

THE MANAGEMENT OF THE QUALITY SERVICES IN AGRO TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

The international economic crisis will drastically reduce the number of tourists visiting Romania this year. There will be a tough fight over tourists' money. One way for keeping the existing tourists and gaining new ones is by raising the quality of accommodation and nourishment services. The hereby study analyzes the possibility of developing the management of the quality services in agro tourism by implementing the Q brand in the agro tourist hostels in Romania. In 2003, the Ministry of Tourism has initiated a project named "The Q Brand" regarding the increase of quality services offered to tourists in Romania. Unfortunately, along with the liquidation of the Ministry of Tourism, it was impossible to promote and develop this program.

In order to analyze the possibility of introducing the Q Brand, we have carried out a study on one hundred hostels located in the main agrotourist areas of the country: Bucovina, Neamt, Maramures, Bran, Mărginimea Sibiului, Vrancea-Buzău, Danube Delta, Harghita Covasna, the Apuseni Mountains and Oltenia under Mountain. The first part of the study comprises a set of quality criteria for the agro tourist hostels. These criteria have been applied on the spot, in order to determine exactly the possible level for implementing the Q brand in the countryside area. The conclusion is on a country level, the average possible implementation amounts to 42.5%; that more than half of the agro tourist hostels studied will not be able to implement the Q brand in a short period of time.

KEYWORDS: *the management of the quality services, agro tourism, the implementation of the „Q” Brand, the international economic crisis, the agro tourist hostels*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *L83, O18, Q56, R11, M15*

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality is the main factor of success on the market when it comes to agro tourist hostels. This is no major discovery as we all know that quality goods do not need advertising and sell by themselves. In this case, a quality service cannot be something else than a quality goods.

Quality is the main factor determining competitiveness, performance, results and therefore profit. Quality supposes good practices (on a high level, that of excellencies, this means the best practices), in conformity with the standardized models, with standards (and on a high level, with the excellence models). These items are figuratively illustrated (in figure 1).

The criteria for adhering to the European Union, the more and fierce competitiveness with the tourist markets in the region, the increase in the clients' exigency, either Romanians or foreigners, for quality services in tourism, force us to approach this topic with a completely different view than the operators in the Romanian rural tourism system have been previously accustomed.

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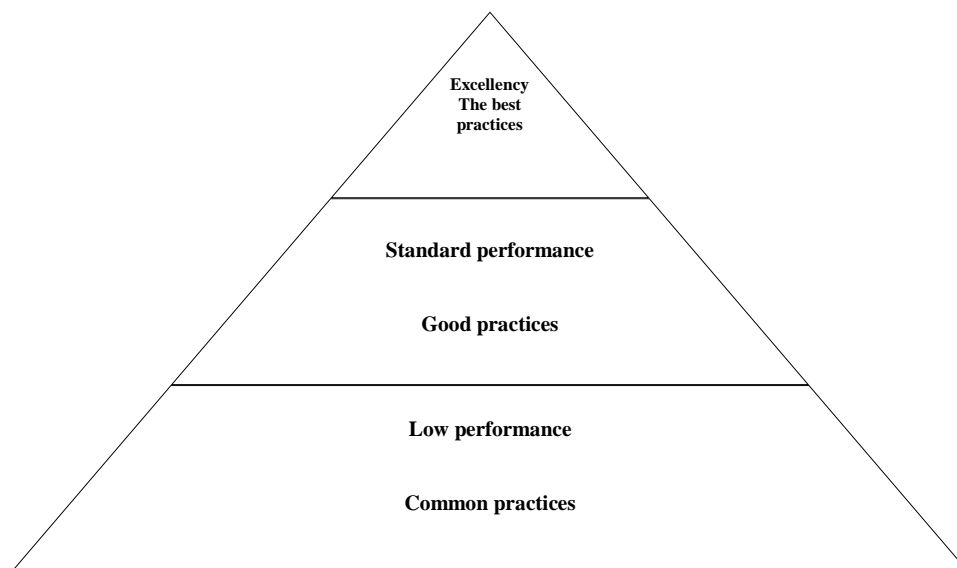


Figure 1. Performance and good practices
Source: adapted from Crețu (2012), p.33

For the future, the three evaluation levels of conformity on the offered services will be configured as such: the base level will be compulsory, the standard and the excellence levels will be voluntary and certified by the accredited structures for certifying quality and management, including according to ISO 9001, ISO 22000.

As Beciu (2011) said "Promoting investments to develop and diversify economic activities such as agricultural services, handicrafts, apiculture, seri-culture, aquaculture and agro-tourism" could be one of opportunities that should be valued in the rural areas.

In the context of current developments, the concept and model of sustainable development, started as 40 years ago, are still fewer followers. "They are disputed, discussed, critiqued, and often simply forgotten (if not deliberately ignored) the current socio-economic analysis". (Crețu, 2012).

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The quality criteria can be divided into 10 components (Crețu, R. C., 2012). Each of them regulates the activity of a part of the B&B's services. These components are: Management; Staff Performance; Accessibility/ Location; Front Face/Exterior Spaces/Parking; Common Spaces; Reception; Rooms/Toilets; Breakfast/Restaurant; Customer Service/Recreation; Supply. For each component we will also mention the specific criteria, according to the type of B&B (according to the European norms adopted by ANTREC). Following herewith, we shall analyze these criteria for the three, four and five daisies B&B.

2.1. Management (pension manager)

Managers will establish and communicate the organization's vision, mission, values, policies and strategies to the employees or to other interested partners; managers will establish and communicate the unit's policy and objectives with regard to quality; managers will establish the short, medium and long-term detailed objectives in order to meet the customers' needs, requirements and expectations. Managers will focus on providing the value expected by the customers and other interested partners; Managers will establish a system of determining the needs of the market, by

identifying target clients according to market segments; Managers will create a working environment favourable to a continuous improvement and innovation within the organization (Antonoaie, Foriș, & Crețu, 2002).

Managers will create a working environment which would impose ethical and legal attitudes and behaviours; the manager will continuously evaluate the organization's and staff's performances; managers will organize an efficient and effective communication system both at internal level as well as with partners outside the organization; the managers will elaborate position sheets for all the employees; the managers will check the permanent update of the customer database and will ensure their being kept confidential; managers will elaborate checklists for all the activities; managers will organize a daily information session of the employees regarding the activity of the bed and breakfast; managers will organize and maintain a system for collecting staff's feedback; managers will establish a rightful system of recruiting, selecting and motivating the employees; managers will create a transparent environment within the organization; managers will promote teamwork at all levels; managers will establish an efficient and effective system of solving quality issues; managers will create a system of permanent evaluation of the customer's satisfaction level; managers will keep contractual terms confidential in their relationship with the providers, customers and creditors (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2002).

2.2. Staff performance

General: the employees must permanently have a neat and adequate aspect; the employees who come in contact with customers must speak at least one or two internationally used foreign languages, according to the B&B type; the employees will provide information with respect to the services offered by the respective bed and breakfast; the employees will ensure the security and confidentiality of the customer's personal information.

Answers to the reservation request: the employees will provide a personalized answer to the reservation request; the reply will contain details regarding the services which have been booked; the reply will mention the means of transportation and the access route to the B&B (Neacșu, 1999).

Reservation: phone calls answer will be prompt (at most 3 calls before answering it, at the 4th call the phone machine of the B&B will be connected); the reply will be polite and will include a greeting formula which will mention the name of the bed and breakfast and of the person answering the phone; the reply will be stated clearly, accurately and in a friendly manner; the reply will provide correct information with respect to the means of transportation and the access route to the bed and breakfast; the reply will include alternative suggestions in case the bed and breakfast is fully booked; the reply will include services suggestions (non-smokers rooms, conference rooms, swimming pool, sauna, recreation etc.); the reply will include an information request with respect to the customer's arrival date as well as the instructions in case the customer will arrive late; the reply will repeat at the end all the data of the reservation; the conversation will end up with a friendly greeting.

Welcoming: the customer will be welcome by all the reception staff standing up; ideally, function of the area where the bed and breakfast is located, the customer should be welcomed according to the area's customs (with bread and salt, with plum brandy, with knot-shaped bread, and the person who welcomes the customer can wear a traditional costume); the customer will be greeted politely; the employees will welcome their customers smiling; the employees will establish the eye contact with the customers; disabled persons will be welcomed with increased care; the requested services will be provided immediately; the employees will permanently show availability, affability and solicitude in their relations with the customers; the employees should offer at least a map of the tourism area of the bed and breakfast and accurate and complete information regarding the tourism, sports, cultural, ethnographic activities of the area, as well as the addresses of the institutions which

facilitate these activities; the employees will guide the customers towards the access ways to the rooms.

During the customer's stay: the employees will work without making noises, without smoking in the presence of customers or in the kitchens; the managers will check at random the way the rooms have been prepared for the customers.

Restaurant: the customer is welcomed by the employees of the restaurant in a cordial manner; the customer will be greeted politely; the employees will welcome their customers smiling; the employees will establish eye contact with the customers and will guide them to their tables; the employees will take the customers' orders quickly and promptly; the employees will adapt their waiting speed according to the client's requirements; the employees will answer correctly to the customers' questions; preferably, the customers will be offered fresh and natural local products, produced in the host's household or in the respective area; the employees will ask the customers if they would like to order anything else; the employees will wait their customers according to the latter's orders; the employees will make sure of the customers' satisfaction, by asking them questions.

Payment: the customers are greeted politely; the employees will welcome their clients smiling; the employees will establish eye contact with the customers; disabled persons will be attended with increased care, the requested services will be provided immediately; the employees will make sure of the customers' satisfaction, by asking them questions; the employees will offer the customers suggestions with respect to calling a cab; the employees will make a copy of the pay bill in case of any further checking; at the customer's departure, the employees will address them in a friendly and polite manner.

2.3. Accessibility/ Location

There are street marks with respect to the nearest main route; the street marks are clean; the street marks are well cared for; the street marks are updated; there is a plan/ map/ other materials of the locality where the position and the means of transportation to the bed and breakfast are marked.

2.4. Front Face / Exterior Spaces / Parking

The name of the bed and breakfast is easily readable both during day and during night; the name plate of the bed and breakfast is kept clean; the surrounding area of the bed and breakfast is well illuminated; the night illuminating system is functional; the garbage tanks/ the rubbish disposal areas are not visible to the customers; the supply entrances and other areas for equipment and services will be kept clean; the supply entrances and other areas for equipment and services will be well cared for; the doors and door cases will be kept clean; the doors and door cases will be well cared for; front faces will be kept clean; front faces will be well cared for; the fence will be kept clean; green areas will be kept clean; green areas will be well cared for; the sidewalks will be kept clean; the sidewalks will be well cared for; the furniture and accessories of the sidewalks and alleys will be kept clean; the furniture and accessories of the sidewalks and alleys will be well cared for.

Parking (preferably with permanent surveillance): the parking will have indicators; the parking will be illuminated; in the parking/ garage there will be waste bins (at least one for 20 parking spaces); the gates will be well cared for; the parking security will be ensured.

2.5. Common spaces

Cleanliness and general aspect of the welcoming and reception hall: the reception and the hall will be permanently clean; there will be no unpleasant smells in the reception area/hall; the reception and the hall will be well illuminated; the reception and the hall can be heated (if the bed and breakfast is open between October and April).

Other common spaces specialized for the customer (living room, TV, club, conference room): common spaces specialized for the customer will be permanently clean; the common spaces specialized for the customer will be well determined (Nistoreanu, 2003).

2.6. Reception

There will be a reception counter and a key panel which will be kept clean and well cared for; there will be phones; there will be a tariffs notice; the authorizations obeying the regulations in force will be posted at sight; there will be personalized typified for all kinds of services; there will be informative materials: leaflets, maps, phone numbers, trains, buses, planes and boats schedule, events timetable; there will be a valuables safe-deposit box; the reception area will be clean.

2.7. Rooms/ Toilets

The room will be sound-insulated; the entrance door will be illuminated; the entire room will be illuminated properly; 20% of the rooms will be for non-smokers.

Furniture and equipment. Cleanliness and general state of the rooms. Toilets. Cleanliness and general state of the toilet

2.8. Breakfast / Restaurant

Breakfast

Available products (preferably natural, traditional, produced in own household or surrounding areas); cleanliness and general state of the breakfast room.

The restaurant

Diversifying the menu; Cleanliness and general state of the restaurant (if it is different from the breakfast room).

2.9. Services provided to the customers

Non-paid services: providing information, giving messages, wake-up alarm on request, booking restaurant tables.

Paid services: renting event halls; renting halls equipment; communication services (internet, inter-city and international phone, fax, etc.); swimming pool, sauna, and massage; selling alimentary and non- alimentary products, souvenirs, handicraft products etc; special areas and playgrounds for children (who will be looked after); all the services must be advertised by means of adequate pictograms, materials and indicators.

2.10. Supply

The process of selecting and assessing the suppliers must be efficient and effective; the products purchased must have specifications, a contract, a quality certificate; purchases are performed in order to obtain a maximum efficiency, profitability and to improve the B&B's image; the supply requests are specified by technical and commercial standards, the brand or the commercial name; the system for establishing the necessary supply must be efficient and effective, and it must aim at avoiding useless stocks (Stabler, 1996).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study carried out in the main agro tourist areas in the country are not satisfactory, but the discussions with the hostels owners and their willingness to learn give us the hope that agro tourist hostels in Romania will have in the future a management of quality services close to the European Union standards.

Romania's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures implies accepting the doctrine of sustainable development not so much as a voluntary option, but the only possible way responsible for the design of medium and long-term development, consistent with the national interest and international cooperation requirements (Bran et al., 2004).

The possible implementation degree of the Q brand in the 10 agro tourist areas studied is shown under (table 1).

Table 1. The possible implementation degree of the Q brand on the 10 agro tourist areas studied

| | Areas | Results |
|----|------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Bucovina | 50% |
| 2 | Neamt | 45% |
| 3 | Maramures | 40% |
| 4 | Bran | 65% |
| 5 | Mărginimea Sibiului | 60% |
| 6 | Vrancea-Buzău | 35% |
| 7 | Danube Delta | 20% |
| 8 | Harghita Covasna | 55% |
| 9 | Apuseni Mountains | 30% |
| 10 | Oltenia under Mountain | 25% |

Source: adapted from Crețu R.C. (2012), p.53

It is obvious that the closest areas to the requirements of the Q brand are Bran and Mărginimea Sibiului, while the farthestmost are the high parts of Oltenia and the Danube Delta.

On a country level, the average possible implementation amounts to 42.5%.

The conclusion is that more than half of the agro tourist hostels studied will not be able to implement the Q brand in a short period of time.

We can only hope that the re-establishment of the ministry will lead to finalizing the program for all public nourishment and accommodation units.

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