

# Tour Leader Quality Crucial for Travel Agency Reputation

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Tour leader quality, including attitude and professional ability, has a direct bearing on travel agent reputation, according to research findings recently published by the SHTM's Associate Professor Vincent Heung. With a concern for enhancing the industry's understanding of "tour quality in the Chinese context", Dr Heung surveyed tourists who participated in package tours organised by a large Hong Kong travel agency. He found that tour leaders' professional attitude and knowledge, ability to communicate effectively and personal integrity all contributed to enhancing travel agent reputation and thus word-of-mouth publicity.

## The Importance of Tour Leaders

The quality of interactions with service personnel is paramount in creating satisfied customers who are likely to offer repeat business. Yet, according to Dr Heung, the dynamics of this situation need further attention in the hospitality and tourism industry, "which is characterised by intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, heterogeneity and perishability. This is particularly true of package tours, on which tourists consume a range of services, some not always evident, even as they are produced.

Tour leaders play a crucial role in defining how tour participants appreciate the overall service encounter, writes Dr Heung, because they "ensure 'what' core service is delivered and 'how' this core service is consumed". At any given stage of a tour, the leader is an "information giver, instructor, motivator, ambassador, entertainer and leader". Tour participants rely heavily on the leader for "almost everything", and the resulting trust is a crucial determinant of how participants perceive the whole tour.

## Measuring Tour Leader Quality

Dr Heung offers three major constructs for measuring tour leader quality: core service delivery, customer orientation and communication effectiveness. Core service delivery focuses on the "essence of the service" and entails delivery

with consistency, regardless of what part of the service is delivered. In this sense, a tour leader must ensure that all aspects of the tour are delivered well – a friendly leader will not enhance a travel agency's reputation, for instance, if he or she fails to follow the tour itinerary.

Customer orientation entails "marketing at the personal level" between the tour leader and each participant, an important way in which long-term relationships are established. Tour leaders need to focus on what is valuable to each participant by solving problems, ensuring participant satisfaction at each stage of the journey and avoiding the 'hard-sell' approach to shopping opportunities. Of necessity, this means that tour leaders should communicate effectively with participants, outlining each day's itinerary, highlighting attractions during the day and handling participants' enquiries and complaints as they occur.

Once these considerations have been addressed, notes Dr Heung, there are two major consequences of tour leader service quality. Most obviously, the travel agency's reputation will be enhanced. The importance of a good reputation for repeat business is self-evident to service organisations, but less apparent is the extent to which it influences potential customers by simplifying the decision process. Reputation is "an issue of attitudes and beliefs", which can easily be taken on by new customers. Crucial to this process is effective word-of-mouth promotion, or the extent to which tour participants are willing to inform their friends, relatives and colleagues about their favourable experiences.

## Research Setting

Dr Heung applied his perception of how tour leader quality is determined to a survey conducted through a large Hong Kong travel agency that offers package tours to the Chinese mainland. Forty-four tours and 20 tour leaders were covered, with tour participants completing questionnaires at the end of each journey. With 431 valid responses, Dr Heung gained

a comprehensive view of a single destination market. Just over half of the respondents were female, almost half were aged between 41 and 60, and just under half had received post-secondary education. A third of the respondents were white collar workers, and just under half earned between HK\$10,000 and HK\$30,000 a month.

The three most important attributes that these respondents saw in their tour leaders were punctuality, the ability to give clear information on security and safety, and daily briefings of the tour itinerary. In broader terms, presentation and communication skills were most highly appreciated, followed by professional attitude and ability, and professional knowledge. When linked to travel agency reputation, professional attitude and ability was the most important factor, as it was for word-of-mouth publicity. In other words, tour leader service quality does influence both an agency's reputation and the word-of-mouth publicity it will receive.

### **Implications for Travel Agencies**

Dr Heung comments that even though these results are promising, the honesty and trustworthiness of tour leaders were not considered to be satisfactory by the tour participants. He suggests that agencies factor these elements into their recruitment processes and ensure that they always deliver on their promises through their tour leaders during the journey. Another consideration should be to focus on the professional attitude and ability of tour leaders, given the importance of this factor to participants. Overall, claims Dr Heung, "the travel agency should pay special attention to the quality of the tour leaders' services to ensure the long-term growth and prosperity of the firm".

### **Points to Note:**

- Tour leader quality directly affects travel agency reputation and the word-of-mouth publicity received.
- Tour participants rely heavily on tour leaders to deliver an adequate tour experience.
- Tour leaders' presentation and communication skills, professional attitude and ability, and professional knowledge are most appreciated by tour participants.
- Travel agencies should ensure that tour leaders are trustworthy and honest.

Heung, Vincent C. S. (2008). Effects of Tour Leader's Service Quality on Agency's Reputation and Customers' Word-of-Mouth. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 305-315.