

Customer experience for tourists

Chris Harrison, Marketer

Marketing

It is all change on the regional tourism front, with Kenya emerging largely undisrupted (we hope) from its election process. Tanzanian tourism is delivering much less value for money thanks to ill-considered presidential interference in taxes and levies. And in Uganda, an entrepreneurial sector continues to develop adventurous holiday options while battling with underdeveloped infrastructure.

All these macro-economic factors impact on the visitors' perceptions of the tourism experience. It is hard to address them, because tourism operators are limited to lobbying. And often they find themselves talking to stone-deaf politicians and public servants.

But there are many aspects of the customer experience that operators can address. And I do not just mean making sure the tea is hot or the sheets are clean. Customer experience in a marketing sense — the delivery of brand against



promise — is now becoming a top priority.

No wonder, as many companies in the travel industry, particularly airlines, consistently rank in the lower levels of customer satisfaction league tables.

Many tourism brands are generic, following category norms. (Have you ever seen a safari website without the obligatory leaping Maasai?) If your promise is generic,

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then it is difficult to deliver without disappointment.

Poor customer experience on arrival and during the stay does significant damage to tourism brands. Social media has shifted power to the customer, enabling them to hold any business to a new standard of performance. Tourist expectations are not static, but change due to the broader

influence of online properties such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Uber, Airbnb.

Clearly, you need to evolve customer experience at the right pace. Tourists — like any customer — will want you to fix the basics before you start getting clever with sophisticated features. But if you are confident your tourism business does the basics brilliantly, you can think about building additional value.

You will need a clear vision — I prefer to call this business purpose — which defines what your business is going to win at. For too many businesses their purpose is simply to participate in the tourism category and hope for their share of the cake.

You will need to envision how your business should fit into your customers' lives, and then you will have to bring this to life for your staff.

Last week in Dar es Salaam I reacquainted myself with the

Southern Sun Hotel (formerly a well delivered Holiday Inn).

With the brand change has come a significant upgrade in the look and feel of the hotel. The menus are a lot better. But what has changed is the behaviour of the staff. In Holiday Inn days, they were always kind and courteous, but you got the clear impression that Tanzanians were being pressed into an uncomfortable South African mould. Now there seems to be far more staff around, they are almost all Tanzanian and they are all busy delivering their own interpretation of personal service.

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Chris Harrison leads The Brand Inside.

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