Service Design for tourism SMEs - The concept of service design and its application on the Alpine Zoo in Innsbruck, Austria

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Case background

Tourism is a service-intensive industry that is dependent on the quality of customers' service experiences and their consequent assessments of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The recent development of online customer reviews through social media causes an evident reorientation of company resources from classic one-way advertisement towards a mutual communication and proper service quality (Stickdorn & Zehrer 2010, Stickdorn & Zehrer 2009, Egger 2005, Buhalis 2003). Therefore, the management of service quality is of crucial importance to the tourism industry and the adoption of a so-called 'service orientation' by service businesses has thus become of increasing interest in recent years as an important factor in the enhancement of profit, growth, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and employee satisfaction (Zehrer 2009; Lytle & Timmerman 2006; Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons 2001; Lynn et al. 2000). In an attempt to ensure that service orientation is consistent with the overall strategy and environment of the service provider, the approach of service design gains interest in the tourism literature. The concept of service design is an interdisciplinary approach, which can be outlined along five basic principles: user-centred, co-creative, sequencing, evidencing and holistic (Stickdorn & Schneider 2010). Since the tourism industry is dominated by small and medium sized enterprises - 94% of European tourism companies have less than 6 employees – it is questionable if service design methods are financially and organisationally feasible for most companies in this sector (EC 2003). The purpose of this paper is to present a short case study on the applicability of service design methods for the tourism industry, in particular to appraise prospects of success for the predominant SMEs.

During the case study a group of tourism management students who had no distinctive knowledge on designing services worked in teams of 3-5 people on the case of the Alpine Zoo in Innsbruck, Austria. The aim was to appraise if the student teams were able to come up with realisable concepts and if the board of the Alpine Zoo recognizes potential for a further implementation of these. Students only received minimal instructions during three one-day workshops and faced the very limited time frame of 6 weeks for the whole project besides their full-time studies. During the workshops, students became familiar with the basic concepts of service design thinking including the iterative process and a few methods and tools, such as Stakeholder Maps, Personas, Customer Journey Maps, 5 Whys, Service Blueprints, Storyboards, Service Prototyping, etc. (Stickdorn & Schneider 2010). Both the feedback from the board and the realised components of the students' concepts indicate the significance and applicability of service design thinking for tourism SMEs.

Take home

The case illustrates the importance - if not even the need - of service design thinking for the tourism industry and in particular for its predominant small and medium sized enterprises. Social media forces companies to increasingly draw attention to customers' experiences and thus shift resources from advertisement to the customer-centric development of services and their perceived quality. Furthermore, the findings of this case study show the applicability of a service design approach for tourism SMEs, since even a basic understanding and knowledge of service design methods and tools very likely has an impact on the service quality and thus the resulting customer satisfaction.

This paper reports a single case study and thus certain limitations need to be taken into account when considering the results of the study and its contributions. However, findings imply to develop a self-help toolkit focusing on small and micro sized companies which are unable to finance service design consulting. Furthermore and foremost the case shows the importance to adopt service design thinking in tourism degree programs – even if only on a basic level. However, further research is needed to complete the overall picture and a broader survey with a comparative service company would be most valuable to evaluate these findings.

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