

3

Understanding the quality of the experience

Aims and objectives

This chapter aims to explore another aspect of the experience, focusing on its functional side. Despite their hedonic components, tourism services share commonalities with other types of services. Here we look at the different characteristics of services and various grading schemes that aim to guarantee satisfaction. The SERVQUAL scale and approaches inspired by it are then presented to better understand the advantages and limits in measuring quality. Since customers are present during the consumption process, the chapter also addresses the difficulties of directly managing dissatisfaction on the spot, and then points out the complexity of measuring satisfaction. It particularly questions the fact that consumers might develop specific mechanisms when appreciating a vacation, potentially different from the consumption of other services. Finally, the chapter looks at the indirect dimension in service delivery.

After studying this chapter readers should be able to:

- Identify the main characteristics of services, and the challenges that these present to service providers, especially compared to products.
- Explain what the presence of the consumer during the production process implies in terms of satisfaction measurement.
- Understand the different approaches that aim to measure quality and guarantee a satisfying outcome for the consumer.
- Appreciate the benefits and limits of using quality scales of the SERVQUAL type.
- Understand the limit of traditional quality evaluations approaches in the specific context of tourism consumption.
- Fully appreciate what the notion of indirect service implies and its consequences upon the management of a tourist experience.

This book mostly addresses the consumer experience from an experiential viewpoint, but one cannot ignore the importance of the actual service delivery in that process. Indeed, while we might not contest that the core experience is centred on the achievement of needs of an emotional nature, the actual physical delivery of the service necessarily plays a role in that process. This chapter aims to address this dimension of the experience, keeping in mind that the services marketing field has evolved tremendously over the last decades. The chapter will discuss the SERVQUAL scale. Whilst the authors are aware that this model is no longer used extensively, the approach developed by its creators and the way it stimulated research in the area of service quality cannot be ignored. Starting from this scale, the chapter aims to bring a broad understanding of the strengths and limits of service quality models.

■ **The service quality approach**

□ **The growing recognition of services marketing specificities**

The services marketing field grew rapidly throughout the 1980s as a result of the recognition by academics and executives of the need to generate a new approach for this fast growing sector of the economy. This increased interest can be attributed to several factors, among which the rise in services expenditures, the deregulation of service industries and the acceptance of the unique requirements for effective services marketing played a significant role. The first services marketing conference was organised in early 1980 by the American Marketing Association and much of the research produced at this time aimed at building an argument for the distinctiveness of services from products (Uhl and Upah, 1983). The goods marketing versus services marketing debate represented a fundamental challenge to establish the relevance of the services marketing field. The argument was based on the belief that the traditional concepts developed in the marketing field were biased towards product marketing and were not necessarily applicable to a service context. By then, most scholars accepted that the marketing of services was sufficiently distinctive from the marketing of physical products to deserve separate treatment and since the mid-1980s, the debate has shifted to the study of the adaptations necessary for developing effective marketing strategies for services (Edgett and Parkinson, 1993). This evolution has led to an explosive growth of research with the literature focusing on specific issues such as service quality, service encounters, relationship marketing and the legitimisation of the services marketing literature by major marketing journals (Fisk *et al.* 1993).

The development of managerial and academic interest in services has led to a plethora of definitions and it would be impossible to cover them all. A widely accepted definition was provided by Kotler *et al.* (1996) who defined a service as 'any activity or benefit that one party can offer to another which is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. Its production may or may not be tied to a physical product' (p.588). Originally, the intangible aspect of a service was commonly seen as its most distinctive feature, yet other characteristics also appeared to define its specificities and these can be summarised into four key traits:

- **Intangibility:** this trait has traditionally been recognised as the fundamental distinguishing characteristic between services and products from which all other differences would emerge. However, the level of the tangible dimensions varies from one service to another one. The more the service depends on interpersonal skills (guided tour, etc.) or on very specific elements (historical dimension of a hotel building, location, atmosphere, etc.) the less it relies on tangible elements and it is therefore difficult to standardise. On the other end, services such as fast-food restaurants or some low-cost hotel chains rely on a simplification and standardisation of service production processes, where little flexibility is given to intangible elements and therefore standardisation can be achieved more easily.
- **Heterogeneity** relates to the high variability in the performance of services and the difficulty of standardising services. Hence, the quality of a service is difficult to control since it can vary greatly from producer to producer, customer to customer and day to day.
- **Perishability** means that services cannot be stored for sale at a later date, implying that a service unsold is a service lost which has led to very interesting strategies in terms of yield management
- **Inseparability of the production and consumption processes** means that services are sold, produced and consumed simultaneously. This also means that the consumer is involved in the consumption and production process.

Those four traits have several implications for services marketing. First of all, compared with products, services need to be considered more broadly, by conceptualising their consumption process as a whole experience (Bateson, 1991). This experience is customarily described as all the interpersonal and human-environment interactions which take place during the service. This notion was already at the heart of the 'servuction' model (Eiglier et Langear, 1987) who viewed the service experience as an interaction between a client, the visible part of the service provider, the service environment and other customers.

The concept of service encounter refers to this interaction between the consumer and the firm (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987) and is commonly defined