

# Senzorial Marketing – Means of Evaluating Customer's Satisfaction on Balnear Tourism

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**Abstract.** *In the course of time customers' satisfaction raised many disputes and can be defined by various authors as a "generalized attitude, based on a cognitive comparison and an affective component" (Homburg, Stock, 2001). One of the requests of the studies regarding satisfaction is the multi-attributive measuring (multi-dimensional). In the field of balneal medicine the need of standard evaluation of satisfaction appeared when the consumer became stricter and stricter, this leading to reorientation and adaptation to customers' demands up to outrunning the customers' expectations. Using marketing research and its specific instruments of satisfaction measurement, the experience of a customer regarding certain product usage, decomposed into dimensions or attributes, leads to permanent distinguishing of elements that draw him closer to/disturb the customer, in his role of conscious or unconscious observer.*

**Key words:** attached customer; consumer; quality; satisfaction; sensorial/perceptive marketing.

**JEL Codes:** D12, M31.

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**REL Codes:** 7B, 14F, 14G.

## 1. Sensorial marketing background

It is defined by certain authors as being “both a final state and a continuous process” (Oliver, 1992) and at the same time the result of a complex comparative psychic process (Herrmann, Homburg et al., 1999), satisfaction is a necessary but insufficient element for becoming devoted, resulting in a customer’s loyalty to a company, product and brand.

To obtain a certain level of satisfaction the customer uses certain comparative standards, which can be defined as ideal expectations, individual standard or other evaluative instruments. In these conditions, satisfaction represents “a true key of molding the customer’s acquisition behavior”, which deals with three groups of variables: cognitive variables (based on superior quality of merchandise given by performance), affective variables (based on customers’ feelings) and cognitive variables (based on customer-provider interaction during the process of buying; Meyer-Waarden, 2004, quoted by Brătianu, Lixăndroiu, Pop, editors, 2006).

For the cognitive variable, the most important element is the technical quality of the product, expressed by its characteristics such as: performance, durability, design, maintainability, environmental protective, etc.

For the affective variable, the marketer has to take into consideration the quality of the reputation (competence, solidarity, image and notoriety) and for the cognitive variable the most important element is the quality of service (certainty, durability,

tangibility, quickness) and not to mention the quality of personal relationships, expressed by personal communication, selling capacity, inter-relational atmosphere and the employees’ behavior.

If for the conative and cognitive variables the degree of satisfaction can be measured by objective standards and indicators, being easier to, for the affective variable the multi-attributive method is much more used, method which presumes the identification of all factors or the attributes determined by these and the hierarchy of their importance to global level of satisfaction. At the same time it is required to separate/delimitate them into basic, necessary factors and also factors of enthusiasm. The degree of customer satisfaction is hard to be evaluated in some sectors, such as tourism, where a multitude of forms of tourism exists and also of touristic products which can be achieved by taking into consideration the consumer motivation. That is why, an important role in this situation is the evaluation of the product by taking into consideration its main objective and subjective characteristics. The role of the marketer is to understand-transform the product into an unique experience lived by the consumer, during all his stay in the touristic place.

Thus every product must have certain characteristics to distinguish it from the competitors, and much more this should be viewed as unique in the customer’s mind, put it in a different way, it becomes a „brand”. The services, through their

nature and characteristics, require a longer contact between customer and provider, allowing a connection on long-terms, with benefits for both sides (Pop, 2006). From this perspective, during the customer's stay, the provider can use different levels of presenting (impact, influence, impression) the touristic product to the customer. Through this relational concept,

that places first the interaction between the consumer and the product, can point out perceptual elements which make up and generate the satisfaction process associated with the marketed product consumption which at the same time differentiate and transform it into brand through his components: visual, rational, cultural and emotional (figure 1).

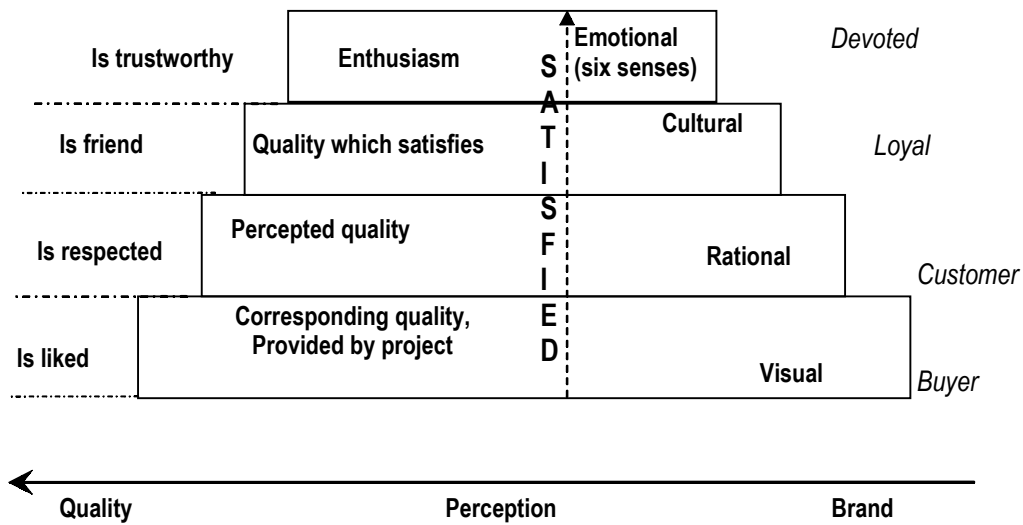


Figure 1. Relationship between perception-quality-satisfaction-brand

### Visual component (sensorial)

It represents the first level of interaction of the individual with the surrounding environment and from this perspective has a fundamental role in establishing a satisfactory relationship. Deficiencies at this level cannot be ignored by the consumer, but can be tolerated. The visual component gives 90% of the received and analyzed information regarding the environment and it refers both to quality elements of project execution (fix structures) and to its use to achieve the target purpose. The visual information is corroborated with the olfactive, tactile and

audio information and offers an impression of “uncomfortable/embarrassing”, “adequate” or “superior” regarding the product. In a balneal resort, at this level aspects of comfort are generally included: quantity, distribution and harmonizing the natural/artificial light, temperature, humidity and air circulation, etc. which are compared to the level and type of activity. These are identification sources like symmetry, angularity, proportion, measurement which have an important role in preparing products/ treatments used at this level.

### Rational component

It represents the level at which the sensorial information obtained is analyzed and processed and assures the individual adaptation and integration in the environment. This type of approach confers this component an essential role, necessary to satisfy the customer's needs. In practice, this aspect can often be neglected, without obstructing the other elements and obtaining a certain degree of satisfaction. It is undoubtful that a certain degree of satisfaction has to be addressed efficiently to the interaction consumer-product. The following statement is well known: "we don't like what we don't understand". From a limited point of view the rational component provides understanding of product's elements, of general idea to form positive impressions which finally creates a link between the consumer and the product. A useful example is the usage of a short history of the surroundings and some anecdotes which frame the touristic elements into a social and historical framework giving some value. It is well known that – although inappropriate – the association between Dracula and Bran castle raised the number of tourists coming to this destination.

In this direction one can emphasize what people do in a certain field. Taking into consideration the rational level, the consumer can get some information about certain useful aspects, which he can successfully use in the future and at the same time associate them with the given

experience (in case of balneal tourism, for each of the three types of products the variety of products, its benefits and mechanism of action are motivated, the explaining regarding the density of negative aero-ions and association with a new technique of relaxation and treatment).

### Cultural component

This level can be characterized as subconscious. It generally contains elements of conception, harmony, and integrity of components (buildings, rooms) in which people live. This level can be influenced rationally by explaining its utility and aesthetic advantages of construction elements. It has a powerful influence on the individual, but it still can be connected to artistic contemporary trends (fashion, design, internal architecture). The said level is represented by the experiences, traditions, social particularities in which an individual lived (a relaxing vacation contains elements usually connected to a comfortable atmosphere: quiet/fresh air, cleaning/organizing/food/refinement etc). Regarding balneal tourism, suitable products are those named "restful holiday". One of the products/modern means of treatment is also balneal-aromatherapy (aromatherapy correlated with balneal treatment).

Considered to be an alternative treatment, its purposes are relaxation, equilibration and energetic harmonization and it is based on individual studies, folk and not in the last on various traditional knowledge of various times and cultures,

by using a sense that makes connection with the ancestral memory, which can influence us individually both biological and psychological – a certain smell associated with various sensations and memories, which can change the mood of a person, to happiness and self confidence (Coifan, 2005).

### **Emotional component**

This is the most difficult level to reach, and indeed this can give someone the feeling of long-term satisfaction, that is, pleasant memories. The emotional level is the most individualized (specific for each) and reaching it requires information regarding personal preferences. To reach this level the other three components have to be successfully achieved or in extraordinary cases this kind of experience can be achieved directly.

It is also worth mentioning that a way to lead in this direction requires the fulfillment of all the customer's expectations, helpful for the customer satisfaction in this case is a questionnaire making the services more appropriate to his wishes.

The customers' expectations can vary considerably compared to the presented product; from this point of view an efficient research should contain questions about the customers' expectations, before he/she arrives to the touristic resort. The previous experiences, daily routine, things

considered indispensable to assure a reasonable comfort may differ considerably from individual to individual and at the same time can hinder a satisfactory response at the affective level from the consumer.

When it comes to balneal services, if the customer expects a functional improvement, one can take into consideration the physiotherapy component, which is situated at the base of the pyramid concerning means of treatment for each individual, being in a continuous process of adaptation (figure 2); if the customer needs to be refreshed and relaxed, the accent is placed on preferable means of relaxation/treatment (aromatherapy, balneal therapy, aromatherapy) on favorite products (bergamot, fir, cedar, eucalyptus, ginger, lavender, mint, vanilla, ylang – ylang ) specially for the consumer that has had this sort of therapy, this case turns into a mean of differentiating, but also a method of improvement for the brand identity.

An interesting approach to this component is the involvement of the consumer in a new and unique experience beyond his/ her daily routine (termal baths in the open-air, rafting and others).

Most of the times this relies on the creation of a microadventure with happy ending; also in this case one should take into consideration the experience and preferences of the individual.

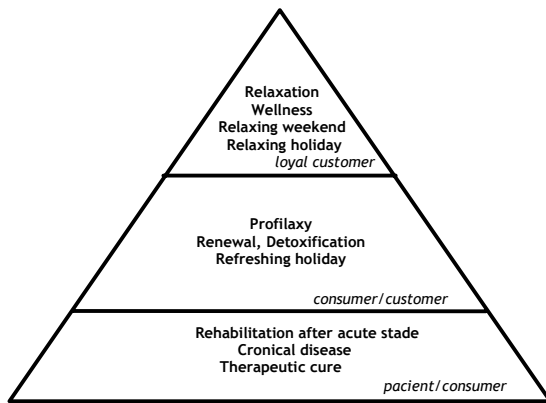


Figure 2. Main spa products and treatments

Source: adapted from Daniel Kulla, Slovak Experience in Upgrading of the Balneary Resorts with focus on Spa Piestany, Balneal forum, Sovata, Romania, 4-6 October 2007.

Any strategy of long-term customer retention has to take into consideration the quality of the product/touristic service, the brand components (visual, rational, cultural and emotional) can have various levels of quality and, taken in a certain order, can lead to a good systematization of customers' degrees of satisfaction (Stăncioiu, Pop, 2006).

The complexity of the concept of customer's satisfaction regarding balneal products is caused by heterogeneity of target-markets (figure 3), and the diversity of products/spa treatments (therapeutic treatment for a chronic patient, retrieve treatment, retrieve treatment for athletes, prophylactic treatment for a well informed customer, relaxation for wellness customers) as well as overlap products consumption for various uses (as an example the chronic patient can need both a therapeutic treatment and another for relaxation, from hydro-kinetic-therapy to socio-therapy).

While for the chronic patient the treatment efficiency is the most important source of satisfaction, for the "refresh/prophylaxis" consumer the satisfaction is best characterized by a combination between useful and pleasant, the "wellness" consumer's satisfaction represents the quality of the global balneal product (Gustaffson, Johnson, Roos, 2005).

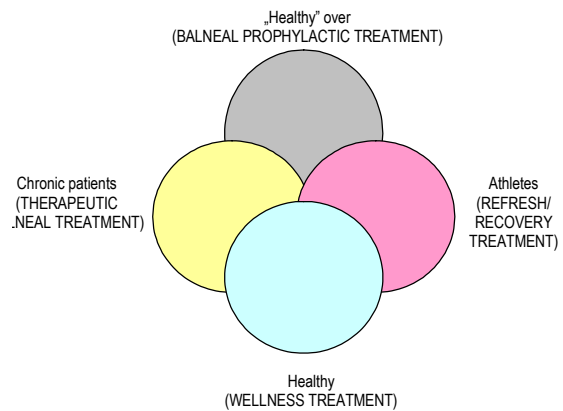


Figure 3. Target markets/products in balneal tourism

As a conclusion both in balneal tourism as well as other means the static vision of satisfaction as a mere state between consumer and producer is replaced and completed by the paradigm of cumulated satisfaction, the outcome of a process that can only take place if a stable customer is present, needing a certain product, brand, destination or company to satisfy certain wishes or needs (Schüler, Fuchs, 2004, Mithas, Krishnan, Fornell, 2005).

Starting with the conclusions above, the experiences of a customer regarding the use of a product, decomposed into dimensions or attributes which form the affective variable (to gain devoting clients) is the object of marketing research that gives

information regarding the customer's ways of perception of a product/lived experience.

## 2. Methodological sketch

In order to mould the effects of touristic services client satisfaction to diminish/consolidate his/her process of devotion, a methodological sketch of a questionnaire was established, structured in four sections, taking into consideration both the complexity of deciding to buy a certain touristic product, and also the complicated behavior of the consumer during his stay. The chosen sample, taking generally into consideration the characteristics of the services and of touristic services in special, is interested only in present consumers uses of service/touristic products.

Thus the major sources of information in choosing the service/touristic product have been identified in the first section. In the second section, according to Homburg and Stock (2001) theory starting from the identification of three factors (basic, wanted and of enthusiasm) next an evaluation of customer's satisfaction was achieved regarding components of touristic product accommodation: meals, lodging, treatment, entertainment and others, next a measurement of the level of customer's satisfaction, including the means of solving a reclamation (Bruhn, 2001). In the third section there were identified indicators that characterize the consumer's life style in general, at the same time establishing a correlation between the life style and level of content/satisfaction. The fourth section deals with the socio-demographical identification characteristics of touristic customers (Florescu et al., 1992, Dăculescu, 2006).

The results interpretation was made by using a bidimensional matrix, based on satisfaction indexes for all determinative factors/attributes, according to which the consumers can be classified:

- very satisfied consumers (9-10), for whom strategies of devotion would be accomplished;
- satisfied customers (7-8), for whom various strategies to avoid migration should be accomplished (offering of additional services);
- unsatisfied customers (5-6), for which the company should elaborate, according to case, strategies of product, price and personnel, but also actions with immediate results.

## 3. Conclusions

In order to make the research an empirical base for the investigations regarding customer's satisfaction, the questionnaire should be performed periodically, the majority of customers should be the stable clients of touristic services, and one should have a permanently actualized base of customers (Timm, Jones, 2005).

Since satisfaction is an specific experience and a subjective phenomenon which can be submitted to objective determinism, an efficient strategy of positioning the touristic product can influence positively the subjective perception of an individual in various levels (and/or in different components of products) to improve the dregree of customer's satisfaction.

The concept and the methodology mentioned above represent a new way of tackle in which the four perceptual elements (visual, rational, cultural and emotional) are

evaluated simultaneously and complementary, to achieve the best level of customer's satisfaction.

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