



## Creating memorable service experiences to hotel senior guests

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### Abstract

#### **Purpose of the paper**

this paper aims to identify what kind of needs managers hotels should satisfy in order to generate guest delight.

#### **Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative approach. Since delightful experiences are more likely to be retained in consumers' memories, based on the critical incident technique, the positive memorable experiences (i.e. delightful experiences) of some senior hotel guests are collected and analyzed.

#### **Main findings**

Four main types of needs emerge which, when satisfied, determine customer delight and memorable hotel experiences. These needs include learning, authenticity, uniqueness and emotion.

#### **Practical implication**

Hotel managers must learn how to manage the emotional component of their guests' experiences and apply the same rigor used in the management of other hotel products and services. The senior market is highly heterogeneous; hotel managers should develop specific marketing strategies to deliver memorable experiences to their specific target. Offering the same service attributes to all senior guests will not prove a successful strategy because attributes will be perceived differently by different customers.

#### **Originality/value**

To study how to delight hotel guests is not new in service and hospitality literature but, at the best of our knowledge, limited attention has been paid to the seniors' market.

#### **Keywords**

Senior tourists' needs; guest delight; learning; authenticity; emotion; uniqueness

## 1. Introduction

In today's competitive environment, delighting customers is a strategy very paramount for companies of any industry (e.g., Kim and Mattila, 2013) because it creates memorable consumption and service experiences (Schmitt, 1999; Vanhamme, 2008). To delight customers, companies must not only satisfy customers, i.e. meet their needs and wants, but also exceed their expectations (Oliver et al., 1997). by generating a profoundly positive emotional response (Zeithaml et al., 2008) to a pleasant surprise and joy (e.g., Oliver et al., 1997).

This strategy is source of competitive advantage also in the hospitality industry (e.g. Torres and Kline, 2006). Hotels especially strive to provide their guests with positive service experiences and achieve high level of customer satisfaction (Magnini et al., 2011).

For hotel managers it is important understanding what factors and activities can generate an emotional state for surprise and joy and, then, promote guests delight. In other words, managers need to establish what attributes unexpectedly affect guests (Yang, 2011) to delight them. However, it is not important to focus on specific hotel attributes because people hold different expectations and needs which modify on the basis of different elements such as age, lifestyle, and travel opportunities. Accordingly, providing hotel managers with a list of attributes is few useful. Understanding guests needs delighting them should be more significant because human needs are stages of deprivation perceived by people.

Especially focusing on senior guests' delight is interesting, given that the seniors market is an attractive target for the tourism industry (Shoemaker, 2000) due to its size, growth potential and, additionally, the potential financial resources, free time and active lifestyles of seniors (particularly as compared to other demographics of society).

This study focuses on attributes of hotels that satisfy and delight senior guests in order to identify needs of senior guests being met by these attributes. To this end, a qualitative research was conducted among Italian senior tourists. We especially identified some needs of senior guests on the basis of their memorable stories during the hotel stays.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *Customer delight and memorable service experiences*

A number of definitions of customer delight are provided in literature. Fundamentally, it is understood in the three following manners (Keiningham and Vavra, 2001; Vanhamme, 2008; Kim and Mattila, 2013): a) as excitation (surprise or excitement) or a positive feeling (great pleasure, joyful satisfaction or happiness) perceived by customer, b) higher level of customer satisfaction, and c) service providers' skill for exceeding customers' expectations.

Regardless of the definition considered, to delight customers service organizations have to be able to respond to customer needs by unexpectedly increasing performance levels, by providing superior quality in terms of unexpected attention and service features during the service encounters, as well as by creating yet a "wow" exclamation (e.g., Chandler 1989). This happens when companies provide attributes beyond their customer's expectations, by satisfying their unexpected (or 'attractive') needs (Kano et al., 1984). Interestingly, certain service attributes can meet

expectations and needs of customers that they themselves are not aware they hold. If these service attributes create a positive surprise or feelings of pleasure or joy, customers are also delighted.

In this study we propose that customer delight sets the basis to the creation of memorable service experiences. Previous literature has well recognized the importance of delivering memorable (service) experiences (Lehto et al., 2004; Wirtz et al., 2003). by also studying both memorable tourist experiences (e.g., Tung and Ritchie, 2011; Kim et al., 2012a,b; Kim, 2014) and the key role of memorable tourist experience in the development of revisit intentions (Sugathan and Kumar, 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). Tung and Ritchie (2011) explored the essence of memorable experiences (MEs) from a psychological standpoint by highlighting four key dimensions of MEs: affect, expectations, consequentiality and recollection. In addition, Kim et al. (2012a,b) developed the MTE scale (MTES) after cross-referencing the literature of memory with that of tourism experiences. Kim (2014) suggested that memorable tourists experiences (MTE) includes seven dimensions (i.e. hedonism, refreshment, social interaction and local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty) and proposed a scale of destination attributes affecting MTE. Kim (2018) further investigated the mediating roles of satisfaction and destination image in the relation between MTE and customers' loyalty, and identified 10 dimensions affecting MTE (local culture, variety of activities, hospitality, infrastructure, environment management, accessibility, quality of service, physiography, place attachment and superstructure).

## 2.2. Customer delight in the hotel context

In today's competitive, dynamic and overcrowded market, it is crucial for hotels to move beyond simply satisfying guests to delighting them (Goswami and Sarma, 2011).

While customers satisfaction is more related to cognitive evaluations, customers delight is highly influenced by affective evaluations (Lee and Park, 2019).

Given that leaving guests 'simply satisfied' will not result in a hotel being preferred or winning customer loyalty over time, and that the hotel service be offered in an attractive way (e.g., Baccarani et al., 2010; Goswami and Sarma, 2011), hotel manager should include with the service a surprise element or something that makes the whole service experience memorable. Previous research (e.g., Lynch, 1993; Heung, 2000; Mohsin and Lockyer, 2010) identified the following attributes as important to seniors guests: cleanliness, convenience of location, price, safety and security, small food portions and value for money (e.g. Ramanathan, 2012; Caber and Albayrak, 2014).

Little significant contributions on guest delight at hotels have been published (Magnini et al., 2011; Goswami and Sarma, 2011). Goswami and Sarma (2011) especially identified the following factors constituting guest delight in hotels: hygiene of food and beverage, welcoming atmosphere in the hotel, cleanliness and tidiness of the hotel, cleanliness of the room, security of belongings including valuables inside the room, and responsible security personnel.

More recently, Lee and Park (2019) adapted Schmitt et al. (1999) scale of experiences to show the relation between customer delight and hotel loyalty. Affective experience, that is supposed to generate customer delight, comprised 3 items: positive thoughts, pleasure and pride.

Further complicating this debate is the lack of research on what hotel attributes might delight senior guests and the specific needs of senior guests being met by these attributes. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap in the literature, given that drivers of customer delight depend in part on the customer segment being served (Fuller and Matzler, 2008).

## 3. Methodology

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### 3.1. Context of the study: senior tourists in Italy

Despite the limitations of using chronological age to define seniors (Sudbury and Simcock, 2009), the age of 50 has commonly been selected as the commencing criterion to define older adults (e.g., Sudbury and Simcock, 2009; Chen et al., 2013). Older adults can be classified into pre-seniors or prospective seniors (aged 50–64) and seniors (aged 65 and over) (Chen et al., 2013; Vigolo and Confente, 2013). According to the European Commission (2012), Europeans aged 65 years and over spent one-third more on tourism in 2011 than in 2006. Similarly, between 2006 and 2011, during the economic crisis, the number of tourists dropped in all age groups, excepting the 65 years and over age group. Specifically, the 65 years and over age group made 29 per cent more trips and had 23 per cent more overnight stays in 2011 than in 2006. In Italy, where the senior population will be 25 per cent of the total population by 2030 (European Commission, 2012), senior tourists are under close scrutiny. In 2016, one out of 4 Italian elderly persons had at least one overnight trip (European Commission, 2017). In Italy seniors over 60 years of age equate to approximately 12.5 million people, including low-income retired seniors (50 per cent), still-working medium-income seniors and wealthy seniors (30 per cent). A more recent study conducted by Europcar-Doxa (2014) showed that senior tourists are travelling with increasing frequently, are interested in tailor-made services and are interested in luxury travel. Accordingly, understanding what drives satisfaction among senior guests at hotels is very important.

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

This study adopted a qualitative approach based on McCracken's (1988) long interview technique to collect data. Previous research demonstrated that people tend to process and store information as stories rather than using item-by-item categories (Adaval and Wyer, 1998).

A 'purposive' sample of informants was selected. Prospective informants were approached and pre-screened with general questions about their travel experience and whether they would be willing to participate in a long interview. Respondents needed to have experienced a hotel stay at least twice in the previous 12 months.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts became the subject of a series of iterative coding and analysis. The attractive quality theory (Kano et al., 1984) was used to explore what hotel attributes created surprise or aroused pleasure in senior guests. Subsequently, the types of needs met by these attributes were identified by means of Qualitative Solutions and Research (QSR) NVivo 11 software. In this regard, the transcribed interviews were read and initial nodes were constructed. These nodes were compared to create final nodes that were clustered in more general analytical themes (i.e., needs), which were used for the analysis.

## 4. Results

The respondents were 26 senior consumers ages between 60 and 80 years old. Seventeen were retired and 9 still working. Each had different travel experiences, but had stayed in hotels at least twice in the past 12 months.

From the data, four types of needs emerged which, when satisfied, determined customer delight and memorable service experience. These needs are: need for learning, authenticity, uniqueness and emotion.

### **Need for learning**

Several customers connected the memorability of the service experience to a learning process or a learning outcome. While narrating a memorable experience that produced customer delight, individuals used expressions such “I learned/they showed me how/they explained/teaching”. More specifically, learning can include the development of practical skills, as well as the deepening of theoretical knowledge. For example, Francesco thus described his practical cooking experience at the hotel restaurant:

“There was a two-Michelin-star chef teaching us how to prepare high cuisine recipes! We were invited in the hotel’s restaurant and we prepared our own lunch. I love cooking and that was one of the most stimulating experiences ever” (Francesco).

### **Need for authenticity**

From the interviews, some reported memorable experiences were closely related to elements that respondents perceived as typical of a certain context. Some recurrent expressions include (or can be semantically connected to) “typical/local/authentic”. Such elements could refer, for example, to handicrafts or natural resources of the environment. Perceived authenticity of products, services and situations increased customer delights to a level that those experiences became something worth remembering.

### **Need for uniqueness**

Some of the respondents recalled a memorable experience based on the perceived uniqueness of the service experience. Uniqueness is not to be intended here in absolute terms as something that the service provider has never done before, but rather as something that has been distinctively created for a certain customer in a specific situation. Although it entails a degree of customization, the concept of uniqueness goes beyond the notion of “tailor made” services because it includes an element of surprise.

### **Need for emotion**

Lastly, from the interviews it emerged that some participants remember most favourably those service experience which generated overwhelming positive emotions. The sources of the emotions able to generate delight may vary from individual to individual and include for example events organised by the hotel in which customers were actively involved:

“We were lodging on a wild camp (...) The guests were staying in private secluded lodges. The camp managers invited us on an excursion in the bush before dinner to look out for scorpions. I was quite scared, but I joined anyway. It was dark, and we were all very silent and at a certain point we saw a light coming from the bush. To my greatest surprise, we found that the hotel had organised a wild dinner in the bush for all the guests! There was a long table, chairs with blankets, and torches. It was such a magical atmosphere, I will never forget it” (Simone).

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

Results indicate that four different needs determine customer delight, when satisfied, i.e. need for learning, authenticity, uniqueness and emotions. Furthermore, these needs determine memorable hotel experiences of senior tourists.

Related to the seven dimensions that Kim (2014) suggested for a memorable tourist experience (i.e. hedonism, refreshment, social interaction and local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty), the current study supported only four of them. In fact, the four needs,



i.e. need for learning, authenticity, uniqueness and emotions, could be associated with four dimensions of MTEs, i.e. knowledge, social interaction and local culture, novelty and hedonism. In the interviews, tourists did not explain the relevant effect of refreshment, meaningfulness and involvement dimension in their memorable experience.

This study outlines that, to delight senior guests in hotels, it is necessary to surprise them by providing unexpected positive attributes. Hotels can evoke positive emotions that contribute to the creation of a memorable hotel experience and customer delight (Tung and Ritchie, 2011).

Accordingly, hotel managers must learn how to manage the emotional component of their guests' experiences and apply the same rigor used in the management of other hotel products and services (see Berry et al., 2002).

Hotel managers must also learn about the marketing strategy of presenting specific characteristics to travellers choosing a hotel. Offering the same hotel attributes to all senior guests will not prove a successful strategy because attributes will be perceived differently by different customers.

This study has extended the literature on customer delight in the hospitality industry, with a specific focus on senior tourists. Previous studies on guest 'delight' have not specifically considered senior guests (e.g., Lynch, 1993; Goswami and Sarma, 2011). Further, while previous research on guest 'delight' showed that hotel attributes create delight (e.g., Wei et al., 1999; Caber and Albayrak, 2014), this paper has specifically addressed the needs to which such attributes respond, and has made a significant step towards understanding the desire of customers for 'attractive' attributes.

The choice of the sampling, the selection of respondents and the fact that this work exclusively considers Italian senior guests means further study is required. Future research should extend the analysis by considering the perspective of a larger sample and highlighting possible differences between the needs and expectations of male versus female senior guests.

Undertaking an analysis of the functional and hedonic elements of hotel service that affect hotel selection would also be an interesting area for further research. In addition, this study is based on an analysis of hotel attributes in the post-purchase phase. Further research should thus be conducted to investigate what attributes affect choice of hotel in the pre-purchase phase. Finally, it would be interesting to examine how the Internet affects the choices of senior guests in selecting and booking hotel accommodation.

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