

THE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES OF TOUR GUIDES AND QUALITY TOURISM



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Abstract: The present work was conducted through exploratory research that sought insight into the tour guides necessary competencies and their impact on the quality of tourism in the Algerian setting. The findings of the study show that tour guides have a crucial role in enhancing the image of the whole tourism sector as they are the front line staff. The results show that tour guides' service quality positively influences tourist satisfaction. The findings provide insight into practical implications for the competence development of tour guides and proffer instrumental contributions to help travel agencies strengthen tour guides' professional competences for effectively enhancing service quality of tour guiding and improving tourist satisfaction.

Key words: Professional competencies, Quality tourism, Tour guides, Training.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the tour guides in the field of tourism lies in their direct contact with tourists and their spending longer periods of time with them in comparison with other staff of the same field. It is necessary, then, for tour guides to be given much more consideration as a tribute for their valuable services.

The tour guide has to know how to deal with people from different

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backgrounds and cultures. He has to be careful and must adapt himself to any circumstances that are likely to happen during the journey. And he has to endure tiresome long periods with the tourists as he is the one who spends the longest time with them.

Tour guides professional competencies can be seen as part of travel products, since such competencies can influence tourists' perceptions on service quality of tour guiding and improving tourist satisfaction. For travel agencies, tour guides are one of the critical human capitals to make profits in today's severely competitive market of the tourism industry. In order to acquire customers of niche market, modern tourism firms not only have to provide high-quality travel products and innovative services, but also need to cultivate their tour guides' professional competencies, thereby enhancing tourists' satisfaction on group package tours. Tour guides should not only maintain travel quality, but also need to guarantee tourists' rights. They are the bridges between destinations and tourists. In addition, tour guides should provide immediate, proper, intangible, inseparable and positive services (Yi 2017: 02).

2. The Status of Tourism in Algerian Economy

Tourism as key service sector in economy is not a new phenomenon, despite the fact that it is considered as an emerging economic activity in Algeria. In 1910, an Austrian economist defined tourism as "a bob total of operators, mainly of an economic nature, which is directly relate to the entry, stay and movement of foreigners inside and outside a certain country, city or region".

Nowadays, tourism is a huge industry. To escape from one' s routine and travel towards a new horizon is no longer fuzzy phenomenon, it is a real market, a huge industry which involves organizations and professionals whose main mission is to welcome tourists and sell them different services. It should be highlighted that the industry of tourism represents 11 % of the international gross domestic product, and employs 231 million people who work in different fields or service sectors linked with tourism, such as, transportation, accommodation and leisure activities services. For some counties, as Tunisia, the sector of tourism has a vital role in Tunisia' s economy as it provides significant income that comes from tourists consumption of goods and services and the chance for employment in the service industries associated with tourism (Bekri 2012:16).

Algerian authorities now are trying to find alternatives to oil/gas- based economy, and tourism could be the best choice. Nowadays, Algeria is

witnessing a peaceful atmosphere, economic stability accompanied with a political conciliation towards the international market permits Algeria to get involved in a worldwide competition and promote its wonderful landscape and rich cultural heritage.

Algerian governments made great efforts to promote and develop the sector of tourism. One of those decisive efforts was a cooperation program between the Ministry of Town Planning, Environment and Tourism and the World Tourism Organization(WTO) for 2010 – 2015 was signed in Algiers during the 50 th meeting of WTO commission for Africa on May 17 – 19, 2010. The cooperation includes three (03) main components: marketing, the improvement of infrastructures, and training (Bekri 2012:16).

.As the focus of the present study is training and developing professional competencies of tour guides, it should be said that tourism has its own professional training track that comprises human resources and infrastructures. Tourism as a broad concept is an umbrella term that includes various disciplines as catering, hotel industry, travel agencies, tourists activities, etc. The personals in all those tourism disciplines need training and professional development to develop the sector of tourism in Algeria.

Among the training tourism institutions for human resources developments including tourist guides, one can mention the National Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (INTH) in Tizi-Ouzou with several annexes, Tourism and Hotel Management Center (CTH), and the National Institute of Tourism (ENST) within the Hotel El-Aurassi.

Thus, training plays of tourism human resources plays a crucial role in developing the sector of tourism. Professionalism of human resources including tour guides will lead to quality tourism in the country.

3. Definitions of Tour Guiding

The Oxford English Dictionary (1933) defines the concept ‘guide’ as ‘one who leads or shows the way, especially to a traveller in a strange country, especially one who is hired by a traveller or tourist to conduct (e.g., over a mountain, through a forest or over a city or building) and to point out objects of interest’.

Collins (2000: 22) defines a tour guide as “a person who guides visitors (in the language of their choice) and interprets the cultural and natural heritage of an area, possessing an area-specific qualification.”

Another definition provided by the Professional Tour Guide Association of San Antonio (1997) states that the guide is a person with an effective

combination of enthusiasm, knowledge, personality qualities and high standards of conduct and ethics who leads groups to the important sites, while providing interpretation and commentary.

An internationally accepted definition given by the International Association of Tour Managers and the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (EFTGA, 1998) is that a tour guide is a person who guides groups or individual visitors from abroad or from the home country around the monuments, sites and museums of a city or region; to interpret in an inspiring and entertaining manner, in the language of the visitor's choice, the cultural and natural heritage and environment.

4. Tour Guides Roles

In the contemporary context of tourism, the key role of tour guides is to show the path to tourists wanting to discover more about the place they are desired to visit. Pearce (1984: 136) supports this proposition when he points out that in cross-cultural settings, many tourists still need a guide since such visitors frequently break social rules and intrude upon others privacy.

Cohen (1985) proposes that the mentoring role of the contemporary tour guide is made up of four (04) components:

1) Selection: The itinerary of a tour is firstly chosen by the management of the tour company with varying degrees of input from the tour guide. In terms of the transferring of cultural understanding, these items of interest would include more than just examples of the natural and built environment of interest to tourists, but also examples of housing, gardens, recreation activities, entertainment, shops and markets, sub cultural groups and many other designs for living. As Cohen points out, this selection process also involves what is *not* shown. The tour company and tour guide can therefore give a misleading view of a tourist destination's culture by selecting only those examples that they think their customers wish to see and experience, or that they consider to be an acceptable face of the destination.

2) Information: Cohen (1985) states that the dissemination of correct and precise information is considered by many to be the kernel of the guide's role. This is supported by two of the very few published training texts for guides - Barry (1991) and Mancini (1990). It is interesting to note that Mancini (1990: 63) states "tourists are hungry to learn things, it's one of the main reasons they travel". Cohen's proposition is reflected in the meager literature on tour guides, including Nettekoven (1979: 142), who states that "professional tour guides are [...] the most important

informants about touristic as well as social conditions of the destination"; and Gurung *et al.* (1996), who claim that "a well-managed guiding program can allow for the integration of local knowledge about cultures". Pond (1993), the author of a fine text on tour guides also states that information dissemination is integral to the guide's effectiveness. Again the selection of information is seen to be crucial to the transferring of cultural understanding. For example, an Australian tour guide may or may not choose to inform tourists that, until the late 1960s, Australia had an immigration policy that discriminated against non-Europeans, or that Australia has an Aboriginal population that many claim were unfairly displaced, facts that have had a large effect on Australia's contemporary culture (Mc Donnel 2001: 02).

3) Interpretation: It is Cohen's (1985: 17) view that interpretation and not the mere dissemination of information, is the distinguishing communicative function of the trained tourist guide. The many who have made similar observations include Moscardo (1996: 382), who states that "interpretation is trying to produce mindful visitors; visitors who are active, questioning and capable of reassessing the way they view the world". In other words, interpretation of information can give tourists new insights and understandings of the culture of the area they visit. This makes the tour guide a culture broker between the cultures of the host and guest or, in other words, a person who is familiar with and knowledgeable on all aspects of the host culture and who has some understanding of the culture of the guest (Nettekoven, 1979: 142).

4) Fabrication: Fabrication is outright lying as opposed to interpretation. Cohen refers to guides who present fake antiques as if they were genuine, or who take tourists to a location and falsely claim it is the place promised in the tour brochure. Ko (1996) reports a contemporary Australian example of fabrication, with guides taking Korean tourists in Sydney to certain souvenir and duty free shops, where they are encouraged to spend by being told these shops offer excellent value. The guide receives high commissions from the shopkeepers, unknown to the tourists. It is practices such as these that result in calls for the regulation of tour guides in many tourist destinations.

Briefly speaking, tour guides are the persons who take care of tourists from their arrival till their departure. They are the ones who spend the longest periods of time with tourists. Tour guides are key constituents of the tourism sector due to their significant role to demonstrate historical and cultural products of the country to tourists. They are responsible of

giving positive impressions to visitors and it is their duty to make the trip successful.

The main role of tour guides is to provide tourists with information. Yet, tour guides' role is multi-faceted; it is not limited to information disseminating. A tour guide is a leader, a teacher, a translator, an information-giver and an entertainer. As roles generate language, each role performed by the tour guides has its specific linguistic patterns and features. Besides being simple, tour guide's language is not constant. It varies depending on the situation and the need of the role. It includes diverse kinds of genres as it alters from description to narration, to direction, to translation and many other linguistic styles (Seriou 2014: 03).

5. Tour Guides Conditions and Requirements

Tour guides are expected to play better roles when given the right education and training. Tour guide's performance depends on his competencies which in turn depend on the training and learning he has been through.

McDonnell (2001) insists on tour guides to be expert in the culture of the destination and have a good understanding of the culture of the tourist in order for them to be effective in their role as a cultural bridge. This training requirement can vary from one that is tightly regulated, for example in Cyprus, where the Cyprus tourism organization controls tour guides, to Australia, where anyone can set up as a tour guide without any qualifications. Andronicou (1979) states that in Cyprus only Cypriot nationals can become a tour guide, they must be of decent character, have an appropriate educational background, and have graduated from the school for guides, which teach Cyprus history, archaeology, art and culture. He states that the culture broking role of the tour guide is seen as vitally important, which is why their professional requirements are so high.

To improve guides' professional skills and work performance, tour guide certification systems have been practiced in many countries. In China, studies on this issue are related to the analysis of tour guide's function, professional knowledge, obligation and duty, as well as commentary skills and principles (Seriou 2014: 46).

Countries that have traditions in tourism regulations, have licensing systems for guides and their education takes place at university or a college, as well as on-the-job training. McDonnell (2001) adds that countries with large inbound tourism flows, such as Thailand, People's

Republic of China, the Republic of China, India, Singapore and Korea, all have formal training and licensing of guides.

From what have already been said, Algeria can benefit from the training experiences of professionals mainly tour guides of countries that passed a long path in tourism professionals training.

6. Tour Guides Training Challenges

There are several reported challenges in training. For example, because training overlaps daily operations, it is difficult for companies to measure how much they spend on training. Therefore, measuring return on investment (how effectively the company uses its capital for training and the profit from that investment), is also difficult to evaluate (Valentini 2011: 08).

Training professionals should consider the different competency levels of different working groups in training. Trainers often deal with four groups of workers: people who do not know what skills are required to do the job, newly hired graduates who know what they need to know but do not know how to do it, experienced employees who are promoted and need to develop a new set of skills, and veterans who possess years of experience and seem to naturally know what to do in every situation (Valentini 2011: 08 - 9).

Another challenge in training that can result in burnout is charging an already overtaxed workforce with the responsibility of acquiring more knowledge and skills. Eight hours per day is usually about the limit for intense training. The answer is not to overload the participants' daily schedule; rather it is to include fun elements in the sessions and build in frequent breaks in order to allow some downtime for attendees. Especially for younger employees, making training fun and integrating training methods such role play and practicing problem-solving skills improve their customer service skills. Hence, traditional teaching methods, such as lecturing, might prove ineffective and would have to be altered, starting by allocating more resources, not only for training the employees, but also the trainers (Valentini 2011: 10).

7. Quality Tourism and Tourist Guides' Competencies

Tour guides' professional competencies significantly influence service quality. Tour guides' professional competencies are a kind of psychological characteristics that may influence their external behaviors and performance of tour guiding. Therefore, tourists' perceptions on service quality of tour guiding were significantly influenced by tour guides' professional competencies.

The tourism industry is the business in which people serve the people. Positive professional attitude can bridge the gaps among tourists, tour guides and travel agencies. Travel agencies can recognize tourists' real thoughts and needs by tour guides in order to satisfy tourists when designing package tour or activities (Yi 2014: 13 – 14).

8. Conclusion

Tour guides should reinforce service quality to tourists, quality and service competencies in order to demonstrate their friendliness. Through tour guides' positive service attitude and service efficiency, their customers (i.e. tourists) will perceive high-quality service contents that can enhance tourist satisfaction considerably. As a consequence, travel agencies and tourism firms can identify tour guides' professional competencies needed, demanded and concerned by tourists. They will truly approach tourists and realize how to satisfy tourists to strengthen their service quality and tourist satisfaction. Our research findings can serve as instrumental guidelines for travel agencies to recruit employees and make decisions on training as well as for the competency development of tour guides and those who will work as tour guides.

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