

RELIABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY IN THE QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF TOURISM PRODUCTS

Pavel Stanciu¹ and Cristian Valentin Hapenciu²

¹⁾²⁾ University „Ștefan cel Mare” Suceava, Romania

E-mail: pavelstanciu@gmail.com

E-mail: expresedinte@gmail.com

Abstract

During its consolidation as an economic science, tourism has formed its own emergent market, characterized by factors with specific action and heterogeneous elements. On this slightly atypical market the quality of tourism products and services tends to become an element of competitive differentiation.

Constantly practicing high standard quality services allows obtaining certain notoriety both for the tourism services providers and for the promoted destination. Continuous monitoring and improvement of tourism products quality must base on the correspondence relation between the satisfaction, perception and tourists' expectancies.

Nowadays tourist wants to be offered multiple choices, to discover the tourism offer suitable to satisfy the most diverse preferences. He is not willing to make any concession regarding the quality of the tourist products he is being offered. His discontents are linked, mainly, to poor performance of the staff training activity, to lack of equipment and facilities compared to the ones present in other states of the European Union and to the infrastructure's precarious state.

In order to emphasize the way of perceiving the tourism products quality among tourists who had visited Bukovina, during December the 20th 2008 and January the 20th 2009, we developed a socio-statistic research on a sample of 151 tourists accommodated in the lodge units within Suceava county. The study results emphasized that because of the global economic crisis, the tourism products quality is more frequently perceived as a differentiation element between tourism agencies, and Romanian tourists stress more then ever this detail.

This way, touristic product Bukovina, suggests in an accurate manner the overall image of Romanian tourist reported to services quality level of in the national tourism area.

Keywords: tourism services quality, touristic product, touristic reliability, safe tourism, tourism satisfaction.

JEL Classification: L83, L84

Introduction

Speaking from the commercial point of view, touristic market represents the economic interference sphere, where the touristic product materializes into touristic offer, and the

needs for tourism consumption –as a demand (Nedelea, 2005). Tourism consumption begins exactly in the tourist's residence locality, throughout the purchase of various goods and services necessary for the journey, it continues during the entire voyage, including at the holiday destination, and it ends with the returning in the residence locality. From many points of view, the concept of the touristic product has a considerable abstract character, being difficult to quantify, as the tourist sector implies the interconnectivity of all other components of a scale economy.

According to these, the touristic product presents specific features and characteristics:

- it is a touristic package services formed of various components, commercialized throughout the tourism agencies;
- it needs a specific distribution and an accurate synchronization of performances chain;
- characterized through immobility, due to its specific engaged attraction, determined by the natural and anthropological resources of environment;
- due to of the necessity to ensure touristic satisfaction, the tourism product must have specific quality characteristics.

The specialty literature has adopted various general correlations of touristic products as ways of tourism (Minciu, 2005) practiced or practicable depending on certain categories, implying a vast correlation of the tourism resources specificity, tourists' structure, travelling motivations and tourism's active character.

All the touristic products components, regardless of their belonging, have the justification to ensure satisfaction to consumers, which is not quite easy to achieve. In order to realize the main objective of tourism operators –clients' satisfaction, this must correspond with tourists' incentives, most diverse expectations.

Once it has been conceived, the touristic product must be disseminated either by image promotion, or by various distribution channels (Gale Jennings and all, 2005). Usually, the distribution vector comprises two important agents: the tourism agency (voyage agency) and the tour operator.

The advantage this package presents for tourists is the forfeiter price which is lower than the sum of services' tariffs comprised in the package, in case they were to be bought separately. Additionally, the purchase of a prestigious tour-operator product offers the quality guarantee.

Quality represents the best insurance policy of clients' loyalty, the most efficient defence against competition and maybe the only way for increasing and maintaining earnings (Kotler, 2006). Perception of quality varies from one client to another, so it does not have the same importance for both the purchaser and the provider. In the end, the quality of the touristic services is valued by consumers who compare their expectations with their experience earned while consuming the product.

It is considered that when we speak about purchasing a touristic product (holiday in Bukovina, journey in Bulgaria etc) the final decisional factor depends mainly on the presentation-promotion manner of that future destination. This way, the intention of purchase implies the interpellation and implicitly the answer to the following questions (Tomescu, 2000):

- Do we know the touristic product or not? If we do, then the next question is obvious.

- How is that product's image perceived? If the image is a positive one, then obviously
- Shall I purchase or not?

The purchasing decision is influenced by a various range of non-touristic elements that may cause the wane of the product, at any time. On the other hand, the tourism agents must emphasize the quality of the offered services, knowing the fact that this is a defining element, specific for the touristic product.

In Romania, the most important issue is the commercialization manner of services, not the touristic product itself, because there often a lack of communication is perceived between touristic services providers and their promoters.

1. Touristic products reliability within the relationship between tourists and tourism agents

Reliability is a concept borrowed from the production field and refers to a piece of equipment maintaining its performances in time. The use of this concept may be extended to adjacent domains (Prutianu and all, 1998) as hospitality and journey industry becoming one of the determinant parameters of products' and touristic service packages' competitiveness.

Quality management in tourism marches towards increasing the marketable level throughout rising reliability. Among strategic approaches it develops the quantification of all possible scenarios (Figure no.1) starting from the probability that one or more components of the cluster – formed by tour-operators, travel agencies, touristic services providers- to suffer major imperfections at the $t > 0$ moment. Any tourism agent in the national network can make the prediction, with the support of touristry services consumers, on base of the characteristics of the aggregate product and as consequences of the periodic quality check.

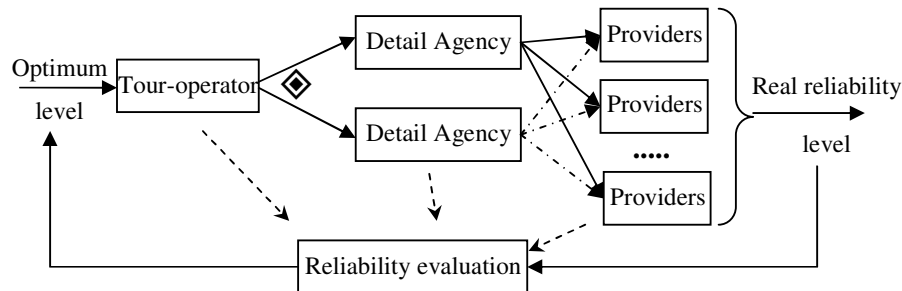


Figure 1 Reliability level check

In order to evaluate the package reliability as well as its lifetime there must be analyzed the possible discontents regarding the tourists' options, general impression, image and notoriety of touristic product, possible administration, planning and prognosis errors, disciplinary deviations and inadequate employees behaviour, taking into account the use of prophylactic and maintenance methods in order to prevent them.

The necessity of reliability studies is indisputable because it implies the permanent correlation of the touristic product with the demands and expectations of tourists and it requires the direct implication of the marketing department. This kind of touristic products mainly focus on:

- raising the qualitative standard due to competition and competence;
- faultlessly functioning systems that the security and safety of the touristy product depends on;
- perfecting the cooperation between touristic products providers and tourism agencies that contribute to conceiving and/or commercializing the touristic services packages;
- planning the maintenance activities of the tourism infrastructure;
- planning the “security alternatives”;
- efficiency of tourism basic activities- transport, accommodation and leisure - by enlarging the period for turning the account and increasing the use level of touristic capacities;
- the content of the quality concept (economical, social and technical) resides within its complex and dynamic character.

In most cases, life duration for touristic services packages is conditioned by most rigid components or by the most solicited “component usage” accentuation. The tourism provider or operator must quickly adjust this kind of situation throughout modernization or proactive substitution. The integrated system corresponding to the touristic services packages will comprise some spare elements that function in parallel, or that start to function only when the basic element is “physically and morally worn”.

Continuous perfecting of integrated touristic systems has led to solutions that imply periodic refreshing, social innovation, innovative solutions, complex services: interactive or personalized and especially the continuous extension towards new markets.

The quality norms and standards regarding the activity developing in the touristic units that settle the minimum conditions level must be perpetually improved. We refer to tourists’ safety during the journey and emphasize that the touristic product has a limited lifetime because of errors occurrence (for example tracking of security flaws, obsolete equipment, lack of important modernization, lack of qualified front-office personnel) or alternatives occurrence – more attractive new destinations, which successfully substitute the old touristic attractions.

2. Necessity of continuous maintaining and improving of tourist products quality

The global economic crisis and the vulnerable destinations exposed to terrorism have generated a strategic reorientation of the quality management towards control, surveillance and safety obsession. The most recent trends approach destinations management, destination proximity and low price or psychological price strategy, transport safety, antiterrorism policies, technological checking of crowded areas, prevention of tourist fears and monitoring the high level risk and hazard areas.

In order to promote the safe tourism concept it is very important to understand the stress factors that stop the optimal development of tourism discouraging the touristic circulation towards, once, well-known destinations. (Konecnik and Go, 2008).

Well-known destinations are not necessarily the safest because the opportunity of a terrorist attack that may have disastrous effects increases in proportion with the destinations' notoriety. As a paradox, the safest destinations seem to localize in the proximity of terrorist focus. One example is the well-known Dubai - the most en vogue occidental destination developed in the centre of the Arabian world. This situation extends to destinations like India, Maldives, or Bali.

Touristic products reliability defies sometimes terrorism and weather whims, but it is hard to explain this paradox. Why some greatly unsafe destinations attract constantly a big number of tourists? Destinations' notoriety is sometimes more powerful than the risks the tourist gets exposed to.

For Romanian citizens the novelty aspect counts. Romanian tourists' latest preferences are: Antalya (Turkey), Hurghada (Egypt) - or closer ones like - Albena, Golden Sands (Bulgaria), Parhelia Katerini (Greece) - well known for the good tariffs, and quality services - Tunisia or even Dubai. The precarious quality of Romanian tourism was speculated accordingly. Consciously or not, Romanian tourists have mainly practiced a particular form of safe-tourism shaped by the desire to escape towards foreign destinations, which are more price convenient and offer better services quality. This kind of spending leisure time was also preferred by tourists from Germany, Nordic states or Russia, a determinant factor being the global economic crisis.

Touristic year 2009 shall be stressed by the evolution of the economic crisis, bringing negative repercussions upon the touristic flow. According to these conditions the touristic units turnover which are involved in creating the touristic products reflect mainly the quality of infrastructure and provided services.

Quality culture in tourism is perceived as a reference concept focused on the perpetual increase of quality. The organizational value system is founded on a certain estate of cultural and psychological values, expectations and mutual engagements in the tourist quality. This contributes to the consolidation of a managerial structural element aiming for individual efforts coordination in order to raise tourist products quality.

Touristic agents, who comply with a quality culture, no matter the provided touristic products or services are characterized as follows:

- the tourists messages are actively considered in order to continuously improve touristic products quality;
- tourism agents are equally involved in the continuous improvement of touristic products quality;
- education and training are necessary in order to ensure competent employees at any level;
- promotion and promontory offers are based on each agent contribution;
- touristic services providers are treated as partners.

Continuous improving of touristic services' quality culture brings into discussion some aspects linked to the quality rhythm and consistency renewal in the hospitality industry as well as hostility or reticence towards changing the employees, respectively remeasurement proportions between new/modern and obsolete/classic. That is why the basis of quality culture for touristic products must be set step by step, throughout pilot tests and successive experimentations, and continuing with remuneration and merits acknowledgement for best

employees. Culture quality is based upon values and expectations, especially in the tourism domain.

Directly involved employees in the providing process of touristic services may suggest viable solutions to a greater extent than the artisans of the touristic product. The suggestions recommended by the touristic services providers and their extrapolation to the entire network level determine in fact the indirect prestige recognition of those contributing to improving and disseminating quality.

3. Generalization and Quantification of Romanian Touristic Products

Tourists perception while the consuming or the contact with the touristic products has a barometer effect. The generated psychological impact may have an immutable effect corresponding to the sensorial relationship $Satisfaction = Perception - Expectancy$ (Tucea, 2007). If expectancies are greater than the provided service quality itself then the satisfaction has a regressive character, and the tourist will avoid future purchasing of touristic products or other service packages offered by the touristic operator.

Constantly supervising the clients' satisfaction level emphasizes the preoccupation towards the preferences of the interested individuals regarding the promoted touristic products, not only in order to satisfy their expectations but also to obtain their fidelity (Hapenciuc, 2008).

If someone should recommend a circuit across Romania, we would surely find among the suggested destinations Danube Delta, Black Sea seashore, Bukovina, Maramures, Brasov, Sibiu –cultural capital of Europe in 2007, Sighisoara, Bucegi Mountains, Apuseni Mountains, Merry Cemetery in Sapanta or Bucharest and would be less enthusiastic about areas like Jiu Valley, Teleorman, Vaslui, Botosani or Copsa Mica.

Image makes the difference: what is better known becomes more attractive. Tourists do not want to discover by themselves new attraction objectives, while there are already plenty tested touristic products and accessible enough when speaking about price-quality.

Despite expectations, the main Romanian touristic areas concentrate their attraction on the patrimony or accessibility and secondly on quality. The less representative tourist destinations have a mainly transitory character.

Even if it is a well-known destination on national level, the average for a journey in Bukovina does not surpass 2,5 days (two days and a half). According to the economic-social development strategy of Suceava County, the touristic offer in Bukovina focuses mainly on cultural-religious tourism programs, the best objective being visitation of well-known churches, which have outside wall paintings, some of them being comprised in the UNESCO patrimony. Other important elements of the touristic offer in Bukovina are encouraged by mountain tourism practicing, by keeping and perpetuating traditions and local customs or by the wide spreading of Dorna mineral waters.

The touristic product "Bukovina", has lacks in consistency and cohesion of famous destinations, because the promotion is realized in a chaotic and fragmented way, based on an obtuse strategic view. In no way should Suceava's County tourism overlap with the local promontory initiative for the cultural-religious tourism.

Bukovina's brand quality and prestige resides in the seriousness with which those 5 traditional attraction points are promoted: outside wall painted churches (Voronet,

Sucevita, Moldovita), crockery (Marginea, Radauti), painted eggs (Carlibaba), balneary tourism (Vatra Dornei) and natural landscapes (Rarau, Codrii seculari in Slatioara, 12 Apostoli, Lucina).

Big Romanian tourism agencies offers do not promote Bukovina out of the important religious holidays (Easter, Christmas) or in the occasion of one day trip to monasteries (Putna, Sucevita, Voronet, eventually Moldovita). Touristic national programs comprise Bukovina only for a short “pilgrimage” and accommodation in Sucevita, Voronet, Gura Humorului or Carlibaba. Taking into account this situation we can estimate that Suceava County is mainly a transitory touristic area.

In this sense, during December the 20th 2008 –January 20th 2009 we developed a socio-statistic research, on a sample of 151 tourists accommodated in the lodge units within Suceava County, in the purpose to emphasize the perceiving of touristic services quality in general and of *Bukovina Touristic Product* in particular. The tourists were randomly selected, from 18 accommodation units (out from 236 accommodation units, according to the Touristical Breviary of Suceava County in 2008) throughout the repeated extraction procedure.

In order to insure representativity at the County level we chose the following localities: Vatra Dornei, Cârlibaba, Pojorâta, Gura Humorului, Voroneț, Sucevița and Suceava County, respectively 2 important lodgings from Voroneț, Cârlibaba and Pojorâta.

For dimensioning the research study’s objectives and hypothesis we took notice of the similar analysis of the phenomenon studied in Suceava County, in 2002, 2003, 2004, on representative samples of tourists (Hapenciuc, 2004).

Starting from the study’s objectives (table no.1), the research results stressed the fact that because of the global economic crisis, the touristic products quality is more frequently a differentiation element between tourism agencies, and Romanian tourists accentuate more then ever this detail.

Main research objectives and hypotheses of the socio-economical study

Table 1

<i>Objective 1:</i>	Determining how often tourists appeal to the services of a tourism agency;
<i>Hypothesis 1:</i>	In general Romanian tourists who visit Bukovina seldom contact a tourism agency, the majority preferring to plan holidays on their own.
<i>Objective 2:</i>	Stressing the motivations that determined the purchase of the „Journey to Bukovina” service package;
<i>Hypothesis 2.</i>	Tourists who appeal to a tourism agency services are mainly interested of the attractive and guaranteed services of Bukovina prescribed product quality which is offered by the tourism agencies.
<i>Objective 3:</i>	Journey budget estimation granted for a 4 days hypothetical trip (transportation, accommodation in a 3 stars unit) for Bukovina, in comparison to the expected quality standards;
<i>Hypothesis 3:</i>	Depending on the financial status of each tourist, trip budget varies in general between 200 and 300 euro.
<i>Objective 4:</i>	Determining the degree of tourists involvement in improving touristic products quality;
<i>Hypothesis 4:</i>	Tourists seldom get involved in increasing the touristic products quality level.

<i>Objective 5:</i>	Tourists questioning regarding the touristic services quality level that they benefited of;
<i>Hypothesis 5</i>	Qualitative level of touristic products (touristic services packages) is satisfactory, but they imply a greater attention to the tourists and to their suggestions, recommendations concerning some deficiencies observed during the trip.
<i>Objective 6:</i>	Stressing the main suggestions, recommendations (feedback) formulated by tourists when referring to tourism agencies, which are meant to improve the Bukovina touristic product quality;
<i>Hypothesis 6:</i>	The main recommendations are linked to the practical checking of services providers' activity, to imposing minimum quality standards to comply with and elaboration of a conjugate quality management system.

Mentality change owes to a certain extent to broader openness towards Europe. The modernization of the premises was achieved in parallel with the capital infusion realized by the "strawberry men" –seasonal workers in the European Union states. A statistic research developed by Smith&Smith reveals the fact that in 2007 and 2008 the most money transfers were granted for the country's north-east. Only in 2007 alone, the people in Suceava that have a job abroad have sent home, through banking and currency transfer agencies, around 400 million euro, other 700 million euro got to Bukovina throughout extra-banking services, or throughout relatives. The development of such localities as Sucevița, Mănăstirea Humor, Voroneț, Sadova or Mălini is due to this phenomenon.

The contact with the countries abroad especially with the main European touristic destinations: Rome, Venice, Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, Paris, has allowed the familiarization with the touristic modern phenomena. So at their arrival the qualitative expectations were similar to the ones for the Italian or Spanish tourism.

On the basis of a better quality-price relation, the majority of the questioned Romanian tourists comprise among the holiday preferences, for the summer season 2009, mainly foreign destinations, even if the economic uncertainty will continue for the next two or three years. The Bulgarian seashore, Greece, Turkey and Tunis are considered to be more attractive (64,4%) then the Romanian seashore or Prahova Valley, which are preferred only by 28% of the questioned individuals. Even if they declare to be content with the services quality offered by Suceava's tourism operators, only 2% of tourists take into consideration the possibility to spend a summer vacation in Bukovina.

As for the tourists that resorted to the tourism agencies services, they stated that they had previously used the agencies because the global touristic products they offer were much more attractive than the separate acquisition of each touristic service package directly from the providers (accommodation and leisure time units), touristic products flexibility which are to be sold by the tourism agencies being appreciated for almost 20% of the questioned individuals.

Adds, advertisements, and booklets have a minor effect, just 5,88% of the tourists being decisively influenced by the promotion strategy. Friends advice (13,7%), the convenient marketed tourist products (13,7%), the offer content (13,73%) and the indolence potential tourists (8,9%) are additional elements that enhance the appealing for tourism agencies services (Figure no 2).

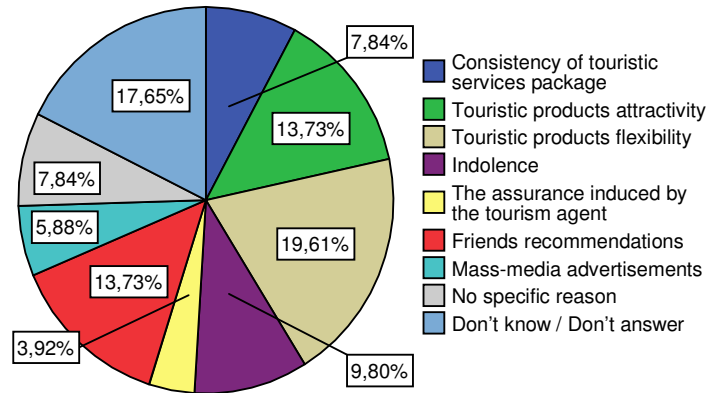


Figure 2 Main reasons that determined the tourists to resort to a tourism agency services

Over 40% of the tourists came to Bukovina mainly for the purpose of going skiing, other 31,4% for spending New Year's holiday, 23,5% are visiting friends or relatives, and 4% for other unspecified reasons.

Speaking about the selection of the touristic product quality we can say that this is restricted by the natural landscape significance, as almost 60% of questioned tourists believe that neglect and shabby environment and ambiance determine a decrease in that specific product demand. The tourism agencies should consider that the special attention given to the natural environment constitutes a stimulus in order to get involved in social responsibility campaigns and in reducing pollution.

For 60,71% of respondents, the essential element, when selling a good quality touristic product, is the existence of an adequate tourism infrastructure. In order to give an example, the lack of internet access or signal for the mobile phone may be decisive factors at the moment of planning a trip.

Bukovina has a well represented infrastructure in the territory, but, for 51% of the tourists who arrive in Suceava County, the precarious quality of the main access roads in the area-DN17 represents the biggest obstacle to the consolidation of the Bukovina touristic product.

The competitive edge of tourism agencies consists in the quality-price rapport in -41,18% of cases, in the agency prestige-13,37% and somehow surprisingly , for 9,8% of cases, in the diverse range of services comprised in the touristic products package.

The majority of the questioned stated that they are cautious regarding the touristic product quality in Romania (54,9%), but they are willing to pay bigger prices in order to have insurance for quality products (33,34%).

Considering the situation of a hypothetical four day vacation in Bukovina, including transportation, accommodation in a 3 star tourism unit, full option pension, sightseeing, most of the interviewed stated that would spend 250 euro (27,45%). Considering the perspective of spending a four day vacation in Suceava County and considering the

revenue, the statute and purpose, tourists consider that a sum of 200-300 euro is more than sufficient.

In order to improve the quality of touristic products packages the options are quite limited and hard to accomplish. The most accessible way, respectively filling in of auto evaluation questionnaires, usually in the accommodation unit's rooms is little appreciated due to the Romanian tourists' indolence. Almost 47,06% of the questioned tourists stated that they did not come across or filled in such questionnaires.

Unofficially, the touristic product quality evaluation may be accomplished even at the agency but there is a small number of tourists who manifest their availability in order to offer a feedback for their vacation consuming. In order to stimulate the filling of the questionnaires that measure clients' satisfaction (materials to be found in the hotel rooms or at the front desk in the tourism agencies) tourists suggest a reward action (free supplementary service, tariff discount).

The quality concept for 37,25% of the sample tourists is understood as perfect equipment and attending, other 21,57% consider that amusement, accommodation and food must be proportional with the tariff, 13,73% of tourists state that a vacation must be memorable, and 11,76% of subjects believe that the definitely element regarding the touristic product quality relies on the permanent availability of the employees.

Even if they may have stated that they were unsatisfied by the services quality or disappointed by the employees' behaviour, very few tourists have complained about this (7,84%) to the tourism agencies where they purchased that specific touristic product.

In order for the agency to be able to constantly improve the commercialized tourist products it is absolutely needed to have the tourists' feedback. Among the tourists' suggestions the most frequent recommendations are: checking the quality of the touristic product and services in practice (55%), very careful selection of business partners, respectively touristic services suppliers (27,45%), money or other kind of reward –free weekend offer (11,76%) and last but not least, selection of the partners based upon some recommendations from trustworthy individuals or tourist entities (5%) (Figure no.3).

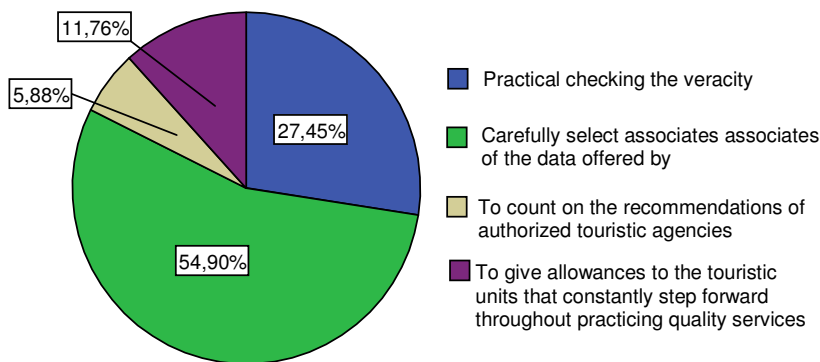


Figure 3 Suggestions for quality improvement of commercialized touristic products

According to tourists opinions the obsolete technical endowments is directly responsible for the precarious quality of local tourist products in 33,33% of the cases. The fact that sometimes the tourism employees show a non-corresponding attitude, bordering on lack of professionalism behaviour towards tourists 23,53% has repercussions upon the overall character of the touristic products. Other elements that negatively influence the touristic products quality are: lack of quality management, precarious infrastructure and low personnel specialization.

Conclusions

The touristic product quality describes the concordance level between the tourists' expectations and the provided service, conferring to the services package utility and usage value. Due to its specificity, the touristic product quality must be analyzed in a singular manner, starting from the premise that tourism relays on three main coordinates: infrastructure and specific technical equipment, the human resource involved in the tourism realization and consuming and not least on the unique character of the touristic product.

Tourists' dissatisfactions, generally, relate to insufficient specialization of tourism employees, to the disproportion between quality and price and the precarious conditions or general infrastructure state (access roads, utilities, internet etc.), situation that shows direct repercussions upon the quality of commercialized tourism services packages.

Bukovina Touristic Product generally covers the Romanian tourism characteristics, but nowadays practicing quality services becomes much more than a simple management strategy. Tourists generally value the touristic services quality and become willing to spend more if the tour-operators interest will focus, more on the quality of the touristic product and on improving the quality management component of the touristic offer.

For the moment *Bukovina Touristic Product* lacks the consistency and cohesion of big European destinations because promotion is being done on segments and rather chaotically, on the basis of an obtuse strategic vision.

In an absolute vision, it can be said that the Romanian touristic offer has not substantially changed during the past 20 years becoming non-competitive in comparison to the exigencies of tourists' demand and similar touristic products on international market. Some lodging or amusement units are obsolete, non-competitive, grounded on touristic services and programs which were stereotypically realized and modest quality and the relation quality-price is not convincing.

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