

SERVICE QUALITY OF TOURIST GUIDES AND THEIR ROLE IN TRAVEL AGENCY MARKETING

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Tourist guides are in direct contact with the tourists on the group package tours. They play an important role in creating tourist experience and the perception of a destination and travel company. For that reason, the purpose of this study was to determine customers' perceptions of service provided by tourist guides in group package tours which were organized by Serbian travel agencies. Research model used 16 items of service quality which were grouped into four dimensions. The paper provided results and indicated the items of tourist guide service quality that should be improved. Further, it was explored how the four service factors were related to reputation of travel agency and word-of-mouth marketing. The results of regression analysis showed that dimensions of service quality of tourist guides influence the reputation of a travel agency and word-of-mouth marketing, whereby the importance of tourist guides in group package tours was again confirmed.

Keywords: *tourist guides, service quality, travel agency*

JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

INTRODUCTION

“The main goal of all marketing activities of a travel company is satisfying the needs and wishes of potential tourists in the way that ensures increased sales and profit in the long run. Business results of a travel company depend largely on the satisfaction of customers” (Đeri, Plavša & Čerović, 2007: 70). “Tourist satisfaction is a key for tourist companies and destinations to retain existing and attract new tourists. Satisfaction with purchased tourism product or service results two basic benefits for tourist company:



- Increasing tourist loyalty and
- Positive “word-of-mouth” marketing” (Đeri, 2009: 53-54).

Due to specific characteristics of the service, meeting consumer needs in service industries is much more difficult than in the production sector. That is why a lot of attention is paid to the employees, especially those who have the most contact with the consumers. From the viewpoint of the consumer of a service, the employees are not only the creators and providers of a service, but they are also an integral part of it (Bowen & Schneider, 1985).

Travel agencies hire tourist guides for group package arrangements to guide the travellers throughout the tour. Tourist guides are the first line of service providing and are in direct contact with the tourists, which is why they play an important role in shaping the tourist experience and the perception of a destination (Wang, Jao, Chan & Chung, 2010).

Aware of the importance of a tourist guide in group package arrangements, the purpose of this paper is to determine the quality of tourist guides in Serbian tourist industry and whether their quality influences the reputation of a travel agency that they represent and “word-of-mouth” marketing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Group package arrangements are comprised of linked industries such as hotel industry, traffic etc. Each component must be delivered as it was arranged to satisfy the passengers. The job of tourist guides is to coordinate these components and connect them into a whole. They are the main link between the tourists and their behaviour can have a crucial influence on the tourist perception of the quality of passenger service. Many authors emphasize that the quality of a tourist guide can be the key item of the tour and that the guide’s presentation can improve or ruin the tour (Quiroga, 1990). With their knowledge and interpretation of the attractions of a destination, their ability to communicate and service, they can transform a plain tourist visit into an event or an experience (Ap & Wong, 2001). Prakash, Chowdhary & Sunayana (2011) claim that a proper training is crucial for future tour guides so they could make the best possible impression of destination.

For many people the job of a tourist guide is their dream job (Mak, Wong & Chang, 2011). However, to be successful in this line of work is not easy. Cohen (1985) emphasizes the diverse roles of a tourist guide: providing safety and protection, informing, encouraging group interaction, role of a surrogate parent, scout, mentor, leader, mediator and

entertainer. Pond (1993) lists the following most important roles of a tourist guide:

- Leader who is ready to take responsibility;
- Teacher who helps the passengers understand the places they are visiting;
- Ambassador who spreads hospitality and presents a destination in a way which creates the desire in the passengers to re-visit;
- Host who can create pleasant surroundings for the passengers;
- Mediator who knows when and how to fulfil the previous four roles.

There are different definitions of a tourist guide depending on the organization. The World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations defines a tourist guide as a person who guides the visitors in the language of their choice and interprets the cultural and natural heritage of an area which a person normally possesses an area-specific qualification usually issued and/or recognized by the appropriate authority (WFTGA, 2003). According to the Tourism Law of the Republic of Serbia from the year 2009, a tourist guide is “a natural person, who according to a previously established program, provides the services of guiding, showing and expert explanation of natural cultural-historic, archaeological, ethnographic, economic and other attractions”. Although there are numerous definitions of a tourist guide, the main areas in the job description include explaining an area in an amusing and inspiring way, working in a clearly defined cultural/geographical space and specialized linguistic knowledge (Ap & Wong, 2001). According to Skanavis and Giannoulis (2010), interpreters (i.e. tourist guide) are often the main awareness/educational source for many visitors, either through personal contact or through interpretive publications, exhibits or films. Therefore they influence the reputation of the area and the organization.

In the Republic of Serbia, the work license of a tourist guide is issued by the Ministry of Economy and Regional development after taking a certain number of exams (Regulation on the Programme and Method of Taking the Professional Exam for tourist guides and tour escorts, 2010) Although it is not conditioned by an academic title, many tourist guides graduated from a university or the department for tourism. A tourist guide can work as a permanent employee of a travel agency or as a freelancer. Aside from the monthly pay, they can earn extra money from the tourist tips and a percent of the sold facultative trips.

Rabotić (2010) in his paper classifies the obligations, qualifications and work areas of a tourist guide which can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Obligations, qualifications and the work area of a tourist guide

Obligations and responsibility	Executes the tour and the sightseeing of a city in a way that is demanded by the client or the way it is required by the announced program, taking in the account the route (itinerary), schedule and the timetable; Cultivates a friendly atmosphere and tries to fulfil special demands of the user, whether it is a large tourist group or smaller companionship with special interests; Honours the code of professional behaviour.
Necessary qualifications	Wide-range general knowledge, with a special emphasis on history, geography, art and architecture, economy, politics, religion and sociology of the work area; Specialized knowledge of a language – excellent speaking, but also knowing special terminology from various domains; Has skill to work with people and the ability to communicate efficiently, which creates “the art of guiding”.
Work area	Detailed interpretation; Tourist guide is a well-informed mediator between the newest research in many thematic areas and different level of interest of the users; Culturally and geographically defined work area is necessary due to the demanded and expected depth and width of knowledge, combined with practical skills and itinerary planning.

Source: (Rabotić, 2010).

Out of numerous tourist services offered on a trip, guiding service is one of the most important ones. Wang, Hsieh, Chou & Lind (2007) constructed an instrument to measure service quality with group package arrangements called GPTCCC. The instrument included six dimensions with 22 items in total. The importance of the role of a tourist guide in grading the quality of group package arrangement is also shown by having two dimensions of this instrument refer to the sector of a tourist guide and a local guide. The ability of tourist guides to give quality service is not of vital importance only to the business success of a travel agency, but also to create a general image of a presented destination.

In the research of Wang, Hsieh & Chen (2002) it is stated that photographs of tourist guides should be in the brochures of group package arrangements. Mossberg (1995) deems that the presentation of a tourist guide can influence the image of a company, loyalty of users and “word-of-mouth” communication. Therefore, the contribution of a tourist guide can differentiate a tour from the one offered by the competition.

Wong & Wang (2009) conducted a research into how much is emotional endowment significant in the work of a tourist guide. The results have shown that it can increase the profit of tourist guides and travel agencies can lead to repurchase and positive “word-of-mouth” communication. Min (2012), states that emotional intelligence is very important in the work of a tourist guide and that using the skills of emotional intelligence tourists’ mood can be regulated.

Hung (2008) recommends that service quality of a tourist guide is evaluated through 3 components: 1) core service delivery, 2) customer orientation, 3) communication effectiveness. Core service refers to the essence of guiding service which the guide must consistently deliver (e.g. conduct the agreed itinerary of the tour and make sure that the transport, accommodation, food and tourist activities are conducted easily and safely). Customer orientation refers to placing needs and wishes of the tourists ahead of those of the guide. Communication refers to the exchange of information (presentation of the itinerary, presentation of the attractions, answering tourist questions etc.).

METHODOLOGY

The instrument to measure service quality of tourist guides in this study was taken from the research of Heung (2008) which is also taken from the work of authors Zhang & Chow (2004). It measures 16 items of quality which were grouped into four dimensions. Those dimensions are “professional attitude and ability”, “teaching and communication abilities”, “professional experience”, and “personal integrity”. Likert 5-point scale was used to measure the items, with 1 being “I completely disagree” and 5 being “I completely agree”.

Sample

A questionnaire was used to collect data. The data were collected from June till September of 2012. The questionnaires were distributed to the users of tourist package arrangements via the internet as well as personally to travel agencies which further forwarded the questionnaires

to their tourist groups. 168 users of package arrangements participated in the research, from 14 travel agencies in the Republic of Serbia. Socio-demographic characteristics of examinees can be seen in table 2

There were much more female responders compared to male responders. Nearly 60% of the responders were in the groups between 20 and 40 years of age. The majority of responders obtained graduate and post-graduate education level. More than half of the responders said that their personal net monthly income was less than 20,000 RSD. The sample travel agencies are: KonTiki Travel, Modena Travel, Rapsody Travel, Argus Tours, Grand Tours, CMC Group – travel agency, Šajka – travel agency, Moj Svet d.o.o., 1A Travel, Matico Travel, Sunny Travel, Go2travelling, Filip Travel and Kaladoukas Holidays.

Table 2. Examinees profile (N=168)

Demographic characteristics	Percentage
Sex:	
Male	10.7%
Female	89.3%
Age:	
younger than 20	13.1%
21-30	39.3%
31-40	20.2%
41-50	13.7%
51-60	11.9%
over 60	1.8%
Education:	
primary	6.0%
high school	16.7%
college	10.1%
graduate	39.3%
post-graduate	24.4%
PhD	3.6%
Monthly income:	
less than 20,000 RSD	56.0%
20,001-40,000 RSD	9.5%
40,001-60,000 RSD	15.5%
60,001-80,000 RSD	6.5%
80,001-100,000 RSD	7.1%
over 100,000 RSD	5.4%

Data analysis

For the data analysis software package SPSS 11.5 was used. To process demographic data descriptive statistics was used. To analyze service quality of tourist guides, arithmetic means and standard deviation were used. To determine connection between items of service quality, reputation of a travel agency and “word-of-mouth” marketing, Pearson’s coefficient of correlation was used. To measure the influence of the dimension of quality of a tourist guide on the reputation of a travel agency and “word-of-mouth” marketing, regression model was used.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Arithmetic means of 16 items of service quality of tourist guides were in the range of 3.82 to 4.58. The highest score was given to the items related to whether the tourist guide was clean and neat ($M=4.58$), civil and pleasant ($M=4.36$), accurate ($M=4.29$), provided clear information about the safety and security ($M=4.23$), had knowledge of the destinations visited ($M=4.22$). The lowest score received the items related to whether the tourist guide was capable of solving problems ($M=3.82$), paid attention to details during the travel ($M=3.84$), had sense of humour ($M=3.87$), was always helpful ($M=3.94$), was social ($M=3.96$).

If the research results are compared with the paper of Heung (2008), what can be noticed is that in the best graded items, the items related to the accuracy of a tourist guide and giving clear information about the safety and security coincide, while in the worst graded items, the ability of the tourist guide to solve problems and whether the guide paid attention to details during the trips coincide. What is interesting is that in this paper the sociability of a tourist guide is in the group of worst graded items, and in the paper of Heung is in the group of best graded items.

Table 3. Assessment of service quality of tourist guides

	Items of service quality of tourist guides	Mean	St.deviation
Q1	Tourist guide was accurate.	4.29	1.170
Q2	Tourist guide gave clear information about safety and security.	4.23	1.199
Q3	Tourist guide gave daily information about the touristic itinerary.	4.07	1.164
Q4	Tourist guide had good communication and teaching abilities.	4.18	1.080

Q5	Tourist guide was social.	3.96	1.168
Q6	Tourist guide was respectful to the tourists.	4.07	1.214
Q7	Tourist guide was always helpful.	3.94	1.320
Q8	Tourist guide had shown good training for his/her work.	4.07	1.209
Q9	Tourist guide looked clean and neat.	4.58	.906
Q10	Tourist guide was civil and pleasant.	4.36	1.079
Q11	Tourist guide had a sense of humour.	3.87	1.155
Q12	Tourist guide had knowledge of the destinations visited.	4.22	1.231
Q13	Tourist guide paid attention to details during the travel.	3.84	1.242
Q14	Tourist guide was able to solve problems.	3.82	1.040
Q15	Tourist guide delivered all services promised in the itinerary.	4.02	1.395
Q16	Tourist guide was honest and reliable.	4.16	1.212

All the items of service quality of tourist guides were grouped in four dimensions or factors (Houng, 2008). The lowest score was given to Factor 2 referring to professional attitude and ability. Reliability measure (cronbach alpha) was very high on all four factors.

Table 4. Assessment of dimensions of quality and reliability of tourist guides service quality

Dimensions of service quality of tourist guides	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach alpha
F 1: Teaching and communication abilities	4.1329	1.02295	0.9399
F 2: Professional attitude and ability	3.9173	1.05445	0.9277
F3: Professional experience	4.2791	.94517	0.8587
F 4: Personal integrity	4.2575	1.11784	0.9433

To determine the correlation between all the items of quality, and the correlation between the items of quality and reputation of a travel agency, that is of “word-of-mouth” marketing, Pearson’s coefficient of correlation was used. It showed that there is a positive correlation of medium and strong intensity between all individual items of service quality of tourist guides. By measuring the correlation between the reputation of a travel agency and individual items of quality, it was determined that the

strongest link is with the item “Tourist guide delivered all services promised in the itinerary”, and there is no link with the item “Tourist guide looked clean and neat”. As far as “word-of-mouth” marketing is concerned, the situation is the same, with the difference of a strong correlation established with the item “Tourist guide was always helpful”. There is a very strong correlation between the reputation of a travel agency and “word-of-mouth” marketing.

Authors Zhang & Chow (2004) performed importance/performance analysis in their paper, using this model to measure service quality of a tourist guide. They discovered that the item “Tourist guide looked clean and neat” is found in the fourth quadrant (possible overkill). This means that it has little importance and high grade of quality. By this it can be explained why in this paper there is no correlation between this item and the reputation of a travel agency and “word-of-mouth” marketing.

Table 5. Pearson’s coefficient of correlation

Items	Travel agency reputation	word-of-mouth marketing
Q1	0.379(**)	0.449(**)
Q2	0.375(**)	0.446(**)
Q3	0.388(**)	0.296(**)
Q4	0.320(**)	0.423(**)
Q5	0.301(**)	0.428(**)
Q6	0.362(**)	0.497(**)
Q7	0.469(**)	0.622(**)
Q8	0.464(**)	0.582(**)
Q9	-0.057	0.052
Q10	0.310(**)	0.447(**)
Q11	0.289(**)	0.284(**)
Q12	0.442(**)	0.447(**)
Q13	0.298(**)	0.337(**)
Q14	0.345(**)	0.353(**)
Q15	0.530(**)	0.651(**)
Q16	0.458(**)	0.546(**)
Travel agency reputation	1	0.788(**)

** Correlation is significant on 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Upon measuring correlation, linear regression was used to determine dependency of the reputation of a travel agency on the service quality of tourist guides. Coefficient of determination showed that dimensions of service quality of tourist guides influence the reputation of a travel agency by 26%, namely, that other factors influence the reputation of a travel agency in a large percent. Factor 1, “Teaching and communication abilities”, has the highest influence.

Table 6. Influence of dimensions of touristic guides’ service quality on the reputation of a travel agency

Dimensions of service quality of tourist guides	Beta	Sig
Factor 1: Teaching and communication abilities	.520	.039
Factor 2: Professional attitude and ability	.487	.019
Factor 3: Professional experience	-.967	.000
Factor 4: Personal integrity	.363	.046
R=.514 R Square =.265 Adj. R=.246, F= 14.123, p<0.001		

Dimensions of service quality of tourist guides influence “word-of-mouth” marketing by 35%, and Factor 1, “Personal integrity” has the highest influence.

Table 7. Influence of tourist guides’ service quality on “word-of-mouth” marketing

Dimensions of service quality of tourist guides	Beta	Sig
Factor 1: Teaching and communication abilities	.415	.078
Factor 2: Professional attitude and ability	.415	.032
Factor 3: Professional experience	-.944	.000
Factor 4: Personal integrity	.616	.000
R= .595 , R Square =.354 Adj. R= .338, F= 2..515, p<0.001		

CONCLUSION

This research dealt with determining service quality of tourist guides in Serbian travel industry and examining how much their quality influences the reputation of a travel agency, and how much their quality influences “word-of-mouth” marketing. Group package arrangements of different travel agencies in Serbia were taken as a material to analyze their users, namely tourists.

Results have shown that the service quality of tourist guides is satisfactory, that is, all measured items are above average. However, there are still items which need improvement to raise service quality on a higher level. That primarily refers to “Professional attitude and abilities” dimension which incorporates the following items: tourist guide 1) was able to solve problems, 2) paid attention to details during travel, 3) had sense of humour, 4) was always helpful, 5) had shown good training for his/her work.

What is interesting is that tourist guides pay a lot of attention to their appearance, therefore, they look clean and neat, and that it is the only item without a correlation with the reputation of a travel agency and “word-of-mouth” marketing. It was determined that the following items have the highest correlation with the reputation of a travel agency and “word-of-mouth” marketing: tourist guide 1) was always helpful, 2) had shown good training for his/her work, 3) had knowledge about the destinations visited, 4) delivered all services promised in the itinerary. Relating to that, the owners of travel agencies should work more on the improvement of service quality of their tourist guides by promoting these items of the service.

This study has confirmed that the service quality of a tourist guide is significant for the reputation of a travel agency and “word-of-mouth” marketing. Therefore, if the tourist guide delivered quality service, the reputation of a travel agency will be better and tourists will say positive things about that travel agency to others, which will improve sales of touristic arrangements. Taking this in consideration, travel agencies should carefully select their tourist guides, who will have the necessary skills and abilities to emit quality service. It can be concluded that this research produced useful information about the condition of service quality of tourist guides in Serbia, their strong and weak points and again confirmed the influence of service quality of tourist guides on the reputation of a travel agency and “word-of-mouth” marketing.

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