

10th International Strategic Management Conference

Components of experiential value: Case of hospitality industry

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Abstract

Customer experience is acknowledged as a dominant objective for organizational strategy, affecting sustainable differentiation from competition. However concerning planning, application and measurement of experiences literature has failed to create a universal continuum. This study based on a qualitative inquiry with 22 upscale hotel managers, uses the value chain concept in order to determine the activities affecting customers' experiential value for services. Interviews with managers were content analyzed and compared with relevant literature before experiential value creating activities were grouped under human resources, technology, procurement & strategic alliances, and physical design.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the International Strategic Management Conference.

Keywords: Value chain, Experiential value, Customer experience, Guest experience

1. Introduction

The competitive advantage of companies is shifting from value and quality statements to experiences they offer to customers. Experiences became a dominant factor affecting differentiation from competition. Customer experiences do not only differentiate the company from its competitors but also create loyal customers that spread positive word of mouth (Walls et al., 2011). This fact is acknowledged in the marketing and strategy literature, however concerning planning, application and measurement of

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experiences literature has failed to create a universal continuum. Although the importance of customer experiences has been recognized there is little research on how to create, manage and measure experiential value. The early value propositions which included problem solving, rational decision making theories have shifted to a more hedonic, emotional, esthetic and symbolic value definitions (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

While commodities are fungible, goods tangible and services intangible, experiences are memorable (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Similarly one can analyze the characteristics of a product from three different perspectives, the technical characteristics are those about the physical product, service characteristics are about what it does and experience characteristics are about what is sensed and remembered (Sorensen, 2004). The shared characteristic of a positive customer experience is that it is unique (personal, surprising, distinct from regular, involving, customized), memorable (remembered for a while) and shared with others (positive word of mouth). Adaptation of experiences to organizational strategy therefore is critical. However adopting a fuzzy concept that cannot be defined, measured and managed is a tough mission. There is unfortunately a lack of structured systematic approach to the concept of experiences.

Another important element discussed for organizational success is the value chain activities (Porter, 1985). Different studies have expressed that customer experiences are actually value propositions. Therefore there needs to be a connection between value chain elements and customer experiences. A substantial number of research argued that supplementary measures are needed to value chain approach in order to effectively monitor customer experience (e.g. Otto and Ritchie, 1996). This study is designed to analyze which value chain activities have the greatest impact on customer experience to create an experiential value for customers. The paper first discusses customer experience and its relation with value theory. Then experiential value for hospitality services are discussed in the framework of factors found after a qualitative study.

2. Literature Review

The importance of experiences emerged from the commodization of services and products through increased competition. Pine and Gilmore (1999) argue that experiences are distinct economic offerings just like products and services and influence customers' perception of value (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Cetin & Istanbulu, 2013). Thus understanding of value creation has been changing; it is shifting from product centric financial perspective into a more experience oriented view (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The financial power, cost structure, distribution channel dominance, even physical quality are losing their attractiveness for long-term organizational success in today's dynamic, customer dominant markets (Shaw & Ivens, 2005). There is an urgent need to redefine the concept of value and its components on the basis of customer experiences in order to align the experience concept with organizational strategy. The experience oriented strategy should incorporate customization rather than standardization, embrace empathy instead of pure rational logic and use imagination more than stark information.

Literature on customer value has so far failed to determine what a unique experience is, what makes it valuable, how to adopt it to organizational strategy, which activities need special attention, why some companies were successful in doing it and how to continue doing it? The value chain elements proposed in this study can guide service firms to better serve clients and increase their experiential value created through interaction of various activities offered in this research. Tourism and hospitality services can be considered as a good domain to study experiences since tourism is basically a human experience (Gunn,

1988) Travellers dream about a unique vacation that would be remembered and worth sharing with others (Hyde & Harman, 2011). This asserts that tourists need to have unique, memorable, engaging and personal experiences in the hotel, surroundings and other organizations representing the tourism system (Aksu et al., 2010).

The value theory is based on the fact that in order to be successful, organizations should offer as much added value to customers as possible. There are different definitions of value but the relevant literature rarely addresses to the components of experiential value. The traditional value concept is defined as the trade-off between quality and price which is also referred to as utilitarian or functional value (Dodds & Monroe, 1985). On the other hand experiential value is related to emotions and interactions with the product and service that are unique and memorable rather than transactional in nature (Wu & Liang, 2009). Therefore in postmodern tourism industry, the value tourists receive can be maximized by offering as much personal and memorable experiences as possible. After all tourists travel in order to experience something new, different and novel (Cohen, 1972; Uriely, 2005). Tourists want to compensate their boring lives through exposure to others and involvement with adventurous, foreign, ancient or spectacular. Tourism facilities should be able to offer such experiences. Thus the central product of tourism activity is the creation of experiences (Sternberg, 1997) and examining the experiential value in tourism is an important issue with practical significance.

According to Pine and Gilmore (1999) experiences have an economic value. LaSalle and Britton (2003) also stated that the value extracted from experience is a result of interaction between customers, products, services, brands and other stakeholders. Marketing messages that include experiential clues are found to be more effective than messages that carry purely functional clues (Schmitt, 1999). Prahalad and Ramasway (2004) also state that customer value is centred around the customer experience. According to Holbrook (1999) customer value includes other items besides efficiency; these are excellence, status, esteem, play, aesthetics, ethic and spiritual benefits. Wu and Liang (2009) also made a distinction between functional value and experiential value and proposed physical environment, interactions with employees and other customers as determinants of experiential value. They also found a significant correlation between experiential value and customer satisfaction. Mathwick et al. (2002) offered four dimensions of experiential value as service excellence, playfulness, aesthetics and consumer return on investment. Various other studies have investigated experiential value and found a positive effect of customer experience on desired customer behaviours (satisfaction, loyalty and recommendation) (e.g. Bilgihan et al., 2013; Keng et al., 2007; Mathwick et al., 2002; Reinus & Fredman, 2007; Shieh & Cheng, 2007). However none of these studies exhibit the relationship between experiential value and value chain model.

The challenge of customer experience for organizations is that it cannot be assessed through traditional commercial value chain elements designed for commodities. The traditional value chain is focused on efficiency and considers consumers as rational decision makers (*homoeconomicus*). This perspective is not very suitable with tourism where travelers become emotional deciders. Because most services in tourism are commodized, the real value that differentiates companies from each other lies in creation of experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993). This framework has various implications for both researchers and practitioners. Firstly this is an alternative tool to evaluate the value offered to clients. Especially for service firms experiential value is a significant factor for success. Second the framework is based on managers' point of view who might provide a bigger picture because of their expertise and practical knowledge. Finally this study is based on a phenomenological approach where the extant literature review

and in-depth interviews are used to reveal dimensions of experiential value rather than a quantitative survey method where dimensions are dictated to respondents.

3. Methodology

This study after the literature review and empirical field research aims to explore organizational tools for creating experiential value in hospitality industry. In order to explore hospitality experiences, a qualitative technique was chosen. Based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with upscale hotel managers, this paper tries to identify various value chain elements that are used by managers to create customer experiences. The screening criteria used for selection of informants was rack rate (the price of the room charged for walk in guests without reservations) their hotels charge. Although ADR (average daily room rate) is regarded as a better indicator of being an upscale hotel, ADR might be considered as sensitive information by facilities. Therefore rack rates (which are disclosed public) are used to determine suitability of the facility and a price above 150 USD was selected as minimum. This process is expected to improve homogeneity and external validity of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The open-ended questions used in the interview were created based on extant literature and two expert sessions with four hotel managers and four travelers. The interview questions were than pilot tested on two managers in order to increase validity of questions asked before the final version of the instrument was created. Although questions also included facility and personal information, main focus was creation of guest experiences. Guest experience questions included the following;

- 1- Can you talk about the experiences you desire to create for your guests? What do you think your guests would remember and share with others after they return home?
- 2- What do you think about the value of those experiences? What makes your products and services different than others?
- 3- What are the organizational tools and resources do you think of value to create customer experiences?

Total number of informants depends on the nature of the study however between one and ten are recommended (Becker, 1986). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), it is advised that researchers should continue data collection until a saturation occurs. In the case of this study after interviewing 22 managers, authors agreed on data saturation and additional interviews would provide limited improvement in the variety of responses. Although some follow-up and probing questions were asked, the researchers avoided leading respondents. Informants were considered as coresearchers rather than subjects (Seamon, 1979) because managers are experienced in the area of study and their thoughts establish the main framework (Crouch et al., 2001). This process encouraged respondents to elaborate their thoughts and revealed underlying perspectives of the managers.

All interviews were conducted in hotels by appointment, between June – July 2013. Interviews took 35 to 65 minutes; they were electronically recorded and transcribed verbatim within the same day by two of the authors. Observations for each interview were also noted. A total of 102 pages of data were created. Transcriptions and field notes were than read by each author, the tools and resources mentioned by different managers are singled out, color coded and grouped under various dimensions (Creswell, 2007). This phenomenological process revealed the final framework of experiential value.

After this grouping process, a total of 45 factors were extracted as organizational tools and resources. Transcripts and observations were then re-read and items were grouped under frequently mentioned broader content related categories. Finally 45 dimensions were grouped under four main themes that cover

all individual activities. This qualitative method is referred to as content analysis and used to analyze and explain concepts that are not well defined in literature or when the phenomena is novel to the area of study (Cozby, 2004).

The findings were then compared with previous literature in order to validate the findings and construct conceptual framework. Based on the literature some items were incorporated under more exhaustive categories. For example *employee responsiveness* (promptness, willingness to serve) was merged under *social interactions with employees* which was then grouped under *human resources* dimension. This inductive process ensured dimensions to be relevant with literature and improved the validity of items proposed. The final framework is an outcome of content analysed and categorized data from transcriptions (inductive analysis) and existing body of knowledge (deductive analysis) (Gummerson, 2000). The findings of the research are discussed in the next section.

4. Findings

The objective of the study was to analyse experiential value as an emerging concept through interviewing upscale hotel managers. Some personal and facility related questions were also asked. As mentioned earlier managers might be considered as an important source of knowledge based on their experience and position they hold. The informants had 16 years of average experience in the hospitality industry. Two of them were also owners of their hotels. Seven of the facilities were five star hotels, there were ten four star hotels and the rest were boutique hotels. Four and five star hotels had a balanced volume of leisure and business travellers. However for boutique hotels, which are located at the historic centre, the client base naturally comprised of mainly leisure travellers.

All managers acknowledged *creating positive guest experiences* as one of the important objectives of their operation. Based on content analysis procedures and previous literature, the underlying organizational resources affecting experiential value were identified as *human resources*, *technology*, *procurement and strategic alliances*, and *physical design* of consumption environment as shown on figure 1. These factors are described in the following sections with quotations from interviews as well as reinforcements from the literature.

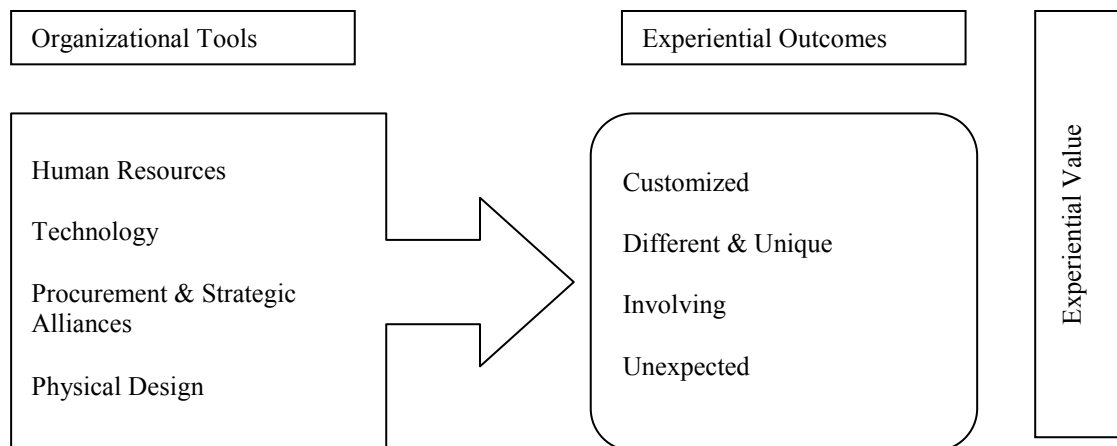


Fig. 1. Experiential Value Activities

4.1. Human resources

Customers judge their experiences based on the performance they perceive on customer touch points. Interactions with employees create a relational value, which can be considered as an investment from customers' side. The level of customization and customer involvement very much depends on the quality of social interaction within service environment (servicescape). All employees should also understand the experiential value organization is trying to create because customers inevitably interact with various employees during their stay. When employees know the experiences they need to create they would better decide on what to do in case of conflicting issues. For example Ritz Carlton employees are empowered to spend up to 2000 USD in order to satisfy customers (Michelli, 2008). Human resource activities including hiring, training, motivating, empowerment and retaining employees are mentioned as critical factors of experiential value by most managers. For example H14[†] said "We are very picky when it comes to recruiting. We scan and interview a large number of candidates before we hire."

Human resources are an important component of customer experience in service organizations (Emir & Kozak, 2011). In order to make experiences as a part of the organizational strategy rather than exceptional events created by few employees in rare situations, the staff should also be trained, motivated, empowered and compensated based on customer experience objectives. Experiences are performance oriented; they require a coordinated team work from all employees in the organization (Berry, 1995). The feedback of employees is also critical as most customers refrain from making a formal complaint. Especially the role of frontline employees to provide feedback for design of experiences is crucial. It should also be noted that positive experiences (happy customers), increase employee morale which in turn improves customer experiences creating a vicious self-reinforcing cycle (Smilansky, 2009).

Various problems concerning human relations mentioned by participants are stated below:

Selection: Employees should be selected on their attitudes and personality rather than solely on their industry experience and technical skills. Creativity and interpersonal communication skills are also crucial in creating experiences.

Training: Experiences should be integrated with the training program as well as organizational objectives. Employees need to know the importance of their role in creation of desired experiences.

Work Environment: Employees need to be equipped with necessary resources, equipment, technology and time to create positive experience.

Compensation: Employees should be rewarded not only based on their financial performance but also on their performance on creating customer experience. It should be acknowledged that a large percentage of the work time in hospitality services is spend on activities that are not mentioned in job descriptions and under responsibilities of employees. For example sales managers use average time spent per lead as one of the criteria on performance evaluation of sales staff, which probably undermines the creation of a real relationship and a positive customer experience.

Empowerment: Employees should be empowered and independent after making sure they are trained to make decisions needed to create desired experiences. One of the barriers to creation of experiences is organizational policies and rules that limit employees to behave in a certain way. Employees should be given authority to decide on corrective action without consulting to superiors when needed.

[†] Respondents were given pseudonyms, to protect their anonymity.

Turnover: The employee turnover should be minimized to keep the organizational memory on customers' personal information and their experiences.

Another suggestion (H15) is creation of a position responsible for customer experience, this department will act like the customer himself and correct issues that prevent desired experiences to occur and improve overall customer experience.

4.2. Technology

Besides providing efficiency in operations, technology is used in marketing of products and services as well. Technology can also be utilized to mass customize services. Amazon.com is an example for organizations that customize their services using technology. Amazon is able to create the content of its internet site, customized based on cookies. A very important fact is that experiences are personal and organizations should know their customers before trying to create an experiential value. Technology is a useful tool in converting customer data into valuable information as well as creating organizational memory and customizing services. Technology can also be utilized to support employees in their efforts to create an experience. One of the 5 star hotel managers (H3) stated that their property management system (PMS) use the same data base with the hotel phone system (pbx) so that when a call is being made from a room, the operator software screen shows the name and nationality of the customer so that staff would handle the call accordingly. Previous transactions, requests, comments and complaints are important information to customize the service based on desired experiences. Technology provides tools to organize and disseminate these experience oriented information among employees (Bilgihan et al., 2014).

Another characteristic of customer experience is that it is unique and different; technology is one of the tools to facilitate creation of a unique service. Managers also believe that technology does not have to be state of the art, it should just be aligned with experience strategy. Over dependence on technology can also undermine social interactions. Moreover technology can easily be copied in short term and should not be considered as a long term competitive advantage.

For example CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems today used by many firms are designed to increase and manipulate usage rather than improve customer experiences. Loyalty cards as a major CRM tool are used to offer financial benefits rather than create a society and emotional bonds with customers. CRM is an opportunity to know more about customers, likes, dislikes, personal choices rather than a technology used to exploit clients. Therefore the characteristics and personality of the customers are more important than the transactions they make, remembering the hobbies of customers might be more useful than the volume of customers business for an employee trying to create an experience.

4.3. Procurement & strategic alliances

Various components of external influence might affect experiential value, the quality of ingredients of food served in hotel restaurant, the promptness of airport transfer vehicle is a part of customers overall experience although they are outsourced most of the time. Another important factor mentioned by some managers is the distribution channel under this dimension. Customers are a part of the product in services; the customer base is also used as a clue to judge the level of service. The distribution channel should be designed and monitored based on positioning of service (Yilmaz & Bititci, 2006). Some market segments might not get along well in a service setting because of different characteristics (e.g. teens vs families) and cultural backgrounds. The customers in the consumption environment might also affect experiential value derived from services. When talking about the impact of other customers in service environment on experience H20 said "We select our business partners based on their clientele, their customers should be

suitable with our existing target. You cannot be everything for everyone if you desire to create a personal experience.”

4.4. *Physical design*

Various authors mentioned importance of sensory clues (tangible, atmospherics) in the consumption environment (Yuksel, 2009). Sensory data are important in creation of experiential value (e.g. Schmitt, 1999). Aesthetic clues, ambiance, design, colours, odour, aroma, decoration, signage, art works, the music played are all part of the experience. For example one boutique hotel manager (H17) mentioned that “We name our rooms after famous Turkish poets and supply information about the poet in room as well as hang one of his poems on the room door. Customers value works and stories of local artists.” Another five star hotel manager (H2) talked about the importance of background music and other generally neglected ambiance clues that actually matter. The physical environment represents the hygiene factor for customers, they expect a certain level of design; without a suitable atmosphere creating positive customer experience is not possible.

5. Conclusion

The value chain model represents a movement from commodity to product and from product to service however it does not effectively define the movement from service to experience. The current value chain model is centered on the product and service rather than the customers. Differentiation solely based on physical features and prices of products and services are no more successful tools for long-term profits without adaption of experiences to organizational strategy. Dell computers learned the importance of customer experiences in the hard way, they admitted that they were too much focused on price and logistics side of the business and neglected customer experiences before they were bought by HP in 2007. The change can also be depicted by Southwest Airlines as a service firm which is frequently used by the strategy literature (Mintzberg, 1998). Literature mentions low prices, distribution and cost structure of Southwest as the main reasons for their success however role of empowered and motivated employees and baggage handling technology they use are rarely mentioned.

Therefore the paper proposes a framework to create value from the customer experience point of view. The proposed template is a way to understand how experience oriented firms can use their activities to differentiate in the experience dominant markets such as hospitality industry. By examining how successful experience oriented firms differentiate their value, the sources of experience can be better understood.

This study identified four organizational activities as main tools to create unique, engaging and customized experiences. It should also be mentioned that none of the activities are sufficient by themselves to create a desired experience, these activities should be aligned to create an overall experiential value. For instance the internet site design (technology) should be integrated with physical design of the facility as well as the other organizations that the hotel cooperates (procurement & external cooperation). The allocation of resources should also be designed accordingly. If the speed of computer is not able to catch-up with an efficient front office clerk trying to check-out a guest who is in a hurry, than an opportunity to create a positive experience is lost. Creating the experiential value is dependent upon an organization wide effort and use of common resources such as manpower. The IT department (technology) in the hotel should be able to have time and motivation to spend on (human resources) customers personal problems (Trying to fix a business traveller’s laptop that infected a serious virus in order to make it work again for his same day presentation (H9)).

One should also acknowledge that the functional value is a given to create the experiential value. That is to say an efficient operation for example is a hygiene factor whereas a good customer interaction is the motivator for experiential value. Therefore functional value supports experiential value although functional value is not sufficient in itself to create loyal clients. The functional value activities should be (re)designed based on experiential value. For example organizational culture and strategy as well as financial resources (firm infra-structure) should comply with desired customer experience objectives.

Another general finding that should be mentioned is that the experiential value is more focused on customer touch points. Importance of these interaction points have been acknowledged as moments of truth by various authors (e.g. Borucki & Burke, 1999; Carlzon, 1987; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). Which resources are more valuable to create experiences, what makes a distinct experience, which experience is hard to imitate or difficult to substitute elsewhere are other research questions that might be explored further in future studies.

The study of organizational activities as determinants of customers' experiential value has important implications for tourism industry and service design. The results of this study would be able to provide both scholars and practitioners a better understanding of factors effecting customer experiences and their relation to existing value theory. This knowledge would be used to adapt organizational structure, human resources and marketing strategies in creation and management of experiences as an output. Finally the proposed framework for experiential value might also be further developed to include other services besides hospitality.

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