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Improving Service Experiences with Mobile Ethnography: The Case of two Attractions in Toronto

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Introduction: Tourism destination competitiveness has been one of the main areas of research in the past twenty years (e.g., Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The competitiveness of any destination relies, in part, on the quality of the customer experience that is delivered in its tourist attractions. More specifically, tourist satisfaction is based on visitors' assessment of an experience as compared to their expectations. It is therefore essential for attractions to not only monitor visitor satisfaction, but also to continuously improve the design of the services and experiences that are provided. The purpose of this study was to conduct a service evaluation of two Toronto attractions with an innovative mobile ethnographic method.

Literature: Tourism marketing is evolving at a fast pace. Because of rapid and recent technological advances (e.g., Internet access, web 2.0 technology and the ubiquity of smartphones), consumers are increasingly becoming the voice of destinations and tourist services (Dimanche, 2010). They voice their opinions in blogs, review and rate facilities, hotels, and restaurants, and share this information with pictures and videos on social media. We are shifting towards a peer-marketing approach where consumers are the most effective medium to communicate about a brand and the experiences it proposes (Buhalis & Law, 2008). As a result, it has become more important than ever for managers and marketers to focus on the quality of the experience and to work on experience design and improvement with their customers (Andrades & Dimanche, 2014). Service design has only been recently used in tourism management and tourism research (Dimanche, Keup, & Prayag, 2012; Stickdorn & Zehrer, 2009). In particular, a mobile ethnographic methodology was developed in Europe to provide destinations and service providers with alternative tool to consumer surveys that would provide richer and innovative information (Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012).

Methodology: This research uses an innovative methodology, mobile ethnography, to help improve the tourist experience in two Toronto attractions: the CN Tower and the Royal Ontario Museum. Service design is a customer-based approach to designing and improving visitor experiences. The methodology (Dimanche, Prayag, & Keup, 2014; Stickdorn & Frischhut, 2012) relies on volunteers to use their own smartphones to document their customer journeys through an App called ExperienceFellow (please visit experiencefellow.com for more information about the research tool). Other researchers have previously used and recommended mobile ethnographies (e.g., Hein, O'Donohoe, and Ryan, 2011; Tan, Foo, Goh, and Theng, 2009). Benefits of this method are that we can collect data on the service delivery site, at the time of service delivery, and in an unobtrusive way.

About 50 students from a large urban university were asked to upload the App ExperienceFellow before a visit to (1) the CN Tower or (2) the Royal Ontario Museum. They were asked to identify and rate through the App the various touchpoints that mattered to them, either positively or negatively (i.e., on a 1 to 5 point scale), during the visit. By doing so, they built their own service journey and had to document each touchpoint with evidence recorded on their smartphone (i.e., a picture, a video, a text message, or a voice recording).

Results: All information collected through the App was then uploaded on the ExperienceFellow server. Once all data were uploaded, the researchers could analyze the experiences through the eyes of the visitors, and make recommendations to the CN Tower and to the ROM for improvement. An application was used to graphically illustrate the visitor journeys with a storyboard including comments and testimonies made by visitors. As a result, researchers identified significant points of the service journey. Quality points to be emphasized and promoted, areas of improvement, significant problems were then synthesized in reports with recommendations for the attractions.

Conclusions: This research responds to the conference call for helping destinations and attractions reimagine and reinvent customer experiences. It describes an innovative method that involves young visitors and their ability to easily use smartphones to address tourism service evaluation and identify significant service touch points, from the customers' perspective, in the context of two urban attractions. Different from traditional service evaluation studies where visitors are asked to rate pre-identified items, this approach gives the subjects a free-hand in identifying touch points and in documenting not only how the touch points are evaluated and why, but also how the service can be improved. Rich audio-visual records of the visitor experience contribute to service improvement and service innovation. The Director of the Office of Tourism in Antibes Juan Les Pins found the tool and method useful and promising; he intends to propose to his board that this method be integrated into the DMO's quality control process.

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