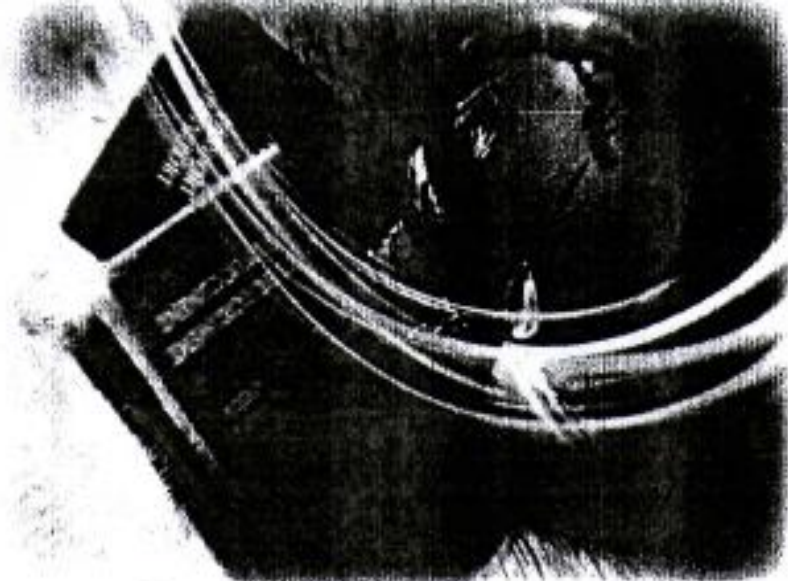


COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES  
AND POLICIES  
FOR TOURISM DESTINATIONS

QUALITY, INNOVATION AND PROMOTION



*Flora Maria Diaz-Perez*  
Editor



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ISBN-13: 978-1-40276-675-4  
ISBN-10: 1-40276-675-5



9 781608 764754



**TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY  
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2010. ISBN: 978-1-60876-475-4

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**FLORA MARIA DIAZ-PEREZ  
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#### LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

ISBN: 978-1-60876-475-4

Available upon request

Published by Nova Science Publishers, Inc. • New York

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# **TOURISM PRODUCT: CONCEPTUALISATION AND CHARACTERISTICS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent decades the route followed by the conceptualisation of the tourism product has led the literature to focus on the crucial role played by the tourist as a consumer/user. In particular, consensus appears to exist as to the definition of the tourism product as the interpretation which tourists make of experiences they experience outside their habitual place of residence (Jafari, 1994). This chapter attempts to classify the concept of tourism product based on some of the ideas posited by consumer theory.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Any definition of tourism must begin by referring to the WTO (World Tourism Organisation), which conceptualises tourism in the following terms:

'Activities undertaken by people travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes'.

For its part, in a definition that complements that given by the WTO, the Tourism Society proposes that 'tourism is deemed to include any activity concerned with the temporary movement of people to destinations outside the places where they live and work, and their activities during the stay at these places' (Tourism Society, 1979, p. 70).

Both definitions are of help in viewing a tourist as someone who is away from his natural environment, as suggested by Jafari (1994). Accordingly, in any analysis of the sector attention must be paid to a number of relevant issues:

- When we think of tourism today we do not necessarily need to take 'accommodation in destination' as our point of reference. The current ease of travel from one location to another in a short space of time makes one-day trips possible, and these also count as tourist visits. We do, however, need to distinguish between a 'tourist', the person who spends the night in the destination, and a 'day-tripper' who arrives and leaves the same day.
- Tourism implies leisure and recreation activities, but should not be confused with the leisure and activities undertaken by someone in their place of residence.
- Tourism should be viewed as comprising not just pleasure/incentive/holiday travel but also all trips for education, business and cultural purposes, etc which involve travel from the habitual place of residence.
- In view of the above, the concept of tourism is necessarily associated with travel. This association has been facilitated by the development of transport, which is currently one of the most important sub-sectors of the tourism industry.

The concept of tourism industry is related directly to that of 'tourism service/product', i.e. viewed from the perspective of the recipient of the service. It covers the entire range of experiences from the moment the person leaves his place of residence to the moment he returns (Medlik and Middleton, 1973).

Bearing in mind the above, all tangible goods, such as planes, buildings,

tourists' needs. These needs can be grouped into five main sub-sectors (Serra Cantallops, 2002):

- Transport: airlines, railways and shipping companies, as well as bus companies and car rental firms.
- Accommodation: hotels, apartments, holiday villas and timeshare complexes.
- Travel organisers and distributors: travel agents, tour operators and organisers of incentive travel, among others.
- Tourism destination organisations: from the political bodies responsible for tourism promotion to tourist information offices and tourism associations.
- Attractions: comprising the bar-restaurant sector, along with museums, theme parks, among others.

Thus, tourism activity presents a horizontal structure, encompassing different sectors (accommodation, catering, transport, commerce, crafts, construction...) on which it exerts direct and immediate effects. However, there is not just an economic side to tourism. It also harnesses destinations' natural and cultural heritage. Hence the view expressed by the OMT (2001) that tourism activity must be viewed as operating as a system, which, according to the Organisation, presents four basic components: demand, supply, geographical space and market operators.

## 2. BACKGROUND

In recent decades, the tourism industry has grown to become an important sector of the economies of several countries, including Spain. Indeed, it is now one of the most important sectors of the world economy. It is labour-intensive, providing employment for many (OMT, 2001). Moreover, it helps many countries attain a certain level of development, brings in foreign currency revenue and helps their economies grow rapidly.

These two aspects associated with tourism (employment and economic development) have probably attracted most attention from researchers in studies of tourism as an industry.

However, in tandem with the above a number of perspectives have been



range of public and private stakeholders play a part in defining and implementing the different components of the tourism offering associated with leisure time consumption by visitors.

The various tourism consumptions - the taxi taken on departing from the home locality, road/rail/sea transport, accommodation... the use of a campsite in destination, a sporting event held in suitable facilities, a concert in a theatre, the return journey, etc - are all elements which are supplied in some cases by private firms (transport, accommodation) and in others by the public authorities (events, amenities, supplies, policing, etc).

Moreover, as Small notes (1993, cited by Trauer 2004), people are part body but also partly shaped by their surrounding environment. Consequently, when tourists visit a location, they interact with the places visited and, at the same time, are influenced by said places and their populations.

Given the importance of all these elements for the configuration of the tourism experience, a substantial sector of the literature refers to tourism production as a systematic reality (Trauer, 2004; Douglas, Douglas and Deret, 2001).

### 3. CONSUMPTION OF TOURISM SERVICES

Given the importance of service provision in the configuration of tourism production, in this section we will examine the characteristics of the services.

In this regard, the important aspect, according to Kotler (2000), is the common denominator of the services in that they generate intangible products, which do not give rise to ownership of any kind and may or may not be linked to a physical product.<sup>1</sup> The expression 'linked or not' to 'tangible goods' leaves the door open to the concept of service -as various authors have noted (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Díaz Pérez et al., 2006; Lovelock, 1997; Kotler and Keller, 2006) - being associated to that of product or tangible good, with different nuances, degrees, multi-dimensions or combinations ranging from the provision of a pure service to provision of a tangible good, thus further increasing the complexity.

Kotler and Keller (2006) give a classification of services, applied to the tourism sector, based on their tangibility: 1) *pure services*, where the offering

mainly consists of an intangible product (service) with no, or very few, tangible goods needed to provide the service: for example, the services of a tourist guide. 2) *Services with accompanying minor goods*, where the main offering is intangible but includes relatively large or numerous support goods; to borrow from Berry and Parasuraman (1991), services involving intensive use of tangible equipment (cable cars, airlines, taxis and hotels): the client does not acquire ownership of any of the objects but does participate in the consumption or accompaniment of minor tangible goods; furthermore, the service is provided using goods that require major investment. 3) *Services with accompanying major goods*, which offer a tangible good accompanied by services, such as the purchase of computer equipment or a vehicle with maintenance or user instructions; tangibles with a low service level, to use the definition of Berry and Parasuraman (1991). 4) *Pure goods*, in this case the offering is simply a tangible good with no service provision of any kind.

A similar distinction between services that are accompanied or not by other goods is established by Buckner and Doerr (1988) and Stanton, Etzel and Walker (2004), for whom services can be grouped as follows: 1) *Services as a utility or transaction centre*, where the bulk of the revenue and the main purpose of the transaction are related to an intangible, as occurs in transport or recreation. 2) *Support services*, which are used to help sell another product, in the shape of client support and facilities.

In that respect, service is a broad and complex activity and is present in all organisations. According to Albrecht and Zemke (1998), Vidal (2004) and Miguel (2002), the differences between service and non-service or industrial products are becoming increasingly smaller, given that no services organisation is capable of offering intangible products alone without the support of tangible goods.

However, organisations exist that supply major or minor tangible components and whose competences lie in the provision of services and quality. Lovelock (1983) even argues that a tangible product per se is of no use: the accompanying service is what makes its consumption, use and physical possession possible, converting it into something useful to meet concrete needs. Intangible elements (services) are constantly being added to increase competitiveness and 'product firms are increasingly becoming services firms also' (Munch 1998, p. 178). Consequently, all organisations must have the human and material infrastructure to support excellent service provision.



Other service activity classification schemes in which tourism firms can be accommodated also prove useful to researchers and service administrators in a number of ways given that they afford managers a better understanding of user conduct and expectations and enable them to design distribution, promotion and service strategies to offer specialised services, among others.

Details are given below of some of the classification schemes, which will be adapted to tourism services. We will look specifically at the characterisation of these services, an aspect already addressed by many experts in services and tourism service marketing, including Albrecht and Zemke (1998), Begg (1993), Cobra (2002), García (2001), Grande Esteban (2005), Hoffman and Bateson (2002), Kotler (2000), Kotler and Keller (2006), Kotler et al. (2005), Lovelock (1997), McCarthy and Perreault (1999), Pride and Ferrell (1997), Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1985) and Zeithaml and Bitner (2002).

These authors present services as having characteristics which set them apart from goods. One such characteristic is *intangibility*, i.e. there is no physical ownership of the good, which cannot be perceived by the senses, even though the customer can see and touch some elements (employee clothing, cleanliness of the premises, furnishings, etc) associated with the service. Moreover, the benefit derived (health, rest) cannot be contemplated via the senses: the client merely purchases the experience and the satisfaction of a need to store in his memory. This, together with all available information, is used by the client in future purchasing decisions and to evaluate or perceive the quality of the service, even before the service is rendered. Thus, one of the tasks of the service provider, according to Berry, Bennet and Brown (1989), Kotler and Keller (2006) and Lovelock (1997), is to make the intangible tangible, i.e., the invisible traits impose burdens on the tangible. Intangibility poses a series of difficulties for service provision, such as the fact that the services cannot be stored and moved, the lack of patents, pricing difficulties, the difficulty in communicating or formulating service promises (Grande Esteban, 2005).

Another characteristic, according to García (2001), is *inseparability or simultaneous production and consumption*, which for Begg (1993) refers to the fact that the services are firstly sold and are then produced and consumed simultaneously, which requires the presence of the client, interacting with the service provider and other clients who influence each other in the rendering of the service. The customer is thus considered part of the service and can obstruct or

moments of truth, face to face, critical incidents where, according to Carlzon (1991), customer care/front-desk staff in contact with the client are responsible for dealing with the situation and customer sentiments and emotions. For Begg, challenges are also posed when the aim is to offer services to large numbers of people: challenges in terms of delegating authority and decentralising functions in customer care to resolve problems and eventualities. For this reason, Hoffman and Bateson (2002) and Zeithaml and Bitner (2002) recommend managing client segmentation and the distribution of the physical spaces where services are provided, as well as a special effort when it comes to choosing, training, motivating and directing front-line staff.

A third characteristic is *variability or heterogeneity*. Given the inseparable nature of service, the outcome depends on the intervening individuals (employees and clients) and their personality, mood, circumstances and other aspects, which change from one person to another and even from one day to another. Hence, client perception of the service may vary at different times and in different circumstances. Moreover, the provision of the service may be affected by uncontrollable and unanticipated factors and, as a result, what has been planned and notified to the client may not tally with the actual service rendered. It also makes it difficult to standardise the service and establish quality controls. For these reasons, some strategies advocate standardisation by replacing human labour with machinery or personalisation of services as a way of harnessing changes and heterogeneity. In both cases, the costs, the time associated with the provision of the service and client preferences for standardisation or personalisation determine the inflection point, which will need to be identified via complaint and suggestion mechanisms and customer surveys.

A final characteristic is *perishability, the non-lasting and expirable nature of the services*. As García (2001) notes, services cannot be produced and kept, returned, stored or inventoried. In other words, the capacity of service offered at a given moment in time may be lost irreversibly if there are no clients (demand) and it cannot be resold if the guest fails to turn up. In some cases, the minor goods accompanying the service (food, cosmetics, medicines) may be stored, but not the actual service experience.

#### 4. THE CONFIGURATION OF THE TOURISM PRODUCT



market price. Viewed from this perspective, the need to quantify and measure tourism production has led to it being considered, in economic terms, as a production that is consumed by tourists and inevitably has a market price associated. Moreover, due to the characteristics of the tourism phenomenon, an indeterminate number of economic sectors play a part in the offering. Said sectors only form part of the offering if their products are consumed by tourists. Even if no consensus exists among the different disciplines as regards conceptualisation, one aspect we can state with certainty is that the various methodological approaches to measurement have taken the expenditure side into account but not production (WTO). This is the approach followed in the preparation of Tourism Satellite Accounts, for example.

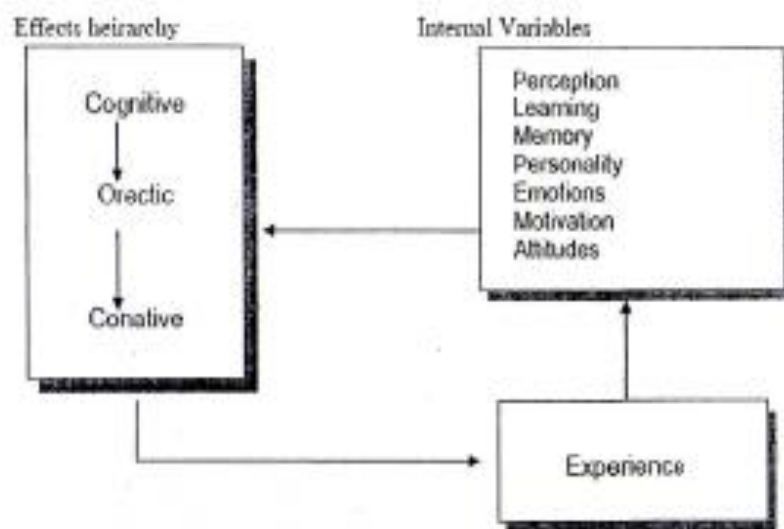
If, from a monetary value angle, the tourist product is defined by tourism expenditure, from the psychological perspective it is configured by tourists' perceptions, specifically in the stories they tell. Hence, the key to tourism production lies in the tourist himself.

In this section we will examine more closely the role of the tourist in the configuration of the tourism product, taking as our reference *Special Interest Tourism* and new tourism.

New tourism (Poon, 1993) is based on three principles: production flexibility, the sustainability of the destination and personalisation in consumption. Under this new concept, strategies guiding tourism production and marketing are related to elements such as the following (Díaz Pérez et al., 2006):

- a) Gearing of the product to the consumer/user
- b) Response to market segmentation
- c) Application of the total quality concept
- d) Transfer of decision-making to employees
- e) Zero defect
- f) Production management
- g) Diagonal integration
- h) Strategic alliances
- i) Associations for information

concrete activity or activities, or on specific destinations or places. In accordance with Schiffman and Kanuk (1997), 'decision-making' is taken to mean the process influenced by internal variables (perception, learning, memory, personality, emotions, motivation and attitudes) as well as all other, external variables.



Schiffman and Kanuk (1997).

Figure 1. Decision-making process.

Along the same lines, authors such as Opaschowski (2001) have expressed the opinion that 'tourists seek emotional stimulus, they want to buy emotions, perceptions, not products'. Consequently, according to the same author, holidays have ceased being for a tourist an escape from daily life but rather have become the quest for

- 1) Enrichment of personal life
- 2) Happiness
- 3) Paradise

In short, a search for stimuli or emotions associated with the idea of quality of

- 2) The tourism demand system
- 3) The tourism supply system
- 4) The media

The concept of SIT thus captures the complexity of the tourism phenomenon, while at the same time reflecting the tenets of new tourism to the extent that a relevant role is accorded to the perceptions of the tourist as a consumer. Moreover, as an idea it is in keeping with the requirements enailed in tourism management of destinations as a unit. The contribution made by the concept of SIT can be summarised as follows (Díaz Pérez et al., 2006, p. 131):

- a) It reflects the functioning of the sector as a system
- b) It is an adequate definition for approaching policy design for a tourism destination
- c) It includes the main characteristics of new tourism

SIT presupposes the existence of three systems (global, demand and supply) at play in tourism production which interact to produce the tourism phenomenon. The notion of a system means that all the component parts are needed to achieve the intended goal, in this case the production and consumption of tourism services. Regarding this system approach, Poon (1993) defined a competitiveness model for tourism in which the different levels are superimposed. She referred to, on the one hand, the competitive strategies of the tourism business and, on the other, those of the destination. According to the author, these strategies need to be combined to cater for the motivations and desires of the tourists.

## THE COMPONENTS OF TOURISM PRODUCTION

Bearing in mind the ideas arising from the concept of new tourism and definition of SIT, in this section we will examine the components of tourism production.

Although the introductory explanations above have already highlighted the complexity of the tourism phenomenon, we will try and break down the total system referred to in SIT and its inherent synergies, in order to understand and appraise the function corresponding to each of the different stakeholders involved.

- The trip itself, namely, the journey by the tourist from the point of origin to the destination and the return journey. Here, transport plays a fundamental role.
- The destination itself and all it offers: the various tangible and intangible elements influencing the perception of the tourist.
- The tourist and his expectations, perceptions and interpretations of the experience, i.e., his motivation, emotions..., plus the availability of the required means and equipment.
- The media and its role in informing and shaping the image which the tourist forms of the destination prior to travel.

The above components are not watertight compartments that operate in isolation in tourism production and consumption. Rather their role in tourism production is justified because they are parts of a system resulting in the tourist experience that is consumed.

Let us look at each component in turn. Firstly, the trip. This encompasses the travel agents; the firms that sell the different travel-related services; transport, namely, the companies that move passengers from one location to another; and the different infrastructures that make the journey possible. The table below sets out the components of the trip:

Trip components

<p><i>Travel Agencies</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wholesale: tour operators</li> <li>• Retail</li> </ul> <p><i>Transport</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Airlines</li> <li>• Railways</li> <li>• Shipping companies</li> <li>• Car Hire firms</li> <li>• Taxi firms</li> </ul>	<p><i>Infrastructures</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Airports</li> <li>• Ports</li> <li>• Roads</li> </ul>
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Secondly, we have to consider the destination and all the elements it offers to the tourist. As the table below shows, a classification can be made of the overall



the other elements relating to actions by the public or private sector (in the latter case as part of economic transaction channels).

#### The destination

##### *Socio-cultural heritage*

- Of the local population

##### *Biophysical heritage*

- Landscape
- Climate
- Flora and fauna

##### *Public sector in the destination/s*

- Regulation of the sector
- Tourism development planning
- (Destination) Infrastructure: roads, sports facilities, cultural amenities,...
- Supplies, maintenance services, security

##### *Business sector*

- Accommodation businesses
- Catering businesses (cafeterias, bars, restaurants, etc.)
- Firms providing entertainment, leisure and various activities
- Transport firms (in destination)

Thirdly, we have to consider the tourist, who configures tourism consumption to the extent that in travelling to satisfy his individual motivations, interests and desires, he undergoes in the destination a range of perceptions and emotions arising out of the experience. A potential tourist will, of course, need to have certain means and equipment at his disposal to embark on a tourism adventure. In addition to motivation, he must have the financial capacity to meet the cost of the trip and/or of certain equipment. Think, for example, of a tourist wishing to travel by road using his own car.

#### The tourist

- Interests, desires and motivations to travel
- Expectations
- Perceptions, emotions
- Equipment and financial means to pay for the travel

Lastly, the mass media play a crucial role in the configuration of the tourism product in that they help create the desires, expectations and motivations that lead a tourist to consume a given tourism product.

## CONCLUSION

According to the approach followed in this chapter (that is, focusing on the consumer's needs and anticipated benefits), the tourism product can be viewed as the interpretation made by the tourist of the experience undergone. Taking the definition even further, it is the synthesis of the perceptions experienced, the interpretation of experiences undergone throughout the trip, specifically in the place(s) visited. This concept of tourism production is reflected in the model suggested by Smith who states that

'The model is a potentially important contribution in the debate about tourism as an industry; it also formalizes the intuitive notion of many authors that tourism products are fundamentally experiences' (Smith, 1994:1).

We know that production and consumption are simultaneous in tourism. They occur at the same time: the product is what is consumed and consumption is what is produced. However, since every interpretation is personal and individual, consumption varies according to the feelings or perceptions of each individual tourist. Taking this logic a step further, there are as many tourism products as there are consumers (tourists). Other authors endorse this view in stating that 'the region-destination ... can be understood as being an art museum in which each work exhibited is a unit of the global landscape, an individual, physical and substantive landscape, but also a metaphysical one and the representation, objective and starting point for as many interpretations as there are readers and/or communities of readers' (Vera Galvan, 1998, p. 63).

The tourism product is not just the destination, given that a tourism experience may be the actual travel to various destinations, geographically close or not, over a period of days. Neither is it just the travel, in the strict sense of moving people from one location to another, since this is merely the means to attain the desired objective. Travel is but one component of the overall experience. In sum, a tourist turns to the tourism market driven by a desire to experience, for example, certain emotions derived from the personal occurrences that he assumes will be generated by the tourism adventure.

The reflections set out in the present chapter enable us to draw some



It is a process in which it is more appropriate to speak of tourism products-consumptions, rather than tourism products alone, given the decisive role played by the tourist in the definition of the product. The tourist is the veritable protagonist of the tourism experience: through his interpretations of the experiences undergone, the tourist defines the product consumed.

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