

## **CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AMONG RURAL HOME STAY OPERATORS IN MALAYSIA**

**KALSOMKAYAT**

Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management  
University Utara Malaysia

---

*Based on earlier writings and research in the fields of total quality management, service quality and marketing which suggest understanding customer needs is a pre-requisite to satisfactory service delivery, a study was undertaken to understand and analyze customer orientation among the home stay operators in Malaysia. Data was collected from 142 respondents who operate home stay programs in 10 rural areas in Peninsular Malaysia using structured survey questionnaires. Findings from the study indicate that rural home stay operators place utmost importance on customer satisfaction as long as it is within their means and their boundaries of traditional customs. What needs to be improved on is their capability so that they are able to identify the expected quality of service of the visitors and so that they are able to fulfil this expected quality of service.*

*Rural tourism business, customer orientation, service quality*

---

### **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

Community organized home stay programs in the rural areas of Malaysia are fast becoming important tourism products for the country. These programs provide opportunities for the tourists to experience a different and inexpensive holiday whereby they put up with local host families in a rural community and experience their hosts' living culture as they eat home-cooked local dishes, and take part in village activities such as rubber tapping, fishing and batik printing. It is observed that the promotion of home stay program in the country is part of the evolution of Malaysia's growing tourism industry, which takes advantage of the natural attractions, cultures and customs and unspoiled beauty of its surroundings to fulfill tourists increasing demand towards rural tourism. The increased demand for this particular form of tourism could be explained by recent global social and cultural changes, such as a greater interest and appreciation in cultural heritage, environmental concerns, the move towards including educational element in tourism and the move towards healthier lifestyles (Page & Getz, 1997).

In the anxiety to promote the home stay programs as new tourism products and businesses, there are concerns that the home stay operators fail to deliver quality product and services (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, 2001). The possibility for this to happen is not remote as most of them do not have much experience in service based business operations, particularly in businesses associated with tourism. Additionally, the education gap and cultural differences between the operators and the guests could further limit their ability to ensure that all the needs of the customers are met. The much publicized success stories of several community home stay programs has resulted with increasing

Address correspondence to Kalsom Kayat: Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, University Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM Sintok, Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia. e-mail: kals932@uum.edu.my.

## KALSOM KAYAT

number of unskilled villagers joining the home stay bandwagon. Since understanding consumers is one of the keys to success in the tourism industry (Goeldner *et al.*, 2000), and a prerequisite to service marketing (Kotler *et al.*, 2003), this paper posits that understanding customer orientation among the home stay operators is critical for its sustainability. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research in this aspect. The objective of this article is to discuss findings from a study that was carried out to understand and analyze customer orientation among the home stay operators in Malaysia. Specifically, the study was to answer the following questions:

1. How 'customer-oriented' are the home stay operators in the peninsular Malaysia?
2. What factors may differentiate customer orientation level among the operators?
3. How far would the operators go in order to satisfy their customers?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the sustainable tourism discussion taking place during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, three components of sustainable tourism were identified: nature conservation, socio-cultural conservation, and sustainable profit (Mowforth and Munt, 1998). The last component indicates the importance to manage tourism establishments, including home stays, as business entities in order to sustain their operations. This is in line with the literature on total quality management and service marketing that stresses the critical role of customer orientation in providing service quality (for example Levitt, 1960; Kotler, 1977; Crawford, 1983; Parasuraman *et al.* 1988; and Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000).

Customer satisfaction and service quality were popular research topics beginning in the 1980s (Williams & Uysal, 2003; Baker & Crompton, 2000). According to Baker and Crompton (2000), the topic of service quality was the most researched topic in the field of marketing during the last decade. This is due to the existence of a clear relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1988) went to the extent of proposing that understanding customer needs is a pre-requisite to satisfactory service delivery.

There are also many studies on service quality and customer satisfaction in the tourism field as it is believed that tourism products can only thrive if the tourists are kept satisfied (Baker & Crompton, 2000). Many of the studies adopt the SERVQUAL scale (see for example Crompton & Mackay, 1989; Fick & Ritchie, 1991; Saleh & Ryan, 1992; Fleisher *et al.*, 1993; Khan, 2003), or the Importance-Performance Analysis technique (see for example Martin, 1995; Duke & Persia, 1996; Chu & Choi, 2000; Wong & Law, 2003) to analyze tourist satisfaction on important attributes relating to specific tourism products. Other studies looked into factors that are influential for customer satisfaction. For example, Law (1998) studied the influence of service design and visitor management on the satisfaction level of visitors to the Leeds Castle in Kent while Neild *et al.* (2000) studied the role and importance of food services in satisfaction formation among the tourists at the resorts surrounding the Black Sea.

In the rural tourism context, a study in this topic was undertaken by Reichel *et al.* (2000) to analyze gaps between quality of services expected and actual services perceived by the guests of the bed and breakfast establishments in rural Israel. Through their structured-questionnaire survey, gaps in nine out of fifteen criteria were found by the authors, namely operators' attitudes, quality of services given, cleanliness of the rooms, air-conditioning system, esthetical values of the rooms (including furniture) and the surrounding area, bathroom and toilet facilities, leisure activities, activities for children, and price. Additionally, several operators were found to perceive that their guests were

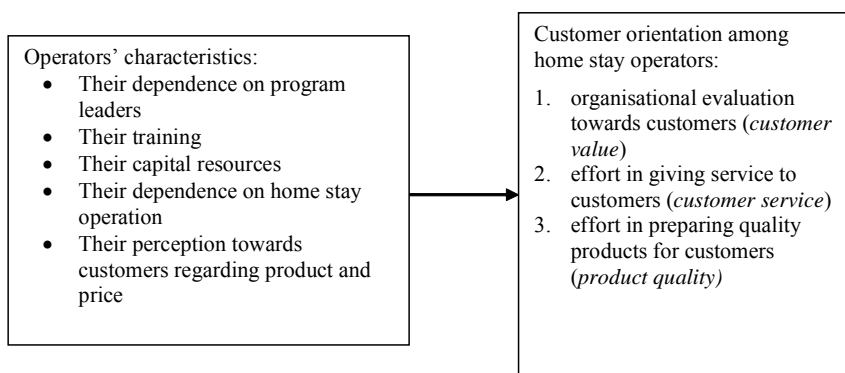
## CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AMONG RURAL HOME STAY OPERATORS

expecting so much more for the small price that they pay. The study concludes that this may explain the gap in the operators' attitudes found in the study.

The gaps such as the ones found in Reichel *et al.* (2000) study are similar to the customer gaps suggested by Ziethaml & Bitner (2000). All businesses should aim to make these gaps as narrow as possible, which requires the businesses to deliver service quality that are beyond their expectation. Understanding the customers' needs and wants, defined as customer orientation dimension by Deng and Dart (1994), is the prerequisite to service quality that has not been researched as much as service quality or customer satisfaction. According to Deng and Dart (1994), customer orientation dimension combine with three other dimensions namely competitor orientation, inter-functional co-ordination and profit orientation dimensions to form market orientation. In their study, Deng and Dart (1994) developed an instrument to measure market orientation in an organization consisting of the four customer orientation dimensions mentioned above. The present study adapted the customer orientation part of the instrument developed by Deng and Dart (1994). This construct consists of three dimensions namely customer service, customer value and quality product, in the context of the Malaysian home stay programs, focusing on relevant elements such as cleanliness, comfort, activities, and security.

Previous writings on rural tourism indicate several factors that may influence the level of customer orientation among rural tourism operators. A report by OECD (1994) highlights that most of these operators lack in marketing skill while Ryan (1997) argues that they also lack in operational management skills such as cost control and account management. Deprivation of training could be the reason for this problem, as was found by Page and Getz (1997) and Alexander and McKenna (1998). In addition, Fleisher *et al.* (1993) found that the majority of the rural tourism operators in their study were small scale individuals with little business experience and most of them were looking for addition income. Finally, the perception of the operators towards whether the visitors should receive products and services that are valued more than the price that they pay could also influence the attentiveness of operators towards customers, as was posited by Reichel *et al.* (2000). The small payment that is imposed on home stay visitors may become the source of justification by the operators for not emphasising on the efforts to identify and fulfil the needs of their customers.

A conceptual framework (Figure 1) is established based on the above literature review, and is used as a guide in this research while the definition for each variable is given in Table 1. Specifically, the study aimed to measure the three constructs of customer orientation suggested by Deng and Dart (1994)



**Figure 1**  
**Conceptual Framework of the Research**

## KALSOM KAYAT

but contextualizing them into the home stay product offerings (the box at the right hand side of the diagram). In addition, the study also attempted to explore factors that may explain the variability of customer orientation among the home stay operators (the box at the left hand side of the diagram). The five factors were chosen from a review form earlier writings and studies in rural tourism, which the author believes have strong resemblance to the research problem.

**Table 1**  
**Study Variables**

Variable	Operational Definition
Customer orientation among home stay operators	<p>Level of customer orientation shown by the home stay operators in identifying and fulfilling customer needs through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. evaluation on the importance of customers to them / their efforts to understand the needs of their customers and their effort in fulfilling these needs (<i>customer value</i>)</li> <li>2. evaluation on their effort in giving service to customers with emphasis on the aspects of hygiene, comfort, and safety (<i>customer service</i>)</li> <li>3. evaluation on their effort in preparing quality products (food, room, bathroom and outdoor activities) to their customers (<i>product quality</i>).</li> </ol>
Dependence on leader	If the operator feels that understanding and fulfilling visitors is the responsibility of their program leader.
Training	If the operator has undergone any training related to the management and operation of home stay.
Capital resources	If the operator has the capital or monetary capability to fulfil the needs of visitors as best as possible.
Importance of home stay as income	If income from their home stays operation is the main source of income for their livelihood.
Perception towards visitors relating to products and price	If the operator feels that the services they provide to the guests are of the same value with the price that they charge.

### **THE STUDY**

Adopting the procedure undertaken by Deng and Dart (1994), the study began the development of its instrument by carrying out unstructured interviews with five home stay operators aimed to gather ideas about the home stay product attributes. Statements that were used by the researcher in these interviews were, “*We would like to know the basic services offered by this home stay program and the visitors. Tell us what you think is very important in running this program, including issues relating to customers, the committee, the available facilities, and other issues that you feel are relevant. The understanding of those issues could help us in giving suitable recommendations to the governmental bodies to increase the quality of home stay in Malaysia. We would only like to interview you now and the questionnaire will come later.*” The researcher had taken notes during each of those interviews.

## CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AMONG RURAL HOME STAY OPERATORS

The summary results of those interviews revealed that basic services or products that are offered by the home stay operators include accommodation, food and beverages, and recreational activities. Most of the visitors that use their services usually come in groups and in packages. Among the issues that were brought up unanimously by the respondents were the constraints faced by operators in the preparation of facilities and limitation in terms of training that can be linked to their lack of financial resources. There was also similar feelings among the respondents about the level of quality of their offerings: they felt that the quality being offered was suitable with the price set; however they agreed that the quality could be improved but with the aid of the government in the form of finance, guidelines, and training. The literature review, as discussed in the previous section, further confirmed that the issues that were highlighted in the interviews may indeed influence consumer orientation among the operators in offering their products and services.

The next step involved the development of measurement items for the construct used in this research, adapting the customer orientation measurement that was developed by Deng and Dart (1994). The three dimensions of the construct were service that is rendered to the customer (customer service), organisational evaluation of its customers (*customer value*), and the quality of products sold (*quality product*) taking into consideration that the core home stay product and services found through the in-depth interviews are provisions of accommodation, food, and customized activities, with the focus given on the aspects of hygiene, comfort, and safety, which are considered to be the important aspects of the home stay programs (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, 2001). Later, a three-part questionnaire was formed. Part A is developed to measure customer orientation among the home stay operators which consists of 13 statements to measure respondents' customer orientation and their attentiveness towards the needs of visitors. For this first part, the respondent was asked to give a score to the 13 statements using a 5-point scale (1= very untrue, 5 = very true).

Part B consists of five nominal scale questions (with choices of 'yes' or 'no' answers) aiming to collect information about the five factors that may influence the level of customer orientation among the home stay operators. The five questions are: "Do you depend on the program leaders to fulfil the needs of your guests?", "Have you had any training in home stay business management?", "Do you own enough capital to operate your home stay?", "Is the home stay your main source of income?", and "Do you feel that tourists should not be too fussy because what you provide them is appropriate with the small price that they pay?" Lastly, Part C was aimed at collecting information about the perception among the home stay operators with regard to the extent they would go to fulfil the wants and needs of the customers. This section asked the respondents to state how far the needs of the visitors should be met through an open ended question.

The questionnaire was then tested on 16 home stay operators with focus given to the aspects of accuracy, clarity, reliability and validity of the research instrument. A reliability test on the instrument was performed using Cronbach's alpha value (Cronbach, 1970). The Cronbach's alpha value that was produced for the 13 statements was 0.713. Consequently, all items of the instrument were used in the survey questionnaire because the validity was around 0.7, which is acceptable as having an element of reliability (Sekaran, 1992). Content validity was ensured through an extensive literature review and evaluation by tourism academicians and graduate students at a university in the northern Malaysia.

The finalized questionnaire was used in a survey carried out among the study sample in a period of one month in May, 2005. With the assistance from the Malaysian Home stay Association, a home stay program that is categorised as being *very* active from each state in the Peninsular Malaysia was chosen as the sample for this study. However, the Home stay programme that was chosen for Terengganu, which was the Kampung Pasir Raja Home stay program, had to be removed from the

## KALSOM KAYAT

sample due to difficulties in obtaining cooperation from the management of that program. A total of 142 operators were interviewed using the developed structured-questionnaire that was filled by the interviewers. The description of the sample is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Home Stay Programs and Respondents Involved in This Study**

No	Homestay Program	Number of Operators	Number of Respondents	Percentage of operators interviewed
1.	Homestay Kg. Banghuris, Selangor	68	18	26.5
2.	Homestay Kg. Sarang Buaya, Johor	12	9	75.0
3.	Homestay Kg. Seri Tanjung, Melaka	20	19	95.0
4.	Homestay Kg. Lonek, Negeri Sembilan	12	6	50.0
5.	Homestay Kg. Desa Murni, Pahang	246	18	7.3
6.	Homestay Kg. Blok Ulu Kusial, Kelantan	23	14	60.9
7.	Homestay Kg. Mengkuang Titi, Pulau Pinang	25	16	64.0
8.	Homestay Kg. Relau, Kedah	30	17	56.7
9.	Homestay Kg. Bukit Gantang, Perak	25	17	68.0
10	Homestay Kg. Ujung Bukit, Perlis	9	8	88.9
	TOTAL	450	142	31.6

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 9.0 was used for data analyses. Mean and standard deviations were used to tabulate the responses for the questions used to measure operators' customer orientation and t-tests were carried out to uncover the differences in customer orientation among respondents according to the independent variables that were hypothesized to influence the level of customer orientation among them. Finally, a qualitative approach was used to examine the analysis for the open ended question regarding the extent of how much the needs of visitors should be fulfilled.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Customer orientation among home stay operators in the peninsular Malaysia

The background of the respondents is shown in Table 3. The majority of the respondents were local residents who are 40 years old and above. Perhaps at that age the respondents have the ability, space, and opportunity in terms of capital, time, and facilities to enable them to become home stay operators. A normal residential home in the rural area usually only have enough room to cater for the residential space that is appropriate with the number of family members. The rural dwellings rarely have 'guest rooms'. A family in the village will only be able to offer their homes for home stay when some of the children have grown up and moved out of home due to work or marriage, which is the normal case when the parents are aged 40 years and above.

As for their level of education, the majority of respondents that were involved in this research have completed either their primary school or secondary school. There were a few respondents (8.5%) that had not received any formal education and another small group (9.9%) that had pursued education at the college (especially teacher's college), institution, and university levels. Overall, the home stay operators that were involved in this study were able to read and write well, but they do not have the

## CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AMONG RURAL HOME STAY OPERATORS

proper knowledge and skills in business. A large part of the respondents (62%) were ordinary members in their respective home stay committees. Most of the respondents (57.7%) have been involved with home stay for quite a long time (5 to 10 years) and there were also (2.8%) those that have been involved for 11 to 15 years. The rest (39.4%) had been involved in home stay for less than 5 years.

**Table 3**  
**Respondent Background**

	Frequency	Percentage
<u>Age</u>		
Less than 40 years	27	19.0
41 to 50 years	56	39.4
51 to 60 years	47	33.1
61 years and above	12	8.5
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	75	52.8
Female	67	47.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<u>Education</u>		
Not formal	12	8.5
Primary School	49	34.4
Secondary School	67	47.2
College/institute/university	14	9.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<u>Membership status</u>		
Committee member	54	38.0
Ordinary member	88	62.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<u>Number of years involved in home stay</u>		
Less than 5 years	56	39.4
5-10 years	82	57.7
11-15 years	4	2.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Table 4 summarises the means of the respondents' feedback on the 13 statements of the instrument. These statements were to measure the three dimensions of customer orientation among the operators, namely customer value (statements 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8), customer service (statements 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13), and product quality (statements 4 and 7).

The overall mean for the statements that were used as a measurement for customer orientation among the respondents is 3.93, which indicates that they portray high level of customer orientation in their operations as home stay hosts. They place high importance on customers' needs because they always try to understand the wants of the visitors before these visitors arrive at their premises and they also obtained previous comments and criticisms or feedback from visitors regarding the service that they gave to the visitors. The effort to obtain feedback is not done just for the satisfaction of the home stay committee, but because the operators themselves want to know the level of comfort and satisfaction experienced by their visitors from the service and treatment that they gave. They do not find it difficult to understand the idiosyncrasies and wants of the visitors. This is aided by the effort of the programme leaders that always try to find a suitable host family for the visitors.

KALSOM KAYAT

Findings from the study also indicate that, in the effort to offer home stay products and services to the visitors, the respondents put great emphasis on the aspects of hygiene, comfort, and safety. This can be seen from the high mean score in the statements regarding those aspects (mean greater than 4). Furthermore, the mean for the safety aspect (4.59) is the highest mean score. However, the respondents are not confidently sure that they had offered the best services and products to their visitors (mean score for related statements was 3.01). This could be explained by the high capital needed in order to prepare the best services and products and the respondents are probably not as capable as they would like to be in this respect. The respondents often use the money received from the visitors to renovate and maintain their homes (mean score for this statement is 4.38). This may indicate that they really would like to prepare the best for the guests, but financial limitations would probably hold them back from doing so. This could perhaps be further explained by the data analysis that was performed for the third objective of this research.

**Table 4**  
**Level of Customer Orientation among Home Stay Operators**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Mean*</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
1. You always try to understand the wants of the visitors before they arrive	4.3064	.69367
2. You try to get comments and feedback from visitors while they are at your premises	4.2717	.67441
3. You measure the level of satisfaction of visitors continuously using feedback forms	3.9827	.76610
4. You are confident that you have offered the best services and basic facilities	3.0116	1.31622
5. It is important to understand and fulfil the wants of the visitors	3.2164	1.21024
6. Effort to obtain feedback was done just to oblige the programme committee	2.4706	1.16241
7. You renovation and maintain your homes continuously to cater to the visitors	4.3779	.61386
8. The home stay programme coordinators always tries to match a suitable host family with the characteristics of the visitors	4.1919	.75961
9. You prepared the toilet facilities in accordance with the guidelines that have been set	4.2659	.71434
10. You prepared the bedroom facilities in accordance with the guidelines that have been set	4.2081	.80156
11. You are careful that the level of hygiene for food preparation meets the guidelines that have been set	4.1850	.85617
12. The external activities that are prepared are appropriate for their needs	4.0407	.72028
13. You continually ensure the safety of the visitors	4.5930	.53809
Overall Mean	3.9343	.39582

*How true are the following statements regarding the offer of your home stay products and services?*

*\* Scale: 1= Very untrue, 5= Very true*



## CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AMONG RURAL HOME STAY OPERATORS

### Factors that may differentiate customer orientation level among the operators

Based on the conclusion from the literature review, several questions were included in the survey questionnaire to get information regarding respondents' dependence on the program leader to take care of customer needs, their training experience, their capital resources, the importance of income to their livelihood and if they feel the services they provide to the guests are on a par with the price that they charge (this is because study by Reichel *et al.* (2000) indicate that several bed and breakfast operators in their study were found to perceive that their guests were expecting so much more for the small price that they pay) . Table 5 summarizes the percentage of respondents according to the five variables. Independent sample t-tests were carried out to examine if the respondents' level of customer orientation differ according to the each of the five hypothesized variables above. The results of the t-tests are shown in Table 6.

**Table 5**  
**Responses to Variables that may Differentiate Customer Orientation among Respondents**

	Number	Percent (%)
<u>Dependence on leaders to satisfy customers</u>		
Yes	50	35.2
No	92	64.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<u>Training experience</u>		
Yes	78	54.9
No	64	45.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<u>Capital resources</u>		
Yes	24	16.9
No	118	83.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<u>Importance of income from home stay</u>		
Yes	16	11.3
No	126	88.7
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<u>Perception that services delivered are on a par with the price charged</u>		
Yes	35	24.6
No	107	75.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>100.0</i>

The results indicate significant differences in customer orientation between groups of respondents who depend on their program leaders to assure that customers are satisfied and those who do not; between groups of respondents with training experience and those with no training experience; and between groups of respondents who feel that the income from home stay is important to them and those who do not feel that income from home stay is important to them. The home stay programs in the rural areas of Malaysia are often organized as community programs, thus leaders of such programs are looked upon as the persons to guide the members who are often lacking in knowledge and experience to plan and manage the program, including in terms of ensuring customers needs are met. The group that has not been trained in home stay business may not know the importance of customer satisfaction as compared to those who have some sort of training in home stay business. This finding support suggestion by previous studies that training is crucial for success development of rural to

KALSOM KAYAT

their livelihood may take much serious attention to fulfilling the needs and wants of their customers than those who do not really depend so much on the income from their home stay operation.

On the other hand, the results show that there are no differences in customer orientation between groups with capital resources indicating that customer orientation may not depend on capital resources. The findings also reveal that there are no significant differences in customer orientation between those who do not have capital resources and between groups who feel that the services they provide to the guests are of the same value with the price that they charge and those who do not. This finding does not support earlier conclusion by Reichel *et. al.* (2000) that rural tourism operators' customer orientation may be eroded by their perceptions that visitors are expecting too much from the operators for the small price that they have to pay.

**Table 6**  
**Differences in Customer Orientation among Respondents**

	Customer orientation mean	t value	Sig
Operators that depend on program leader to satisfy customers	3.85	-2.083	0.004*
Operators that do not depend on program leader to satisfy customers	3.98		
Operators with training	3.94	2.430	0.019*
Operators with no training	3.89		
Operators with capital resources	3.68	-0.274	0.955
Operators with no capital resources	3.66		
Operators who feel that income from home stay is important	4.17	2.543	0.002*
Operators who do not feel that income from home stay is important	3.90		
Operators who feel that services provided are on a par with price	3.91	-0.264	0.298
Operators who do not feel that services provided are on a par with price	3.94		

$p \leq 0.05$  level

**How far would the operators go in order to satisfy their customers?**

In addition to study the level of attentiveness of operators towards the wants and needs of the customers, this research also attempted to identify the perception of the operators regarding how much they feel the wants and needs of the customers should be fulfilled. Designed as open-ended questions, this part of the questionnaire gives the opportunity for the researcher to have a deeper

## CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AMONG RURAL HOME STAY OPERATORS

understanding towards the phenomenon that is being investigated by obtaining the reaction from the respondents. Two questions were presented to respondents for this purpose: *“To what extent do the wants and needs of the customers should be fulfilled?”* and *“Is there a boundary or limit to how far should those needs be fulfilled?”* Responses were then categorised to facilitate data analysis. The results from data analysis for the above questions revealed that 126 respondents that were surveyed (88.7%) had stated that they are willing to fulfil the wants and needs of their customers as much as their able to according to their capability. Nine respondents gave the indication that they need to be moderate and seven respondents felt that they would fulfil the wants and needs of customers as well as possible. Table 7 shows several views from these respondents.

**Table 7**  
**Respondents’ Perception Regarding how far the Wants and Needs of Customers should be Fulfilled**

Willing to fulfil the wants and needs of customers according to capability	Need to be moderate	Willing to fulfil the wants and needs of customers as best as possible
Percentage: 88.7%	Percentage: 6.3%	Percentage: 4.9%
Example of views: <i>“...we prepare what should be prepared...according to our capability”</i>  <i>“Have to be according to our capabilities, right?”</i>  <i>“If we can afford it, we will definitely fulfil all of the needs”</i> <i>“We give them what we should, according to our capability”</i> <i>“Up to us, we are not very well off, so what is within reason, we do”</i>	Example of views: <i>“in moderation...not too little”</i>  <i>“Whatever, we only give moderately, anyway they like it like that”</i> <i>“We are just average, so they also get average”</i> <i>“Whatever, we are just average”</i>  <i>“Depends on the situation, normally just average, in moderation”</i>	Example of views: <i>“They must be satisfied, or they will not tell good things about us, so we must give the best”</i> <i>“We make them comfortable and excited ...with all our might”</i>  <i>“We need to do the best”</i>  <i>“If we do our best, they are sure to come back”</i> <i>“I like them to come, I will prepare the best”</i>

The above findings once again indicate that the capabilities and abilities of the home stay program participants influence their attentiveness towards the wants and needs of customers and thus influences their efforts in trying to prepare the best to fulfil the customer needs. Nevertheless, attentiveness towards the wants and needs of customers alone does not ensure that the wants and needs of the customers will be fulfilled if their capabilities are limited.

For the second question, 121 of the total respondents (85%) stated that the needs of the visitors will be fulfilled just as long as it does not go against cultural norms and customs of the local community. This can be observed in the following statement examples that were given by several respondents below:

*“We can fulfil needs, but if those needs mean that we have to do things that are not according to our culture, then we cannot follow...we have to inform them (why we cannot fulfil their needs)”*

*“We must follow and try to give them the best, but this does not mean that we have to follow all; our culture, we have to maintain”*

*“(Fulfilling the needs of the visitors) has its limitations; that is unique about home stay, they (visitors) also know, these limits are according to our etiquette”*

## CONCLUSION

Operators of the rural home stay programs in Peninsular Malaysia that are categorised as being active portray high level of customer orientation. They put an effort to understand the wants of the visitors before their arrival to the premises and they also obtain comments and feedbacks from visitors about the treatment and service given. They do not do this just for the sake of the home stay program committee; the majority of respondents did not feel that being attentive to visitors is the responsibility of the programme leader only. They showed their curiosity of wanting to know about the level of comfort and visitor satisfaction towards the service and treatment rendered. Their intentions to become host families that are capable to satisfy the wants of visitors so that they will continue to receive visitors in the future are revealed through the findings.

However, the respondents were not too confident that they have offered the best service or facilities to their visitors due to their financial constraints. Approximately 83 percent of the respondents stated that they were not financially capable in preparing the best home stay products and services for their customers. Most of them carry out their own renovation and maintenance on their own home using the money they earned from visitors to their home stays. They are earnest in giving the best, but their financial limitations would prevent them from doing so. About half of the respondents had undergone training on food preparation and hygiene management, but financial support is needed for them to implement the knowledge gained from the training.

The majority of research respondents (88.7%) stated that they will fulfil the wants and needs of the customers according to their capabilities. Only seven respondents felt that they will only fulfil the wants and needs of customers as best as possible. Thus it can be concluded that the capability and ability of the home stay programme participants perhaps firstly influences their attentiveness towards the customer wants and needs, and eventually influences their effort in trying to do their best in fulfilling the wants and needs of customers.

### **Theoretical and practical implications**

This present study focuses on narrowing the gap in the area of service quality in tourism, namely understanding businesses' customer orientation which has not been researched as much as customer satisfaction. Using a model adapted from Deng and Dart's (1994) suggested model of customer orientation, the study measured customer orientation among home stay operators in the rural areas of Malaysia. The results of the study indicate that the model is indeed useful to understand the degree of customer orientation and factors that may help explain the variation in customer orientation in tourism businesses operated by folks in the rural areas. Future studies may want to further explore other factors that are deemed important to be considered but not included in this study.

Although this research is exploratory in nature and the results of this study need to be generalised with care, the findings had revealed several important issues regarding home stay management in rural areas in Malaysia. The home stay program operators were attentive towards the needs of the visitors and placed importance to satisfy their visitors. This should contribute to the success of the home stay. However, several steps need to be taken in order to ensure that the home stay program operators will be able to maintain the level of product and service quality that is in-line with the needs of the tourists. It is crucial to study the expected quality of service of the visitors to the home stay program in Malaysia, the relevant standard to fulfil the expected quality, and the actual service quality that is received by those visitors. This would assist in identifying the first gap, second gap, and third gap in the Quality of Service Gap Model by Ziethaml dan Bitner (2000).

## CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AMONG RURAL HOME STAY OPERATORS

Future research can study several hypotheses that could be formed from this research. Among them are, firstly, the operational efficiency and success of the home stay programme host participants are influenced by the leadership of the home stay programme leader. Secondly, appropriate training is crucial in the success of a home stay operation. Thirdly, as the importance of home stay contribution towards the income of the operators' increases, so does their seriousness in their effort to fulfil the needs of their guests.

Findings from this research may be useful for the management and planning of the home stay program in Malaysia. To assure their sustainability, home stay programs must give priority to customer orientation among the operators. The concern that the home stay program operators fail to give a level of product and service that is in-line with the needs of the tourist requires attention. This study has shown that the home stay program host families have not failed to give the level of product and service that is of high quality because they place utmost importance on customer satisfaction as long as it is within their means and their boundaries of traditional customs. What needs to be improved on is their capability so that they are able to identify the expected quality of service of the visitors and so that they are able to fulfil this expected quality of service.

### REFERENCES

- Alexander, N. & McKenna, A. (1998). Rural tourism in England. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 10, pp. 203-207.
- Baker, D. A. & Crompton, J. L. (2000). Quality, satisfaction and behavioral intentions. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 27(3), pp. 785-804.
- Chu, R.K.S. & Choi, T. (2000). An importance-performance analysis of hotel selection factors in the Hong Kong hotel industry: a comparison of business and leisure travelers. *Tourism Management*, 21, pp. 363-377.
- Crawford, J. C. (1983). The marketing concept – a utopian dream? *Developments in Marketing Science*, 6, pp. 450-452.
- Crompton, J.L. & Mackay, K.J. (1989). Users' perceptions of the relative importance of service quality dimensions in selected public recreation programs. *Leisure Services*, 11, pp. 367-375
- Cronbach, L. (1970). *Essentials of Psychological Testing*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc.
- Deng, S. and Dart, J. (1994). Measuring market orientation: A multi-factor, multi-item approach. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 10, pp. 725-742.
- Duke, C.R. & Persia, M.A. (1996). Consumer-defined dimension for the escorted tour industry segment: expectations, satisfactions and importance. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 5(1/2), pp. 77-99.
- Fick, G.R. & Ritchie, J.R.B. (1991). Measuring service quality in the travel and tourism industry. *Journal of Travel Research*, 29, pp. 2-9.
- Fleischer, A., Rotem, A. & Banin, T. (1993). New directions in recreation and tourism activities in the rural sector in Israel. *Research Report*, Development Study Center, Rehovot, Israel.
- Goeldner, R.G., Ritchie, J.R.B., and McIntosh, R.W. (2000). *Tourism: Principles, Practices & Philosophies*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Khan, M. (2003). Ecoserv: Ecotourists' quality expectations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30(1), pp. 109-124.
- Kotler, P. (1977). From sales obsession to marketing effectiveness. *Harvard Business Review*, 55(6), pp. 67-75.
- Kotler, P., Bowen, J. & Makens, J. (2003). *Marketing for Hospitality and Tourism*. Prentice Hall: New Jersey.
- Law, E. (1998). Conceptualizing visitor satisfaction management in heritage settings: An exploratory blueprinting analysis of Leeds Castle, Kent. *Tourism Management*, 19(6), pp. 545-554.
- Levitt, T. (1960). *The Marketing Mode*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Martin, D.W. (1995). An importance-performance analysis of service providers' perception of quality service in the hotel industry. *Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing*, 3(1), pp. 5-17.
- Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (2001). *Rural Tourism Master Plan: The Main Report*. Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism.
- Mowforth, M. & Munt, I. (1998). *Tourism and Sustainability*. London: Routledge.
- Neild, K., Kozak, M. & LeGrys, G. (2000). The role of food service in tourist satisfaction. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 19(4), pp. 375-384.

## KALSOM KAYAT

- OECD (1994). *Tourism Policy and International Tourism in OECD Countries: 1991-1992*. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Page, S.J. & Getz, D. (1997). *The Business of Rural Tourism: International Perspectives*. London: International Thomson Business Press.
- Parasuraman, A., Berry, L. & Zeithaml, V. (1988). Servqual: A Multiple-item scale for measuring customer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64, pp. 12-40.
- Reichel, A., Lowengart, O. and Milman Ady (2000). Rural tourism in Israel: service quality and orientation. *Tourism Management*, 21, pp. 451-459.
- Ryan, C. (1997). Rural tourism in New Zealand: Rafting in the Rangitikei at River Valley ventures. In S. J. Page & D. Getz (eds.) *The Business of Rural Tourism: International Perspectives*.
- Saleh, F. & Ryan, C. (1992). Client perception of hotels – a multi-attribute approach. *Tourism Management*, 13( 2), pp. 163-168.
- Williams, J. A. & Uysal, M. (2003). Introduction. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, 4(3/4), pp. 1-5.
- Wong, J. & Law, Rob. (2003). Difference in shopping satisfaction levels: A study of tourists in Hong Kong. *Tourism Management*, 24(4), pp. 401-410.
- Ziethaml, V. A. & Bitner, M. J. (2000). *Service Marketing: Integrating Customer Focus across the Firm*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston: Mc-Graw Hill.