‘Inter-services’
A qualitative phenomenological study of leadership perspectives on guest per-trip engagement within tourist attractions

Summary

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INTRODUCTION

Tourist attractions appreciate the importance of innovation in their attraction, products and services to entice visitors to attend. Therefore, initiatives to examine areas where attractions could innovate to improve and enhance the visitors’ experience are welcomed. A way of doing this is to seek to understand their specific customer journey, as this could be considered vital for getting an increased insight into opportunities for increased experience for the visitor in exchange for their currency. Using the customer journey model, there may be an opportunity of starting building the relationship with their guests much earlier than presently. An untapped area is where a relationship could start is from the time the visitor purchases a ticket in advance electronically to the time they arrive at the location. This area is called ‘inter-services’ and can be implemented in any customer journey model.

There is an opportunity for attractions and consumers to build trust and a relationship with each other during this stage. Both parties would get the maximum opportunities of increased engagement, experiences and increased transactions which may not necessarily have taken place previously.

The aim of my dissertation was to find out tourist attractions’ views regarding ‘inter-services’ and if it is an important area for attractions to concentrate on when starting to build trust and relationships with their visitors in advance. This was done by interviewing senior figures from five high-profile London attractions to find out their views regarding this area. Each attraction interviewed is from a different area of the tourist attraction spectrum, from museums to concert halls, which will give a general overview of what the current situation is regarding this idea of ‘inter-services’. Interacting with dedicated tourism groups on LinkedIn also gave an overview of what the tourism industry feels about this area. A number of different themes were explored such as technology, social media, human resources and marketing. The majority of attractions interviewed were aware of this area, however, all attractions currently had a very basic element of this in place. Overall the ‘inter-services’ in the tourist industry is in an infancy stage. Development depends on
finance and a willingness to experiment with technology as a key factor in delivering this sort of service.

**UNDERSTANDING ‘INTER-SERVICES’**

A definition of ‘inter-services’ can be explained as a period of time where tourist attractions can interact with pre-booked visitors in advance.

Tourist attractions interact by providing targeted information to the visitor so they are able to manage their day effectively, benefiting themselves and the tourist attraction operations.

Research done by Rawson et al, (2013) regarding the customer journey found out that if organisations are able to skilfully manage the entire experience, they reap large rewards such as enhanced customer satisfaction, reduced churn, increased revenue, and greater employee satisfaction. Other benefits may include an increase in brand loyalty, return business and additional revenues. In a sense, the attraction can up-sell additional products and services which might not necessarily have taken place without this interaction.

This is a key time and an opportunity for tourist attraction marketers to begin relationship building with their visitors prior to the visit. Currently, airlines, hotels and cruise companies have adopted this idea which adds additional value to the consumers’ product. An example of this could be giving customers additional information so that they can prepare their trip, up-selling opportunities, and/or educating guests on additional value information such as (1) how to get to a location, (2) where the nearest place to eat is and (3) specialist requirements such as disabled access, baby changing facilities and safety security information.

However, the difference between the above sectors and tourist attractions is the way they organise their ticketing. Except for hotels, airlines and cruises obtain individual passenger details which enable them to contact each person individually. Meanwhile in the tourist attraction scenario, the card payer is the only person who would receive this touch point which can make it difficult to reach
other members of the party. This is a challenge for tourist attractions to create ambassadors for their organisation who have not necessarily consumed the attractions’ experience before. This could be a missed opportunity for tourist attractions to enhance their relationship with their visitors, build a brand which could be well respected whilst empowering their visitors to get involved with the company prior to the visit.

For an example of a type of inter-services, Virgin America released an innovative way of engaging their passengers before they took their flight by publishing their in-flight video in advance which was specially created to engage their passengers.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Often, analysing transcripts from all five tourist attractions, several interesting themes arise which will be briefly explained in relation to ‘inter-services’. Please be aware that these themes are not listed in any particular order.

CUSTOMER PROFILING

It is critical for tourist attractions to understand the types of visitors who want to consume their experiences. There are different demographics, psychographics and behavioural needs to be considered when describing and profiling visitors. Other considerations may include: locating customers, (finding out places where visitors are attracted to; physical locations or cyberspace), understanding their purchase process, and connecting with the repeat customers. These are all areas tourist attractions need to understand if they want to attract and retain their visitors (Whole Brain Group, 2012). Understanding these consumers and targeting messages at the right time in the right tone can be very tricky if an attraction is not used to this process. Customer profiling can be a vital area for start-up attractions.

Interestingly, two attractions commented on this area as they are established attractions which attract a certain type of clientele. This is an area in which both attractions are actively trying to
resolve to change their public image and perception. The increase of competition in London is leading them to re-think and re-imagine their attraction to reach out to a greater audience.

With reference to target marketing, several audience categories emerged which included; domestic visitors, overseas visitors, B2B, B2C, educational groups and travel trade.

All of these audience categories have the same issues in relation to the creation of touch points in ‘inter-services’. This may include investing in multilingual communications, which only two of the five attractions interviewed use on their websites, as well as understanding periods of times when these audiences purchase a ticket and how this could give a better understanding of how ‘inter-services’ could be implemented to give an additional experience to their visitors.

EVALUATION
All the tourist attractions interviewed had a formal evaluation process in place. These attractions are capturing evaluations in many different forms including: online surveys, online feedback, mystery shopper and on-site surveys to get an overall picture of their visitors’ perspective of the overall experience. This includes the reporting of evaluations which are shared internally with other departments. This has given them a good appreciation of common or recurring themes which could be addressed to enhance the customer experience. However, understanding how to capture emotions in their results hasn’t really been explored as findings are measured by numbers (tangible) not emotions (intangible). With reference to ‘inter-services’, if tourist attractions want to get closer to visitors, they first need to interact with their visitors. This interaction could be done through a variety of media, e.g. ‘listening’ can be done prior to the visit through channels where the attractions give the visitors the opportunity to create a two-way conversation. Evaluating this process will enhance and iron out any common issues and also bring up complex ones which may need a longer time to resolve.
SERVICES
Customers are now demanding services to be delivered in a more timely and seamless way, so organisations often need to overcome functional boundaries to meet these challenges (Zemke and Woods, 1999). Tourist attractions are in the infancy of their understanding of this challenge and are starting to embrace radical changes to attract new and repeat business from all parts of their audience. All tourist attractions interviewed agreed that services are at the heart of their attraction, but they do have a different view of how this is delivered. All attractions are aware of the concept of up-selling but have a different view on how they approach this when interacting with their visitors. For example, only three attractions have websites with the ability to up-sell when customers purchase tickets in advance.

To get a better understanding of their clientele, attractions need to understand how to target products and services to them. This can be done by investing in technology which will allow them to tailor options to a particular clientele. Interestingly, tourist attractions may need to learn more about the customers before trying to engage in technology.

All attractions agree that delivering exceptional customer service is an important area on which to concentrate. With a very good understanding of how to utilise services within their locations, balancing their online and email communications expectations with actual visit experiences can be very difficult to manage as different elements such as weather conditions, staffing, part of attractions closed and also their customers’ mind-set at that time, can provide a difficult challenge when providing services to visitors which are meaningful and memorable.

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA
This is a very strong and important area for these tourist attractions. They believe this makes it much easier for consumers to get in contact with them, from the time they enquire about their attraction to the time they purchase a ticket. Undoubtedly, this is an area where the majority of tourist attractions are investing a lot of their time and finances to create an outstanding online presence and experience. This could be considered as ‘beginning stages’ of the ‘inter-services’.
The Internet is definitely the main point of contact by visitors, pre-and post-trip, which is agreed by all the attractions.

An overwhelming theme was the use of smart phone and tablet technology. As individuals are much more mobile, smart phone and tablet technology has transformed the way information is accessed by consumers. Attractions know that the majority of their visitors use smart phones and tablets to get up-to-date information about their attractions no matter what the location of the visitor. These tourist attractions have seen an increased trend in the use of these devices. Tourist attractions are aware of this and have created dedicated mobile device web pages to view on a smart phone or tablet. The ability to book tickets directly on the device is another indicator that tourist attractions are actively involved and investing financially in developing the devices’ site for customer access.

Interestingly, the development of mobile apps was not mentioned by any of the attractions. This may be due to consumers not necessarily been interested in downloading an app onto the device and due to the cost implications when creating apps especially on four different operating systems, Apple, Android, BlackBerry, and Windows.

Social media is another area that tourist attractions consider an important part of the overall communication strategy when dealing with their consumers. All of the attractions do have an official Facebook group and Twitter feeds where customers can interact in real time with the tourist attraction.

One of the interesting comments made by one attraction was how social media was used to raise complaints. When a consumer asks questions on a social platform and is answered by the attraction the comments are visually linked together. The general public are able to review the question and answer. This has dramatically helped the way information has been shared, but can be a very time-consuming and a drain on resources if not managed properly.

The full potential exists to integrate social media into a website to create a seamless transition when communicating with consumers. All attractions are aware of this and are planning in the coming
months (in 2014) to increase their social media presence on their website and integrate more of a community conversational element. Except for Facebook and Twitter, other social media platforms such as; Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram were not mentioned during the interviews as being potentially used as part of the ‘inter-services’.

VISITORS READING ABILITIES
Interestingly, an area which was unexpected which emerged from the interviews, was adults’ ability to complete basic reading tasks. Two attractions mentioned this as something which they were aware of, and tailored campaigns carefully with this knowledge. According to The National Literacy Trust (2013), 16%, or 5.2 million adults in England can be described as functionally illiterate which is a literacy level at or below an average 11 –year-old. So, understanding how to create a system or process which is easy to use and easy to be understood by everybody is the key to the success of any web-based system. However, the understanding that reading ability is positively associated with self-esteem (Kiuru et al, 2012), may inform the way tourist attractions present the information, in order to empower their visitors to believe that the user is able to complete a particular task. With this in mind, tourist attractions can play a vital role of creating a positive relationship with guests to complete tasks such as purchasing a ticket in advance, and using this information with in ‘inter-services’ to facilitate a sense of anticipation before arriving on site.

HUMAN RESOURCES
All attractions agreed that staffing is the key foundation of the delivery of service. Tourist attractions operate on two levels, front of house and back of house, but all staff are fundamentally employed to create an overwhelming experience for their visitors. Interestingly, given that this is an important area, a lot of the attractions did not talk about it in a lot of detail. May be this is due to being complacent within the tourist attraction approach to staffing; an understanding that staff need to be treated the same as their customers was not really talked about, which is surprising, coming from a service industry. This is an area which needs more investigation: how organisations use staff to
create memorable experiences, and how organisations are creating worthwhile experiences for their staff.

When asked about their thoughts regarding ‘inter-services’ and if it was relevant to the tourist attractions, all attractions did agree that this was an important area and also a new area of exploration. “Engagement” was one of the key words which came out when interviewing attractions.

CONCLUSION

Social media are becoming an important part of the attractions communications. However, the attractions are still trying to enhance this power and find out how to use social media effectively as part of the overall communication strategy. There does not appear to be any dedicated research literature based on this particular area of the customer journey. By using the concept of the customer journey as the basis, the research undertaken offers insight into how ‘inter-services’ may fit in and become ripe for future investigation.

Reasons why the findings are useful to understand the concept of ‘inter-services’ is that attractions want to create different experiences to attract people. Using this concept would bring a sense of dedicated engagement between the visitor and attraction, with a sense of the attraction showing a "we care" attitude towards a guest. It is interesting how digital communications and engagement can play a very crucial part, not just when inviting guests to visit an attraction, but to ensure that they have a rewarding and satisfactory experience which they can share with their friends and families. Making anyone genuinely feel that they are the important person can lead to gaining brand loyalty as well as trust between both parties. Understanding that tourist attractions are heading down this direction is promising, but there is still a way to go for a total immersion of this type of experience targeted to their visitors.