

Research article

The impact of customer-to-customer interaction and customer homogeneity on customer satisfaction in tourism service—The service encounter prospective[☆]

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Received 8 June 2006; accepted 3 February 2007

Abstract

Customer satisfaction has been an important topic in tourism service management. Many researchers have argued that customer-to-customer interaction may affect customers' evaluation of the service experience. Consequently, the objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between customer-to-customer interaction, customer homogeneity and customer satisfaction. This research adopted questionnaires to investigate tourists traveling to foreign areas from Taiwan. In conclusion, the perception of customer-to-customer interaction incidents could be extracted into six factors, including protocol and sociable incidents, violent incidents, grungy incidents, malcontent incidents, crude incidents, and inconsiderate incidents. The results of the analysis indicate that "protocol and sociable incidents" have a significantly positive impact on the "evaluation of fellow customers". However, "malcontent incidents" have a significantly negative impact on customer satisfaction. "Marital homogeneity" has a positive influence on the "evaluation of fellow customers". Finally, "evaluation of fellow customers" has a positive influence on customer satisfaction. Some suggestions for practitioners to manage customer compatibility and enhance customer satisfaction are proposed.

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Keywords: Customer-to-customer interaction; Customer homogeneity; Customer satisfaction

1. Introduction

Owing to the nature of tourism services, among which heterogeneity and inseparability are some of the characteristics (Bateson, 1985), "service customers tend to be much more involved in service production, or delivery, than their manufacturing counterparts" (Youngdahl & Kellogg, 1997, p. 19). Service is often highly complex and a summation of interaction, exchange and performance between service employees and customers. There is much human interaction in the tourism service, which is called the "service encounter" (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Shostack, 1985, p. 243). Hence, such encounters have been the foci of service delivery (Fisk, Brown, & Bitner, 1993;

Grove & Fisk, 1997), and it has become a major focus of services marketing research (Bitner, 1990; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). Especially, researchers have attempted to identify factors affecting customers' perceptions of exchanges between service organizations and their customers (e.g., Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Bitner, 1990; Bitner et al., 1990; Keaveney, 1995; Kelley, Hoffman, & Davis, 1993).

Service encounter research focuses on the interactions between customers and employees in service firms (Fisk et al., 1993). According to Fisk et al. (1993), the research on service encounters can be divided into three primary types. First, considerable attention is being paid to the management of customer and employee interactions in service encounters and to understanding how customers evaluate individual service encounters. Secondly, research focus is on customer involvement in service encounters and the customer's role in service production and delivery.

[☆]The author thanks for the funding for this research provided by the Taiwan Government's National Science Council (NSC 92-2416-H-130-004).

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Thirdly, research focus on service encounters examines the role of tangibles and the physical environment in the customer's evaluation. Although many of the linkages that solidify customer–business relationships are already well recognized, one important linkage which is the focus of this article has been insufficiently studied: the relationship between customers and other customers in business environments (Martin, 1996). In fact, Pranter and Martin (1991, p. 44) state that “management attention paid to customer-to-customer relations would be as fruitful as attention historically devoted to management–employee, employee–customer and employee–employee relations”.

From the service encounter perspective, the tourism customer shares the same public business environment among other groups of customers in the service context (Martin, 1996). Customers may affect one another indirectly by being part of the environment or more directly through specific interpersonal encounters (Baker, 1987; Bitner, 1992). These relationships are highly relevant because they can dramatically influence customer satisfaction with the broader customer experience (Martin & Pranter, 1989). In the tourism service context, their customers share the service environment with other customers as they consume the service. Customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction often stem from the behaviors and characteristics of other customers who are part of the tourism service experience and, hence, part of the service itself (Pranter & Martin, 1991).

Therefore, the likelihood of successfully grouping compatible customers together randomly or arbitrarily in tourism service environments seems increasingly difficult. Instead, the responsibility faced by marketers and managers of these tourism service environments is compatibility management (Martin & Pranter, 1989). Many service businesses although concerned about customer compatibility, have not attempted to manage compatibility in a comprehensive fashion (Martin, 1996). Broadly defined, compatibility management is a process of first attracting homogeneous customers to the service environment, then actively managing both the physical environment and customer-to-customer encounters in such a way as to enhance satisfying encounters and minimize dissatisfying encounters (Martin & Pranter, 1991). Such a perspective recognizes the potential impact customer-to-customer relations have on customer satisfaction and customer retention (Pranter & Martin, 1991). Some of these issues have been examined in an exploratory vein, but few empirical studies have been conducted on the impact of customer-to-customer interaction and customer compatibility on customers in service (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Martin, 1996).

More specifically, this article attempts to explicate the nature of these customer-to-customer relationships and the customers' homogeneity effect upon customer satisfaction. In this regard, this study is designed both to respond to recent calls for further research into such issues (e.g., Fullerton & Punj, 1993; Harris & Ogbonna, 2002; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Huefner & Hunt, 2000; Martin, 1996), and

to advance understanding of these central issues. Next, a description of our empirical investigation of the phenomenon is presented. The results of our inquiry are then discussed, and implications and directions for future research are offered.

2. Literature review

2.1. Service encounter

There are many human interactions in service encounters (Solomon et al., 1985). Each act is a purposive transaction whose outcome is dependent upon the coordinated actions of both participants. As is the case in many types of dyadic interactions, one cannot predict the quality of outcomes with knowledge of only one action behavior. Instead, much of social behavior consists of joint activity—a major task for the interacting person is the mutual coordination of appropriate behavior vis-a-vis the other person, the dyadic interpersonal interactions period which is called the “service encounter” (Bitner et al., 1990; Shostack, 1985, p. 243).

The service encounters are characterized as discrete, separate, and distinct events and behaviors (Bitner et al., 1990; Ellis, Lee, & Beatty, 1993). However, when one thinks of service encounters, what commonly comes to mind is interpersonal exchange between customers and service providers (Lovelock, 1996; Solomon et al., 1985; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). Specifically, service encounters will be used to indicate face-to-face interactions between a buyer and a seller in a service setting. These interpersonal exchanges can strongly influence customer satisfaction (Solomon et al., 1985). Thus, the service encounter itself occupies a central place in much of service marketing, and impacts on service differentiation, quality control, delivery systems, and customer satisfaction.

On the other hand, Lovelock and Wirtz (2004, p. 46) provide a structural representation of the services marketing system. The component of the structure which is visible to the customer is called the service delivery system. It is the front stage of the services marketing system. Within the service delivery system, a customer's overall experience is affected by various potential interactions: interactions with service (contact) personnel, interactions with internal and external physical surroundings (including equipment), and interactions with other customers. Languard, Bateson, Lovelock, and Eiglier (1981) encapsulate the same interactions in their servuction system model, where their front stage structure identifies the interactions of a customer A, with contact personnel, the inanimate environment and customer B. Also, Grove and Fisk (1992) extend the front stage drama analogy to a service theater where actors and audience participate in the service setting to create a service performance.

2.2. Customer-to-customer interaction

In many service contexts, customers receive a service simultaneously while other customers are being served.

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