

Customer Perception and Health Tourism in Karnataka

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Introduction

The main intension of this paper is analysing the various related to customer perception towards tourism, particularly health tourism. In this paper the reviews of past studies relevant to overall tourism, Indian tourism industry, Karnataka tourism and health tourism were discussed. Customer perception is important for any industry and this is important in the case of health tourism, a service industry.

Customer Perception

A customer is the king of any business as the growth of business is a function of customer delight and retention. The success in business ultimately depends on what customers finally choose to buy. Thus, it is vitally important to understand the psychology of customers as to why they choose to buy one product when compared to another and why they purchase a particular product (Rust et al., 1999). Since a customer's decisions are the direct functions of the customer's cognition, customer preference, and perception. Each one is important to identify the pre and post-purchase behaviour to determine customer satisfaction. Needless to say, it is a complex process to find the behaviour of a customer in the service industry as it involves several steps to send a tourist delighted from the host destination region.

Preference is the positive attitude of a customer towards a particular service, mainly the choice of the tourists for a particular service whereas customer perception is certain beliefs about service that function as standards or reference points against which performance is judged. Because, customers tend to compare their perceptions of performance with these reference points when evaluating service quality (Zeitaml and Bitner, 2000).

Thus, customer preference and perceptions are the first and possibly, most critical step in delivering quality services. Quality services can lead to customer satisfaction, and satisfied customers can be retained and only retained customers can become loyal to the service providers. During the service delivery, customers overall experience are affected by various potential interactions such as interactions with service personnel, interactions with internal and external physical surroundings (including equipments), and interactions with other customers. On the other hand, consumers make their decisions based upon their perceptions regardless of their accuracy or inaccuracy. It is around these perceptions that marketers must build their competitive strategies. Customer preference analysis is really a call to action. By understanding the preference or expectations of customers, the organisation or resort can design strategies that are truly responsive to vital customer expectations that can differentiate in the market place (Recklies, 2006).

Tourism Industry

Tourism industry in India plays a significant role in transforming the society and economy. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's oft-quoted remark, namely "welcome a tourist and send back a friend" has been the essence of Indian tourism approach in the post independence era. Tourism as an industry has great potential to bring about social and cultural development.

Tourism product and service

Tourism is a service industry with typical features. The service qualities of the tourism industry are determined by the integration of service providers at both the forward and backward link points. The salient inherent challenges of tourism marketing are how the information of tourism product is communicated to the customers. The challenges before the service provider are to understand the need, preference, and demand in order to deliver the products that suit the customer needs. Thus, it is an uphill task of the tourism intermediaries to ensure service quality as it is controlled by peculiar characters such as heterogeneity, intangibility, inseparability, seasonality, perishability, and lack of ownership. Given the peculiar features, marketing can be used as a tool to sensitise actual and potential customers with regard to the merits of products and services, as the industry is highly competitive in the present global scenario. Tourism products are the sum total of physical and psychological perceptions that are associated with travel motivation which satisfy the tourist needs. Tourism also provides a platform for both the customer as well as the service provider to directly

interact at the time of delivery of services. Various travel motivators give shape to different tourism products. They include fairs, festivals, beaches, wildlife, adventure sports, yoga, spas, conventions, conferences, and shopping. Accessibility, amenities, and facilities for tourists, and climate, natural, and cultural resources also influence a customer's purchasing decision (Jacob et al., 2007). Nevertheless, all the efforts of service providers aim at catering to the customer needs as a customer is regarded as God. Moreover the true symbolism of "Athithi Devo Bhavo" or "A guest is a God" is deep rooted in India's value and ethos. More importantly, a customer is renamed as a tourist who is greeted and treated as a God in the true sense in India. Thus, customer is the key player in this service industry. In the past few decades, tourism has experienced sustained growth around the world. It is one of the largest and fastest growing economic change agents, thereby contributing enormously to the International trade and commerce. Generation of revenue from the International tourism is so huge that it holds the fourth place after petroleum products, chemicals, and automobile products. For developing and third world countries, it is one of the primary income and employment resource sectors, since tourism is acknowledged as a major driver of economic development for its multiplier effect. Tourism is an extrinsic social phenomenon and an intrinsic mental phenomenon. It is about the transitory movement of people across geographic and cultural landscapes for an experience and the mental transformation. Thus, the nature of tourism is complex and its scope is very wide (B.P.George and S.K.Swain, 2005).

Background of Indian Tourism

India is a country known for its friendly treatment to all visitors, regardless of their origin. India's traditions, varied life styles, cultural heritage, and colourful fairs and festivals offer an unforgettable experience. India being a vast and diverse country is endowed with credible attractions to entice tourists with a wide range of interests. Moreover, visiting India gives an enthralling and memorable experience. The country is a tourist paradise and it has all the unique features of modernity and traditional hospitality. Tradition and modernity have blended here resulting in it becoming a tourist paradise (Jacob, 2008)

Health tourism

Medical travel is often undertaken in combination with tourism services. However, it is estimated that the business of health tourism is very huge as US \$ 40 billion worldwide (2004) with an expected annual growth rate of 20 per cent. Health care is an area in which the tourism industry can take advantage as it is a thriving sector in the new globalization and liberalization. International travel for health purposes becomes a way of life for new age Western and Asian tourists. India is on the threshold of a health care revolution and the country is emerging as a global destination for medical tourists. Health tourism is an emerging concept and is still at the nascent stage. Governments are increasingly concerned about their readiness to meet their social obligations in the health sector. Complimenting health care with tourism is the new mantra that has seen foreigners flocking to India for treatment (R.Pruthi, 2006). Health industry data (CII-Mckinsey, 2003) show that the total health care market in India is expected to rise from the current Rs.1,030 billion (5.2 per cent of GDP) to Rs.2,320 billion to Rs.3,200 billion. As a result, India would spend 6.2 – 8.5 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on health care by 2012, thereby contributing 7 – 8 per cent of the GDP. It accounts for 3 – 5 per cent of the healthcare delivery market (CII-Mckinsey, 2003). Medical tourism in India is growing by an estimated rate of 30 per cent per annum (J.Rao and F.Zaheer, 2010). Health care is estimated to be \$ 3 trillion industry worldwide, where India is in position to attract the high-end segment tourists by highlighting its facilities and services and exploiting the brand equity of leading Indian health care professionals across the globe.

The present trend of health tourism as set by the health conscious consumers can enhance the well-being of tourists through travel experience (S. Kulkarni, 2008). This type of customer seeks to look and feel better to lose weight, to slow the effects of aging, to relieve pain or discomfort, and to alleviate stress or to partake in the use of natural supplements like vitamins and minerals to improve their health. Most health tourism focus on two areas such as pampering and wellness. Pampering involves offering people an experience that makes them feel good. Services such as massages, herbal wraps and exfoliating scrubs where wellness involves helping healthy people prevent problems so they stay well, both physically and mentally (R. Pruthi, 2006).

Health Tourism triggers travel to improve one's health, for the primary reasons of visit to a health resort or weight-loss camp whereas wellness tourism is one of the most ancient form of tourism that Romans and Greeks used to pay much attention to, for the well being of the people. The quests for spiritual

enlightenment of medieval pilgrims or the medical seaside and spa tourism of the 18th and 19th century European elite aim at providing the people good health. Arguably, there has been an unprecedented intensification in the pursuit of wellness in the history of tourism. The consumer survey conducted in 1997 by Health Fitness Dynamics, Inc., that is a Florida spa consulting firm, revealed that 81 per cent of consumers who went to resort based spas expected a property to offer health care services. These consumers actively seek out resorts that offer those services (R. Pruthi, 2006).

Among the factors that make India an attractive proposition for medical treatment is cost efficiency. The estimated cost for a heart surgery in the US is \$ 30,000, however the same could be performed in India for about \$ 6,000. Similarly, a bone marrow transplant could cost about \$ 2,50,000 in the USA while it could be done in India for about \$ 26,000 (P. Begde, 2008). Foreigners have already started trickling into India for medical treatment, thus, various initiatives are taken to increase the influx in the next three to four years. The Government has also introduced various policy measures such as the National Health Policy (NHP) that recognises the treatment of international patients as an export. It allows private hospitals treating such patients to enjoy benefits such as lower import duties, increase in the rate of depreciation (from 25 per cent to 40 per cent) for lifesaving medical equipments, and several other tax sops in order to encourage medical tourism in India (P.K. Singh, 2008).

Another factor is America's fascination with fitness and alternative therapies for health maintenance and healing. In 1997, 42 per cent of Americans spent \$ 21 billion on non-traditional medical therapies and products. In the past three years, nearly 25 million U.S. travelers fought the battle of bulge by using a fitness centre or gym while on the road (S. Kulkarni, 2008). The third element spurring health tourism is the fact that today's consumers are already well traveled. As a result, they seek something new and different in a holiday experience. They often want something educational or experimental and various aspects of health tourism fulfill those requirements.

In Canada and Britain, long waiting lists at home are prompting some to go abroad to seek medical care. There are two clear advantages for India in the field of medical and health tourism. The first and foremost is the cost advantage. The next unique advantage of India is that it offers holistic medicinal services with yoga, meditation, ayurveda, allopathy, and natural herbal treatments. Health and medical tourism are perceived as one of the fastest growing segments in India. With yoga, meditation, ayurveda, allopathy, and other systems of medicines, India now offers a unique basket of services to an individual. It is difficult to match by other countries. According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) India's healthcare industry is worth US \$ 23 billion roughly 4 per cent of GDP. The industry is expected to grow by around 13 per cent per year for the next four years. . According to the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA), India's health care industry could grow exponentially as software and pharmaceutical sector have grown over the past decade. Medical tourism focuses on treatment of acute illness and elective surgeries such as cardiology, cancer, organ transplantations etc.

The combination of health and tourism seems to be a promising and relatively new type of paradigm in India. However, it is facing embedded in Western countries. A notable trend in global tourism has been the popularity of health care holidays. The business potential of health holidays is indicated in the survey by the French Accord group, it shows that at least 20 per cent of Europeans look for more active for health oriented holidays and they would like to find some kind of health and fitness facilities integrated in their holiday resorts or even take their holidays in a dedicated health resort (Jacob et al., 2007).

Medical tourism as a subset of health tourism is generally defined as the act of traveling to other countries to obtain medical, dental, and surgical care or where people travel to other countries to obtain medical care may include complementary (alternative) and traditional medicines like (spa, health resort). It also includes services (inclusive of elective procedure and complex specialised surgeries like knee replacement, heart surgery, etc., (Kulkarni, 2008). Also, leisure aspect of traveling may be included on such medical travel trips. In other words, medical tourism is where the health care services are sought and delivered outside the home country of the customer.

Jabbary (2007) gives another structure of health tourism which explains wellness tourism, curative tourism, and medical tourism. In this structure medical tourism describes various treatments for ailments and cures. The other type of tourism is the alternative complimentary medical treatment. The model mainly explains about medical tourism on surgical and curative treatment.

William Bies and Lefteris Zacharia (2007) opined that a trend emerging in recent years has been travel from industrialised nations to developing countries such as India and Thailand for purposes of

undergoing medical procedures, a phenomenon called medical tourism. Medical tourism offers the prospect of greatly reduced expenses for healthcare as well as other advantages such as reduced waiting times, but there are risks associated with seeking healthcare overseas. The researchers find that self selected medical tourism is preferred over employer – or government sponsored programmes and over the status quo.

Laszlo Puezko and Marin Bachvarov (2006) classifies health services are those used for relaxation, form of stress release and for curing well definable illnesses. Medical or therapeutic tourism involves using the services available at a site for providing therapy, or staying at a medical resort where the minimum length of stay is normally defined typically for the purpose of curing certain diseases. The main focus of therapeutic services, which are typically based on a natural curative factor (e.g. medicinal water, medical care, and medicinal mud), is therapy, which is only complemented by tourist's services and attractions. The most important difference between wellness and medical tourism is that wellness services are used on a voluntary basis.

John Connell (2006) opined that some of the earliest forms of tourism were directly aimed at better health and increased well-being. However, with the partial exception of some spas, none of this has involved actual medical treatment, but merely assumed incidental benefits in amenable contexts. He attempted to examine a contemporary elaboration of the rise of medical tourism where tourism is deliberately linked to direct medical intervention. A new and distinct tourism niche has emerged satisfying the needs of a growing number of people, mainly in developed countries with destinations in developing countries being the main beneficiaries. In less than a decade the rise of medical tourism has demonstrated that the provision of the healthcare can now be globalised like so many other service activities. The trade in health services is expanding becoming more competitive and creating new dimension of globalisation, all elegantly packages and sometimes actually functioning as the new niche of medical tourism.

Rupa Cahndra (2002), examines ways in which health services can be traded in the light of the increasing globalisation of the health sector, using the mode-wise characterisation of trade defined in the General Agreement on Trade in Services. The trade modes include cross border delivery of health services via physical and electronic means, and cross border movements of consumers, professionals and capital. Trade in health services via consumption abroad has mixed implications. It may enable exporting countries to improve their national health systems, by generating foreign exchange and additional resources for investment in health care. It can also help in overcoming shortages of physical and human resources in the importing countries particularly for specialised health services. But consumption of trade abroad could also result in a dual market structure, by creating a higher quality expensive segment that caters to wealthy nationals and foreigners, and a much lower quality resource constraint segment catering to the poor. Availability of services including physicians and other trained personnel, as well as the availability of beds may rise in the higher standard centres at the expense of the public sector, resulting in a crowding out of the local population.

Karnataka Health Tourism

The government of Karnataka is equally keen to position Karnataka as an ideal health tourism destination with its best hospitals and tourism spots. According to the Department of Tourism, Karnataka, the state has an unusual offer of a mix of traditional systems like ayurveda and yoga and modern medical expertise. It can uniquely capture the health tourism market and compete with global competitors like, 54 Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. It has the highest number of approved health systems and alternative therapies. The department has done limited promotion campaigns in the country and in the Gulf, Pakistan and the UK to highlight what it can offer. Therefore, focused promotion which can attract the target countries can lead to an increase in the flow of medical tourists to the state.

According to Vittal Murthy, Secretary, Kannada Culture Information and Tourism, Bangalore has always been the hub for healthcare since the British era. Now, it has become the centre of attraction primarily because of the large number of top hospitals in the city and the innumerable medical institutes and colleges. Hence, the number of medical experts and professionals are also increasing by the day. Similarly, holistic health centres in the city also offer alternate systems of therapy like yoga, Art of Living courses and Ayurvedic therapies.

Karnataka is one of the fastest growing states in India. It is the home to some of the most high tech industries in India. Bangalore, in particular, has become the home to some of India's premier hospital

establishments. It is booming in terms of IT, BT and now, MT, that is medical tourism. Karnataka is endowed with a combination of high – tech super - speciality hospitals on the one hand, and, it has a number of natural beauty spots and ayurvedic spas. The coastal districts of South Canara, Udupi, North Canara, Malnad districts of Shimoga, Chickmagalore, Coorg, and Hassan can provide something unique to the tourists. The state of Karnataka has nine world class medical colleges along with institutions for homeopathy, ayurveda, unani, siddha and yoga and also the best of hospitals and institutes for both modern and holistic medicine. It has the potential to be the health destination of the world (Mathai, 2006). It is of course the air conditioned weather of Bangalore which suits any foreign patient coming here for a treatment. The surgeries in high tech hospitals are followed by rejuvenation therapies in ayurvedic spas or other Indian systems of medicine. The Department of Tourism, Karnataka, terms, Karnataka as –The Garden of Life, as it has the distinction of having the largest number of systems of medicine approved by the World Health Organization in a single country (Karnataka Tourism, 2008).It is the only destination in India that combines world – class talent, infrastructure and an environment that is best suited for healing. It offers a wide range of healthcare options – ultra – modern allopathy, time tested ayurveda, holistic naturopathy, spa- based rejuvenation which other competitors in the field cannot offer (Karnataka Tourism, 2008). The world is increasingly looking at Bangalore as the place for holistic healing. From the NHS in Britain to the largest insurance companies in the US, patients are increasingly referred to Karnataka for treatment.

Conclusion

During the service delivery, customers overall experience are affected by various potential interactions such as interactions with service personnel, interactions with internal and external physical surroundings (including equipments), and interactions with other customers. On the other hand, consumers make their decisions based upon their perceptions regardless of their accuracy or inaccuracy. It is around these perceptions that marketers must build their competitive strategies. Customer preference analysis is really a call to action. By understanding the preference or expectations of customers, the organisation or resort can design strategies that are truly responsive to vital customer expectations that can differentiate

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