

E-mail Responses of Tourism Agencies in Developing Countries

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Abstract

The rise of the Internet has brought significant changes and opportunities for online tourism agencies. Consumers have found new ways to research and purchase services online, leading to rising service-level expectations and transforming the industry. However, the advances in technology and rising expectations among consumers have not translated to exceptional levels of customer service from tourism site owners. The results of this study of 200 tourism agencies in eight developing countries shows a poor level of response to e-mail inquiries from potential customers, with an average of only 30 percent response rate and inadequate level of feedback. The work offers a deeper picture on the lack of online customer service offered by online tourism agencies, which could lead to serious implications on potential customer perceptions of the agencies and the industry and could lead to lost opportunities and revenue. The paper presents practical managerial changes that firms could implement to improve customer service and marketing efforts.

Keywords Market research, E-mail, Customer service, Travel, Tourism, Customer relations

Introduction

With changes in technology, customers have grown more comfortable with electronic correspondence and often prefer its convenience versus other traditional means of communication (Shields, 2006). Thus, it is imperative that business effectively manage communications methods such as e-mail. E-mail can be a highly effective means to engage in low-cost marketing and to be an integral part of business growth and profitability. This is especially true of the travel and tourism industry where foreign visitors to tourism websites may prefer the convenience and free format of e-mail communication compared to the cost or language barriers of using telephone communications.

There has been a tremendous growth of international tourism in developing countries. In order to sustain this growth and achieve profitability, tourism agencies in these countries need to emphasize strong customer service when communicating with clients and potential customers. Technologies such as e-mail allow the agencies to use low-cost means to improve their service quality, thus allowing them to achieve high levels of satisfaction to travel inquiries.

There were three major aims to be addressed in this study.

1. What is the level of e-mail response rates from tourism agencies in eight developing countries?
2. Is there a major difference in the quantity of responses among different countries?
3. What is the overall customer service response level (quality) among the agencies?

This study found a poor level of response to e-mails, as well as lack of quality in answering customer's questions. This could lead to missed marketing opportunities and potential lost income. Tourism agencies should consider altering their managerial focus to emphasize an increased level of customer service with relation to e-mail communications.

Literature Review

Worldwide Tourism Growth

Although the worldwide recession has caused some parts of global tourism to dip, this is still a large industry and contributes to a significant level of income for many countries.

According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2009), in 2008, international tourist arrivals reached 924 million, which was a two percent increase in growth over 2007, although there was a general one percent decline for the second half of 2008.

Asia recorded a two percent increase, while Africa had a five percent increase. The growth was especially strong in North Africa, countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. The UNWTO study also showed that several countries in this research paper did show a significant increase in traffic, including China, India and Egypt. Although the rapid growth that occurred prior to 2007 is expected to remain stagnant for several years, short-term prospects will depend on local economies and conditions.

Tourism revenue is a large portion of income for many countries. In 2007, Kenya had a GDP of \$29.5 billion, of which \$1 billion was earned from tourism (U.S. Department of State, 2009a) and Tunisia had 2008, tourism revenues represented about 20 percent of hard currency receipts (\$2.74 billion) (U.S. Department of State, 2009b).

Some Asian countries with developing economies also heavily rely on tourism to support their growth. India had 5.37 million visitors in 2008 (Thaindian News, 2009) with the Philippines reported almost 2.4 million foreign visitors (Philippines Department of Tourism, 2009) and China reporting 24.3 million foreign tourists (China.org, 2009). Tourism does contribute to a significant portion of economies of many countries, so it is essential that the tourism and travel industry make significant efforts to ensure high levels of customer service as well as bringing in new customers.

Online Customer Service via e-mail

The increase in tourism-related websites (and even online social media sites) has allowed customers to gain an effective way to research services and to communicate with agencies. Although social media websites are a very recent innovation in the area of providing tourism communication channels, e-mail inquiry is still a crucial method of contact between an agent and potential customer. Zehre and Pechlaner (2006) indicate that e-mail based communication in tourism is quite pertinent within the context of competitive advantage and changing consumption patterns. E-mail offers companies several advantages over traditional communication channels such as telephone including: a) does not require scheduled timing to communicate between two parties, b) a cheaper method than telephone, especially with international tourism communication and c) it can remove geographical distance problems (Berghel, 1997). An advantage to both the firm and the customer is that e-mail communication can be effective and easy and allows for quick communication and customer feedback (Shields, 2006). The speed of response and the depth of information are decisive factors in determining customer satisfaction (Zehrer and Pechlaner, 2006).

An increase in customer loyalty can result from effective communication. Shields (2006) indicates that tangible and personalized e-mail responses can pay dividends for the firm in increased satisfaction and a more positive relationship with customers. High quality responses to e-mail inquiries enable tourism firms to gain competitive advantages over firms that do not offer better service (Zehrer and Pechlaner, 2006). According to Costanzo (2009), the increasing usage of electronic communications is due to its low cost and ubiquity. The author also mentions the savings due to eliminating printing of physical documents and timesavings by being able to cut and paste information directly from the website into an e-mail inquiry response. Marinova et al (2002) further contributes to this idea by stating that e-mail is a promising electronic customer service tool for the hospitality industry, and provides a low-cost and speedy communication.

The importance of e-mail technology to businesses in developing countries needs to be understood in light of how this can be used as a competitive advantage. Humphrey et al (2004) conducted a study of 184 businesses in developing countries on their use of e-technologies, including e-mail. Their research found that 80 percent of firms were using e-mail to change the way they were working with their existing customers and suppliers. One of the main reasons cited was the low cost of this technology, which was much cheaper than international telephone or fax calls. The firm owners found e-mail offered completely new opportunities for transferring information. Because of the increasing importance of e-mail in developing countries, it is also essential that governments do contribute to building this infrastructure to allow firms to use e-mail for a competitive advantage. Lai (2002) performed a study of the adoption of e-business technologies in India and found that technologies such as e-mail can result in efficiencies in business transactions and augment a firm's competitiveness.

E-mail has become a very important communication channel in developing countries. Goldstein and O'Connor (2000) indicate that e-mail is the predominant and most important use of the Internet in developing countries. For example, in Bangladesh, e-mail comprises 82 percent of Internet traffic. The authors indicate that small business enterprises (SMEs) in these countries find it especially valuable in gathering information on customers and markets, and they often depend on it as a cheap, but imperfect substitute for more expensive telephone and fax services. However, business use of e-mail is not without its critics. According to Hammerston (2008), e-mail is one of the worst channels for customer service, as companies try to push customers back to their websites or force customers to call service centers. Hammerston also indicates there seems to be a lack of quality of responses and agents do not spend adequate time in properly responding to specific customer questions.

Studies of Online E-mail Responses

A variety of studies have shown issues with the lack of customer service with regards to e-mail inquiries in the travel and tourism industry as well as other industries, although these most studies have concentrated on studies of e-mail among businesses in developed countries. A 2002 study analyzed 200 Singaporean travel agencies to determine the level and quality of e-mail responses. It found that the odds of receiving a reply was about 25 percent, and there was only a three percent chance of receiving proper responses to all questions that were included in the inquiry (Murphy and Tan, 2003). A study of online travel service in Thailand found that even though the country had a mature tourism industry, the quality of effectiveness of e-mail use was poor (Cosh and Assenov, 2007).

Another study in 2003 analyzed e-mail inquiries to Austrian hotels. Its results found that approximately two out of 10 hotels did not respond to an e-mail inquiry. More than 25 percent of hotels needed more than two days to answer questions, and only one-third of hotels answered all questions on the inquiry (Matzler, et al., 2005). Research by Law and Kua (2009) of 433 international luxury hotels found that e-mail management remains a problem and this industry does not include e-mail customer service as part of their Internet strategy. E-service provider Transversal did another study on a variety of industries. It found that website owners usually take an average of two days to respond to inquiries and about one third do not reply at all. The study also found that fewer than half the questions were answered correctly and insurance firms ranked the worst in e-mail customer service (Hammerston, 2008). A study during Christmas season of 2007 found that firms were taking an average of 46 hours to response to customer's inquiries, with the travel industry averaging 58 hours (Bearne, 2007). The current literature and research studies in this field transcend various hospitality industries for some individual countries. For example, Law and Kua (2009) and Schegg et al (2003) analyzed international hotel e-mail responses and Gherissi et al (2003) reviewed Tunisian hotel customer service and found poor customer services. However, no current has reviewed a wide range of tourism agencies throughout the developing world and research on some countries, such as India and Kenya is missing.

Thus, this research attempts to increase the knowledge of issues related to e-mail communication channels for the tourism market among developing nations.

Methodology

The research was accomplished through completing an analysis of customer service response to e-mail inquiries sent to 200 different travel and tourism agencies in eight different countries. The project consisted of four phases:

1. Choosing a list of agency websites and countries to test
2. Developing the e-mail inquiry
3. Sending the inquiries and recording responses
4. Perform an in-depth analysis of the data collected

Choosing a list of travel/tourism agency websites and countries

The first phase of the study was to create a stratum of four countries to analyze and then compile a substratum of 25 agency websites for each country stratum. There have been others studies that have analyzed online marketing from websites in developed countries, but a lack of comprehensive research specifically pertaining to travel and tourism agencies in developing countries in Asia and Africa. Therefore, this research was to concentrate on a review of online e-mail service among developing nations in these areas. Thus, four countries were chosen from Africa (Tunisia, Kenya, South Africa, Egypt) and Asia (India, Thailand, Philippines, China). These countries were chosen for two reasons. They are within the developing world economies and they all have a significant amount of tourism and a developed tourism infrastructure. Although there are a significant number of other countries in both continents, many of these do not have a significant tourism infrastructure or this industry only contributes to an insignificant portion of their GDP. For example, tourism in Mali is only a very small percentage of their economies (U.S. Department of State, 2009c). According to Euromonitor International (2009), the travel and tourism sector in Somalia is

largely non-existent due to civil war, with the few existing hotels relying heavily on business tourism.

For each of the four strata, a grouping of members of 100 most popular Web-active tourism agencies was collected using a Google search. From this list, a random sampling of 25 agencies was selected. This study concentrated on Web-active agencies, because it would be highly likely that potential customers from foreign countries may start their search of travel agencies using a Google search. The size of the sample for each country would be large enough to provide statistically significant results.

Each website from the Google search was reviewed to see if it was relevant for the study. One of the criteria was that the agency had to have its home office located with that country. A second criterion was that the agency had to sell tour services within that specific country. Third, the website had to have an e-mail contact found somewhere on the pages, which was usually either the home page or the 'contact us' page. However, several websites were found to only have a form for inquiry, with no discernable e-mail address located anywhere on the website. Fourth, the website had either to be mainly in English, or to have an option for consumers to choose the 'English' portion of the website. If a page were available in English, it was assumed that the owners were encouraging English-speaking potential customers to contact those using English, and the agency would have at least one English-speaker who could respond. Several websites, especially from Tunisia and China were not available in English, so were rejected.

Developing the e-mail inquiry

The second phase of this project was to create the e-mail inquiry consisting of a 'mystery shopper method' that would be sent to each of the 200 selected agencies. A variety of industries and past studies have employed mystery shoppers as a methodology to analyze customer service levels, and this type addresses certain reporting behavior limitations in

traditional studies by investigating actual answers to customer e-mail responses (Schegg, et al, 2002). The types of mystery-shopper questions were developed from questions that a typical potential customer may ask of a tourism agency. In addition, the questionnaire methodology from several research studies of the online tourism industry were using including Murphy (et al, 2003) who used a series of 16 questions in their personalized survey. Appendix A shows the completed e-mail inquiry. It first consisted of a polite 'Dear Agent' salutation followed by an explanation of why the sender was e-mailing the inquiry along with potential interest in their services. Four generalized questions were created including: a) tour availability for a date range, b) price, c) number of people in a tour group and d) ability for a single traveler to share accommodations.

Sending the inquiries and recording responses

An e-mail account was created on the mail.com e-mail service and then the questionnaire was e-mail over a two-day period. The account was then checked over the next month to record any responses.

According to Murphy and Tan (2003), effective e-mail responses should be (or contain): a) prompt, b) polite open, c) politely close, d) address customer by name and e) answer the question. Responses were tabulated based upon adherence to these factors. The first factor involved promptness in the agent's replies. If these agencies treated e-mail as a form of business communication and a potential marketing source, then the e-mail responses should have a reply within one or two business days. Response time was tallied for responses based upon whether a reply was received within the following: a) response within 24 hours of the initial send time (same day), b) response time greater than 24 hours or less than 48 hours (one day), c) response greater than 48 hours (two days or more).

If the agent responded with a polite opening and included the sender's name (in this case the name was 'Brad Ziker'), then the response was included in the positive tally. The e-mail

response was analyzed to determine which (if any) of the four questions were answered. In addition, a polite close, such as a 'Thank you' was tallied. If the agent asked any follow-up or additional questions, this was also indicated in the results. Finally, if the e-mail was returned as undeliverable or an automatic response was received, these numbers were also compiled.

Analysis of Data Collected

Table 1 shows the average response rates and times for agency websites for each country, as well as total results. The first column is divided into overall response rates and specific response times (days) for each country. The subsequent columns list the results for the eight countries, and the last column contains the aggregate results for all counties. The first section of rows on the left side of the table includes information about the total sample, which are 25 websites tested for each country. The 'return' row indicates the number of e-mail responses that were received from that country. The fewest response (five responses at 20 percent) came from Indian agencies. The best response was from agencies in China, who had 14 responses for a 56 percent response rate. These results show that the average consumer could only expect a response of 32 percent of the e-mails they send to tourist agencies.

The last column of Table 1 shows that ten websites from seven different countries had undeliverable e-mails. This is especially concerning as those e-mail addresses came directly from their websites. One of the undeliverable e-mail messages indicated the websites mailbox was full. The other nine messages merely indicated that the e-mail was undeliverable, which could possibly mean the address was not valid. Immediately after the e-mails were sent, an automatic delivery receipt response was received from seven websites of three counties (South Africa, Thailand and China).

Table 1. *Response Behavior*

	Tun	Ken	SAf	Egy	Ind	Tha	Phi	Chi	Total
<i>Response Rate</i>									
Sample	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	200
Return	9	7	7	6	5	6	10	14	64
Response Rate (%)	36	28	28	24	20	24	32	56	32
Undeliverable	1	1	2	1	2	2		1	10
Autoresponse			3			2		2	7
<i>Response Time (%)</i>									
Same day (<24 hours)		86	86	50	100	66	60	64	60
1 day	77		14	33		17	20	36	28
2 days	11					17			3
3+ days	11	14		17			20		9
Mean Response Time (hrs)	56	34	27	44	24	36	43	32	37.8
<i>t=-.980 Sig.(2-tailed)= .365</i>									

The second section of Table 1 shows response times as a percentage value. All countries except Tunisia showed that the majority of e-mail responses were received within a 24-hour period, with 60 percent of all responses received. India had all responses received within 24 hours of the initial e-mail inquiry. Next, 28 percent of responses were received with one day (which is more than 24-hour response from the initial sending time, but less than 48 hours). Tunisia and Thailand did have responses of 2 days (three percent of total e-mail responses). Four countries had a few responses sent after three days from the initial sent e-mail. The mean response time was 37.8 hours. In addition, a t-test analysis using SPSS was run reviewing any significant differences between travel agents in African countries versus those

in Asia. Results show that the result was 0.365, indicating the differences in response times were not significant.

Table 2 shows the quality of responses and how many agencies answered specific questions the researcher included in the initial inquiry. Similar to Table 1, this table also lists the numeric results for each of the eight countries, and includes an aggregate total in the last column. The first row shows the results for the research question asking if the agency had any tours available between September 1 and 9. The responses ranged from a low end of one response per country (Thailand) to the highest response of nine answers for agencies based in China. Thirty-five websites out of 64 who returned e-mails did answer this question. The responses for the inquiry on prices of the tours were answered by 30 total responses, with a low rate of one response for Thai websites to a high rate of six responses for Chinese and Philippine agents. One note that should be considered in response to customer service is that in many of the responses for the first two questions, agents often merely copied tour information directly from their website as opposed to tailoring the response based on the needs of the customer.

The next two inquiry questions had a poor response rate from the majority of agents. This first inquiry asked whether tours included between four and 15 people in the travel group. This was answered only by 11 agents, with the best responses from agencies in China (four responses). The question asking about a single traveler sharing a room had an even poorer response rate. Only nine agents did answer this question, with the best response being Chinese websites (four responses). It should be noted that these responses could be positive or negative, but they did answer the question. For example, an agent could answer that either they did have a single sharing program, or that they could not accommodate this type of program. As long as they did specifically address these specific questions, their response was counted into the tally for Table 2. However, if they did not address this inquiry question, then there was no addition to the tally for that country's aggregate results.

The quality of agent’s customer service responses was also gauged from other factors of how the agents responded to the inquiry. One element of good customer service was gauged by if the agent responded by first addressing the person’s name. If the agent responded with a ‘Dear Mr. Ziker,’ ‘Hello Brad,’ or other similar address, it was tallied into the table. Of the 64 total responses in this research, a majority of 56 (88 percent) did answer by addressing the respondents name. Agents who answered with a positive ending to the e-mail, such as ‘Thank you,’ ‘Best wishes,’ and other positive ending to the e-mail displayed even greater numbers. There were 61 of 64 (95 percent) positive endings. If the agent asked additional customer clarification questions, this was viewed in a positive light. Fourteen (22 percent) of those agents who responded did ask follow up questions, such as ‘What is your nationality’ or ‘What specific areas of the country would you like to visit?’

Within these responses, that there were some instances where a website would initially respond with a generic e-mail indicating that a specific agent would get back with more details on trips. In these cases, if the second e-mail contained detailed information about prices or tours, the results were included in the response tallies.

Table 2. Quality Reponses

	Tun	Ken	SAf	Egy	Ind	Tha	Phi	Chi	Total
Date Available	4	4	3	4	2	1	8	9	35
Price	4	4	3	4	2	1	6	6	30
4-15 People	2		1	2			2	4	11
Single Person			1	2			2	4	9
Answer With Name	8	6	7	5	5	5	6	14	56
Thank You Response	9	6	6	6	5	5	10	14	61
Additional Questions	1		2	4	2	2		3	14

Discussion and Implications

Evaluation results of this study show potential online customers cannot expect to receive e-mail response inquiries from the majority of agency websites within developing countries.

There were several areas of concern to potential customers. The chance of a customer receiving a proper e-mail response to their inquiry is just over 30 percent. Five percent of e-mails were bounced back to the originating server as undeliverable. This should be of specific concern to website owners, who may not be updating their website information with correct e-mail addresses. Customers may wonder if e-mail addresses are not correct on the websites, other information on the pages may be incorrect as well. In addition, e-mails that are bounced back as 'full box' indicate that agency staff are not promptly monitoring their e-mails.

This study demonstrates that tourism agencies have further work in strengthening their relationship with potential customer by using effective e-mail correspondence. Currently the firms show a serious shortfall in meeting customer inquiries. Negative response to e-mails can have a negative effect on firms. First, the customers who do take the effort to research a firm's website and send an e-mail are expressing an interest in purchasing services. If the firm does not respond to an inquiry, they risk the customer purchasing the service or product from a competitor. Second, the customer's could easily tell friends and family about their negative experiences. With the increase in customer service blog websites, online consumers can easily post negative comments that other potential customer may review. Additionally, before e-mail communications became common, firms may not have been so concerned about the impact of word-of-mouth negative publicity because of its limited reach. Shea (et al., 2004, p. 155) states that with e-mail forwarding, negative publicity can be sent to thousands of people. This form of written communication can also carry more of a façade of credibility as the original message from a firm retains its specificity. Alternately, recent industry discussions in viral marketing have shown that with correct and positive responses,

firms may have customers who are willing to pass along positive e-mail messages concerning products or services (Phelps, et al., 2004).

The situation with low e-mail responses should be further analyzed in additional research to gain a clearer understanding of why this is occurring, which could help firms develop strategies to combat this deficiency. A variety of studies have been performed that may shed some light on the problem. Researchers performed a study of 184 businesses in developing countries and found in their interviews that customer service respondents tended to discard e-mail inquiries that came from generic e-mail providers, such as hotmail (Humphrey, et al, 2004). This could possibly serve to indicate why there was a low response rate from some countries, as the account used by the researcher was hosted by mail.com.

Gefen and Straub (1997) analyzed gender differences in the perception and use of e-mail. They found that using e-mail as a channel for communication may be perceived differently between men and women. Their study suggests managers should recognize different social presence and different perceptions of usefulness. Thus, if different travel agencies in different countries have various levels of employment between men and women, this could contribute to differences between the rate and quality of responses. Straub et al (1997) studies e-mail technology acceptance among three countries: Japan, Switzerland and the U.S. They found that the U.S. and Swiss respondents had similar adoption and acceptance of e-mail, but not in Japan. Thus, their findings could lead to a possibility that cultural differences, such as more reliance on face-to-face contact, among the developing nations could lead to differences in responses among e-mail inquires. A significant management attitude change is deemed necessary to improve upon the results of this study. One factor that tourism agencies in developing countries should consider is the customer attitudes toward e-mail communication as opposed to their own values. Brashear (et al., 2009) performed a study on Internet and e-mail usage attitudes among online shopper in the U.S., Brazil, Bulgaria, China, New Zealand and England and found a wide range of usage and

attitude towards the technologies. If agency owners are located countries where e-mail usage is not as culturally acceptable as traditional telephone communication, it may affect their service level when dealing with electronic mail. However, they should not let their bias affect potential customer marketing. As many agencies solicit customers from outside their own local area, they should understand where their customers come from, and realize that these customers may have a difference in communication preference. They may need to adjust their customer service training to teach staff of the importance of answering e-mail inquiries both promptly and effectively.

Companies in these countries could also implement statistical software or procedures to analyze their e-mail responses and usual types of customer inquiries. Numbers could be kept on the response rates of incoming e-mail and compared against newly created corporate marketing goals. It is also imperative that agencies do not merely send out a reply as soon as possible just to meet response time goals. High quality responses must be implemented in tandem with prompt responses. This may involve additional training of staff as well as periodic monitoring or random responses to ensure that customer questions are answered properly.

Conclusion

This research shows that a preponderance of tourism agencies in developing countries do not promptly respond to e-mail inquiries from potential customers. Just over one-third of websites even responded to e-mails, and of those, a minority actually answered the specific questions that the customer asked. A full five percent of e-mails were undeliverable, which means that the address located on the website is probably not correct. These findings indicate that online tourism agencies are not taking this mode of customer service and marketing in a serious light, and are losing potential customers. This can have serious consequences to profits and future public relations. The agencies should alter their

management attitudes and implement policies, procedures and training to improve usage of this valuable customer service tool.

Further research could be expanded to give a more comprehensive review of the industry and marketing issues. This report analyzed eight websites in developing nations in Africa and Asia. The study could expand to other developing countries in places such as South/Central America or Eastern Europe. There is no reason to believe that customer service response for tourist agencies in developed countries is any better than in the developing world, so a comparison could be run. This study concentrated on customer response for e-mail inquiry communication. Many websites also have form-based inquiry pages where customers could type in information and send an inquiry after hitting the 'submit' button. It may be beneficial to analyze whether tourism websites have a better response for customers who submit their inquiries via a form-based inquiry versus e-mail inquiry. The research could also be expanded to include a different sampling of different agencies within each country to see if there is a statistical difference among various agencies.

Appendix A

Dear Agent:

I have a business trip planned to China at the end of August, and would like to continue with a short holiday visit after my business trip. I have several questions:

I would like to inquire about specific tours you may still have available starting in Beijing between September 1-9, preferably for a 5 to 7 day tour. Do you have any that would be available? What are the prices?

Do you have any group tours that include between 4 and 15 people? I will be a single traveler and was wondering if any of your trips include a sharing program with another single traveler?

Thank you for your time

Brad Ziker

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