

Customer Expectations from Travel Portals: An Exploratory Study

Abstract

Customer expectations are beliefs that serve as a yardstick against which the actual performance is compared. It is an important basis of customer evaluation of services. As the travel service is intangible in nature a study of customer expectations assumes importance as these have undergone sea change in recent times owing to the penetration of information technology in our daily life. As more and more customers are increasing using of online travel services it becomes imperative to examine the web site dimensions and web service quality attributes that affect customer expectation and satisfaction. An exploratory study has been undertaken to identify the important attributes that influence customer expectations in the context of travel-based portals. The purpose is to find out what type of expectation standards does a customer hold about these travel portals. The primary data has been collected from organizations in NCR where most employees use these for travel-related services.

Key Words: Web Portals, Content Design.

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Introduction

Expectations are variations of beliefs; these beliefs are influenced by a wide variety of factors, some within the control of the firm and some beyond the control of the firm. Information technology has brought about a change in work processes that have significantly altered customer service standards and therefore expectations. As customer expectation is an important building block of service quality web site design is an important parameter. Customers hold different types of expectations from travel-based portals as it is a 24X7 interactive, seamless facility as compared to traditional brick-and-mortar business models that are primarily offline. And these expectations are variable as travel is intangible-dominant service offering. The expectations are formed prior to actual consumption of the service; travel is one of the verticals where websites are frequently used for information search and booking/reservations. Thus the actual experience or the web-based interaction with the service provider referred to as 'moment-of-truth' in service literature becomes an important determinant of customer expectation. The study undertaken makes an attempt to identify the most important parameters being considered by customers. The web portals like Yatra, Travelguru, Travelchacha, MakemeyTrip have been included in the study.



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Literature Review

The conventional approach with respect to online travel till 2007 witnessed the emergence of third-party travel portals increasing market share by offering services like loyalty schemes and low price guarantees. As technology was evolving and the market forces like traveler behaviour changing the customer expectations were low. This was also owing to low penetration of Internet in India. In other words the travel trade witnessed a growth in e-ticketing wherein the minimum expectation were defined in terms of ease of booking and whatever and whenever demands. As customer adoption of technology grew so did the customer expectations. The technology focus shifted to providing rich content, multiple paths of access, dynamic pricing and personalization in the fierce battle of customer attention. Industry consolidation in the form of railways and domestic aviation offering ease and convenience like travel portals changed the industry paradigms. The third party web portals had to refocus and realign as consumer expectations were changing rapidly also due to technology factors like growth in mobile and wireless connectivity and adoption of open source technology (value added services). Therefore a need to understand what customers look for in travel portal was undertaken.

A company's success or failure in managing customers rests with its ability to provide and sustain the level of service quality that meets and exceeds the expectations of its customers.

The role of customer expectations in service quality was first conceptualized by Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1985) in their widely quoted gaps model and a measurement instrument SERVQUAL. They have identified and defined the sources of expectations. Some of these sources are stable and enduring whereas others are changing over time. These sources vary in terms of their credibility and potential.

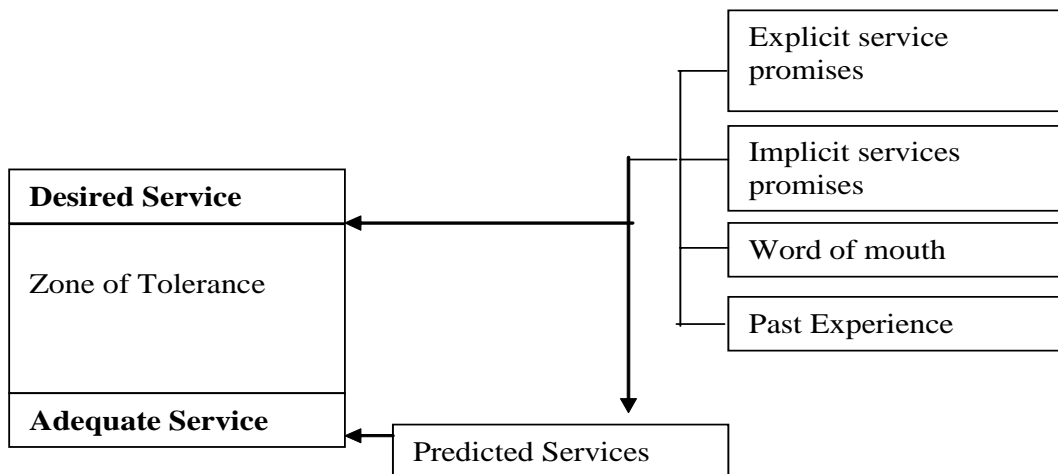


Figure 1-Factors that influence desired and predicted service

Source-Zeithaml, Berry and Parsuraman (1993)

As can be seen from the above model customer expectations have two levels viz. adequate service and desired service. The adequate service level is the basic minimum that should be delivered by the service provider (in this case the travel portal) and the desired level is the wished-for level of performance. The zone of tolerance is the extent to which the customers are

willing to accept the variations (in this case it can be the time taken to open the home page). It is pertinent to mention that the zone of tolerance varies for different service dimensions; lower is its magnitude higher is the significance of that dimension for the customer. The explicit service promises are the communications made by the service organization that is the travel portals. The implicit service promises are the psychological benefits that lead to inferences regarding what the travel portal should deliver like information about hotels, money changer and other such cues. The past experience of self or friends and the social networking opportunities further impact these expectations. Thus it can be concluded that the pioneering model proposed by Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1985) is in sync with the philosophy of customer-focus.

Barnes and Vidgen (2000) identified the attributes that affect the online service quality - content, ease of use/ navigation; reliability; and personalization. Similarly, Cox and Dale (2001) had found that accessibility; communication; credibility; understanding; appearance; as important influencers. Loiacono, Watson and Goodhue (2002) in this study has asserted that; interactivity; trust; response time; ease of understanding; online completeness; emotional appeal; consistent image; intuitive operations; visual appeal play a significant role in the web site quality. Wong and Law (2003) identified nine attributes that prompt travelers to make purchase online which include time required to furnish the necessary details, web features, time required to navigate and price as important determinants. Law and Leung (2000) too have highlighted the significance of website features that stimulate emotional response. Web experience as defined by Constantinides (2004) is the customer's total impression about the online company. He has postulated that dimensions such as browsing, searching, comparing, selecting and evaluating information are important to the customer. Constantinides (2004) explained further that, the interest about web experience does not only come from firms that sell products or services. Even sites with informational content are significant for the visitor. The most significant attribute is the web experience that includes the interaction between the user and the online firm. Gani (2006) in his article discusses how the tourism industry has evolved and expanded with the onset of Information technology revolution in last fifty years. It deliberates on how computers have literally changed the operational and functional system of tourism industry especially air travel scenarios in India and world. Nusair and Kandampully (2008) had conducted the study to examine the travel web sites quality dimensions that ultimately influence customers' satisfaction. They have considered the six web quality dimensions like navigability, playfulness, information quality, trust, personalization, and responsiveness. They have concluded that the factors like privacy policy information, terms of use information, appropriate load time, cancellation/refund policies, site maps, FAQs, press release, customer support are important drivers for customer satisfaction. It also describes how the emergence of internet has helped the tour operators, airlines and hospitality industry to cut costs, save time, increase efficiency.

To sum up it can be said that though travel portals allow customers to search, select or arrange travel and holiday packages there is scope for differentiating the same by providing better and/or value added services. Developing general insight in to the determinants of e-expectations is at a

very nascent stage in India. However there is great scope for the same as online travel business is expected to grow in future.

Purpose of the study

On the basis of the foregoing review an exploratory study was carried out to study the expectation, the customers have from travel based portals. The problem statement of present study is:

What attributes in a travel portal are important to a customer?

The primary data was collected from working executives in different organizations like HCL, Dabur, Jindal, etc in NCR. Purposive sampling was used; the total number of valid responses was 330 in number. An exploratory factor analysis was employed to identify the major dimensions that influence customer expectations.

Analysis and Discussion

Descriptive statistics were calculated to obtain a profile of the respondents (refer tables 1 to 5). Table 1 shows that working executives made more use of online travel as compared to others. As can be seen from Graph 1 business and visiting friends and relatives are the dominant purposes for travel. Out of the 66% male and 34% female respondents 53% people say that web portals are good in comparison to traditional travel agencies. The data collected says that 92% of the respondents prefer to use tourism websites for travel The most preferred site is Makemytrip.com, being preferred by 52% of the people.

The KMO and Bartlett's Test (table 6) indicates the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy's value is 0.769 which is greater than 0.5. This indicates that a factor analysis will be useful with the data. The value of significance level is 0.000 that is less than 0.05. So there is a significant relationship among the variables.

The initial extraction (table 7) shows that the communalities are very high, which indicate that the extracted components represent the variables well. About 64.958 % of the total variance in the 23 variables is attributable to the first eight components.(refer Table 8). It can be seen that Component 1 explains a variance of 3.064, which is 11.786% of total variance of 26; Component 2 explains a variance of 2.964, which is 11.398% of total variance and so on. The rotated component matrix contains the same information as the component matrix (refer Table 9) except that it is calculated after rotation. From this table we can make the following factor matrix.

The eight factors (table 10) have been explained as under:

1. Tour and travel Packages: This factor has emerged as a most important determinant of research with a total variance of 23.065. Major element of this factor include pictures of destinations and services (0.823), Virtual tour of destination desire (0.814) etc.
2. Explicit Services (Bookings, reservations): This factor has emerged as the second most important determinant of research with a total variance of 12.909. Major elements of this factor include, availability of seats and its positions (0.742), information kept confidential (0.676) etc.

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3. Web design: This factor emerged as the important determinants of research with a variance of 6.250. Major elements consisting this factor include less time to open the page (0.699), less time taken to load search page (0.688) etc. This study shows that home page give all the links play a significant role in Customer expectation.
 4. Value added Services: This factor has emerged as the effective determinants of research with a variance of 5.305. The elements in this factor include detailed information of tourism destination (0.647) and emergency booking available (0.639)
 5. Implicit Services: This factor has emerged as a relevant factor of research with a total variance of 4.802. Major elements of this factor include, availability of currency changer(0.731) and web blog available (0.658). This study reveals that availability of booking services for cars/cabs a significant role in Customer expectation.
 6. Hotel Services: This factor has also emerged as the effective factor of research with a total variance of 4.467. The elements consists in this factor is availability of booking services in hotel industry (0.813)
 7. Convenience: This factor has also emerged as the effective factor of research with a total variance of 4.225. The element consists in this factor is available for 24*7 (0.760). This study shows that easy language to understand plays a significant role in Customer expectation.
 8. Multi Language Detail: This factor has also emerged as the effective factor of research with a total variance of 3.935. The element consists in this factor is availability of details in Hindi (0.760).

Conclusion

It can be seen from the above study that customer expectations have heightened in the virtual world; they prefer a bundle of services rather than a single identified attribute. The preferred bundle includes various service elements such as hotel booking, destination information and explicit (high in tangibility) and implicit service elements (high in intangibility). When there are multiple service providers in the networked world their expectations are different as they can get or solicit information from personal sources. Situational factors (emergency booking/cancellation) also influence the expectations. Virtual tour of destination desire and value added services are driving all facets of customer expectations more than problem rectification, competitiveness, self belongingness and accessibility of information. When it comes to satisfaction from usage of the services, all the eight factors are impacting satisfaction with 'Network quality and image' being the most important driver of satisfaction followed by 'Retailers and offers' and 'accessibility of information' are the least important factors. Information Technology has become one of the drivers of expectations and has also emerged as

one of the alternatives. The travel portal needs to consider integrating features that make shopping experiences more enjoyable. This study finding contributes to the present body of knowledge and also highlights web site quality dimensions that customers utilize in their assessment of overall online satisfaction.

Recommendations

The analysis reveals that the web content that matters to the customer include features like destination maps, pictures of the site, links to local restaurant services, airline fare policies such as cancellation and refund, baggage policies, weather information, reviews and sharing of

information of other travelers are important determinants. In an era of rising fare complexity, pricing acts as an influencer. It can be seen that the technical functionality of the user interface impacts customer expectations. The design of the pages on the portal, the ease with which the customers can access, navigate and retrieve affects the overall evaluation the travel portal. Supporting services like hotel, cab services can act as differentiators. As there are multiple options these travel portals have to integrate with emerging mobile and wireless technology applications and explore new business models as cycle of change in terms of customer adoption and technology evolution is going to drive the market.

The study cannot be generalized as the sample has been taken from NCR only. It corroborates the studies undertaken by other researchers. The digital environment has transformed the travel and tourism market into a buyers' market. There is immense scope for further research in this arena as the e-service dimensions cannot be same across all categories of consumers

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Table 1: Percentage of Respondents on the basis of Age and Occupation

Age→	18-24		25-34		35-44		45-54		<54		Total		Total
Occupation	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total
Executive /Manager	7.27	1.82	26.67	11.52	7.88	1.82	1.82	0.61	1.21	0.00	44.85	15.76	60.61
Clerical Work	0.00	0.00	1.21	0.00	1.82	0.00	0.61	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.64	0.00	3.64
Student	4.24	3.03	0.00	0.61	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.24	3.64	7.88
Self Employed	1.21	0.61	1.21	0.61	3.03	1.21	1.21	1.21	0.61	0.00	7.27	3.64	10.91
House Wife	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.42	0.00	0.61	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.03	3.03
Others	3.03	1.82	1.82	4.85	0.61	0.61	0.61	0.61	0.00	0.00	6.06	7.88	13.94
Total											66.06	33.94	100.00

Graph -1 Purpose of Trip

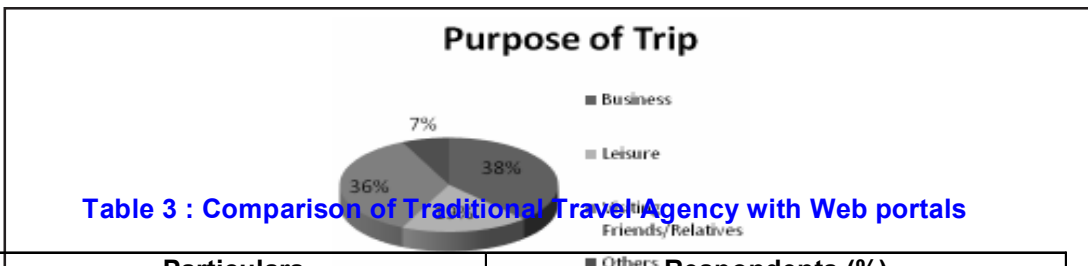


Table 3 : Comparison of Traditional Travel Agency with Web portals

Particulars	Respondents (%)						
Use of Travel Agency, per Year	Very Good	25	25	25	25	25	25
Use of Travel Agency, per Year Respondents (%)	Good	53	53	53	53	53	53
	Neutral	20	20	20	20	20	20
	Poor	23	23	23	23	23	23
Use of Tourism Website Service per Year	Very Good	12	12	12	12	12	12
Use of Tourism Website Service per Year Respondents (%)	Good	45	45	45	45	45	45
	Neutral	19	19	19	19	19	19
	Poor	8	8	8	8	8	8

Table 4 : Recommendation to use Tourism Websites

Particulars	Respondents (%)
Yes	92
No	08

Table.8 Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigen values			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.997	23.065	23.065	5.997	23.065	23.065	3.064	11.786	11.786
2	3.356	12.909	35.974	3.356	12.909	35.974	2.964	11.398	23.184
3	1.625	6.250	42.224	1.625	6.250	42.224	2.602	10.007	33.191
4	1.379	5.305	47.529	1.379	5.305	47.529	2.118	8.147	41.339
5	1.249	4.802	52.331	1.249	4.802	52.331	1.829	7.034	48.372
6	1.161	4.467	56.798	1.161	4.467	56.798	1.599	6.151	54.523
7	1.098	4.225	61.023	1.098	4.225	61.023	1.434	5.515	60.038
8	1.023	3.935	64.958	1.023	3.935	64.958	1.279	4.920	64.958
9	.936	3.598	68.557						
10	.869	3.344	71.901						
11	.788	3.031	74.931						
12	.704	2.707	77.638						
13	.671	2.580	80.218						
14	.608	2.338	82.556						
15	.594	2.284	84.839						
16	.552	2.123	86.963						
17	.542	2.083	89.046						
18	.503	1.933	90.979						
19	.389	1.497	92.476						
20	.380	1.462	93.938						
21	.343	1.318	95.256						
22	.317	1.220	96.476						
23	.297	1.144	97.620						
24	.242	.931	98.550						
25	.196	.753	99.304						
26	.181	.696	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Table.9 Rotated Component Matrix(a)

	Component							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Q1				.504				
Q2			.431					
Q3							.760	
Q4			.417				.502	
Q5			.639					
Q6			.488					-.407
Q7		.646						
Q8				.505				
Q9						.813		
Q10	.739							
Q11		.555	.419					
Q12			.699					
Q13				.647				
Q14				.639				
Q15	.823							
Q16	.815							
Q17								.772
Q18					.457			
Q19		.514		.491				
Q20					.658			
Q21					.731			
Q22		.643						
Q23		.742						
Q24		.676						
Q25			.688					
Q26	.635							

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
 a. Rotation converged in 24 iterations.

Table 10: Factor matrix

Factor No.	Factor Name	Eigen Value		Items	Items Loading
		Total	% of Variance		
1	Tour and travel Packages	5.997	23.065	Pictures of destinations and services	0.823
				Virtual tour of destination desire	0.814
				Availability of offers and Discounts	0.739
				Availability of Special Travel & Tour packages	0.635
2	Explicit Services Do you use Web-based portals to make travel arrangements? If yes then please furnish the following details (Please tick (" ") the appropriate category) 1) Please specify the age group to which you belong a) 18-24 b) 25-34 c) 35-44 d) 45-54 e) >54	3.356	12.909	Availability of Seats and its Positions	0.742
				Information to be Kept Confidential	0.676
				Transaction of Money is Safe	0.646
				Accessibility of Booking Status	0.643
				Responsiveness in less than 24 hours	0.555
				Easy Cancellation of Bookings	0.514
3	Web Design Occupation a) Executive/Manager e) Housewife f) Others 3) Purpose of the trip a) Business b) Leisure 4) Use of Travel Agency Services (per year) a) Nil b) 1-3 5) Use of Tourism Websites Services (per year) a) Nil b) 1-3	6.250	23.065	Less time taken to open the home page	0.699
				Less time taken to load slide page	0.639
				Home page give all the links	0.639
				Availability of Search Portals	0.488
				Time required in visiting Friends/Relatives	0.470
				Others	0.410
4	Value added Services 4) Use of Travel Agency Services (per year) a) Nil b) 1-3 5) Use of Tourism Websites Services (per year) a) Nil b) 1-3	5.205	23.065	Services (per year) of Tourism Destination	0.647
				Emergency Booking Available	0.632
				Services for your Facility	0.505
				Web pages easy to use	0.504
5	Implicit Services	1.249	4.802	Availability of currency converter	0.731
				Web Blogs Available	0.658
				Availability of Booking Services for Cars/Cabs	0.457
6	Hotel Services	1.161	4.467	Availability of Booking Service in Hotel	0.813
				Services in Hotel Industry	0.813
7	Convenience	1.098	4.225	It is Available for 24*7	0.76
				Easy language to understand	0.502
8	Multi Language Detail	1.023	3.935	Availability of details in Hindi	0.772

Annexure I-Questionnaire
PART-A

please furnish the

Self Employed

Others

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- 6) Sex:
a) Male b) Female

PART- B

(Please tick (?) the appropriate box)

1- Unimportant 2-less important 3-neutral 4-important 5- most important

Sl. No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1	Website is easy to use	1	2	3	4	5
2	The required information is available	1	2	3	4	5
3	It is available for 24*7	1	2	3	4	5
4	Easy language to understand	1	2	3	4	5
5	Home page give all the links	1	2	3	4	5
6	Availability on search portals	1	2	3	4	5
7	Transaction of money is safe	1	2	3	4	5
8	Availability of Plan my tour facility	1	2	3	4	5
9	Availability of booking service in hotel industries	1	2	3	4	5
10	Availability of offers and Discounts	1	2	3	4	5
11	Responsiveness in less then 24 hours	1	2	3	4	5
12	Less time taken to open the home page	1	2	3	4	5
13	Detailed information of tourism destination	1	2	3	4	5
14	Emergency booking available	1	2	3	4	5
15	Pictures of destinations and services	1	2	3	4	5
16	Virtual tour of destination desire	1	2	3	4	5
17	Availability of details in Hindi	1	2	3	4	5
18	Availability of booking services for cars/cabs	1	2	3	4	5
19	Easy cancellation of bookings	1	2	3	4	5
20	Web blogs available	1	2	3	4	5
21	Availability of currency converter	1	2	3	4	5
22	Accessibility of booking status	1	2	3	4	5
23	Seat availability/location	1	2	3	4	5
24	Informational to be kept confidential	1	2	3	4	5
25	Less time taken to load search result	1	2	3	4	5
26	Availability of special Travel & Tour packages	1	2	3	4	5

1- Unimportant 2-less important 3-neutral 4-important 5- most important

Q. As compared to traditional travel agency you will rank web portals as:

1. Very good 2. Good 3. Neutral 4. Poor 5. Very poor

Q. Will you recommend purchasing from tourist website to others:

1. Yes 2. No

Q. Your most preferred website portal:

1. yatra.com 2. Makemytrip.com 3. Travelchacha.com 4. Any other (please mention).....