6 VIP Hospitality Packages – Style over Substance?

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Introduction

This chapter advocates the importance of effective communication by exploring examples of VIP/hospitality event packages where experiences fail to meet consumer expectations. VIP event packages have received limited academic coverage, with luxury hospitality in particular identified as an area requiring future research (Heyes & Minor, 2021).

Upselling or augmenting standard event tickets, such as via 'Meet and Greet' options, is a method used by event organisers to create more luxurious experiences and opportunities to participate in the event (Swarbrooke, 2018). Ticketmaster (2019) states that a "*VIP package is when artists offer exclusive packages for an unforgettable concert experience*". The additional spend on VIP/Hospitality over face-value tickets will likely heighten attendee expectations, as VIP experiences "*cannot possibly be the same as [for] other guests or customers*" (Getz, 2007:194). VIP Nation (2019) website positions packages with phrasing evoking prestige, for example using phrases such as 'best seats in the house' and 'exclusive' which appeals to the corporate market and general public alike.

Often focused on the affective or emotional achievement of attendees, experience-driven events outcomes are generally high-end or premium priced. These are commonly applied to corporate, music or high-profile festivals, as well as large-scale hospitality events including banquets and weddings. Sensory stimulation promoting attendee memories often occurs via the event's ambiance, decor, service provision and technology (Bladen, 2021). However, are expected consumer experiences being delivered effectively, especially in relation to VIP offers?

Given the growing number of VIP offers, and some diversity in what exactly these include, there may be some confusion in the minds of prospective buyers.

The link between consumer confusion and customer satisfaction is argued to have neglected the role of choice goals, i.e. confusion may be caused by ambiguous information, choice overload (reducing choice confidence), and perceived similarity of attributes between products which increases choice confidence (Wang & Shukla, 2013). These considerations suggest that unclear communication, coupled with numerous package options/attributes may result in dissatisfied consumers, due to expectations not being met or service failure.

The purchase context is equally important as the general public may not demonstrate loyalty to a particular ticketing provider. Conversely, a corporate ticket purchaser may show loyalty to a specific hospitality agency which is important as "*customers with higher expectations of relationship continuity had lower service recovery expectations after a service failure*" (Hess *et al.*, 2003:127). Prior experiences and perceptions of consumers are also likely to be influenced by promotional materials.

Within this chapter the role of the event organiser in setting and managing expectations is explored, as it is significant in terms of managing potential service and event failure, and SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988) provides an appropriate framework for exploring such dimensions. Similarly, journey mapping and co-creation are also presented as methods for event practitioners to incorporate, to ensure greater consideration is demonstrated towards consumers, improving the consumer experience. The chapter concludes with recommendations and key lessons regarding how communication may be improved by event organizations and staff, in order to manage and meet consumer expectations and experiences.

SERVQUAL

SERVQUAL is a popular research instrument which has been designed and developed to examine service quality by reviewing participants' expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). The benefits of SERVQUAL has resulted in it being adapted for a range of sectors, for example DINESERVE for restaurants (Hudson & Hudson, 2013), as well as within the events industry. One advantage of SERVQUAL is that it enables different layers of data to emerge, from the superficial to more detailed surveys that quantify service quality (Wilson *et al.*, 2012).

Getz (2018) provides an adaptation of SERVQUAL (RATER) that can be applied to events:

■ **Reliability:** Meeting specifications and accuracy the first time; fulfilling promises (as stated in media/signage); attendee confidence in the organisation regarding scheduling/programming; ensuring attendees understand different tiers of service (price, location, time); treating attendees as honoured guests.

■ **Assurance:** Attendees feel safe regarding security measures; polite, capable, trustworthy staff; enhanced reputation via quality events/service; demonstrate proactivity when listening to attendees/stakeholders.