

## DESIGNING AND PROMOTING EXPERIENCES IN A TOURIST DESTINATION. AN ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH AND ACTION NEEDS

*Rita Carballo Fuentes\**

*Sergio Moreno-Gil\**

*Carmelo León González\**

*J.R. Brent Ritchie\*\**

\*Instituto de Turismo y Desarrollo Económico Sostenible –TiDES-. Cátedra UNESCO de Planificación Turística y Desarrollo Sostenible. Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. E-mail: ritinaca@yahoo.es; smoreno@dede.ulpgc.es; cleon@daea.ulpgc.es.

\*\*Chair, World Tourism Education and Research Centre. University of Calgary. 2500 University Drive NW. Calgary, Alberta, CANADA T2N 1N4. E-mail: britchie@ucalgary.ca

Tourism experience is a topic that has been widely used in both academic and professional environment. However, its conceptualization, explanation, research methodologies, practical application and promotion, are issues that have not received much attention in the literature. This paper provides some academic knowledge and practical application lines for the proper development of experiences, so appreciated and needed in tourist destinations.

This paper aims to provide a framework that facilitates the identification and better understanding of the major challenges facing tourist experience research and its implementation. These challenges have both theoretical and management implications. The article begins with a review of the current literature in this field, based on Ritchie and Hudson (2009) seminal work that identifies the existing theoretical thinking and empirical research in this topic. Subsequently, the article focuses on promoting experiences through “experience marketing” and develops its communication process through the brand (central unifying communication item) and events (the paradigm of experiences creation and communication). Finally, the article addresses a practical and synthetic methodology explanation for the design of successful tourism experiences in a tourist destination: the experience design matrix.

The Pine and Gilmore philosophy of “work is theater and every business a stage”, provides the framework used to management and implement the “experience economy” where managers must understand the need to turn every interaction into an experience, forming the sum of all the interactions a memorable experience for tourists. Thus, Ford and Heaton (2000) develop the management of the customer experience in hospitality, the

so-called “guestology” defined as the difference between the customer quality expectations and the quality that the customer perceives after consumption.

As previously developed, the seed of the experience concept proposed by Csikszentmihalyi was developed by Berry (1981) and colleagues (Zeithaml et al., 1985), with the success of its model SERVQUAL for service quality experience. This model was an important catalyst for calling greater attention to the intangible aspects of the experience in the marketing thinking. Also, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) highlighted the importance of consumer experience by focusing on the symbols and icons, the hedonism and aesthetic of consumption process. This continuous evolution in the nature of the experience leads us to distinguish between different typologies that conceptually appear to be an evolutionary path: basic experience, successful experience, quality experience, extraordinary experience and memorable experience.

Once the experience and its dimensions is contextualized and analyzed in this work, we conclude that the tourist experience is a cumulative process, in stages, including the previous phase (before travelling to the destination), the destination resort, and after the holidays, and it takes an explicit preparation to happen. Being a subjective perception, it is absolutely necessary to incorporate the tourist in this process, and this paper has identified some specific dimensions that should be integrated into the experience analysis, although the evolution of academic analysis will continue to identify other possibilities. The main dimensions identified are: tourists' involvement, integrating external environment elements with internal tourists conditions, being nature a key facilitator; sensory shock, appealing to the five senses and stimulating tourists, creating an environment of surprise and escape; authenticity, linking the personal experience with the immediate environment and the destination (sense of place); fun, creating a pleasant atmosphere and entertaining; sociability, providing the possibility to share and participate in a community; personalization, which provides freedom and control, where the tourist feels he can choose and define to some extent the end result thanks to their ability and effort; and self-discovery and transformation, where through learning and exchange of values and ideas, the tourist feels some change.

When analyzing and researching experiences, it seems appropriate to combine the use of mixed methodologies, including quantitative and qualitative techniques. The results provided by previous research seem to confirm the dimensions previously outlined. In any case, regardless of the analysis methodology, there is a need to recreate a memorable experience for the tourist and communicate it properly. The brand is the promise that ensures that memorable experience. It can be concluded that the brand not only incorporates the tourist experiences in the destination, but it is a dynamic process, where the brand itself also brings experience to the tourist. Thus, designing a memorable experience is key aspect, as discussed extensively in this work, and requires a dual approach: destination management and consumer perspectives.

Destination management perspective. Tourist destination image is constructed based on the real referent of the physical destination space, the environmental, economic and sociocultural destination characteristics. Based on these real characteristics, tourists form a personal and subjective image that includes some aspects of the destination. The tourist image, the invention, replaces reality. Therefore, each stage of the process must be consi-

dered, integrating intangible and image elements that turn this interaction into something memorable.

Tourist's perspective. On the tourist side has emerged a focus on the experience in response to the limitations of analyzing consumer behavior only in terms of cognitive information as a logical and sequential process. As Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) says, experiences are subjective, emotional states loaded with symbolic meaning. Consumption is hedonistic not utilitarian, especially in leisure situations.

The two lines of research in tourist experience literature: the managerial and the consumer perspectives, generally agreed to consider the tourist as a final object, but also as the co-creator of the product (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Extraordinary experiences objective is getting tourist' growth and personal fulfillment (Arnould and Price, 1993) leading to the tourist transformation. It is through a stage or space designed for this to happen, that a company or destination can attract and retain customers.

The design and development of a tourist experience must incorporate a management process analysis approach, but it seems insufficient to address all the complexities of it. So, tourist's perspective should be also integrated. Because experiences are very subjective, a meaningful experience can never be guaranteed. However, the ideal conditions can be created to recreate meaningful experiences. Whereas theoretical studies do not usually provide an operational tool to apply experience design (Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011), this work shows a simple practical tool to analyze, understand and design the elements of a memorable experience, integrating management destination and tourist perspectives.

Figure 1 (experience design matrix) integrates both perspectives: (A) destination management, with the various phases in which the process of enjoy the tourist holidays at the destination is divided (eg. information, reservations, arrival, transportation, hotel check-in, leisure destination, food ...). These phases may be developed in more detail, and even breaking down the different elements that compose them, reaching an extremely elaborated level of analysis; and (B) the tourist's perspective, integrating the service criteria that bring meaning and significance to the tourist experience such as individuality, which makes the service unique, special and adapted to the client; authenticity, as a credible service, real, in this world and culturally sustainable; with a story, a theme that gives meaning to the service; a multi-sensory perception including sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste and why not ... any more; learning, that involve the individual transformation; contrast, that from the customer's perspective brings exoticism, breaking social norms or traditional perspectives; interaction, between product and customer with service staff, other customers, the environment, friends, etc.

If we cross these aspects in the experience design matrix, we analyze phase by phase the holidays enjoy process, and check the ability to incorporate or enhance the presence of each of the service criteria (individuality, authenticity, storytelling, multisensory perception, learning, contrast and interaction) and its potential impact. Illustrating briefly for the first phase (search for destination information), destination managers must consider if the information and images projected in various media shows provides a unique appeal, if it is authentic, if the storytelling has social and cultural significance to communicate successfully, if the image is multisensory and produces pleasant or annoying sensations, if the information facilitates the discovery of new aspects for tourists and is exotic and, if the

image allows social interaction, accessibility and social appreciation. As a check-list tool, each phase and the opportunities of improvement for each criterion of service that provides a memorability experience must be analyzed. The result will be the sum of suggestions, provided by the design matrix, which transforms a service routine into a memorable destination for tourists. This scheme of work, together with the appropriate techniques, generate a lot of opportunities to improve the design of a memorable experience at the destination, and through the experiential marketing, also allows to translate them to the communication of its brand. Obviously the combination of elements and improvement suggestions will vary depending on the context and content of the experience, and the tourist target.

Finally, the application of this methodology of experience design matrix, linked to the destination branding and experiential marketing, means not only understanding research as a tool for analysis and improvement, but as part of the promotion process of the destination.