
IMPROVING SERVICE MANAGEMENT IN TOURIST ACCOMMODATION UNITS FROM MARAMUREȘ COUNTY

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Abstract

Worldwide, tourism has grown in importance, being considered a source of wealth. The competitive environment in which accommodation units operate is focused on customer satisfaction which requires strong interaction between the management of the accommodation units and the client. Provision of high quality services favors the increase in economic efficiency as well as customer satisfaction related to the services offered by the accommodation units. Dealing effectively with customer variability represents a great challenge for service businesses that need to learn to manage it in order to provide the customers with the expected quality and profitable offerings.

Keywords

tourism, quality, service management, customer orientation, satisfaction.

JEL Classification

M21, Z31, Z32.

Introduction

Nowadays, organizations are operating in a globalized economy where markets are described by hyperactive competition (Sloan, Legrand and Chen, 2013). This means that businesses must be able to continuously adapt to the changing environment and also maintain their focus on the quality of services, customer needs so as to retain the present customers and attract potential ones, all of these taking into consideration the available resources. In order to achieve competitive advantage, companies should not only capitalize on their technological and physical capabilities, but also find solutions to improve the performance of employees (Bavik, 2016).

Worldwide, tourism is seen as a source of wealth, as well as a political, economic and social force. The concept of quality in tourism is thus defined by the World Tourism Organization as "the result of a process that involves satisfying all the needs, requirements and the legitimate expectations of consumers for products" (Ciucudean, 2009). Apart from the direct benefits of tourism in the economy, another important aspects are related to transport services, hospitality services and also, the beneficial effects of tourism for the mind and body as people can relax, have fun and also discover new places (Jurcău and Popa, 2012).

At the moment, the cultural tourism has experienced a growing trend. According to Richards (1996), culture has become an essential part of tourism: tourism being now regarded as culture. Cultural tourism may take various forms, from which there can be mentioned: religious tourism, gastronomic tourism, visiting archaeological sites, parks, gardens, castles, memorial houses, taking part at festivals, cultural events. The role and

importance of tourist services is also reflected in the fact that they must be designed and organized so that, following the consumption of the service, the user to gain extra information, knowledge and even new skills. Only in this way, tourism receives a new role and content in accordance with the increasing requirements of the modern traveler (Sabou et al., 2015).

According to Bogan, Vărvăruc and Stoican (2014), quality management in tourism requires the companies to be long-term oriented, continuously improving their products and services, together with their capacity to anticipate the customer needs in order to meet or maybe to exceed their expectations. All of these will lead to increased productivity and profit.

The quality of tourist services represents the ability of a tourist service to meet through its features the expressed or implied needs of tourist at the level of his expectations and quality standards (Cruceu and Bica, 2011). Provision of high-quality services favors the increase in economic efficiency, customer satisfaction related to the services offered by accommodations (Ciucudean, 2009).

Cruceu and Bica noted that since 1980, in the hospitality sector there have been concerns for quality of services and products offered to customers due to the impact they can generate on the performance of the business. It has been found that quality management can influence performance indicators in two ways: through an internal impact by improving efficiency, reducing costs and through an external impact by maximizing the market share, increasing the number of customers, obtaining customer satisfaction, improving the image (Cruceu, 2010, Marquardt, Olaru & Ceausu, 2017).

The accommodation units implement quality management systems because they are considered a way to: improve service quality; train employees; to develop a quality culture; to achieve the desired economic efficiency (internal impact); to create a favorable image (external impact).

There are five dimensions of quality for tourism:

- *The quality of tangible part*: buildings, equipment, appearance of staff and accommodation;
- *Credibility*: the fulfillment of tourism services promised in the offer;
- *Courtesy*: availability of prompt and efficient service;
- *Safety*: the reputation obtained by a tourist unit through its customers and through its offered travel packages;
- *Empathy*: commitment to clients and the individualization of the activities done depending on tourists (Cruceu and Bica, 2011).

Bogan, Vărvăruc and Stoican (2014) considered that today's consumers' expectations concerning quality involves the satisfaction of their needs and wants that are related to hygiene, ensuring security and safety, accessibility, protection of the natural environment, preserving the traditions. The essential element that potentiates the achievement of total quality in tourism is the human factor, which implies that firms must be flexible enough to permanently adapt to the changing environment (Onete, Pleșea & Budz, 2018).

Dealing effectively with customer variability represents a great challenge for service businesses that need to learn to manage it in order to provide the customers with the expected quality and profitable offerings (Frei, 2006).

Frei (2006) stated the five types of variability introduced by customers that influence the performance of service businesses: arrival variability-which refers to the different times when a client wants a service, which do not necessarily suit the needs of the companies; request variability-which relates to the different amenities, needs, preferences that customers may ask from the service businesses; capability variability-which refers to the different skills, level of knowledge, abilities of customers involved in performing various roles related to the service, effort variability- implies the level of effort a customer is willing to put when performing a task with regards to the service and subjective preference variability-

which refers to the different perceptions regarding quality and treatment in a service environment.

As Ciucudean (2009) stated, in today's fierce competition, managers must pay significant attention to client-orientation in their actions to achieve the desired economic efficiency. In order to satisfy the client's needs, organizations may appeal to diversification strategies, considered by Porter (2001) to be a determinant factor in the activity of an organization, contributing to the development of performance indicators. Also, Pantelescu (2010) emphasized that lots of improvements have been made in the study of the relationship between service diversification and performance.

The implementation of information technology in accommodation units is overwhelming because of the advantages it produces: obtaining customer loyalty, improve profitability and performance improvement of the processes for service provision (Cojocaru, 2010).

In the hospitality industry, branding is considered to be an essential activity in order to achieve competitive advantage. According to Pavel and Baltaretu (2015), the destination brand symbolically describes "positive, memorable, attractive, unique, relevant and sustainable qualities of a destination". Therefore, this image will be reflected in a set of beliefs and impressions about a particular tourist destination that may also influence the development of the tourism in that area by encouraging or discouraging potential tourists to come to visit that destination.

The competitive environment in which accommodation units operate is focused on customer satisfaction which requires strong interaction between the management of accommodations and the client (Fleșeriu, 2011). The dimension to which the staff is customer-oriented is considered a key factor for achieving economic success (Stegerean, 2006).

Fleșeriu (2011) considered that in achieving customer satisfaction, the role of human resources is recognized and improving the quality of services must be centered on the selection, training and staff rewarding. Managers who grant importance on the relationship between customer focus and employee satisfaction, succeed in ensuring personnel involvement in improvement practices, with favorable effects on their business results (Boselie and Wiele, 2002).

Analysis of the Maramureș region

Maramureș County is considered to be one of the most emblematic tourist destinations in Romania. Maramureș County belongs to the Nord-West Region providing numerous tourist objectives, being considered a Romanian cultural brand. The Maramureș County is recognized for "the spectacular landscapes, traditions and habits and also, for the vernacular of Maramureș that exists since ancient times" (Ștef, 2008).

Maramureș provides tourist destinations of great originality that keep the traditions and the spirit of Maramureș alive, among which there can be mentioned: the wooden churches which are part of the UNESCO heritage, Mocănița Steam Train, The Maramureș Village Museum, Monastic Establishments (St. Ana Monastery at Rohia, The monastic complex from Bârsana, The Moisei Monastery, The Săpânța Monastery), Strongholds and Castles (Chioar Stronghold, Teleki Castle), Memorial Houses (Vasile Lucaciu Memorial Museum, Gheorghe Pop de Băsești Memorial House, Petöfi Sándor Memorial House), The History and Archaeology Museum, The Memorial of the Victims of Communism, The Mineralogy Museum Baia Mare, "Petre Dulfu" County Library, Ștefan's Tower and the Fortress Square (Baia Mare), The Historical Center of Baia Mare, The Art Museum – The Baia Mare Cultural Artistic Centre. The Merry Cemetery is considered to be one of the most important attractions from Maramureș, being famous for its colorful funeral crosses with witty poems written on them, which harmoniously combine the spirituality, the ancient beliefs with the wood (Sabou, et al., 2015).

According to the National Institute of Statistics, at the level of Maramureş County there are 197 accommodation units that provide 5,614 places. The accommodation capacity from Maramureş represents 25,55% from the Nord-West Region’s capacity (first place, being followed by Cluj County and Bihor County).

The largest share is held by agro-tourist boarding houses– 40% (79 units), followed by touristic boarding houses – 36.5% (72 units) and the hotels – 12.6% (25 units), while the smallest share is held by tourist villas (only one unit).

Concerning the number of tourists who visited Maramureş in 2015, 81% were represented by Romanian tourists (125,463 tourists), while 19% were represented by foreign tourists (29,170 tourists).

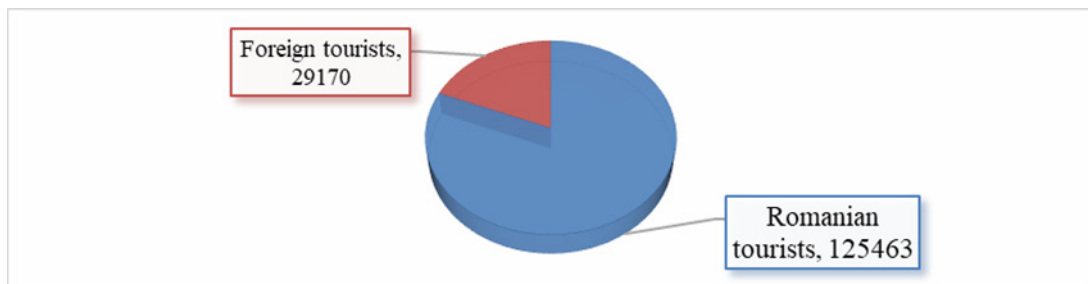


Fig. no. 1. The number of tourists who visited Maramureş in 2015

As far as the most visited destinations are concerned, between September 2015 and September 2016, the most visited place was Baia Mare (87,132 tourists), followed by Sighetu Marmăţiei (25,716 tourists), Borşa (13,370 tourists), Vişeu de Sus (11,133 tourists), while the least visited was the village Şieu (only 79 tourists).

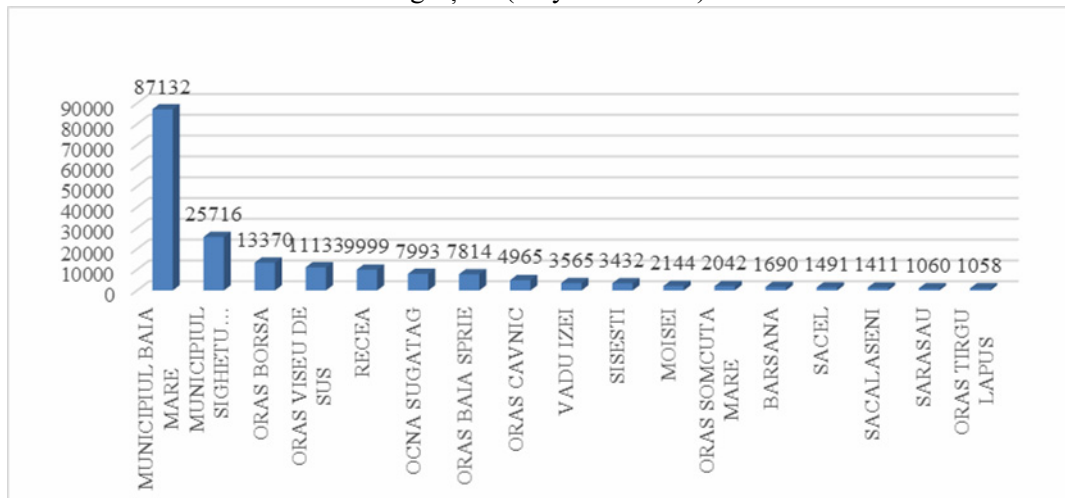


Fig. no. 2. The number of tourists visiting Maramureş between September 2015-September 2016 (only the destinations which received over 1000 tourists)

Nistoreanu (1999) noted that it is proved that the existence of a valuable touristic patrimony does not automatically lead to high profitability unless the patrimony is made accessible to tourists through corresponding services.

Although Maramureş has a great potential for developing tourism and attracting people from all over the world, the service offered especially in the rural areas are limited to accommodation and dining services. In a reduced share, there are organized other types of

services like: sleigh rides, carriage rides, horseback riding, attending traditional crafts exhibition, hiking trails, going with the Mocănița steam train.

However, the tourists that choose Maramureș County have the opportunity to come into direct contact with the traditional activities carried out in the Maramureș households, habits and specific traditions during various events and iconic moments in the life of the peasants from Maramureș, without them being especially organized for touristic purposes (Simion, 2011).

Simion (2011) considered that there are a series of problems that influence the decision of tourists to visit Maramureș County, among which, the most stringent are: poor infrastructure, under-dimensioned promoting activity, lower quality of tourist services compared to other countries, reduced facilities found in the accommodation units from rural villages, small number of organized tourist activities, absence in the rural areas of facilities for people with disabilities.

Methodology of the research

The study has as main objective the improvement of the quality of the tourist accommodation units which were analyzed. For this research, a questionnaire comprising 25 questions was designed. Based on the responses to questions, there have been identified the main problems encountered in the accommodations, which generated a low degree of customer satisfaction.

The method used for determining the satisfaction degree is the survey based on questionnaire, the analysis of responses representing the starting point to improve the quality of tourism services in the units analyzed. In order to determine the satisfaction of customers relating to the quality of services and products offered and to find out their preferences, the questionnaire was applied to 23 tourist accommodation units.

Analysis of the study results

The results of this survey are grouped into two diagrams in order to present the degree of customer satisfaction taken into account the items analyzed in the questionnaire.

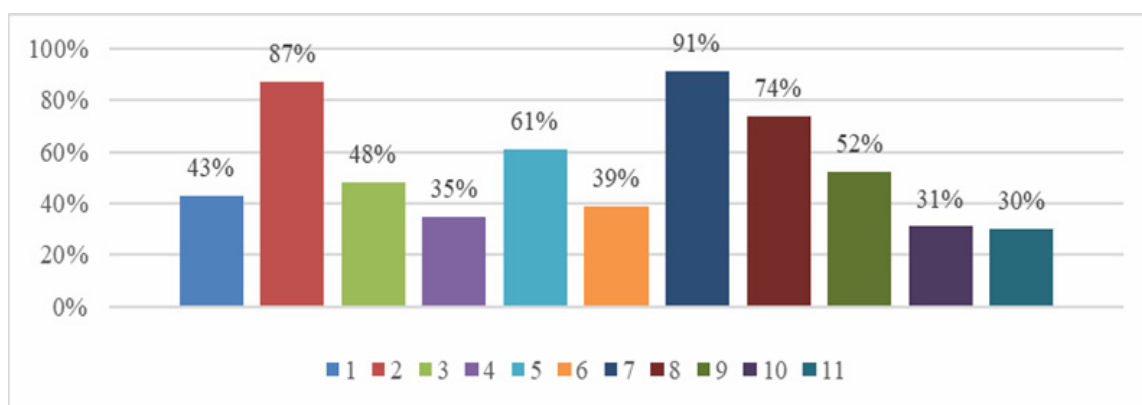


Fig. no. 3. The degree of customer satisfaction

The variables involved are the following:

Table no. 1. Leisure form, by category

1.	Leisure forms	43%
2.	The location of the accommodation unit	87%
3.	Access and transport to the destination	48%
4.	Accommodation capacity of the units	35%
5.	Room types	61%
6.	Average time for check-in	39%
7.	Free access to Internet	91%
8.	Parking places	74%
9.	Informations regarding the tourist objectives	52%
10.	Quality and variety of services	31%
11.	Attention of personnel towards clients	30%

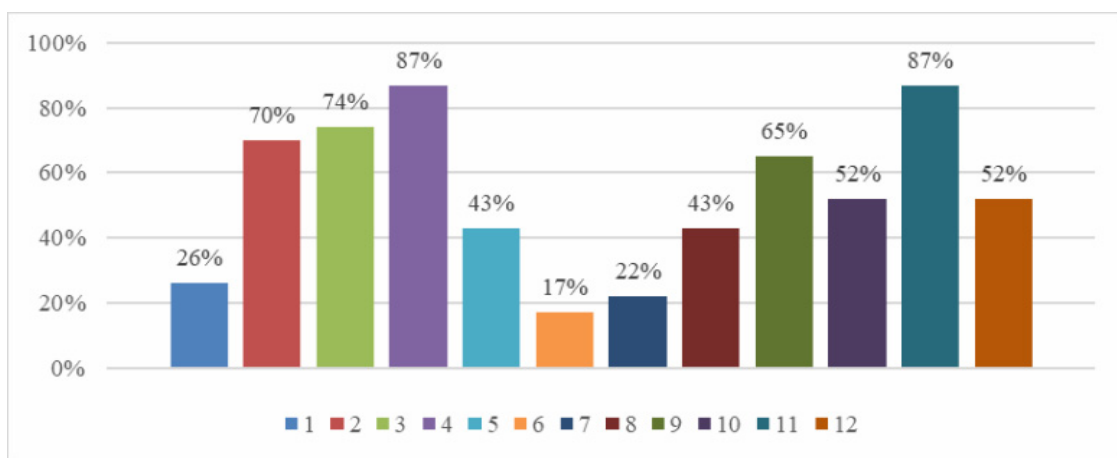


Fig. no. 4. The degree of customer satisfaction

The variables involved are the following:

Table no. 2. The variables involved

1.	Cleanliness in the accommodation units	26%
2.	The tranquility and the possibility to relax	70%
3.	Spending the leisure time	74%
4.	Restaurant open for breakfast, lunch, dinner	87%
5.	Diversity of menus	43%
6.	Menus with ECO products	17%
7.	Average waiting time for serving meals	22%
8.	Communication with the personnel	43%
9.	Promoting ways	65%
10.	Staff dress code	52%
11.	Elements of visual identity	87%
12.	The personnel behaviour	52%

Analyzing the degree of satisfaction with a percentage less than 50% from both diagrams, it resulted the main problems from tourist accommodation units that can be improved are:

Table no. 3. Main problems

1.	Leisure forms	43%
2.	Access and transport to the destination	48%
3.	Accommodation capacity of the units	35%
4.	Average time for check-in	39%
5.	Quality and variety of services	31%
6.	Attention of personnel towards clients	30%
7.	Cleanliness in the accommodation units	26%
8.	Diversification of menus	43%
9.	Menus with ECO products	17%
10.	Average waiting time for serving meals	22%
11.	Communication with the personnel	43%

The diagrams showed that the major problems of the tourist accommodation units analyzed are the following: reduced number of leisure forms and tourist activities, increased average waiting time for check-in, cleanliness of accommodation units, difficult access to the destination due to the poor infrastructure, reduced diversification and lack of menus with ECO products, poor client orientation, quality and variety of services provided for which satisfaction is low.

In order to improve the quality of services provided in tourist accommodation units, a series of recommendations have been formulated:

- diversification of tourist activities and the presence of an offer with a high degree of attractiveness;
- development of programs concerning traditional occupations of the local people in order for tourists to come into contact with the spirit of Maramureş County;
- encouraging and supporting tourism activities involving protected areas or forests, organization of trips with specialized guides;
- improvement of infrastructure, access roads to support tourism development and deployment especially in rural areas;
- construction of paths marked with signs for access to observation points;
- modernization of tourist accommodation units to improve the quality standards
- putting a great emphasis on the traditional local gastronomy and on usage of ecological products;
- improvement of tourism promotion activities, with a strong emphasis on the online advertising;
- managers to invest more in flyers and leaflets that promote the services offered to tourists;
- introduction of a Diary for tourists' impressions in the accommodations, which will identify customer dissatisfaction, so as managers will be able to make better decisions to improve service quality;
- implementation of specific programs regarding motivation, support and reward of employees, coherent personnel training programs (focus on foreign language skills and client orientation) in order to ensure and improve the service quality and customer service management;
- paying close attention to the cleanliness of the rooms;
- improving the efficiency of check-in and check-out procedures by establishing specific intervals for each of them in order to eliminate the long waiting times;
- development of facilities for people with disabilities.

Conclusions

Sustainable development of tourism in Maramureş has a high chance of success due to the attractive potential of the area, to the natural settings with nature reserves and parks and to the preservation of traditions over time which is specific to the Maramureş County.

Development of tourism in Maramureş will contribute to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage in rural areas, and also to the improvement of living standards in this region of the country.

The managers of tourist accommodation units which were analyzed, through effective leadership, may succeed in applying measures to solve the identified problems regarding the lack of customer orientation, cleanliness of accommodations, lack of menus containing ecological products, reduced quality and variety of services, access and transport to tourist locations, the waiting time for check-in and for serving meals, for which customer satisfaction is low.

Application of management methods and quality standards will improve the performance of services in the analyzed tourist accommodation units. Managers of these units will have to invest more in the quality of services and implement an effective system of quality at the level of the hotel/boarding house.

In order to improve the quality of the services provided in the tourist accommodation units, managers will have to train and motivate human resources, with a view to generating increased satisfaction from customers.

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