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# Co-creating a Special Interest Tour: Enhancing the Experience and Strengthening Tour Group Ties through the Internet

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper reports on a longitudinal study that examined the co-creation process of two special-interest tours. The virtual space provided by the tour company, with the facilitation of the tour leader, evolved a group of unconnected serious leisure participants into a small interactive community. Involving the participants within the construction of the tour product extended the duration of the experience, increased their emotional ownership of the product and developed an intimacy between them. These were the ingredients for two extraordinary tour experiences for those participants and have resulted in loyalty and compelling word of mouth recommendations for the tour company.*

**Keywords:** co-creation, tour, Internet, community, serious leisure

## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on two longitudinal studies that examined the co-creation process of two separate special-interest tours organized by the same tour company. The tour company was innovative in its marketing co-creation approach in that it brought together potential participants of each tour within an online environment before the tour and encouraged them to participate as a group to determine the structure and itinerary for the tour. The first tour was to the Athens Olympics in 2004. The second tour was to the World Equestrian Games in Kentucky in 2010.

The participants of both tours were undivided in categorizing each of their sport tours as an “extraordinary experience”. From the forums’ archives and interviews after each tour, the word “extraordinary”, and similar synonyms such as “incredible”, “phenomenal”, “awesome”, “sensational” and “unbelievable” were frequently and persistently repeated by the participants.

Using an exploratory approach by employing grounded theory methodology this paper aimed to provide three contributions. Firstly, a theory of the elements that contributed to an extraordinary customer experience. Secondly, to provide an insight into one method of engaging customers in the co-creation of a special interest tourism experience. Thirdly, to propose a model of the stages of development of a customer community for group tours using the Internet as a tool.

## LITERATURE

A contemporary approach to marketing is to “market with” by collaborating with customers and partners to create and sustain value. This approach applies a service-dominant logic which has been assembled upon ten premises (Lusch and Vargo 2006). The sixth premise is that the customer is always a co-creator of value which implies that value creation needs to be interactional. Consumers want to, and are being empowered to, co-create a personalized experience using firms’ experience environments (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). Indeed the role of other customers in that co-creation process is also being highlighted, with a number of authors stressing the benefits of developing and, or, maintaining a role

within customer-based communities (Rowley, Kupiec-Teahan and Leeming 2007; Fuller, Jaecki and Muhlbacher 2006).

## **METHODOLOGY**

An exploratory approach was utilized by employing grounded theory methodology investigating two tour groups' experiences as case studies. Essentially the theory was developed using data from the Athens case. The Kentucky case study data was then used to reinforce the fit, relevance, workability and modifiability of the theory, making refinements where necessary.

Data collection for the Athens tour group's case was over a 15 month period that spanned the formation of the group's online presence through to post-tour. The data collection included field notes from participant observation within the group's virtual space and the archives of forum discussions. The Athens tour included conducting 41 interviews using synchronous "chat" software with the tour leader and participants plus one initial face-to-face interview with the tour company's owner. In analyzing the data open coding was used initially and extensive memoing. The literature was then addressed, coding that also and comparing it to what had been found within the data. From this a theory on what contributed to the tour's success was established.

The same data collection methods were employed for the Kentucky case study. This data was compared against the theory developed from the Athens case to see how well it fit and instances where the theory required refinement. The results discussed here are the result of this reiterative theory building and refining process.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Four prerequisite conditions were identified that formed the foundation of what contributed to the extraordinary experience the tour participants reported. These included the impact of providing a virtual space, the nature of the service encounter itself, the experiential aspects of co-creating the consumption process and that the participants are all Serious Leisure participants with respect to Equestrian sports.

Providing a virtual space amplified, extended and facilitated the sharing of the entire experience. It enhanced interaction between participants. Coded categories within the data related very closely to the dimensions found in Extraordinary Service Experiences (Price, Arnould and Tierney 1995). These included that by using the virtual space to assist with the product creation, the duration of the encounter was extended well beyond the tour itself. The sharing of information and decisions within the virtual space also assisted in building an emotionally charged context between the participants and, even though virtual, it created an intimate spatial closeness between the provider and the customer as well as between customer to customer. The ongoing interactions within the virtual space engendered more sharing of identity and a sense of belonging to a small community.

The co-creation involved the participants as they collaborated to produce what the participants referred to as "their" tour. The co-creation of the product involved the customer more deeply and resulted in a sense of ownership and investment within the final experience (Pralhad and Ramaswamy 2000). Categories within the data also indicated enjoyment and pleasure was being derived from this process of co-constructing the group's travel product. So by using the virtual space to plan the tour together acted to build a further sense of community and community ownership of their product. It also provided a sense of involvement and excitement before the tour even commenced.

The participants within this tour were all equestrian enthusiasts. Much of the coding related quite directly to the dimensions of Serious Leisure (Stebbins 1992). Memos from after the tour demonstrated that the trip itself provided participants with a means to facilitate their serious leisure involvement by constructing and confirming their leisure identities as well as providing a stage to parade and celebrate that identity (Green and Jones 2005).

The virtual space helped a group, who previously did not know each other, become a community. The shared space permitted the group to form its own structure, norms, consumption values and a collective identity. It encouraged interaction for an extended duration, building and sharing excitement between members, the result being that the tour itself was a close-knit community travelling as one.

These two case studies established that there were five temporal stages to the formation of the resultant tour communities. An introductory stage, a more interactive decision making stage, an excitement building stage where collective identity became evident, the travel together stage which acted to confirm this new collective group identity and finally, post-tour sharing.

## CONCLUSION

The virtual space provided by the tour company, with the facilitation of the tour leader, evolved a group of serious leisure participants into a small interactive community. Involving the participants within the construction of the tour product extended the duration of the experience, increased their emotional ownership of the product and developed an intimacy between them. These were the ingredients for two extraordinary tour experiences for those participants and have resulted in loyalty and compelling word of mouth recommendations for the tour company.

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