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Measuring customer satisfaction: Are you measuring what you are supposed to be measuring?

For the past 15 years, there has been increasing attention in evaluating the post purchase stage of services. Businesses understand that satisfaction is the key for customer retention and recruitment. Consequently, many tourism and hospitality businesses track satisfaction of their customers via surveys. Typically, statements about various aspects of a service are presented where the respondents indicate their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with a tourism product/service. Satisfaction scores are then calculated to understand the relationship between satisfaction scores and the ratings for service quality determinants. While useful, there are however, other factors interfering with consumers' evaluations of services biasing or hiding true satisfaction scores. For example, the mood or state of being of the consumer during the evaluation stage might contribute to erroneous measures of customer satisfaction. This commentary addresses this issue in light of recent evidence indicating the possible effect of consumers' mood on service evaluations.

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Measuring and managing customer satisfaction is important for the survival, development, and success of tourism businesses. For the past 15 years, the service industry, including tourism, has paid increased attention to understanding customers' post-purchase reaction. Now, may businesses measure and track their customers' satisfaction with their service or product.

When measuring customer satisfaction the basic premise is that consumers reflect on their experiences and divulge their thoughts honestly and free of bias. Studies conducted in consumer behavior suggest that customers usually exhibit a positively bias, where they seem to be generally satisfied with what they receive. A fair conclusion of this is that customers actually did receive good service and therefore indicates their satisfaction. However, the concern is that somehow their responses were artificially inflated, masked by some intervening variable which had not been taken into account. One such variable that drew much attention in consumer behavior literature is "mood.' To date, tourism managers and researchers have given much less attention to the impact of affective (mood) states that are generated by leisure consumption experiences.

How can a tourism manager influence people's moods? Although managers constantly attempt to create environments conducive to positive mood states using such strategies as playing soft classical music to create a relaxing environment or using soft lighting to evoke warm and favorable mood states, largely, mood is considered to be beyond the control of the marketing manager. People's moods can be influenced by a variety of factors, many of which are beyond the control of the management. What becomes important is the customer satisfaction measurements taken during a particular time when people are in a positive or bad mood. How much of a positive evaluation of a service is attributable to customers positive mood states versus how much of these scores can be attributed to actual quality of the services received, becomes an important research and managerial issue.

The extant literature on consumer behavior appears to be conflicted regarding the direction of the mood effect. While there are few studies supporting the notion that negative-mood produces less favorable response to marketing stimuli or a person, the majority of the evidence suggests that the effect of mood on memory, recall, storage and evaluation are asymmetrical. Individuals in positive mood states evaluate marketing stimuli more positively than individuals in neutral or negative mood states. In the context of a tourism product, this skewed effect of mood on evaluation efforts could mean that respondents in a positive mood may believe that they are satisfied with the service experience, when in fact this positive evaluation is more due to their 'good mood', therefore resulting in *a false acclamation of the quality of the service.*To avoid a biased evaluation such as this, the researcher must account for or adjust for the effect of mood when reporting customer satisfaction scores. A recent tourism study by Sirakaya, Petrick and Choi (soon to be published in the Annals of Tourism Research) indicates that there is a significant relationship between consumers' satisfaction with a product or service and their mood states during their evaluation. Vacationers with lower mood evaluations tended to have lower satisfaction levels with tourism services. Further, lower levels of satisfaction were related to bad mood.

Consumers' emotional and mood states may moderate the relationships between customer satisfaction scores and ratings related to service quality measurements hence giving management a false sense of success when satisfaction scores are either high or

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low. Accordingly, mood can be a nuisance variable that can contaminate consumer satisfaction ratings. Controlling for the moderating effect (ceteris paribus) of mood state may give researchers true and unbiased satisfaction ratings.

One important implication of this is that the traditional use of average scores as a measure of customer satisfaction seems obsolete. According to Peterson and Wilson (1992), comparison of distributions should be used rather than measures of central tendencies in such cases. Thus, new measures or scales need to be developed that compensate for the observed skewness when measuring satisfaction, since it seems that the existing self-reports of customer satisfaction lack reliability.

From a practical standpoint, there are several fundamental implications for management and marketing professionals alike. Since vacationers' moods can influence customer satisfaction ratings, the context in which satisfaction scores are rated must be considered for any employee reward system. Additionally, positive service evaluation scores may not necessarily mean that the service delivery system is free from error or problems. In summary, tourism and hospitality researchers must incorporate affective states such as *mood* and *emotions* of consumers into decision-making and customer satisfaction studies.

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