ARTICULATING SERVICE CONCEPT TO ENHANCE TOURISM EXPERIENCE DESIGN

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Introduction

The Tourism Policy Review Group's "*Vision for Irish Tourism 2003 – 2012*" identified that international tourism is increasingly driven by more demanding customer requirements, with greater emphasis on unique experiences, authenticity and emotional involvement. In its response to this report the ITIC (2006:55) assert, "*The core goal for Irish tourism is to develop and deliver distinctive, authentic and memorable experiences that stimulate increased visits, longer dwell times and higher expenditure… The quality of the experience is the key*." Critical to the attainment of this objective is the development of a sector-wide competency in the areas of experience development and innovation.

The development and innovation of any service offering requires a strong understanding of the process of service design; Service design being the conception or planning of a service in advance of it being delivered. Operations Management theory has long advocated a strong methodological and sequential approach to service design in order to effectively create service offerings that are matched to organisational capabilities and market needs. With the focus of attention in service operations moving from the delivery of services to the staging of experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 2000) a progression of the established frameworks for service design is required in order to fulfil the emerging challenges of experience design.

This paper forms part of a larger study in the area of experience design, a field of study which is increasingly acknowledged as being in need of further research and theoretical development (Tax & Stuart 2004, Pullman & Gross 2003, Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons 2000). The existing body of knowledge in the area of service design owes its foundations to the manufacturing-based area of product development and consequently the emerging area of

experience design must build upon the existing literature in New Service Development (NSD) and Service Design. The process of NSD has been dealt with by a number of eminent service operations researchers (Bitran, G. & Pedrosa, L., 1998; Booz et al, 1982; Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996; Johnson, Menor, Roth and Chase, 2000) and a number of models have been developed which map the sequence of activities from the setting of strategic objectives, through idea/concept development, process design, market testing and implementation of the service. A common preliminary stage of all of these models is that of service concept development. The theory of service design is an evolution of the methodological sequences of product development, similarly the design of experiences does not require a completely new design methodology rather it requires that the activities within the existing product and service design methodologies are revised and adapted to incorporate the emotional, behavioural and performance characteristics of experiences (Tax and Stuart, 2004).

The objective of this paper is to contribute to management understanding of experience design by examining the preliminary stage of the experience design process: the stage of concept articulation, and to build upon existing knowledge on service concept articulation to develop a framework for experience concept articulation. To achieve this objective the authors will first review the literature on service concept articulation and seek to clarify the components of a service concept. The characteristics of experiences will then be reviewed and integrated with service concept components in order to propose a conceptual model of an experience concept. In response to the need to amend existing NSD models to suit the emerging needs of experience design, the final stage of the paper proposes a methodological framework for the articulation of experience design concepts.

The Service Concept

The definition of service concept is a fundamental part of the strategic advantage seeking processes of service design, service development and service innovation (Stuart & Tax, 2004; Goldstein, Johnston, Duffy & Rao, 2002) however many practitioners have difficulty articulating the true nature of their service concept (Khurana & Rosenthal, 1997; Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2004). As services are driven to become more experiential and therefore increasingly intangible, the articulation of service concept invariably becomes more difficult but also more necessary (Bitran & Pedrosa, 1998).

There is widespread academic acknowledgement that the articulation of service concept is a central component in designing services and there exists a significant number of varying definitions of service concept from both marketing and operations perspectives, confirming Goldstein et Al's (2002) assertion that most work to date has been concerned with the definition of service concept. Clark, Johnston and Shulver (2000) identify that the term service concept is frequently used but rarely developed, arguing therefore that the full potential of its impact for improved service design goes unrealised. The low frequency of service concept development can be attributed to the common perception of service concept articulation as the "*fuzzy*" front-end of service design, with many practitioners preferring to concentrate on the more objective execution orientated back-end design activities (Khurana & Rosenthal, 1997). Definitions of service concept are of value to service managers in understanding what a service concept should be but the increasing quantity and variety of definitions contribute to the perceived complexity of service concept articulation, particularly since many definitions do not go far enough in assisting practitioners in the arduous task of actually defining their individual service concept. In reviewing the existing definitions of

service concept, a number of core themes emerged which will form the basis of proposed model of the components of a service concept. By bringing together the underlying themes to identify the components of a service concept, the authors hope to remove the perceived fuzzy nature of service concepts thereby assisting practitioners in better articulating their service concept.

Service Concept has commonly been defined in terms of the service package; Collier (1994) coins the phrase "*Customer Benefit Package*" and Goldstein et al (2002) see it as the mix of physical and non-physical components that combine to create the service package, however both fall short of clearly identifying the elements that need to be considered in designing the service package. Marketing theorists conceptualise the service package using the numerous P-models (Lovelock and Wright, 1999; Ziethaml and Bitner, 1996; Booms and Bitner, 1981; McCarthy, 1960) which show the core product surrounded by the augmented product/service elements of process, place, physical evidence, people, productivity, price and promotion. The P-models, commonly referred to as the marketing mix, were initially intended to assist practitioners in the development of marketing strategies and despite being modified and extended to deal with the elements of service delivery they still contain a strong marketing bias and are seldom directly incorporated into operations management based service design theory. The P-models are notable in that they explicitly include reference to the importance of the people aspect of the service package, an element that is not directly referred to in other models but is widely acknowledged as a critical element to be considered in the design of a service offering. The marketing mix models are comprehensive in their identification of the components of a service but differ from other definitions of service concept in that the terminology does not directly alert service designers to the need to incorporate statements of customer needs, desired value and outcomes in a service concept.

The concept of Value is at the centre of a number of service concept definitions (Van Looy, Gemmel & Van Dierdonck, 2003; Clark at al, 2000; Heskett, 1987) and the service concept is seen by many as a means for the service provider to identify the value being delivered to customers and the value expected by customers from the organisation. The term value is commonly used in association with monetary worth, however Ziethaml and Bitner (1996) broaden the definition of value, identifying it as an individualised customer perception based on a composite judgements of a number of product/service attributes such as perceived quality, perceived costs; monetary or personal and other high level abstractions, intrinsic and extrinsic attributes such as prestige, accessibility and performance. Defining service concept in terms of value introduces the element of perception and the service concept has also been defined as a statement of how a service organisation wishes its service to be perceived not only by external customers but also by its other stakeholders (Heskett, 1987; Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996). The management of perception is critically important in services with high intangibility since as Edvardsson & Olsson (1996: 145) state, "*what the customer does not perceive does not exist...*". The management of perception has traditionally fallen within the realm of marketing and promotional activities and is an integral part of the various marketing mix P-models, however consumer perceptions are also greatly influenced by the physical, human and operational aspects of the service design (Bitner, 1992; Grace & O'Cass, 2004) and therefore a service concept should address how all aspects of the service contribute to the perceived service package. The management of perceptions has a central role in the creation of customer expectations but also contributes to employee clarity as to nature of the service they are required to deliver.

Edvardsson & Olsson (1996: 149) see a service concept as "*a detailed description of what is to be done for the customer and how this is to be achieved*", i.e. the service concept as an outline of customer needs and a specification of how they are to be satisfied. The need to incorporate customer requirements into the definition of service concept is directly identified by Khurana & Rosenthal (1997) and Goldstein at al (2002) and other authors (Johnston & Clark, 2001; Clark at al, 2000; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004) allude to the satisfaction of customer needs through the articulation of customer outcomes as part of the service concept. The inclusion of customer needs in the articulation of a service concept provides the service concept with '*external integrity*' (Clark & Fujimoto, 1990), assuring that any proposed service is aligned to the needs of its target market. The requirement for a service concept to clearly articulate how customer needs are to be satisfied is indirectly dealt with in other service concept definitions through the reference to service process (Lovelock and Wright, 1999) and the form and functions of the service operation (Johnston & Clark, 2001; Clark at al, 2000; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004).

Clark et al (2000:72) define a service concept as '*Service in the Mind*' - a mental picture of the whole service that should encapsulate the nature of the service business and capture the value, form and function, experience and outcomes of the service. This definition of service concept is based on the Oxford English Dictionary definition of a "*concept*" and Clark et al. (2000) assert that a service concept is more than the elements of its package, it should be a mental picture of the service held by all stakeholders: the management, employees and customers. The need to balance the attainment of a holistic picture of the service with the desire to break the service concept into components for operational ease of articulation remains a fundamental area of discourse. Practitioners that focus on the development of a mental picture often have difficulty in translating the mental picture into operational

deliverables whereas those that concentrate too heavily on the sub-components often fail to develop a unifying picture of the whole. Goldstein et al (2002:124) state "*deconstructing a service into the what and the how or into its components allows designers to identify the various elements of a service concept, check them against customer needs and then design and deliver those elements*", however they also question whether customers perceive services as a sum of components or as a single outcome. Given that many practitioners have difficulty articulating the true nature of the service concept, the authors postulate that breaking the service concept into its constituent components would encourage practitioners to partake in what is commonly seen as a difficult and fuzzy process (Khurana & Rosenthal, 1997) and although there remains a risk that a holistic picture may not be developed, this risk is lower in magnitude to the scenario where service practitioners fail to develop of a service concept due to the perceived fuzzy and difficult nature of the process.

In figure 1, the authors propose a conceptual model of the components of a service concept based on the common themes identified in the review of service concept literature. The authors do not seek to develop a new definition of what a service concept is; rather the model is designed to serve as a map to assist practitioners in identifying the constituents of a service concept. The authors assert that this model aligns with and unifies the central themes of existing definitions of service concept. Its components define the how and what of the proposed service (Goldstein et Al, 2002), it contributes to the building of a complete picture of the value, form and function and outcomes of the service (Clark et al, 2000), it acknowledges the need to define customer value and benefits (Collier, 1994) and draws management attention to the critical role of service concept in designing and managing service perceptions (Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996).
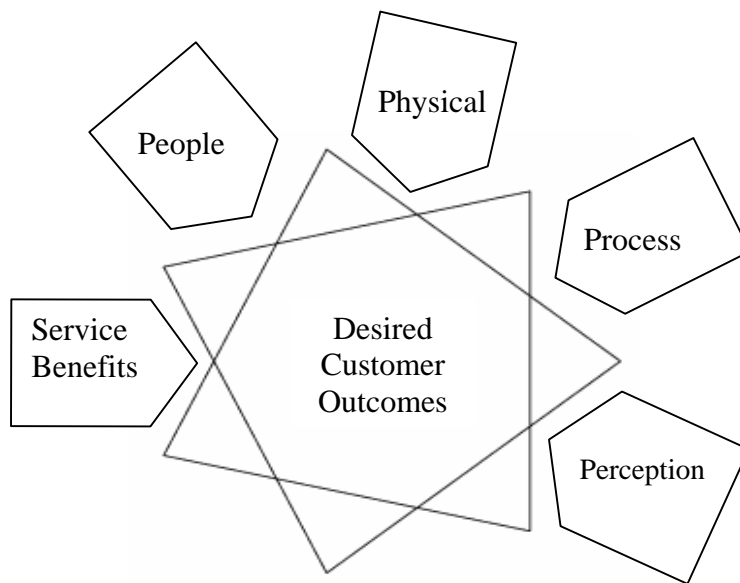
Figure 1   Conceptual Model of a Service Concept

The elements of the proposed Service Concept Model are;

1. *Service benefits* - The range of value / benefits to be made available to the customer in order to satisfy their identified needs and desired outcomes. By defining these as benefits rather than products a clear relationship to customer needs is created.

2. *People*   - The arrangement of human resources and skills required to deliver the desired customer outcomes. The articulation of the human factor in the service concept is critical to service design since organisational members constitute a vital part of both the product and the delivery process

3. *Physical*   -   The form and function of the physical environment in which the desired customer outcomes are delivered and the role which this physical environment will play in the delivery of customer outcomes

4. *Process*   -   The organisational activities and resources that enable the delivery of the service outcomes. This correlates to the 'how' of the service concept and creates a clear link to the subsequent stages of service development.

5. *Perception*   -   The collection of management actions that signal to stakeholders the outcomes and value to be attained on consumption of the service. This element provides for the deliberate creation a unified picture of the service in the mind of customers and service providers.

In presenting this conceptual model the authors hope to elucidate existing knowledge of the elements of a service concept, while also providing practitioners with a clear indication of the factors that must be considered in building and evaluating their service concept. As the tourism sector becomes increasingly aware of the competitive need to offer experiences rather than just services, the service concept model will be developed upon in the next stage of this paper and will constitute the cornerstone on which the proposed experience concept model will be constructed.

From Service Concept to Experience Concept

Pine & Gilmore (1998) assert that developed nations have moved beyond the notion of a service economy to the idea of an experience economy and the ability to design effective systems for the creating desired customer experiences has become increasingly important for competitive advantage. Experiences create added value by engaging and connecting with customers in a personal and memorable way (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2004) and progress the economic value of the organisations' market proposition via increased differentiation and premium pricing opportunities (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). There exist a number of Definitions of experiences; Pine and Gilmore (1998) state that an experience occurs when a company intentionally engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event, whereas Carbone & Haeckel (1994) define experiences as the aggregate and cumulative customer perception created during the process of learning about, acquiring and using a product or service. Other key characteristics of experiences that emerge from the literature are that experiences require active participation by the consumer (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Gupta & Vajic, 2000), experiences involve the acquisition of knowledge and sensations (Gupta & Vajic, 2000; Carbone & Haeckel, 1994) and that experiences create emotional connections that are revealed over time rather than merely at the moment of delivery (Pullman & Gross, 2003; Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

The consumer driven imperative for enhanced experiences in the Irish Tourism Sector (TPRG, 2003) means that failure to realise the competitive opportunity provided by experience development will have a detrimental impact on the competitiveness of an organisation (Gupta & Vajic, 2000). Efforts to deliver experiential components to customers must be incorporated into service design deliberately (Pine & Gilmore, 1989) and from the

outset. Berry, Carbone & Haeckel (2002:86) warn against adding experience components in isolated pockets and assert that in order to "*fully leverage experience as part of the customer value proposition, organisations must manage the emotional components of experiences with the same rigour they bring to the management of product and service functionality*". The incorporation of experiential components into service design therefore requires the development of an integrated experience concept. Since experiences are a progression from pure services, an experience concept would naturally include the core service elements, proposed in Figure 1, but would also require the emotional, behavioural and performance characteristics of experiences.

Carbone & Haeckel (1994:9) state that designing an experience begins with "*the deliberate setting of a targeted customer perception*", this aligns with the perception element of the service concept model and reinforces the need to articulate the desired perception in the early stages of the design process. The element of customer participation highlighted by Pine and Gilmore (1998) as a key characteristic of experiences must also be considered in the development of an experience concept. Gupta and Vajic (2000) see the primary differentiating factors between services and experiences as the user environment, the element of customer participation and the degree of social interaction. The user environment relates to the physical component of the service concept model, however, the elements of participation and social interaction, although somewhat covered by the areas of people and process, are critical differentiators between services and experiences and therefore are included as a distinct element in the experience concept model as participation activities. Gupta and Vajic (2000:43) state, "*One of the critical conditions for creating an experience is designing the activities in which clients engage*". These activities are part of the normal service provision processes but purposeful design of activities, both core and peripheral, is required in order to engage customers in creating their own social experience (Gupta and Vajic, 2000).

Berry et al (2002) see the management of Service Clues as critical to experiences and identify two types of service clues: Functional and Emotional. Functional clues are concerned with the 'what' of the service experiences: the reliability and competence of the service (Berry, Wall & Carbone, 2006) and so can be presumed to be subsets of the service benefits, people and process elements of the developed service concept model. Emotional Clues are sub-divided into Mechanic and Humanistic Clues; Mechanic Clues stem from the physical objects or surroundings in which the experience is delivered and consumed and therefore link with the physical element of the service concept model. Humanic Clues emerge from the behaviour and appearance of the service providers and therefore link to the people element of the service concept model. The key role of these clues is their contribution to customer emotions and experience designers must have a clear appreciation of what emotions consumers wish to undergo in consuming the experience and how they can then design and configure experience clues to provide these emotive outcomes. The element of deliberate emotion management was not dealt within the service concept model and so an additional component of emotional theme has been added to the experience concept model. Pine and Gilmore (1998:102) assert that memorable experiences require a "*theme*" around which impressions should be organised. Gupta and Vajic (2000) warn against the creation of themes solely around physical surroundings rather than the central activities, a practice that can often result in the creation of themed surroundings rather than a themed experience. They propose that a theme should establish the tone of the experience context but does not in itself create a memorable and unique experience. Berry et al, (2006:52) advocate the use of a three word '*experience motif*' to express the emotions which customers seek to satisfy. Pullman & Gross (2004) state that experience design is concerned with the emotional nature of customer reactions and how this contributes to improved loyalty. By linking emotions and theme under

the emotional theme component of the experience concept model, experience designers are directed away from the tendency to develop a theme without consideration of the emotional requirement of experiences and are more likely to be deliberate in aligning the varied functional, mechanic and humanic clues in order to influence customers' thoughts, feelings, emotions and behaviour.

Having reviewed the key themes and definitions from the experience management literature, the authors propose the addition of the two additional components; participation activities and emotional theme, to the service concept model outlined in Figure 1, to develop a model that it is hoped can assist practitioners in the development of their experience concept. This proposed model for the components of an experience concept is outlined in Figure 2.
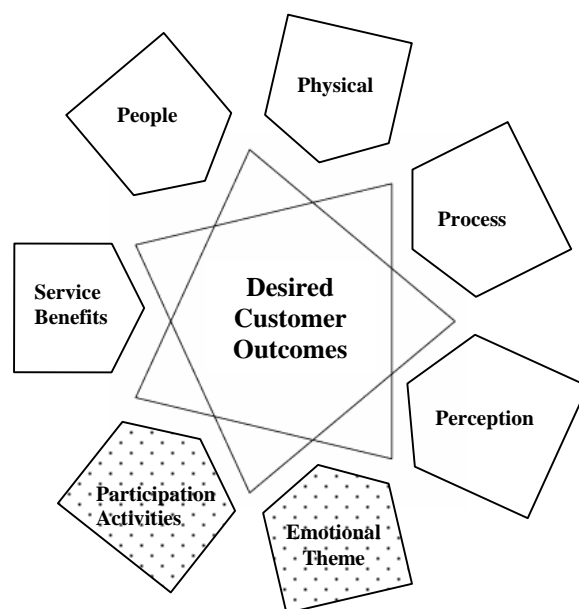

Figure 2   Conceptual Model of Experience Concept Components

The elements of the proposed Experience Concept Model are;

1. *Service benefits*   -   The range of Value/Benefits to be made available to the customer in order to satisfy their identified core needs and desired outcomes. An experience should deliver core service benefits as well as supplementary desired experiential benefits. Experience benefits stem from the unique emotional and participative elements of the experience

2. *People*   -   The arrangement of human resources required to deliver the core service, contribute to social interactions and facilitate participative activities.

3. *Physical*   -   Practitioners are guided to purposefully design the physical environment and sensory clues that are both the context in which the experience is delivered and part of the experience itself.

4. *Process*   -   The organisational activities and resources that enable the delivery of the service benefits and desired outcomes. These organisational activities may link with customer participation activities however as they are not always

mutually inclusive they therefore merit consideration
separately

5. *Perception* - The collection of management actions constitute the
vision for the experience and that signal the outcomes of
the service experience to all stakeholders. Given that
customer expectations of experiences are often
considerably higher than for pure services, the
management of perception in experiences is of vital

6. *Emotional Theme* - The articulation of the emotional outcomes the experience
seeks to satisfy is critical to the success of the experience
offering and should link strongly with the design of
experience clues throughout the other experience concept
elements

7. *Participation Activities* - The design of opportunities for active customer
participation which allow for the creation of inherently
individual experiences for each customer

The identification of the components of an experience concept is of benefit to practitioners in
better understanding the nature of experiences, but the literature indicates that the process of
concept articulation also holds many difficulties for experience designers. The process of
concept articulation is not a back room activity, conducted by a isolated design team but
rather it is an iterative process involving multiple consultations with varied stakeholder

groups and the requires the effective translation of ideas, suggestions and requirements into a concise statement of intention that will inform and guide subsequent stages of the design process. In the concluding stage of this paper, the authors review existing concept articulation methodologies developed for service design and adapt this knowledge to propose a model for experience concept articulation.

Process of Experience Concept Articulation

Shostack (1984) identify that the four essential characteristics of effective service development are objectivity and precision, it must be fact driven and methodologically based. Methodologies for service development borrow heavily from manufacturing orientated product development strategies and although there exist considerable differences in the attributes of product and services, the methodological approach advocated is broadly similar. The advancement of services to experiences also draws heavily on existing development models but the authors postulate that the requirement for experiences to be personal and memorable requires increased consultation and participation from the experience stakeholders in order to give the concept articulation process external integrity.

There are 2 preliminary stages that must be completed before concept development can commence: strategic assessment and idea generation (Bitran & Pedrosa, 1998; Scheuing & Johnson, 1989). Strategic assessment involves a thorough assessment of the organisational mission statement and analysis of the external and internal environments in order to ascertain the strategic, marketing and regulatory environments under which the new experience is developed (Bitran & Pedrosa, 1989). This preliminary step will ensure that any service

developments have internal integrity, i.e. they match the organisations long-term strategic direction.

The second stage to be conducted before concept generation can commence is the process of idea generation. Slack, Chambers & Johnston (2004) identify that ideas are not the same as concepts, they define concepts as clear statements that both encapsulate the idea and indicate the overall form, function, purpose and benefits of the experience being developed whereas ideas are more conceptual and need to be transformed into concepts so that they can be objectively evaluated and then operationalised by the organisation. Ideas for service development may originate from a number of sources, including market research, front line staff and existing customers, however Scheuing and Johnson (1989) identify that due to the ease of copying, competitors have been identified as a more common source of ideas for new products than customers. Slack et al (2004) are keen to point out that taking ideas from competitors will require a capability in reverse engineering and caution that the back office aspects of services are difficult to reverse engineer, as they are less transparent to competitors. This advice is particularly appropriate for service practitioners seeking to generate ideas for experiences, given that experiences should be unique, imitating competitors gives little competitive advantage and also the higher level of intangibility in experiences makes them more difficult replicate or reverse engineer. Once ideas have been generated and given an initial evaluation against the strategic direction of the organisation they may be progressed for development into an experience concept.

The first stage in Concept development is gaining a clear understanding of customer requirements in order that the concept has external integrity (Clark & Fujimoto, 1990). In order that the service development process is objective and fact-driven (Shostack, 1989) it is

not adequate presume that an experience idea developed and supported by organisational members will automatically satisfy customer needs, direct customer input must form part of the concept development process. Magnusson, Matthing & Kristensson, (2003) assert that user involvement in service innovation, if properly managed, has a positive effect on the quality of the created service ideas and can result in a mutual learning process which results in a deeper understanding of the users real needs and wants, whereas users will learn more about the possibilities and limitations of the service delivery system. If an experience is to realise its potential for competitive advantage and premium pricing it must be unique and progress the value offered to customers by being aligned not only with their existing needs/wants but also with latent or previously unimagined needs. The management of customer input requires organisational decisions on the types of involvement, the stages of involvement and the intensity of involvement (Alam, 2002). These decisions will depend to a large extent on the resources available to the service organisation in terms of time, money and facilitation skills. Magnusson, Matthing & Kristensson (2003) point out that service designers should not confuse user involvement with being user driven: the responsibility for the design process, although influenced by the end user, should be directed and managed by the experience design team.

Customers are not the only group of stakeholders that must be consulted in the experience concept articulation process, the employees of the organisation, particularly those who will play a front-line role in the delivery of the proposed service experience, must also be consulted and engaged in the concept articulation process. (Schneider & Bowen, 1984) identify that employee involvement can aid in the identification of customer requirements, increases the likelihood of positive implementation and assists in the balancing of process considerations and customer needs. The participation of staff is critical not only in terms of

gathering input but it also begins the process of educating employees of importance of their role in the delivery of experience and the different behavioural and performance related roles expected of experience providers vis-à-vis service providers.

Once the voice of the customer and employees have been gathered, they should be formally documented, grouped under the experience concept model headings and returned to the participants for validation in a manner that presents a coherent picture of what the proposed experience will look like. Burchill & Fine (1998) advise that the customer's language should be converted into an objective, fact-orientated customer requirement statement better suited to use in down-stream development activities. The statement should clarify those elements of the experience that the customers perceive as core and those that may be supplemental or merely desirable. This ranking of customer needs is important so that concept development can focus on those needs that are most important to the success of the new experience (Bitran & Pedrosa, 1998). The validation stage should also include a re-checking of the concept against the strategic assessment outcomes and resources to ensure that concept components are both deliverable, economically feasible and compatible/complementary to the organisations existing offerings. Once this stage is completed the concept can be formally articulated as a complete picture of its components before being progressed to subsequent, more in-depth operational design stages. A proposed model of the stages of concept articulation outlined above are represented in figure 3
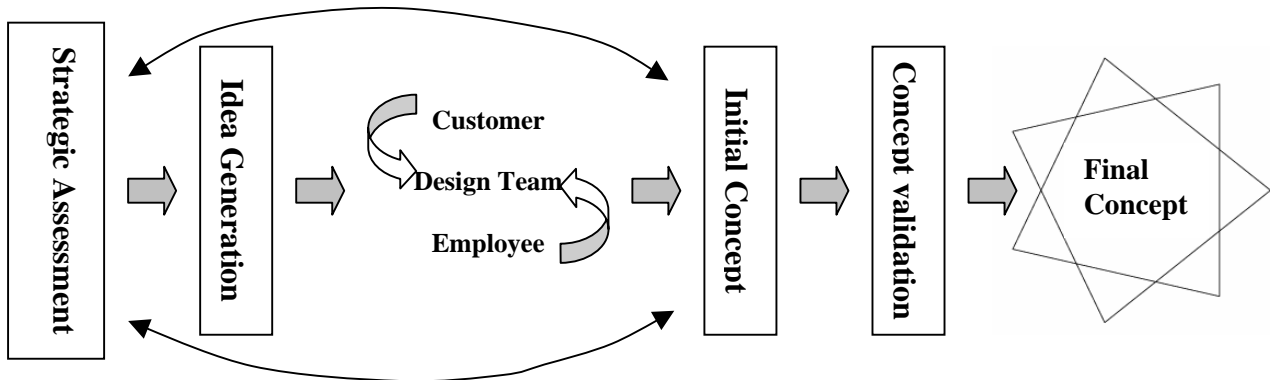
Figure 3   Stages of Experience Concept Development

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The literature on service development along with industry reports stressing the importance of improved experience design give credence to the need for the articulation of a experience concept as a critical first stage in the design and development of experiences. This paper is the initial phase of a larger research project that seeks to integrate and build upon prior research contributions from the fields of service design and experience management in order to contribute to management understanding of the process of experience design and to advance existing service design models for use in experience design. The paper proposes a preliminary conceptual model of an experience concept and offers a methodological framework for experience concept articulation. Further research is required to test the validity of the proposals expressed in this paper and it is anticipated that this will consist of a focused trial of the experience concept model and articulation methodology within a sample of tourism providers. The sample group of tourism providers will be drawn from a variety of

tourism organisations who seek to develop current service offerings into experiences and/or develop new experiences. This field testing of the validity and effectiveness of the proposed concept model and experience articulation methodology will allow for the refinement of the research propositions. It is also anticipated that the field research will allow for the realisation of valuable insights into the difficulties encountered by tourism providers in designing experiences that will inform subsequent research .

The future competitive position of Irish tourism is dependent on the ability of tourism practitioners to effectively design unique, world-class experiences that will satisfy customer needs and allow for the progression of economic value in the sector. The design of experiences requires a clear understanding of the characteristics of experiences and in order for the resultant experience offering to realise its full market potential, the development methods must be rigorous in approach. This paper deals with the first stage of experience design; the articulation of an experience concept. Concept articulation is the foundation on which all-subsequent design activities must rest and therefore is critical to success. The experience concept model and articulation methodology proposed in this paper brings together and builds upon existing service design knowledge to offer tourism practitioners a guide to assist them in this first step along the road to effective experience design.

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