

# Quality of Feedback to E-Mail Requests - An Explorative Study in Alpine Tourism Destinations

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## Abstract

This study explores the state of response behaviour to e-mail enquiries in alpine tourism destinations by e-mailing a typical room request with some specific questions to a random sample of 65 tourism offices. One of the striking results was that one third of those electronic enquiries were not answered at all. In addition, many other unexpected results emerged, especially relating to the service quality of replies and to the quantity of answers. Neglecting their actual responsibility as an information provider, the tourism organisation often forwarded the enquiry. As a result, the tourism organisation obviously lost control of the enquiry process and for a single e-mail, numerous answers from different hotels were sent back. Altogether, many responses had to be rated as more or less unsatisfactory which gives rise to the question how a better e-mail customer service may be achieved.

**Keywords:** Electronic customer request, customer service

## 1 Introduction

With the ongoing diffusion of internet technology, new ways of communication have become commonplace. This is in particular the case with e-mail. Nowadays, many people frequently use e-mail communication as alternative to phone or traditional 'snail' mail. Moreover, people expect the accessibility of their correspondents by this new media. Clearly, this development poses a considerable challenge for organisations to offer an e-channel and to effectively and efficiently handle the incoming communication over this channel.

Tourism is a particularly information-intense industry which conducts many important business activities by the means of telecommunication. Given the importance of the e-mail media, it seems to be straightforward that tourism

organisations pick up this means of communication to establish a new channel for requests and feedbacks from customers.

Based on previous e-mail customer research in the tourism industry, this study benchmarks the enabling of electronic requests and the service quality of e-mail responses to these requests by tourism destinations. The purpose of this study is firstly to measure response behaviour in terms of response rates, response time and service quality defined as the extent to which the information needs of a mystery guest have been answered adequately.

## **2 E-Mail Customer Service in Tourism**

The Internet offers new customer service channels (Zemke & Connellan, 2001). Websites and e-mail exemplify this new 'interface' for one-to-one communication with current and potential customers (Grönross, 2000; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). Just like for traditional channels, service quality and customer satisfaction are key success factors for the successful use of Internet and its services. Strauss and Hill's (1998) study about consumer complaints by e-mail revealed that responding quickly, addressing the subject comprehensively, and closing with an employee's name are simple ways to raise the perceived quality of customer service.

E-mail is the most prevalent internet technology and consumers' most popular internet activity (WEMF, 2004). Just as telephones and toll free numbers pioneered new customer service delivery, e-mail adds a ubiquitous, cost-effective customer service channel. E-mail communication is characterised to be instantaneous, easy to use, inexpensive and asynchronous; it provides the users with a great degree of flexibility (Matzler et al., 2005; Rudy, 1996; Strauss & Pesce, 1998). This results in a wide spectrum of possible requests and principle each e-mail requires a unique treatment (Yang, 2001).

In the way customers prefer e-mail to other communication means, companies shift towards customer service via e-mail (Strauss & Pesce, 1998; Zemke & Connellan, 2001). The effective handling of e-mail requests is considered as an essential and critical means for customer service and customer relationship management, regardless whether the consumers have already engaged in a transaction or not (Yang & Jun, 2002; Zemke & Connellan, 2001).

From a customer's point of view, e-mail service is a critical factor for two reasons. First, it directly affects the buying decision. The consequences of a non-reply or an inefficient response are a negative impression in the first place which obviously influences customer satisfaction. Economically this may lead to a loss of present and

future business or the outfall of revenues from friends and associates of the e-mail writer (Ho et al., 2003; Matzler et al., 2005).

Various scientific research projects in the tourism industry, especially in the hotel sector, address this subject (Gherissi-Labben et al. 2002, Pechlaner et al. 2002). Several studies revealed that scores of hotels are reluctant to fully adopt the medium e-mail and to use it effectively. A study of 200 Swiss hotels assessed the relationship between features on a hotel's website and the e-mail response. The availability of certain features are significantly related to responsiveness and quality of response (Murphy et al., 2003). Murphy and Tan (2003) tested response rates and response quality of travel agencies and found out that agencies handle e-mail requests from prospect customers poorly. Leuenberger et al. (2003) studied responsiveness and response quality of e-mail customer service by upscale international hotels. In a similar empirical survey from Austria, a mystery guest got a response from only 63% of the DMOs. In rare cases the guests were even overwhelmed by the amount of information they got. Nevertheless, the overall quality of the answers was poor: only 15 out of 300 responses were adequate (Ahrens & Gassner, 2005).

These disillusioning findings may be explained under the perspective of the concept of diffusion of innovations. Organisations often misapply and overestimate the near-term influence of emerging technologies and underestimate the technologies' long-term effects. Organisational diffusion involves two phases, initiation and implementation (Rogers, 1995). However, many organisations fall into an assimilation gap between the two stages (Fichmann, 2000; Fichmann & Kemerer, 1999). Organisations reaching beyond the initiation phase towards the implementation phase by establishing principles that ensure accurate – i.e. prompt, polite, personal, professional – e-mail responses (Murphy & Tan, 2003).

### **3 Destination Management in an ICT Environment**

Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) are the organisations responsible for the management and/or marketing of destinations and generally fall into one of the following categories: National Tourism Organisations (NTO); Regional or provincial DMOs as well as local DMOs.

A DMO plays the central role in cooperative promotion of their geographic area to business and individual travellers (Palmer & McCole, 2000). Despite this marketing tasks, DMOs carry out various cooperative activities such as representation of interests, offering bundling and strategic planning (Bieger, 2002). This study focuses on the DMO's function as an information provider. In this role, the DMO acts as an intermediary among the tourists and the local service providers with the objective to

match buyers and sellers (Bakos, 1998). This has been increasingly supported by information and communication technology, hence resulting in a reorganisation of these processes.

As a survey of the WTO indicates, 95% of the interviewed DMOs worldwide are operating a website with a wide range of tourist information including accommodation offerings (WTO, 2004). This information can be integrated in a destination management system (DMS), which is the central element of the IT infrastructure of the DMO. DMSs enable individual travellers to carry out direct bookings at hotels and facilitate the information providing as well as the reservation processes in the DMO's back office (Sheldon, 1997). DMS are referred to as the most important technological tool for the future of both, DMOs and destinations (Buhalis & Collins, 2003)

## **4 Research Design**

The central aim of our project is to explore the handling of e-mail request from customers by tourist organisations and to explain the perceived behaviour. For this purpose, we designed a qualitative empirical study which consists basically of two stages. The first stage consists of a black-box test where we employ the setting of a qualitative experiment to measure the behaviour of the organisation to an e-mail request. Here we choose the often used mystery-guest approach. The results of this stage are reported in this paper. The second stage comprises a with-box test where we want to look into the tourist organizations and analyse the relevant information processes. This study should give us some insight in the internal processing of e-mail requests and thus should help to explain the reactions that we registered. This stage is still due.

Our focus is on DMO's which in our perspective act as an intermediary between customers and the local service providers because we are particularly interested in the information flows between these entities. We choose a random sample comprising 65 alpine destinations mainly in Switzerland and in neighbouring Austria. This type of destinations basically attract leisure travellers for winter sport, such as skiing as well as tourists who admire natural attractions in all seasons (Buhalis, 2000).

### **4.1 Data Collection and Experimental Design**

First, the possibility to place an online enquiry had to be checked. Therefore the websites of tourism destinations were analysed accurately, to find a contact e-mail address or an enquiry form. For both, e-mail and enquiry forms, the availability and localisation was checked. The availability of both features was rated with yes or no

and the variable 'localisation' analysed the navigation perspective by examining the access path from the entry website. For the websites in the sample a content analysis has been conducted to identify the presence or absence as well as the localisation of the benchmark features. To ensure that unbiased reliability is maintained, each of the websites was evaluated double-blind (Krippendorf, 1980).

A mystery guest approach was used to assess the response behaviour of the selected Swiss and Austrian tourism destinations concerning electronic information requests. This means that inquiries from a fictitious person are simulated. Mystery guests are widely used as a technique of quality assessment (Matzler et al., 2000). Considering the sample's multi-lingual characteristics of the addressed tourism destinations the query used English to guarantee equal conditions for all tourism organisations involved.

On 16. February 2005, 65 e-mails were sent from a public e-mail account. The Bcc (blind carbon copy) function allowed multiple e-mails to be sent simultaneously. The sample was splitted up to groups of 5 to 10 recipients to override filtering programs that protect tourism organisations from information overload and spamming (Matzler et al., 2005). In the e-mail inquiry, the (female) mystery guest asked for:

- A skiing holiday with family (two adults and two children) for 8 days; from March 19 to 26 in 2005.
- Two adjacent rooms, hopefully with a connecting door
- Skiing lessons for children
- A swimming pool in the case of bad weather
- A special event to celebrate the husband's birthday, including an estimation of the occurring costs.

#### **4.2 Responsiveness and Quality Elements Factors**

Being the objective of this study to analyse the DMO's function as information provider, we focused on the evaluation of the responses of the DMO's and ignored the replies of hotels.

After having received the answers from the DMO's, the replies were analysed regarding two dimensions: responsiveness and the content quality. Previous research (Frey et al., 2003; Leuenberger et al., 2003; Murphy et al., 2003; Murphy & Tan, 2003; Strauss & Hill, 2001) determined four variables for responsiveness and six for quality. The four elements measuring responsiveness were: did the DMO send a reply, the promptness of response, how many e-mails received the prospect guest and did the mystery guest obtained a follow-up e-mail. The following six items indicate content quality: The DMO's were supposed to reply in English and follow English

norms, address the mystery guest politely and personally, thank for the interest, answer all questions and they should disclose the hotels and the electronic receptionists identity. The coding of responses was double checked to ensure reliability (Krippendorf, 1980).

## **5 Descriptive Results and Discussion**

### **5.1 Addressability**

Generally, all tested DMO's enable their customers to get in touch with them by e-mail. Finding the right e-mail address on the web pages may also be considered as simple. In average it takes a guest using Internet 0.79 mouse clicks to get from the entry website to the contact details including e-mail address. One third of the tested destinations are providing an electronic enquiry form on their website. The localisation of the enquiry form was measured on a scale from 1 'good' to -1 'poor' with an overall very good result of 0.723.

### **5.2 Responsiveness and content quality**

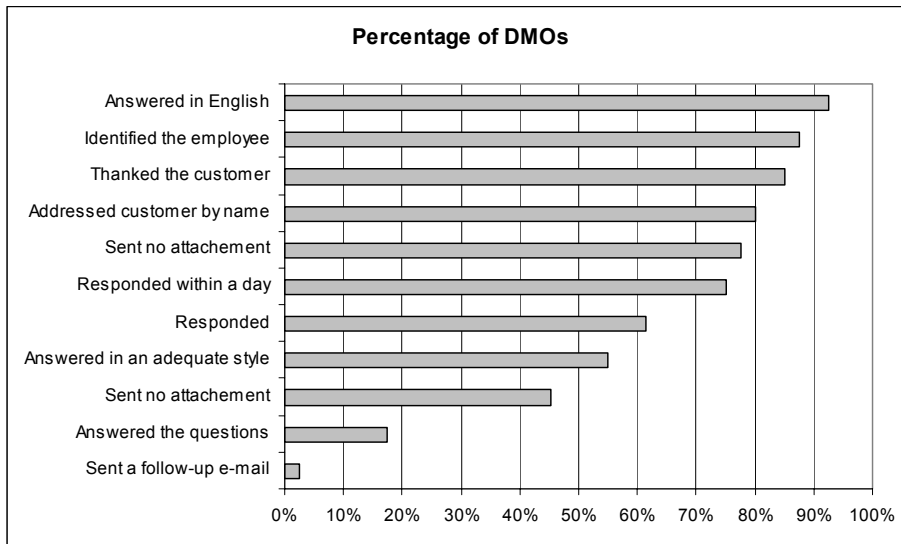
In a relatively high number (35.38 % or 23 cases) of the tested destinations neither DMO's nor hotels got back to the mystery guest. The mystery guest received 17 offers from the DMO and in 23 cases the guest got a feedback from the hotel as well as from the DMO. Very rarely (2 cases) only hotels got back to the mystery guest. On the other hand response time is relatively short: 75% of the answering destinations took less than 24 hours to react. The fastest feedback took only 16 minutes whereas the slowest came back after one full week.

The quantity of feedbacks varied widely. 45% of the destinations answered with one e-mail. From the customer's point of view, this would presumably be the best response behaviour. In average one enquiry generated 3.86 response e-mails, with a maximum of 42 feedbacks for one enquiry. Obviously, DMO's forwarded the enquiry to related organisation (e.g. hotels) which answered to the mystery guest individually. Follow-up e-mails by the DMO's are not common. One DMO alone asked the mystery-guest about the status of the travel planning process.

Two reply e-mails were sent with an attachment (>1MB), 76% of the answers were plain text. The linguistic style of the answers does not meet the requirements, not more than 55% of all cases could be assessed as adequate. Having got an English enquiry, 93% of the DMOs answered in English. Hence, not all answers were written in this language. It may be assumed that customers enquiring in English do not understand any other language. In this case a good German or French answer

nevertheless has been rated as a poor feedback. The mystery guest is called by name in only 80% of all response mails. Taking in account how little it takes to address the enquirer personally and how much this can improve satisfaction, this result is astonishing.

By and large, questions were remarkably poor answered. Each enquiry was divided into six separate questions and each got one point if answered and no point if ignored. Only 18 % of all destinations reached 5 or more points (with a maximum of 6 points). Most answers were incomplete. A new enquiry would have to be sent, which requires a high involvement and may have a negative impact on customer's satisfaction. At second glance it also emerged that DMO's hardly ever pay attention of promoting related activities, even though the prospective customer displayed a genuine interest , e.g. enquiries about skiing lessons were often ignored or referd to a telephone number.



**Fig. 1.** Frequency analysis for the responsiveness and reply quality variables

## 6 Implications and Further Research

This exploratory research sheds light on e-mail customer service of alpine tourism destinations and offers insights to the handling of electronic requests. Given the small sample of our mystery request – just one specific e-mail – the study may not be

considered to be representative with respect to the performance of any given organisation in our sample. However, the fairly sufficient number of respondents allows us to draw some conclusions on the particular type of DMO's altogether.

One general conclusion is that the quality of e-mail customer services is in many cases more or less unsatisfactory. Particularly startling is the fact that a considerable number of DMO's failed to answer at all. This may have very different reasons. One argument of a failing organisation has been that the form of the mystery-mail - English language, free-mail account, several addressees- makes it very suspicious and it has been therefore justly considered as SPAM and automatically filtered and removed to the trash mail box. This is a clear hint that automatic treatment of e-mails may cause undesired effects. For any customer who gets no answer it is irrelevant whether this is due to poor processes or that his or hers e-mail is considered as SPAM.

The quasi nonexistence of follow-up actions is with respect to customer relationship management a sign for a bad lead management. Tourists which are interested in a tourism destination should be treated more effectively resulting in better chances to settle transactions.

The DMOs are obviously organising their function as information provider in different ways. In some cases they act as a filter between the potential guest and the hotels and provide an offer customized to the guest needs. But often they are 'outsourcing' this task to the hotels and are losing control over the interaction process with the customer. DMOs have to set up principles which cause an adequate feedback for the prospect guest.

One reason for the unsatisfactory responsiveness and the improvable response quality may be found in the defective information sharing between the DMO and the local service providers, first of all the hotels. Therefore the DMO has not the required room availabilities from the hotels to arrange a customized offer and has to forward the request for quotation to the suppliers. This process design may result to a lot of feedbacks for the customer and consumer confusion because of an overload of information.

Further DMOs should create template e-mail answers that use basic communication procedures such as politely greeting the recipient by name, thanking the recipient and identifying the DMO. Murphy and Tan (2003) suggest the five Ps – prompt, polite, professional, promotional, and personal - of a proper reply. Better e-mail guidelines and training should support the DMO by achieving the customer expectations and give tourism organisations a direct competitive advantage via improved e-service.

As described in the research design, the conducted black-box approach provides only limited insights about the internal processes which are initiated through the electronic requests. To balance this shortcoming, we plan to execute a white-box test on the DMO's in our sample. In this stage, destination managers will be interviewed to obtain the required information about the established processes and the factors influencing the responsiveness and the service quality of replies. The results may give us some clues whether good or poor performances are related to organisational or political reasons and which role IT-infrastructure plays in this.

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