A SURVEY METHOD FOR IDENTIFYING KEY DRIVERS OF GUEST DELIGHT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- Key drivers of guest delight are attributes that have a surprise value and a
direct relationship with customers’ repeat visit intent and thus a business’ overall success.
It is an important strategic task to determine what those critical attributes are. The aim of
this paper is to provide a method for identifying those key drivers that contribute to guest
delight.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors adopted two survey questions from
Pritchard and Havitz (2006) to obtain liked and disliked service attributes, and two
additional questions to identify the delighted and highly satisfied guests. Drawing from a
sample of guests to a food and wine festival, this research purports a simple but
inherently useful tool to identify key drivers of guest delight through four survey
questions.

Findings – The four questions could be an economic and useful way to discover the key
drivers of guest delight. The questions and their further analysis method evoke personally
meaningful responses from visitors, at both the micro and macro levels, that have
practical implications for managers.

Research limitations/implications – This paper used a survey of festival visitors to test
the method. Further testing on other types of travel and service surveys need to be
conducted.

Originality/value – This research clearly adds new knowledge to the present body of
hospitality and tourism literature by providing a simple and economic way to measure
key drivers of visitor satisfaction; it also offers managerial implications for practitioners
to improve their service quality.

Keywords Satisfaction, delight, key drivers

Paper type Research in Brief
INTRODUCTION

Visitor experiences are complex phenomena. They involve a diverse array of moments of truth, all influenced by the visitors’ unique expectations and evaluations. In today’s competitive business environment, the ability to meet and exceed customers’ expectations is a key determinant of guest satisfaction. In turn, customer satisfaction has a direct and positive impact on the economic viability of any hospitality organization (Torres and Kline, 2006). Thus, all visitor service organizations should strive to meet and exceed visitor expectations in every aspect. However, recognizing that organizations have limited or finite resources, each organization needs to make sure that its primary focus and highest priorities are on the specific key drivers that pleased its most satisfied and delighted customers. In this paper, key drivers were defined as the most important elements in determining customer evaluation and behavior, such as customer satisfaction or repeated visitation intent.

Customer delight, which goes beyond satisfaction, has recently drawn more attention in the service industry research field (Berman, 2005; Arnold, Reynolds, Ponder and Lueg, 2005; Verma, 2003; Zemke, 2000; Schneider and Bowen, 1999; Oliver, Rust and Varki, 1997). Different from satisfaction, guest delight is defined as positive emotional response to surprising product attributes or service encounters (Berman, 2005). It is more positively correlated with customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and repeat purchase or visitation than guest satisfaction (Torres and Kline, 2006). Therefore, more hospitality firms are interested in creating not only satisfactory, but actually delightful, experiences (Torres and Kline, 2006). Key drivers of guest delight are attributes that will have a direct relationship with customers’ repeat visit intentions. Hence, one can under-perform on a particular function or service that is not a key driver and still be successful. Conversely, a destination or property cannot succeed if they perform poorly in the key driver areas. So it becomes a critical strategic task to first determine what the critical attributes of services are that have a direct and significant relationship to a destination’s overall success.
(Gundersen, Heide and Olsson 1996; Ford and Heaton, 1999). The intent of this study is
to provide a survey method approach to identify the key drivers of guest delights
illustrated using a guest survey in an event setting. Through four questions, we contend
the method proposed identifies the most important elements that delights customer and
drives their repeat visitation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two areas of research which have informed the design of our methodology: the
research on customer satisfaction and delight, and studies on destination appraisal using
critical incident analysis (Pritchard and Havitz, 2006). The following paragraphs will
discuss relevant studies in these two areas.

Customer Satisfaction and Delight

Customer and guest satisfaction is a well-researched area in the consumer behavior and
tourism field. In the tourism field, consumer satisfaction has been defined as “post
consumption evaluative judgment concerning a specific product or service” (Gundersen,
Heide and Olsson 1996, p. 74).

The concept of customer delight moves beyond customer satisfaction. Customer delight
is the customer’s positive emotional reaction when they receive a service or product that
not only satisfies, but provides unexpected value (Berman, 2005). Figure 1 shows four
different types of post purchase responses to a product or service on a continuum
(Berman, 2005). Outrage and pain result when a customer encounters unanticipated poor
service, and dissatisfaction occurs when the service could not meet the customer’s
expectations. When customer’s expectations are met or exceeded, the customer will feel
satisfied. Delight is the mixture of surprise and happiness when one exceeds customer
expectations on key criteria; those criteria create memorable and emotional responses that
drive overall satisfaction and repeat purchase intent (Berman, 2005). Past studies have
shown that delight, although related to satisfaction, is constructively separate and more
correlated with positive word-of-mouth, loyal customers, and profitable businesses
(Torres and Kline, 2006). In general, customer delight has the most potential to influence
future customer behavior (McNeilly and Barr, 2006; Finn, 2005; Berman, 2005; Oliver, 1997).

Service Appraisal using Critical Incident Analysis
Destination marketers attempt to gain insights on visitors’ experiences through analyzing their likes and dislikes. However, how best to identify and measure the major elements of such a complex entity as a visitor’s experience and satisfaction are often debated. General questions have been used to assess visitors’ satisfaction levels - for example, questions like ‘I thoroughly enjoyed attending the festival’ and ‘Please rate your visit in terms of quality of food and beverages purchased’. However, these are only gross assessments of a guest experience, and do not take into account the importance of the detailed attributes of a destination. More advanced measurements of visitor satisfaction are the Importance-Performance Scale (Pritchard and Havitz, 2005) and service quality scales such as SERVQUAL (Berman, 2005). Importance-performance analysis and SERVQUAL capture each attribute’s importance but along pre-defined categories. However, those attributes need to be studied and constructed beforehand. Given the complexity and uniqueness of destinations, their general utility is in question (Pritchard and Havitz, 2006). This fixed attribute approach is limited in providing managerial implications for a unique destination or service business.

On the other hand, the use of open-ended questions evokes more personally meaningful responses. However, this has proven to be an overly cumbersome method for producing results that might be inferred to the population at large. Each open-ended answer needs to be manually coded and validated. The idiosyncrasy of the answers may make the coding a daunting task.

Methods for Identifying Key Drivers of Guest Delight
In this paper we propose a simple but inherently useful tool to analyze not only a destination experience, but also the key drivers of customer delight during that
experience (Crotts and Pan 2007). The task is to identify the requirements that may not
be expected by the consumer but will boost their mood to a higher level (Tan and Pawita
2001).

Oliver, Rust and Varki (1997) measured customer delight on a 5 point Likert scale using
one single question: How frequently do you feel delighted when visiting the park/concert?
(p. 332). However, their approach did little to identify what aspects of the consumer
experience might have elicited delight versus normal satisfaction. From a managerial
standpoint, a tool that identifies the aspects of a visitor experience that affect delight,
satisfaction, and dissatisfaction outcomes is inherently more useful. In this paper, we did
not measure delight levels directly; rather, the researchers first identified delighted
customers, those who were highly satisfied and also had a higher degree of intent to re-
visit (Oliver, Rust and Varki, 1997; Torres and Kline, 2006). Next, the researchers
utilized four questions to capture the key drivers of customer delight for visiting a
destination or event:

1. What are three things you enjoyed most about your visit?
   a. ___________    b. ___________    c. ___________

2. What are the three things you enjoyed least about your visit?
   a. ___________    b. ___________    c. ___________

3. I thoroughly enjoyed my visit:
   Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree    No Opinion

4. The probability that I will visit again next year/two years/three years/ is: ”
   0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  60%  70%  80%  90%  100%

The first two simple, open-ended questions were adopted from Pritchard and Havitz
(2005, 2006). They utilize the critical incident analysis method to reveal both the positive
and negative attributes. The questions require very little space in survey instruments and
generate personally meaningful responses (Pritchard and Havitz, 2006). In later analysis,
classifying these comments while employing multiple researchers is a standard way of
testing inter-judge reliability. Question 3 and Question 4 are used to identify the most
delighted customers who have a strong revisit intention since high loyalty is more strongly correlated with a delight experience than satisfaction alone. Being able to connect a subject’s specific likes and dislikes with their general responses to overall visitor satisfaction and probability of repeat visitation allows one to capture what Ford and Heaton (1999) considered *key drivers*. Key drivers are identified by establishing a direct relationship between how customers rate a destination or firm’s performance on a specific service or function by their “overall satisfaction” and “intent to return”. Those specific services or functions are the key drivers for the destination or businesses.

The researchers followed three steps during the analysis phase. First, those respondents expressing the highest satisfaction level and highest intent to return were identified through their answers to Question 3 and Question 4. Secondly, the researchers were assigned to the dual task of categorizing the content into both limited and unlimited numbers of categories and those categories were tabulated. This allowed for assessments at both the macro- and micro-environmental levels. Finally, the relationships between the positive comments and negative comments were graphically linked for visual effectiveness. The graphics often provide holistic insights on travelers’ experience and destination strengths and weaknesses. Those insights may not be reflected in the mere counts of positive and negative comments.

**METHOD**

This study demonstrates the above described technique on a visitor experience survey for the 2006 Charleston Food and Wine Festival. This was a three day, city-wide festival from March 2 to March 5, 2006 held in Charleston, South Carolina (Crotts and Pan, 2006). The survey was conducted online during four days after the festival concluded in March, 2006. Virtually all 8,619 tickets were sold online, with each visitor being able to purchase multiple tickets for different events. In total, 644 unique email addresses were obtained, since email addresses were required in order to complete an online sale. The survey focused mainly on festival visitors’ information source usage, demographics and spending patterns.
RESULTS

In total, 310 completed surveys were returned from the 644 solicitations sent out, yielding a response rate of 48 percent. Among all the respondents, 62.6 percent were females; 61.7 percent were married, and 61.3 percent were full-time employed. The median age was 43, and median household income was $100K to $149K.

In the initial step, we identified 77 (24.8 percent of all respondents) who rated the overall experience as “excellent” and indicated the highest “intent to return” (100 percent) in Question 1 and Question 2. We used their responses for the following steps.

In the second step, using a bottom-up approach, the researcher freely coded each comment with unlimited categories and aggregated them according to their similarities and dissimilarities (Crotts and Pan, 2007). A bottom-up approach could retain those detailed comments which might be missed from using preset categories (Crotts and Pan, 2007). Afterward, the coding on the likes and dislikes of delighted customers was tabulated (Table 1). The likes should be considered key drivers since they are positively linked to overall visitor experience and intent to return. These are the elements that the festival must do an excellent job in to be successful. Among the 28 categories, the major ones were the diversity of the wines, and food tasting and the quality of the food samples, which together represented 39.2 percent of all positive comments given. Of equal importance to festival managers were areas of dislike which generated negative comments. The negatives were frequently categorized as crowded conditions, lack of seating, limited food samples, admission prices, and a dislike of purchasing tickets online. Of the 28 categories of dislikes, the top nine represented greater than three out of five (64.4 percent) of all dislikes. However, these negatives in this sub-sample had no relationship with repeat intent or overall satisfaction and delight with the festival, which suggests that they were important but not critical issues to address. Theoretically, all dislikes shared by guests are important and should be addressed. However, under-performance on these particular issues had no measurable impact on visitors overall satisfaction and delight. Therefore, these should not be considered a key driver.
In the third step, an analysis on linked categories was conducted in order to reveal the connections between drivers of delight and the key dissatisfaction factors. The links between the likes and dislikes of those customers were calculated and analyzed based on the numbers of co-occurrence, such as the co-occurrence of comments on likes with other likes, likes with dislikes, and dislikes with dislikes. To illustrate the critical linkages, the thicker the line between concepts, the more prevalent the categories were co-linked among respondents. For example, 10 respondents made both positive comments of “wine variety/tastings” and “great food/samplings”. Thus, there is a thick line connecting “great food/sampling” with “wine variety/tastings” in Figure 2. The most frequently paired like with a dislike was a positive comment regarding “wine variety/tastings” with the complaint of “too crowded”, representing 5.2 percent of all positive/negative pairings of comments. Lastly, the complaints of “lack of seating” and “too crowded” were the two most frequently paired dislikes, representing 10.5 percent of all complaints. Figure 2 represents a link analysis of likes and dislikes. There were also categories without linkages which represented isolated likes and dislikes.

The key drivers of “wine variety/tastings” and “great food sampling” were sufficient enough that the negative impressions of “lack of seating” and “too crowded”, although mentioned, did not prevent the respondents in our sub-sample from stating the intent to return. Thus, the latter two could be rated as lower priority in terms of improving the festival services for the event in future years. The link analysis provided a wealth of useful information not only for image creation but destination management as well. In general, the results on the key drivers showed that managers for the festival should focus on the key success factors of the event: great food and wine tasting. The complaints on the lack of seating and crowded conditions might be discounted. Those two negative factors were not strong enough to counter the key drivers of visitor satisfaction and delight, wine variety/tastings and great food sampling.
DISCUSSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The survey-based method employing four simple questions illustrated the usefulness of those questions for identifying the delighted customers and their key drivers. The authors argue that this technique has numerous advantages over other, more fixed-attribute measures like Importance-Performance Analysis. The four questions require very little space on survey instruments, reveal both festival attendees’ likes and dislikes, and generate personally meaningful responses that can be analyzed at the micro and macro levels. Additionally, they are validated by inter-judge reliability measures, and when linked to broader delight and intent to return measures, help identify key drivers. Researchers will find that the four questions can easily be adapted to their unique situations and are a practical tool not only for gauging guest delight, but also for identifying the key drivers of guests’ overall delight and repeat visit intent. As pointed out by Ford and Heaton (2001), service-industry businesses need to identify and successfully address those dimensions of guest experience which drive overall delight and repeat purchase intent in order to achieve economic viability. The four questions from this study, when used in a travel satisfaction survey or festival visitor survey, have the advantage of occupying very little space. The analysis of the four questions could reveal the essential key drivers for the overall success of the festival and/or businesses involved, and would help managers to focus on the important service attributes with their limited financial and human resources.

In addition, we also looked at the other end of the spectrum, the unsatisfied visitors. Only six (2 percent) of the 310 respondents indicated an overall moderate to low satisfaction, along with an intent to revisit the following year at a possibility of 10 percent or less. For them, major dislikes included: charging young children to attend the festival, not enough food samples, crowded conditions, and high ticket prices. A unique driver of dissatisfaction was gleaned from this separate analysis: charging young children admission. In addition, it also challenges the previous assertion that limited food
samples, crowded conditions, and ticket prices are negatives that are not associated with
overall satisfaction and repeat intent. As with all consumer research, there are individual
thresholds that can be breached. Future researchers are encouraged to isolate both ends
of the delight/repeat visit intention continuum to ascertain where those thresholds are and
which market segments are uniquely affected. Researchers should be prepared to find
those drivers of outrage and pain, with no relationship to those factors that lead to
customer delight. In addition, the linkage analysis was based on the counting of numbers
of co-occurrence, and no statistical testing was performed due to the small sample size.
Future researchers might explore appropriate ways to test the significance through
network analysis methods (Wasserman and Faust 1994).

A final, but arguably most important, step would be to identify the key drivers of those
visitors that expressed moderate satisfaction and repeat purchase intent. In this study
they represented approximately three out of every four respondents. The purported
method highlighted in this paper lacks ability to separate out key drivers and non-drivers
(those negative service attributes which inhibit repeat visitation). However, the factors
derived from the analysis are a good starting point in the design of a more quantitative
survey method which would allow for both univariate and multivariate statistical
techniques that could potentially tease out the unique effects of each factor.

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Table 1. Counts of Top Comments on Likes and Dislikes (N=77)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Dislikes</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wine diversity/tastings</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Lack of seating</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great food/sampling</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Too crowded</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culinary Village</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Price/expense/hidden charges</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of cafes/restaurants/vendors</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Difficulty purchasing tickets on the website</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good organization/crowd control</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Not enough food samples</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bubbles &amp; Sweets event</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bathroom availability</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking seminars/demos</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Chef demos too pricey/hard to hear/learn</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine seminars</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lack of signage</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall atmosphere</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Parking limitations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday night gala</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful city/friendly local people</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting chefs/winery-merchants/owners</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total*</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>Total*</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The totals include some minor categories of Likes and Dislikes that were not listed here (those less than 4 in Likes and less than 3 in Dislikes).
Figure 1: Guest Perception of a Service

Guest or Customer Loyalty

Zone of Outrage and Pain  Zone of Dissatisfaction  Zone of Satisfaction  Zone of Delight

Delight occurs as a result of memorable, positive reproducible events

Customer Rating of Service

Adapted from Berman (2005)
Figure 2. Network Relationship between Likes and Dislikes of the Festival

- Food Sampling
- Good Organization
- Wine Tasting
- Variety of Restaurants
- Culinary Village
- Bubble Sweet Event
- Crowded
- Lack of Seating
- Not Enough Samples
- Price
- Wine
- Purchase Online
- Likes
- Dislikes