Customer Experience with Tourist Brands - New Challenges After Pandemia

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Abstract

The research paper suggests some new visions and rethinking of marketing opportunities to manage the brand experience of customers in tourism based on contemporary marketing innovations in times of pandemia. The ongoing global pandemic crisis poses challenges to the future profitable and sustainable development of tourism business and in particular tourism brands. The revival of the tourist brand is based on the inevitable process of total digitalization of business and market processes on one hand, but on the other hand the living human touch with the brands and the relevant humanity of brands are becoming more and more demanding factors for success. Overcoming fears for travelling in the after pandemia tourist mind seems to be in alignment with the retrieval of the customer's trust in the tourist brand. The transformations of tourism brands are still to come and the key to the successful completion is the new way of managing the customer experience.

Keywords: Experience Marketing, Customer experience, Brand experience, Tourism brands, Innovations

Introduction

The situation with the world tourism seems to be quite delicate at the second half of 2020. Most popular tourist destinations have witnessed unprecedented declines in international visitor numbers of between 60% and 80% level while the condition of the air transport is even more dramatic – almost 90% slump has been recorded for the first half of 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). Over the first quarter of the year the tourism sector has lost more than 80 billion dollars while the general optimistic forecast until the end of 2020 is about 1,3 – 2 trillion dollars in losses. The unemployment rate in the world tourism sector is expected to reach 100 - 120 million lost job positions. Against the background of the uncertain present and the looming unfavorable near future, the challenges for tourism business to survive, through transformations and to take on new competitive positions are becoming more and more neuralgic. In times of extremely developed customer experience, the brand characteristics of travel companies and their products seem to be losing their previous impact.

The new "normal" reality after the end of the pandemic crisis will require new ways to restore the strength of tourism brands and rebuild their market positions. In this regard, the **general goal** of the present study is to rethink the marketing opportunities for managing the customer experience with tourism brand based on some world-famous marketing innovations in tourism.

1. The concept of "Experience Marketing" as a modern competitive philosophy in tourism business

The experience marketing concept is a relatively new one, through which the tourism organization aims to create a higher level of experience between a particular brand and its current and potential customers. Marketing campaigns for creating experience use techniques to activate the brand in order to "bring it to life" through direct interaction with the target audience - for example, the use of samples, elements of material products, immersive real or virtual experiences, use of augmented reality, events and festivals, conducting interviews, travel shows and stimulating creative events in the audience, direct and immediate PR activity through webinars, symposia, creating partnerships and other activities related to the tourist organization and its product.

Experience marketing is a strategy that engages target consumers with brand experiences. In a narrow sense, the strategy in question is also called 'experiential marketing', 'experimental marketing' or 'event marketing', where the idea is to create an unforgettable impact on the consumer

audience. In any case, the whole experience built between the brand and its customers encompasses both all the above stated categories along with a much wider field of states. The customer experience with the brand does not only affect the present moment, as an experience, but can be based on a significant accumulation in the past, as well as an inevitable manifestation in the future. The desired impact should inspire the audience to further share online and offline with family and friends a great number of elements of interaction with the brand. Current experiences can be provoked by a key event, part of an event or by a pop-up (active) brand appearance that is designed completely autonomously and is not tied to any particular event. In its conceptual design, experience marketing is about immersing consumers in live experiences. For that reason events most often overlap with experimental marketing campaigns in two ways:

- can be part of a larger experimental marketing campaign
- smaller activations of the brand may exist in separate experimental marketing programs of the brand - for example, such as art installations on site, temporary kiosk stores, kiosk devices, etc.

It is not enough to offer participants a prize from the wheel of fortune or a raffle, relying on this type of interaction to gain experience. In this regard, it is necessary to create points of contact to engage the audience in an unexpected and / or non-standard way. Regardless of the case of an experimental marketing event, it must be targeted and planned in each marketing campaign.

There are different ways to measure the impact of the experience marketing campaign, especially through the use of social media - gaining likes, generating media content, following through the unique hashtag of the event, surveying participants after the event and more. Each activation of the brand intended to exert experience may require the use of a specific methodology for the measurement and evaluation by a specialized internal company unit or the optional hiring of an external consultant.

The concept of experience marketing rethinks traditional marketing communications, with the aim of making the tourism brand meaningful and recognizable in a new way amid the extremely loud communication noise of the 21st century. In this regard, for the tourism organization experience marketing is more than a supportive marketing concept, which may have a one-time or periodic nature of implementation. It is often applied to the product marketing concept and / or in combination with the strategic development of customer relationships. Usually, the implementation of marketing experience is not aimed at directly stimulating sales of the product, which distinguishes it from the classic commercial concept.

There is a growing number of marketers who are advocating for more budget for implementing experience marketing instead of throwing money for classic advertising campaigns. The main challenges and skepticism regarding the use of experience marketing can be grouped in the following areas about:

- the measure of success of the implementation of the experience marketing concept and the payback of the investment are questioned
- the feasible creative ideas for unique realization of a given experience marketing concept are decreasing in options
- the criticisms also refer to the poor targeting of this type of marketing to the desired audiences
- the real support from consumers and the extent to which marketing events around the brand leave long-term positive results in the memory of customers are also questioned.

Contemporary consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical about brands. Combined with the rise of social media, brands are expected to be more transparent and much influencing in order to attract people's attention and attachment to them. The available experience marketing techniques allow tourism organizations to use a wide range of creative ways by which organizations can connect with consumers in the real world, through interactions and experiences about the company brand. Compared to a one-way sales monologue by simply pointing out the key benefits of the product, the marketing communication of a brand through experience has real potential for a wider

market reach, as people are more likely to recommend the brand in question to family and friends, as a result of a positive experience with it.

Techniques for obtaining experience with brands can work seamlessly with all types of marketing channels. In this regard, the marketing channel is subordinated to the concept of realizing the brand experience. Since the experience covers a wide range of brand activations, it is necessary to find the right technique to create something influential in a certain way that to achieve tangible results. Usually, organizational budget constraints are not an obstacle for the creative realization of a successful marketing campaign for brand experience.

In tourism business, the customer experience with the company brand creates a corresponding specific value for both parties – the company and the custoimer. The experience cannot take place without the active participation of the client. The customer experience is extremely personal in relation to the tourist brand. That is why in a certain context the tourist organizations do not just transaction products, but also help to realize a customer experience with the tourist brand. Hence, the main challenge for tourism organizations is to deliver unique experiences as an added value in their business offers. Unlike products which remain outside buyers, experiences are inherently personal. For that reason customers should be engaged on emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual level. Experience should be triggered by a special or designed context and shaped in the mind of customer who has been involved in this context. From managerial perspective the design of the experience process must be distinct from the design of the product. The attributes of an experience include anything that can be perceived or sensed, or recognized by its absence so long as it is recalled after the experience process is complete. In this regard, companies should act as experience stagers which are supposed to create specific platforms for customers in order to shape their own (personal) experiences.

2. Main aspects of customer experience with the tourist brand

In order to reveal the category of customer experience with the tourism brand it is important to combine approaches and knowledge from several areas of scientific knowledge, such as philosophy, psychology, social psychology, cognitive research, consumer behavior, marketing, management, anthropology and others. In this regard, it is necessary to distinguish the customer experience with the brand from related categories, such as:

- **product experience** - relates to the process of interaction with a particular product in the consumer stage of search, research or evaluation of products and their alternatives. Experience with the product can be direct when there is physical contact with it (Hoch, 2002) and indirect (Kempf and Smith, 1998) - in its virtual presentation or advertising. In this regard, respondents are usually asked about their direct and indirect experience with the product - their attitudes and evaluations of the product, preferences, intention to buy it, memories of its characteristics and details, ways of using and handling the product, etc. are examined.

- **shopping** and **service experience** - realized through the customer's interaction with the physical environment of the commercial establishment, with the company staff, company policies and practices (Kerin, Jain and Howard, 1992). Researches in this direction (Ofir and Simonson, 2007) focus on various factors and variables of the atmosphere in the commercial store, the overall behavior of sales assistants, their interaction with customers, and the ways in which customer experience reflects on their feelings, attitudes to the brand and satisfaction achieved (Grace and O'Cass, 2004).

- **consumption experience** - includes mainly hedonistic variables such as feelings of satisfaction, fantasies, fun, humor and the like, targeted by the consumer before and after his consumption (Joy and Sherry, 2003).

Customer experience with the brand is also distinguished from related categories, such as: *brand attitudes, brand involvement, brand attachment, customer delight, brand personality.*

Customer experience with the brand does not reflect general judgments as "I like this brand" compared to the brand attitudes. Clients' attitudes toward the brand are based on basic beliefs or automatic affective reactions (Murphy and Zajonc, 1993). On the other hand, the experience with the brand includes specific feelings, emotions, cognitive states, behavioral reactions provoked by specific brand-related stimuli.

Brand involvement is based on needs, requirements, values, interests that motivate a customer to focus on a particular brand. On the other hand, customer experience with the brand does not presuppose the presence of a motivational state in a particular client. The experience happens even when the consumer does not show interest or does not make a personal connection with the brand. In this regard, it was found that brands that cause strong customer involvement do not lead to significant customer experience with them.

Brand attachment refers to a strong emotional connection of the client to it on three dimensional levels - love (devotion), passion and connection (Park and MacInnis, 2006). On the other hand customer experience with the brand does not require the push of strong emotional states in the client.

Customer experience with the brand also differs from brand associations and brand image (Keller, 1993) and does not presume the evidence of a motivational stage. In this relation consumers also seek to attribute personal characteristics to the brand, which are generally grouped into the dimensions of "openness", "competence", "sophistication", "excitement", "sincerity", "ruggedness" (Aaker, 1997). The personality of the brand is created on the basis of inferential processes, by way of customer syllogisms. On the other hand, developing a customer experience with the brand does not have the explicit goal of building its personalization in terms of "personality".

As a complete definition of customer experience with the brand, we can refer to this presented by Brakos, J et al. (2009). In this relation customer experience with the brand is conceptualized as a subjective, internal consumer reaction (senses, feelings, perceptions) on the one hand and behavioral reaction on the other, caused by brand-related stimuli, such as brand design , its identity, image, characteristics of the brand logo (signs, colors, fonts), packaging characteristics, communication and environment. The overall customer experience refers not only to the brand of the travel organization, but also to its specific products, services, partner networks of suppliers, other stakeholders, as well as to the personal characteristics of the customer (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

3. Strategic marketing innovations in developing customer experience with the tourism brand

Contemporary global conditions of extreme market uncertainty and strong economic fluctuations are forcing travel companies, especially in the most affected sectors (passenger transport and cruises) to seek innovative solutions to save their business and secure its future sustainable development. Customer experience with the brand is at the heart of these marketing innovation breakthroughs. There are many examples so far that witness the already going process of divergent transformations of tourist companies in this direction.

In October 2020, the Australian airline Qantas offered a seven-hour flight of a Boeing 787 from Sydney, which passed as a low-altitude cruise over the Great Barrier Reef and the Urulu area before landing again in Sydney. Due to capacity constraints below 50% (without selling seats to the aisle for visibility reasons), all available 134 seats on board of the plane are purchased in less than 10 minutes. Ticket prices for the first flight have ranged range from $ 575 to $ 2,700. In this regard Qantas is trying to turn the defect into an effect by relying on the fact that the lack of flying of their regular customers in a state of pandemic emergency leads to a more essential need for primary satisfaction of passengers' needs than simply arranging them visit destinations. The realized trips with Qantas under this atypical program emphasize the exceptional interaction of their passengers onboard with the brand of the airline. Similar actions are being taken by Singapore Airlines by

planning three-hour flights over the country and the region from and backward to one of the most modern airports in the world - Changi. The flights of the mentioned airlines can be boldly stated that they set the beginning of a new product category with the original name "Flights to Nowhere".

In July and August 2020, Eva Air in Taiwan also exploited the ability to manage customer experience with its brand by launching special Hello Kitty "flights to nowhere", some of which remain on the ground during the "experience" while passengers receive high quality restaurant food and entertainment services on board.

From November 2020 on the country of Singapore offers its citizens a cruise "Journey to Nowhere", as the vessels are scheduled not to visit any ports, but to sail in the waters around the state. The trips are planned to be operated by local cruise companies Genting Cruise Lines and Royal Carribean International, and the Cruise Safe program is only available to Singaporean citizens. In this way synergistic development of customer experience is expected both with the brands of the respective cruise companies and with the national brand of the tourist destination Singapore.

Before the onset of the pandemic crisis in 2020, well-known companies and destination management organizations have started successful marketing campaigns aimed at developing the customer experience with the tourist brand. For example the Dutch KLM finds a spontaneous way to bring people together, even when they are thousands of miles apart. Using synchronized touch screens in Amsterdam and New York, people passing by have a chance to "give five" - across the screen. This is seen as a fun way to connect two quite distant parts of the world, in addition to a prize ticket to a new destination.

The Russian airline S7 also decided to help Russians travel more often. For that purpose the participants in the experiment (brand experience) are supposed to prove that they really want it. To do this, the airline creates an installation called "imagination machine", which measures brain waves and with a strong enough focus on the desired destination, each of the participating passers-by has 45 seconds to win a free ticket for this journey.

Marriott also uses virtual reality in front of the New York City Hall, through which they literally take the newlyweds on a honeymoon from London to Hawaii in very few minutes.

The visitation of destination Ottawa is filled with an unexpected adventure. To share this message, the Ottawa Tourist Board launches several unexpected flavors from the local special ice cream in order to present the different categories of excitement that can be "gathered" at this tourist place by various guests of the city. "Ottawa is anything but vanilla" is confirmed in the perceptions of visitors.

The "arrival of the British" in a mall in Moscow, combined with surprising imitations of The Beatles, James Bond and the Queen, is considered a pretty good brand experience in tourism marketing by Visit Britain and British Airways.

In order to invite Europeans to Canada's foodie culture scene, Poutinerie decided to organize restaurants featuring Canadian-specific cuisine. Paired with a a media push and social elements, this experiential marketing for tourism campaign stirred a lot of excitement for across-the-pond travel.

The Montana Office of Tourism launched a campaign that made city-goers want to head for the wild in Montana. The mobile tour included a Montana Mercantile food truck that handed out huckleberry ice cream, a bison head and 3-D photo mat. It was experiential marketing for travel that really made people say, "I'd rather be in MT"

To promote travel within the state, the New Mexico Tourism Department used the help of the legendary Old West gunslinger Billy the Kid. Their "Catch the Kid" campaign challenged New Mexico residents to a summer-long scavenger hunt through the state to "capture" Billy the Kid using clues for a grand prize of $10,000.

Palm Springs and JetBlue brought a seasonal, fun and shareable challenge to Manhattan – in the middle of January. New Yorkers were challenged to "break out of the chill" by using whatever

tools they could to pick out summer essentials frozen in giant blocks of ice. A grand prize ticket was also hidden in the ice: a free trip to Palm Springs.

SNCF, a French rail network, literally opened the door for travelers. They set up colorful doors around European cities, and when passersby opened them, they caught a fun glimpse into another city, showing that with SNCF, they're "Europe, it's just next door."

KLM has experimented with "Layover with a local" They created a mobile application that helped flyers pass the time during a long layover in Amsterdam airports. It connected passengers with a local resident, and gave them a free ride into the city. It helped travelers see Amsterdam through the eyes of a local, rather than a tourist – and gave them the most fun layover experience they have ever had.

JetBlue decided to give a plane full of people a round trip ticket to a destination of their choice. The catch was about that the entire plane had to vote unanimously on one preferred destination.

The Swedish tourist association has initiated the campaign "The Swedish number". They come out with the presumption that before traveling to a faraway land, it's quite logical a traveler to speak with someone who lives there. The experiential marketing campaign allowed people to do this by ringing a ling.

Graubünden Tourism's experiential marketing campaign tops the list for the best tourism activations so far. This initiative combines an emotional appeal, a human element, advanced technology to drive the simplicity of the activation and a few free tickets to go explore a new destination.

There are many other examples of successfully applied marketing to develop customer experience with the travel brand, but several main features distinguish them from other types of marketing campaigns, such as:

- high degree of creativity (originality) of the overall concept
- use of specific scenarios and props, images of famous characters and personalities in live
- spontaneity and client involvement in actions resulting from live or mediated interactivity
- use of virtual and augmented reality
- use of specific equipment, installations and other types of scientific and technical inventions in situ during the marketing campaign

Conclusion

The strength of the tourism brand and its corresponding customer experience are associated with new marketing challenges after the end of the pandemic crisis. The revival of the tourist brand rests on the one hand on the inevitable process of total digitalization of business and market processes, but on the other hand it becomes increasingly demanding living human contact with it. Overcoming the fears of travel will inevitably interfere with the return of confidence in the tourist brand. New strategies of marketing positioning are forthcoming with strengthening the connection of "human touch" and "humanity" between the tourist brand and the clients looking for this mental state. The rediscovery of the connection is forthcoming, and the key to a successful outcome is the new way of managing the customer experience of the travel brand.

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