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The impact of strategic marketing elements on the customer relationship programme for a regional tourism organisation

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the impact of strategic marketing elements on the customer relationship program of the Tshwane Tourism Association (TTA) in South Africa. Adopting a quantitative approach, random sampling was implemented in collecting data from twenty tourism and marketing experts from ten universities across South Africa. SPSS was applied in the data analysis process. Key findings indicated that strategic marketing elements were essential for the success of the customer relationship program for the TTA. Particularly it was highlighted that the adoption of a customer relationship program was important specifically for effective strategic marketing performance. While there was agreement that customer relationship management improves customer interactions leading to improved customer experience, sales and marketing, the implementation of a successful customer relationship program required clear focus and attention to be afforded to strategic marketing elements from the onset. Suggestions are made for further empirical enquiry into the barriers to developing a customer relationship management program and to investigate its impact on customer loyalty.

Keywords: Customer relationship management, marketing, regional tourism organization, customer loyalty, customer retention.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article considers the impact of strategic marketing elements on the customer relationship program (CRP) for a regional tourism destination marketing organisation. Customarily, organisations' service endeavours have focused on exchange with customers, but within the progressively competitive environment characterising worldwide markets, destination marketing associations are facing expectations of them being required to focus their considerations on building long-term relationships with their customers (Musa & Nasiru, 2020; Payne & Frow, 2005; Rahimi & Gunlu, 2016; Yang & Hu, 2015). One way of achieving this is through a customer relationship management (CRM) focus on relationships between destinations, marketing organisations and customers. Considered the second-best effective management tool and major marketing weapon principally based on the concepts of relationship marketing, CRM has been found to be beneficial to firms and has become even more relevant due to the increased competition in the contemporary business environment (Madhovi & Dhliwayo, 2017; Moudud-UI-Huq, Akter, Mahmud & Hassan, 2021). As the global community recovers from the COVID-19-induced economic downturn, CRM could become an important strategy for developing a competitive edge for organisations (Moudud-UI-Huq et al., 2021).



Essentially CRPs aim to help organisations move away from simply attracting new clients but also to extend to retaining existing clients and advancing service quality engagements with them (Juanamasta, Wati, Hendrawati, Wahyuni, Pramudianti, Wisnujati, Setiawati, Susetyorini, Elan, Rusdiyanto, & Astanto, 2019; Musa & Nasiru, 2020; Yang & Hu, 2015). The quality of connections between regional tourism organisations (RTOs) and customers is frequently shaped through CRPs which often determine the length of the customer relationship (Ibrahim, Abbas, & Kamal, 2021). Through the adoption and implementation of strategic marketing elements, CRPs play significant roles in achieving CRM objectives by regional marketing organisations through ensuring customer loyalty and retention in the long term (Musa & Nasiru, 2020). Angamuthu (2015) stipulates that CRM helps organisations enhance customer understanding, elevate consumer experience, attract new customers, expand profitability and lessen customer management costs.

Modern-day customers are increasingly demanding when it comes to service delivery, customer service and satisfaction, expectations which pose a distinct challenge for businesses (Madhovi & Dhliwayo, 2017; Moudud-UI-Huq et al., 2021). Consequently, an environment of continuous monitoring of customer service and product offerings needs to be established to encourage customer retention and new customer exploitation (Baksi, 2014). Ramaj and Ismaili (2015) intimate that maintaining effective CRM enables businesses to increase their customer retention rates and promote customer loyalty.

Despite growing interest based on the plethora of studies that have delved into the area of CRM globally and in South Africa (Du Plessis, Jooste & Strydom, 2005; Hamid, Cheng & Akhir, 2011; Madhovi & Dhliwayo, 2017; Nguyen & Waring, 2013; Rootman, Tait & Sharp, 2011; Vallabh, Radder & Venter, 2015), there is still a dearth of enquiry into the impacts of strategic marketing elements on CRPs with a specific focus on tourism destination management organisations (DMOs), especially in the context of RTOs. As such, the main thrust of this study is to consider the impact of strategic marketing elements on the CRP of the Tshwane Tourism Association (TTA), a RTO in South Africa. These strategic marketing elements are approached through hybrid constructs including destination marketing, customer service quality, tourism trends, customer loyalty, marketing planning, marketing research, internal marketing, customer satisfaction, customer retention, tourism growth, mission, vision, goals and objectives, which constitute the platform upon which CRPs are predicated. The paper now focuses on a review of relevant literature in line with the scope of the study, followed by a statement of the research approach. Thereafter the relevant findings will be presented, discussed and analysed while the study will wrap up with a statement of the recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

CRM is a significant, relatively new field and has become one of the fastest-growing practices within business operations (Dewnarain, Ramkissoon, & Mavondo, 2021). The success of a firm depends on its ability to attract, satisfy and retain its customers and this can be achieved by developing and maintaining closer relationships with the customer base. Consequently, organisations have realised that managing customer relationships is a very critical factor in gaining success in a competitive environment, with CRM being viewed as a strategy of modern governance of customer relationships (Madhovi & Dhliwayo, 2017; Nguyen & Waring, 2013). CRM is a customer-orientated and cross-functional business strategy concerned with ensuring that businesses understand their customer groups and respond quickly and at times, instantly to shifting customer desires (Darrel, 2010).

According to Bosio and Scheiber (2022:319), CRM serves to “encompass the development and consolidation of long-term profitable customer relationships through coordinated and customer-specific marketing, sales and service concepts with the help of modern information and communication technologies.” The success of tourist destinations depends to a large extent on effective relationships between DMOs and enterprises, which from regional perspectives constitute RTOs that must adopt CRM to create relationships with customers and stakeholders at regional levels (Al-Hazmi, 2021). Such adoption has the potential to improve marketing, sales, customer service, channel management, logistics and technology for delivering customer satisfaction and maintaining a long-term, profitable relationship (Goel, Singh & Shrivastava, 2015). The CRM paradigm has in its evolution shifted focus from simply attracting

new customers to retaining current ones as a consequence of the understanding that the cost of retaining current customers is lower than acquiring new ones (Ullah & Narain, 2020). Additionally, Meena and Sahu (2021) suggest that RTOs should focus their CRM processes and practices on designing CRM as a strategy for managing and identifying valuable and relevant stakeholders to enter long-term relationships with, and such relationships should be based on customer-centric models and cultures to affect marketing, sales and service processes positively.

According to Marques, Moleiro, Brito and Marques (2021), CRM extends beyond persuading customers to buy products, to fulfilling their expectations thereby transforming them into long-term, loyal customers. RTOs should carefully select their most valuable customers and maintain and strengthen these relationships to ensure long-term loyalty. Such RTOs and their customers need to develop mutually beneficial relationships built upon trust and loyalty through marketing strategies, customer service and relationship programmes. Kumar and Reinartz (2018) capture the key aspects that bring together the importance of CRPs in relation to strategic marketing elements and regional destination marketing by noting that creating unique, one-to-one relationships with customers based on individual needs and wants is key to organisations' growth and future success. For RTOs like the TTA, customer relationship strategies are essential for CRP planning in order to give direction in the development of these strategies. The strategic marketing elements considered in undertaking this study are focused on customer loyalty, marketing planning, marketing research, Internal marketing, customer satisfaction, customer retention, mission, vision, goals and objectives. For successful implementation, the TTA CRM programme must consider aligning its CRP processes on these strategic marketing elements.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research paradigm that was deemed appropriate for achieving the objectives of the study with the primary focus being to establish relationships between measured variables. Fink (2014) notes that a research design should ideally describe the way in which a study's subjects and participants are organised and more importantly, how their behaviour is measured, hence the option for quantitative methods. In terms of the sampling strategy, a census approach was anticipated, with all twenty-six universities in South Africa being targeted, in order to get responses from senior academics in their tourism and marketing departments. However, within the census approach, a simple random sampling method was deemed sufficient for the purposes of administering the questionnaire surveys for this enquiry to the identified professionals, experts, and academics.

For its part, the quantitative survey instrument was developed based on an extensive literature review and other similar studies that have been recently conducted in other destinations (Bashir, 2017; Everett, 2014; Rahimi & Kozak, 2017). The first part of the survey contained questions about the demographic data of the respondents while the second part adopted a five (5) point Likert scale ranging from 1= not important; to 5= very important (which in this article has been reduced to 1= not important, 2= somewhat important and 3= very important) as informed by previous studies around CRM (Madhovi & Dhliwayo, 2017; Moudud-UI-Huq, Akter, Mahmud & Hassan, 2021; Rani & Babu, 2015), albeit they were modified to suit the current study objectives. The survey was randomly distributed via different modes (email, face-to-face, virtual calls) as were deemed convenient to the identified participants. In total, twenty respondents participated from twelve universities that responded to the approaches that were made.

The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27, and the findings as collated will be elaborated upon both in terms of the descriptive presentations and thematic annotations. Discussions will accompany these presentations looking at the potential implications of the responses.

4. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The results of the data analysis are presented as descriptive statistics with variables based on the strategic marketing elements' importance in a customer relationship program. Firstly, the demographic characteristics of participants are presented which reflect an equal split in the participation rates with 50% of participants being female and 50% being male. In terms of the educational status of participants, the majority (50%) of the participants held a doctoral qualification, 30% had a master's degree and 20% had achieved a Bachelors' or Honours degree. Such

results are unsurprising considering the objective of the study was to target academics within the HEI ecosystem. In terms of the positions held by the participants, the majority (40%) were senior lecturers, 30% were lecturers and 20% were junior lecturers. The remaining 10% were equally split between associate professor and professor at 5% each. This augurs well for the study as most of the participants can be adjudged to possess the requisite knowledge and experience to contribute towards attaining the study objectives.

4.1 FINDINGS OF THE DESTINATION MARKETING-RELATED VARIABLES

Having established the demographic profiles of the participants, the study now focuses on the strategic marketing elements in a bid to establish the significance of destination marketing-related factors for the success of the CRP of an RTO. As previously noted, a Likert scale approach was used in measuring the participants' considerations of the predetermined variables that are reflected in Table 1. According to Lee and Park (2019), customer equity positively influences the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. The results from the surveys seem to suggest that the experts from the HEIs share similar sentiments with 95% indicating that customer loyalty (V1) was very important and only 5% noting that it was somewhat important (Table 1). In this light, the TTA should ensure that employees are committed to building quality customer relationships that have the potential to boost customer loyalty which could be achieved through the implementation of an 'employee-customer commitment' policy for the organisation, a strategy which demonstrates the potential of engendering customer loyalty.

Ponomarenko (2018) asserts that organisations should compile marketing plans aimed at enhancing their overall performance and meeting customers' needs, especially in the context of the digital era. Quizzed on the importance of marketing planning (V2), all participants (100%) in the survey noted that this was very important for the TTA (Table 1). While such feedback is positive, it is incumbent on the TTA to ensure that the process involves top management focusing on long-term planning, developing suitable company goals, and everybody is committed to marketing planning to benefit from an improved brand position and increased revenue.

Furthermore, with a 100% response rate in favour of the importance of marketing research (V3), it is vital that the TTA focuses on understanding changing customer needs to avoid wrong pricing decisions, forecasting and obtaining information about competitors. Adequate market research will assist the TTA to make informed decisions about services and mitigate service risk. Additionally, Pool, Khodadadi and Kalati (2017) indicate that internal marketing (V4) plays a crucial role in a services-related industry. Results from the data highlight that all participants (100%) consider internal marketing very important. Management at the TTA should therefore ensure that employees understand their customer service responsibilities and take pride in serving customers to their best ability. The TTA must take steps to achieve customer-centred service delivery, enhance external business relationships, improve the internal flow of information, comply with standards and protocols and improve brand reputation.

According to Pakurár, Haddad, Nagy, Popp and Oláh (2019), delivery and quality are positively associated with customer satisfaction. Again, 100% of study participants indicated that customer satisfaction (V5) was a very important consideration in the CRP process. Satisfied customers are a strong source of marketing via customer advocacy and loyalty, increased customer lifetime value and brand differentiation (Dewi, Hajadi, Handranata & Herlina, 2021). Customer satisfaction is often closely aligned with service quality and unsurprisingly, all respondents (100%) indicated that service quality (V6) was a very important consideration. The TTA should therefore set modalities for gauging satisfaction levels via customer satisfaction surveys and ensuring service delivery of the very highest standards. Employees must be fully involved in customer care processes to achieve quality services which could enhance customer retention, increased profitability and word-of-mouth marketing (Moudud-UI-Huq et al., 2021; Musa & Nasiru, 2020).

Customer retention is a catalyst for long-term profitability and is often signified by the length of the customer's relationship with the organisation (Jaiswal, Niraj, Park and Agarwal, 2018; Kim, Liu, and Williams, 2019). In this light, the entire respondent group (100%) indicated customer retention (V7) was very important in the CRP development process. Consequently, consistent service quality is essential for the organisation to retain customers; however,

customers will switch to competitors if they experience inferior quality in an organisation's services. Chahal and Bala (2017) report that a one per cent improvement in customer retention revenue has an almost five times greater positive impact on organisation value add.

Asked to indicate their views on the importance of the mission (V8) and vision (V9) statements as well as the goals and objectives (V10) of the TTA in building a successful CRP there was unanimous (100%) indication in all instances that these variables were very important (Table 1). These would possibly be understandable given that building a strategic direction of any organisation would require a strong focus on these elements (Manoharan & Singal, 2019). An astute implementation of the mission and vision statements, goals and objectives in the TTA will encourage successful CRP and effective market planning, thereby leading to a successful CRM.

TABLE 1
FINDINGS OF THE DESTINATION MARKETING-RELATED VARIABLES (N= 20, IN PERCENTAGE)

V#	Variables	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important
V1	Customer loyalty	0	5	95
V2	Marketing plan	0	0	100
V3	Market research	0	0	100
V4	Internal marketing	0	0	100
V5	Customer satisfaction	0	0	100
V6	Service quality	0	0	100
V7	Customer retention	0	0	100
V8	Mission statement	0	0	100
V9	Vision statement	0	0	100
V10	Goals and objectives	0	0	100

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

CRM continues to play an important role in how destinations vie for attracting customers whilst engaging in processes to retain existing clients. CRP involves the performance of numerous processes and activities aimed at providing the customer with relevant and timely information. The TTA must therefore monitor tourism trends both locally and regionally in order to understand how the City of Tshwane (CoT) is impacted presently as well as projections for the future. Based on the outcomes of the current study, it is suggested that the TTA develops and implements an internal opportunity identification model which should provide the basis for developing and sustaining customer satisfaction. Such a model will assist the TTA to take advantage of tourism growth in South Africa and the CoT more specifically.

Furthermore, this study finds that there is an important relationship between a successful CRP and customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and retention. This augurs well in terms of extant research where it has been previously established that CRM has a significant effect on tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty (Moudud-UI-Huq et al., 2021). As such the TTA needs to prioritise developments and processes in these established areas to ensure a sustainable relationship with clients is enhanced. This can be achieved through activities such as celebrating the arts and artefacts, sporting activities (e.g., South Africa's success in the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan), cultural achievements and cultural diversity of local communities in different South African destinations. In addition, the TTA collaboration with SAT and Proudly South African should include organising annual events to foster community pride.

This research aimed at understanding the importance of strategic marketing elements on the CRP of an RTO being the TTA. In considering these strategic marketing elements, the study focussed on customer loyalty, marketing planning, marketing research, internal marketing, customer satisfaction, customer retention, mission, vision, goals

and objectives. The study established that these elements were overwhelmingly considered very important for the development of the CRP of the TTA. Successful integration of these strategic marketing elements in developing CRPs for RTOs could have a significant impact on the CRM program, resulting in customer satisfaction, loyalty, and repeat business.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Though this study revealed several noteworthy findings, there were certain limitations. The implications of this study's results should, therefore, be considered in light of these limitations. CRM is a critical business process being adopted by the tourism industry which leads to augmented perceived service quality of the tourists leading to the elevation in satisfaction level and subsequent repatronisation. The outcomes of this study confirmed that strategic marketing elements are very important in the CRP development process for RTOs. However, other variables were not included in this study which could also influence the findings. Therefore, future enquiry should pay attention to these and other variables such as destination marketing, quality, tourism trends and growth to gain a broader perspective.

Another limitation of the study was that the respondents were limited to academics within the Hei ecosystem in South Africa. The findings of the study could perhaps be affected by consideration of other industry stakeholders and experts such as public sector organisations, non-governmental organisations within the tourism industry and other civil society organisations. Future research should therefore bear this in mind and interrogate varying stakeholder groups to better access the respondents' feelings on the issues.

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