
CREATING MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES
Experience provoking elements in the outdoor sector

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Abstract

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AIM OF ABSTRACT – RESEARCH QUESTION

The consumption of experiences has become increasingly important for individuals in current society (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003). The Outdoor Recreation industry aims at fulfilling this need by creating memorable experiences in the outdoors. As many outdoor companies offer the same type of activities (e.g. canoeing, abseiling, mountain biking), being able to manage and design experiences becomes increasingly important to differentiate from competitors and achieve competitive advantage. Though research has revealed and applied experience provoking elements within a range of contexts, surprisingly little attention is paid to the application of these elements within the outdoor industry. This case study aims at developing a model with experience provoking elements applicable in an outdoor context and subsequently operationalising these elements into different measurement tools to determine to which extent these elements are present within a specific outdoor company.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Theories of the Experience Economy provide outdoor companies with understandings and techniques for optimizing guest experiences (Pine & Gilmore 2011, Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003; Boswijk, Thijssen & Peelen, 2013). This knowledge can be used to fully engage guests in meaningful programs which might build loyalty and commitment. In contrast with the service economy, the experience economy “stages” encounters that yield emotional and motivational states which may become memorable experiences (Ellis & Rossman, 2008). As Outdoor Recreation companies primarily sell a “staged” experience it is expected that known experience creating techniques are readily applied. However, research to potential applications within this context has been limited. Ralston, Ellis, Compton and Lee (2007), describe an integrated model with service and experience factors which can be applied to events and festivals. Ellis and Rossman (2008) introduce a model relevant to parks, recreation and tourism organisations, which proposes attention to technical performance and artistic performance factors. This study tries to combine current knowledge to create a model for the Outdoor Industry.

METHODOLOGY

Desk research, in combination with focus group interviews and expert meetings resulted in a conceptual model with five experience provoking elements: program, interpersonal skills of employees, authenticity, theme and co-creation. Subsequently, a questionnaire and an observation tool were constructed to determine to which extend these elements are present within an outdoor program. The questionnaire consists of 70 items, distributed among the five experience provoking elements. Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from present in a very low degree to a very high degree. To gather data from a guest perspective, a questionnaire was developed to measure the memorable experiences of guests.

In this case study approach data are currently (from March 2014) gathered among five Outdoor Recreation companies in the Netherlands. Different employees of each company fill out the questionnaire for the program the company is most proud of. The programs chosen are programs consisting of no-risk activities with a clear theme and story line. Observations are carried out by three observers as a mystery guest. After the observation, guests fill out a questionnaire, based on the 10 characteristics of an experience (Boswijk, Thijssen & Peelen, 2012).

RESULTS

Preliminary results of the questionnaire show an average above 3 on the Likert Scale on most experience provoking elements. At present, this is in contrast with the mystery guest observations during the direct

exposure phase of a program. At the end of June 2014, final data will be analysed. Results from the three research tools will be compared and provide a company scan which can be the starting point for improving guest experiences. Differences in results will be showed against segmentation differences of companies. These detailed results will be discussed in further detail during the conference.

DISCUSSION

Though focus group meetings indicate that outdoor companies see interpersonal skills of their employees as the most important factor for creating a memorable experience, little attention is paid to developing these skills in depth during in service training. Beside this, experience creation is mainly done by the company using a product perspective while the point of departure for creating value needs to be the individual, the guest and his personal experience. This demands a new innovative way of thinking where creating value for guests starts with a focus on the individual instead of the organization.

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