

*Andrzej Rapacz**

SERVICE QUALITY IN THE TOURIST INDUSTRY AND METHODS OF SECURING IT

The objective of the article is to define the notion of quality in the tourist industry and the basic levels of quality analysis. Their determination is of primary importance for all measures that should be taken in order to guarantee the quality of individual services, service packages, and the tourist product, which seems to include more and more often also the tourist localities (tourist destinations). The article puts special emphasis on the latter aspect of the analysis of quality in the tourist industry. Its cognitive value is enhanced with the presentation of results of research on quality in the tourist industry on the example of one of tourist regions in Poland. The conclusion stresses the need for activities stimulating quality improvements in the tourist industry.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stabilization of the political arena in Poland in the 1990s and the simultaneous economic development were the main reasons for increased tourist traffic into Poland and increased tourist activity of Poles. In the late 1990s Poland was among the top ten countries most frequently visited by foreign tourists. It was expected that in 1998 the number of foreign tourists who stay in Poland at least overnight will have reached 20 million. The profits from incoming tourist traffic in 1997 amounted to nine billion dollars. This is doubling of the income of 1992. This phenomenon is accompanied with the dynamic development of the Polish tourist market, visible in the growing number of firms within the tourist industry (e.g. travel offices, hotels, tourist transportation services and rural tourism facilities) and in increased competition on the market, also from foreign competitors. This is a good prospectus for the tourist market and tourist services in Poland provided that the level of many tourist services is increased to West European standards. Therefore it may be expected that quality will be an important factor in the further development of the Polish tourist market at the turn of the next century.

* Department of Marketing and Management of Tourist Industry, Wrocław University of Economics.

2. THE PROBLEM OF QUALITY IN THE TOURIST INDUSTRY

Quality is a notion widely used in various fields of social and economic life. We speak about quality of product, services, workmanship, or quality of life. With reference to quality in the tourist industry, we must consider the complexity of the phenomenon. Tourism involves a wide range of relationships and aspects resulting from strangers' travelling and staying at a particular locality, which does not involve permanent residence or employment (Hunziker 1961, p. 11). Tourists demand numerous goods and services as they stay for a specific time outside their area of residence. They seek fulfilment of their needs that primarily originate from travelling and staying in a locality (region) of definite tourist value. The response to these needs must comprise of special offer of goods and services relative to the tourists' preferences and their economic resources. This is reflected in the tourist product, consisting of basic tourist qualities (tourist values) as well as material goods and services offered by various economic units and organizations. This means that the notion of tourist product refers not only to the product offered by a firm, but also to the so-called product of the tourist destination. In this context, the notion of quality in the tourist industry is of a rather complicated nature. Assuming that the quality of the tourist product is the general set of its characteristics, decisive for its potential for fulfilling definite tourists' needs and expectations, it must be stated that quality in the tourist industry should be analysed at the following levels:

- individual service,
- service package (specific range of services)
- area of tourist traffic reception, usually called tourist destination.

In this context quality appears to be quite a complicated problem. It is not just a problem of guaranteeing the high quality of individual services or service packages, but also quality of a tourist product like reception area. Therefore it may be assumed that quality in the tourist industry is not only the set of characteristics of individual services, service packages, and reception area (tourist destination) that make them different from the others, but also the ability of the tourist product in general to meet certain needs and expectations of tourists (Rapacz 1996, pp. 44-46).

Here we should pay attention to two possible approaches to quality in the tourist industry. From the inside point of view, quality in the tourist industry means compliance of qualitative characteristics of the tourist product with some terms, conditions and standards that should be kept by service providers and the tourist destination itself (its local authorities, inhabitants, etc). From the outside point of view, quality is assessed on the basis of the relative reaction of the

individual tourist, i.e. his recognition of offered quality in relation to the competitive offer, coming from individual tourist service providers and tourist destinations. This approach should also be applied by tourist firms and destinations (regions). Therefore the key aspect of quality in the tourist industry is the adoption of authentic criteria of assessment done by customers (tourists).

3. DETERMINATION OF QUALITY PARAMETERS IN THE TOURIST INDUSTRY

Using the suggested definition of quality in the tourist industry as the starting point, a crucial role in its assessment is assigned to the customer/tourist whose needs are to be met. This means that there is a need to determine some parameters (characteristics) of quality perceived by the tourist and making the basis of assessment. Some specific features of the tourist product are created by the provider before the service starts to be delivered. They may be created (and thus assessed) during the service performance or afterwards, which allows managing the service performance process. What is the result for tourist product quality modelling? The more precise the definition and description of the process of creation of the individual service, service package and tourist traffic reception area (tourist destination), the greater the ability to determine and regulate the principles and procedures of a system guaranteeing the high quality of tourist services.

The complexity of the problem of service quality in the tourist industry requires analysing many elements affecting the quality. The choice of elements to be analysed is a primary consideration both for practitioners and theoreticians investigating the problem. Determination of a set of variables to describe the tourist product quality requires research into:

- tourists' expectations as to the product (service),
- attitudes of service providers and the knowledge shown by specialists in the tourist industry, marketing, quality theory, psychology, etc.

This wide-ranging approach to the choice of parameters to assess quality in the tourist industry results from the fact that in practice there is a discrepancy in attitude to quality between service providers and users. The differences refer mainly to the weight of individual parameters of quality assessment, i.e. their position in the order of importance (Coyle, Dale 1993, pp. 141-153). While doing a research into quality parameters of hotel services, the authors noticed that the parameters most important to the customers are:

- provider's sensitivity, i.e. their reaction to the customer's needs and problems,
- provider's affability, i.e. kindness and politeness,
- provider's reliability, in the sense of a fair service offered at the right time and place,
- provider's professional skills.

It results from the above that the customers are most sensitive to the intangible parameters of service. At the same time, the practice of tourist firms proves that their managers pay major attention to professional skills, affability and material aspects of services (condition of service infrastructure). This is by no means a full list of parameters of tourist services. One should carefully consider the list of quality parameters suggested by V. Zeithmal, A. Parasuraman and L. Berry and their measurement tool for service quality assessment called SERVQUAL (Berry, Parasuraman, Zeithmal 1985). However, it seems that there is a need for creating certain sets of parameters to assess the quality of individual tourist services. This would be useful in applying a more objective approach to tourist service quality, although such an assessment is subjective by nature and therefore highly individualized.

If we accept the approach consisting in assessing the quality of individual tourist services, we should consistently observe the same rules with service packages, since the quality of the latter is determined by the quality of individual services incorporated into them. Low quality of one service (e.g. a tourist event) of a service package lowers the quality of the whole.

Since in the tourist industry quality is closely related to tourist destination, quality parameters of this specific product should also be defined. This involves consideration of the fact that the quality of tourist reception area represents a combination of quality of the area as expressed by tourist value and of quality of services offered in objects making the tourist infrastructure. Attempts to reach the high quality of the tourist reception area must involve:

- proper organization and management of the area (tourist reception area),
- proper marketing of the tourist destination,
- environment protection and management in compliance with sustainable development principles.

In accordance with the presented parameters (characteristics) of individual service quality, we suggest the determination of these parameters with relation to such a tourist product as the tourist reception area. These can be for example:

- sanitary condition of devices, facilities and localities,
- order and safety levels,
- transport accessibility of the locality and area,
- condition of environment,

- level and diversification of tourist values and service offer (infrastructure facilities),
- compliance of information included in catalogues and leaflets with the realities of the tourist reception area,
- local people's attitude to visitors.

Because of the nature of tourist product, which may also be a tourist resort, management is of crucial importance in the process of shaping the quality of tourist service and tourist reception area. This involves the creation of such management structures in tourist resorts (regions) and such management methods in the industry that would favour integration of firms providing tourist services and recognizing the need for measures aimed at reaching a high quality of tourist product.

4. ACTIVITIES STIMULATING IMPROVEMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY IN THE POLISH TOURIST INDUSTRY

Recognition of the importance of tourist service quality by entities responsible for the creation of attractive tourist products in Poland, resulting from increased competition in the home market and from foreign competitors, gives rise to the question concerning the ways and means of guaranteeing this quality. The present developmental stage of the Polish tourist industry makes it possible to indicate several ranges of activity to aid the increase in tourist service quality.

An important range of activity to stimulate the process of improving and guaranteeing tourist service quality is the sphere of legal regulations related to the tourist industry. After long discussions and several versions of draft regulations, in 1989 Poland succeeded in passing a tourist service law. This regulates the problem of concessions for economic units in the tourist industry (activities related to service organization and intermediation) and covers travel offices, tour guides and area guides. The law introduced obligatory financial securities for tour organizers and tourist intermediaries taking care about the quality of services offered. The law takes into account the regulations concerning the tourist industry currently in force in the European Union.

An important sphere of regulations included in the law is the problem of categorizing hotels. The current regulations increased the level of requirements that must be met by hotels applying for granting a specific category. The requirements are close to the standards observed in West European countries. They are of basic importance for structuring the Polish market for tourist accommodation services and for the gradual improvement in the quality of these services. The significance of this problem is illustrated by the data presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Hotels in Poland by categories

Hotels (by category)	Number of hotels	Number of rooms	Number of beds
*****	3	1090	1704
****	21	3942	6700
***	236	19650	34788
**	256	10660	20858
*	257	7893	16714
Total:	773	43235	80764

Source: *Turystyka...* 1998.

In the period 1990-1996 there was a 41% increase in the number of hotel rooms and 56% increase in the total number of hotels. The largest increase occurred in the number of small hotels with a small number of rooms and beds. Only about 34% of the total hotel number are those providing services of upper-intermediate or high standard (3, 4, or 5 starred hotels). A significant majority of hotels provide services of a quality standard much different from that of Western Europe. Hotels – no matter what their category – make up only 7% of all registered tourist accommodation facilities. Accommodation not included in any category makes up about 80% of the total number of the 11,000 registered accommodation units. Thus most of them provide accommodation services whose quality differs from West European standards. In this situation applying categorization procedures to all accommodation seems necessary, as in the long run it will lead to an improvement in the quality of accommodation services offered in Poland.

Improvement in the quality of hotel services has been stimulated since the early 1990s by the Polish Hotel Association (trade organization of hotel managers and owners), which grants its recommendations to hotels providing high-quality service. The procedure of recommendation granting involves assessment of not just the material base of the hotel, but also (and primarily) staff professional skills and service quality. The Association is also the organizer of the "Golden Key" competition in which the best hotels are awarded.

The problem of quality in the tourist industry has also been described in the "Strategy for the Development of Domestic Tourist Product", elaborated on a commission from the Bureau for Physical Culture and Tourism. The strategy specifies five major Polish tourist products whose development and care for their high quality and attractiveness should be the basis for the still faster development of tourism and the tourist industry in Poland.

The recent activities aimed at a more visible increase in quality in the tourist industry in Poland has started to bring results. This is proved by the results of an evaluation of the level of tourists' satisfaction with the quality of tourist services offered in two provinces in south-western Poland, Jelenia Góra and Wałbrzych.

This issue was an important subject of marketing research that was carried out in 1996 within the above region. The research – which took the form of a survey – involved 600 persons staying within the area for tourist reasons. The surveyed people were of both sexes who represented all age groups of 15+ and various education and income levels, and who came from various regions of Poland and the abroad. Table 2 presents the results of the survey to illustrate tourists' evaluation of quality of various elements of the tourist product offered in the region.

Table 2

Tourists' evaluation of selected elements of the tourist product offered in localities situated within the provinces of Jelenia Góra and Wałbrzych (% of responses)

Specification	Very high	High	No opinion	Low	Very low
Price / quality relation	8.67	57.67	26.00	7.67	0.00
Marking (road signs, information boards, symbols)	2.67	40.67	21.50	30.83	4.33
Locality adaptation for tourist reception	6.00	66.67	17.83	8.33	1.00
Efficiency of tourist information	2.00	32.00	52.50	10.50	2.83
Communication accessibility in the region	1.83	37.67	38.83	19.50	2.17
Safety	8.33	63.33	17.17	10.33	0.83
Friendliness (hospitality) of local people	21.67	63.67	11.67	2.67	0.33
Compatibility of promotion and realities	3.67	47.17	44.50	3.83	0.67

Source: Rapacz, ed., 1997, p. 157

The tourists had a very high or high opinion on such parameters of tourist product quality in the region as friendliness (hospitality) of the local people, their politeness, adaptation for tourist reception, and safety. However, it is worth noticing that their opinion on the efficiency of tourist information was rather low, since this is an indispensable element of promotion of the region and of proper service to tourists already staying in the region. The disadvantage of many resorts in the region is also their low accessibility, which together with poor marking of tourist routes and roads indicates that tourist firms and local authorities pay too little attention to the problem of easy access to the resorts and travelling around them.

The same persons were also asked to evaluate the quality of selected services included in the typical tourist product offered to tourists staying in both provinces (Table 3).

Table 3
Evaluation of quality of tourist services
offered in the provinces of Jelenia Góra and Wałbrzych (% of responses)

Type of service	Level of tourists' satisfaction				
	Very high	High	No opinion	Low	Very low
Accommodation	13.7	71.0	12.9	2.5	0
Catering	8.7	73.9	11.2	6.2	0
Transport	0.4	33.6	51.5	14.5	0
Trade	3.3	66.0	23.2	7.5	0
Cultural	1.7	35.7	44.8	17.8	0
Entertainment	2.1	34.9	40.7	22.4	0
Tourist information	0.8	32.4	53.5	12.0	1.2
Sports & recreation	2.5	37.8	41.5	17.0	1.2

Source: Rapacz, ed., 1997, p. 109

5. CONCLUSIONS

The remarks on the nature of quality in the tourist industry presented in the article show the complexity of the problem. This results not only from the difficulty in assessing quality in the tourist industry, but also from the complexity of the tourist product itself. Here we should keep in mind the three levels of tourist product quality analysis mentioned above. Even though in the current conditions of the Polish tourist industry the importance of quality of tourist services (both individual and service packages) has already been recognized, there is still little understanding of the importance of quality of such a product as what could and should be for example an attractive tourist resort, a recreation complex like an amusement park, aqualand, etc. It is not perceived that tourists' opinion is influenced by the quality of all services and elements included in such a product as the tourist destination. Therefore it is not enough if all individual providers care for the quality of their particular offer. All other elements of the tourist destination infrastructure used by tourists must guarantee a high level of tourists' satisfaction. The intangible elements of the product, which also influence its quality, must also be remembered here. These include for instance cleanliness, safety, friendly attitude of local people, their hospitality, etc. Thus in the activities aimed at an improvement

of quality in the tourist industry and of competitiveness of our tourist product in international markets we should aim at:

- rapid implementation of regulations to guarantee increased quality of services in the tourist industry (e.g. regulations to allow updating of hotel categorization),
- popularization of trade competitions which stimulate the increase in tourist service quality,
- including people involved in the tourist industry (especially service providers) and in local authorities of tourist communities in a series of training sessions on quality and quality guarantees,
- stimulating (e.g. by trade organizations such as Chambers of the tourist industry or Bureau for Physical Culture and Tourism) the activities aimed at the creation in tourist destinations (resorts, communities and districts) of structures to integrate traders and to facilitate increased quality in the tourist industry,
- support on a governmental level (central and provincial agencies) for all activities of local self-governments in tourist localities, communes and provinces aimed at the development and implementation of development strategies for the tourist industry, whose major element is quality.

There is also a need to continue research on quality in the tourist industry. The most significant task is working out a set of parameters to describe adequately the quality of not only individual tourist services or their packages, but also of such a product as the tourist destination. The remarks included in the article make a proposal to this end, but they do not cover the full range of the problem. And the problem is very important, the more so because the Polish tourist industry faces not only strong international competition, but also the necessity to prepare for the gradual implementation of the concept of quality shaping based on systemic quality guarantees incorporated in ISO 9000 standards.

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