TOURISTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TOUR GUIDES IN VISITING TAIWAN

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Abstract

It is evident that tour guides play a vital role in linking the tourists with their destination. They bridge the gap brought by cultural differences and language barrier, which apparently hinders the ability of tourists to enjoy their experience. In this regard, the objective of this study is to examine the qualities that a great tour manager needs to possess in order to offer excellent travel experience. Several studies reveal that the role of a tour guide is critical in achieving the overall tourism experience. To affirm this hypothesis, the research used fifteen case studies to scrutinize the experience of Mainland China tourists in Taiwan. Among the good qualities identified from the cases studies that a tour manager should possess include
but not limited to professionalism, knowledgeable, enthusiastic about the job, a sense of responsibility and patience. The manager also needs to be humorous, have the ability to handle emergency, and be attentive to guests.

Keywords: Tour Guide, Tourist Perception, Travel Experience, Travel Quality, Tourism Bureau, Taiwan (R.O.C)

Introduction

Background of the Study

Over the past few years, there has been a rapid growth in outbound tours among the Asian countries. According to Wang, Jao, Chan, & Chung (2010), the dramatic growth as well as the rising income levels in the regions is fuelling this increase. Outbound travel in this region mainly comprise of group package tour or all-inclusive travel. Apparently, Asian tourists are the leaders in this type of packages much more than their western tourist counterparts (Wong & Lee, 2012). Novice explorers and thus the need of a tour guide characterize this organized mass tour. The service industry particularly in tourism is highly dependent on contact employees, who are familiar with the destination and thus highly influence the service quality as perceived by customers (Wang, Hsieh, & Chen, 2002). In this regard, international and local tourism industries at many destinations are increasingly recognizing the role played by tour guides.

Tour guides plays an essential role in linking the host destination and its visitors.

Tour guiding profession is the core of the tourism industry, and helps to make the industry attractive and profitable. According to Ap & Wong (2001), the guides are the front-line employees, who bear the responsibility of overall impression and satisfaction of the services offered at any destination. Although the form and condition of destinations are essential, it is the quality of service offered that defines customer experience. To achieve these tremendous results, tour guiding can be viewed in three broad perspectives. From the tourist perspective, the guides serve as pathfinders, tour leaders, as well as mentors. From the investors’ perspectives, they serve as spokespersons that represent the image and reputation of the company. Lastly, from the viewpoint of host destination, tour guides are interpreters that assist to deduce sense of the culture and heritage of the destination (Mak, Wong, & Chang, 2011).

The functions of a tour guide make tour guiding to assume various definitions. Nonetheless, there is an internationally accepted definition provided by the International Association of Tour Managers and the European Federation of Tourist Guide Association. It defines a tour guide is a person who “guide groups or individual visitors
from abroad or from the home country around the monument, sites and museums of a city or region; to interpret in an inspiring and entertaining manner, in language of the visitor's choice, the culture and natural heritage and environment” (Ap & Wong, 2001). From the definition, it is clear that the guides have the ability to transform the tourists’ visit from just a tour to an experience. This major discovery is what the Taiwan government is relying on to attracts tons of tourists in to the country, particularly from the mainland China.

**Problem Statement**

Cultural differences as well as language barrier are key components that may hinder the inspiration and entertainment of a tourist when visiting a particular destination. This is particularly devastating when visiting a destination like Taiwan, which is cupped with rich and diverse culture and heritage. Nonetheless, it seems that the influence of a great tour manager can overturn things. The influence usually improves the tourists’ experience, feelings, and attitude toward the destination, during their travel time and thereafter. Using related case studies, the research will examine the qualities possessed by great tour managers, which agencies and travel business related industry understand and utilize to ensure there is quality travel experience. This not only assists in expanding the market but also promoting the culture and heritage of the destination.

**Objective of the Study**

The major objective of this study is to examine the qualities that a great tour manager needs to possess in order to offer excellent travel experience. To be able to achieve this objective, the following specific objectives will guide the study:

- To search for the balance between commercial needs of tour operators and their experiential desires.
- To understand how the various forms of tourism determines the quality of a tour operator.
- To determine ways to reduce the response time taken by tour operators to deal with tourists’ complaints.

**Research Questions**

1. What really matters of a great tour manager for offering an excellent travel experience?
2. Are good qualities in tour management naturally acquired or learned at school?
3. What knowledge and professional attitude do a great tour manager needs to possess?
4. What are the physical characteristics that a good tour operator needs to have?

Significance of the Study

Identifying the qualities of a great tour manager will increase the quality of services offered to tourist visiting a particular destination. To start with, travel agencies and other investors will have a benchmark of the kind of tour leader to put in the front line. Using their knowledge and experience, the tour operators will be able to meet the demands of the customers, which will not only give the tourists the value for their money but also leave them satisfied. The result will be an increased number of tourist visiting a particular region, thus improving the economic as well as the social well-being of communities living there.

Review of Literature

There is a plethora of management mechanism all over the world with the aim to guide, regulate, monitor, and even control a business. Hu & Wall (2013) posit that, these mechanisms extend to the tourism industry, where tour guides, and their performances are managed. Nonetheless, it is good to note that there are great variations across the world in terms of strategies that are employed, as well as the required standards and qualification of a tour guide. Apparently, there are variations among countries on the requirements that a tour guide need to have. In North America for instance, training experience is not necessary and virtually anyone with an operating license can be a tour guide. This is not the case in other cities, where one must have training in order to be a tour guide (Wong & Lee, 2012).

Tour guide training is critical in the improvement of the guides’ standards of services as well as their product knowledge. Carmody, (2013) suggested that professional bodies in the hospitality industry should develop a mechanism that would support tour guides. The role of the bodies toward the guides would be to instigate training, certification, licensing, and award programs for the members. This is the underlying premise of a sound tourism industry. According to Baum (2007), good human resource management, particularly training is always adopted since they deliver bottom line profitability. He want further to suggest that how people are recruited, managed, educated, valued and rewarded, as well as how they are supported largely determines their ability to deliver quality service.

The role of tour guides

Reisinger & Steiner (2006) describe tour guides as information givers, a source of knowledge, surrogate parent, pathfinders, leaders, cultural brokers, and entertainers. On the other hand, Chang & Tang (2011) assert that the guides assist the tourists to understand the places they visit. Nonetheless, insists that the primary role of a tour guide is to provide information, which is the
number one drive for professional status. In this regard, the information is passed from the guide to the tourist can break or make a tour. From these roles, tour guides performs four major functions namely instrumental, social, interactionary, and communicative. In addition, Reisinger divides the guides into four categories, each focusing on the specific function. The four categories comprises of originals, animators, tour leader, and professionals.

Tour leaders, according to Chowdhary & Prakash (2008) are a subcategory of tour guides, whose role is to inform tour participants, in this case the tourists, the broad travel-related knowledge of a particular area. Traditionally, tour leaders were referred to as people who manage a group movement over a multiday tour, with the duty of escorting rather informing. Nonetheless, this of late has changes with tour leaders assuming a more informative role (Chang & Tang, 2011). Chowdhary & Prakash, (2008) add that tour leaders are also responsible to ensure that all the activities listed in the travel itinerary are executed. In this regard, the leaders are expected to act as mediators, and maintain good relations with all group members in order to perform their duties with minimal resistance.

According to Reisinger and Steiner (2006), originals are the pathfinders, who functions are primarily instrumental. As their name suggests, their role is to select a route, break the path, and make it accessible so that the tourists can reach their destinations. They ensure that the tourists are safe to and from their destination. On the other hand, the animators perform a more subtle function of socializing and interacting with tourists, being friendly, listening to them, and respecting their preferences. From their function, it is evident that an animators need to possess certain characters in order to interact freely with the tourists. They also need to have a wide knowledge of their destination as well as be easy going.

The last subcategory of the tour guides is the professionals, who have immense knowledge in their area of expertise. They perform the communication function, which entails transferring detailed information as well as interpreting experiences, attractions and sites to tourists. Professionals according to Reisinger & Steiner (2006), have advanced training in tour guiding and are specialize in specific areas of tourism such as ecotourism or marine tourism. In this regard, they act as mentors, with four distinct functions. One is selecting the itinerary that suits their clientele in terms of what to see, and what to experience. Their second function is disseminating the correct and precise information to the tourist. This is not a problem to them due to their vast knowledge in their respective fields. They also interpret what the tourists see, explaining to clients the causative action of the experience. Lastly, professionals fabricate information, where they present fake information as though it were genuine. The aim
of this is not to cheat the customers but to entertain them.

Professional tour guides are of great importance particularly when guiding tourists in areas that are considered sensitive or benign. Among such forms of tourism that are rapidly advancing are nature based tourism and ecotourism. These form places more emphasis on the negative impact on the natural environment and degradation of the natural habitats of the flora and fauna (Randall & Rollins, 2009). In this regard, asserts that tour guides can play a vital role by educating their customers through interpretation and modeling environmentally appropriate behaviors. According to Yamada (2011), the guide not only provide information but also develop and understanding and appreciation of resources and help manage the tourists’ impact on resources. He went further to suppose that the interpretation of natural surroundings, local culture, and cultural heritage be provided to customers as well as explaining appropriate behaviors while visiting natural areas, living creatures, and cultural heritage sites (Yamada, 2011).

Whether a professional or an original guide is handling a customer, perception is critical in presenting the destination to a tourist. Naturally, tour guides are cultural brokers operation at the site of tourist destination. They are supposed to be the interface between the host destination and its visitors (Bryon, 2012). It is also evident that working as a tour guide can at times be stressing, and it is upon the guide to know how to manage the stress. In this regard, they are supposed to understand the image of the destination and be able to communicate and interpret the same to the customers with ease. Apparently, tourist perceptions are more susceptible to unofficial images than official one projected by the tour agencies. As a result, the way a tour guide behaves in their first encounter with the customer will largely influence satisfaction level of the customer (Larsen & Meged, 2013).

Methodology

Research Design

This study was conducted using descriptive methodology, where data was gathered at a particular point in time with the aim of investigating the prevailing conditions. According to (Key, 1997), this design is useful in obtaining an overall picture of the respondents’ opinion at that time. Collective case studies were used, which are a holistic and in-depth investigation of specific areas in the subject being studied. The choice of this research design was that the researcher needed to have a glimpse of the real world situation in regard to tour guiding. Case studies are often used to bring out details from the viewpoint of participants using various sources of data. A total of 15 cases were used in this study, all drawn from the webpage Executive Information system, Tourism Bureau, Taiwan (R.O.C). They are under a special section titled “The Experience of Mainland China Tourists”.

Target Population

The target population for this study was the tour manager fraternity in Taiwan particularly those who had an experience with the mainland China tourist. This is a large population bearing in mind that millions of tourists from China visit Taiwan each year. Such tourists are attracted by various attractions ranging from culture to historical sites, museum to business, and exploration to sport. This demonstrates how huge the target population was for this study.

Sampling

Since it was hard to create a sampling frame for the target population, the sampling technique that was used was non-probabilistic in nature. In this regard, the research used the tourists’ responses from internet to form the case studies. This was effective as the tourists had first hand contact with the tour operators. Both stratified and random sampling was used in the selection of the website to be used for the study. Stratified sampling ensured that only credible websites had the probability of being selected. Random sampling on the other hand ensured that all the websites had an equal chance of being selected. On the other hand, the choice of 15 case studies was optimum sample size in relation the study.

Research Instrument

Case study was the only instrument that was used to collect data for this study. It entailed in-depth study of characters of tour operators in Taiwan. The subject of inquiry for the cases was the “the good qualities of a tour operator that needed in order to offer excellent services”. 15 case studies were used, and their selection was based on the quality of information they had in relation to this research. Each case was used to unveil the qualities that a good tour guides, which through collection of writing were posted by tourists from the Mainland China. The tourists had already done their travel experience and willingly had opted to share what they felt about the Taiwan local tour managers.

Validity & Reliability

Validity entails the assessment of accuracy, correctness, truthfulness, and meaningfulness of the instrument used in the study. In this research, it is true that cases studies were valid since they are a replica of exactly what happens in the real world. In this regard, the case studies were able to obtain what they were supposed to measure. Reliability on the other hand demonstrates the degree of consistency in the study. It is the dependability of the instrument used in the study in order to obtain the information. By the mere fact that the website where the case studies were obtained was credible, the case studies are reliable. Additionally, the tourists expressed their sincere feeling about the tour managers without being coerced to do so.
In order to offer excellent services, there are qualities that a great tour manager needs to possess. This is demonstrated from the case studies as well as from previous research. While most of the qualities apply to a number of tour managers, some are tailored for specific type of tour managers depending on the type of work they do. From the case studies, there a number of qualities pinpointed by the tourists that they feel made tour managers in Taiwan offer excellent services.

Out of the 15 case studies used, 7 revealed that tour manager’s knowledge was critical in offering excellent travel experience. This encompassed the knowledge of the destination, the products, the surrounding amenities, as well as the other factors that makes the tour interesting. According to Mordue (2009), the knowledge of a destination enables the tour manager to plan for the tour, as he is aware of the best places to take the tourists. Knowledge also enables the tour managers to interpret the destination’s attractions as well as culture.

The case studies also indicated that professionalism was another quality that good tour managers need to possess. In six out of the fifteen cases, the tourists were thrilled by the professionalism demonstrated by the tour managers. In one case for instance, the tourists were thrilled by how the tour manager organized the tour, preparing everything for the trip from posters to maps, maps to stories. Ap & Wong (2001) posit that, professionalism entails making tourist happy, providing them with updated and accurate information, as well as meeting and exceeding customers’ expectation. Passion for the job is another quality that the tourists on the case studies identified. In six of the case studies, the tourists identified that the tour managers were happy to serve and this increased their experience. This is affirmed by Grosspietsch (2004), who posit that if the tour manager shows the passion for the job, it is likely that the perception of the tourists toward the destination will change, eventually enjoying their travel.

The study also revealed that a good tour manager should have patience when dealing with tourists. Patience ranked among the best qualities, particularly when dealing with new customers, who are not accustomed to the culture of their destination. In almost all the cases, tour managers took their time to explain to the guests about the new place as well as listening to them. In one of the cases, the guests attest to the fact that the tour guide tried to attend to everyone’s plea and tried all he could to come to an understanding when he failed to satisfy them. According to Chang & Tang (2011), patience plays a major role particularly in an unease situation. It enables the tour manager to play calm and not let personal emotion interfere with the work.

A sense of humor is another quality from the case study that the tourists were happy with. Most of them expressed their gratitude on how their trips were humorous, where the guides introduced the sceneries
with a humorous style. Apparently, most the guest agreed that the tour managers always had a smile in their face, not only when dealing with them but also when dealing with the locals. This enabled the tourists to feel comfortable in their entire journey, asking questions which they do not understand. In addition, this assists the tour managers to communicate sensitive information without looking offensive. One of the clients in the case study explained how the tour manager was able to tell her how to behave when encountering certain dangers during the travel.

A sense of responsibility is another quality of a good manager that the tourists were happy about in their Taiwan visit. This is cultivated by the fact that most international tourists have no knowledge of the country of their visit. In that case, tourists need guides and someone who will always be there in case they need any help. This is evident from the case studies as many tourists express their gratitude on the way the guides were willing to assist them. In one of the cases, a tour manager went out of his way in assisting a tourist find his lost cousin, whom he has not seen for about ten years. The tourist explains how the guide made numerous calls and even contacted some of his local friends in the quest to please the customer. This sense of responsibility not only makes the tourists feel they are cared for, it also makes them feel safe.

Another quality of good tour managers that enable them offer excellent travel experience the ability to handle emergencies. This was clearly demonstrated in the case studies. Apparently, travel is a risky phenomenon and sometimes the nature of the tour such as rock climbing makes the experience more risky. This calls for caution and the ability to handle emergencies. In one of the cases, a tourist hurt herself and started bleeding on the right eye and forehead. Nonetheless, the tour manager was able to address the situation swiftly. This not only pleased the other visitors but also enabled the tour manager earn respect and more business.

Conclusion

In their quest to attract more customers as well as reap bountifully from the ever-growing tourism industry, companies are searching for key aspects that would satisfy tourists. This is the case facing Taiwan as it continues to host group tourists from the Mainland China. The best thing about Taiwan companies is that they know the potential in tour managers in enhancing tourist experience while visiting a particular destination. Nonetheless, what really matters are the qualities that such a tour manager should possess in order to offer excellent travel experience. Several studies indicate that the role of tour guides is critical in linking the tourists with their destination. Tour guides serve as a source of knowledge, pathfinders, leaders, cultural brokers, entertainers, and surrogate parents to the tourist. In this regard, they must have superior qualities in
order to be able to execute their duties effectively and efficiently.

To understand better the qualities of a great tour guide, it is good to understand the various subcategories of guide. Each subcategory has its unique features and thus the guide is expected to have the quality suitable for their role. The subcategories include originals, animators, tour leader, and the professionals. In all the categories, what really matters is that a customer’s expectations are met and exceeded. In this regard, the case study revealed a number of qualities for a great manager. First, the guide should be knowledgeable of what is happening in the surrounding. He should also act professionally by planning, organizing, and executing all the aspects of a tour. Equally, the guides should be patient with the tourists, who take their time to learn several things in their new environment. Good guides also have a sense of humor, which usually aid in creating a comfortable environment for everyone. Other qualities include having a sense of responsibility, ability to handle emergencies, and being creative.

References


