

Formulating of an All-Encompassing Tourism Systems Framework Incorporating Introduction of a New Customer Satisfaction Measurement Approach (EPI).

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Abstract

It is now generally accepted that tourism is the largest and most rapidly growing industry in the world. Trends indicate that this relentless growth will continue. Yet the approach to managing and studying tourism is fragmented, uncoordinated, and lacking a theoretical foundation. This study is an attempt, albeit on a small scale, to find a unifying concept on which to base tourism theory and practice. It is common knowledge among tourism theoreticians that interdisciplinary and systemic approaches are the most suitable for the management and study of tourism. Various writers have adopted this perspective, and many practitioners have followed suit. This thesis pursues a similar pattern but with two major differences:

First, it disputes the traditional claim that tourism is generically an 'open system'. It argues that tourism is in some instances an 'open system', in others a 'closed system'. Further, closed systems can be partially open, and open systems can be partially closed. Second, it looks to the manufacturing sector, the so-called antithesis of the service sector of which tourism is considered a part, for benchmarks. 'Systems theory / systems practice' is introduced as theoretical base for tourism, with quality management as promulgated by W. Edwards Deming being the operationalisation of the systems approach.

This thesis proposes a tourism management framework that relies on an understanding of specific aspects of the customers' interaction with the operator and environment. The framework is based on the quality management philosophy of Deming, reflecting systems thinking. A key aspect of this philosophy is the need for deeper understanding of customer satisfaction, which can be obtained only through the collection of appropriate data. A review of the literature identified substantial deficiencies in the existing data collection approaches; hence, a new approach was devised, developed, and tested for this thesis. The EPI approach identifies Expectations, Perceptions, and Importance as the three components underlying customer satisfaction. Several alternative combinations, giving varying results, were identified in the literature. SERVPERF, measuring Perception alone, is the most commonly used, both in general and in tourism. SERVQUAL, measuring the gap between expectation and perception and following strict guidelines on questionnaire format, wording, and dimensions, is the most high profile, although much maligned. IPA (Importance Performance Analysis) is becoming increasingly popular.

In proposing the EPI formula, this thesis not only adds a new dimension to the measurement of customer satisfaction, but also highlights the respective values of the other approaches. Primary data were obtained in five separate surveys, backed up by additional secondary data from five further surveys, administered within the accommodation, food service, and leisure industries in Dunedin, New Zealand. The approach and results were deemed useful by both respondents and

management of the organisations involved, and confirmed the utility of the new measurement approach.

The customer satisfaction measurement methodology is only one part of the feedback system driving the proposed tourism management framework. Further research will refine both the EPI measurement approach and the framework, based on the underlying philosophy of systems thinking.