

# How Far Can They Go?

Tourism marketers and hotel managers should take account of the distances people travel and offer them different packages, according to the SHTM's Dr Sangwon Park and his co-researchers. In a recently published study, the researchers used information collected from TripAdvisor to evaluate how travel distance affects tourists' satisfaction with the level of hotel service at the destination. They found what they called an "inverted U-shaped" relationship, which suggests that there is an optimum point at which the distance travelled maximises the perception of service quality, after which it begins to decline.

## **Demand Decreases with Travel Distance**

The distance between a traveller's origin and destination is an "important parameter in understanding tourist demand and behaviour", the researchers suggest. Travel distance, they note, represents the "effort that a tourist makes to overcome the geographical obstacles" to travel, and the further a destination is from the origin, the lower the number of tourists willing to travel. The distance does not just influence demand, but also tourists' behaviour at the destination, because it makes economic sense to stay longer and spend more after travelling a long way.

Although significant academic attention has been focused on the influence of distance on tourism demand, very little is known about how travel distance shapes tourists' experiences, particularly their satisfaction, once they have arrived. This is rather surprising, given that customer satisfaction is one of the most prominent elements

in understanding and enhancing customers' experiences and measuring overall competitiveness in the hospitality industry.

In the retail context, it is known that shoppers prefer to minimise the distance they travel to shop, and the further they have to travel, the less positive their evaluation of their shopping experience. However, the researchers point out that the same may not be true for tourism-related travel because for tourists, the journey is an inherent part of the experience. Travel may thus not be regarded as particularly onerous, and it may even provide satisfaction in its own right. The motivation to travel to distant places and experience adventure and novelty is referred to as the "Ulysses factor", and is associated with the willingness to engage with different cultures.

Nevertheless, distance is still something of a barrier, with travel demand increasing with distance up to a certain point, and then decreasing as both the financial and time costs increase. However, the extra cost and effort of long-distance travel may influence tourists' expectations of, and hence their level of satisfaction with, their experiences at the destination.

## **Measuring Distance and Satisfaction**

To determine whether distance does indeed influence tourists' appreciation of their destinations, the researchers collected reviews from TripAdvisor. They focused on hotels in four cities in the United States: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Antonio. The first three are the three largest cities in the US, while San Antonio is the seventh largest. They are all

highly popular tourist destinations and have extensive convention and event facilities that, as the researchers note, "support the business travel market".

The researchers chose to focus on the service satisfaction ratings provided in guests' TripAdvisor reviews. Overall, there were 81,486 reviews for New York, 15,340 for Los Angeles, 44,922 for Chicago and 34,502 for San Antonio. However, a high number of these reviews were excluded from the analysis for various reasons, mainly to focus on travellers from other US cities rather than international tourists. Information about guests' home locations was obtained from users' TripAdvisor profiles, so that the geographical distance to the travel destination could be calculated.

The reviews were mainly left by "couple travellers, business travellers and family travellers", with fewer solo travellers and travellers with friends. Among these different types, reviews from business travellers were the most common in Los Angeles and Chicago hotels, and family travellers were the most common in San Antonio hotels. About 60% of guests gave the highest rating of five for hotel service, with only 10% rating the service as poor or terrible. Among the cities, New York had the highest average travel distance of 1,082 miles, indicating that the city attracts hotel guests from a wider geographical range.

## **Distance Creates a Positivity Bias**

Through analysing the results, the researchers identified an "inverted U-shaped relationship" between the distance the reviewers had

travelled and their satisfaction with the hotel service at the destination. They explain that tourists seem to enjoy better service experiences when they travel further, but the “service quality starts to reduce” beyond a certain point.

The finding that satisfaction increases with distance confirms the Ulysses hypothesis that a longer travel distance meets what the researchers label “people’s novelty-seeking motivation”. It also confirms that people view travel distance in a different way depending on the purpose of travel: when people travel to shop or commute, increasing distance has a negative effect on their experience, but when they travel as tourists, the distance enhances their positive perception.

The researchers explain this by referring to “construal theory”, a psychological theory which suggests that the further away something is, the more abstract people’s thoughts about it become. So, for instance, if we think about visiting a nearby city, we might imagine it in fairly concrete detail, but when thinking about visiting somewhere very far away, we can only imagine it in abstract terms, which also affects our judgement of it. When tourists are planning a long-distance trip, therefore, their expectations are less specific and their judgment while at the destination is more favourable. As the researchers put it, tourists show a “positivity bias when assessing hotel service experiences under long distance travel”.

### **Business Travellers are Harder to Satisfy**

This effect, however, does not extend to the longest travel distances, as beyond a certain point service expectations increase along with the financial and time costs of

travel. The researchers pinpoint this “inflection point” as approximately 1,300 miles for travel to New York and Los Angeles, and about 950 miles for travel to Chicago and San Antonio.

The researchers also identify differences in the level of satisfaction expressed by different types of travellers. More experienced travellers tend to leave less positive reviews, suggesting that “the more trip experiences” people have, “the more their expectations increase”, leading to lower levels of satisfaction with the service they receive. Business travellers are also “more demanding” than other travellers in most situations, which might reflect their greater travel experience.

Hotel managers cannot, of course, change where their customers travel from, yet the researchers still have some recommendations for how their findings can be implemented in practice. They suggest, for instance, that managers could “develop different marketing and operational strategies” for guests travelling different distances. Those who live close to the destination might not “generate a sense of getaway”, so managers could offer them novel experiences that satisfy the quest for adventure. Conversely, guests who travel long distances, beyond the threshold where satisfaction starts to decline, might require a higher level of service to compensate for their increased “psychological, physical and monetary” travel costs.

### **Next Step. International Travel**

The study provides interesting insights into how travel distance affects travellers’ perceptions of the service they receive at their destination. Although their findings currently only apply to domestic

travellers, the same methodology could be used to provide similar insights into how distance affects international travellers’ perceptions, while also taking into account the effects of “different countries and cultures”.

## **POINTS TO NOTE**

- Travel distance affects both tourist demand and satisfaction with service.
- Satisfaction first increases with distance and then starts to decrease.
- Distance satisfies people’s novelty-seeking motivation until the costs become too high.
- Managers need to develop differential marketing strategies depending on travel distance.

Sangwon Park, Yang Yang, and Mingshu Wang. (2019). “Travel Distance and Hotel Service Satisfaction: An Inverted U-shaped Relationship”. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 76, pp. 261-270.