A multi-attribute approach to understanding image of a theme park

The case of SantaPark in Lapland

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Abstract This study investigates the image of a theme park by determining the relative importance of factors tourists rely on in their evaluations of a theme park and their assessments of that theme park in satisfying these motives. The analytical framework of the importance-performance technique is used in analyzing the data. The SantaPark in Rovaniemi, Finland serves as the study setting. Study results and their implications are discussed.

Introduction

Destinations are amalgams of tourism products and services, which offer an integrated experience to tourists (Buhalis, 2000). In today’s competitive milieu, successful marketing of a destination requires an understanding of its image (Joppe et al., 2001; Litvin and Ling, 2001). Widely studied from the perspectives of semiotics, geography, anthropology, sociology as well as marketing (Gallarza et al., 2002), a universally accepted definition of destination image is yet to emerge. Extant definitions range from a visual representation of a place to the more holistic notion that it is a sum total of knowledge, emotions, values and beliefs a person has of a destination (Jenkins, 1999). There seems to be an agreement, however, that image is a subjective interpretation of reality and both cognitive/functional and emotional components figure in this interpretation (Bigne et al., 2001; Walmsley and Young, 1998). The functional component is typically related to tangible characteristics while the emotional component is associated with psychological dimensions manifested by feelings. These feelings are derived from individual experiences and from the processing of information on the attributes that constitute indicators of image. Marketers are keenly interested in the concept of destination image as it relates to travel decision-making before a trip, cognition and behavior at a destination during the trip and satisfaction and recollection of the experience after the trip. In other words, imagery pervades the whole touristic consumption experience (Jenkins, 1999).

To date, most of the research dealing with destination image considers the attitudes of tourists towards destinations as a gestalt or their attitudes towards various attributes forming that image and suggest that the tourists will choose the destination that they believe will best satisfy their needs. Or alternatively research attempts to ascertain tourists’ satisfaction with various attributes forming the image and uses this
information to predict tourists’ future behavioral intentions (e.g. revisit, recommend to others).

The fact that research into destination image typically considers perceived or real performance of a destination rather than both the importance and performance of attributes forming the image is a shortcoming. If research into destination image formation is to progress and produce results that are managerially meaningful, it needs to go beyond the mere how questions (i.e. to what extent motives are being satisfied by a particular destination) and should also simultaneously consider the why issue. After all, attitudes are composed of both subjective assessments of attributes that a destination possesses and evaluations of the importances of those attributes (Um and Crompton, 1990). Adding the importance dimension gives tourism officials more strategic options and helps them to better understand the tourists’ image formation process.

Purpose
Against this background, the purpose of this study is to determine the relative importance of factors tourists rely on in their evaluations of a theme park and their assessments of SantaPark in the Finnish Lapland in satisfying these motives. The analytical framework of the importance-performance technique is used in analyzing the data. The remainder of the paper presents the importance-performance analysis, discusses the setting, method and findings of an empirical study and offers implications of the study findings.

Importance-performance analysis
Importance-performance analysis is based on the conceptual foundations of multi-attribute choice models (Martilla and James, 1977; Yavas and Riecken, 1998) and in its original or variant forms (Chakravarty et al., 1996; Cheron et al., 1989; Crompton and Duray, 1985; Huan et al., 2002; Keyt and Yavas, 1988; Sethna, 1982) it has been applied in different product and service settings. The technique identifies the strengths and weaknesses of an object (in this study, the SantaPark) in terms of two critical criteria. The first is the relative importance of factors tourists rely on in their evaluations of the object. The second is tourists’ assessment of the performance of the object in terms of these factors. By developing a two-dimensional matrix with the horizontal axis representing the perceived performance from low to high and the vertical axis signifying the importance of the factor from low to high, the analysis yields prescriptions for four strategies (see Figure 1).

Factors in quadrant 1 are evaluated high in both importance and performance. What is needed here is to “keep up the good work”. Quadrant 2 signals those factors that need special effort. These attributes are high in importance but rated substandard in performance. They demand immediate attention and, if ignored, could pose serious threats. The factors in quadrant 3 indicate those rated low in terms of both importance and performance. Because of their low salience, these factors are considered low priority and require no immediate action. Factors contained in quadrant 4 are rated high in performance but low in importance. This implies that an “overkill” has occurred.
Study setting

Lapland is Finland’s northernmost province accounting for almost one-third of the country’s total land area but only about 4 per cent of population. The population is concentrated in a few “large” cities of 20,000 to 30,000 residents with the remainder scattered in small towns and villages. Paralleling the economic decline in other sectors, notably forestry, Lapland’s economy has become increasingly dependent on tourism. While the scenic landscape, the indigenous Sami (Lapp) culture, the wilderness and solitude (an escape from the routine and mechanized life to find solace in the forest), recreational activities (swimming, boating, canoeing, skiing) have long lured tourists to Lapland, tourism planners viewed these attractions insufficient and in the 1980s started to develop new marketing strategies to rejuvenate Lapland’s tourism sector (Pretes, 1995). In 1984, the Finnish Tourist Board in cooperation with local authorities began to market Lapland as “Santa Claus Land,” where Santa Claus resided and worked. Santa Claus became the ambassador and chief spokesman for Lapland and the so-called Santa Claus industry was born.

As an essential element of this strategy, on the one hand, efforts were undertaken to convince the rest of the world that Lapland was the real home of Santa Claus against rival claimants in Greenland, Norway, Alaska and Sweden. On the other hand, Santa Claus Village containing a Santa Claus Post Office, a reindeer enclosure, restaurants and gift shops was opened on the Arctic Circle (Pretes, 1995). The most recent addition to this strategy of commodification of Christmas and Santa Claus is SantaPark, which opened its gates during the Christmas season of 1998. Designed by Santaworld Ltd, England, SantaPark is located on the Arctic Circle in a cave 160 feet under the ground. It is about five miles from Lapland’s capital, Rovaniemi, and can be accessed easily by
air, rail and highway. The park offers handicraft workshops, rides, a multimedia theatre where Northern Lights are shown, restaurants and gift shops selling local products and souvenirs. According to local tourism authorities interviewed during the planning stages of this study, success of SantaPark is vital to the long-term growth and sustained profitability of the Santa Claus industry in Lapland.

Methodology
Data for the study were collected via personal interviews from 82 tourists visiting the SantaPark during the Christmas of 2001. All the tourists were on the last day of their visit to the SantaPark. Thus, they had the benefit of the entire holiday to assess their experience, which was still fresh in their minds.

Importance and performance information needed to construct the grid depicted in Figure 1 was collected in two parts. First, on five-point scales respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance they attached to a set of 13 factors in evaluating a theme park. These factors were canvassed from related writings (e.g. Kozak and Rimmington, 2000; Pine and Gilmore, 1998) and were related to basic facilities (e.g. restaurants), infrastructure (e.g. signs), economic factors (e.g. value for the money) and sensory stimulants (e.g. theme). Second, respondents were asked to evaluate their satisfactions with these attributes on seven-point scales ranging from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied”.

Results
Importance and performance
To determine which of the 13 evaluative factors are important and which ones are unimportant, mean importance scores were calculated for each factor. These scores were then compared to the grand mean (i.e., the mean importance rating for all 13 factors taken collectively). The factors with means exceeding the grand mean were considered to be the important and the rest unimportant factors. As shown in Table I, from this analysis six factors emerged as being important. They were theme, space design, personnel, range of activities, road signs and information facilities. The unimportant factors, among others, included transportation, shopping facilities and ticket prices.

To dichotomize the 13 factors into good and poor performer categories, again each factor’s mean performance score was calculated. A comparison of these mean scores to the grand mean performance score revealed that the respondents viewed the performance of the park good in theme, space design, personnel, range of activities, road signs and signs inside the park, transportation, restaurants and information facilities. Of those personnel was the best performer. The park performed poorly on four factors. Value for the money and ticket prices were the worst performers.

Simultaneous results
By simultaneously considering each factor’s importance and the park’s performance in terms of these attributes, placements of each of the 13 factors were determined. As can be seen from Table I, six factors fell into the keep up the good work category. These were theme, space design, personnel, range of activities, road signs and information facilities. None of the factors received the concentrate here designation. Several factors including ticket prices, shopping and value for the money were deemed low priority.
Overkill category had three factors and they were transportation, restaurants and signs inside the park.

Discussion
The results are enlightening in several ways. First, they show which motives are important and which are unimportant to visitors when they evaluate a theme park. Second, they highlight the SantaPark’s performance in terms of these motives. Third, motive placements point out the SantaPark’s areas of strength. This type of information is critical for the park administrators and other concerned civic, business and governmental groups as they prioritize and design courses of action to better market the park.

Results in Table I indicate several bright spots. Specifically, theme, space design, personnel, range of activities, road signs and information facilities are important to tourists when they evaluate a theme park. Furthermore, they perceive the park’s performance in these attributes as good. Actions to maintain and/or enhance SantaPark’s strengths in these areas can proceed on several fronts. The theme of SantaPark is a Christmas theme, which for many people represents a deep intangible cultural product that conjures up memories of romanticized happier yesteryears. By harmonizing appropriate sensory cues (smell/aroma, music, etc.), the SantaPark management can heighten visitors’ experiences wrapped around a consistent Christmas theme. Further improvements in ambient cues such as color, light, and temperature could have an impact on the visitors’ five senses, enhance their response to the environment and consequently influence their level of pleasure and leave them with indelible impressions.

In this context, it is important to remember that, in service environments, the ambient cues interact with the social cues to influence consumers’ level of pleasure and arousal (Benkenstein et al., 2003). In their interactions with the park, the sense of human touch to the visitors is conveyed by the personnel who are the predominant actors. In the eyes of the visitors, the contact personnel are an important dimension of a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>Keep up the good work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of space</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>Keep up the good work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>Keep up the good work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of activities</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>Keep up the good work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road signs</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>Keep up the good work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>Overkill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs inside</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>Overkill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>Overkill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>Keep up the good work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value for money</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>Low priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ticket price</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>Low priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something for everybody</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>Low priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>Low priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand mean</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I: Importance-performance analysis results
service organization’s image as they are the first points of contact in the service encounter. Since first impressions are lasting impressions, the contact personnel, who are part of the total servicescape, have a key role in the formation and management of an image. The contact personnel maintain this major role until the completion of the service delivery process (i.e. by the time the visitors leave the park). The results here show that visitors view the personnel attribute important and are satisfied with the personnel’s performance. Appearance, competence and behavior of personnel are crucial elements of visitors’ performance judgements. Among others, appearance encompasses dress, hairstyle, make-up, and cleanliness and significantly influences visitors’ first impression. The competence of contact employees is derived from their expertise gained from training, and from their experience and ability to communicate with customers in conformity with the procedures and standards of the service delivery. The behavior of these employees is a result of their individual personality traits and their perception of the social interaction with customers. Thus, SantaPark management should devote more resources to staff training. For instance, in-house training programs could be arranged to improve employee courtesy, helpfulness, understandability, language skills and appearance. Furthermore, the SantaPark management should ensure that all personnel become involved in setting quality standards and that they realize that maintaining service quality is part of their jobs (Yavas and Shemwell, 1997).

Design of space is another keep up the good work attribute. Given that the park is located in a cave under the ground, the layout of rides, activities and other facilities is a challenging task. Apparently the visitors surveyed here are satisfied with the current arrangement. Because space design is an important factor in the creation of image, further improvements in layout (especially when adding other activities and rides) must be designed with two objectives in mind. One is the maximization of organizational effectiveness and efficiency in serving the needs of the visitors. And the other is making sure that the changes further strengthen the Christmas theme and ambiance of the park. For instance, the recent additions to the park such as the bar, which tempts visitors with Christmas aromas of different Christmas drinks and the bakery that emits wonderful smells of Christmas cookies to the outside, are already well received by the visitors.

It should be noted that in this study several factors fell into the “low priority” quadrant of the importance-performance grid. As such they do not demand immediate attention. But this should not lead to complacency. Because any changes in the importance levels of factors, which are currently deemed “low priority”, would convert them into “concentrate here” factors. Therefore, administrators should continuously scan the environment and try to detect any changes in the saliences of these factors. Particularly noteworthy in this context are the two crucial cognitive factors of ticket prices and value for the money. In fact, of all the 13 attributes included in the study, price by far is the worst performer closely followed by value for the money. Given prior evidence that in evaluating theme parks price can be an important consideration for consumers (Bowen, 1990), well-planned arrangements would be imperative to help the park to prepare for contingencies more systematically and improve the performance of the price factor. Enhancements to ticket prices in the forms of discounted prices or promotional prices for families and dissemination of this information to the current and
potential visitors through such channels as travel agents, the park's Web site, etc. could pay dividends.

Value for the money reflects a mental estimate that involves a comparison of the time or money invested with the experiences gained (Murphy et al., 2000). Specifically, consumers' value for the money judgments represent the tradeoffs between the value of the experiences they gain and the sacrifice they make by paying the price to receive the gain. Thus, to enhance the performance of the value for the money attribute, administrators should focus on factors that would reduce the “costs” and increase the “gains”. Keeping ticket prices reasonable will certainly have beneficial effects on the “cost” side of the money for the value equation. Likewise, enhancements to the visitors’ experiences would positively influence the “gain” side of the equation. Experiences are personal and exist in the minds of individuals who have been engaged on an emotional, intellectual or even spiritual level (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Consumers judge an experience worth the price they pay if experiences are scripted around enticing themes. Thus, by further improving the performance of the theme attribute as described earlier and complementing this by improvements in other attributes, the SantaPark management can achieve desired results on the gain side.

It is interesting to note that respondents surveyed in this study find the performance of the SantaPark good in terms of range of activities but do not feel that the park offers something for everybody. Our post-hoc interviews with visitors revealed that the relatively poor rating of something for everybody attribute stemmed from lack of sufficient activities and rides for the children. Given that families with children comprise a sizeable portion of visitors to the park and that children influence their parents in making a visit to a theme park, the management would be advised to create more “hands on” activities to involve children with the park. An activity which is already very popular among children is the Elfschool where kids get red Elf clothing, an Elf name and at the end of the lesson make their own Christmas decoration.

Finally, the analysis here identified three attributes as being low importance with relatively high performance. These attributes do not need immediate attention and in fact scarce resources should be channelled to maintain and/or enhance other attributes which are of a higher priority.

On a closing note, it should be underscored that the results reported here and the prescriptive guidelines offered are enlightening. However, the limited scope of the study does not permit sweeping generalizations. Therefore, until further studies are conducted to cross-validate the results, the study findings and the strategies based on them should remain tentative. Replication studies with larger samples are in order. In addition, periodic assessments would be helpful to the SantaPark management in detecting changes in visitors’ sentiments over time and guide them in formulating more precise marketing strategies.

References


