



Case Study

Developing a forest-based wellbeing tourism product together with customers – An ethnographic approach



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Ethnography suits well in the external testing phase of tourism NSD.
- Ethnographic approach brings versatile information for the purpose of NSD.
- Gained information benefits the development of service concept, process and system.
- The customer involvement in NSD benefits both customers and suppliers.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the usability and usefulness of ethnographic approaches in new service development (NSD) in tourism. This paper discusses and describes what kind of information is gained through the process. The paper includes a case study which uses an ethnographic approach in one phase of the NSD process. The data was collected during a tourism product test phase on-site by participant observation, conducting surveys and holding group interviews. The results show that an ethnographic approach brings highly versatile and detailed information that benefits different phases of NSD and the development of the service concept, service process and service system. Some challenges were identified during the data collection, mainly related to participant observation. This study contributes to tourism management literature by providing an empirical example of how consumers are involved in NSD in the tourism industry and how an ethnographic approach can be utilised in NSD.

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1. Introduction

In recent studies, the role of the customer has been highlighted in product and service development processes. Service-dominant logic (e.g. Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and service logic (e.g. Grönroos, 2006, 2008, 2011) emphasise customer interaction with suppliers during e.g. product design, production and consumption (e.g. Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). Services occur when customers and service suppliers interact, which emphasises the central role of the customer in services. This interaction and dialogue between a customer and a service provider is often described as co-creation or co-production (e.g. Payne et al., 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2006) and the customer is seen as a co-producer of a service, as well as a co-creator of value (Grönroos, 2007; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2006). One of the reasons

for discussing the importance of customer involvement is that it is seen to be an effective strategy for improving the success of new services (Sjödin & Kristensson, 2012).

It is stated that the products of the hospitality and tourism industry are always experiential (Williams, 2006) and thus many examples of these services come from the context of “experience” industries, such as restaurants, theme parks, and tourist destinations. Experiential services do not solely focus on the utilitarian benefits resulting from the products/services delivered (Voss & Zomerdiijk, 2007; Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2011) but more on the experiential value a consumer obtains from the consumer service experience. Even though the core product of tourism is the experience of the consumer, it is interesting to note how limited the research into how customers are involved in developing tourism products and services is at present (Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013).

Though some studies have recently focused on examining the roles co-creation and customer involvement play in service development and new service development (NSD) in tourism (e.g.

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Chathoth, Altinay, Harrington, Okumus, & Chan, 2013; Prebensen et al., 2013) there is still a lack of (especially empirical) studies that focus on the innovative activities and e.g. modes of customer involvement in the tourism and hospitality sector (Hjalager, 2010; Komppula & Lassila, 2014). In addition, Hjalager and Nordin (2011) have stated that future research in tourism innovation should concentrate on examining user-driven innovation methods and practices. A number of studies have outlined methods that are suitable for acquiring customer information (e.g. Alam, 2002; Lagrosen, 2005; von Hippel, 1986), from which some methods are seen as being suitable for particular phases of the development process and others are seen as being appropriate for the gathering of customer information throughout the entire process (von Koskull & Fougère, 2011). However, according to Nijssen and Lieshout (1995, cited in von Koskull & Fougère, 2011), there is little information available concerning the extent and the way in which customer information is actually collected in real cases of service development praxis. This study aims to fill this gap by examining one case of customer involvement in tourism NSD.

Several authors (e.g. Edvardsson, Kristensson, Magnusson, & Sundström, 2012; Ryan, 2010) encourage researchers to tend towards using qualitative methods and approaches that are both interpretative and interactive in order to gain more comprehensive information about the phenomenon under investigation. Ethnographic approaches have quite often been applied in tourism research, especially when examining travel/service experiences (Barbieri, Almeida Santos, & Katsube, 2012; Coghlan & Filo, 2013; Komppula & Gartner, 2013; Muskat, Muskat, Zehrer, & Johns, 2013; Prebensen & Foss, 2011), tourist motivations (Buckley, 2012), tourists as co-producers and in co-constructing experiences (Larsen & Meged, 2013; Tumbat, 2011), the meanings of certain sightseeing places or environments (Mordue, 2005; Rantala, 2011) and the experiences and emotions of tourists and tourism service personnel (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2013; Tumbat, 2011). Even though several ethnographic studies have been conducted in relation to tourism, many have not examined their findings from an ethnographic perspective or have applied an ethnographic research approach in a service development context. Komppula and Lassila (2014) studied ethnography as a means for focussing on customer involvement and they found that valuable information was gained in relation to customers' motivations, preferences and wishes that could be used for service development purposes. However, there is still a need to obtain more detailed information about how an ethnographic approach can be applied and to subsequently evaluate its potential contribution to tourism NSD.

This study is part of a wider tourism development project aiming to develop forest-based wellbeing tourism products. The study focuses on a tourism product development process that aims to develop forest-based wellbeing tourism products through the involvement of potential customers. In this case, the study focuses on examining the development process with one of the potential target groups – Japanese tourists. The initial idea for a project to develop a forest-based tourism product for Japanese tourists came from a Japanese medical doctor who had previously visited the region. In 2013, Japanese tourists were the sixth biggest foreign customer group in Finland (FTB, 2014c), being the largest group of visitors who came from outside of Europe. Compared to the previous year, overnight stays by visitors from Japan increased by 16.4 percent (FTB, 2014c). The preconceptions that the Japanese have about Finland are connected to the Aurora Borealis, the Moomins (cartoon characters), nature (e.g. natural scenery, the natural environment, snow, the cold, forests, lakes, berry-picking), Santa Claus and Christmas, as well as Nordic design (e.g. furniture, handicrafts, ornaments, souvenir, littala, Arabia, Marimekko) (FTB,

2014a). The top three main interests of the Japanese in Finland are the Aurora Borealis, the midnight sun and food. However, also listed in the top ten are other Finnish natural assets such as lakes, snow and forests (FTB, 2014a). As Japanese visitors show interest in these the natural resources, an increase in the offering for the Japanese target group and the provision of new kinds of services related to the forest and nature were suggested.

The paper describes the whole NSD process of the case, but it concentrates on examining one phase of new service development process – external market testing – in more detail. The aim of this study is to make a contribution to the tourism management literature by providing an empirical example of how consumers are involved in NSD in the tourism industry. The more precise goal is to examine the usability and usefulness of an ethnographic approach in tourism NSD by discussing and describing what kind of information is gained through the process, and what kinds of challenges the approach has.

The paper is structured as follows: This introduction is followed by a theoretical section in which I focus on examining customer involvement in NSD and ethnography as an approach/method, and how ethnography is used in business and tourism studies. I then move to describe the context and the study case. This is followed by the data collected during the course of the study, and a description of the method, which includes a presentation on how I conducted the ethnographic research in this case. In the section following the data and method study, I present my findings from the empirical material and bring forth issues that were connected to the usage of the ethnographic approach. In the conclusion, I discuss the most relevant findings and put forward some theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Involving customers in new service development

In tourism, the overall experience and the value for customer derives from services they consume at particular facilities or at a destination. Several authors have pointed out that value for a consumer is generated in the service process (e.g. Grönroos, 2006) and a service company can provide the prerequisites and settings for services and experiences (e.g. Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996). The starting point for new tourism service development needs to be the service concept (the core of a tourist product), which expresses what kind of experiences and value the customer seeks (Komppula, 2006; Konu, Tuohino, & Komppula, 2010). The service process includes the various service modules and steps of the customer process through which the customer consumes the services (Komppula, 2006; Komppula & Lassila, 2014). To realise the service concept, all stakeholders, namely consumers, the service company's personnel, technical and physical environments and the suppliers all need to be involved in the service process. The service system comprises all of the resources available to the service process for realising the service concept (Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996), e.g. the internal and external resources of a service provider. Hence, both the service process (including the services and interaction) and the service system (including e.g. external resources such as destination resources) influence the experience the customer has (e.g. Komppula & Boxberg, 2002; Tuohino, Konu, Hjalager, & Huijbens, 2013). The service concept, service process and service system are seen as prerequisites for a customer-orientated tourist product (Komppula, 2006).

Konu et al. (2010) have adapted several NPD and NSD theories and applied them to the tourist product context. Their framework for service system development includes five main phases: service concept development, service process development, market testing, commercialisation and post-introduction evaluation. Service concept development includes phases of idea generation, core

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