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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an innovative qualitative method, a mobile ethnography, where visitors are asked to use mobile technological devices such as smartphones to identify service gaps, evaluate service journeys, and help improve tourist services.

Keywords: *qualitative research, mobile ethnography, service design*

INTRODUCTION

The competitiveness of a tourist destination is largely dependent on the quality of experiences provided to visitors. Given that a destination consists mostly of a bundle of service experiences that influences pre-purchase decisions, on-site evaluations, and post-purchase behavior, service providers in the past have adopted a service orientation to remain competitive. This notion of service orientation has been conceptualized in two different ways. First, service orientation occurs at the individual level whereby service employees are either service-oriented or not. Second, the extent to which an organization is service-oriented determines its service orientation (Homburg, Hoyer, and Fassnacht, 2002). The latter specifically considers internal service design characteristics and how the marketing strategy supports the organization to become service oriented. In recent years, this concept of service orientation has been superseded by the service dominant (S-D) logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The S-D logic is philosophically grounded in a commitment to collaborative processes with customers, service partners and employees. It is based on an interwoven fabric of individuals (viewed as employees, customers, and other business partners) and organizations rather than the fragmentary approach of service orientation, thereby making the S-D logic a more holistic approach to managing service experiences (Lusch, Vargo, and O'Brien, 2007). However, the application of this logic for tourism purposes, including destination management remains scarce (Shaw, Bailey, and Williams, 2011).

The tourism sector, in particular, is increasingly driven by customer experiences and as such, customers and service providers interact more closely at all stages of the relationship (Shaw, Bailey, and Williams, 2011). A central tenant of the S-D logic is the co-creation of service experiences (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) that can be driven on the supplier side by service-design innovation (Shaw, Bailey, and Williams, 2011). Although there exists a large body of research on service design principles (e.g. Chase, 2004; Morelli, 2009; Pullman and Moore, 1999; Shostack, 1982; Williams and Anderson, 2005), the deliberate design and execution of service experiences as a distinctive management discipline with its own principles, tools, and

techniques is a new domain of research (Stickdorn, 2009; Zehrer, 2009). In particular, the application of service design for tourist destinations requires a holistic analysis of all sequencing touch points between customers and service providers within a complex tourism product (Buhalis, 2000; Stickdorn, 2009). Such an analysis needs to be extended beyond the actual service period to include also pre- and post-service periods (Stickdorn and Zehrer, 2009).

Using this approach, the current study aims at understanding the service touch points and the associated satisfying and/or dissatisfying experiences of visitors to a city destination, Antibes, on the European Mediterranean coast. By doing so, the study contributes to this emerging field of research in two main ways. First, a holistic approach based on pre-service, on-site, and post-service experiences is used to understand visitor experiences. Second, from a methodological perspective, mobile ethnography is used to understand on-site experiences. This method remains a relatively new technique to understand tourism experiences in general (Buscher and Urry, 2009) and provides rich audio-visual records of lived practice that can instigate collaborative service innovation that moves across the boundaries that divide service design and use (Karasti, 2001).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The design of services to create memorable experiences is not new (Zehrer, 2009). Traditionally, the service blue print technique has been used to create and enhance customer service experiences. The service blue print is essentially a method by which the service production and delivery process is described including chains of activities, the use of facilitating goods, and equipment, and time and cost effects (Gummesson, 1990). It is based on the identification of 'moment-of-truths' and 'fail points' that enable organizations to maximize customer satisfaction or activate service recovery strategies (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1990). It remains a favored approach in service design that enables service providers to understand critical incidents and shape customers' emotional experiences accordingly (Zehrer, 2009). Equally popular is the drama production principles in service design. This approach is based on a theatre metaphor, suggesting that the service experience needs to be orchestrated during the service encounter where actors, directors, supporting cast, the set, the audience and the script must be cohesively aligned to provide the best customer experience (Grove, Fisk, and Dorsch, 1998). However, this approach has been criticized given that many service encounters today are more participatory than spectator based (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Chase (2004) proposed five basic service design principles that include segmenting the pleasurable components of the service into identifiable chunks and unpleasant processes into a singular 'get it over' activity. The author also suggests that customers are less likely to complain about service quality when they have control over some part of it. His approach is grounded in the S-D logic where customer experiences should be designed in such a way to engage all their five senses.

The service design principles we used in this study are principally structured around a bottom up approach where we try to understand the service process from the customer perspective. At a destination level, the moments of truth are many, and the customer has the possibility of arranging these moments or touch points in different ways (Stickdorn, 2009). The visitors also have the possibility to define which touch points are notable and which ones they would ignore or overlook (Stickdorn and Zehrer, 2009). Using this user-centered approach, Stickborn (2009) suggested a three-stage analysis of the service experience. Stage 1, similar to past service encounter studies (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1990), the expectations of customers need to be understood. In Stage 2, the on-site experiences of customers are

assessed at the destination. In stage 3, the post-service behaviors such as overall satisfaction, satisfaction with each touch point, and customer loyalty are measured. While this approach is not necessarily new to the service marketing literature, existing studies neglect the *mobilities* paradigm that suggests customers are 'movement driven', that is, they are constantly moving at destinations and between destinations. They have access to multiple technologies of travel and communication that move ideas, information, people, images and objects across varying distances (Buscher and Urry, 2009). Hence, our study tries to capture this mobility using smartphones that support features like taking pictures, videos, voice recording, and even locating geographic positions with GPS.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative method that was chosen for this study, a mobile ethnography, was designed with various European partners as part of a European Union - funded project titled "Service design as an approach to foster competitiveness and sustainability of European tourism." This project is further described on the following website: http://www.servicedesigntourism.com/. Other researchers have previously used and recommended mobile ethnographies (e.g., Hein, O'Donohoe, and Ryan, 2011; Tan, Foo, Goh, and Theng, 2009). Benefits of this method are that we can collect data on the service delivery site, at the time of service delivery, and in an unobtrusive way.

Visitors to the city of Antibes who had registered for a guided tour of the old town were invited to participate in the project. After a short briefing and interview session to explain the procedure and the data collection tool to visitors as well as to ascertain visitors' expectations, the visitors were invited to upload on their smartphone or tablet an App called "myservicefellow." Visitors who did not have the necessary equipment but who were willing to participate in the study were lent a smartphone or an Ipod Touch. The App was designed for visitors to identify and evaluate various touch points in a particular service situation, or service journey. In this study, the service journey is the guided tour. Visitors that volunteered for the study are asked, throughout the tour and with the assistance of the mobile device, (1) to identify significant touch points; (2) to evaluate each touch point on a Likert-type scale; and (3) to document their perception of each touch point by using the multimedia capabilities of their electronic device: they are invited to take pictures, to film a short video, to type a few words, or to record a voice testimony. When visitors returned to the Office of Tourism, all data were uploaded to a dedicated server. Thirty-one visitors participated in the study over a 2-week period.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Once all data were uploaded, the researchers could then analyze the service through the eyes of the visitors, and make recommendations to the Office of Tourism for guided tour improvements. A specific application called "myservicefollow" was used to graphically illustrate the guided tour with a storyboard including all comments and other testimonies made by visitors. As a result, researchers can identify the significant points, both positive and negative, of the service journey. Quality points to be emphasized and promoted, areas of improvement, significant problems were then synthesized in a report with recommendations for the DMO Director and his staff.

CONCLUSION

This research responds to the conference's call for innovative research in destination marketing. Through an innovative approach, with electronic mobile devices such as

smartphones, IPod Touch or tablets, researchers were able to address tourism service evaluation and identify significant service touch points, from the customers' perspective, in the context of an urban destination. Unlike other service quality studies where visitors are asked to rate pre-identified items, this approach gives the subjects a free-hand in identifying touch points and in documenting not only how the touch points are evaluated and why, but also how the service can be improved. Rich audio-visual records of the visitor experience contribute to service improvement and service innovation. The Director of the Office of Tourism in Antibes Juan Les Pins found the tool and method useful and promising; he intends to propose to his board that this method be integrated into the DMO's quality control process.

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