

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE TOURISM SERVICE QUALITY A CASE STUDY OF THE SOL PLAATJE MUNICIPAL AREA

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ABSTRACT

Globally, tourism is increasingly referred to as the world's biggest industry. As tourism increases, so does consumer demand for quality. Superior customer service may be viewed as one of the most effective strategies for tourism destinations to create and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage.

The primary goals of this article are to:

- Describe the current satisfaction levels of international and domestic tourists to the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area in terms of service quality;
- Describe the perceptions and experiences of role-players in the local tourism industry regarding service excellence; and
- Make recommendations to improve service quality in the Sol Plaatje area where applicable.

The findings of this study revealed the following:

- Although the majority of tourists (83.4% of domestic and 93.8% of international tourists) were generally satisfied with the service they received, there are specific areas requiring urgent attention for service levels to improve.
- A large number of local role-players (50%+) representing the tourism industry in the region believe that service delivery must improve substantially within accommodation establishments, the transportation sector, restaurants (including coffee shops) and tourist attractions.

The major contribution of the research study lies in the fact that the findings and recommendations will be beneficial to tourism stakeholders in their efforts to provide tourists with the best holiday and/or business experience at their respective tourist destinations.

Keywords: service excellence, accommodation, transportation, tourist attractions

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of tourism as a sector of South Africa's economy is well documented. According to South Africa's former Tourism Chief Executive

Officer, Moeketsi Mosola (Van Schalkwyk, 2008: 3), more than R60.5 billion in foreign direct spending was generated in 2007, making it one of South Africa's fastest growing sectors. During his speech at the opening of Tourism Month (September 2008) in Rustenburg, the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, stated that overall, foreign arrivals to South Africa had grown by 7.6% in the first quarter of 2008 to reach a total of almost four million. Van Schalkwyk also acknowledged that the industry faces certain challenges, with the most important being service excellence, stating: "The single most important factor, in my opinion, that will continue to motivate tourists to visit a destination or return to it, is service excellence" (Van Schalkwyk, 2008: 3).

This challenge is also documented in the South African Annual Tourism Report (Department of Tourism, 2007: 62), where it is noted that only 27% of foreign tourists visiting South Africa experienced good service. The results of both consumer and industry surveys show that service levels must become a core focus area for the industry (Department of Tourism, 2005b: 68).

Swartbrooke and Horner (2007: 237) stated that service quality is neither a fact nor a reality, but a perception in the mind of the customer. Williams and Buswell (2003: 47) defined the concept of service quality as the degree of excellence intended to meet the customers' requirements. According to George (2001: 277) service quality is the delivery of excellent or superior service relative to consumer expectations.

George (2001: 274) claimed that all industries are dependent on customers, but leisure and tourism, as a service industry, relies more than most on its ability to provide good customer service. It is a highly competitive industry, and businesses that cannot provide customer satisfaction will suffer at the expense of rival companies (Williams & Buswell, 2003: 9). Customers who believe that a particular company will give them quality, service and value for money will be more likely to repeat their purchases and become loyal to the company's brands (Burke & Resnick, 2000: 250).

Understanding domestic and foreign tourists' perceptions and experiences of service quality during their stay is therefore of paramount importance, as it plays a valuable role in marketing a country, province and city as a top tourist destination. According to the South African Tourism Global Competitiveness Programme 2005–2010 (Department of Tourism, 2005b: 55), personal experience from previous visits and 'word-of-mouth' recommendations were key influences on which foreign tourists based their decision to visit South Africa in 2003.

Furthermore, Williams and Buswell (2003: 21) stated that future research needs to focus on the behaviour, attitudes and needs of existing and prospective urban tourists so as to reduce the gap between their expectations and the service delivered. The approach adopted by the tourism industry

must be more proactive in the pursuit of high-quality visitor experiences, rather than reactive and focused on individual problems that arise as a result of tourist dissatisfaction after a visit. Swartbrooke and Horner (2007: 61) mentioned that past experiences of tourists are among the factors influencing their decision to buy tourism products.

Tourism companies improve and maintain service quality or add new services in order to attract customer interest and loyalty; service excellence is used to differentiate their products and services from those of competitors (Burke & Resnick, 2000: 250). Bennet (2000: 300) also stated that customers form perceptions of service quality by comparing their prior expectations of the service to what they receive.

The most critical step in delivering service quality is to determine exactly what customers need. When the organisation does not know exactly what the customers' needs are, they cannot possibly hope to meet those needs (Bennet, 2000: 284). Therefore, when service goals are formulated, they should be in line with customer expectations and needs. According to Bennet (2000: 291), procedures are too often the result of management decisions based on assumed perceptions of guest preferences, rather than the true results of careful research on what the targeted markets really want. Furthermore, Brooks (2002: 64) stated: "What matters is what your customers need and what they think about what you do. Your performance is your customers' reality but your reality is their perception of your performance."

According to Williams and Buswell (2003: 9), the future of tourism will not lie in the mass, standardised and packaged industry of recent decades, but will become much more customer-oriented and integrated, with the emphasis on meeting individual needs and expectations. It is therefore important that the suppliers of tourism products at a destination provide the leadership and commitment to make service quality work. The emphasis should be on adhering to a service value chain rather than single actions to improve service delivery (Mascarenhas, Kesavan & Bernacchi, 2004: 486). Du Plessis and Saayman (2011: 132) confirmed this approach with a clear emphasis on value and its relationship with other variables like price.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON SERVICE DELIVERY IN TOURISM

In order to achieve a position as a world-class quality service destination, it is important that South Africa (and the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area) look at international destinations such as Singapore, Malaysia and Germany to provide benchmarks for spectacular service. The destinations of Singapore and Malaysia have shown exceptional growth in their tourism industries over the past ten years. In addition, Germany hosted the 2006 Soccer World Cup and faced similar challenges in service quality to those faced by South Africa

when hosting this event in 2010.

2.1. Lessons to be learned from Singapore

Although Singapore has a population of only four million and is one of the smallest countries in the world, it received more than 10 million visitors in 2008 (Singapore Tourism Board, 2009). A study of Singapore's approach towards tourism in general and tourism service excellence in particular revealed the following (Singapore Management University, 2009):

- The whole experience, from the moment the tourist disembarks from the aircraft and goes through all the necessary procedures, leaves the airport, uses transportation, arrives at the hotel, goes shopping, etc. must be carefully managed and planned at destination level.
- It is therefore not only about providing a good service but also designing that service in such a way that good service eventually leads to a very different and unique service brand.
- There are some important things that businesses must keep in mind when seeking to reinvent their service delivery:
 - Training is critical to prepare for higher levels of service delivery.
 - Service leaders must lead by example.
 - The introduction of benchmarking and the measuring of service standards is critical for the monitoring and improvement of customer satisfaction levels.

2.2. Lessons to be learned from Malaysia

Malaysia began to focus on tourism in 1998 following an economic crisis in Asia. As a result of new allocations towards tourism, the industry grew from 5.5 million visitors in 1998 to 20 million visitors in 2008 (Wee, 2008:1). In his speech at the 2008 Annual Tourism Conference at Emperor's Palace, Mr Wee, Secretary General for Tourism in Malaysia, distinguishes between both the hardware as well as the software aspect of quality (Wee, 2008: 7). The following hardware and software components of service quality are critical factors that should be present at a destination if the tourist is to be given a memorable service experience.

- Hardware aspects
 - Infrastructure: The challenge is to increase the accessibility and flexibility of a destination by road, rail, sea and air.
 - Tourism attractions: This will involve the restoration and conservation of historical sites, the upgrading of tourism facilities, and the beautification of manmade and natural attractions.

- New product development by public and private sectors: Incentives should be provided for private sector investment in developing new products, facilities and attractions.
 - Maintenance by local authorities: Local authorities must be held responsible for maintaining facilities.
- Software aspects
 - Sustainable tourism development: All planning for tourism developments must seek a balance amongst its economic, social and environmental goals.
 - Co-ordination among all role-players: Greater co-ordination among role-players is important at all levels in the tourism industry.
 - Public awareness: The general public plays an important role and must get involved in tourism service delivery.
 - Comfort, safety and security of tourists: It is important that a positive image of these aspects is created in the minds of prospective tourists.

The quality of service is therefore dependent on how well the visitor's expectations can be met.

2.3. Lessons to be learned from Germany

In his speech at the 2008 Annual Tourism Conference at Emperor's Palace in Johannesburg, Dr Nikolaus Eberl, author of the book 'BrandOvation: How Germany won the World Cup of Nation Branding', shared the lessons learned by Germany during the four weeks prior to hosting the Soccer World Cup in 2006. According to Eberl, two actions stood out:

- The rebranding of Germany for the 2006 World Cup with the brand promise of 'A time to make friends' was highly successful and sold Germany to visitors from all over the world as a friendly, open-minded and innovative country.
- A successful campaign, the 'Friendliness Campaign', was launched to make the world aware of the 'new Germany' and was designed to teach employees how to interact with visitors from other cultures (Eberl, 2008).

3. TOURISM IN THE NORTHERN CAPE PROVINCE

The Northern Cape Province is a unique part of South Africa which, from a tourism point of view, has not yet capitalised on its full potential as a destination of choice. This has led to the province remaining undiscovered by both the sizable domestic market and the high-yield international market (Northern Cape Department of Economic Affairs, Tourism, Environment and

Conservation, 2004: 1). According to the South African Annual Tourism Report (Department of Tourism, 2007: 55), the Northern Cape remains the least-visited province in South Africa with a 2.5% share of total foreign arrivals and a 1.6% share of domestic arrivals. The Northern Cape captured only 1.8% of total foreign revenue and 2% of total domestic revenue (Department of Tourism, 2005a: 10).

According to the Northern Cape Department of Economic Affairs, Tourism, Environment and Conservation (2005: 1), the province has substantial tourism potential, given the range and depth of assets the Northern Cape has to offer. The Northern Cape Department of Economic Affairs, Tourism, Environment and Conservation (2006: 69) indicated that tourism grows faster than other economic sectors in the province and, if well managed and funded, will increase the market, both domestically and internationally. There is no doubt that tourism, as a major job creator, could become a powerful vehicle for social and economic change and therefore forms an important part of the strategy for economic growth in the Northern Cape. This province, and in particular the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area, which includes Kimberley (the capital city), is in a position to develop into a successful and competitive tourism destination within South Africa and in the international marketplace (Northern Cape Department of Economic Affairs, Tourism, Environment and Conservation, 2004: 1).

One of the key constraints to tourism growth identified by the Northern Cape Department of Economic Affairs, Tourism, Environment and Conservation, 2005: 24) is the lack of product and service quality. The report states that the levels of service in the tourism industry are in some instances unacceptable and reflect the lack of a true service culture.

The city of Kimberley, known as the 'Diamond Capital of the World', is situated in the north-eastern corner of the Northern Cape (Northern Cape Tourism Authority, 2009). Sol Plaatje Municipality services the city of Kimberley and is the largest municipality in the Frances Baard District Municipality with just over 200 000 inhabitants, 91% of whom reside in Kimberley (Sol Plaatje Municipality, 2006). Kimberley occupies a position of significance, as it is home to the country's first flying school and first stock exchange, and was the first city in the Southern Hemisphere to install electric street-lighting. It is also home to the world-famous landmark, the Big Hole (Sol Plaatje Municipality, 2009).

Against the above-mentioned backdrop, the main purpose of this article is to report on the level of service quality in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area, from the perspective of the tourist and the tourism industry. In essence, the research is based on an application of the SERVQUAL model as it is explained in Saayman (2001: 366).

4. OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this article are to:

- Describe the current satisfaction levels of international and domestic tourists to the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area in terms of service quality;
- Describe the perceptions and experiences of role-players in the local tourism industry regarding service excellence; and
- Make recommendations to improve service quality in the Sol Plaatje area where applicable.

5. METHODOLOGY

The first step in the empirical study was the assessment of service quality satisfaction levels as perceived by domestic and foreign tourists. A questionnaire of structured and open-ended questions was used as a measuring instrument to determine service quality as perceived by tourists. The convenience sampling technique was used to select an appropriate sample. Three sampling points were selected to conduct the survey, namely the departure hall of Kimberley Airport, the Big Hole and the McGregor Museum, which form the cornerstones of tourism in the study area. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed to both domestic and foreign tourists, with 100 questionnaires distributed at the Big Hole and Kimberley Airport and 50 at the McGregor Museum. The reason for this is that more tourists visit the Big Hole and use Kimberley Airport. The questionnaires were completed and distributed with the assistance of fieldworkers at the various locations mentioned above. The fieldworkers were orientated and trained by the researcher prior to the collection of the research data. Two hundred questionnaires were received back in good order.

Tourists were interviewed on different days of the week and times of the day over a period of two weeks in December 2009. Data was analysed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 2007 software package. The questionnaire was tested for clarity and length by means of a pilot study, which was conducted during November 2009 amongst 25 senior students in Tourism Management at the National Institute of Higher Education (NIHE).

Additionally, unstructured interviews with role-players involved in the local tourism industry were conducted by the researcher in order to gain insight into their perceptions of service levels in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area. The role-players represent the different sectors in the tourism industry and provided valuable information about current trends experienced in the delivery of quality service. A qualitative analysis technique was used where open-ended

responses were categorised into meaningful categories through content analysis, and a purposive sample was used. According to Jennings (2001: 139), purposive sampling involves the researcher making a decision about which persons or study units will be most appropriate for inclusion in the study based on the potential study units' knowledge base. Hussey and Hussey (2003: 147) stated that participants should be selected by the researcher on the strength of their experience of the phenomenon under study. The role-players targeted represented the following sectors (Table 1):

Table 1: Interviews with role-players representing the tourism sectors in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area

	Sectors:	Respondents:
1.	Tourist Attractions	Project Manager of Big Hole Manager of McGregor Museum
2.	Accommodation	Director of Kimberley Guesthouse Association Manager of Big Hole Protea Hotel
3.	Transportation	Owner of Newton Bus Tours
4.	Travel Organisers	Northern Cape Provincial Registrar: Tour Guiding Private Tour Operator in Northern Cape Branch Manager of Astra Travel Agency Branch Manager of Rennie's Travel Agency
5.	Destination Organisers	<u>Northern Cape Tourism Authority:</u> Marketing Director Marketing Officer Chief Executive Officer <u>Northern Cape Tourism Department (NCTD):</u> Director of NCTD Deputy Director for Tourism Policy & Research Manager: Partnership & Industry Development Client Service Desk Officers Tourism Information Officer Tourism Information Clerk at Frances Baard District Municipality
6.	Commercial & Industrial	Chief Executive Officer of Chamber of Commerce & Industry (NOCCI) Manager of Sol Plaatje Information Centre

6. FINDINGS (QUANTITATIVE STUDY)

6.1. Demographic profile

Three quarters (75.5%) of the respondents were domestic tourists, 20.5% from abroad and 4% from the rest of Africa. The majority of domestic respondents were from Gauteng (33.1%), the Northern Cape (24.5%), Free State (11.9%) and Western Cape (10.6%). The majority (26.5%) of foreign tourists interviewed came from the United Kingdom, followed by the United States of America (8.5%), Namibia (8.2%), and The Netherlands, Germany, Israel and Malawi (all 6.1%). The same percentage of respondents came from the United Arab Emirates (4.1%), Botswana (4.1%), Switzerland (4.1%) and Canada (4.1%). It is therefore evident that the majority of foreign respondents were from countries outside of Africa. Males represented 57.5% of the sample, while females represented the remaining 42.5% of the sample size. There were a fair number of respondents from each age category. The 31–40 age group had the highest representation with 26% of respondents, while the 21–30 and 41–50 age groups each accounted for 24%. They were followed by the age groups 51–60 (13%), 61–70 (8%) and under 21 years (5%). The White race group dominated the sample (64.5%), followed by the African (17.5%), Coloured (11%) and Asian (7%) groups. The majority (60%) of respondents spent 1–2 days in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area, while 26% spent 3–5 days and 7% spent 11 days or more in the area. The data further indicates that 6.5% of the respondents spent 6–8 days and less than one percent spent 9–11 days in the area. The majority of the respondents (55.5%) had already visited the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area before, of which 21% had visited once before, 4.5% were visiting for the third time, and 30% had visited the city more than three times. A large number of respondents (44.5%) were first-time visitors to the city. The majority of tourists interviewed were visiting the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area for holiday purposes (42.5%), secondly for business (30.5%), thirdly to visit family or friends (23%), and a small percentage (4%) for sports events. The most popular accommodation type for visitors was hotels at 28.6%, followed by the homes of friends and relatives (27.1%), guesthouses (21.1%), bed-and-breakfast establishments (13.2%) and self-catering establishments (3.5%).

6.2. General rating of service in accommodation establishments in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area

The overwhelming majority of respondents rated the following components of quality service in the accommodation establishments as good to very good (combined rating in excess of 80%):

- Staff attitude (88.9%);
- Timely response to needs (89.6%);
- Reliability of staff (90.9%);
- Communication skills of staff (90.3%);

- Utilisation of technology by frontline staff (82.7%); and
- Good value for money (80.9%).

Figure 1 illustrates that 56.8% of tourists perceived the overall quality of service in the accommodation establishments as good, followed by very good (30.1%), average (11%) and poor (2.1%).

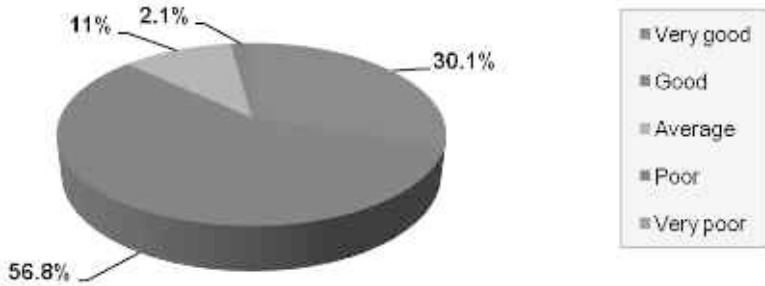


Figure 1: Overall quality of service in accommodation establishments

The tourism-related knowledge of staff members in accommodation establishments was rated as average to poor by a significant number of respondents (26.4%) an indication that improvement is needed in this area.

6.3. General rating of service in the tourism transportation sector in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area

The majority of respondents rated the following components of service quality in the tourism transportation sector as good to very good (combined rating in excess of 80%):

- Staff attitude (85.3%);
- Willingness of staff to provide assistance (80%);
- Communication skills of staff (81%); and
- Efficiency of staff (81%);

Figure 2 provides a summary of the general rating of service in the transport sector in the study area:

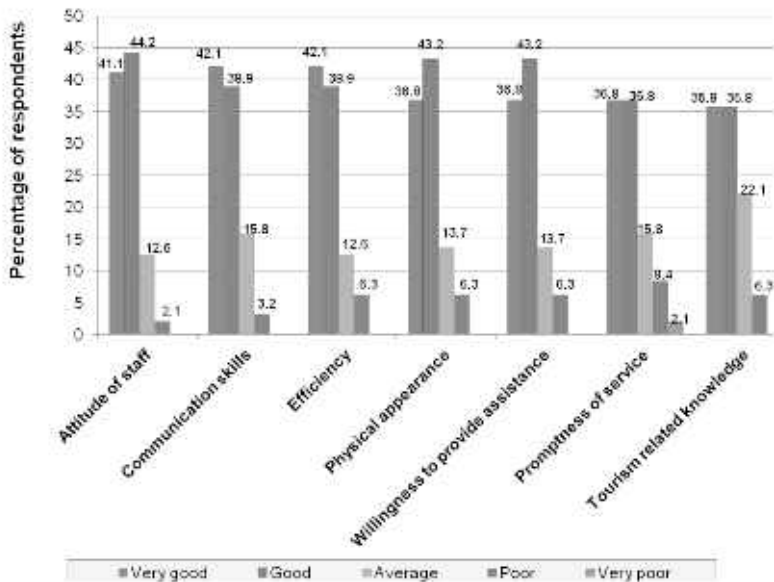


Figure 2: Summary of the general rating of service in the transport sector in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area

The positive ratings (very good to good) for the first five categories deserve mention. Although a large number of respondents perceived communication skills to be very good, a number of respondents perceived it to be average (15.8%), leaving room for improvement in this area. Other areas requiring more attention due to an average rating are the tourism-related knowledge of staff (22.1%) and promptness of service (15.8). In addition, 8.4% of respondents perceived promptness of service to be poor, while 2.1% rated it as very poor.

6.4. General rating of service in the food and entertainment sector in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area (including restaurants, pubs and coffee shops)

A concerning factor is that a significant number of respondents rated the following components of service quality in the food and entertainment sector as average to poor (combined rating in excess of 20%):

- Value for money (20.4%);
- Friendliness of staff (24%);
- Efficiency of staff (24.5%);
- Promptness of service (31.1%);
- Willingness to provide assistance (28.9%);

- Handling of complaints (35.1%); and
- Overall service quality (25%).

Figure 3 provides a summary of the general rating of service in the food and entertainment sector in the study area:

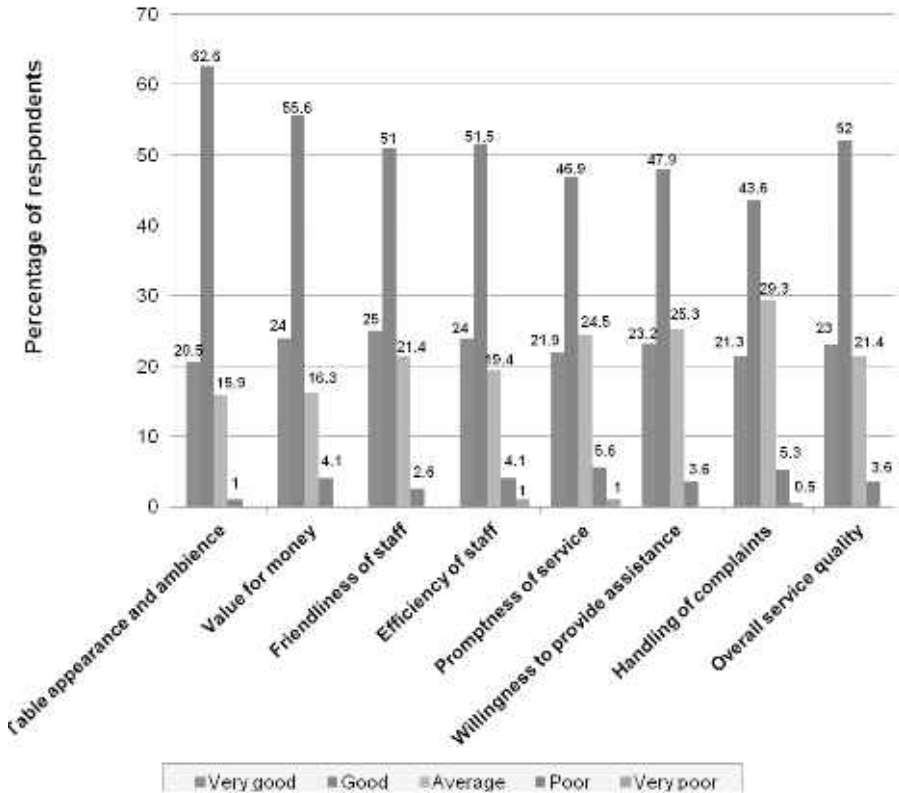


Figure 3: Summary of the general rating of service in the food and entertainment sector in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area

6.5. General rating of service at tourist attractions in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area

A concerning factor is that a significant number of respondents rated the following components of service quality at tourist attractions as average to poor (combined rating in excess of 20%):

- Accessibility in terms of location (25.1%);
- Signage (27.7%);
- Efficiency of staff (26.7%);

- Friendliness of staff (27.2%);
- Value for money (31.3%);
- Enjoyment factor (26.2%);
- Learning opportunities (23%);
- Consistency of service delivery (28.4%);
- Clean and well maintained (23.6%);
- Overall experience (23.1%); and
- Overall service quality (24.2%).

Figure 4 shows a summary of the general rating of service quality at tourist attractions.

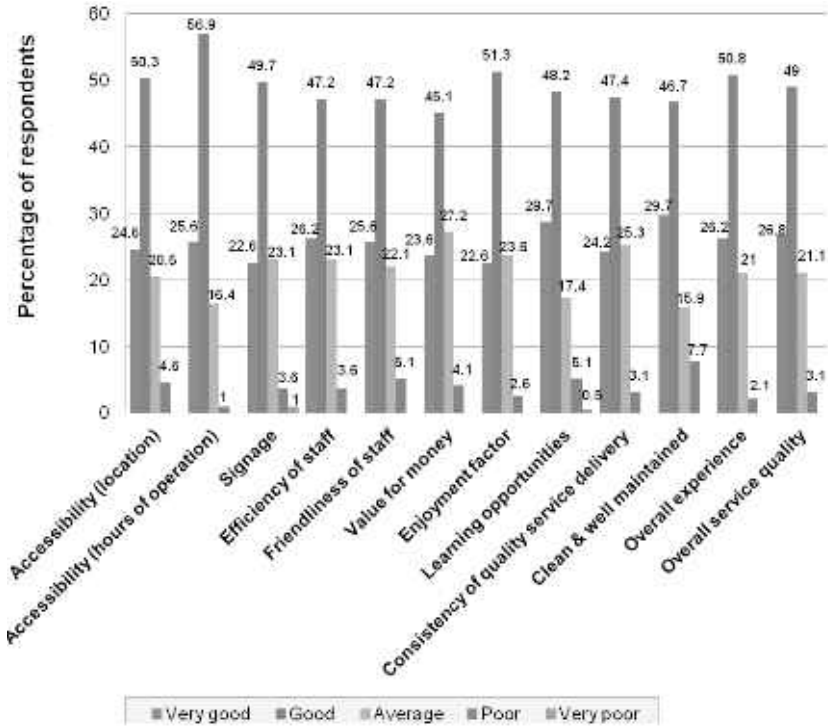


Figure 4: Summary of the general rating of service at tourist attractions in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area

The majority of respondents (92.9%) had not experienced particularly poor service at any attraction in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area, compared to 7.1% who felt that they did experience poor service. One can therefore conclude that the majority of respondents were satisfied with the service they had received, but they also indicated that they had not experienced superior service.

6.6. General satisfaction

The majority of tourists (respondents) were satisfied with the delivery of service in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area, with 68% of respondents rating it as good to very good. However, a substantial 32% rated it as average to poor.

The majority (51.8%) of respondents rated their preconceived perception of service delivery compared to their actual experience of service delivery in Sol Plaatje Municipal Area as good, while 36.2% rated it as average, 9% as very good and 3% as poor.

7. FINDINGS (QUALITATIVE STUDY)

7.1. Interviews with role-players (refer to paragraph 5 for types of role-players)

The researcher interviewed 20 role-players representative of the sectors in the local tourism industry. The purpose of the interviews was to get valuable insight into the perceptions of role-players regarding tourism service levels in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area.

7.2. Feedback on services at accommodation establishments

The majority (70%) of respondents indicated that their expectations as tourists were not met in the accommodation sector. According to one respondent, "In general service is bad; there is a lack of management and training". Another respondent said, "Nobody is monitoring or co-ordinating if accommodation establishments comply to certain standards".

The respondents felt that the local community is very friendly and hospitable, but would not go that extra mile in terms of service delivery. Business owners tend to overlook the small things (for example providing a steak knife, hairdryer or plug, or seeing to the presentation of food) and therefore do not create and present a quality product to visiting tourists. The accommodation sector can therefore improve in this regard by understanding the different needs of tourists and by offering a unique product and quality service.

It is vital that owners of accommodation establishments understand, implement, and invest in the concept of service excellence. There was a general feeling that more can be done regarding the training of staff members, especially frontline staff, as they create the first impression of the business. The product owners, therefore, have the responsibility to not only train their staff on a consistent basis, but to employ the right people.

According to the majority of respondents, the employees at accommodation establishments need to improve their skills in administration, telephone etiquette and interpersonal communication. Another problem is that

employees do not always present themselves in a professional manner and do not always wear a uniform. Furthermore, employees at accommodation establishments do not always have first-hand knowledge of tourist attractions in the city. Respondents suggested that they be sent on a tour of the city. All these above-mentioned factors influence not only the overall image of accommodation establishments, but also the city in general.

A number of respondents (30%) in the local accommodation sector agreed that there is a need for additional good-quality and accredited accommodation establishments in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area.

Furthermore, there is a general lack of monitoring and inspection to ensure that a certain standard is maintained, resulting in the existence of poor-quality accommodation establishments in the city. A number of accommodation establishments refuse to become members of the South African Tourism Grading Council due to the problems experienced with this body. This is a major problem, as foreign tourists are generally only prepared to stay at graded establishments. Hotels and other establishments in the city that are graded generally offer very good service. Furthermore, some respondents felt the need for five-star accommodation, especially for the major events that are held in the city.

7.3. Feedback on service in the transportation sector

The majority (70%) of respondents indicated that the transport sector delivers a basic service to tourists, but rarely exceeds their expectations. One respondent said, "Bus drivers tend to be technically minded and not focused on the needs of the tourist".

The respondents were satisfied with the service delivered by rental car companies, as they are geared towards the tourism market. The service delivery of local transport companies is poor, however. It is imperative that the local taxi operators, in particular, receive customer care training and become aware of the importance of service excellence.

According to 55% of respondents, there is currently a shortage of luxury coach services in the city. Unfortunately, the absence of competition has resulted in a monopoly in the market, and little effort has been made by tour operators to upgrade their buses. A need for more bus owners to operate in the city has been identified.

One of the issues raised by 35% of respondents concerned the accessibility of the city as a tourism and business destination. There is an increasing demand for more flights into and out of the city, especially to neighbouring countries (such as Namibia and Botswana), as Kimberley is the gateway to these destinations. The current airline, South African Airlink, operates only once a day between Kimberley and Cape Town; this does not cater adequately to the

ever-increasing number of business and game-hunting tourists flying into the city. The South African Express Airline delivers a more frequent service to the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area, offering three to six return flights to Johannesburg on a daily basis. The respondents perceived the cost of Kimberley-related flights to be very expensive (especially between Cape Town and Kimberley), thus having a negative impact on the tourism industry, as well as accessibility to the whole of the Northern Cape Province.

7.4. Feedback on service at restaurants, pubs and coffee shops

Sixty percent of respondents in the local tourism industry indicated that there is a general lack of quality service in restaurants and coffee shops, and that there are only a few good restaurants that can be recommended for their quality service. A possible reason for the poor customer service could be that some restaurants only employ skeleton staff during the low season, only to find that staff cannot manage or perform inadequately during busier periods. According to one respondent, "Service is inconsistent and a general lack in training exists".

Pubs, on the other hand, deliver a fairly good service in general, employing some of the best bartenders and chefs in the country. Furthermore, 55% of respondents suggested that establishments should maintain longer opening hours, especially over weekends and on public holidays. In addition, some establishments are closed over the peak tourism season in December. The minority (25%) of respondents suggested that there is a need for after-hours entertainment for young people.

Fifty percent of respondents further suggested that training is needed on a continual basis, especially in areas relating to the interpersonal skills and attitudes of staff. They suggested greater co-operation and liaison between the public and private sectors regarding service delivery in the tourism industry. In addition, greater awareness among the role-players must be established to improve service delivery in the hospitality industry.

7.5. Feedback on service at tourist attractions

In light of the rich variety of historic and heritage sites in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area, 50% of respondents felt that an overall improvement in the attraction sector is needed. The mindset of managers and employees should be geared towards service excellence to improve the tourist experience. Respondents felt that some historic attractions, such as the Kennilworth Graveyard, are not well maintained and are even unsafe to visit. More can therefore be done to improve historic tourist attractions. Some respondents also felt that the attractions in the city are not marketed well (for example, township tours), resulting in tourists not being aware of what the city has to offer.

Forty percent of respondents indicated that the operating hours of attractions are cause for concern, as some attractions are only open during certain hours of the day, which are not always convenient to the passing tourist. Other attractions show little commitment to their advertised time schedule. According to 25% of respondents, there are no guided tours available at certain attractions over weekends.

Another point of concern is the lack of affordable souvenirs at attractions in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area. An adequate supply of these products, which serve as a powerful marketing tool, should be one of the focus areas of attractions.

The poor signage related to attractions in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area is a hindrance, especially at the Big Hole, as it is not clear and leads to confusion. This was also confirmed by the response of visiting domestic and foreign tourists who participated in the survey. The lack of visible and standardised signage has a negative effect on the tourist experience. Furthermore, the litter at attractions is of major concern, as it does a lot of damage to the image of the local tourism industry.

The respondents further recommended that registered and professionally trained tour guides be employed at attractions such as the Big Hole, William Humphreys Art Gallery and McGregor Museum, since the staff members employed at certain attractions are sometimes not able to assist and provide adequate information upon enquiry. The facilities and physical appearance of the city's historic and cultural attractions, such as the battlefields, are in need of upgrading and general improvement in appearance.

Owners or managers of attractions do not always have control or influence over the experience of tourists regarding poor signage, roads and the general cleanliness of the city, and therefore the assistance of the local municipalities is needed in this regard. The majority (60%) of role-players felt that the customer's experience of the city depends on the Sol Plaatje Municipality's intention to make improvements in respect of the above-mentioned issues.

8. CONCLUSIONS

8.1. Accommodation establishments

Although the majority of respondents rated the overall quality of service at accommodation establishments to be good, there are some areas of concern. These concerns were highlighted during interviews with local role-players, with the major challenges emerging in the areas of management commitment and staff training. Such training should include areas such as improving the tourism knowledge, administration skills, telephone etiquette and interpersonal communication skills of staff.

8.2. Transportation sector

Despite an overall positive rating, there are some areas of concern, including communication skills, tourism knowledge of staff, and promptness of service delivery. Again it was confirmed by local role-players that the basics are present in terms of service delivery, but expectations are seldom exceeded.

8.3. Food and entertainment sector

As indicated in paragraph 6.4, a significant number of the components in this subsector were rated as average to poor by more than 20% of respondents. This was confirmed by the majority of local role-players, who indicated a lack of service quality in restaurants and coffee shops. Again, lack of training and insufficient staff levels were highlighted as problem areas.

8.4. Tourist attractions

As in the case of food and entertainment, a significant number of components were rated as average to poor by more than 20% of respondents. From a service perspective, local role-players indicated insufficient access and a lack of professional guides at the major attractions as specific weaknesses.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the research that some interventions are needed in order to address current gaps in service delivery in the tourism industry in the Sol Plaatje Municipal Area. These interventions may be summarised as follows:

- Training: A comprehensive and continuous staff training plan is recommended and should focus on the following areas:
 - Tourism knowledge;
 - Interpersonal communication skills;
 - Telephone etiquette;
 - Customer care; and
 - Tour-guiding.

Officials at local and regional government levels should encourage tourism product owners to participate in the voluntary grading scheme offered by the South African Grading Council. By doing so, accommodation establishments will at least be able to bridge the current gaps in service delivery in the sense that they will be constantly monitored in terms of standards.

- Tourism product owners in the study area should reconsider their accessibility in terms of convenient hours of operation for the tourist. Also, more research is needed on the viability of the so-called low-cost airlines including Sol Plaatje in their flight schedules.
- Tourism product owners should ensure sufficient staff levels at all times in order to provide excellent service and not only the basic requirements.
- The other aspects of tourism, like infrastructure, signage, pricing and product quality, will have to be integrated with service excellence in order to provide a unique experience to visitors. The visitor will only be satisfied if the whole value chain is of superior quality. This comprehensive task will only be attainable through partnerships with the private sector, even across provincial boundaries.

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