

## KEY FACTORS OF QUALITY IN THE SECTOR OF TOURISM SERVICES PROVIDERS: CASE STUDY: CZECH REPUBLIC

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### Abstract

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The paper summarizes main results of partial research aimed at detection of the key factors affecting quality in the sector of tourism services providers, namely tour operators and travel agencies. A primary questionnaire survey was conducted; the researched factors were distributed in the context of service quality dimensions (Grönroos model); the dimensions were tested in relation to sex, age and education of the respondents (ANOVA; Brown-Forsythe test). Assurance was identified as the most important dimension. The output of the study is determining the significance of individual quality factors from the perspective of a potential customer when selecting a service provider.

Keywords: tourism services providers, service quality, quality dimension, assurance

### INTRODUCTION

The area of tourism has been significantly expanding in recent years, which is beneficial for the economic and political as well as the social spheres of many countries. Tourism becomes an inseparable part of social and modern lives for many people. To be able to sustain competitiveness it is inevitable to pay remarkable attention to the quality offered. With regard to the specific character of services, especially their tangibility, evanescence and variability, it is rather difficult to measure this quality and so in practice we can meet different approaches and understandings the quality of services.

The quality of a service can be assessed according to the level of customer satisfaction. A number of studies have been written about satisfaction in tourism sector (e.g. Baker and Crompton, 2000; Chi and Qu, 2008; de Rojas and Camarero, 2008; Meng *et al.*, 2008; Alegre and Garau, 2010; Williams and Soutar, 2009; Campo-Martinez and Garau-Vadell, 2010; Kim and Brown, 2012).

To evaluate customer satisfaction we can use tools that give a service provider rather a basic picture

of satisfaction e.g. systems of complaints, mystery shopping, satisfaction surveys, simple questionnaire surveys (Kotler, 2001; Kotler, Keller, 2007) as well as more sophisticated methods Gap (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Berry, 1990; Zeithaml, Bitner, 2000), Kano (Kano, 2001), PFI, (Hill, Brierley, MacDougall, 2003), ECSI (Fornell, 1992) that are based on models the aim of which is to operate service quality and customer satisfaction in such a way that they become better measurable and traceable. Undoubtedly, it is more effective to approach quality in a complex way, so to understand quality not only as a number of complaints or claims.

Zeithaml *et al.* (2006) in their publication state that although in practice the terms of satisfaction and quality are mutually interchangeable, experts claim that satisfaction is generally perceived as a broad concept while the quality of services concentrates especially on the dimensions of services. Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) clarify the differences between service quality and satisfaction: perceived quality should be regarded as a global state, close to an attitude, while satisfaction refers to a specific transaction. Also, when consumers

judge quality levels, they can base their assessment on their opinions and brand image, without any necessary prior experience of the product. However, satisfaction relates to a specific transaction and, for it to be assessed, consumer must use the product or service.

Lee *et al.* (2004) suppose that the research cannot agree which of the two terms mentioned above has a wider scope and which of them is the prerequisite of the other. Getz *et al.* (2001) notice that defining relations between quality and satisfaction properly depends mainly on the way quality is defined.

The area of service quality management was influenced significantly by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (e.g. 1988, 1990, 1991, 1994). Their instrument SERVQUAL for measuring the gap between consumers' expectations and customers' perceptions is widely cited as a measurement tool of service quality. These authors define quality in five service dimensions which have been quantified on the basis of an extensive research and which affect the customer's perception of service quality. These attributes are listed in the order of their importance and their validity is expected theoretically in all types of services (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990):

- Reliability – availability and ability to provide services accurately and reliably.
- Responsiveness – helpfulness, sensitive approach to customers, prompt service delivery.
- Assurance – staff competence, knowledge, courtesy and ability to create a sense of confidence in the customer.
- Empathy – understanding individual wishes, care and attention paid to the customer, sensitive approach.
- Tangibles – service materialization and influence of environment.

Saleh and Ryan (1991) or Baker and Fesenmaier (1997) were one of the first who used SERVQUAL in tourism industry. Many researches (Knutson, 1991; Webster and Hung, 1994) adopted and modified SERVQUAL battery (22 examined service factors) to specific industries and target

groups and although the number of factors measuring service quality was different, the same five service dimensions remained constant.

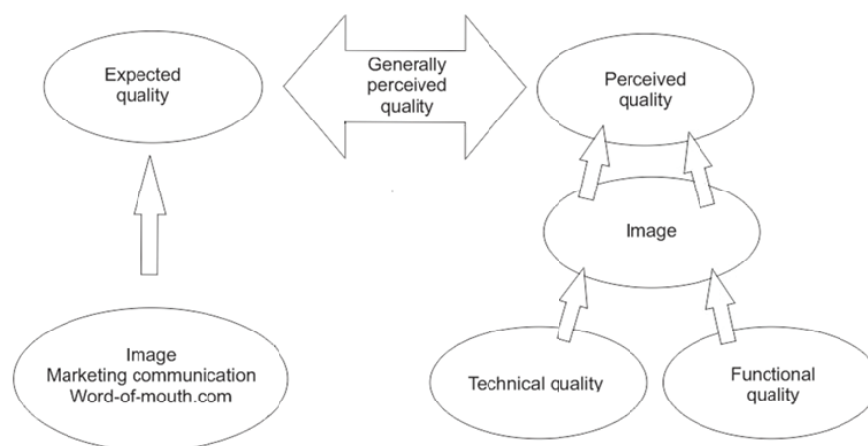
The aforementioned SERVQUAL dimensions represent the service functional quality, i.e. the subjective perception of the way the service is provided to the customer. In his model of quality (Fig. 1) Grönroos (1984, 2007) takes into account not only the subjective functional quality but also the technical quality, which is represented by objective measurable indicators as well as a factor representing the company image.

Technical quality represents what customers receive and functional quality expresses the way in which customers receive the service. By force of both the image of a company is created as it is perceived in reality. A customer compares this perceived quality to his or her expectations of a quality level and this level is influenced by various factors. With the help of this model a company realizes how it can influence various factors which create customers' expectations.

## METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of this paper is to present the results of the partial analytical research aimed at identifying the key factors that the customer sees as crucial in assessing the quality of a travel agency. Partial objectives include: determining the importance of individual factors, distributing various factors into the elementary quality dimensions based on empirical and theoretical support, in literature specifically the initial model developed by Grönroos (1984), determining the importance of dimensions and subsequent statistical verification of the hypotheses in the context of the variance of the results within market segments (according age, sex, education).

A primary research was conducted in the form of a questionnaire survey in order to meet the stated goals. The survey was conducted in autumn 2012 and the sample consisted of 230 responders who make use of travel agencies services. The sample



1: The model of customer-perceived quality (Grönroos, 2007)

was obtained by random selection. The decisive factors were selected based on the arithmetic average of the scores that each factor was given by the respondents. The factors were then divided according to Grönroos' model into groups expressing technical quality, functional quality and image. The functional quality was further divided into sub-dimensions: responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. As each quality dimension contains a different number of factors, two most important factors had to be chosen from each dimension for comparison. The dimensions with the highest rating also included decisive factors. These dimensions were then tested in relation to sex, age and education of the respondents. The testing was performed in Statistica programme according to ANOVA analysis of variance. In addition, the homogeneity of variance was tested using the Brown-Forsythe test at a significance level of 5%. Having rejected the null hypothesis, the HSD method for unequal N was applied to determine the pairs of mean values which differ from each other.

## RESULTS

The Tab. I below shows the order of the key factors ranked to relevant dimension perceived by the client when evaluating the quality of travel agencies.

The importance of the examined factors ranges from 4.98 to 9.27 on a ten-point rating scale. The most important quality factor, according to the respondents, is the competence and knowledge of the service personnel, as it was assigned grade 8 or higher by more than 90% of respondents. All the key quality factors were given rating higher

than 8.5 points, the most frequent value being the highest score 10; more than 75% of respondents rated them with scores 8 to 10. The first three factors (qualification and knowledge, helpfulness and credibility of the service personnel) were rated with scores 9 and 10 by 75% of the respondents. On the other hand, the least important factors with a value of 6.16 and lower are the accessibility of the travel agency, furnishing and building appearance.

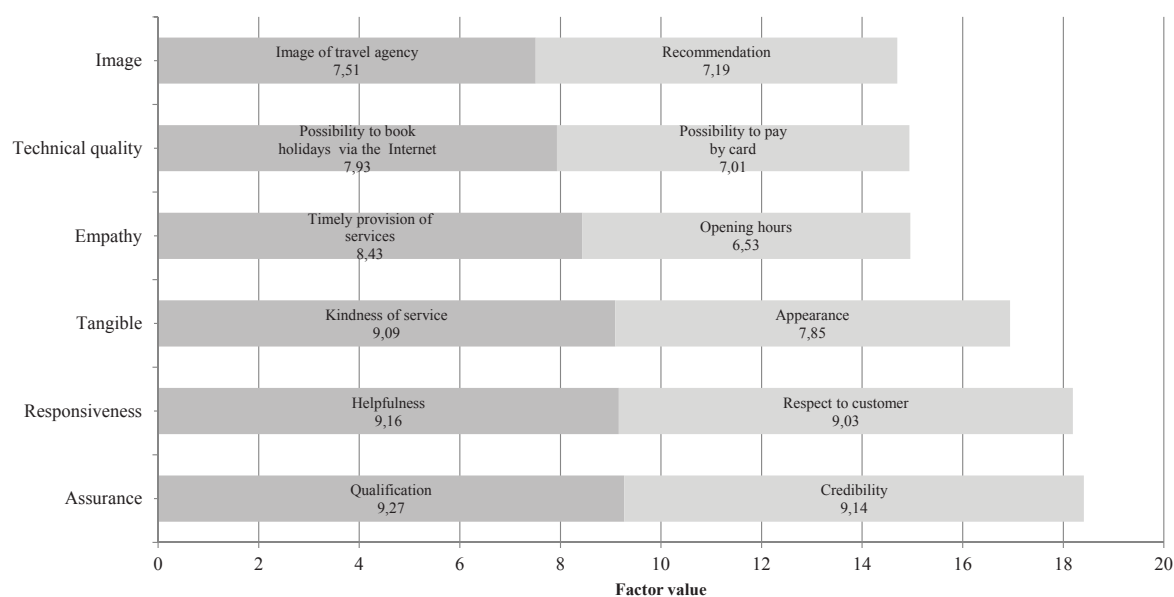
Subsequently, the most important factors were distributed among the relevant dimensions and Fig. 2 shows them in the order of their importance.

The most important dimension was assurance, followed by the dimensions of responsiveness, tangibles, empathy, technical quality, and the least important according to the results seems to be the dimension of image.

Hypotheses in the context of the variation of market segments were tested for the three dimensions identified as most important ones after the Brown-Forsythe test by means of ANOVA. The dimension of assurance is seen differently by women and men; the factors of the dimension are more important for women, age and the level of education have no influence on this dimension and the factors of this dimension can be used to improve the service quality for any target group, regardless of age or the level of education. The dimension of responsiveness has distinctly different importance for women and men; for women the factors of the dimension are more important than for men; on the other hand the dimension is independent of age and education. The dimension of the influence of environment on the customer does not depend on sex, age or education.

I: Factors in descending order according to their importance in the context of quality dimensions (1–10 scale of factor importance). Dimension of functional quality: 1. responsiveness, 2. assurance, 3. empathy, 4. tangibles.

Order	Factors	Ø value	Dimension of functional quality				Technical quality	Image
			1	2	3	4		
1.	Qualification and knowledge of service personnel	9.27						
2.	Helpfulness of service personnel	9.16						
3.	Credibility of service personnel	9.14						
4.	Kindness of service personnel	9.09						
5.	Respect to customer	9.03						
6.	Provision of detailed information about accommodation	8.84						
7.	Provision of detailed information about transport	8.53						
8.	Provision of detailed information about destination	8.53						
9.	Provision of detailed information about catering	8.47						
10.	Timely provision of services	8.43						
11.	Possibility to book holidays via the Internet	7.93						
12.	Appearance of service personnel	7.85						
13.	Website quality	7.68						
14.	Image of travel agency	7.51						
15.	Provision of catalogues and promotional materials	7.20						
16.	Recommendation of relatives and friends	7.19						
17.	Possibility to pay by card	7.01						
18.	Reservation of seats in means of transportation	6.97						
19.	Sufficiently long opening hours	6.53						
20.	Catalogue appearance	6.51						
21.	Good accessibility of travel agency	6.16						
22.	Furnishing	6.14						
23.	Building appearance	4.98						



2: The most important factor distributed among the relevant dimensions

Source: Vajčnerová, Ryglová, 2013

## CONCLUSIONS

Tourism is a very prospective industry; however, in the Czech Republic its potential has not been fully exploited yet. As tourism, despite temporary fluctuations, has been showing globally long-term sustainable growth, a great attention to quality should be paid in order to gain a competitive advantage. The Czech Republic is currently going through a stage when national standards are being formulated in some selected sectors within the National Quality System in Tourism Services. The quality standards, however, focus only on the technical aspects of quality, not the functional ones, and they are not related to the external environment. The functional quality system has not been implemented yet.

The main objective of this paper was to identify the key factors affecting quality in the sector of tourism services providers – travel agencies in the Czech market, and to determine their significance for the selected segments (according to age, sex, education). A primary questionnaire survey was applied to achieve the stated objectives. The crucial factors for the customers of travel agencies are those related to the service personnel. The most important factor is the factor of competence and knowledge of the service personnel, followed by helpfulness, credibility, kindness of the service personnel, respect to the customer and provision of information about transport, destination and accommodation. The key factors were also distributed in the dimensions of functional quality where the dimension of assurance has the highest weight of importance for customers assessing the service quality. On the other hand, the factors related to the technical quality and to the image of a service provider are of the lowest importance for potential customers. The quality of human resources in the field of services, especially of the front-line workers in contact with customers, is the crucial factor in the competitive environment of travel agencies that is decisive for the purchase of services and must be paid utmost attention.

The presented results show certain differences in perceiving the importance of individual quality dimensions in comparison to the basic quality model according to Parasuraman *et al.* (1990) who presumes the theoretical validity for all types of services. These results can be caused not only by a lower extent of the selective set but also by the selected quantitative form of the research. Of course, it is necessary to consider the specifics of the Czech market in the field of mediatory services of tourism. Despite of this, the results prove the necessity of higher investments into the human resources development in the business as the staff qualification is much more important for customers than the image and the technical quality of services.

The authors are going to spread this research not only as to the extent of the selective set but especially by qualitative data through focus groups and depth interviews. Another objective is to focus on the prospective segments of travel agencies (for instance the segment of seniors or families with children). The part of the authors' research activities is also the survey of key factors in other sectors of tourism (hospitality industry, information centres, tourist attractions, etc.).



This paper presents the results of the initial partial analytical phase of a research project aimed at defining the best practices and designing a model of comprehensive evaluation of the quality of tourism services in the context of increasing the competitiveness of the Czech Republic in the highly competitive European market.

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