

# Tour Operator's Service Quality Evaluation Model

The peculiarities of services quality, its conception in tourism market, different theoretical models of service quality evaluation are being analyzed in the article. Service quality maximization, its constant improvement, and timely renewal of the tourism of service offering strategy become vitally important in contemporary competitive market. The problem solved in this article was how to measure and evaluate tourism service quality? As the result, the authors of the article on the basis of other theoretical models of service quality elaborate the tour operator's service quality evaluation model.

**Keywords:** service quality, service quality evaluation, tour operator.

Straipsnyje analizuojami paslaugų kokybės ypatumai, paslaugų kokybės koncepcija turizmo rinkoje, teoriniai paslaugų kokybės vertinimo modeliai. Paslaugų kokybės maksimizavimas, nuolatinis jos tobulinimas, savalaikis atnaujinimas tampa gyvybiškai svarbūs šiuolaikinėje konkurencingoje turizmo rinkoje. Straipsnyje sprendžiama problema – kaip matuoti ir vertinti turizmo paslaugos kokybę. Straipsnio pabaigoje pateikiamas kelionių organizatorių teikiamų paslaugų kokybės vertinimo modelis, sudarytas paslaugų kokybės teorinių modelių pagrindu.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** kelionių organizatorius, paslaugų kokybė, paslaugų kokybės vertinimas.

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## Introduction

**Relevance of the research.** The field of services can be named as one of the most rapidly growing economic sectors in Lithuania. Many Lithuanian and foreign authors (Ruževičius et al., 2007; Paulavičienė and Arlauskaitė, 2007; Hudson et al., 2004) highlight the importance of quality in the processes of World's economic integration and globalization as

a main factor differentiating products of service industry, herewith, creating competitive advantage. The trend is emphatic in tourism industry, where competitions as well as processes of changing consumer requirements are constantly intensifying. This encourages organizations to pay greater attention to recognition of customer expectations, constant improvements of the main competitive advantage – service quality.

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**Scientific problem.** In Lithuanian, as well as in foreign scientific literature, the problem of designing and maintaining high quality services and products, can be observed and analyzed. One approach suggests (Ghobadian et al., 1994) that problems of service quality mainly occur in the organizations, where the proper concern about identification of customer needs and expectations and feedback getting persists; the other approach (Čepinskis et al., 2005; Navickas and Malakauskaitė, 2007) concerns the impact of tough competition on the possibilities for organizations in differentiating their products in the market, formatting new attracting service packages, and representing it to consumers. Consequently, quality maximization, its constant improvement, and timely renewal of the tourism market strategy become vitally important. The problem rises with the question: how to measure and evaluate tourism service's quality?

**The subject of the research** is the evaluation of service quality.

**The aim of the research** is to elaborate the model for evaluation of the quality of services provided by tour operators.

The authors of the article, on the basis of scientific insights and other theoretical models of service quality, elaborate the model for evaluation of the quality of services provided by tour operators.

**Research methods.** On purpose of analyzing possibilities and methods for service quality's evaluation, the theoretical analysis and synthesis were provided; considering the necessity of elaboration of proper model for tour operator's service quality evaluation, methods of deduction and induction were used. The research basis was scientific insights of foreign and national researchers.

## Conception of tour operator and its service quality

Among the service industries, tourism is especially significant in terms of its sensitivity to quality issues, impact on national economies, and recent expansion (Atilgan et al., 2003). Service quality in this industry is one of the most important factors, which determines the success and expansion of the business. In tourism industry, tour operators are one of the principal actors, having huge direct impact on the performance quality factors. However, sometimes it becomes hard for the customer to distinguish one tour operator's products from another. Service quality can be named as the exceptional competitive advantage, determining customer's future decisions and business's future success. Atilgan et al. (2003) defines tour operator as "the principal service provider who is responsible for delivering and/or contracting and monitoring the promised service mix, including all arrangements such as flights, transportation, accommodation, excursions, guidance etc. throughout the service delivering period".

According to the Law on Tourism of the Republic of Lithuania (2002, 6) "[t]our operator is a juridical person who regularly plans tour itineraries and prepares the required packages of tour services for these tours". At the same Law, tourist service is defined as "activity linked with satisfaction of tourist needs, by providing services in connection with organising of tourist travel, transport, accommodation, eating, information or special services". However, there are no limits or framework for service quality establishment.

Service is a subjective concept and a complicated phenomenon (Bowie,

Chang, 2005). Vveinhardt and Kigaitė (2005) state that perception of service quality is rather subjective process; and the perception of tourism service quality is determined by staff professionalism, skills, expertise, and ability to create a good impression, attitude and behavior. Still and all, Bowie and Chang (2005) highlight the intangibility of a service as a primary obstacle for a proper service quality's evaluation and control. According to the authors, it usually means selling intangible services when selling a tour product. Quality of service is difficult to control before it is sold or consumed; its invisible and intangible nature makes customers rely on the image of a firm for further purchases. Consequently, service quality is decisive only from the moment of service encounter.

Bowie and Chang (2005), analyzing different scientific insights about service quality, highlight some important moments. The previously mentioned service encounter occurs when the customer assesses the service quality and his/her satisfaction with the complex set of behaviors which have happened between the customer, the server and the service company. According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2003), service quality is based on customer's perceptions of service and not on the criteria that determine what a service would have or not to be. In other words, service quality can be defined as a customer's verdict about the service's or service organization's expertise and superiority among others.

Gabbott and Hogg (1998) state that during service delivery the quality of the service encounter involves two significant elements: service personnel and the service setting (Bowie, Chang, 2005). The importance of personnel was also high-

lighted by Miranda (2003), who stated that "[t]he achievement of quality should be the main purpose of the organization and of everyone working within it". To ensure that every employee accepts responsibility for quality, all should be encouraged to see themselves as customers, even inside the same company. According to the latter approach, customer is becoming the core point for an organization, and his/her need satisfying should be the main aim of a business.

According to Bowie and Chang (2005), three characteristics of service personnel directly affect consumer's service experience: employees' expertise, employees' attitude and the demographic background of the employee. Besides, service encounter involves five service personnel oriented dimensions: time, physical proximity, participation, engagement and degree of customization. Meeting these dimensions helps to build and maintain high service quality and customer orientation.

Service quality is often considered as a principal factor differentiating service products and substantiating competitive advantage in tourism industry. The process by which customers evaluate a purchase, thereby determining satisfaction and likelihood of repurchase, is important to all marketers but especially to services marketers because, unlike their manufacturing counterparts, they have fewer objective measures of quality by which to judge their production (Zeithaml et al., 1988; Brown, Swartz, 1989; Hudson et al., 2004). The Mediation Model of Tourists' Repurchase Intentions (see Figure 1) supplements the latter point of view, linking perceived value and perceived quality to repurchase intentions through tourism satisfaction.

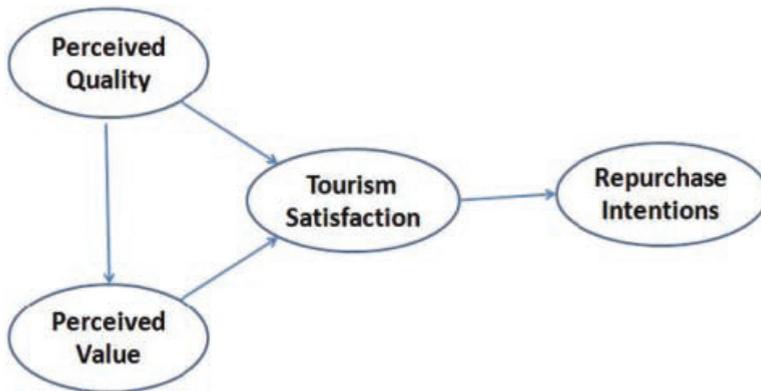


Fig. 1. A Full Mediation Model

Source: He and Song (2009).

He and Song (2009) define 'perceived value' as the evaluation of the customer's overall assessment of the utility of a service product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given, 'tourism satisfaction' as overall tour satisfaction – an overall affective response that reflects a customer's emotional state of mind created by his or her exposure to a service experience, while 'perceived quality' is an evaluation of the attributes of a service that are primarily controlled by a supplier (Baker, Crompton 2000; Cronin et al., 2000). Two main questions were used to indicate overall tourism satisfaction: 'How well the service quality of the tour conforms to customer's prior expectations before joining the tour' and 'How close the service quality of the tour is to that of customer's ideal case'. 'Repurchase intentions' in the model are determined by the ultimate question 'How likely customer is to visit the travel agent again'. Hence, the main goal of tour operator is the provision of the service which: encouraged customer to return; induced trust and confidence in service provider; met customer's expectations or even exceeded them.

According to O'Neill et al. (2000), tour operators must understand that service quality is essentially a customer issue – customers determine it, and not the service provider. There is a need to understand the specific requirements of customers and tailoring the service delivery system to meeting these requirements. Successful organizations are able to diagnose their customer expectations fully and satisfy them completely, during each and every service encounter (Zemke and Schaaf, 1990).

While analyzing tourism industry, Vveinhardt and Kigaitė (2005) cite WTO (2005) and provide the following definition of quality in tourism: "the result of a process which implies the satisfaction of all the legitimate product and service needs, requirements and expectations of the consumer, at an acceptable price, in conformity with mutually accepted contractual conditions and the underlying quality determinants such as safety and security, hygiene, accessibility, transparency, authenticity and harmony of the tourism activity concerned with its human and natural environment."

While analyzing tourism service industry, the growth of the attention for service quality provision in accordance to customers' requirements can be detected. According to Fache (2000), this is the consequence of the increase of the degree of dominance of the customer in the service process. This degree of dominance is high, if the customer can dictate his/her demands to the service provider. Wide range of alternatives in tourism industry strengthens customers' power. Contemporary tourists are well-informed about traveling, more proficient in their choices; hence, their requirements concerning service providers are growing. Consequently, service providers pay greater attention to service quality enhancement in compatibility with customer needs and requirements.

Whereas a choice of service provider is an important part of consumer behav-

ior (usually the process leads to formation of further relationship between service provider and customer), it is important to understand the factors affecting the choice of one or another service provider. Kugytė and Šliburytė (2005) analyze how consumers choose among service providers and what criterions make the hugest impact on their choice. Authors provided a modified model of service provider selection criteria (based on other related insights), where their contribution is delineated using dotted line (see Figure 2).

Eight basic criteria categories are defined in the model: pricing, convenience, technology and tangibles, core service, service encounter, recommendations by others, reputation, and brand image/familiarity, grouped into three broad groups – search, experience and credence – based on the degree of risk per-

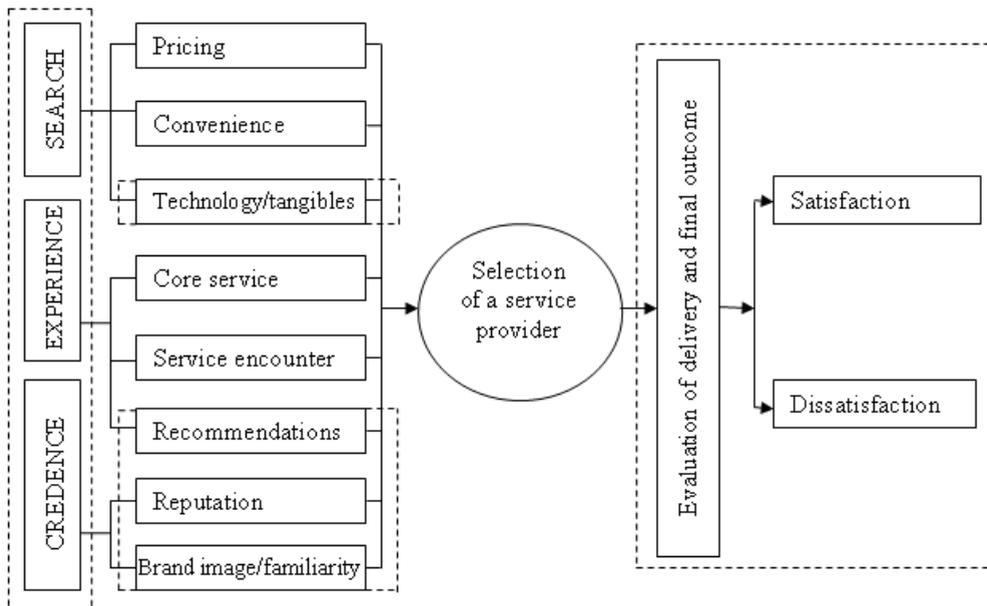


Fig. 2. A modified model of service provider selection criteria

Source: Kugytė and Šliburytė (2005).

ceived, information search conducted and information sources used, and behavioral intentions associated with each criteria category.

Search-based attributes are those that can be accurately evaluated prior to making a choice. They denote the highest pre-purchase knowledge and lowest perceived risk, lowest search time, reliance on mass media and lowest behavioral intentions. Experience attributes are those that can be accurately assessed only after the services have been purchased and used. They denote a moderate pre-purchase knowledge, perceived risk, search time, behavioral intentions, reliance on mass media and personal sources while credence criteria are identified by the lowest pre-purchase knowledge, the highest perceived risk, search time, behavioral intentions and reliance on personal sources and they may or may not be evaluated even after the purchase is made simply because the consumer may lack the necessary experience or knowledge (Kugytė, Šliburytė, 2005).

The model of service provider selection criteria helps in understanding the essence of customer choice of service provider and highlights the aspects that should dominate in service package.

## **A comparative analysis of service quality evaluation models**

The abundance of service quality evaluation models provided in national and foreign scientific literature reveals the complexity of service quality evaluation and encourages the search for holistic model for quality evaluation (Hopenienė, Ligeikienė, 2002; He, Song, 2009). On purpose of elaborating conventional model

for service quality evaluation, existing ones: Grönroos' (1984) Perceived Service Quality Model; Parasuraman et al's. (1985, 1988) Service Gap Analysis Model; Brogowicz et al's. (1990) Synthesised Service Quality Model were analyzed, criticized, and improved.

According to Schembri and Sandberg (2002), three dominant service quality models emerged in the past two decades: Grönroos' (1984) Perceived Service Quality (PSO) Model; Parasuraman et al's. (1985, 1988) Service Gap Analysis Model; and Boulding et al's Dynamic Process Model of Service Quality. The common feature of the models is consensus that service quality is a multidimensional object according attitude held by consumers, with each dimension comprising of a number of attributes or service aspects. Hence, achieving to understand the meaning of service quality for consumers, primarily there is a need for critical analysis and evaluation of existing models of service quality.

Grönroos (1984) emphasizes the importance of understanding what consumers are really looking for and what they evaluate (Schembri, Sandberg, 2002). Two dimensions are indicated in the model: technical quality (related to outcome) and functional quality (related to process). The two dimensions are supplemented with 'image' which contributes to consumer's perception of service provider (Lewis, 1989; Thai, 2008) (see Figure 3).

According to Hopenienė and Ligeikienė (2002), Grönroos' (1984) model is the most general model useful for perceiving service quality dimensions and evaluation of service provision process. However, model lacks of evaluation of consumer's internal characteristics

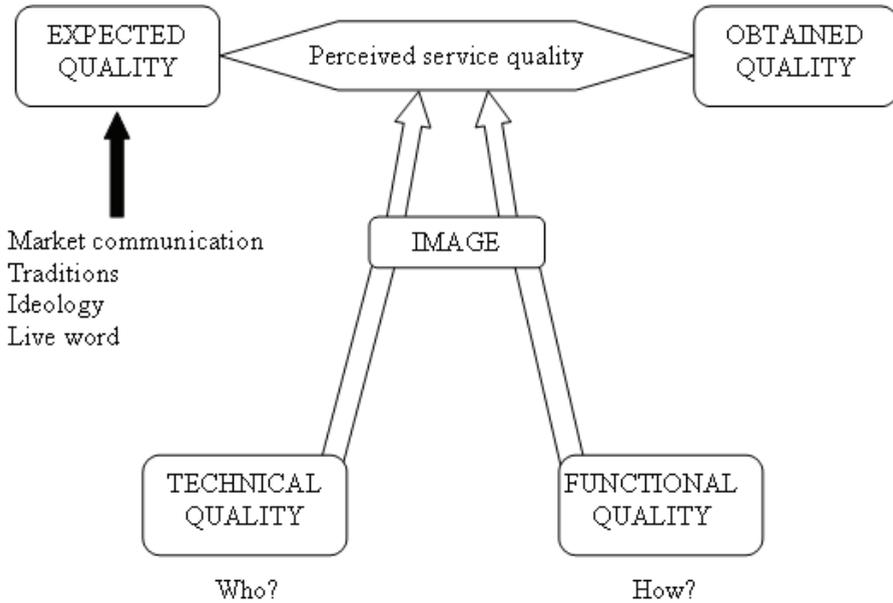


Fig. 3. Perceived Service Quality Model

Source: adapted from Grönroos (1984).

and consumer him/herself as an external factor. Consequently, it can be called too 'narrow' for service quality evaluation.

Parasuraman's, Zeithaml's and Berry's (1988) Quality Gap Analysis Model can be assigned to the most appropriate for service quality evaluation. The model provides quality evaluation instrument, also known as SERVQUAL methodology. The quality gap analysis model and SERVQUAL methodology are analyzed and adapted by various national and foreign scientists: Swan, Bowers (1998); O'Neill (2000); Tarn (2000); Marshall, Murdoch (2001); Hopenienė, Ligeikienė (2002); Schembri, Sandberg (2002); Atilgan et al. (2003); Hudson et al. (2004); Pilgrimienė, Bučiūnienė (2005); Collier, Bienstock (2006); Gil et al. (2006); Carrillat et al. (2007); Skalen, Fougere (2007); Thai (2008), and others.

SERVQUAL model (see Figure 4) enables to determine the discrepancy among customer's expected service and perceived service. The discrepancy is called the 'gap'. Parasuraman's, Zeithaml's and Berry's (1988) model was elaborated for evaluation of the situation perceived service quality, which was defined as customer's opinion about common product's or service's ability of meeting customer's needs or expectations (Hopenienė, Ligeikienė, 2002).

Despite of all advantages of the model, the critics exists. Cronin and Taylor (1994) highlight that fact of asking a respondent to mark his or her perceptions of performance already lead him/her to compare mentally perceptions and expectations. In other words, the estimation of perceptions might already include a perception minus expectation mental proc-

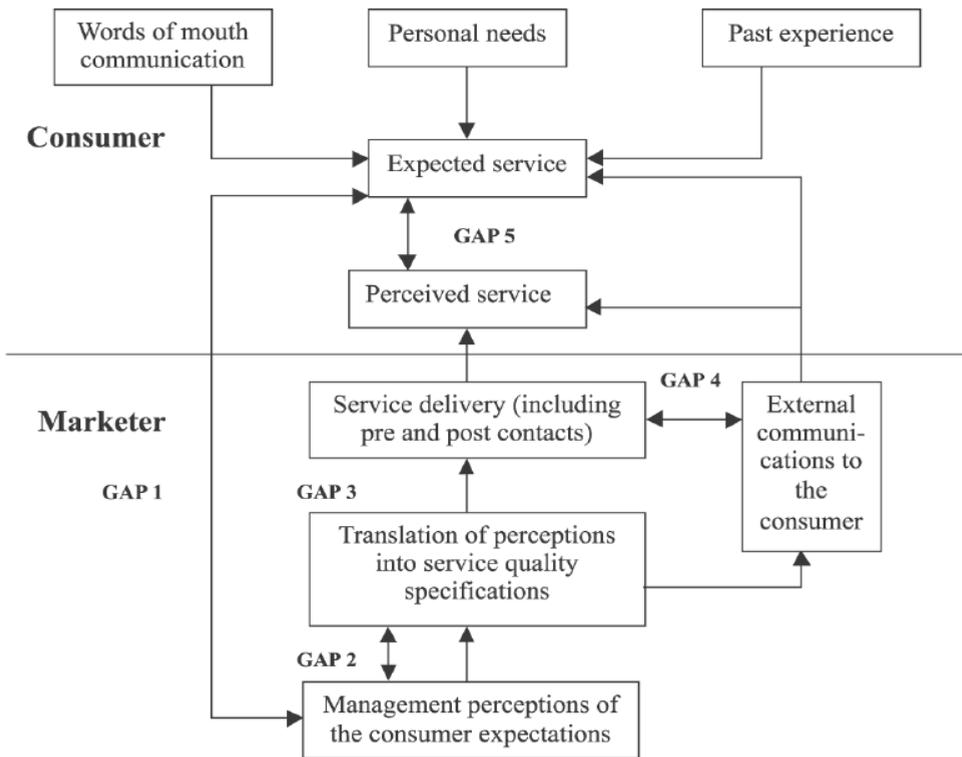


Fig. 4. Service Quality Model

Source: Parasuraman's, Zeithaml's and Berry's (1985).

ess (Hudson et al., 2004). Authors suggest that only performance can be evaluated to represent total quality; the SERVPERF methodology was suggested. However, Parasuraman et al. (1993) in their model emphasized that the critical indicator for a firm willing to improve its service quality is the *amplitude and the direction of the gap* between the expectation and perceptions scores, not the perception itself.

Five service quality gaps (see Table 1) are defined in SERVQUAL model.

Brogowitz et al. (1990) provided a synthesised model of service quality (see Figure 5) on the basis of earlier service quality models from the two streams of research on service quality: the Nordic

school and the North American school. The model encompasses technical and functional quality conceptions, quality gaps, dimensions and factors determining service quality perception.

Analyzing the synthesised service quality model, Seth et al. (2005) state that “[a] service quality gap may exist even when a customer has not yet experienced the service but learned through word of mouth, advertising or through other media communications. Thus there is a need to incorporate potential customers’ perceptions of service quality offered as well as actual customers’ perceptions of service quality experienced”. The gap of service quality at the center of the

1 table

The five gaps of service quality

GAPS	Scope
1 gap	Discrepancy between customer's expectations and service provider's ability and efforts to understand them
2 gap	Discrepancy between the understanding of customer's expectations and their modification into service's features (quality standards)
3 gap	Discrepancy between quality standards and service provision process
4 gap	Discrepancy between service provision and marketing communication
5 gap	Discrepancy between customer's expectations and service encountered (satisfaction with the service)

Source: adapted from Hopenienė and Ligeikienė (2002), Skalen and Fougere (2007).

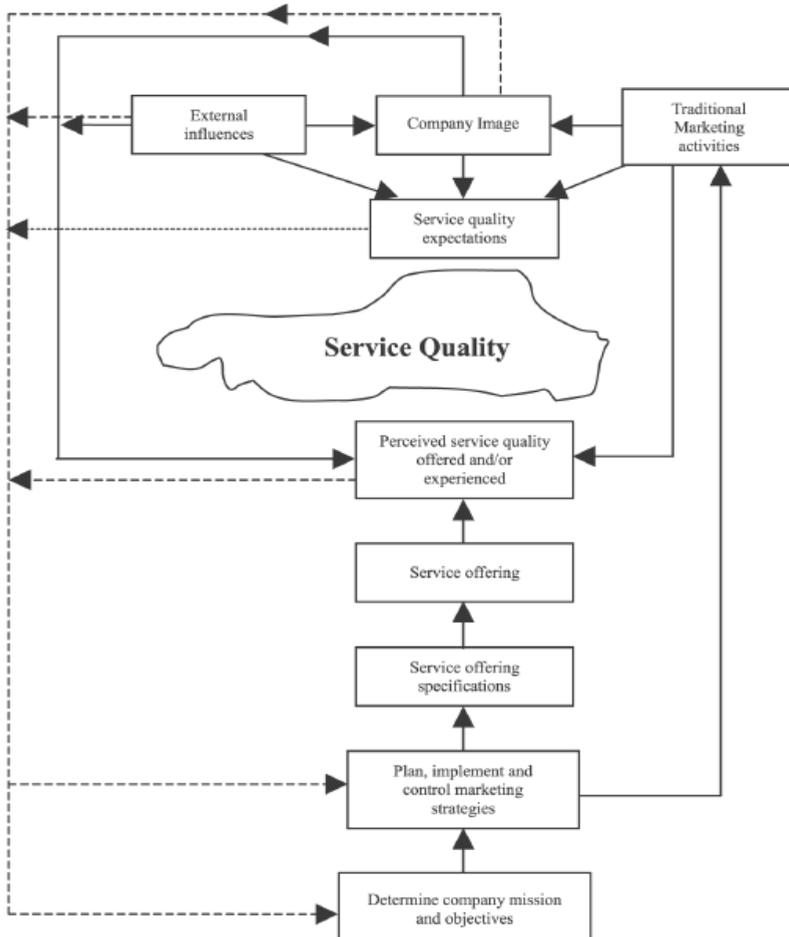


Fig. 5. Synthesised service quality model

Source: Brogowicz et al. (1990).

model emerges after customer's expectations related to service quality exceed the obtained service quality (Brogowicz et al., 1990; Seth et al., 2005).

According to Seth et al. (2005), the model attempts to integrate traditional managerial framework, service design and operations, and marketing activities. The purpose of this model is to identify the dimensions associated with service quality in a traditional managerial framework of planning, implementation and control (Seth et al., 2005).

The three analyzed models of service quality are specified as most appropriate for tourism service quality evaluation in scientific literature. Considering scientific insights analysed, the model for tour

operator's service quality evaluation will be provided.

The analyzed models suggest that service quality is multidimensional (at customer's point of view), and every dimension consists of various features and service aspects. Not only the obtained result of service provision, but the provision process as a whole is important for the customer. Service provision process encompasses various dimensions helping to determine customer's expectations and perceived service quality gaps. As it was mentioned before, the models analyzed have weaknesses which could evoke difficulties in evaluating tour operator's service quality.

The elaborated model (see Figure 6) consists of two principal blocks which

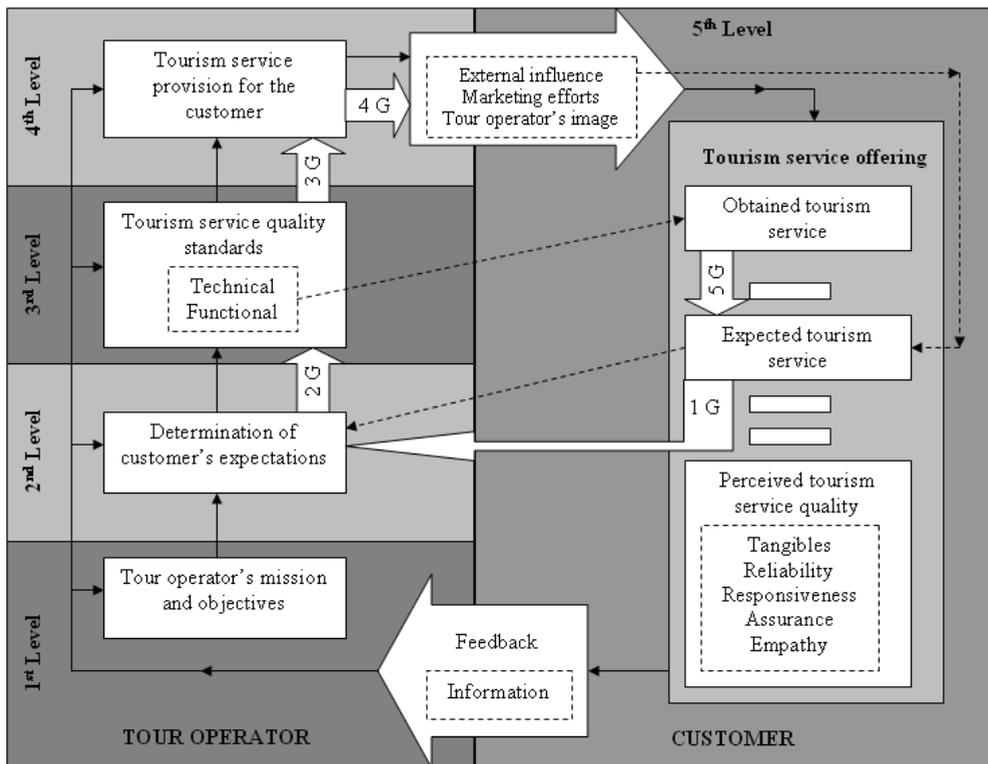


Fig. 6. Tour Operator's Service Quality Evaluation Model

help to distinguish customer's and tour operator's participation and interaction in tourism service provision process. There are five levels which correspond with the progress of tour operator's service provision process. Dotted lines highlight one factor's influence on another; and five gaps of tourism service quality provision are numbered and named 'G'.

The process's initiation is in the first level where tour operator's mission and objectives are established. That is the principal step to creation and provision of an established quality service. At the second level, tour operator determines customer's expectations. Various customer and staff surveys are applied here on purpose of customer's expectations-based determination of employee education and establishment of activity standards. Tour operator determines technical and functional aspects (service quality standards) of service offering at the third level. Technical quality represents 'what' customer receives (material tools and technologies of service provision), whereas functional quality determines 'how' customer does receive it (the behaviour characteristics of tour operator's personnel: appearance, attitude, complaisance of contact personnel). The ways of providing technical outcomes for the customer (technical quality) are important for the perceived service. Perceived tourism service is the result of customer's attitude to various technical and functional dimensions framed by dotted line in Figure 6.

The fourth level represents tourism service provision for the customer. External influences, marketing efforts, and organization's image appear in this level. As pointed with the dotted line in the model (see Figure 6), external influence (culture, social structure, verbal communication, mass-media, competition), mar-

keting efforts (advertising, public relations, personal selling, sales promotion, pricing, distribution) and tour operator's image form customer's expectations and determine expected tourism service quality.

External communication strongly impacts customer's needs and expectations. Promotional efforts can be used as tools for promise giving to customers, enabling customer affection and awaking desired reaction. The promises influence customer's expectations and form the vision of expected service. On the other hand, customer's expectations form on the basis of attitude to the tour operator, its image (which relates to reputation and previously experienced service quality from same tour operator). At the fourth level it is important not to promise more than tour operator can afford. Real communication is necessary for avoiding exaggeration of customer's expectations and reducing perception of quality.

Provided service is being evaluated under customer's attitude at the fifth level of the process. As the analysis of scientific insights revealed, perceived service quality is the outcome of customer's evaluation process, when he/she compares service-related expectations to obtained service; hence, perceived service quality is expressed as a disparity between obtained and expected service. Perceived tourism service quality is measured using five quality evaluation dimensions concerning WTO's (2005) definition of quality in tourism: tangibles (physical elements, equipment, personnel appearance, tools of communication, hygiene, and authenticity); reliability (ability to provide precise and accurate service, without withdrawals and at the promised time, assuring mutually accepted contract condition at stable prices); responsiveness (personnel's desire

and readiness for helping customer and timely service provision; this dimension reflects safety of tourism service); assurance (personnel's knowledge, skills, helpfulness, and ability creating confidence; tourism service security and harmony with human and natural environment is assured); and empathy (carefulness, tenderness, individual attention to customer, service transparency). The quality dimensions helps in gap determination between customer's expectations and obtained service.

Five quality gaps of service provision are emphasized in the model. The first (1G) emerges between service expected by customer and the ability of tour operator to understand and determine customer's expectations. The second (2G) opens between determination of customer expectations and their conversion into tourism service features (quality standards). The third (3G) emerges between service quality standards and the process of service provision to the customer. The fourth one (4G) is the discrepancy between the tourism service provision and marketing efforts. Finally, the fifth gap (5G) includes the discrepancy between customer's expectations and obtained tourism service (the extent of this gap depends on all four previously mentioned gaps). The extent of fifth gap has a direct impact on customer's perception about total tourism service quality. Consequently, the identification of the gaps is particularly important in mistake determination and strategy selection for fulfilling customer needs.

All the tasks in tour operator's management require information and feedback about customer's needs, external influence, tour operator's image, service quality expectations, and perceived encountered service quality. Unimpeded feedback is essential at every level. Only having feed-

back, enables the constant process evaluation, determination of mistakes at the point of their emergence, selection of proper actions for problem resolution at the right place and time. Tourism service provision and its evaluation is continuous, constantly renewable, monitored and controlled process. Without the information obtained by tour operator's service quality evaluation process and constant feedback, the probability of service quality gaps emergence increases, gaps become hardly identified, reduced and removed.

## Conclusions

Tour operator is the principal service provider in tourism industry, responsible for the provision of promised service package, fulfilling commitments, and constant control through the whole period of service provision. Tour operator's service quality depends on understanding of customers' requirements, and the adjustment of the whole service provision system to meeting those requirements.

The analyzed service quality evaluation models contain weaknesses which could determine limited service quality evaluation. Therefore, on the basis of principal ideas of analyzed models, tour operator's service quality evaluation model was elaborated. The model is designed for the evaluation of perceived service quality and based on the discrepancy between obtained and expected service quality evaluated by five quality dimensions. Various customer surveys on purpose of provided service quality evaluation, quality gap determination, or customer expectation-based activity standard determination can be provided within the framework of the model.

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## KELIONIŲ ORGANIZATORIŲ TEIKIAMŲ PASLAUGŲ KOKYBĖS VERTINIMO MODELIS

### S a n t r a u k a

Tiek užsienio, tiek lietuvių mokslinėje literatūroje pastebimas ir analizuojamas problematiškas organizacijos aukštos kokybės paslaugų ir produktų sukūrimas bei išlaikymas. Vieni autoriai (Ghobadian et al., 1994) teigia, kad paslaugų kokybės problemos dažniausiai pasireiškia organizacijose, kurios nėra sutelkusios pakankamai dėmesio vartotojų poreikių ir lūkesčių identifikavimui ir nesulaukia grįžtamojo ryšio iš savo klientų, kiti (Čepinskis ir kt., 2005; Navickas ir Malakauskaitė, 2007) svarsto, kad konkurencinėmis sąlygomis, organizacijoms tampa vis sunkiau išskirti savo siūlomus produktus ar teikiamas paslaugas iš kitų, suformuoti naują, įdomų paslaugų paketą bei netradiciškai jį reprezentuoti vartotojams. Dėl šių priežasčių kokybės maksimizavimas, nuolatinis tobulinimas bei savalaikis atnaujinimas tampa gyvybiškai svarbūs organizacijai. Taigi, nagrinėjant turizmo paslaugų rinką, kyla problemiškas klausimas: kaip matuoti ir vertinti turizmo paslaugos kokybę?

**Straipsnio objektas** – paslaugų kokybės vertinimas.

**Straipsnio tikslas** – sudaryti kelionių organizatorių teikiamų paslaugų kokybės vertinimo modelį.

Analizuojant paslaugų kokybės vertinimo galimybes ir metodus, atlikta mokslinės literatūros analizė ir sintezė. Akcentuojant modelio, skirto kelionių organizatorių teikiamų paslaugų kokybės vertinimui reikalingumą, taikyti dedukcijos ir in-

dukcijos metodai. Tyrimo bazę sudarė Lietuvos ir užsienio autorių mokslinės įžvalgos. Straipsnio autoriai nagrinėtų mokslinių įžvalgų ir teorinių paslaugų kokybės modelių pagrindu sudaro kelionių organizatorių teikiamų paslaugų kokybės vertinimo modelį.

Atlikus mokslinės literatūros analizę, nustatyta, kad kelionių organizatorius yra svarbiausias paslaugų teikėjas turizmo industrijoje. Šio asmens atsakomybės sritis apima žadamo paslaugų paketo sudarymą ir teikimą, išsipareigojimų klientams išpildymą, ir nuolatinę kontrolę paslaugos teikimo laikotarpiu. Kelionių organizatoriaus paslaugų kokybė priklauso nuo vartotojų keliamų reikalavimų supratimo, paslaugos teikimo sistemos pritaikymo minėtiems reikalavimams taip, kad atitiktų vartotojų reikalavimus.

Straipsnyje analizuoti paslaugų kokybės vertinimo modeliai pasižymi trūkumais, ribojančiais paslaugų kokybės vertinimą. Atsižvelgiant į esmines analizuotų modelių idėjas, buvo sudarytas kelionių organizatorių paslaugų kokybės vertinimo modelis. Modelis skirtas suvokiamos paslaugos kokybės nustatymui ir yra grindžiamas neatitikimu tarp gautos ir lauktos paslaugos kokybės, išreikštos penkiomis kokybės dimensijomis. Taikant sudarytą modelį, gali būti atliekami įvairūs vartotojų tyrimai, kurių metu nustatoma teikiamos paslaugos kokybė bei kokybės spragos.