "adjusts to tourism". From the moment when tourists, guided by their own choosing, hold the key characteristics of goods and services – security, accuracy and speed of implementation, ICT boots up the power of return ratio in the supply chain between intermediaries and clients, while, at the same time, creates new priorities, order and structure on the market. In accordance with this, new relations between intermediaries and service providers in tourism are defined where they are ready to accept new priorities as measurements of service quality by adjusting the launching of their own tourism products and services. Reverse effect of this relationship is evident when service providers in this "adjustment program", structurally and with the way of placement, penetrate the consciousness of individuals by creating competitive products. Therefore, ICT can, indirectly, affect changed characteristics of services which tourists value in selecting services and products. While polarization, on the tourist market, stimulates relevance of theory application and necessity of effective exchange, the power of this creative process does not affect the fundamental philosophy of tourism on the market. The power of this creative process is evident in the way of placement of tourist products. And while transformation of the way is evident, the mission in which service providers and intermediaries respond to market challenges is not. The subject of trade in tourism is directly related to the character of service providers and intermediaries, thus availing three forms of tourism products: simple as a single service provider, elemental such as hotel product or integrated product such as travel agencies and tourist packages. The quality of information to be obtained in relation to these tourism products is dependent on the method of effective advertising and information carried out by the same service providers, intermediaries or sources. Researches show information quality complements service quality and both are synergistically directed towards the satisfaction of consumers and loyalty with which tourists perceive used products by tying them to concrete service providers or intermediaries.

Understanding distribution channel system for placement of tourism products and services, it experienced a big shift from the traditional conception as an entirely simple model according to which "goods and services offered tourists directly and/or indirectly through intermediaries, such as travel agency" (Lubbe, 2005, p.386). Therefore, the meaning of travel agencies dominated in the area of "intermediaries that transfer goods and services to users from service providers"

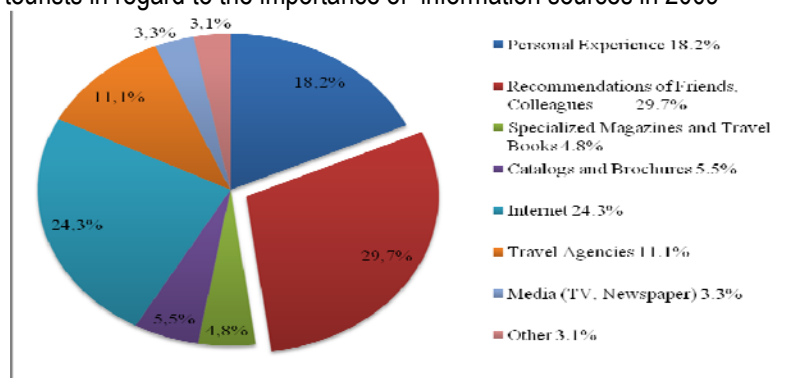
(Lubbe, 2005, p.386). According to Standing and Thandarayan (2000, p.47), travel agencies have three main functions “(1) perform the functions of financial brokers; (2) perform the transaction process (including printing tickets and forwarding money to service providers); (3) advising passengers”. In that light, travel agencies were looked at as agents of service providers who paid commission to travel agencies for selling their service. However, the new way in the distribution system of tourism goods and services and the new way in placement system of tourism products, which include information quality, motivate intermediaries to change the way of business by which they implement a competitive advantage. That means that travel agencies, which were limited in market coverage due to their size, but now with the use of new technologies agencies are able to approach a much wider market. Golob points out how “the local travel agencies which used to use GDS (Global Distribution System) adjusted marketing strategies and widened market coverage of services provided in attempt to gain competitive advantage” (Golob, Regan, 2001, p.98). According to Mamaghani (2009, p.367), the Internet, as channel distribution and source of quality information, allowed tourist intermediaries to utilize it as easier access to the global market. This created possibility of entering into additional marketing segments and it stimulated global joining of intermediaries with the goal of widening tourist offers, advertising and booking through inter-organizational reservation systems. The new distribution channels can't be observed separately from other business segments, so the same author assumes online travel agencies can overall tourist experiences and expectations coordinate with the design of websites, online booking and “future travel agencies need to keep up with competitive destination offers which will offer forms of content, value and benefits and technical - the use simplified to the level of friendly relations between the clients” (Mamaghani, 2009, p.368). Technology, in that way, doesn't change only one segment of business, but it may influence all elements of organization and the complete value chain of tourist intermediaries.

The dynamic interoperable information system that collects, processes, stores and uses information from internal and external environment, has developed from a simple system made of components that collects, processes, stores, and sends information for supporting vitalization, analysis, coordination, decision making, organization control (Laudon, Laudon, 2007, p.117). Therefore, ICT represents an integrated system by securing effective information processing. Technology development is the key for innovation of tourism systems, because it can provide assumptions such as creating acceptable software and networking which will create better communication with partners and clients.

From the above, it is clear that with the goal of more efficient time usage during tourist travel, it is necessary to collect information related to the specific destination, and content-related services available in accordance with tourist preferences. The specificity of the information still depends on the nature of travel and the manner of its organization while, keeping in mind, usage of intermediary products, such as travel arrangement, tourists retain a dose of security since performance synchronization of services, minimizing uncertainty and activities of travel entrusted to an agent is under arrangement. Two main ways of travel reservations are direct reservation and reservations through intermediaries (travel agencies and tour operators) who, as distribution channels in tourism, represent a system which facilitates the sale and delivery of tourism services (Buhalis, Laws, 2001, p.67).

A secondary research was conducted in order to value sources of information which tourists are oriented to according to their preferences. Respondents who participated in the Eurobarometer research were asked which sources of information they used when making travel decisions and plans. Respondents valued information sources from the most important to the least. Research results are shown in continuation.

Figure 1 The share of tourists in regard to the importance of information sources in 2009



Source: Eurobarometer (2010). Survey on the attitudes of Europeans towards tourism.

Figure 1 shows the share of tourists with regard to the used information sources as the most important ones when making travel decisions in 2009. Most commonly, 1/3 (29,7%) of the respondents take recommendations of friends and

colleagues as sources of information when making a travel decision. On the other hand, 1/4 (24,3%) of the respondents use Internet as a source of information, while about 11% of the respondents use travel agencies. One out of ten tourists from Europe state travel agencies are the best source of information. Therefore, almost all travel related information, including travel organization, are available on the Internet, printed brochures or tourist guides available from specialized intermediaries or other media sources. The classic way of informing tourists about specific services in relation to travel or travel organization through travel agencies and intermediaries once dominated in the simple form of communication between tourists and travel agencies. However, the introduction of ICT in the business of travel agencies improves the way placements and quality of intermediaries, as a source of information, seems to be more efficient and which can be seen from the results of this research, i.e., only 11% of the respondents used travel agencies as a quality source of information. This research also shows respondents take recommendations of friends and colleagues as a good source of information when making a travel decision. In this way, tourists can obtain information they can rely on, based on experience and which supports views of individuals who utilized specific services. It is in the interest of the tourist to receive true, timely and reliable information. This data confirms the importance of quality products and services in tourism sold by service providers or agents, as it can strengthen or weaken the reputation of such service providers or agents, assuming the competitive position of the same. Nowadays, when tourists are constrained by time and physically dislocated from a travel agency, so the usage of ICT prevails time and location constraints and increases efficiency both in direct contact with service providers in the destination as well as organizing trips through travel agencies using package arrangements and benefits underlying the same.

According to the Eurobarometer research results in 2009, a respondent majority stated the most important source of information for an EU tourist when making a travel decision is the Internet. Among users of the media, the most prominent are residents with higher living standards in countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, Iceland, Finland and Denmark. On the other hand, respondents in Croatia, Hungary and the Czech Republic (12, 5% -13.8%) were of the opinion the Internet is the first and foremost source of information. Respondents using travel agencies as the first and foremost source of information are from Italy, Belgium, and Spain, while respondents from Luxemburg, Slovenia, Finland and Denmark use catalogs as sources of information. Specialized magazines and travel books are also an important source of information to respondents from Cyprus. From the above listed data, it is evident the application of new technology, the Internet, is becoming more popular as a source of information, however, it is also evident that traditional sources of information, travel agencies, with their informative, advisory and advertising function, occupy a stable segment of the total sources of information. The ways of informing and the importance of information depend on characteristics of market segments such as age, income, gender, education, and personal demands of tourists, predetermine the motivation for individual sources (Hsu, Tsai & Wu, 2009, p.293).

According to results of above explained research, with regard to demographic characteristics of respondents, Internet, as the most important source of information, is more frequently used by men than women and by respondents in age groups from 15-24 and 25-39. Also, Internet is used by respondents who are still pursuing education and respondents from metropolitan areas and respondents who are employed or self-employed. Travel agencies, as a source of information, are more often used by women, respondents who are 55 or older, less educated, respondents from rural areas and the unemployed. The results of the research within age populations, indicated above, presumes lower levels of education and technological awareness and respondents competency in using new technologies. This confirms respondents' contacts with travel agencies are established through intermediary channels communication. This again confirms the stability of travel agencies and their further representation in above mentioned market segments, as being part of an information source in all sources of information available. Depending on specific interests and preferences of tourists, specific tendencies are developed, so according to this, the character of information varies from the individuals' specific area of interest as well as the reasons that encourages travel such as cultural attractions, entertainment, sports, health, etc. (Sparks, Wen Pan, 2009, p.486).

4. Orientating tourists to the specific sources of information when deciding on the current travel conditions in the European travel market

The recent crisis has affected the development of world economy, and it created negative consequences in movements of tourism trends. Little (2009, p.3) states that tourism/travel represents one of the first needs that in people disaffirm from during the crisis. Until 2007, movement in world tourism trends indicated a large increase, especially in Europe. As one of the most popular tourist regions in the world, Europe contributed to 53% of tourist travels in the world. The European Union has the most developed economic system in the field of travel and tourism, which makes for 40% of the world's travel market. Statistical data shows that the world crisis brought a 4% decrease in tourist travelling, and a 6% profit

decrease in 2009 (RIVAF research, 2011). There is no definite answer on the effects of crisis on the tourism market due to the heterogenic changes in European countries, with respect to direction, intensity changes and participants who are directly or indirectly under the influence of these changes. Studies of the competitiveness of European tourism confirm the following dubious conclusion; despite the financial crisis the tourism sector had the least negative consequences in relation to other industries. However, this data argues, the term of horizontal substitution is related to poor economic conditions. This means tourists have similar behavior in their activities by preferring tourist products determined by lower prices, and not long distance destinations and simplified services. In that case, their choice would be concentrated on destinations marked by previous stated characteristics, priority characteristics, allowing the possibility of substitution of the tourist destination by another one, and the package tour by another one. It is necessary to add that in the last 15 years, during positive and negative growth, cyclical movements are evident within the tourism market.

The financial crisis was felt through almost all segments of tourism business. With regard to destinations, tourists in conditions of crisis choose cheaper destinations; therefore, Greece and Portugal as the east European countries had positive movements of tourism trends (Mazilu, Avram & Ispas, 2011, p.113). Even though some countries are politically unstable, this can create additional interest for tourists, and the reason is low prices of services and tourist products created in conditions of given countries. Furthermore, tourists are additionally motivated with acceptable quality of services and specifics such as cultural and natural factors. In such conditions, the tendency of further lowering prices in given countries is evident. So, we might say that one market segment gives place to a new market segment activity determined by disposable income by the same motives for travel, which in the given market conditions create additional space. It can be concluded that further progress and development of tourism greatly depends on intensity of involvement and interest of service providers and intermediates and their synergistic interest directed towards quality products by adjusting services according to tourists' demands – determined in conditions of crisis. The global financial crisis has largely led to changes in the behavior of tourists when organizing travel and using sources of information. They are interested in shorter journeys, cost attractive destinations, and the growth of interest in the "last minute" arrangements is evident as tourists postpone the moment of payment for arrangements (De Voldere, 2009, p. 101).

Security arrangements fundamental to the implementation of the responsibilities that a mediator takes on itself during the implementation of arrangements in these market conditions are an additional argument in favor of this type of travel arrangement. In that context, the interest of tourists for travel agencies could sustain as tourists entrust them with travel organization and use them as an acceptable source of information. However, taking into account the many advantages the Internet and ICT provide, travel agencies using these advantages can be competitive by using them in a way which enhances the efficiency of information and advisory functions, advertising functions, where customers are introduced to the specifics of services, products and destination. These conditions of business in the tourism market create additional chances for travel agencies and, for the tourists, encourage an impression of trust and safety in information of services and tourist products within destination.

5. Discussion

Uncertainty of business entities in tourism offers and travel agencies, on a global scale, characterizes market saturation and changing customer heterogeneous demands, which for travel agents and intermediates additionally makes implementation of marketing strategies difficult. In these conditions travel agencies need to make an additional effort to survive on the market and to attract a maximum number of tourists. In doing so, and due to the many advantages offered by new technology, tourists are turning more and more to online buying and booking services, which also alters the way travel agencies experience changes. One of the advantages of doing travel agency business is that customers realize their demands connect to obtaining services at one place, while implementing a quality service is entrusted to a travel agency. The advantages of such benefits for tourists arise from the responsibility on implementation of an intermediary service that takes intermediary and simplicity which relates to activities of necessary information, creation and synchronization of service performance, reservation of tourists' accommodation and agreements regarding other services tourists' use thus saving time and money. The number of Internet users is rising, so the introduction of ICT into the business represents a competitive advantage which is not reserved only for individual service providers, but also for travel agencies required to know how to use such technologies and implement them for the creation and placement of new products and services. Additional effort of travel agencies investing into new technologies and using them to obtain new information in relation to products, obtaining quality information about destinations, while anticipating the same experience as a virtual one. The advantages of technology are the assumption of continued travel development organized by agents and the signs of their development. Users of tourism products and services are very sensitive to price of these same products. It is interesting that tourists are ready to substitute products and services as long as the

price difference is less than 1%. Because of this, creating meaningful and cost acceptable products and placement which guarantees availability of information regarding products and services in targeted market with benefits and specific product availability, the advantages are evident concerns for both agents and potential users.

Given the fast transaction of data via Internet, communication time between intermediaries and clients is greatly reduced. ICT enables tourists' accurate and reliable information and booking reservation, compared to traditional business models which sometimes prove more expensive and difficult. In this way, ICT helps to improve services and contributes to increasing satisfaction of customers. Tourists from the biggest emissive European areas are regular travelers and are linguistically and technologically skilled and able to adapt to a multicultural and challenging environment, which is evident from the level of communication. The key of success lies in fast identification of tourists' needs and desires. Today, tourists are self-confident and experienced and demand interaction with tourism operators. Search for information has a very significant role when making travel decisions. ICT does not only lower uncertainty and possible risk, but increases the quality of travel. A greater supply of information results with better service, because the well informed tourist will better experience local culture and choose services in accordance with their interests. Additionally, the study suggests that the four fundamental factors affect the quality use of information when making decisions and organizing travel: (1) characteristics of tourist group; (2) recommendations from friends and family about destination; (3) previous visit to destination; (4) novelty offered by destination. Internet also affects the behavior of tourists in the destination. Researches have shown that tourists, who find travel services over the Internet, spend more money at destination choice compared to those who use other sources of information. The reason is that Internet enables interaction between tourists and service providers at destination, giving them greater ability to adjust services according to their own needs. Through the Internet, tourists are also in a position to plan future spending before arriving at the destination.

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