



PUBLIC RELATIONS VIS-À-VIS ATTITUDES & PERCEPTIONS OF USERS OF SERVICES – A SYNTHESIS FOR TOURISM PROMOTION MARKETING

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Abstract

The paper begins by spelling out the relevance of service sector in the contemporary scenario. It then dwells a little on the meaning and concept of public relations besides highlighting its significance in the corporate world. The direction and orientation of consumer behaviour in Tourism is then brought out and examined. A specific section is devoted to tourism and promotion marketing. The paper focuses specially on the aspect of public relations in the tourism industry. The paper goes on to bring out an interaction between public relations and travel intermediaries. It endeavours to draw attention to the role of public relations as a promotion marketing tool. Finally, the study rounds off by inferring that in tourism business, public relations as a management function has so far not been incorporated to the extent it should have been. Using 'advertising' as a part of the marketing function is conceptually different from using 'public relations' to create productive

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relationship. Marketing and advertising in tourism or intangibles/ services are generally aggressive in nature; public relations, on the other hand, is a subtle human activity. It is in fact an extension of international relationships and therefore more friendly as well as productive.

Introduction

The service sector has emerged as a fast-growing smokeless sector dealing with invisible trade and has therefore, become one of the pivotal concerns of nations and international community. Like manufacturing and extractive sectors, service sector has also passed through a long process and has been primarily an outcome of civilization and technological advancement. It has emerged to be a revolutionizing phenomenon especially in the second half of the twentieth century, outpacing the manufacturing and extractive sectors as a catalyst of the development process both at national and the global levels and hence the transition to a service-oriented economy. It is an ever-expanding sector with latent vast growth potential and has, indeed, turned into a normal, indispensable part of life style and consumption pattern of the population.

On the other hand, the term 'smokeless' sector has become a cliché, but it is doing all that a manufacturing sector does namely generating income, employment, wealth, etc., that is generating the ripple/multiplier effects, encouraging innovations, in addition to satisfying human needs. Moreover, in the frame of reference of changing economics in the international market in general and India in particular, there are hardly a few economic sectors which ensure generation of much added value, employment and monetary benefits and that also at quite a low cost. In other words, service sector is largely examined and questioned for its ample potential to bring about changes in the economic, socio-cultural and ecological edifice of a country. This has generated analytical exploration of the various dimensions and details of the sector perceived as an economic activity. Service sector has come, therefore, increasingly to occupy a place of importance not only for the business sector, but also for the concerned academic and management institutions.

Of the various industries comprising the service sector such as Transport, Tourism, Hoteliering, Communication, Insurance and Banking, etc., the study intends to take into account Tourism industry. This choice has especially been made on the

basis of the growth pattern the on-going trend and their relevance in the economic development of national economies. Tourism is one of the world's most competitive industries. This competition is increasing as more and more countries seek to attract tourists and more companies and organizations become involved in the highly skilled business of transportation, accommodation and catering for tourists/guests.

In today's world of business, information plays a vital role. Technological changes are frequent and business concerns which do not adopt to these changes may face serious set backs and consequences. An emerging and most needed tool is 'Public Relations'; its use is vital in developing and updating communication skills, whether to project the products' quality or for planning a client's holiday. Public relations is indeed needed at all levels of the service sector. Public relations are not only critical for the development and updating of the right image but also to develop the awareness of consumers and persuade them to purchase the products/services.

Public Relations

As per *Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia*, Public Relations is a general term describing a wide variety of techniques used by institutions such as corporations, government agencies, charitable foundations and trade groups to present themselves in a favourable light to the general public and to specific audiences such as stockholders, the financial community, employees, customers or potential customers, federal, state, and local legislators. Such groups frequently undertake research into public opinion before making decisions. However, according to *The American Peoples Encyclopedia*, Public Relations is considered as an effort on the part of a person, group or organization of any kind to influence the attitude of the public or a portion thereof, toward the beneficiary of the public relations activity. In the business world, Public Relations or PR, as it is called, are a function of management, performed by specially trained employees, professional consultants in communications or both. *Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia* states Public Relations as a management that creates, develops, and carries out policies and programmes to influence public opinion (q.v.) or public reaction about an idea, a product or an organization. The field of public relations has become an important part of the economic, social and political pattern of life in many nations. That field includes advertising, publicity, promotional activities, and press contact. Public relations also coexists in business with marketing (q.v.) and merchandising to create the climate in which all selling functions occur.

As stated in *The Encyclopedia Americana*, although the roots of Public Relations are old and deep, and its principles clearly set forth in the golden rule, public

relations has existed in its present form for such a relatively short time that there is little general agreement on its precise definition, its proper scope or its practical responsibilities. One rather widely-held but perhaps oversimplified definition has termed public relations merely "doing good and getting credit for it". It might be better understood, if the definitions were expanded somewhat as follows: public relations is the art of analyzing, influencing and interpreting a person, idea, group or business so that he, or it, will be recognized as serving the public interest, and will benefit from doing so. According to *Encyclopedia International*, Public Relations is a profession concerned with communicating the policies and actions of an organization to special groups or the public at large. It advises the organization on the probable public effect of a given action or policy, and keeps the organization informed about trends in public opinion. It was Ivy L. Lee, an adviser to major corporations and financial leaders in their dealings with the press and public, who employed it to describe the term in its modern usage in 1916. Until Lee introduced the phrase 'public relations,' people engaged in such informational activities were known, not too flatteringly, as publicists, publicity men, or press agents, and were connected mainly with theatrical attractions, circuses, political campaigns and sporting events. It is a relatively new calling, as public relations was not defined in standard dictionaries until 1946.

The day-to-day business of public relations firms is to seek favourable publicity for the products, services or personnel of client organizations within the editorial content of consumer media such as newspapers, magazines (print media), television and radio (electronic media) and major business and trade publications. Misconceptions about PR arise from use of public relations to describe both ends and means, and from its popular misuse as a synonym for some of its functional parts - press agency, publicity, propaganda, even advertising - as may sometimes be part of a public relations programme, but each of which is an individual type of activity and may be employed independent of public relations work.

Public Relations activities in the modern world help institutions to cope successfully with many problems, to build prestige for an individual or a group, to promote products, and to win elections or legislative battles. Whilst the majority of public relations workers are staff employees working within a corporate or institutional framework others operate in public relations counselling firms, dealing with a variety of clients. Of the many forms of public relations perhaps the best known role is that of the press agent or publicity department involved mainly with various aspects of the entertainment industry. The theatre, motion pictures, sports, resorts, restaurants, hotel-chains, tour operators/travel agencies, airlines and individuals all use public relations services to increase their business or enhance their image. The successful

public relations practitioner is a specialist in communication and persuasion. Public relations efforts sometimes include assisting in the formulation of policies and practices that must be communicated to the public. Proposed actions of an institution may be reviewed by a public relations specialist in order to assess their possible impact on the welfare of the public and on public opinion. Briefly public relations can be described as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public. It is indeed the process of influencing the attitudes and opinions of a group of persons in the interest of promoting a person, product idea, institution etc.

In its public relations, a company may take account of one or more publics – stockholders, employees, consumers, governments, the people of the communities in which it operates and the public at large. It is the function of the company's public relations department or counsellor to act as an informational intermediary between these publics and the company's top management. In the corporate world of the various activities falling within the scope of public relations, the significant ones are *Internal Communications* and *Consumer/Customer Relations*.

Consumer Behaviour in Tourism

Marketing scholars and practitioners in tourism like elsewhere set out to investigate consumer needs and attitudes in order to develop influential measures. Contemporary marketing science attempts to explain consumer behaviour by employing models, i.e., systems of hypotheses relating one or more dependent variables (such as buying probability, trial or repeat purchase) to several independent variables (motives, product comprehension, attitude, behavioural intention etc.). Market response may be modeled on an aggregate level. In tourism such a *macro model* is easily recognized since it uses number of visitors or bed nights recorded in a destination, tourist receipts or market share as endogenous (dependent) variables. Often, these response criteria are directly linked to input factors like travel cost or distance, disposable income, relative prices, tourist advertising etc. – *Black Box Model*. The tourist researcher or manager interested in the interior structure of the consumer's/ tourist's mind will turn to a *micro model* – a behavioural model in the proper sense of the term.

Classifying the traveller's decision process from a micro-perspective requires a more discriminating approach. A novel tourist product and/or an inexperienced tourist are likely to entail a process called *extensive problem solving*. In order to arrive at a travel decision the tourist runs through a sequel of perceptual and

learning steps. On becoming aware of the new travel options he actively searches for information develops his choice criteria sets up an overall attitude towards the range of alternatives establishes a preference for a particular tour operator etc. A decision process known as *limited problem solving* alleviates the traveller's endeavour in avoiding conflict and coming to a conclusion. A satisfactory amount of product knowledge and firmly established choice criteria help in shortening the information-seeking period and reducing the decision time. In *routinized response behaviour* consumer information processing drops to a minimum level. Preferences are stable and the main question is whether the favourite alternative is still available. Loyalty vis-à-vis a tour operator, an agency, a resort/hotel or an airline is quite common in travel behaviour. Conversely, *impulse buying*, another type of consumer decision process is a rare phenomenon in travel and tourism. For most consumers holiday and travel decisions are highly important with a great deal of ego-involvement. Therefore, they may not be dealt with spontaneously in a rapid booking action.

From the managerial point of view, in strategic marketing planning, a tourist destination faces the problems of product positioning and market segmentation. The structural model outlined in Fig.1 can be used as a frame of reference. Intention to visit a particular destination (say India in the next winter) is the dependent variable. Solid lines indicate direct influence of the predictors; dashed lines signify influence. Amongst the explanatory variables are the eminent theoretical constructs 'image', 'attitude', and 'perceived risk' – image being made up of emotional feelings, attitude comprising more rational knowledge-based evaluations, and perceived risk covers undesirable consequences of a trip the traveler seeks to avoid. If the tourism/hotel/airlines manager can be assured that the emotional, rational and risk-bearing assessment criteria do have a significant impact on destination/preferences and travel intentions, then a conversion into marketing strategy and action planning is straightforward. Moreover, managerial expertise and learning by monitoring market response is systematically integrated into modern decision support systems.

A Structural Model of Travel Behaviour

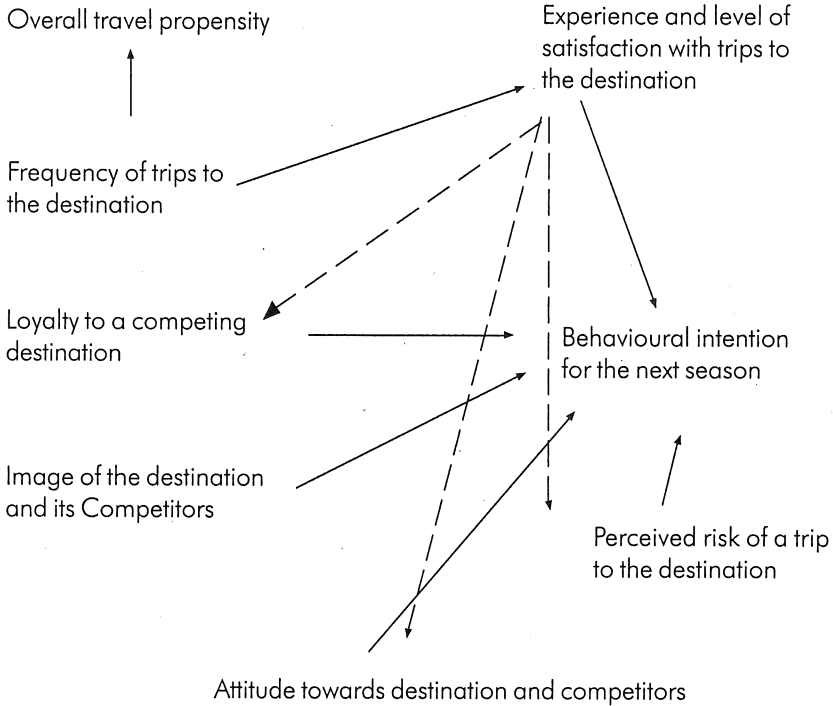


Fig.1

(Destinations far apart are unlikely to be substituted for each other while neighbouring locations are under competitive threat.)

Yet, another direction of translating behavioural findings into strategic marketing emerges from *benefit segmentation* which implies that consumers be classified by their wants and desires sought in a tourist product. A consumer's decision process reaches its crucial stage when the evaluation of alternatives takes place. Depending upon the character of evaluation criteria used, the outcome may be portrayed by a theoretical construct such as 'image', 'attitude', 'perceived risk', and 'cognitive dissonance'. Only the last of these operates in the post-purchase (post-choice) situation whereas the others are relevant to the cognitive mechanisms leading to a holiday/travel booking decision.

Image

The image of a tourist product (a receiving country, a resort, a special type of trip, hotel services, and a carrier) consists of connotative and emotional criteria associated with the product. Images exist even in the absence of factual knowledge. Single word items such as 'luxury', 'adventure', 'boredom' etc. are typical image attributes. Whatever the shortcomings in terms of objective assessment may be as a stereotype the image governs at least the early stages of product evaluation and pulls the consumer into a state of sympathy or aversion high or low preference for a tourist product. In other words images simplify consumers' orientation vis-à-vis a puzzling world of consumables.

Attitude

It is also a fact that consumer decision-making is not entirely image-bound or governed by non-rational 'reasoning'. With an increase in product comprehension due to active search for information the consumer acquires choice criteria relating to the 'real' properties of tourist products. He generates an attitude while evaluating product alternatives by their goal-satisfying capabilities. Motives and some degree of emotional arousal are still implicit in attitude formation.

Perceived Risk

The notion of 'perceived risk' in consumer research framework implies the phenomenon of consumer risk reduction which in economic context means minimizing disutility. Every traveller is not equally risk prone and perhaps tiny risk-averters hides in most of us. These are risk-averters in tourism and elsewhere which are inclined to go for a travel product by judging its undesirable or even dangerous implications. For example, while bad weather, unfriendly locals, airport personnel on strike etc. are uncomfortable enough; inedibility of local food, contagious diseases, political unrest etc. is worse. Perceived risk motivates intensified information seeking and (if not properly reduced) erects a consumption barrier around the unacceptable alternatives.

Cognitive Dissonance

The concept of 'cognitive dissonance' was adopted, by consumer research from behavioural sciences to cover post decisional regrets/conflicts which often become rampant. In an extreme case, dissonance is apprehended as consumer dissatisfaction due to a travel product that fails to come up to pre-purchase expectations. Obviously, dissonance prevents a tourist from becoming a loyal visitor to a resort or from patronizing a hotel or carrier. For example, consider a situation that a tourist has

booked an inclusive tour well in advance from an operator's catalogue and then he comes across competitors' advertising messages. Was it right or wrong to take just that decision? Then, in the last minute before departure the same operator announces some discount. Such post-choice conflicts become rife.

Other Variables

There may be many more motivational and cognitive factors such as *awareness*, *overt search*, or *product comprehension* which have a strong influence on attitude formation. Confidence in one's own beliefs and values may moderate the effects of attitude on purchase intention. In addition to these, several demographic, socio-economic, and psychological (personality traits, buying habits) variables too may have leverage on the decision-making process. The need for consumer behaviour expertise arises as soon as customer relations become more anonymous, face-to-face contact is replaced by market research and word-of-mouth communication is increasingly supported by advertising.

Tourism and Promotion Marketing

The industry under review is in fact, people's industry in which product is inseparable from the staff that delivers it, be they tour guides, travel agents or coach drivers. Each member of the industry has a marketing function to perform in their dealings with the public and it is therefore vital that they acquire and put into use the practical skills of Public Relations. Unlike in most other industries marketing in tourism takes place on two levels. At both levels the tourist organization is concerned with promoting the destination for which it is responsible - destination marketing.

The structure of the tourism industry is highly fragmented in terms of size, styles, location and ownership pattern; however, it has four common characteristics – inflexibility of supply, perishability of tourism services, fixed location, and relatively large financial investments. The development of a tourist market depends on the analysis of actual and potential tourists' needs and wants; travel motivations and attitudes; demographic structure and trends; purchasing power; social and cultural factors; the range of available travel opportunities; intensity and quality of travel marketing efforts and distribution system; the existence (or absence) of travel restrictions; and the economic situation and expectations about its future development.

The tourist product is an amalgam of several separate products supplied by individual enterprises, coordination of these separate interests is essential to effective marketing. Within this framework the marketing of individual firms takes place. Destination

marketing will seek to establish and identify the tourist products and their attractions for the relevant market segment. The individual firms supplying the tourist's/guest's needs may thus concentrate on developing the markets for their particular components of the composite product. Thus marketing of these products are a continuous and sequential process through which management of any concern (public or private) plans, researches, implements, controls and evaluates activities designed both to satisfy tourists/customers needs and wants and their own organization objectives.

Tourism services need to be marketed just as any product, indeed, more so, because these are the industries in which the customer still has an immense variety of choice. It is enlightening to note how recent marketing posts for large tourism and allied firms are increasingly advertised exposure and involvement in tourism is described as 'useful' but not essential while evidence is sought of experience in other forms of marketing especially in the field of Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG). The reason for this is not only because marketing requires a common approach regardless of industry it is also because the FMCG business has applied the marketing philosophy much earlier than the travel business and has established a fad in strategic marketing practice. Small businesses and the travel industry is still made up largely of small units which generally remain unaware of marketing principles tending to equate marketing with the sales function. However, large corporations especially in tour operations have been quicker to recognize the need for more professionalism in management in general and in marketing in particular.

Tourism promotion marketing can be defined as the management process through which tourist organizations identify their selected tourists actual and potential, and communicate with them to ascertain and influence their needs, desires, and motivations on local, regional, national and international levels, in order to formulate and adapt their tourist products accordingly in view of achieving optimal tourist satisfaction and maximizing organizational goals. Tourism marketing indeed, involves discovering what tourists want (market research), developing suitable tourist services (product planning), telling them what is available (advertising and promotion), and giving instructions where they can buy the services (channels of distribution – tour operators and travel agents) so they will receive value (pricing), and the tourist organization will make a profit and attain its goals (marketability).

Once the target markets have been determined, the marketing mix must be defined. In formulating a marketing mix one must make sure that the elements are not considered in a vacuum but are considered as they are affected by changes in tourist attitudes and habits i.e., changes in consumption pattern, changes in competition, changes in the economic outlook, and changes in government activity. The elements of the marketing mix include pricing, branding, channels of distribution,

personal selling, advertising, promotion, packaging, product service, personal contact, displays and the merchandising strategy. Pricing in tourism is a complex matter particularly where the individual suppliers, airlines, hotel groups and so on determine their prices independently of one another. The tourism industry relies on tour operators, travel agents and airlines for most point-of-sale contacts.

According to Rothschild (1987), "Promotion, which is also called the Marketing Communications Mix, commonly includes four major components: advertising, publicity and public relations (including sponsorship), sales promotion, and personal selling". There are six major underlying features of promotion in tourism which need to be considered before deciding upon the strategy and its implementation. These are: Identity building, Intangibility of product, Perceived risk, Tourism decision making, Cultural expectations, Attitudes and behaviour. Schmöll (1977) argues that the component elements of promotion are interdependent and must be combined into a mutually reinforcing whole. This can only be the case if the various promotional activities are governed by goals and objectives common to all of them. In view of the intangible nature of the tourism product the prospect cannot see the actual product the way he/she could examine the goods in other markets. You cannot test drive a holiday or try on a new airline schedule. This means that the role of promotion is critical i.e., it has a greater role in establishing the nature of the product in tourism than in many other markets.

Foster (1985) suggests that promotional strategy should be seen as the cumulative reduction of risks the customer perceives to exist in travel/tourism decisions. Some of these decisions include: where to go, where to stay, how to travel, how much to spend, where to book, and the type of travel (as a group or individually). People naturally attempt to reduce risk by seeking out information. The purpose of promotional strategy is to identify and anticipate through research the major perceived risks in the holiday decision process are, and then devise a promotional plan that reduces or eliminates them at the points at which they occur in the overall decision sequence.

Attitudes and behaviour of the users of services is one of the key features which need to be considered while deciding on the promotional strategy. All promotion is aimed at influencing the attitudes and behaviour of audiences but there are three different directions in which it may do so. Strategies should determine clearly which or what combination of the following is desirable in their policies: (i) Confirmation and reinforcement – Much promotion is not aimed at getting people to do or think anything different but to remain the same. In many consumer goods fields the main communication task is to 'hang onto what you've got' and there are reasons to think that tourism markets consist of significant numbers of people with previous

experience of a product and people do tend to repeat their holiday behaviour.

- (ii) Creation of new patterns of attitude or behaviour – Some tourism organizations need to educate potential customers to consider completely new travel options.
- (iii) Changing of attitudes and behaviour – This is the most difficult of all forms of behavioural influence because people resist change.

The elements of promotional strategy are called promotion mix. The promotion mix like the marketing mix is a blend of the four types of promotion – advertising, personal selling, publicity and sales promotion. Advertising includes paid communication through mass media (television, radio, cinema, print) and more direct forms of communication such as direct mail. Mass media advertising is feasible under tight budgets; advertising dollars can be stretched using cooperative advertisements from several tourist organizations, e.g. tourist sites, hotels and airlines. Personal selling refers to one-to-one communication such as travel agent suggesting tour destinations to a customer. Publicity consists of promotion which has not been paid for, e.g. articles in travel sections of newspapers or magazines. Sales promotion includes activities designed to generate an immediate response from the audience such as special price discounts and ‘not classified elsewhere’ promotions, for example contests and ‘special items’ such as ‘fam tours’ or T-shirts. However, each element of the promotion mix must complement each other, i.e., must communicate similar or at least non-conflicting messages to each target market.

Promotional strategy in short, is the art of defining the audiences the firm needs to reach; the messages needed to influence them and the channels that will deliver those messages to the designated audiences. When these have been agreed it requires monitoring mechanisms to provide feedback on achievements and feed forward for future strategic modifications, where necessary. “Ask Listen and Observe” should be the promotional planner’s watchwords. Hague (1985) defines promotion as ‘... transmitting information, creating awareness and an interest finally resulting in a desire to buy’. In other words it may be used as a means to influence the attitudes and perceptions of the actual and potential users of services.

Public Relations in Tourism Industry

Tourism industry is the one that deals with humans (tourists), money, means and tourism products. As a matter of fact tourism itself is no industry instead consists of several industries like accommodation (Hotels, Motels & supplementary accommodation), Travel Trade (Travel Agency & Tour Operators), Transportation (Air, Water, Road & Rail) and many more which produce goods and services demanded by tourists. Most of its component industries are also associated with

other commercial and non-commercial activities besides rendering their services to the tourists. Public Relations is needed at all levels in tourism industry.

It is defined as a set of communication techniques which are designed to create and maintain favourable relations between an organization and its public like shareholders, suppliers and distribution channels. The need for Public Relations has arisen with the growth in size of organizations. A few years ago all tour operators and travel agents handled their reservation system manually; retailers were on the first name terms with individual staff members and knew whom to call when they had a problem. This close relationship eased criticism of the company in other directions as well. The movement to on line CRS, coupled with a reduction in agency calls by sale representatives, depersonalized the company for agents who found it easier to find fault with the company. Customers too grew alienated from the businesses with which they dealt and thus circumstances were created in which Public Relations became an important aspect to be considered.

Role of Public Relations

Because of the advent of travel and tourism as a service industry, the reputation of a travel company's products hinges on the quality of its staff and the attitude of that staff to the customers. When a company is carrying more than million passengers abroad every year, it has to make greater and greater efforts to retain a friendly and personal image. Public Relations can play a role in supporting and publicizing that image, although its creation must still lie with other marketing staff whose role is to train and to maintain quality control. As with other communication techniques, Public Relations plays an important part in informing and reminding customers about the company and its products, in order to generate an attitude towards the company favouring the purchase of its products. In generating information, however the Public Relations message has to be accurate and unbiased, while still reflecting the needs and interests of the company. This objectivity is essential if Public Relations are to do its job effectively. However, it is the media that will determine what appears before the public. Public Relations are essentially weapons for long term, rather than immediate impact on a company's markets. Since consumers are becoming increasingly sophisticated and hence more immune to the messages carried by advertising, the role of Public Relations in an organization has become doubly important. Public Relations have an importance in every organization, however small or big it may be as small companies too need the goodwill of the local community and a strong reputation to generate sales. In addition to creating favourable publicity for the company, Public Relations are helpful in diminishing the impact of unfavourable publicity.

Public Relations and Travel Intermediaries

The primary role of information in post-industrial societies poses a challenge for all firms servicing consumer markets. Retailers in particular are having to cope with a vast increase in information flows, created both by the need to collect more information about the customer - *tourist profile through market segmentation*, and to provide the customer with more information about purchases - *building imagery and product positioning*. The key information-exchange role of the retailer has been a primary factor in shifting the balance of power in the chain of distribution away from the manufacturer and towards the retailer in most European Markets- the transition being largely an outcome of Public Relations. The move from generalization to specialization in retailing has involved the creation of outlets aimed at particular consumer values and lifestyles - a market-led approach often based on targeting key values for specific lifestyle groups. The basic and crucial product values communicated by retailers are price, time and choice. Providing the consumer with choice involves both the availability of a range of alternative product offers, as well as the information required to enable the consumer to discriminate between different products on offer. The provision of choice therefore implies that the retailer must provide an increased amount of information about a growing range of products. The resulting rapid growth of product information implies a widening gap between the amount of product information available and the ability to communicate that information to the consumer in a convincing manner.

To date, most attention has been focused on providing information about price and time aspects of products (How much does it cost? When and where is it available?), but as the number of 'inner directed' individualistic consumers grows, the need for choice based information becomes paramount. Not only will consumers be looking for a reasonable quantity of product information, but will also be increasingly critical about the quality of information provided. Moreover, as consumer marketing becomes increasingly concerned with service quality and moving even closer to the customer, the retail function should become even more important as a decisive influencer of customer-supplier relationships. Again, as Linder (1970) has suggested from an economic perspective, some customers will be happy to pay for the convenience of obtaining packaged information (e.g. inclusive tours) or the ability to access and evaluate information (e.g. through computer reservation systems (CRSs) or the knowledge of travel consultants). The ability to sell information in this way depends to a large extent on the capacity of the retailer or the Public Relations/ Customer-Care professional as engaged in big organizations to provide the information that the customer requires about the products available.

Interestingly, in spite of the vast array of information available through automation, and the time it can save in making a booking technology alone is not enough to sell travel products. CRS and videotext systems can provide a large amount of information about timings, availability and price but they can supply very little information about the actual content of the product. As travel products are intangible, the role of experiential information is extremely important in making product choices. As Bennett (1993) has indicated, for example, the products offered by automated travel agents tend to be those which are easiest to access through automated systems rather than the products best suited to consumer needs. In fact products which are relatively complex in composition such as skiing or cruising require a higher than usual level of knowledge on the part of agency staff to sell adequately. And this very well explains why tour operators selling such products in UK have invested heavily in training programmes specifically designed to familiarize agency professionals with their products. However, even with these aids, the agents are often fighting a losing battle against the emergence of the 'skilled consumer'.

The concept of skilled consumption was originally developed by the economist Scitovsky (1976), in his research for explanations of leisure motivation. Building on Scitovsky's work Gratton (1990) suggests that 'stimulation-seeking is the motivator behind many if not most leisure demands and is certainly an important motivation for participation in tourism'. Evidence from the UK and elsewhere also suggests that stimulation-seeking behavior is on the increase (Bryant, 1987; Shaw and Williams, 1993). For travel retailers this poses a particular problem since most of them deal with an extremely wide range of products including air travel, package holidays, cruising, coach travel and insurance etc., in a rapidly growing and increasingly segmented market. Information technology can help the agent access 'hard' information about times, prices and facilities, but this is no substitute for direct experience of the product itself. Skilled consumers are increasingly asking 'what is it like?', in place of 'how much does it cost?'. One potential strategy to cater the information needs of consumers is to specialize in particular products, rather than trying to service the entire range available.

Studies of travel agency functions usually deal with one of the two aspects. The first is the role of travel agents within the distribution chain, and the second is the role of agents in influencing travel decisions among consumers. It has been observed that the demand for specialist information is highest among those with high incomes and considerable holiday experience. And for that, they tend to rely more heavily on personal recommendation than automated information i.e., computer systems are not able to replicate the human capacity for building expertise in narrow subject areas.

Increasing product differentiation and growing consumer sophistication creates a problem for retailers trying to service their customers through effective information provision. The market survey reveals that the agents are being left behind more and more by the 'skilled consumers' who are able to invest more heavily in specialized product knowledge acquisition. Such consumers are turning progressively to direct suppliers, and packaging their own travel products bypassing the travel agent as agency staff still rely a great deal on printed information in travel brochures. Interestingly while it may be difficult for travel agents to meet the information needs of an increasingly demanding clientele, there is evidence that room exists for a 'no-frills' product, even at the top end of the market. The major growth area in the European and South-Asian tour operating industry is 'part packages' - individual holiday elements such as airline seats or hotel beds, which allow the tourist to assemble their own holiday.

It is also tragic that unlike manufacture, there is no evidence of research on 'Expert Systems' designed specifically for business travel counselling. As per El- Najdawi and Stylianou (1993), "Expert Systems are computer programmes that embody the knowledge of one or more human experts in a narrow problem domain and can solve problems in that domain matching the expert's level of performance". Business travel agents face fundamental strategic decisions as price considerations are being replaced by concerns about quality and width of service. Highly automated travel centres and sophisticated business consultancy are seen as the competitive tools for this mature market. Nevertheless the use of multi-media has also shown its importance as a competitive tool. It is clear that an increasing number of multi-media booking and information systems are emerging in the market such as the Thomas Cook Travel Kiosk at their Marble Arch (London) branch which shows still images of destinations. With the audio-visual output of product information integrated with counselling, the system is likely to appeal to the psychological needs of the customers making the products more tangible by allowing customers to 'experience' them on the screen.

The economics of new tourism is quite different from the old, system economies acting as determinant of profitability rather than the scale economies. In other words, system gains, segmented markets, designed and customized holidays are evolving into more and more significant criteria for profitability and competitiveness in tourism. Tourists of their own are shifting from 'tinsel and junk' (anything sham, showy and trash) to more natural services to high tech, high touch and greater care, concern for the conservation of the natural environment. There is, indeed a shift towards ecotourism, green tourism, rural tourism, farm tourism, sustainable tourism, etc. with perpetual opportunities of benefit from this new tourism.

Public Relations – A Promotion Marketing Tool

Of the various known and practiced marketing tools *public relations* (PR) is also a significant one. An organization or a company must not only relate constructively to its customers, suppliers, and dealers, but it must also maintain liaison with large set of interested publics. As stated by Kotler et al. (2004) "A public/audience is any group that has an actual or potential interest or impact on a company's ability to achieve its objectives i.e., public can further or hold up a firm's ability to carry out its objectives". Most organizations operate a public relations department to manage successful relations with its main public. The PR department monitors the attitude of the organization's public and disseminates information and communications to build goodwill. In case of a negative or unpromising image and/or publicity, the PR department acts as a troubleshooter. Public relations has generally been looked upon as a marketing stepchild, an afterthought to more serious promotion planning. The PR departments perform the following activities, which support marketing objectives directly or indirectly:

- *Press Relations*: These are intended to place newsworthy information into the news media to attract attention to a person, product, service, or organization.
- *Product Publicity*: Such an activity involves different efforts to promote specific products.
- *Corporate Communication*: Corporate communication takes into account internal and external communications and promotes perception of the organization.
- *Lobbying*: This activity relates to dealing with government authorities and legislators to promote or defeat legislation or regulation.
- *Counselling*: The activity is concerned with advising management about public issues and company's position, and image.

Moreover, marketing managers and public relation practitioners do not always talk the same language in the sense that marketing managers are heavily bottom-line oriented whereas PR personnel mainly focus on preparation and dissemination of communications. However, of late, there has been a transition. Organizations have started setting up a marketing public relations group (MPR) for specific purpose of product promotion and image building. Earlier MPR was called publicity but now it contributes to the following undertakings beyond simple publicity: Assist in the launch of new products; Assist in repositioning a mature product; Build up interest in a product category; Influence specific target groups; Defend products

that have come upon public problems; and Building promising corporate imagery that maps out well on its products. In several cases MPR has even proved to be more cost effective than direct mail and advertising and in general, it carries more credibility as experienced in practice.

It is a fact that MPR's contribution is more difficult to evaluate because it is used along with other promotional tools. Although, the most simplistic and easiest measure of MPR effectiveness is the number of exposures carried by the media, but this exposure measure is not very satisfying. A better measure, however, is the change in product awareness/perception / attitude resulting from the MPR campaign, after allowing for the effect of other promotional tools. For example, how many people recall hearing the news item? How many tell others about it – a measure of word of mouth communication? How many changed their minds after hearing it – change in attitude and perception of users (actual and/or potential) of product/service. Nevertheless, Sales- and profit impact is the most satisfying measure, if obtainable.

Briefly, public relations are one of the tools of growing importance in marketing planning. It is an important communication/promotion tool especially in service sector organizations where the product delivered is in the form of intangibles i.e., services. Even though less utilized, it has great potential for building awareness and preference in the marketplace, repositioning products, and promoting them. The major PR tools are publications, events, news, speeches, public-service activities, written material, audio-visual material, corporate-identity media, and telephone information services.

It is a common fault in the provision of services that suppliers hide behind the smokescreen of 'service' or even 'personal service' as if this allows them to escape the need to evaluate honestly just what the consumer wants. Too often personal service degenerates from 'service to a person' to 'service by persons': the consumer is then neglected in favour of convenience for the producer. Yet, the increasing sophistication of the consumer and the diffusion of technological possibilities require a closer analysis of the consumer's needs. With any purchase, however, what matters are the resulting experiences that the consumer either undergoes or expects to undergo. It is difficult to measure these experiences with precision or compare the experiences with those of another in an objective manner, generally termed as 'intangibility'. And at times converting intangible concepts into tangible components though a difficult process, but becomes increasingly necessary. For instance, comfortable accommodation has to be expressed in terms of physical attributes of the room and its furnishings, in such a way that degrees of perceived comfort can be identified.

It has emerged as a simple truism that promotion of a service sector organization needs to be classified into *instrumental* (advertising and sales promotion) and *personal* (public relations and personal selling) in view of the fact that personnel are also part of the interactive marketing and the service quality. While marketing service products, one expects forthcoming customers to buy promises and so it becomes all the more necessary to present symbolic reassurances of quality and to mechanize the service delivery process. And the metaphorical reassurances can be better provided through personal communication i.e., public relations. On the other hand the service customer presently confronted with changes in the social and technological milieu is unpredictable and not loyal to one brand or organization. The change with respect to customer orientation brings on higher standards throughout the industry thus making strides in its general perception. And so all communications between the organization and the identified target market with a view to enhance the tangibility of the product-service mix to establish and/or monitor consumer expectations or to induce and influence consumers to purchase.

In tourism business, Public Relations as a management function has so far not been incorporated to the extent it should have been. Using advertising as a part of marketing function is conceptually different from using public relations to create productive relationship. Marketing and advertising are generally aggressive in their nature, public relations, on the other hand is a subtle human activity. It is an extension of international relationships and therefore more friendly and productive. Both Marketing and advertising are visible but public relations can only be felt. Advertising communication both as a source and receiver is mainly the activity of the brain, public relations activities cater to the heart. For establishing the role of Public relations in the promotion of service sector, the managers have to study and compare the 'profit earned per rupee invested in 'promotion' of various options available. An organization must not only relate constructively to its customers, suppliers and dealers but it must also maintain liaison with large set of interested publics. The art of mastery lies not in finding new ideas but in using the appropriate tool at the right place and at the right time.

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