Tourism Management Perspectives 28 (2018) 201–210

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tourism Management Perspectives

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tmp

The 'customer journey': Learning from customers in tourism experience encounters

Jonathan Moshe Yachin[a,b,*]

[a] School of Technology and Business Studies, Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden
[b] Department of Tourism Studies and Geography, Mid-Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Experience encounters
Customer knowledge
Customer journey
Micro-tourism firms
Value in experience
Guided-tours

ABSTRACT

For micro-tourism firms, customers are a readily-accessible and highly important knowledge source that often remains unutilised. This study explores firm–customer encounters along the customer journey as learning opportunities. Based on data collected through participant observations, interviews and a review of user-generated content, this case study provides an in-depth look into the customer journey, with a Swedish micro-tourism firm. The findings suggest that the possibility to generate knowledge about experiential purposes is conditioned by the firm's ability to bestow encounters with an experience-like quality and promote the customers' transformation into participants. This is facilitated by involving customers, adopting an experiential discourse and utilising in-situ supporting moments to socialise. Firms can also learn about customers' subjective perception of value from user-generated content. The study concludes that in the context of learning from customers, small size provides micro-tourism firms with an opportunity to engage in personal relationships with their customers.

1. Introduction

'Perhaps the most important source of learning is learning from consumers' (Poon, 1993, p.272). The idea that consumers, users, and customers are a valuable knowledge source for firms resonates through a body of conceptual and empirical works from different theoretical streams. Service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), new service development (Alam, 2002; Matthing, Sandén, & Edvardsson, 2004), open innovation (Brunswicker, 2016) and user-driven innovation (Von Hippel, 2005) all advocate involvement of, and learning from, customers. In principle, the notion is that sourcing knowledge from customers about their interests, latent desires and past experiences, has the potential to increase the firm's innovation capacity and enhance the value for their customers.

The customers' role in co-creating tourism experiences makes them a vital knowledge source (Hoarau, 2014; Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011). Tourism firms can learn from customers in different ways, for example, through surveys, interviews, observations and workshops (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager & Nordin, 2011). For small-scale tourism firms these methods are often too demanding and costly (Komppula & Lassila, 2015). Indeed, recent studies have found that small-scale tourism firms rarely utilise customers as sources of knowledge (Pikkemaat & Peters, 2016; Yachin, 2017). This is, arguably, a crucial oversight for the global tourism system, of which, micro-firms constitute an extensive and vital part (Middleton, 2001; Reinl & Kelliher, 2014; TOURISMlink, 2012). Micro-firms, the smallest type of business entity, employ fewer than ten persons and have an annual turnover of less than €2 million (European Commission, 2014). Micro-tourism firms typically operate within small economic margins and have a limited capacity to innovate (Hjalager, 2002; Müller, 2013). While investments in research and development are beyond their means (Nybakk, Vennesland, Hansen, & Lunnan, 2008; Pikkemaat & Zehrer, 2016), close interactions with tourists are an integral part of their daily operations (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010). Thus, for many micro-tourism firms, customers are a readily-accessible knowledge source that embodies innovation opportunities.

Tourism is a sector in which intensive encounters between customers and service providers constitute the experience (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). These encounters take place along the 'customer journey', which involves a pre-trip period, the tourism experience itself and a post-purchase phase (Shaw & Williams, 2009; Voss & Zomerdijk, 2007). The aim of this research is to study firm–customer encounters along the customer journey, as opportunities for micro-tourism firms to learn from customers. In the context of producing tourism experiences, addressing the socio-psychological aspects of value is pivotal (Komppula, 2006; Williams & Soutar, 2009). Accordingly, this research is especially concerned with practices and factors that facilitate knowledge development of the customers' experiential purposes.

* Corresponding author at: School of Technology and Business Studies, Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden.
E-mail address: jmy@du.se.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2018.09.002
Received 20 February 2018; Received in revised form 13 September 2018; Accepted 14 September 2018

I explore this topic through an interpretivist lens, which constructs knowledge through the researcher's lived experiences and interactions with the subject (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The setting is a micro-tourism firm based in central Sweden. The firm provides nature-based tours in small groups. Presumably, these are rich in relevant data about firm-customer encounters. In the context of micro-tourism firms in Sweden, the purposely selected firm possesses qualities that position it as both a common (representative) and an unusual (relates to customers as a knowledge source) case study. I collected data through participant observations, in-depth interviews with the firm's owner-manager, conversations with the tour guides and review of user-generated content. As a single-case, my purposes with this study are: to illustrate firm–customer communication dynamics along the customer journey; inspire theoretical advancements in tourism experience encounters and knowledge sourcing; and motivate managerial practices that will enable micro-tourism firms to utilise their encounters with the customers, as a knowledge source about experiential purposes.

The article is structured as follows. First, I present the theoretical background, which focuses on customer knowledge, the value it embodies for tourism firms and how it could be sourced. Then, I develop the customer journey model (Fig. 1) and discuss theories relevant to firm–customer encounters. The methodology section motivates the research design, presents the case study and details the data collecting methods. The empirical findings are presented as a report of a customer journey with the studied firm. In the discussion section, I analyse the reported encounters as knowledge sourcing opportunities, identify factors that affect learning from customers and suggest managerial practices that promote the transformation of customers into participants (Fig. 2). I conclude the article with some thoughts that I hope will inspire further research and change in managerial approach.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The value of knowledge and knowledge of value

Knowledge and information are often defined in relation to the ‘wisdom hierarchy’, in which knowledge is positioned at a higher level (Rowley, 2007). Moving from information to knowledge involves understanding patterns (Bellinger, Castro, & Mills, 2004). Information refers to organised data that are useful and relevant in a certain context (Rowley, 2007). It typically answers questions concerned with ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘how many’, while knowledge answers ‘how to’ questions (Ackoff, 1989). Knowledge provides grounds for action, decision-making and innovation and it is created by the intelligent application of experience and skills on information (Cooper, 2006; Hall & Williams, 2008). The knowledge literature distinguishes between tacit and explicit knowledge (Rowley, 2007). The latter relates to codified knowledge, which is relatively easy to transfer through different types of documents (Weidenfeld, Williams & Butler, 2010). Tacit knowledge, by contrast, involves intangible factors and is embedded in the individual experience, which makes it more difficult to capture (Cooper, 2006; Rowley, 2007).

Customer knowledge refers to the understanding of customer preferences. Utilising customer knowledge is vital for product and service development (Kumar et al., 2010; Tseng, 2009). Understanding tourists' preferences and travel motivations, is essential when creating tourism experiences (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hoarau, 2016; Marrocu & Paci, 2011). Tourists are an important source of knowledge and ideas, and therefore a driver for innovation (Clausen & Madsen, 2014; Williams, 2014). In addition, tourists can also be seen as innovators in their own right, since they build their own itineraries and negotiate the meaning of places and local resources as they imagine new ways to experience a place (Hall & Williams, 2008).

According to the service-dominant (S-D) logic, a firm cannot deliver value but rather design, develop, and offer value propositions (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), which should be based on customers' desires and perception of value. One of the core axioms of the S-D logic states that ‘value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary’ (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 19). The notion that value is subjective and vital for service development further stresses the idea that firms should learn from their customers. However, similarly to tacit knowledge, customers' perception of value involves intangible factors. Overcoming the complexity of capturing value in a tourism context requires multidimensional value conceptualisation, such that address both functional and socio-psychological aspects (Williams & Soutar, 2009). Accordingly, Prebensen (2014) adopts a value perspective that consists of four dimensions: *Functional Value* relates to perceived quality and performance in relation to cost; *Emotional Value* relates to the capacity of the experience to generate well-being, excitement and happiness; *Social Value* is derived from one's improved status in a social context and relates to how consumption enhances self-identity and image; *Epistemic Value* is created when the customer gains new knowledge that satisfies his/her curiosity and it is also associated with a sense of adventure. Considering the experiential character of many tourism products, the social, emotional and epistemic dimensions of value might be more decisive in determining the value customers generate (Komppula, 2006).

Helkkula, Kelleher, and Pihlström (2012) argue that the concept of value has not been sufficiently explained in ontological, epistemological and methodological terms. Thus, any analytical, theoretical or practical implications of the S-D logic in relation to sourcing customer knowledge are limited. Helkkula et al. (2012) address these issues and focus on three questions: What is value in the experience? What can be accepted as evidence regarding value in the experience? And: What methods and techniques should be adopted for collecting data about value in the experience? According to Helkkula et al. (2012), value can be created outside of the service context as it can be based on imagination and other people's experiences. These authors claim that subjective experiences are justified as data and evidence of value in experience. Thus, methodological choices should be based on individual narratives (e.g. diaries, blogs and open-ended interview questions), and concerned with the interpretation of human experiences, rather than measurement of pre-defined constructs.

2.2. Knowledge sourcing methods

The question, as to how to source knowledge from tourists, has received some attention in the academic literature. Notably, Hjalager and Nordin (2011) have presented sixteen methods to source ideas and inspiration from customers. Some methods, such as customer surveys, review of complaints and product ratings, collect information from a large number of passive customers. However, such conventional assessment methods are insufficient when it comes to learning about tourists' evaluation of experiences (Park & Vargo, 2012). These methods cannot grasp the complex character of value in experience and therefore they limit the firm's ability to learn about the customers' latent desires. Alternatively, by adopting an interpretive approach, managers could identify possible patterns in the lived experiences of customers (Helkkula et al., 2012). Interpretive methods, such as interviews and observations, are based on close interaction with fewer customers, and aim to understand consumer motivation and behaviour. These methods have the potential to generate valuable knowledge, but they require trained personnel that could analyse qualitative data (Hjalager & Nordin, 2011). Other methods aim to utilise active lead users through open calls for product development, virtual communities and innovation camps. The applicability of these is conditioned by the ability of the firm to facilitate engagement (Hjalager & Nordin, 2011). Elsewhere, Fuchs, Höpken, and Lexhagen (2015) show how customer knowledge could be sourced using a business-intelligence approach and application of web-mining and electronic tracking devices. Konu (2015) found that the Delphi method provides abundant information and ideas from potential customers. Konu and Komppula (2016) add that a customer