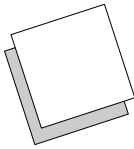


An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this issue



Closing the gaps: service quality in sport tourism

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Keywords *Sport, Tourism, Services marketing, Service quality*

Abstract *Draws on the extant literature in the areas of services marketing, sport tourism and service quality to present a range of concepts and models that have utility in heightening management's appreciation of the complexities of achieving service quality in a sport-tourism context. Emphasis is placed on the multidimensional nature of the issues involved. Generic service and quality concepts and models are tailored to sport tourism through a range of examples. More in-depth illustrations are provided by case material relating to Club La Santa, which is located on the northern coast of Lanzarote. Marketed as "the world's leading sport and leisure resort", La Santa offers all-year-round training and leisure facilities for national and international standard sportsmen and women, as well as less competitive visitors who merely seek exercise and relaxation. The managerial implications of the issues are discussed.*

Background

A prominent feature of the last decade has been the general growth in discretionary income that has provided consumers with additional choice of leisure and recreational activities and contributed to a more competitive environment. Shilbury and Westerbeek (1996, p. 149) note that:

All sports confront intense competition from not only other sports, but also a range of recreation and leisure options.

In response to this new environment, sport and leisure organisations have acknowledged the importance of the customer and placed greater emphasis on marketing activities and the delivery of service quality (Berrett *et al.*, p. 993). The relevance of these issues is illustrated by the growing literature relating to service quality in sport, recreation and tourism. For example, Tsan and Maguire (1998) have attempted to develop a service quality model for professional sports events, specifically derived from a spectator perspective. The generic service quality instrument, SERVQUAL, developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985), has proved a popular research tool and has been applied directly, or in a modified form, to a variety of leisure-based sectors, for example:

- tourism (Fick and Ritchie, 1991; Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1995);
- hotels (Saleh and Ryan, 1991; McColl-Kennedy and White, 1997); and
- racquet and health clubs (Clowes, 1997).

Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to identify from the extant literature, covering services marketing, sport tourism and service quality, salient issues specific to the delivery of service quality in a sport tourism environment. The

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Intense competition

appreciation of these issues has been heightened through the application of a range of concepts and models, or where appropriate, particular elements of these concepts and models. The discussion has been placed in context by reference to case material relating to Club La Santa (CLS), which is located on the northern coast of Lanzarote in the Canary Islands. Marketed as “the world’s leading sport and leisure resort”, CLS offers all year round training and leisure facilities for national and international standard athletes as well as the less competitive guests who merely seek exercise and relaxation. While it is acknowledged that reference to CLS brings into question the ability to generalise beyond a single case, the issues addressed are generic to many sport tourism resorts. As such the difficulties faced by CLS will be shared by many similar organisations. While the solutions generated may be specific to CLS they nevertheless offer a broader appeal and serve as a guide to managers operating in a similar environment. On balance, it is argued that the ability to highlight issues through reference to real life situations outweighs the slight weakness inherent in the use of a single case. Data were generated from the personal observations of the researchers, interviews with management, staff and customers and documentary material provided by CLS and published in the media.

Research techniques

The following section of this paper provides a definition of sport tourism before highlighting a number of features that are peculiar to the sector and impact upon management practices in general. A brief introduction to CLS is then offered to provide a context for the subsequent discussions that focus more directly on the provision of service quality. The gap model of service quality (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985) forms the basis of the deliberations and is underpinned by a variety of additional concepts and models, or parts thereof, which are utilised to provide a greater depth of understanding and tailor the discussion specifically towards sport tourism issues. The topics discussed in the paper are of necessity selective, bearing in mind the gap model alone has approximately 35 factors which could contribute towards reductions in service quality levels. In these circumstances, emphasis has been given to some of those issues that appear particularly relevant and important to the delivery of service quality in a sport tourism resort. Clearly, such decisions are to some extent subjective and open to debate. Nevertheless, reference to the literature suggests the selected topics draw on a sound body of theory, have practical utility, and contribute to the developing literature in the field. The paper concludes with a discussion of the managerial implications of the issues addressed.

Sport tourism

De Knop and Standeven (1998) define sport tourism as:

Travel for non-commercial (holiday) or for commercial (non-holiday/business) reasons to participate in or observe sporting activities.

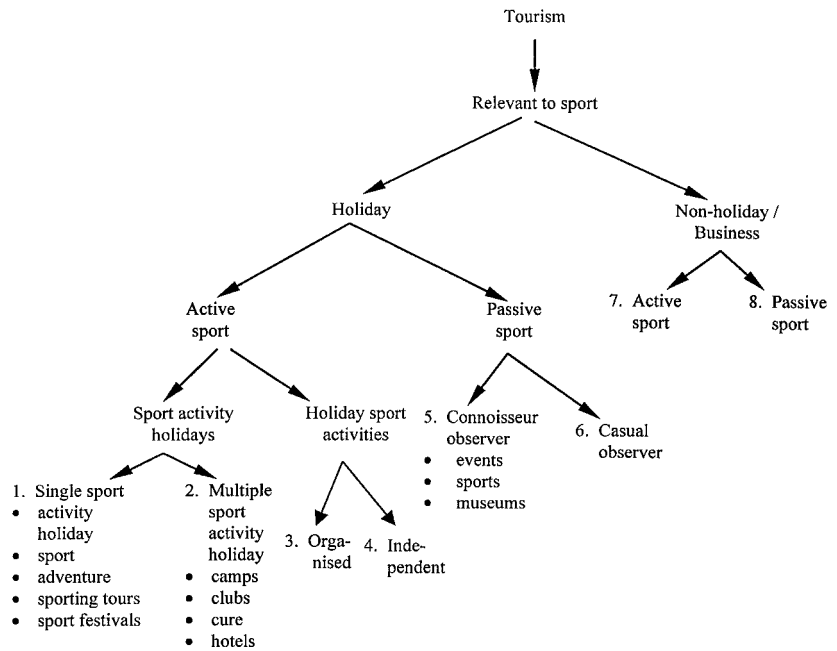
Defining sport tourism

Based on this definition, eight types of sport tourism can be identified. These are illustrated in Figure 1.

The defining characteristics of the sport tourism offer are such that they present specific issues for practising managers (adapted from Augustyn, 1996):

(1) *Supply-related:*

- the multisectoral and complex nature of the product which represents a mixture of various elements (for example, the destination with its facilities, attractions and accessibility);



Source: De Knop and Standeven (1998).

Figure 1. Eight types of sport tourism

- the rigidity of the main elements of the offer that limit speedy responses to changing consumer tastes;
- the highly fragmented supply – many businesses may contribute to the overall experience;
- the intangibility, inseparability and perishability of certain aspects of the offer; and
- staff issues – tourism is a “people industry” (see also Morrison, 1989).

(2) Demand-related:-

- high elasticity;
- seasonality;
- changing needs, attitudes and preferences of customers;
- little brand loyalty; and
- heterogeneous customer groupings.

While the above list is not exhaustive, it highlights some of the features that help to differentiate this sector from conventional product markets and as a consequence suggest modifications to traditional management practices.

The history of Club La Santa

The resort, which is situated on the northern coast of Lanzarote in the Canary Islands, was built in 1972 by a major bank, La Caja Insular de Ahorros de Canarias. The intention was to construct a village with accommodation for 6,000 people. The development was peripheral to the bank’s core business and this lack of focus and emphasis soon led to economic problems and closure. In 1978, the attention of Danish tour operator, Tjaereborg, was drawn to Lanzarote as a potential tourist destination. At that time there was little commercial exploitation of the island’s beneficial geographic location

CLS case material

and climate. In conjunction with a senior colleague, Willy Bechman, the owner of Tjaereborg, Pastor Eilif Krogager, decided to acquire the complex and transform it into a sports and holiday resort. By 1983, La Santa Sport, now renamed Club La Santa, opened for business, although renovations to apartments were ongoing and many of the sports facilities were still under construction.

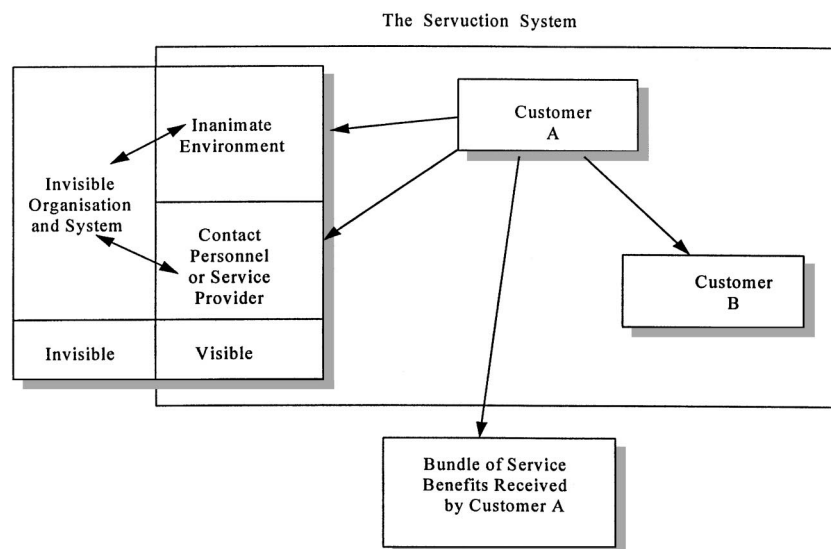
It was decided, initially, to operate the complex under the (then) recently developed “time-share” concept, although this was not particularly successful. While this facility remains, less than 20 per cent of visitors are involved in the scheme. CLS attracts elite athletes and teams from a wide range of sports, as well as accomplished, non-elite performers and those seeking more leisurely sport and recreational activity. Visitors to the complex travel from all over the world, although Denmark (31 per cent), Great Britain (31 per cent) and Germany (21 per cent) supply the greatest proportion of guests (1997 figures).

Concepts and models

The nature of the service that a sport tourism resort offers – and CLS exemplifies this – is an experience based on the delivery of a bundle of benefits (Bateson, 1995). Different components of the bundle of benefits may come from a variety of sources. This is illustrated in Figure 2 which outlines the servuction system model.

Servuction system model

The servuction system model highlights that the service organisation comprises two parts (Bateson, 1995). The invisible aspects of the business are inextricably linked to the visible aspects that are represented by the inanimate physical environment in which the service encounter takes place (Bitner, 1992) and the contact staff who actually deliver the service. Wakefield and Blodgett (1996) note that recreation or health clubs, hotels, resorts and sporting events are examples of services where customers spend lengthy periods of time in the physical surroundings of the service provider (servicescape). Accordingly the perceived quality of the servicescape will influence the desire to stay in the facility for an extended period which in turn may affect spending patterns. Turley and Fugate (1992) highlight the competing perspectives in relation to the planning of service facilities, viz.



Source: Bateson, (1995).

Figure 2. The servuction system model

operational, locational, atmospheric/image, consumer use and contact personnel. A key requirement for the delivery of service quality is the integration of these perspectives to ensure compatibility.

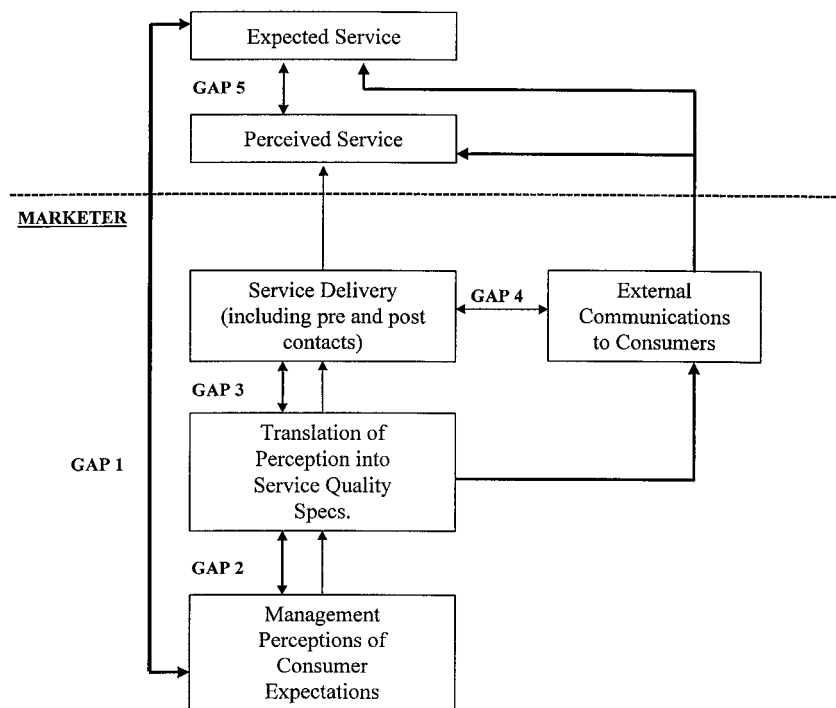
Also illustrated by the servuction system model is the interrelationship between customers and the impact that this can have on service quality. For example, other athletes who exhibit poor track discipline may inconvenience athletes who wish to train seriously. The customer's experience, therefore, is created through a variety of sources, some of which are outside the control of the organisation.

Expanded marketing mix

Several implications for managers employed in the service sector stem from the model. These can be found under the headings intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability. They are the antecedents of an expanded marketing mix, incorporating people, process and physical evidence. Space constraints preclude a detailed discussion of these issues, although they receive comprehensive coverage in virtually any mainstream services marketing text. However, as they are inevitably associated with topics to be addressed in the subsequent sections of the paper they will be considered in their particular context. The various components of the servuction model have direct relevance to sport tourism and will also be considered more fully later in the paper.

A model of service quality

Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) suggest that customer assessments of service quality are based on a comparison of service expectations and actual performance[1] (see these authors for a discussion of the antecedents of customer expectations). While in an ideal world customer expectations and their perceptions of service delivery would match, this is not the reality of the situation and a gap occurs. This gap, known as the customer gap, is a combination of four provider gaps (Figure 3).



Source: Parasuraman *et al.* (1985).

Figure 3. Gap models in service quality

Gap model

Each gap is the result of the provider's inability to manage a range of factors. These are outlined in Table I.

The structure outlined in Table I was adopted as the working framework for this study and provides a detailed sequential model that illustrates a number of elements that are essential to the provision of service quality. In summary, it is imperative for management to:

- (1) know what customers want;
- (2) select appropriate service designs and standards;
- (3) deliver to these standards; and
- (4) match performance to promises.

<p><i>Gap 1</i></p> <p><i>Inadequate marketing research orientation</i></p> <p>Insufficient marketing research Research not focused on service quality Inadequate use of market research</p> <p><i>Lack of upward communication</i></p> <p>Lack of interaction between management and customers Insufficient communication between contact employees and managers Too many layers between contact personnel and top management</p> <p><i>Insufficient relationship focus</i></p> <p>Lack of market segmentation Focus on transactions rather than relationships Focus on new customers rather than relationship customers</p>	<p><i>Gap 3</i></p> <p><i>Deficiencies in human resource policies</i></p> <p>Ineffective recruitment Role ambiguity and role conflict Poor employee-technology job fit Inappropriate evaluation and compensation systems Lack of empowerment, perceived control, and teamwork</p> <p><i>Failure to match supply and demand</i></p> <p>Failure to smooth peaks and valleys of demand Inappropriate customer mix Over-reliance on price to smooth demand</p> <p><i>Customers not fulfilling roles</i></p> <p>Customers lacking knowledge of their roles and responsibilities Customers negatively impacting each other</p>
<p><i>Gap 2</i></p> <p><i>Absence of customer-driven standards</i></p> <p>Lack of customer-driven service standards Absence of process management to focus on customer requirements Absence of formal process for setting service quality goals</p> <p><i>Inadequate service leadership</i></p> <p>Perception of infeasibility Inadequate management commitment</p> <p><i>Poor service design</i></p> <p>Unsystematic new service development process Vague, undefined service designs Failure to connect service design to positioning</p>	<p><i>Gap 4</i></p> <p><i>Ineffective management of customer expectations</i></p> <p>Failure to manage customer expectations through all forms of communication Failure to educate customers adequately</p> <p><i>Overpromising</i></p> <p>Overpromising in advertising Overpromising in personal selling Overpromising through physical evidence cues</p> <p><i>Inadequate horizontal communications</i></p> <p>Insufficient communication between sales and operations Insufficient communication between advertising and operations Differences in policies and procedures across branches or units</p>

Source: Zeithaml and Bitner (1996)

Table I. Key factors contributing to provider gaps

To achieve this managers must fully appreciate the interrelationships between various components of their offer. The following section utilises a range of models to highlight the complexities inherent in these relationships.

The services marketing triangle

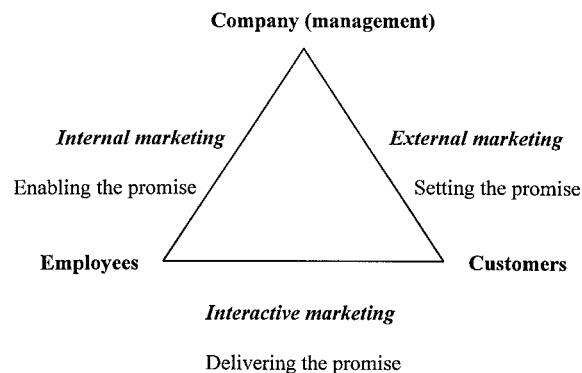
The services marketing triangle provides a useful conceptualisation of some of the complexities of the service offer and has utility for sport tourism services (see Figure 4). In essence it suggests that all three sides of the triangle must be integrated to ensure that service quality can be achieved. Excellence in one component is insufficient. Setting the promise includes those elements that contribute to developing customer expectations of service standards. This could include, for example, the traditional elements of the marketing mix (promotion, price, etc.) or aspects of the servicescape (gymnasium, pools, tennis courts, etc.).

Enabling the promise

In the context of the gap model (see Table I) weaknesses in setting the promise could contribute to gaps 1 and 4 in particular, but also impact on gaps 1 and 2. In order to enable the promise, managers must ensure that they recruit, train, motivate and reward the right people and provide them with the resources that are necessary to deliver the promise. These features are more directly related to gap 3, but also have implications for gaps 1 and 4. Delivering the promise relates to the interactions between the resort staff and customers. This is the point at which the promises are brought to fruition and customer expectations realised. However, these relationships are subject to the influence of other customers or the inanimate environment (servicescape). This feature is clearly illustrated in the servuction system model (see Figure 2).

Inseparability

The model also serves to highlight the notion of inseparability whereby the service producer and consumer are in contact at the point when the promise is delivered. This suggests that the process is visible to the customer who will be in a position to identify any weaknesses, hence the inclusion of the process dimension in the services marketing mix. The intangibility of a service product makes it difficult for customers to imagine, understand and evaluate the offer. Consequently the behaviour of front line staff takes on additional importance as a surrogate for more traditional evaluation criteria (McCull-Kennedy and White, 1997). Issues relating to the delivery of promises have a strong impact on gap 3, but also involve gaps 1, 2 and 4.



Source: Zeithaml and Bitner (1996).

Figure 4. The services marketing triangle

Actors and audience

Theatrical and sporting analogies

Another useful way of conceptualising service quality issues, that has value in a sport tourism context, is the theatrical analogy (Grove *et al.*, 1992). This is summarised in the following section and subsequently adapted to a sport tourism context. A much more detailed validation of the appropriateness of the analogy is offered in Grove *et al.* (1998). A service encounter may be viewed in terms of the actors (resort staff whose presence and behaviours assist in the determination of the service) and the audience (visitors to the resort who consume the service). The encounter is acted out in a theatre (resort) that represents the physical setting. The performance will depend upon the degree to which an organisation can integrate these elements. Included within these elements are other theatrical concepts such as rehearsals, scripts, routines, uniforms and backstage activities (Grove *et al.*, 1992).

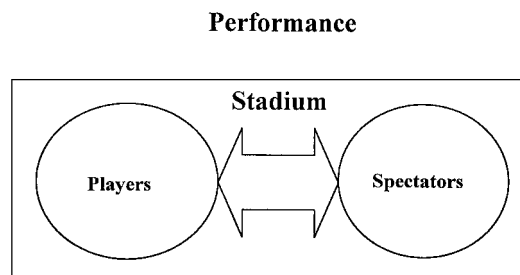
The theatrical analogy could reasonably be adapted to be more sport-specific by utilising a sporting theme. For example, actors would be represented by players, the audience by spectators and the setting by a stadium. This is illustrated in Figure 5.

Customer satisfaction

This approach underscores some of the earlier points illustrated by both the servuction system model and the services marketing triangle. For example, the levels of customer satisfaction may be influenced by the activities of the players (resort staff) who represent the human component, and/or by the stadium factors (physical aspects of the resort). Other spectators (fellow guests) may also have an impact on the overall performance. Unruly behaviour or overcrowding would have a negative effect, whereas an optimum number of good-humoured spectators would have a beneficial effect by creating a positive atmosphere. The spectator role takes on added significance where a large number of people are required to share facilities, a feature that typifies sport tourism (Martin and Pranter, 1989). The sporting analogy also illustrates the invisible components of the performance, for example, the masseurs, dieticians, physiotherapists and training staff who ensure the players are in peak condition. In resort terms this could include, for example, bicycle mechanics who service the cycles at frequent intervals to ensure they are roadworthy when used by customers, or pool attendants who maintain water quality. The various components of the sporting analogy can be related to the gap model in a similar manner to the services marketing triangle illustration cited earlier. For example, the stadium would be a potential source of overpromising through physical evidence cues (gap 4).

The three- and two-dimensional approaches to quality

Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991), discuss service quality in terms of different dimensions of the service production process. Three dimensions are



Source: Adapted from Grove *et al.*, (1992)

Figure 5. The service experience as sport

considered. Physical quality represents the quality derived from the physical elements of the service. This will include both the physical product, for example, food and drinks in the restaurants and bars and the framework of physical support that facilitates production of the service. The latter can be subdivided into environmental factors such as buildings, swimming pools, tennis courts, etc., and equipment such as racquets and balls. Wakefield and Blodgett (1996) note that the aesthetic appeal of the facility architecture may be the basis of a customer's first impression of the quality of the service provider. The physical elements lay the foundation for the second dimension, interactive quality. This feature relates to interactions between customers and interactive elements of the service provider. These elements may be human or mechanical, as in the case of an ATM or drinks dispenser. Interactions between different groups of customers would also be an important feature of interactive quality. The third dimension, corporate quality, is symbolic in nature and involves customer perceptions of the corporate entity. Given the intangible nature of many aspects of the sport tourism offer and the difficulty of evaluating the service in advance of consumption, the corporate image promulgated by resorts such as Club La Santa will influence consumers' purchase decisions.

Alternative approach to quality

An alternative, yet complementary, approach to quality merely utilises two dimensions, process quality and output quality of service production (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). Process quality is the customer's subjective judgement and draws upon their view of the production process and from feelings of how well they fit into it. Customers participate in the production process to varying degrees, although in the sport tourism context there are many cases of heavy participation, for example, learning to windsurf, training on the track or in the pool or gymnasium. This has significant implications, as any deficiencies in the process will be highly visible and available to close scrutiny. The more customers become part of the production process the more they will contribute to service quality levels, for example, a physiotherapist will have greater difficulty treating an injury if the athlete cannot clearly articulate the problem. These issues and those relating to the compatibility of service styles between staff and customers have implications for management, in particular through their contribution to gaps 3 and 4.

Output quality

The second dimension, output quality, represents the customer's evaluation of the service production process. This can include both tangible and intangible elements, although Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991), stress the output of tourism is often intangible, as represented by personal feelings and experiences. The use of physical evidence cues during and on completion of the process may mitigate some of the problems that this causes, for example, a certificate at the end of a coaching course to indicate a particular level of achievement. It should be noted that the output of the service may well be influenced by elements of the process and that these two dimensions are not mutually exclusive.

The concepts and models presented to date seek to provide a broad framework by which managers may appreciate the multifaceted and interactive nature of service design and delivery and the implications this has for service quality. The review highlights a significant number of recurring and consistent themes, thereby reinforcing the significance of these issues for managers operating in a sport tourism environment.

Multidimensional nature of the topic

Utilising the models

The following section addresses a selection of sport tourism related issues through the application of some of the marketing and service quality concepts and models discussed earlier. The aim is to highlight the multidimensional nature of the topic. In view of the wide range of issues that could be considered, it is only possible to offer a few examples by way of illustration. These have been selected from the list of defining features of sport tourism highlighted earlier (Augustyn, 1996). Case material derived from a study of CLS is used to provide a context for the deliberations.

Failure to match supply and demand

Because services are deeds, processes and performances they exhibit intangible elements that make them difficult to inventory. The fact that services are performed when the producer and consumer come into contact (inseparability) lends a further complication in that it inhibits mass production of the service. This situation is exacerbated due to the perishability of services, for example a seat in a restaurant or space on a tennis court that is not used in one time period cannot be accumulated for use at a future time. Aspects of these features of services are identified in the servuction system model (Bateson, 1995), the theatrical analogy (Grove *et al.*, 1992) and the three dimensional model (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991) discussed earlier. They present specific problems for managers who must accurately forecast demand to ensure effective capacity utilisation. The balancing of supply and demand is an important feature of gap 4 and operates at two levels for CLS, first in relation to the resort as a whole and second at the level of individual facilities, for example, restaurants, swimming lanes, soccer pitches.

Supply and demand

Where there is excess demand for holidays to CLS, some customers will be unable to secure the weeks they desire. Alternatively, demand may exceed optimum supply. This results in additional customers visiting the complex, but they may not be fully satisfied because overcrowding contributes to low quality. A common feature of overcrowding is queuing (waiting in line) for service. Long waits have been identified as a key source of customer dissatisfaction, and may influence decisions regarding future patronage (see, for example, Sarel and Marmorstein, 1998). The ideal position would be demand and supply in equilibrium, although achieving optimal capacity is challenging for management given the demand and supply characteristics of the tourism product outlined earlier (Augustyn, 1996). On the other side of the coin, excess capacity through inadequate demand would result in apartments remaining unoccupied with consequent reductions in revenue. Insufficient numbers of visitors may also contribute to a lack of atmosphere thereby reducing quality perceptions for some segments. Similar issues arise at the level of individual facilities such as squash or tennis courts.

CLS operates a number of strategies to smooth the peaks and troughs in demand for accommodation. In accordance with traditional tour operator's practice, the year is broken down in terms of popularity and prices rise to reflect the more popular periods (differential pricing). For example, an apartment (to accommodate four people) which would cost £311 for a week in late January 1999, would rise to £635 during the week of the Easter vacation. Pricing must also take into account the availability of and demand for substitute destinations. For example, during the winter period in Northern Europe, tourists will need to travel long distances to find warm weather resorts. In this context, Lanzarote may be one of the closest options. However, during the summer period tourists will be able to find warm

weather resorts much nearer to their homes. Consequently, the cost of travelling to Lanzarote may be prohibitive compared to a substitute summer destination. These issues must be reflected in the pricing structure to ensure CLS remains competitive, particularly during the Northern European summer.

Pricing structure

The over-reliance on price as a demand management strategy can present problems, however, as customers will develop expectations of quality at given prices and have preconceived value definitions. Where prices are particularly low during off-peak periods undesirable segments may also be attracted (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). This could present compatibility problems (also a contributory feature to gap 3) and lead to some groups becoming dissatisfied, an issue that is taken up later in the paper.

One example of an alternative, non price-based approach adopted at CLS is the sport week. During periods of low demand leading figures, often World or Olympic Champions in particular events, are encouraged to hold training weeks. These events attract large numbers of participants and are deliberately scheduled at times when demand is normally low. The relatively predictable demand cycle patterns (identified through market research), allow management to schedule events at appropriate times in the year. There is very little cost to CLS who merely offer the athletes free accommodation packages in return for their agreement to spend time coaching/advising participants. In this context the interactions between the coaches and participants can be very productive and contribute to a positive atmosphere. Interactions between like-minded participants can also enhance overall enjoyment, and this illustrates how some dimensions of service quality may be outside the control of management (see the servuction system model).

A similar situation occurs where training camps choose to use CLS as a base. For example, triathlon and swim camps use CLS in March and October thereby introducing many first time (and like-minded) visitors to the complex. Invariably, significant numbers of participants return to CLS independently in the future. Again it can be seen that these camps are accommodated at times when demand is likely to be relatively low.

Publicity

A number of internationally renowned events are also held at CLS and help to fill accommodation at off-peak times. In 1986, the Sports Manager organised the first Volcano Triathlon which was to become the pioneer of triathlon in Spain and of events at CLS. Many other events have now been added to the programme and government, sport federations and many corporate sponsors have become involved. These events have enormous publicity value, a point that is taken up later in the discussion.

Customers not fulfilling roles

The heterogeneous nature of sport tourists has the potential to contribute to gap 3 through the impact which particular groups of customers may have on one another. Some of the managerial implications of this feature of sport tourism (and services in general) are addressed in the following section.

Customers negatively impacting each other

The servuction system model, in particular, and elements of both the theatrical analogy and three dimensional approach, highlight the relationship between customers and the impact this has on service. Given the strong support in the literature for the profitability of retaining existing customers (Aaker, 1995; Davidson, 1997), the value of gaining loyalty (Ostrowski *et al.*, 1993) and the switching behaviour exhibited by dissatisfied customers

Inter-customer conflict

(Naumann and Shannon, 1992), management cannot afford to allow one group of customers to irritate another.

Tourism resorts are prone to potential inter-customer conflict by virtue of their diverse customer base, which may differ in terms of language, food requirements, values and behavioural norms, as well as specific service needs. The process of compatibility management seeks to address these potential difficulties and is defined by Martin and Pranter (1989) as:

a process of first attracting homogeneous consumers to the service environment, then actively managing the physical environment and customer-to-customer encounters in such a way as to enhance satisfying encounters and minimise dissatisfying encounters.

The features of the CLS offer include many of the factors which suggest compatibility management could yield dividends (Martin and Pranter, 1989; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), for example:

- customers are in close physical proximity to each other (the resort is self contained, isolated and all activities take place in a relatively small area of land);
- customers are engaged in numerous and varied activities (many sport options are available together with bars, restaurants, shops, hairdressing, car hire, etc.);
- customers must occasionally wait for service (there is potential for delays to occur in relation to any of the above facilities);
- customers are expected to share time, space or service utensils with each other (the sport facilities such as pools, courts, etc., and equipment such as cycles, rackets, together with bars, restaurants, etc.); and
- the service environment has the potential to attract a heterogeneous customer mix (this is taken up in the following section).

Customer needs

CLS attracts visitors of varying nationalities, who speak different languages, have different food preferences, and hold different attitudes and behavioural norms. In addition, the basic sport and recreational needs of visitors may differ. At one extreme will be visitors whose key need is the extensive sport facilities, while at the other will be those customers who value the hotel and location features of the resort more highly. The above distinctions do not necessarily imply incompatibility, but it is incumbent on management to check for variations that may contribute to friction. Emphasis can then be given to encouraging some segments and discouraging others.

Depending on their position on the sport-tourism continuum, visitors may prioritise various elements of the service. While some features of the CLS offer will not represent discriminating dimensions, for example the location and warm climate, other features will influence segment membership based on a prioritisation of need. Failure to employ effective segmentation is a contributing factor to gap 1. Elite athletes and families with young children will require different types of support services, and place differing emphasis on the need for physical, interactive and corporate quality. Notwithstanding these aspects of heterogeneity the two groups may be homogeneous and therefore compatible, in other contexts. For example, both groups will require quiet to guarantee a good night's sleep, in one case to be fresh for early morning training and the other to ensure children receive adequate rest. Contrast this with young single groups who may require bar and discothèque

Conflict of interests

facilities into the early morning and may be responsible for much of the noise which prevents other visitors sleeping soundly.

CLS has recognised the potential conflict and has brought forward the start times of some of their evening entertainment. In addition, a quiet period between midnight and 07.00 is intended to reduce noise levels. This requirement appears to be ignored by many guests who return to their apartments from the bars and discothèques early in the morning or who sit talking on their balconies until the early hours. The honeycomb structure of the accommodation merely exacerbates the transmission of noise, illustrating the effect the setting (theatrical analogy) or inanimate environment (servuction system model) can have on service quality issues. Again CLS has recognised the difficulty and three security staff are positioned at strategic points to minimise the noise situation. Given the size of the resort, this may well be a token gesture and represent paying lip service to the problem. If customers attribute the blame for the noise problem to other customers their own level of dissatisfaction with CLS will be limited. If, however, the feeling is that the organisation has the power to resolve matters, but has not made a serious attempt to do so, dissatisfaction will increase. Clearly, CLS must manage the delicate balance between heavy “policing” and allowing some customers the freedom to “let their hair down”.

This illustration of compatibility management is merely one of several potential areas of conflict that CLS has been required to address, for example, the relationship between smokers and non-smokers, time share owners and one-off visitors or different cultural attitudes to dress codes such as “topless” sun-bathing.

Influences and stimuli

Not matching performance to promises

Given the broad range of features which come together to create the sport tourism service, customers are exposed to many influences and stimuli. The services marketing triangle, in particular, stresses the need to integrate the company, employees and customers to ensure that the three elements of the promise – setting, enabling and delivering – can be achieved. Where unrealistic promises are made the level of service delivered is likely to fall below the inflated expectations of customers. This is a key feature of gap 4.

Provider gap 4 is particularly related to issues of communication, one area of which relates to overpromising in terms of advertising, personal selling or through physical evidence cues. The failure to utilise these elements effectively may lead to an inability to connect service design and service positioning, thereby contributing to gap 2. Some examples of the issues involved are illustrated herewith.

Overpromising

The process by which customers evaluate a service varies from the corresponding process used to evaluate goods. Services are generally seen to be high in experience and credence qualities whereas goods are high in search qualities (Table II).

Because of the complexity of tourism services outlined earlier, features of the CLS offer fall into all the categories shown in Table II, although experience qualities and to a lesser degree, credence qualities are particularly relevant. This results from the fact that services by nature are intangible, heterogeneous and inseparable. Indeed, Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) argue that past experience is the most important factor in shaping customer expectations of a service. The fact that customers evaluate much of the service after purchase

Quality	Definition	Examples	
		Consumer services	Business services
Search	Can be evaluated prior to purchase	Shoes Jeans Refrigerators Lawn mowers	Raw materials Component parts Office supplies Tools
Experience	Can be evaluated only after purchase	Food Catering service Entertainment Cosmetic surgery	Janitorial services Lawn services Delivery services Repair services
Credence	Difficult to evaluate even after the service	CPA services Funeral services Education Veterinarian	Consulting Financial advice Advertising Insurance

Source: Kurtz and Clow (1998)

Table II. Quality characteristics

and consumption has implications for their initial information search. If they have no personal experience, consumers seek and rely more on personal sources (friends, experts) than on non-personal sources (media) when evaluating services before purchase (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). Alternatively, they will view corporate image as a surrogate for service quality as identified by Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) in their three-dimensional approach.

This feature has implications for the form of communication adopted by CLS and its agents located in key European markets. The literature suggests that potential customers will be more influenced by word-of-mouth communication and expert comment rather than, for example, mainstream media advertising. The management at CLS subscribes to this view and undertakes little mainstream advertising. Word of mouth plays an important role in their strategy and works on the basis of satisfied customers becoming unpaid advocates who recommend CLS to friends and relatives.

Communication strategy

Another important element of the communication strategy is the courting of publicity based on events that are organised at CLS. For example, in advance of the London Marathon, a training week was organised which included Spain's World Champion, Abel Anton, former track star Steve Cram and the actor Jerome Flynn, who was running the race for charity. Many participants were attracted to CLS, at what was normally a quiet period prior to Easter. Furthermore, a large amount of publicity was generated by way of the many journalists who attended the event. Their copy was published in sources that would serve as information points for CLS's potential target audience, for example, sports magazines, sports-based television programmes and the sports pages of the press. The cost of this coverage was minimal compared to mainstream advertising, yet was highly targeted and carried endorsement and credibility because of its independent source and the presence of personalities.

One potentially negative feature of this form of communication is the fact that positive word of mouth communication can elevate the levels of desired and predicted service (see Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). In turn this may contribute to the development of gaps where expectations become unrealistic. While management has control over mainstream advertising, publicity and word of mouth are blunter instruments. Customers who have enjoyed their visit to

Multi-dimensional nature of the construct

CLS may be prone to exaggerate aspects of the resort when talking to friends and colleagues, thereby increasing the expectations of these groups in the event that they visit CLS. CLS management is alert to this potential problem and where control is possible, seek to avoid overpromising. For example, during a recent filming of the resort for a holiday programme in the UK the full range of sporting facilities were not illustrated. Customers booking holidays on the strength of the programme would then be delighted by the extent of the sporting facilities, all free at the point of delivery. Significantly, there would be a lesser probability of a gap developing between expectation and delivery levels.

Summary and managerial implications

This paper has attempted to heighten management appreciation of the key issues involved in the delivery of service quality in a sport tourism context. In particular the complex multi-dimensional nature of the construct has been identified by reference to a range of concepts and models drawn from complementary literatures and specific case material based on Club La Santa. Service quality represents a customer's subjective interpretation of his or her experience and will be affected by a diverse range of stimuli. It is, therefore, incumbent on management to be aware of the factors that influence customer perceptions before, during and after the service encounter. They should also appreciate that customers will use their own definitions of service quality, which may not, necessarily, correspond to those used by management. This underscores the need for customer involvement, for example, in service designs and standards.

Sport tourism has the potential to attract large numbers of diverse groups of customers and, while this does not necessarily lead to incompatibility, managers should be aware of the criteria which delineate segment membership and whether certain segment mixes are incongruous. Because sport tourists are invariably in close proximity to each other and often share time, space and service utensils, there is potential for both positive and negative interactions. Interrelationships between customers will therefore impact service quality evaluations, as will interactions with staff and the physical elements of the offer (servicescape). The nature of sport tourism highlights the visibility of these components and accordingly suggests a focus for managerial attention. Flaws in any of the areas will be only too apparent given that the producer and consumer are closely linked during the production and delivery process.

Priorities

In essence, sport tourism organisations should seek to understand their customers and appreciate the extent to which different quality dimensions are prioritised. This will aid the planning, implementation, co-ordination and control of specific service designs by stressing which components to emphasise in a given situation (see for example Grove *et al.*, 1998). As an example high contact customers will have more interrelationships with resort staff who, as a consequence, will need to be suitably trained in "people skills". In contrast low contact customers may have greater affinity with the tangible components of the servicescape. Given that resources are necessary to underpin various elements of the service encounter a failure to understand the importance customers attach to particular elements could contribute to sub-optimal resource allocation and a failure to achieve competitive advantages in certain segments. Providing too much of what customers do not want and too little of what they do, is the likely outcome of offering a "vanilla" package. A preferred approach is the delivery of specific "flavours" tailored to the needs of individual groups. This is achieved

through the effective management and prioritisation of service quality dimensions which is clearly predicated on a broad understanding of the multidimensional nature of the construct and the interrelationships inherent therein.

Note

1. While this view has been questioned (see, for example, Buttle, 1996), it nevertheless remains a popular basis for the development of service quality research.

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