Perceptions of Services Offered by a National Park:
Customers of Nyanga National Park in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

In today's highly competitive market environment, understanding perceptions and purchasing behaviour of customers is a major determinant of organisational success. The aim of the study reported in this paper was to assess the perceptions of repeat visitors to Nyanga National Park (NNP) in Zimbabwe on the quality of service they received from the park, including the range of products and facilities offered by the park. In particular, the study aimed at assessing whether the park met its customers' expectations and if not what areas needed improvement. The study used both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments. Postal questionnaire was the instrument used to collect quantitative data. A postal questionnaire was sent to 500 randomly selected customers who had visited the park. Of these, 250 completed questionnaires were returned and 200 were found to be usable. Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews and visitors' comment reports. In-depth interviews were held with 9 park managers and personnel who interfaced with visitors to NNP. Visitor comment books in each lodge were also reviewed. The findings revealed highly satisfied customers with service encounters with personnel of the park. There were deficiencies in the physical infrastructure and equipment provided by the park. These badly needed refurbishment and replacement. The paper concludes by recommending that top management must have a strategic focus, and develop a strategic business plan, which has a marketing orientation so that customers to NNP are not only delighted of the high service delivery, but are prepared to pay more for it.

KEYWORDS: Perceptions, Service Quality, Competitive Market Environment, Government Funding, Visitors Satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive market environment, understanding of expectations and purchasing behaviour of customers is a major determinant of organisational success, and national parks are no exceptions. This is particularly important with the advent of globalisation, which has resulted in increased competition in the tourism sector and reduced government's funding to national parks. In order for national parks to ensure their own survival, they need to transform themselves from wholly government-owned and funded entities to self-sufficient, profitable commercial organisations. Zimbabwe's economy in general and tourism in particular is characterised by unstable economic and socio-political environment since the Zimbabwean government's implementation of the land reform programme in 2000. These macro-economic factors have impacted national parks negatively too. For example, there was a drastic drop (41%) in the number of international visitors to the NNP in 2000, compared to 1999 (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2001). There has, however, been an increase in domestic tourists visiting the park, as reflected in Table 1 below. The implications of this are that NNP will no longer be guaranteed a stable income; it will need to have a stronger competitive advantage, and pay increased attention to customer needs, wants and perceptions of the resort. NNP is situated in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. The altitude ranges between 1, 800 and 2, 593 metres (Zimbabwe Parks and
NNP was chosen as a study area for a number of reasons. Firstly, the majority of the first-time and repeat visitors to the park are local Zimbabweans (Manwa, 2007). Secondly, the park is of historical importance to Zimbabwe. It is one of the estates of Cecil Rhodes, the founder of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, (Pwiti, 1996) and forms part of Zimbabwe's Parks and Wildlife Estate. It was proclaimed a National Park in 1950 for the purpose of protection and preservation of its scenic beauty, catchment area, and flora and fauna (National Parks Act, 1975; Rhodes Estate Act, 1978).

The park is a unique tourist destination, offering a varied of tourism products. It has remarkable historical and archaeological sites which include pit structures, ancient agricultural terracing, irrigation furrows and ridges, forts, and smelting sites. It offers a variety of wildlife, for example, wildebeest, kudu, zebra, waterbuck, impala and sable. The park also offers outdoor recreation activities, including sport fishing. The only trout research centre in Zimbabwe responsible for producing trout for stocking the designated fishing waters is located in NNP. Four dams, Mare, Rhodes Gulliver and Udu dams have been designated for sport fishing (Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority's internal records). Game viewing, bird watching, horse-riding and mountain climbing are also offered. NNP has valuable scenic assets like the Mtarazi Falls, the Pungwe Gorge and Falls, Nyamuziwa Falls, Nyangwe and Chawomera Forts, Mount Nyangani and Rhodes museum. The park also offers accommodation facilities such as lodges, camping, and caravan sites. There are 49 self-contained lodges situated in four different locations within the park.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the body of knowledge on customer satisfaction in national parks from an African perspective. The aim of the research reported in this paper was to assess the perceptions of park visitors on the quality of service and products offered by Nyanga National Park in Zimbabwe. In particular, the study aimed at assessing whether the park met its customers' expectations and if not at identifying the areas that needed improvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is an intangible product. The lifeblood of tourism is service. Research undertaken in other parts of the world has confirmed the importance of adopting a customer-orientated culture for the long-term success of any business enterprise (Absher, 1998; Fick and Ritchie, 1991; Geva and Goldman, 1991 and Parasuraman et al., 1985). The benefits of a customer-oriented culture are enormous. It enhances the organisation's reputation of offering quality service. Dissatisfied customers tend to 'bad mouth' the company, thereby driving away potential customers (Anderson, 1998). Secondly, highly satisfied customers become loyal to the organisation (Baker and Crompton, 2000). Loyal customers are less price-sensitive, and increase revenue for the organisation (Hallowell, 1996 and Zeithaml et al., 1996). Organisations can rely on the business derived from loyal customers, who are nurtured through its customer relationship management, and can therefore predict future revenue with much more accuracy. Thirdly, delighted customers help in the increase of customer base for the organisation through word-of-mouth advertising of the organisation's services to friends, relatives, and acquaintances (Kotler, 2000; Murphy and Pritchard, 1997).

Central to the provision of quality service are the employees of the organization, who need to be highly motivated to deliver high customer value (Armstrong, 1999; Jones and Davis, 1991 and Kandampully, 1997). They should be customer-orientated and manage good relations with each customer (Gummerson, 1994). The other important components of satisfaction of customers are the tangibles, like the facilities, décor, equipment, and interpretation (Sureschandar et al., 2002; Ross, 1993 and Gronroos, 1984). Facilities should be adequately furnished and equipped to high standards in order to attract the right customers (Bitner, 1992; Zeithmal and Bitner, 1996). Interpretation is needed to anticipate and answer customer queries while exceeding their expectations. The last critical factor in customer satisfaction is customer profiling. This could be achieved through market
segmentation, targeting, and positioning. These factors are critical in satisfying customer needs, wants, and tastes (Fornell & Johnson, 1996 and Walle, 1995). NNP has been operating as a tourist destination for years, but without evaluating perceptions of the customers regarding their levels of satisfaction with its products and services. The visitor comments have not been analysed and addressed adequately to improve the park’s service delivery to its valued customers. The downturn in tourism in the country, exacerbated by the political and economic environment, should have persuaded the park to be more customer-orientated, if it is to survive and grow as a business entity.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted the descriptive survey design methodology. Other approaches were considered inappropriate, since the study aimed at surveying the perceptions of customers concerning the quality of products and service delivery at NNP (Best & Khan, 1993).

**Data Collection Instruments**

Postal questionnaire was the instrument used to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire was pre-tested on 10 visitors to Lake Chivero Recreational Park in Harare, which offers facilities such as lodges and chalets which are similar to those offered to customers who visit NNP. The results from the pilot study helped in the revision and improvement of the questionnaire. Out of the 500 questionnaires posted, 250 were returned, of which 200 were found to be usable. This was considered to be a good sample size that provided reliable and valid data to enable the researchers to reach valid conclusions concerning perceptions of the quality of service at NNP by tourists who were familiar with the park (Cohen and Manion, 1995). The questionnaire’s target population was customers who had visited the park during the last five years and had spent a night at the park. We believed that repeat visitors to the park would have a better understanding of the quality of service offered by the park (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). The reservations register was used to obtain customer details. A sample size of 35% (500 respondents) of the population was selected using random sampling. We specifically targeted domestic visitors to the park. In-depth interviews were also held with nine National Park managers and personnel (a Warden, an Ecologist, a Tourist Officer, a Provincial Officer, and some 5 Scouts) who interfaced with customers who visited the park. Visitor comment books in each lodge were also reviewed. This was to take cognisance of the fact that the country was experiencing a decline in tourist arrivals hence it was not attracting as many tourists as it would have wanted (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2002). The synthesis was also intended to establish how the comments coincided or diverged from the responses obtained through the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was analysed using the Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) where descriptive statistics was used. In-depth interviews and the visitors’ comments were content analysed to arrive at themes.

**FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

**Tourist profiles**

The majority of tourists at NNP were domestic tourists. This was in contradiction to findings from Botswana, Kenya, and Namibia where research had shown that visitors to national parks were mainly international tourists (Barnes et al., 1997; Mmopelwa et al., 2006; Navrud and Mungatana, 1994). Zimbabwe is not currently popular with international tourists. The park attracted more married couples (81%) than single people. When participants were classified by age, the park attracted relatively young couples; 42.2% were in the 30-35 age brackets, 31% was in the 36-41 age brackets; 10% was below 30 years. Only 16.2% was over 41 years. What these results show is the changing nature of Zimbabwean tastes and values. Unlike the older generation who did not go on holiday, (Child and Heath, 1989) the younger generation spend their leisure time in travel and tourism.
Advertising Media

The results showed that visitors to the park first heard about the park from other people who had visited the park before, ‘word-of-mouth’ (72%). Only 28% were informed about the park through the print media. Respondents also suggested the use of the internet to publicise the park. The publicity should capitalise on the park’s strategic assets such as Mtarazi Falls, Pungwe Gorge and falls and Mt Nyanga. In addition, they suggested setting up a good interpretation centre in the proximity of the park.

Purpose of the Visit

According to table II below, the majority of the respondents visited the park to enjoy its unspoiled environment (40%). NNP is one of the smaller parks in Zimbabwe which does not have the big five mammals that are a big attraction to international tourists coming to Africa. NNP is still a pristine destination far away from the tourist circuit. The park offers nature lovers tranquil and peaceful atmosphere without the hustle and bustle of international tourists.

Being located in the Zimbabwean highlands NNP offers opportunities for mountain climbing. Mount Nyangani offers such possibilities. We were therefore not surprised that another major reason for visiting the park was mountain climbing (26%). The third ranked purpose for visiting the park was trout fishing (24%). The least ranked purpose of the visit was bird watching (10%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sightseeing and relaxing</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain climbing</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trout fishing</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird watching</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quality of Service and Standard of Facilities

NNP customers were satisfied with the way the employees treated them. Fifty per cent (50%) of the respondents rated the service provided as excellent. They found the staff friendly and helpful (20%) and they were on the whole satisfied with the service provided by the employees of the park. Only 2% expressed dissatisfaction with the overall service. These results explain why the park had return visitors who were able to advertise the park to their friends and relatives through word-of-mouth. Under quality of facilities and product offerings, the respondents were negative about the state of the facilities and equipment used in the lodges. These centred on structural and facilities defects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Comments</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Negative Comments</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent Service</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Staff not helpful</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful and friendly staff</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Poor conditions of lodges</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable accommodation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Stoves/fridges need replacement</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonderful place</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Leaking roofs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lovely weather</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Old furniture, needs replacement</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean environment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Do not cut trees</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good wildlife</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table III below shows, the defect mentioned by the highest number of respondents was the state of the lodges which were in a poor state of repair (40%). In particular, leaking roofs in the lodges were mentioned by 10%. Dysfunctional fridges and stoves that needed to be replaced were mentioned by 20% of the respondents. Obsolete furniture was mentioned by 20% of the respondents. The above results did not surprise us because of the economic
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conditions prevailing in Zimbabwe. The national parks receive all their funding from the
government of Zimbabwe. Since 2000, the government has not been able to provide basic
social services like medicine. Most hospitals in Zimbabwe are not able to carry out basic
operations and patients are required to provide their own surgical gloves and syringes
(www.News24.com), so it is to be expected that national parks are in a state of neglect.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As Kotler (2000) has put it, it is no longer enough to satisfy customers, but to delight them
(Morrison, 1998). It is through the provision of customer value and customer relationship
management, that bonds between the customer and the organisation are created. Survey
results clearly indicate that customers of a newly commercialising entity need to be
recognised and valued, and have their needs and preferences met. To NNP’s credit, which
might not be the case with all national parks, there was a high level of customer loyalty,
which could be taken advantage of and enhanced for survival and growth. This would fall
within a strategic business and marketing framework, with a clear vision, mission, and core
values oriented towards exceeding customer expectations. Another important element that a
tourist destination should have is strategic assets (Faulkner, 1997 and Foster, 1985). For
example, the Pungwe and Mtarazi Falls, Mt Nyangani, and the beautiful scenery in an
unspoilt environment, gave NNP a sustainable competitive advantage. The national park
could build on this edge by pricing its products and services competitively, thereby earning
higher profit margins.

The results of this study have demonstrated the need for NNP to segment, target, and
position its products, bearing in mind the largely domestic market. The segmentation could
be based on demographic, psychographic, and lifestyle variables of the customers. In so
doing the exercise would differentiate the product offering in order to meet the needs of
various customers who have different levels of affluence. Basic to any marketing strategy,
and particularly fundamental to pricing, is the recognition that customers differ enormously
in price sensitivity. For some customers, price is the dominant criterion, but for others
quality, service, and image are much more significant (Doyle, 1998; Crosby and Stephens,
1987). Cravens (1997) has pointed out that the pricing of goods and services performs a key
strategic role in many firms, as pricing decisions impact financial performance and are an
important influence on customers’ perceptions and positioning of brands. For example, NNP
could classify their lodges based on the furnishings provided. So that luxuriously furnished
lodges are priced higher than those with basic furnishings. The higher prices can be
sustained provided NNP’s service offering is perceived to be of superior quality and value to
the customers. A synchronised marketing effort would be essential. Wilson & Gilligan (1997)
have noted that companies that run customer satisfaction as the most important corporate
value were highly profitable. They also noted that the cost of gaining a new customer,
particularly in mature and slowly declining markets, was often high, hence the need to
ensure that the existing customer base was managed as effectively as possible. It is
important, therefore, for commercialising entities to encourage continuous feedback from
customers and assist dissatisfied customers with complaints. This however, must be
followed by a speedy resolution to the problem.

The research results could assist Nyanga National Park and National Parks and Wildlife
Management Authority to implement a turnaround strategy, which focuses on customer
orientation, as it undergoes the transformation into a self-sustaining national park. Adopting
the philosophy of customer satisfaction explored in the study would contribute significantly
towards the growth and profitability of the organisation and the tourism business in general.
Finally, in spite of the recent positioning of the tourism sector as a strategic sector in
Zimbabwe, it remains and has always been highly sensitive to exogenous factors, in
particular political and economic pressures. The unstable political and economic
environment prevailing in Zimbabwe has had devastating effects on all sectors of the
tourism industry, which have been experiencing negative growth rates in both tourist arrivals and receipts (UNWT, 2004). NNP has been affected notwithstanding the fact that it relies exclusively on the domestic market. Zimbabwe currently has the highest inflation rate in the world, its economy is shrinking drastically and unemployment is estimated at over 80% (http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id = 1233&l = 1&gclid = CNGozLf5-4oCFQbclAo8SCPcGA accessed on 22 November 2007). The implications are that the park’s customer base is declining at a fast rate and also that NNP, like all government institutions, lacks the capacity to implement the suggestions outlined above.

REFERENCES


