

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION ON THE AMAWATERWAYS AFRICA TOUR: TURNING TRAVELLERS INTO BRAND AMBASSADORS

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Abstract

This paper examines the critical role that suppliers and services professionals play in the ability of Destination Marketing Companies (DMCs) to deliver consistent service levels. The research investigates customer satisfaction on the AmaWaterways Africa tour and the dependency of customer satisfaction on partner companies. It extracts highly skilled staff, unexpected encounters and experiences that surpass customer expectations as critical factors to counter service breakdown. Using questionnaires to obtain feedback from customers following river cruises, insights are gained into the risks of service breakdowns and mitigation of such risks so that DMCs can manage their own sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, eco-tourism, service excellence, customer service, destination marketing, service delivery, tourism value chain

1. Introduction and background

Increasingly, travellers can choose from a growing number of offerings and destinations. The ability to maintain high levels of customer service - while catering for ever increasing demand - motivates tourism organisations to expand relationships with suppliers and services professionals. Hotels, restaurants, transport- and professional guiding services are packaged, reserved and booked by Destination Marketing Companies (DMCs). DMCs rely on their package participants to produce satisfied customers and remain sustainable by attracting growing numbers of travellers to destinations, booking as many services and tours per customer as possible. However, the success of DMCs is critically dependent on the levels of service provided by their supply chain partners as well as the continued sustainability of natural environments, which provide the settings for experiences. DMCs recognise that their dependency on supply chain partners presents high levels of integrity risk, which need to be considered and managed during expansion and formation of partnerships. They typically address obstacles in service delivery by building relationships with trusted local suppliers.

Giltedge Africa, a Cape Town based DMC, has such a relationship with AmaWaterways, a river cruise company expanding into Southern Africa. AmaWaterways has a partnership with and the Zambezi Queen, a luxury African river safari cruise company. Giltedge Africa faces steep competition from other DMCs and can only remain sustainable if its partner, AmaWaterways and its partners are able to continuously produce satisfied customers. It is therefore critical that AmaWaterways, Giltedge and Zambezi Queen understand each other's roles and responsibilities in the overall customer offering. As partners, they need to be accountable for service breakdowns which could have been avoided in the first place and which demand expensive recoveries when they are incurred. According to Giltedge Managing Director, Sean Kritzinger (2014): "Service must be more than expected, it must be hand held every step of the way. Our guests become our ambassadors. Our staff and destinations are not 'other general', they are hand-picked elements of quality service delivery that create unique experiences." AmaWaterways, Giltedge Africa and all other service providers in the value chain's success and growth depend on the experiences and perceptions of customers on their tours, in their hotels and on their flights.

In order to contextualise Giltedge's challenges, this research investigates customer satisfaction on the AmaWaterways Africa tour and the dependency of customer satisfaction on partner companies. AmaWaterways Africa regards customer satisfaction as a product of the service expectations and – experiences of guests and considers all customer-facing interactions within the tourism value chain partners. It is a challenge to ascertain what exactly thrills and wows clients into becoming brand ambassadors. Defining and describing what impresses customers beyond expectations gives AmaWaterways and Giltedge Africa a competitive edge. By using the findings of this study, DMCs can get to know their customers better, gain insights on customer satisfaction and improve services to those who buy and return for more of their products. More specifically, this research brings into perspective the types and levels of service customers expect while on an African tour, the impacts of unexpected encounters and the opportunities for improving service to meet or exceed expectations. This study will create perspectives on how to turn customers into brand ambassadors.

The topic of tourism experience is not currently well researched. Ritchie *et al.* emphasise this as a fundamental but lacking ingredient to tourism success and that an in-depth knowledge of what tourists need and delivering this are essential for to create memorable, high quality offerings to tourists (Ritchie *et al.*, 2011). A more holistic approach to customer service would recognise the interaction between hosts and guests as opposed to only considering a one-way customer approach to the encounter (Ritchie *et al.*, 2011). Understanding and studying elements and principles of great experiences and service encounters enhance the tourism business's ability to provide extraordinary service that creates memorable, satisfying tourism experiences (Ritchie *et al.*, 2011).

This research will illustrate the disparity between customer expectation and level of service provided by the DMCs, service providers and the impact this may have on business sustainability. The aim is to establish if services by AmaWaterways and its supply chain are delivered in line with the expectations of the customer. In particular, the objectives are to investigate and describe the level of customer service expectations of the African tour, to identify which aspects of the tour customers perceived to be most valuable and to recommend to AmaWaterways and Giltedge Africa ways to improve overall service. The study will contribute to the understanding of how customers and clients of services are satisfied and in what ways they reached satisfaction. It will further illuminate examples of service lapses and how recoveries can be used to increase the changes of converting disgruntled unsatisfied customers to content brand ambassadors. The study will shed light on the perceptions of AmaWaterways and Giltedge Africa customers, and whether they feel served and cared for.

The remainder of this article will discuss the current context of tourism service delivery as outlined in a detailed literature review. It will then describe the research methodologies and instruments, present findings and discuss opportunities and areas of focus for AmaWaterways to improve on current service delivery and reduce service breakdowns, thus enhancing the overall level of service and customer satisfaction experienced by tourists aboard the Zambezi Queen.

2. Contextual Framework / Literature Review

“For visitors, the service provided by the destination takes the form of a global experience shaped by multiple, frequent and varied interactions between all the factors of the system” (Lombard, 2014, online).

A customer's perceptions and experiences are a product of efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery by the business. In the tourism context, how guests feel after a specific tour will determine whether they will return or rather look elsewhere for their next experience. Service levels therefore have a significant impact on the profitability of businesses. As outlined in the introduction, DMCs' business sustainability is critically dependent on to sustained high quality service delivery of their partners. *“There is no doubt that systems and processes are very important to run a successful business and that*

these elements are also correlated to service output. However, it is the matter of customer satisfaction that is most fundamental to business sustainability and success” (Duvenhage, 2014: p 77). The disconnect between what travellers expect and what they receive may either have significantly positive or significantly negative impacts on business sustainability. When expectations are exceeded, businesses become more profitable, but when expectations are not met, businesses become less sustainable (Angelova and Zekiri, 2011:232-258).

Within the tourism sector, the focus on customer experience has steadily gained attention over the past decades (Schembri and Sandberg, 2002) and (Zouri and Kouremenos, 2008). Various studies have irrefutably shown the linkages between service quality and customer satisfaction (Saleem & Raja 2014),(Akbaba 2006) and (Bierbaum 2011). The critical importance of customer satisfaction in the organisation’s relationships with customers was highlighted by Hansemark and Albison (2004), while Angelova and Zekiri (2011:234) described customer relationships as the backbone of all organisations, and particularly in the service industry.

Zagonari (2009:2-9) explains that service employers require specialisation and a well-educated workforce in order to provide quality service. Managing customer experiences and resulting satisfaction or dissatisfaction requires an understanding of the customer’s expectations of the experience (Kotler, 2000). Oliver (1981:25-48) stated that “...*expectations are consumer-defined probabilities of the occurrence of positive and negative events if the consumer engages in some behaviour.*”

Modern understanding of the concept of customer experience includes Wellington’s six satisfaction elements (Wellington, 2010), which links the understanding of customer needs with improved service and relationship building.

The six satisfaction elements referred to by Wellington are:

1. **Product or service:** The product or service consistently meets agreed customer requirements and meets or exceeds expectations. Customer service progress is continuously communicated in order to keep customers informed.
2. **Sales:** Customer facing sales staff is non-dismissive, responsive, empathetic, trustworthy, knowledgeable and loyal to the corporate team (p. 10). Supportive and honest communication ensures that promises are delivered upon, conveys information timeously and is nonintrusive.
3. **After-sales:** Professional, well-informed, empowered and trustworthy staff manage customer relationships and reward customer loyalty. Customer queries or complaints are handled efficiently and effectively and is supported by continuous customer communication. Customer information is legally protected and secured.
4. **Location:** Clients are informed precisely of locations or destinations involved in the service and access is user friendly and non-discriminatory. Customer safety, space requirements and information needs are well understood and communicated effectively prior to delivery.
5. **Time:** Customers’ time is respected and variations (e.g. seasonal variations) are communicated timeously. Waiting time is filled with activities, e.g. short information sharing walks are utilised when time elements are not within the control of the service provider. An understanding cultural interpretations of time will empower the service provider to manage culture specific needs.
6. **Culture:** Excellence in service involves unquestionable ethics and authentic customer focus. Constructive internal relationships between colleagues enhance customer care and service, while understanding and respecting cultural traits of customers and suppliers ensures respectful interaction with local people (Lorton, 2013).

Watkinson (2013) explores experiences from the customer’s perspective and provides an analysis of what constitutes positive, memorable service encounters. Watkinson identifies ten principles of great customer experiences, i.e.

1. **Reflecting the customer's identity:** humans' beliefs and values influence their behaviour as customers: great customer experiences are built on brand reality and not –image.
2. **Satisfying our higher objectives:** Only through empathic understanding of the customer can their objectives be understood and met. Objectives have stakes, and the higher the stakes are the more emotionally involved customers are in reaching their objectives (p. 72).
3. **Leaving nothing to chance:** Attention to detail is key in creating seamless experiences for customers. An African tour presents many surprises in vistas, natural- and cultural experiences. The challenge for the organisation is to keep surprises to pleasant ones.
4. **Setting and meeting expectations:** Watkinson (p. 93) quotes Magliozzi: "*Happiness equals reality minus expectations*" in his introduction. Positive experiences lead to happiness, while negative ones cause discontent. However, Watkinson also warns that intentionally delivering beyond expectations may cause difficulty in sustainable delivery of satisfaction.
5. **Effortless:** Service providers should focus on making it easy and convenient for the customer before, during and after the experience. Customers need to be practically assisted. Great service performs demanding tasks on behalf of the customer, treating the time and energy of the customer with respect.
6. **Stress free:** Stress causes errors and errors cause stress. Attention should be given to stress and error prevention and service should assist in recovery. Satisfactory service evaluates the individual abilities of the customer and focus on providing what is most relevant, valuable and beneficial.
7. **Indulge the senses:** Exposure to services and products provide multi-sensory experiences and create opportunity to develop a unique journey of the senses. However, sensational intensity and discrimination against individuals with disabilities have to be considered when designing and conducting experiences that stimulate the senses.
8. **Socially engaging:** Humans are social creatures and a personal service gives the business a comparative advantage. Service- and front line staff embodies the business and must be treated as a valuable asset.
9. **Put the customer in control:** Customers want to reach their objectives, and they want to do it in their way. To create the best possible experience, the customer must feel in control every step of the journey. Choices and decision making have to be balanced with convenience.
10. **Consider the emotions:** Excellent service delivery stimulates positive emotions and prevents negative ones. Brand success depends on the customer's emotions, where positive feelings create loyalty. Emotions have to be considered and managed throughout the experience. Customer emotions of trust, surprise, disappointment, regret and acceptance all depend on expectations. Creating strong emotions demand combinations of all ten principles effectively. Understanding and managing customers' emotions are critical success factors in providing great customer experiences (p. 201). Emotions are therefore regarded as the building blocks of satisfaction, and people use their emotions intrinsically when giving feedback of an experience. It is imperative to study and understand emotions when attempting to understand levels of satisfaction.

While Wellington's work is especially useful to professionals planning and designing experiences for tourists, Watkinson's approach is a description of favourable service experiences. Both Watkinson and Wellington highlight the importance of continuous, clear and effective bilateral communication between the customer and the supplier and the significance of a human approach to understanding the service encounter. Exaggerated sales talk jeopardises delivery in the remainder of the value chain. While Wellington's model alludes to the notion that customers must feel in control, Watkinson's model state this explicitly. In addition, Watkinson's model places emphasis on the stimulating senses and appealing to emotions of customers to improve the service experience. From the studies of Watkinson and Wellington, three clear themes emerge in the successful service delivery of the tourism experience, i.e. clear communication, making the customer feel important and in control, and appealing to the senses and emotions of customers. These three themes are expanded in the following paragraphs.

2.1 Clear Communication

Tourists, as any other type of customer, require a personal service which will provide the business with a competitive edge. Service- and front line staff represent the business, and their failure to deliver service will result in a perceived failure of the business. They are therefore valuable assets and important allies in delivering a service that makes the customer feel important and looked after (Watkinson, 2011). If service professionals and in particular frontline staff can continuously adapt behaviour to incorporate the feedback received from customers, results can be improved. Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2006) emphasise the human approach from the organisation's, service professional's and customer's perspectives: *"The organisation's need for efficiency can be satisfied when contact personnel are trained properly and the customer's expectations and role in the delivery process are communicated effectively."* The essence of the service delivery process is seated in the efficient of the three-way relationship between the customer, organisation and service professional. Satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) is produced in the way that service delivery calls are managed. Heskett *et al.* (2008) contributes to the understanding of services by introducing the service profit chain. The profit chain highlights customer loyalty as the primary stimulant to profitability and growth. Customer satisfaction influences loyalty and is driven by service values provided. Loyal, productive and satisfied employees create value. Employee satisfaction is enhanced through support services and policies that empower employees to deliver high quality services.

2.2 Making the Customer Feel Important and in Control

Customers want to reach their objectives, and they want to do it in their way. To create the best possible experience, staff has to make sure the customer feels in control every step of the journey. Choices and decision making have to be balanced with convenience. Dimensions of control such as who, what, when and where can stimulate or dilute customers feeling of control. The key is to balance control factors into what works for the customer. It would be safe to assume that such high levels of customer service would require highly skilled service staff. Saayman and Geldenhuys (2003:83-95) refer to skills that tourism service workers need for high quality performance and include computer skills, arithmetic skills, telephone skills, business writing, listening skills, language skills, negotiation skills, presentation skills, leadership and social skills, organisational skills, interpersonal skills, research skills, ethical and social responsibility skills and cultural sensitivity skills. However, Zwane *et al.* (2014) alludes to a significant skills gap in the South African tourism industry and concludes that in order to improve service, this skills gap will need to be closed. Without this, the sustainability of the industry may come under threat. Currently, *"thirty percent of labor in the hospitality sector is classified as unskilled. While there has been a steady increase in the number of employees in this sector, general workers dominate the industry by 72%. Most of the employment opportunities remain labor intensive"* (Mothiba 2010:11). In other words, while highly trained and professional staff is key to successful service delivery, the skills gap is a real threat, as the skills required to

2.3 Appealing to emotions and senses

Understanding and managing customers' emotions are critical success factors in providing great customer experiences (p. 201). Stimulating positive emotions create means of delivering new delight to customers. Highly unique and positive tourism experiences - to most customers a once in a lifetime achievement - are highly prized. Potentially challenging to manage and measure, emotions experienced by customers are indicative of the relationships between organisation and customers. Watkinson (2013:187) quotes Vincent van Gogh: *"...little emotions are the great captains of our lives and we obey them without realising it."* Influential variables involved in this experience include emotions stirred by wildlife watching and the nature experience.

This intrinsic value that guests link to the wildlife experience should be considered in terms of the impact it may have on guest's perception of experience and service level feedback. *"Tourism is the point of convergence between the economy and the environment. The prospect of tourism dollars justifies conservation and helps to place an economic value on the environment - as such the tourism sector should be a leader within the area of sustainable business practice"* (Alive2Green, 2014). To service professionals, striving to deliver quality means to understand the customer's emotions, and deal with

them efficiently all through the service value chain. The activity of measuring the value of wildlife watching is in its infancy. Spenceley (2012) points out that while wildlife presents an asset value for a destination, the intrinsic value that it presents to the customer is not yet understood, and therefore, challenges persist in studying services during luxury experiences in a natural setting. Modern DMCs cannot ignore the addition of the intrinsic value of wildlife in their offerings. However, as the planet experiences a severe biodiversity reduction, it is not certain for how long the main attraction of safaris will survive. In the age of African development, it is critical to value and acknowledge the human and natural assets and resources of the continent. What impress customers today, may be gone or extinct tomorrow. Future studies in a natural setting have to acknowledge and include the price needed to protect and secure the natural environment experience complete with its inhabitants on a global scale.

Skinner and Theodossopoulos (2011:16) suggest that *“the mismatch between anticipation and actual experience in tourism can sometimes generate pleasant surprise or a spontaneously genuine cum-authentic adventure. It can also produce tensions or contradictions that may be decisive in shaping the tourism experience.”* In other words, expectations not only affect the lives and experiences of tourists, but also that of their hosts, impacting the success or failure of the overall tourism experience. For this reason, it is important to realise how expectations impact, effect and sustain tourism. Careful attention must be given to how the imagination of the tourist impacts the imagination of the host, and vice-versa. Scarles and Lester (2013:2) point out that *“tourists are now understood to play an active role in the mediation of their own tourist experience as well as the experiences of other tourists...not simply passive observers...experiences are mediated to make the viewer dream into the picture. Tourists become co-producers of their experiences...they engage imaginatively or experientially.”*

While unlimited variables are involved in the outcome of an experience, the focus in this research will remain on what guests say in the AmaWaterways questionnaire. Action taken as a result of guest feedback will be described, and further analysis of feedback conducted. Application of the information is a key element in the outcome of the research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Types of data used

This study used a mixed method approach for data collection, which included both qualitative and quantitative data. John Creswell (2013) explains that the mixed method approach is *“putting together the stories of people’s lives as well as the statistics of what occurs.”* Creswell (2012) stated that both data types (qualitative and quantitative) provide a better understanding of the research problem than either type by itself and that one type of data is often not enough to comprehensively address the research problem or answer the research questions. The assumption was that when the researcher combined statistical trends (quantitative data) and stories (qualitative data), data interpretation and understanding would improve on results obtained from viewing trends and stories in isolation. Terrell (2012: n.p.) showed that A Sequential Transformative design to research is characterised by collection of two types of data (quantitative and qualitative) and either type can be given priority. However, *“the limitations of this design are lengthy time and feasibility of resources to collect and analyse both types of data”* (Ivankova, 2006). As the researcher had the opportunity to collect both types of data on the tours under study this method was followed. It was estimated that an accurate, relevant and interesting research would be produced with this approach.

3.2 Data collection instruments

A reliable research instrument produces similar results on repeated trials and measures exactly what it is supposed to measure. Reliable instruments are accepted by the academic community and are used as reliable tools which enable researchers to make generalised claims about their research, to draw conclusions and discuss theories. (de Vaus, 2002). Reliability is an important factor for every day applications in for example construction, transport and education and is also relevant and useful. Instruments can arguably never be perfectly reliably or valid, but they can be valid for the specific

purpose with a specific group of people (Siegle, n.d.). Similar to scientific research, instruments attempt to stay as close to the explainable truth as possible. Cronbach's alpha coefficient increases when the correlation between two data sets increases, thus indicating reliability. An alpha of 0.7 is normally considered to indicate a reliable set of items (de Vaus, 2002). This research excluded the purpose-specific design of an instrument, but rather relied on the opportunity to use the AmaWaterways questionnaire, as one but made use of Cronbach's alpha coefficient to show reliability of research results.

The questionnaire was developed over time within the company since its inception in 2001. The questionnaire includes all aspects of the tour that AmaWaterways requires feedback on. The questionnaire has been designed internally with assistance of Operations and Marketing Departments. According to Teijlingen and Hundley (2004) pilot studies pre-test the particular research instrument, warn of possible project failures and assess whether research protocol is realistic and workable. In this project a pilot study was not required since AmaWaterways had already used and developed the research instrument since 2001 (Schreiner, 2014).

The questionnaire starts with a short salutation and the customer's itinerary- and demographic information. Qualitative questions use a five-point scale from which a guest can select, i.e.

- ☐ Excellent
- ☐ Very good
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Fair
- ☐ Poor

The N/A (not applicable) option is provided for guests who do not want to answer a specific question. The questionnaire provides detailed data on how the guests experienced specific elements and sections of the tour. Since the river cruise is the backbone of the AmaWaterways experience, questions are structured around the Zambezi Queen experience. Although the complete tour and experience is considered, this investigation focuses specifically on the service experiences during the five days spent on the Zambezi Queen cruise. The adoption of the existing questionnaire created an opportunity to use information normally reserved for AmaWaterways sales and marketing purposes. On the other hand, this approach presented limitations to the questionnaire construction, and question types were not specifically designed for the study.

Additional primary qualitative data was collected through direct unstructured interviews. The researcher used e-mails and contacted relevant professionals and service providers directly in order to collect qualitative data. Interviews with the Managing Director of Giltedge Africa, Sean Kritzingner and the AmaWaterways Director for Africa, Jake Schreiner were also included in the research. Post-tour reports written by tour managers and unstructured interviews with the relevant professionals along the value chain further contributed to primary qualitative data collected and analysed.

As tour manager, the researcher was able to perform an in-situ investigation on three of the five tours included in this study. To eliminate bias, this study's focus remained on the experience of the guests other than those associated with the tour manager. In addition, two alternative tour managers conducted the fourth and fifth tours in the five tours under investigation.

3.3 Population and Sampling

Guests who book an African tour with AmaWaterways were the target population. AmaWaterways source markets include amongst others, the United States, Mexico, Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. The majority of tours are booked through travel agents across the United States. Guests spend between \$15 000 and \$20 000 per person on the tour (Schreiner, 2014). AmaWaterways had 16 departures of the Southern Africa tour booked for 2014, representing more than 400 guests on the tour that year.

A census study, which includes the entire reference group, was conducted. Five tours, which accommodated a total of 124 guests were targeted for this research. For practical purposes, the tour groups under study were capped at twenty-eight individuals as the Zambezi Queen hosts 28 sharing guests. All guests were requested to complete the questionnaire, but on the final two tours, most couples completed the questionnaires together. As a result, only 104 questionnaires were completed, representing a response rate is technically 84%. The fact that couples in the last two tour groups completed questionnaires together may have diluted the quantitative results. In the same way this collective completion may have enhanced the qualitative results since some guests would have encouraged their partners to add detail to the open ended questions. According to Mancosa (2014), a sample of 100 qualifies for a quantitative study. Additional qualitative primary data obtained from tour manager reports and interviews with service professionals were included in the study.

The five tours under study were scheduled between mid-March and mid-June 2014. Group sizes are illustrated in table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Tour Group Samples

Group number	No of Guests per Group (n)	Percentage of Sample
Group 1	27	26.0
Group 2	22	21.2
Group 3	26	25.0
Group 4	15	14.4
Group 5	14	13.5
Total	104	100.0

3.4 Data Collection

This research collected primary quantitative and qualitative data through a questionnaire distributed to guests. Guests were requested to complete the questionnaire on the last day of tour, in a natural setting that formed part of the experience. It was expected that the feedback would be accurate and real, since the guest would still be “in the experience”. Primary qualitative data was also collected through unstructured interviews with the directors, managers and staff of organisations involved, as well as tour manager reports and diary entries as well as interviews with service professionals. Additional qualitative data was gathered from service providers within the value chain to contextualise guest feedback. It was projected that variable results could be explained using this strategy.

In this study, the Sequential Transformative design departed with the analysis of quantitative data collected (Research Rundowns, 2013). This analysis focused on descriptive statistics outlining what guests said about the experience when answering the questionnaires. Quantitative data analysis was conducted in collaboration with and under guidance of the Mancosa statistics services who provided the quantitative data output. As the design suggests, quantitative results were contextualised through the use of qualitative data collected (Sweetman *et al.*, 2010).

The qualitative data collection was conducted through interviews and emails with directors, service professionals, managers and tour manager reports. Results were integrated in the interpretation phase (Creswell: 2013 & Biddix: 2009). Qualitative data was collected and used to elaborate on specific quantitative data results. For example, as the quantitative results indicated perceived highlights of the tour to include staff performance, qualitative data relating to staff performance was used to elaborate on the details surrounding the measurable of staff performance. In the same manner, when the quantitative data indicated elements of the experience that failed to provide satisfaction, qualitative data results were used to contextualise the specific outcomes and describe details surrounding the quantitative results. This enabled the research to not only state the outcome, but also tell the story of what happened.

3.6 Factor Analysis

A factor analysis (or a principal component analysis) was conducted to validate the research instrument. This analysis is used to extract underlying and unobservable variables from the primary data collected (Upton, 2014). Factor analysis is useful when dealing with a large number of measures and is based in the correlation matrix of the variables involved. Correlations usually need a large sample size before they stabilize.

The AmaWaterways questionnaire contains 49 questions and therefore with 104 completed questionnaires will produce 5096 measures. *“This is far too much to easily make sense of. Factor analysis allows you to reduce this mass of data to a smaller, more manageable amount”* (Walker, 2008: n.p.). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy and the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was the minimum standard passed before the factor analysis could be conducted (University of Texas, 2014). Since the data was not at an interval and ratio level, measures such as mean and standard deviation could not be used (Upton, 2014).

Limiting elements in the design and methodology of this study influence interpretation and application of results. Additional data collection could include feedback collected at convenient times from guests who are back at their homes after the experience. In this case, more data could have been collected after the tour, theoretically adding a more thought-through response from participants. This process was, however, excluded from the research because of time and resources demanded for such research. A discussion of four additional limitations of this study follows.

“Self-reported data contain several sources of bias that should be noted as limitations: (1) Selective memory (remembering or not remembering experiences or events that occurred at some point in the past); (2) telescoping (recalling events that occurred at one time as if they occurred at another time); (3) attribution (the act of attributing positive events and outcomes to one’s own agency but attributing negative events and outcomes to external forces); and (4) exaggeration (the act of representing outcomes or embellishing events as more significant than is actually suggested from other data)” (USC Libraries, 2014).

Although limitations are present when feedback is gathered from guests, this research regards the data at face value. It builds and develops a profile of the services received based on the questionnaires and mentioned interviews. In this way it remains biased in favour of the samples’ immediate opinion. Future research should include quantitative data from the viewpoint of the service professional and all stakeholders.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Full permission was granted from AmaWaterways to use the questionnaires and conduct the study. AmaWaterways approved the use of customer-facing questionnaires to provide for quantitative data that covered the experiences of guests on tour in specific chronological experiential categories. Qualitative data was acquired through interviews with directors of supply chain organisations involved, service staff along the value chain. To address concerns from AmaWaterways that in-depth interviews with customers could be intrusive and demanding, these were not utilised during the data collection phase of the research.

4. Findings

“There is a theory that the satisfaction of a service customer is given by a formula: perception of performance minus expectation” (Madhosh, 2012: n.p.). The purpose of this investigation is not to apply or reject this formula but rather to investigate and describe the guest experience in a coherent and logical manner while keeping in mind what the formula aims to achieve. With this in mind, the following are presented as key findings of the research.

4.1 Demographics

Six percent of the 104 respondents did not indicate their gender. Of the remaining 98 respondents, gender distribution was 48.5% male and 51.5% females, as shown in figure 4.1.

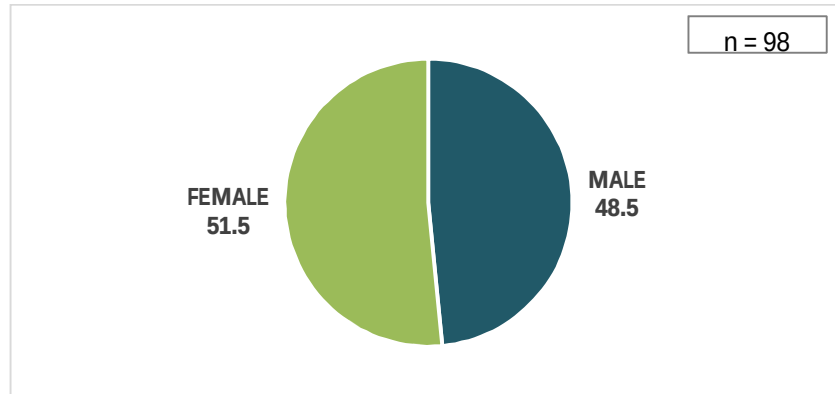


Figure 4.1: Gender distribution of respondents

Figure 4.2 shows that 46.3% of guests reside in the USA, 38.9% in Canada, 6.3% in Mexico, 3.2% in Australia, 2.1% in Norway, 2.1% in New Zealand and 1.1% in France (n=95). Response rate is 91%. This signifies that 91.6% of respondents reside in North America. Since the survey was conducted in English, an element of language bias exists with regards to non-English speaking guests. Considering the country of residence of travellers is critical for planning and hosting of guests. Cultural characteristics, language barriers and visa- and dietary requirements are examples of factors to be considered when planning travel experiences for international travellers. Eight point eight percent (8,8 %) of guests on this tour found immigrations and transfers “challenging”, and a further 4.5% suggested “improve inter African travel”.

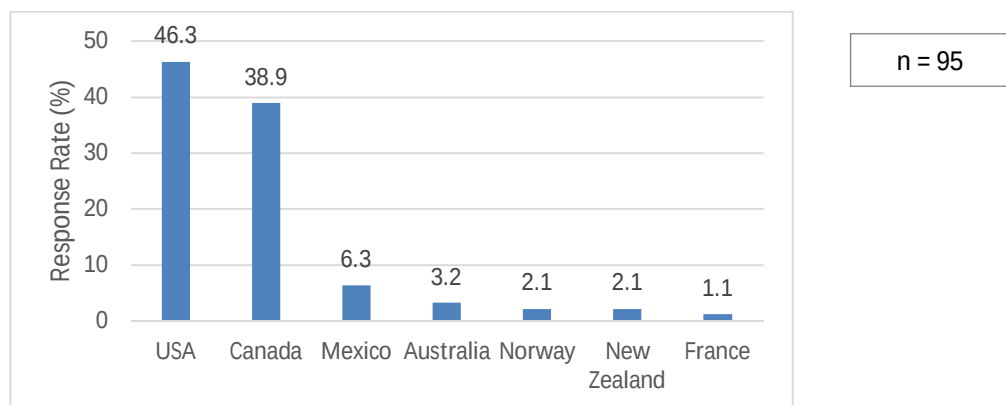


Figure 4.2: Country of residence

Only 93 % of guests indicated their year of birth. Of these the average age of participants was 65 in 2014. As show in figure 4.3, 94% of the guests were over 50 years of age, and 86 % are over 60. Thirty-eight percent are over 70 years of age and 4% over 80. Seventy-one percent of the guests are between the ages of 60 and 80. Guests at different ages have different abilities and generalisations lead to planning suitable guest experiences in specific age groups. The mature age of the sample is important when considering types of service offerings, especially in terms of transport to and from remote locations.

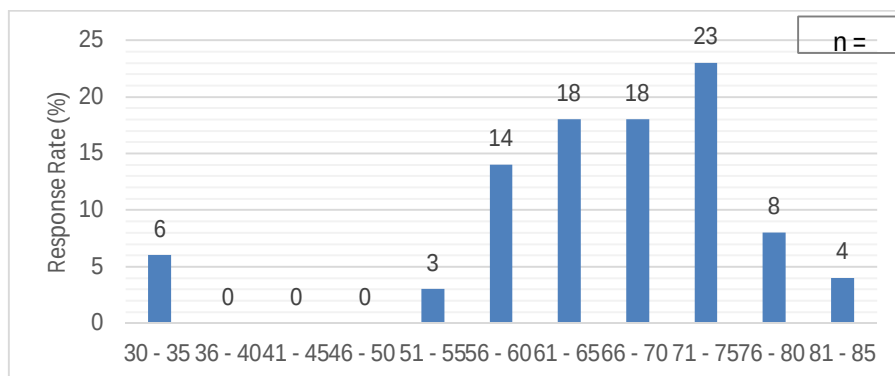


Figure4.3: Age distribution

4.2 Factor Analysis

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is larger than 0.5. The sample is therefore adequate to perform a Factor Analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant, therefore the data is not multi-collinear. It is not an identity matrix ($\chi^2(666) = 2023.918$, $p < 0.0001$). The first five factors accounts for 72.273% of the overall variance.

"What factor analysis does is this: it takes thousands and potentially millions of measurements and qualitative observations and resolves them into distinct patterns of occurrence. It makes explicit and more precise the building of fact-linkages going on continuously in the human mind"(Rummel, 2002).

Fact-linkages based on the factor analysis with regards to the service experiences of the sample surrounds the following factors:

- 1: Friendly, professional, knowledgeable and entertaining service staff.
- 2: The place and atmosphere, including local villages.
- 3: Accommodation, quality of vehicles, program and housekeeping.
- 4: Cape tours, lunches and motor coach condition.
- 5: Overall impression of wine and beverage selection and service.
- 6: Zambezi Queen and safari boat guided experience.
- 7: Overall destination impression and available information.
- 8: Chobe National Park safari experience and ranger.
- 9: Pre and post cruise experience and overall gastronomic experience.

The four research questions (marked A, B, C and D below) were expanded into a total of eleven questions (marked 1 – 11 below). These are:

- A. What are the service expectations of guests on the tour?
 1. Overall impression of the Zambezi Queen experience
 2. Friendliness of staff on board the Zambezi Queen
- B. What kind of service do guests experience on tour?
 3. Dining room service
 4. Bar service
 5. Food on board – overall impression
- C. What unexpected encounters added value to the experience?
 6. Favourite part of the Zambezi Queen experience
 7. Impression of staff throughout your trip
 8. Safaris by boat
 9. Safaris boat guides
 10. Combined impressions of the Cape Town and Johannesburg experience
- D. 11. How can AmaWaterways, Giltedge Africa improve service and meet expectations?

The 11 questions addressed the objectives of this research. The findings are presented below, followed by a discussion to contextualise the quantitative and qualitative data obtained. The response rate (n) to each question is indicated at the top of each graph.

4.3 Research Results

A. *What are the service expectations of guests on the tour?*

1. Overall impression of the Zambezi Queen experience

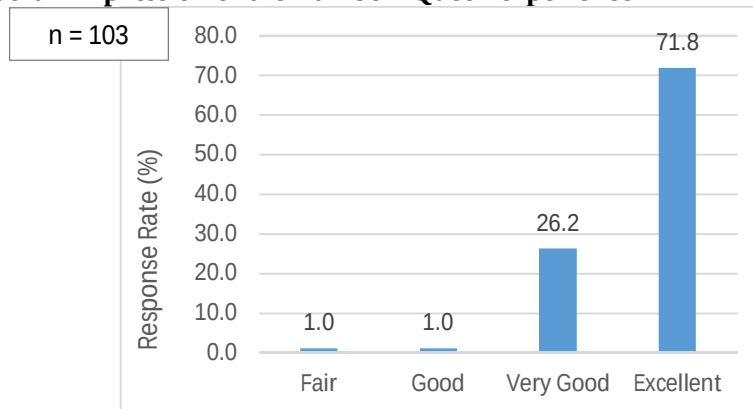


Figure 4.4: Zambezi Queen experience

Figure 4.4 shows the relative rating of the Zambezi Queen experiences. Seventy-one point eight percent of respondents selected Excellent and 26.2 % Very Good. Fair and Good received 1% each and no guests selected 'Poor'.

2. Friendliness of staff on board the Zambezi Queen

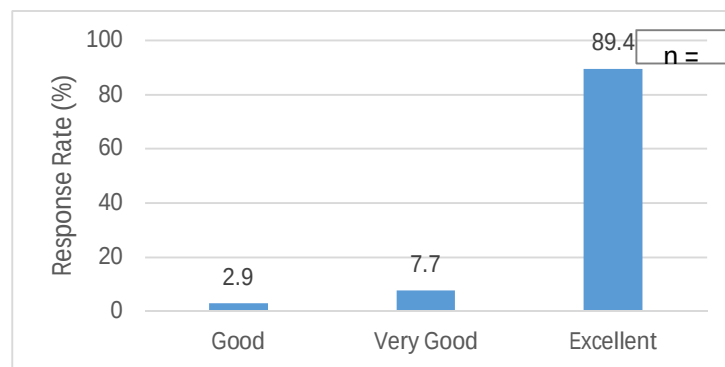


Figure 4.5 Friendliness of staff

The outcome of staff friendliness is shown in figure 4.5. Eighty-nine point four percent of respondents rated staff friendliness as Excellent, 7.7% Very Good and 2.9%

A moderate, positive correlation exists between friendliness of staff and the overall impression of the experience ($r = 0.407$, $n = 104$, $p < 0.0001$). In other words, guests experienced staff as friendly, thus positively adding to the overall impression of the experience. The feedback from questions one and two above suggests that most guests on the AmaWaterways Africa tour found the experience and service exchange positive, indicating that their expectations have been met or surpassed. It is clear that friendly staff enhanced the experience. In line with the suggestions of

the Factor Analysis, free text suggestions of “*friendly, professional, knowledgeable and entertaining service staff*” was a primary pattern of occurrence.

Guests further provided additional valuable information in their free text response, i.e.

- Respondents (9%) suggested “*improve immigrations processes*”;
- Respondents (7.4%) suggested, “*improve Zambezi Queen food and beverage*”;
- Respondents (3%) suggested “*improve opportunity to exercise.*”

B. What kind of service do guests experience on tour?

3. Dining room service

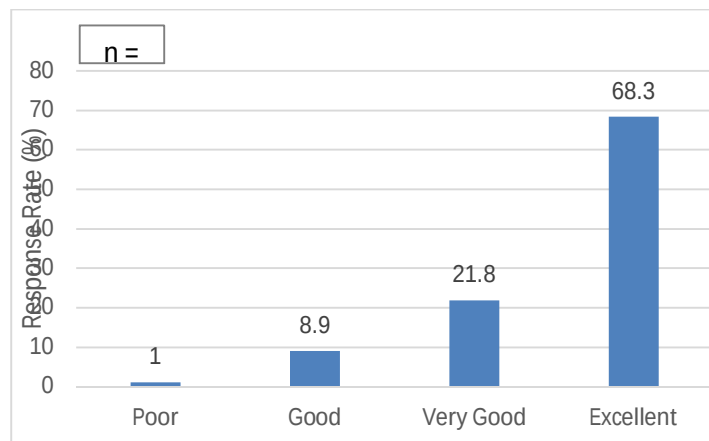


Figure 4.6: Dining room service

In relation to dining room service, results are captured in figure 4.6. Sixty-eight point three percent of respondents selected Excellent, 21.8% Very Good, 8.9% Good and 1% Poor.

4. Bar service

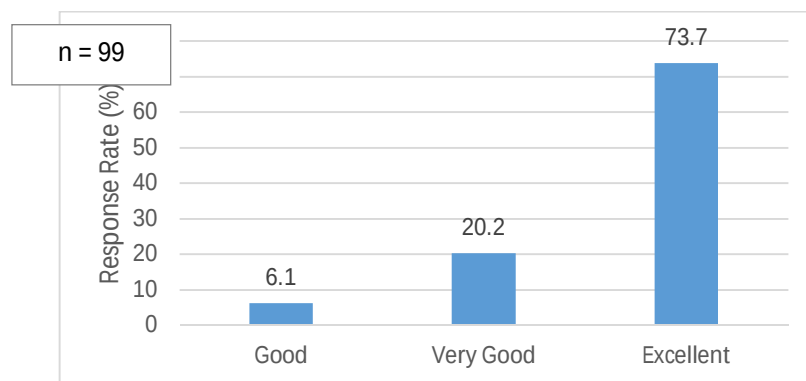


Figure 4.7: Bar service

Figure 4.7 shows that seventy-three point three percent of respondents selected Excellent, 20.2% Very Good and 6.1% Good.

5. Food on board – overall impression

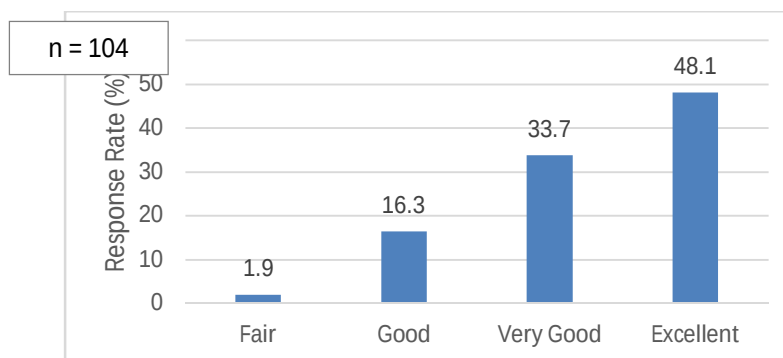


Figure 4.8: Food on board – overall impression

Figure 4.8 captures the impressions of food on board. Forty-eight point one percent of respondents selected Excellent, 33.7% Very Good, 16.3% Good and 1.9% Fair. Kurtosis < 3, indicating flatter than normal distribution with a wider peak. The values are wider spread around the median.

There is a significant, strong, high correlation between dining room service and bar service on board the Zambezi Queen ($r = 0.817$, $n = 97$, $p < 0.0001$). In addition a significant, strong correlation exists between dining room service and wine and beverage selection ($r = 0.732$, $n = 98$, $p < 0.0001$). Satisfaction with the dining room service enhanced satisfaction with wine and beverage selection. The correlation matrix indicates a positive, moderate correlation between Bar Service and the Overall Zambezi Queen experience ($r = 0.419$, $n = 98$, $p < 0.0001$). This signifies that satisfaction with the bar service enhanced satisfaction with the overall experience. It must be noted that the Zambezi Queen bar is an open bar. Guests do not pay separately for beverages since it is included.

Overall impression of food is not as steep as previous bar-charts, with more guests scoring the options to the left of the median. Guests scored Food – Overall Impression less Excellent and more Very Good and Good than Bar Service, Dining Room Service and Friendliness of Staff. When prompted for suggestions, 7.4% of respondents mentioned, “*improve Zambezi Queen food and beverage*”.

C. What unexpected encounters added value to the experience?

6. Favourite part of the Zambezi Queen experience

Respondents were prompted in the open-ended question: “What is your favourite part of the Zambezi Queen experience?” The main responses are summarised below:

- Staff knowledge, quality and friendliness – 16.5 %
- Wildlife watching and nature experience – 7.7 %
- Boat safari – 7.7%
- Boma dinner 4.4 %

The boma dinner was an opportunity for guests to experience the African evening sky and enjoy a meal with entertainment around the fire. At the boma, traditional foods are prepared and a braai (barbeque) enjoyed.

7. **Impression of staff throughout your trip**

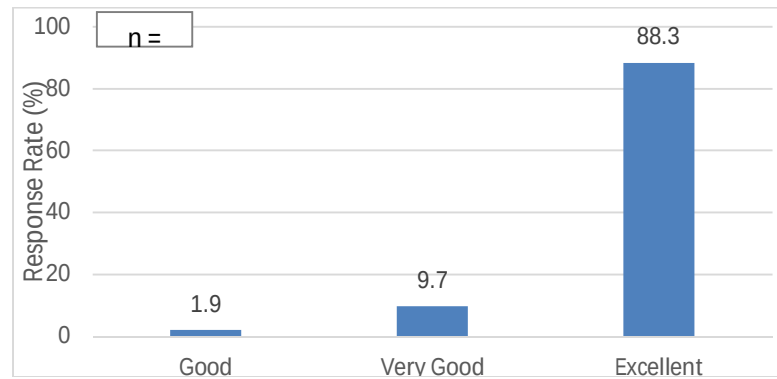


Figure 4.9 Impression of staff throughout your trip

As shown in figure 4.9, eighty-eight point three percent of respondents selected Excellent, 9.7% Very Good and 1.9% Good.

8. **Safaris by boat**



Figure 4.10: Safaris by boat

Figure 4.10 shows that seventy-seven point nine percent of respondents selected excellent, 20.2% Very Good and 1.9% Good.

9. **Safari boat guides**

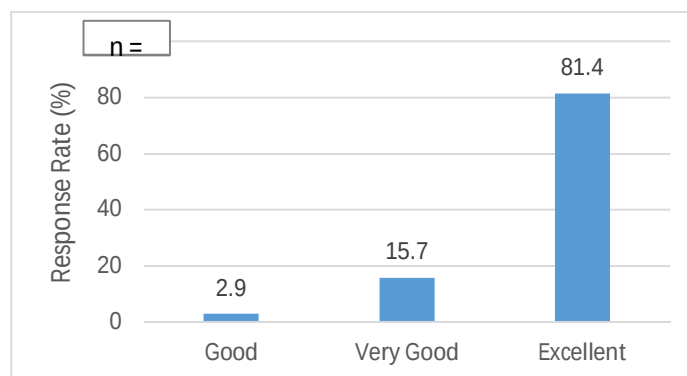


Figure 4.11 Safari boat guides

Figure 4.11 shows that eighty-one point four percent of respondents selected Excellent, 15.7% Very Good and 2.9% Good.

According to the correlation matrix, there was a significant, moderate, positive correlation between Destination Knowledge of Staff and Impression of Staff throughout their trip ($r = 0.547$, $n = 102$, $p < 0.0001$). The impression of staff was enhanced by staff knowledge of the destination.

It can be argued that quality of staff and staff knowledge was an unexpected element that added value to the experience. “Staff knowledge” implies that staff communicated in such a manner that the guests observed and enjoyed this knowledge and information.

The sixth factor in the Factor Analysis is “Zambezi Queen and the Guided Safari Boat experience”. Data suggests that guests were impressed with this element of the experience. The surprise here is not the activity as such, but rather the degree that respondents treated it with in describing perceptions of the experience.

In the open-ended question regarding guest’s favourite tour, 24% of the sample selected Chobe Game Drive and 24% Boat Safari (separately). Another 12% selected Chobe game Drive and Boat Safari (combined) - illustrated in figure 4.11. More than 60% of respondents mentioned Chobe Game Drive and Boat Safari in their favourite part of the experience, followed by 6% of respondents favouring Cape Town’s Peninsula and Winelands tours. Both the Elephant Interaction and Village tour received 1.2% as favourite tour.

10. Combined impressions of the Cape Town and Johannesburg experience

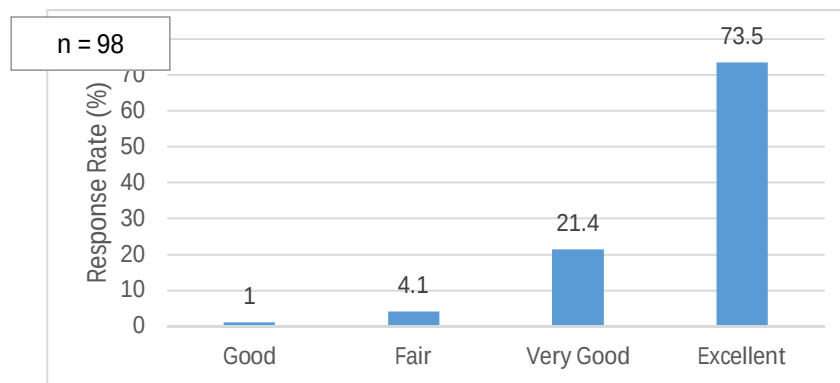


Figure.4.11: Combined Cape Town and Johannesburg experience

Seventy-three point five percent of respondents selected Excellent, 21.4% Very Good and 1% Good, 4.1% of guests selected Fair. Response rate is 94% ($n = 98$).

The correlation matrix indicated a moderate positive correlation between ease of arrival transfer and combined impression of the Cape Town and Johannesburg experiences. Furthermore, there was a significant, strong correlation between ease of arrival transfer and quality of transfer vehicle ($r = 0.7$, $n = 92$, $p < 0.0001$). It is clear that perceived quality of transfer vehicles enhance the transfer experience. Airport transfer drivers and vehicles are the guests’ first point of contact and create the firsts impression. Guests are further fatigued from long flights and crave pampering as the first step of the luxury holiday. Quality vehicles and well-dressed non-intrusive but engaging drivers make guests feel part of a luxurious experience.

Guests enjoyed the pre- and post-experiences to the Zambezi Queen. However, there was a weak ($r = 0.262$, $n = 98$) non – significant correlation between the Cape Town/Johannesburg experience and the over-all Zambezi Queen experience.

D. 11. How can AmaWaterways, Giltedge Africa improve service and meet expectations?

Intra African flights

The approach to this final research question is found in the elements measured with least positive results. In other words, what were the least favourite parts of the experience? Or what did guests enjoy less, and what are suggestions for improvement.



Figure 4.12: Intra African flights – overall impression

Only 28.9% of respondents selected Excellent, 41.2% Very Good, 16.5% Good, 4.1% Fair and 9.3% Poor, as shown in figure 4.12.

Village Tour

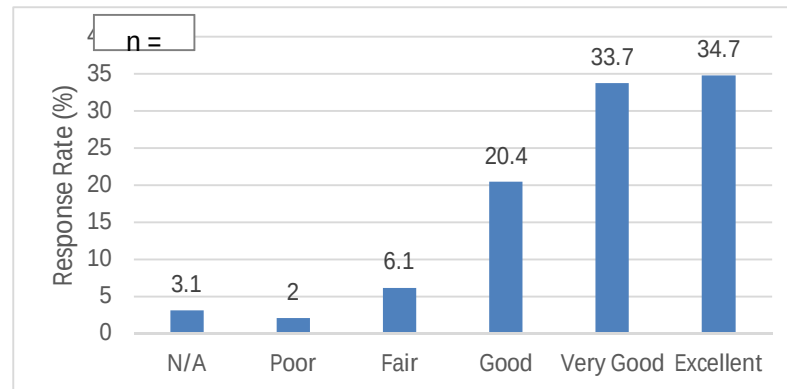


Figure 4.13: Village tour

Thirty-four point seven percent of respondents selected Excellent, 33.7% Very Good, 20.4% Good, 6.1% Fair, 2% Poor and 3.1% selected Not Applicable, as shown in figure 4.13.

It is evident that measured by the standards of previous ratings, guests overall impression of the Intra African flight experience resulted less favourable. The flights concerned are from Cape Town to Kasane in northern Botswana and the return flight to Johannesburg from Victoria Falls. Qualitative evidence of this service failure is evident in the tour report', in that: "...the main challenge on this tour was the issue with the flight from Cape Town to Kasane. Thank you very much for your attention and help in resolving the issue " (Keun, 2014: personal comm.; 8 May).

Bespoke tickets are acquired by AmaWaterways from the United States. By the time of check-in at the airport, some guests were not confirmed on the flights. Some guests were told that they are not on the flight at check in, whilst others were mistakenly checked to Johannesburg only. In this

case the experience was not stress free or effortless, but rather stressful and requiring effort to resolve. Two guests in the sample missed the flight to Kasane, requiring special attention on the part of AmaWaterways at a service recovery: *"We are getting a free Christmas cruise in Europe to make up for the mistake of our names not being in the South African Airways computer"* (Bentley, 2014). On the face of this evidence, the recovery was successful.

Further qualitative data suggests that after-sales service was satisfactory and complaints handling settled any possible service lapses that may have occurred. The location of the African safari did not disappoint, "place and atmosphere" was the secondary element produced in the factor analysis. The element of time was frustrating to some guests who did not appreciate waiting at passports and immigrations control and a common suggestion was *"improve passport control."* Data showed that the business culture of the tour and the anthropological culture of the staff involved were highly valued. Guests found the staff to be friendly, professional and entertaining.

5. Discussion

In the literature review, clear communication, making the customer feel important and in control and appealing to emotions and senses of customers were highlighted as key aspects in deriving customer satisfaction.

Emotions are as complex a theme as experiences. This investigation leans on Watkinson's Ten Principles behind Great Customer Experiences, which was highlighted in the literature review. Watkinson holds firstly that great experiences reflect the customer's identity. Explaining that at brand level people support what they believe in or feel good about. Satisfying higher objectives results when understanding the wants and needs as a derivative of the higher objectives. Customers feel in control when nothing is left to chance and interactions are considered, planned and designed in order to ensure a smooth journey. Great experiences are a result of expectations being met. Through quality communication, vague and speedy promises to sell quickly are avoided. Customers thus know what to expect and service is received effortless and stress free to the customer. Worthwhile experiences indulge the senses and they are socially engaging. Watkinson concludes his principles by putting the customer in control and considering the emotions. Emotions stirred by Africa's mega fauna and the safari setting feature prominently in the results of this investigation. Emotions are ways of delivering new delight to customers – in other words, to expose them to things to do not expect. This further reinforces highly unique and positive experiences which are once in a lifetime achievement and are universally highly prized. Potentially challenging to manage and measure, emotions are tell-tale signs of relationships between organisation and customers. Watkinson (2013:187) quotes Vincent van Gogh: *"...little emotions are the great captains of our lives and we obey them without realising it."* Influential variables involved in this experience include emotions stirred by wildlife watching and the nature experience.

Overall, data analysed shows that guests were satisfied and regarded the tour as a quality product in line with their ambitions. The response rate of 84% shows that guests are eager to participate in the investigation. Customers delivered a wealth of comments and information, of which the essential parts are highlighted by this investigation. Quality of staff and the natural experience contributed primarily to the positive perceptions of the experience. It is important to the DMC to understand and invest in "quality of staff" and the "nature experience", in order to build on elements that provide satisfaction. Skills assessments and development must be employed to keep up with the demand of quality service. Sustainable quality service delivery to customers requires a new relationship with the ecology of the Zambezi Queen and all stakeholders.

In particular, the objectives were

- ✓ to investigate and describe the level of customer service expectations of the African tour,
- ✓ to identify which aspects of the tour customers perceived

- ✓ to be most valuable and to recommend to AmaWaterways and Giltedge Africa ways to improve overall service.

5.1 What are the service expectations of guests on the tour?

As highlighted in the literature review, pleasurable experiences are the result of expectations being met, and are an important consideration when dealing with customer expectations. Exaggerated or irrelevant expectations are impossible to satisfy. To service professionals, striving to deliver quality means to understand the customer's emotions, and deal with them efficiently all through the service value chain.

The data analysed shows that guests had an overall very good to excellent experience on board the Zambezi Queen which was supported by excellent staff interactions. Guests felt good about the tour, their needs and wants were understood and the higher objectives reached.

However, it would appear that some elements of the tour such as specific animal sightings and the inter-African travel experience were left to chance. These are examples of elements outside of the direct control of the DMC, and may have caused stress or effort to some guests, as they would not have been communicated up front. While the expectations of the tour were met and often exceeded, guests were not always properly informed of the physical requirements of the tour and quick sales could have been made. Customers therefore did not always feel informed and in control.

While service lapses do occur, reasonable customers can be converted to content customers through service recovery. Recoveries are expensive and should be avoided in the first place by pre-empting areas of possible service lapses. Front line staff must be supported by empowered support staff who are equipped to deal with situations behind the scenes in order for challenges to be overcome or errors corrected. Employees were extracted as a critical link in the value chain. Skills development and specific skills required for high performing service staff was illuminated and complemented the findings of the literature review. Guests have high expectations of AmaWaterways cruises. Reaction to the experience largely explains what guests expected of service on tour. Friendly, professional, knowledgeable and entertaining service staff fulfils AmaWaterways Africa tour guests' expectations. The atmosphere, nature and guided experiences surpass the expectations of customers, while factors such as the African night sky, boma experience, and quality friendly service rounds off the end-to-end experience.

5.2 What kind of service do guests experience on tour?

Challenges to deliver quality service and satisfaction in Africa include transport to remote locations, local culture-, language differences and travel regulations. For example, during the village tour, guests visit a real village untouched by made-up pretences of a romanticised lifestyle.

The research participants reacted positively to a number of service experiences, including the dining room service, bar service and food on board the Zambezi Queen. It can be argued that service perceptions (the way that service is experienced) are higher when delivered in a peaceful, relaxed, natural setting. On the Zambezi Queen, guests enjoy the service offering while bird watching or wildlife watching at the same time. Service is offered in a relaxed and natural atmosphere on a craft that floats comfortably on the Chobe River. The stage is set for a great service experience. The tour indulged the senses of the guests and engaged them with fellow travellers and service staff as well as locals. The guests' emotions were considered and they were in control as far as options of activities are concerned.

5.3 What unexpected encounters added value to the experience?

The nature experience and friendly/professional staff stood out as valuable unexpected elements of the tour. Guests were impressed with the Chobe Game Drive experience and the boat safari experience. An important part of the safari experience is the opportunity to view mega fauna. The findings explicitly

point to the exhilaration of an African safari or nature experience. On this tour factors that surprised guests included: the nature element, the quality of service staff, accommodation and the atmosphere on board, quality of vehicles and the wine and beverage service. The traditional food, night sky and staff singing, dancing and entertainment surprised the guests at the boma dinner.

The village is real and not a replica for tourism purposes. Guests are enthusiastic to see how locals live as they are exposed to the real life situation of a Namibian Caprivi region fishing community. Some of the staff on board grew up and live in the village. Guests are welcomed, invited in and showed around by one of the patriarchs. After wondering around the homesteads, guests are entertained with song and dance and awarded the opportunity to buy local souvenirs and crafts under the Baobab tree of Ijambwe village. However, experience on the Village tour was scored lower than other activities. The lifestyle observed in the village tour may not be the lifestyle that guests identify with, and could explain why this activity received comparatively low scores. This situation could conceivably be addressed through clear communication on what to expect when visiting the village.

Watching animals and birds by boat is a rewarding method of approaching wildlife, with pictures as evidence of the satisfactory experience. On the banks of the Chobe river, large wildlife herds congregate to drink or graze on the riverine vegetation. The non-intrusive safari boats are able to approach animals to close proximity, adding to the impression of the safari experience.

5.4 How can AmaWaterways, Giltedge Africa improve service and meet expectations?

The majority of guests were satisfied and their expectations fulfilled or surpassed with the African experience under study. As this study suggests some challenges in sustainability and efficiency to the tourism industry in Africa at large exists. AmaWaterways and Giltedge fulfil a leading and exemplary role in quality service provision in the African context, and as modern service organisations can strive for continuous improvement. The following recommendations should be treated as action points in the quest for a sustainable, healthy and profitable African service environment and to take the travel experience perception of guests to new levels.

6. Recommendations (Managerial implications)

RECOMMENDATION 1: CONSERVATION: The natural setting and beauty that guests on tour are exposed to, have a significantly positive impact on the overall experience of the tour. A healthy natural setting with great wildlife watching experiences is a critical component of the AmaWaterways Africa tour. However, as outlined in the literature review, enormous risk exists for the sustainability of all services and experiences based on wildlife. Environmental accountability and sustainable practice is imperative to the modern tourism enterprise. It is important to stay informed and involved in the conservation of areas visited. It is therefore recommended that DMCs lead conservation efforts to secure sustainable natural resource utilisation in Africa. Ecosystem services cannot be taken for granted. The Zambezi Queen shares an ecosystem with fisherman living on the banks of the Chobe River. All role players have to be consulted and included in quantifying, utilisation, protection and conservation of ecosystems impacted by tourism. Africa's wildlife currently faces a crisis in poaching and wildlife security, a direct threat to the main attraction of the tour under investigation. AmaWaterways and Giltedge Africa have to contribute to solutions to the crises facing the continent's natural resources.

RECOMMENDATION 2: SERVICE IN A NATURAL SETTING: Service provided in this natural atmosphere can only be fully understood if the setting can be described more accurately. Animal- and bird sightings contribute to the service experience, contributions that can't be taken for granted and needs to be quantified. The nature experience must be investigated further.

RECOMMENDATION 3: CONTINUED HUMAN CAPITAL INVESTMENT: The importance of friendly professional service staff was emphasised by the data output. Front line staff can improve service instantly when equipped with the right skills. Staff was judged friendly and professional in this

study, but it is unclear if this is a product of training and skills development or as a cultural reaction to visitors who bring jobs and remuneration. Empowerment of service staff is imperative in the sustainable development of tourism in Africa. Culture and lifestyle of local staff is a valuable asset that becomes a gift to the traveller and enhance the experience. However, the majority of workers that guests meet on tour are unskilled. The Zambezi Queen and related services present an opportunity to bespoke organizations to step in, while at the same time fulfilling their corporate social responsibility. It is recommended that AmaWaterways and Giltedge Africa contribute to the improvement of the skills deficit, as training and skills development will strengthen the delivery of quality service, and build on the basis of a friendly and competent staff within their own supply chain.

RECOMMENDATION 4: IMPROVED INTRA AFRICAN TRAVEL: Challenges arose for the flight from Cape Town to Kasane. Unfortunately, luxury group transport in remote parts of Africa is in a development phase. However, improvements in communication with airlines and other supply chain partners are imperative to enhance the intra African travel experience. At the time of writing, AmaWaterways and Giltedge Africa have started improving communication with the relevant airline. Continued support from DMCs who send guests on new routes will also stimulate development of airports and destinations alike. Further, service staff responsible for ticket bookings must be on stand-by at times of groups boarding flights in order to deal with unforeseen problems. Should a problem occur, corrective decisions and actions should be implemented to avoid costly service recoveries and disillusioned guests.

RECOMMENDATION 5: GOOD FOOD vs EXCELLENT CUISINE

According to the guests, the tour presents room for improvement in the gastronomic experience on board. It is recommended that AmaWaterways and Giltedge focus on finding ways to improve the delivery and presentation of food. This could include activities such as skills development in sourcing of food, improvement in planning and preparation of food. Fresh produce must be sourced from reliable suppliers. Chef training is critical in this process. Popular boma dinners and picnic lunches can be offered more regularly. Cooking with fire and/or in a natural setting proved a popular favourite and highlight in this research, and it can be expanded to improve the gastronomic experience on the Zambezi Queen. Modern green practices must be implemented to grow the Zambezi Queens own vegetable gardens. Local communities must be empowered and involved in order to serve the Zambezi Queens needs for fresh vegetables and produce. Information shared with guests must emphasise original African food and fair in order to build on the gastronomic experience. More native dishes with accompanying information of preparation must be used to enhance the food and beverage experience on the Zambezi Queen.

RECOMMENDATION 6: IMMIGRATIONS CONTROL AND VISA REQUIREMENTS

Feedback from guests suggests that standing in line for a visa or stamp was one of the least favourite parts of the customer experience. Customers do not see the need or importance of this bureaucratic process and perceive the lack of efficiency as a product of poverty, laziness and unreliability. The service delivered by AmaWaterways and Giltedge can be greatly improved if customers know what to expect. In up front communication, guests must be encouraged to view immigration points as an opportunity to observe the culture and everyday lives of locals. Wherever guests need to pass through passport control, an opportunity exists to soak up the culture and make new friends. Guests can be reminded that this is an easy way to recount experiences and destinations visited. Educating guests on the adventurous-, cultural- and natural value of passport controls in remote locations is an antidote to negative connotations of the experience. Informative reading or interpretation of the surrounding nature experience (e.g. bird watching) can be utilised to alleviate boredom.

RECOMMENDATION 7: CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF COMMUNICATION

Destination management companies must cooperate with local providers to offer prime travel experiences to their customers. Customers buy journeys that cover vast distances and include services provided by local service providers. Modern communication techniques must be implemented and used

to ease operational difficulties. Successful travel brands should embrace diversity to enhance the travel experience. The experience of an African adventure must be delivered in a safe and comfortable manner. Expectations of activities and elements of the tour that created least satisfaction, e.g. the village tour, intra African flights and procedures surrounding passport controls and emigrations, should be supported with clear up front communication. The expectations of these experiences must be managed by the DMC, especially where interaction with the customer falls outside of the service provider (e.g. passport controls).

7. Conclusions from the study

“In conclusion service excellence improvements starts when business leaders use the results of on-going; statistically sound “customer satisfaction” research to benchmark the lowest performing areas against the highest performing areas. The customer centric leader will then take appropriate actions to address and uplift the areas of lowest customer satisfaction and move to the highest customer satisfaction levels. Actions could include training, performance management, remuneration or other incentives or a combination of these. Service excellence is a journey. For it to become a reality, it has to be grasped and driven from the highest position within the business, and accepted and understood by everyone else throughout the business” (Duvenhage, 2013:79). There is a limit to the business influence of the travel organisation. But there is no limit to the social responsibility influence of the same organisation. It is interesting that the friendliness and professional conduct of service staff stood out as a highlight, and yet the village tour (where some of the service staff are from) was one of the least enjoyed activities offered. If the village elder that leads the village tour is invited on board to experience what the guests experience, the elder may present the village tour differently. A possible culture- and communication gap may be overbridged in this manner, and the village tour scoring improved. *“Africa’s tourism potential is acknowledged to be significant but underdeveloped”* (Naudé and Saayman, 2005). This is the African development age, for tourism and other industries. In developing its own identity, Africa learns from experiences of other world regions, with visitors transporting information to local destinations. In this way Africa can be up to date with international standards of service delivery and trends.

Future research must investigate social interactions between guests and service staff. This will elucidate why guests found the service for example friendly and attractive. Interviews with frontline staff will also include the reasons and stories behind the friendly service, and serve as an educational example to related service organisations.

Satisfying the guest is the minimum requirement of the DMC, the departure point of a tourism venture. Quality services enrich the lives of recipients and professionals alike. African tourism development can potentially improve the lives of millions of its inhabitants. Environmental risk mitigation and management is the key to sustainable tourism development. The African Development Bank Group (2014) describes tourism in Africa as an “untapped goldmine”. The same paragraph presents a stark reminder of the consequence of indiscriminate and irresponsible business practice: *“Soon those untouched beaches and remote villages will become a thing of the past.”* In order for quality service to thrive and continuously improve, it must also consider, nurture and protect the environment that surrounds the exchange. An environment that in the case of Africa and the Zambezi Queen, is as delicate in its relationships with local stakeholders as it is complex.

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