

The role of expectations in the consumer satisfaction formation process: Empirical evidence in the travel agency sector

Ignacio A. Rodríguez del Bosque*, Héctor San Martín, Jesús Collado

Department of Business Administration, Avda. de los Castros s/n, 39005, Santander, Spain

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Abstract

Many studies have examined the different components involved in the formation of expectations, as well as the influence expectations may have in the consumer satisfaction process. This paper provides empirical evidence about the formation of expectations, and the relation between expectations, satisfaction and consumer loyalty. We analyse the tourist industry, an important sector in advanced economies, and more specifically the travel agency sector. Using two structural equation models our results demonstrate the importance of 'image' in the expectations formulation process, the direct relationship between expectations and consumer satisfaction, and the close association between satisfaction and consumer loyalty. Finally, several recommendations are suggested for academics and managers.

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1. Introduction

There are many studies in services marketing literature on the concept of consumer expectations, analysing both the nature of expectations (Miller, 1977; Prakash & Lounsbury, 1984; Tse & Wilton, 1988; Walker & Baker, 2000; Woodruff, Cadotte, & Jenkins, 1983; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993) as well as their antecedents (Clow, Kurtz, Ozment, & Ong, 1997; Faché, 2000; Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991). From a review of the literature a wide variety of comparison standards can be identified in the consumer satisfaction formation process, among which are predictive expectations, as well as lists of various determinants of consumer expectations (Zeithaml et al., 1993).

There are two main objectives for this work. First, to analyse the dimensions underlying the concept of expectations, usually established in a theoretical way in services marketing literature, as well as their application to the travel agency sector. The intention is to fill the gap of empirical research related to the concept of consumer expectations and its components (Clow, Kurtz, & Ozment, 1998; Oliver & Burke, 1999). Second, to study the effect of these expectations on the post-consumption judgements of the consumer (i.e. consumer satisfaction) and to assess how this leads to recommendations to other consumers and to the intention to re-use the services of the same company (i.e. user loyalty).

With these goals in mind, the work is structured as follows: In Section 2 marketing literature is reviewed for the main theoretical contributions made in the consumer satisfaction process. Next, a number of hypotheses are tested in field work. Subsequently, a description of the methodology of the empirical research, consisting of a survey of users of the products and services of holiday-travel agencies in various urban areas in a region of

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 942 20 16 38;
fax: +34 942 20 18 90.

E-mail addresses: rbosquei@unican.es
(I.A. Rodríguez del Bosque), smartinh@unican.es (H. San Martín),
colladoj@unican.es (J. Collado).

northern Spain follows. Finally, the results obtained through two structural equation models are discussed and conclusions are drawn for both academics and managers.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. Components of expectations

First, there is a lack of consensus with regard to the nature of the expectations involved in consumer judgements. Thus, previous research has proposed ‘predictive’ expectations, ‘ideal’ expectations, ‘desired’ expectations or ‘experience-based norms’ as comparison standards in consumer satisfaction judgements. This work proposes a framework based on predictive expectations, which are the comparison standard most frequently used in consumer satisfaction literature (Park & Choi, 1998; Prakash & Lounsbury, 1984; Walker & Baker, 2000; Woodruff, Clemons, Schumann, Gardial, & Burns, 1991).

Predictive expectations, which have their origin in expectancy-value theory (Tolman, 1932), have been variously defined: for example, as consumer predictions about the outcome of a transaction or interchange (Miller, 1977; Liechty & Churchill, 1979; Oliver, 1980), the most likely performance of the product (Tse & Wilton, 1988), estimates of the anticipated performance level (Prakash, 1984), pre-purchase cognition about the product performance (Park & Choi, 1998), and finally, the consumer’s prior beliefs about the future performance or attributes of a product (Summers & Granbois, 1977; Prakash & Lounsbury, 1984; Ngobo, 1997). In short, these conceptualisations adopt “anticipation” as a central idea, which allows to define the expectations as the product performance anticipated by the consumer.

With regard to the components of consumer expectations, there are many studies contributing theoretically to consumer expectations formulation in very different contexts. Given the nature of the services of travel agencies, the framework proposed by Zeithaml et al. (1993) about the determinants of customer expectations of service is adopted. Thus, the past experience and the explicit and implicit service promises as factors generating predictive expectations are emphasised.

Like Zeithaml et al. (1993), other studies postulate that a consumer’s past experience will influence positively in their expectations of a future episode (Anderson & Hair, 1972; Faché, 2000; Hoffman & Bateson, 1997; Oliver, 1997; Oliver & Burke, 1999; Prakash & Lounsbury, 1984). Two essential arguments support the effect of the past experience of the individual in the formation of his/her expectations: mere exposure effect and elaboration level of the cognitive structure. With

regards to the mere exposition effect, the theory of attitude formation proposed by Zajonc (1968) postulates that the mere exposition of the individual to a stimulus or an object enhances attitude towards it. Transporting this argument to an expectations context, Johnson and Mathews (1997) establish that repeated encounters with a service probably enhance the user expectations of a future encounter. On the other hand, Söderlund (2002) suggests that a high level of familiarity leads to a more elaborated cognitive structure, and therefore, to a different frame for evaluations compared to a low level of familiarity. In this context, individuals with a high familiarity tend to polarise their inferences and evaluations of the stimulus compared to individuals with a low familiarity (Peracchio & Tybout, 1996; Söderlund, 2002).

Additionally, user expectations can be contingent on the level of previous satisfaction with the company. It seems reasonable that the more familiarity the user has with the travel agency, the higher the expectations he/she will have about a future encounter. On this basis the first hypothesis proposes:

H₁: The experience accumulated by a travel agency user in earlier encounters with the service will be an expectations-generating factor for a future encounter.

There is a generalised consensus about intangibility as a distinctive and essential characteristic of services. This characteristic may complicate the formation of expectations because users cannot perceive the tangible outcome of the service, and therefore, they cannot clearly form their expectations of a future encounter with the service (Bebko, 2000). Consequently, the intangible nature of services may be perceived to be risky and uncertain. So, consumers seek information from a wide variety of sources to reduce the risk and uncertainty of their future experiences, e.g. advertisements, brochures and promotional material (Murray, 1991). Likewise, consumers look for tangible cues, e.g. installations and equipment, to firmly form expectations of service performance (Bitner, 1990; Clow et al., 1997; Kotler, 2000). In short, consumers will use explicit service promises—i.e. external communication—and implicit service promises—i.e. tangible cues—to anticipate the provider’s capabilities and their future encounters.

Several studies recognise the importance of both communication from the service provider (Anderson & Hair, 1972; Faché, 2000; George & Berry, 1981; Grönroos, 1984; Hoffman & Bateson, 1997; Murray, 1991; Oliver, 1980, 1997; Oliver & Burke, 1999; Prakash & Lounsbury, 1984) and of the tangible cues associated with the service (Bitner, 1986, 1990; Booms & Bitner, 1981; Clow et al., 1997; Hoffman & Bateson, 1997; Kurtz & Clow, 1991a; Parasuraman et al., 1991) in the user expectations formation process. Thus, the more the positive communication and tangible cues of a travel

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