

EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING PRACTICES IN GOA – A CASE STUDY OF AN ECO RESORT

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ABSTRACT

In the modern times tourism and hospitality consumption has become more qualitative, more demanding, and more varied (Ritchie, Tung, & Ritchie, 2011). Goa has been one of the favourite destinations for both domestic and international tourists right from the late 60's with major emphasis on budget beach tourism. Besides beaches, Goa has forests, hills, backwaters, vast water bodies and rich Portuguese and Goan culture and heritage which have been tapped beautifully by the eco resorts at Goa. This paper discusses the experiential marketing practices at one eco resort at Goa which has its presence for over two decades in the eco tourism industry. It attributes its success to delivering a unique and complete holiday experience. An exploratory study was conducted covering a period from November 2016 to October 2017 which included domestic, international and local tourists, the owner, staff and local residents in the vicinity of the resort. The qualitative research included semi structured interviews, participant observation, discussions and secondary data analysis in the form of diaries, written accounts of past events of tourists. It was not a smooth journey for this resort especially with the new Supreme Court rulings in the eco tourism industry which put a tremendous strain and pressure on it. But fortunately the resort handled every issue and obstacle with care and wit. It has maintained its position as one of the top eco resorts in Goa due to the friendly nature of its staff, beautiful ambience and prompt action by the owner to continuously stage events and increase the attractiveness of the place.

Keywords: *experiential marketing, ecotourism, experience, eco resort, consumer experiences*

Introduction

Goa, a tiny state of India has been on the international tourism radar from the late sixties with the introduction of the hippy-trail. Endowed with beaches, forests, forts, churches, temples, and immersed with rich Portuguese culture and heritage, it is one of the favorite destinations for both domestic as well as international tourists. Goa has a coastline of about 105 kilometers and is well connected to the rest of the world via road, rail and air. But Goa suffers from the “paradox of plenty” and lacks outreach to its

full potential. Goa's image of sun, sand and sea coupled with parties, clubs and casinos attracts the young tourists with limited means and retired budget tourists (Kamat, 2010). The government of Goa has been working on various projects along with the private players to uplift the image of Goa and attract high end tourists who expect a memorable holiday experience as they attribute greater meaning to the word free time.

Goa has been losing out on destinations which publicize extraordinary experiences like Thailand, Singapore, Dubai, Hong Kong and China. They promote experiential activities in order to create value and maintain core capabilities in the tourism industry. This paper discusses the experiential marketing practices at one Eco Resort situated in Goa, which attributes its success to delivering a unique and complete holiday experience by building customer loyalty through the creation of total customer experience.

Ecotourism and Experiential Marketing

According to Hetzer (1965), the core principles of ecotourism are minimizing the environmental impact, respecting and minimizing the impact on local culture, maximizing the economic benefits for local residents, and maximizing tourist satisfaction. On one side there is a growing awareness and need the world over, to protect and safe guard the ecology and environment and on the other side there is a transformation of consumers who want brands to engage with them and add value to their lives, which has given rise to a new mode of tourism, which combines ecological conservation, environmental education, and cultural experiences. In today's world with our hectic life style, tourism is gaining more and more importance not only for a break from our everyday jog-trot life, but also for the conservancy and development of the countryside too.

In the era of experiential marketing, the focus is on customer experiences and lifestyles and not product performance (Holbrook, 2000; Desmet & Heekkert, 2007). Consumers look for pleasure, feelings and fun from products or service providers during their consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982 and Schmitt, 1999, 2003). Demand for experiences especially enhancing and managing experiences for their customers in order to gain a competitive advantage over other destinations is a major trend in the tourism industry, since tourists are no longer satisfied with traditional services. Companies engage various experiential marketing strategies and campaigns to outdo their counterparts and thereby develop loyalty by aggressively designing, continuously innovating, and managing their consumer experiences (Pullman & Gross, 2004).

Most of the countries are shifting their attention not only to sustainable ecotourism, but are focusing on increasing the competitiveness of ecotourism through experiential marketing. According to Lin (2007), the Tourism Bureau in Taiwan is promoting the ecotourism policies that focus on "local, ecological, and diversified tourism" so as to reduce the environmental impact of recreational activities, encourage local residents to participate, and conserve natural and cultural resources experientially. Several studies have been carried out covering ecotourism issues; Buckley (2009) studied the outcomes ecotourism has accomplished with regard to environmental issues, Jaafar & Maideen(2012), examined ecotourism-related products and activities and studied the economic sustainability of chalets on four Malaysian islands, Chaminuka et al (2012)

investigated the ecotourism potential of rural communities near the Kruger National Park in South Africa and Olson (2012) explored two unique ecotourism projects in the Sierra of Manantlán Biosphere Reserve in west central Mexico by using anthropological methods. Ceballos-Lascurain(1983) predicted that, conserving the northern Yucatan wetland, an American flamingo habitat would attract tourists for bird watching, thereby stimulating local economic activities and promoting ecotourism. Follows & Jobber, (2000) conducted a study assessing the attitudes and norms to predict environmentally friendly behaviour since ecologically oriented consumers are willing to pay a higher price, when they have the assurance that they are purchasing environmentally friendly products (Minton & Rose, 1997). According to a report in 2000 by the World Tourism Organization, understanding tourists' expectations and feelings, demands, and experiences and providing high-quality services that meet their expectations and needs is crucial to maintain the advantage ecotourism has on the tourism market (Parasuraman et al, 1988).

The reason behind the continuing growth in demand for experiential marketing is that it works for both brands and customers (Witthaus,2004).Therefore, understanding consumers' feelings, demands, and experiences, as well as the environment and ecology, is essential to enhance the competitive advantage of ecotourism industry.

Research Design and Methodology

Exploratory study is appropriate for exploring a relatively new topic area in order to provide descriptions in under investigated areas (Eisenhardt,1989; Gummesson,2000; and Yin,2008). Qualitative research methods are used to acquire a deeper understanding of the nature of consumer experiences in ecotourism industry and the factors or dimensions which lead them to be categorized as ordinary or extraordinary. There are a variety of methods of data collection in qualitative research, including observations, interviews, focus groups, textual or visual analysis, case study and secondary data (diaries, written accounts of past events). The Eco Resort under study has been operational for over two decade. An exploratory study was conducted covering a period from November 2016 to October 2017 which included domestic, international and local tourists; the owner, staff and local residents in the vicinity of the resort. The qualitative research included semi structured interviews, participant observation, discussions and secondary data analysis in the form of diaries, written accounts of past events of tourists in order to acquire a better understanding of consumer experience types and characteristics. In total there were 35 participants, namely the owner, 4 staff members, 27 tourists and 3 local residents. Purposive/Judgmental sampling method was adopted as it is effective when only limited numbers of people can serve as primary data sources. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano,2011; Patton,2002).

A Case Study of an Eco Resort at Goa

The journey of this Eco Resort has been a roller coaster ride with many hurdles which were tackled with care and wit. The new Supreme Court rulings in the eco tourism industry put a great strain and pressure on this resort. But thankfully the friendly nature

of the staff, beautiful ambience and prompt action by the owner to continuously stage events and increase the attractiveness of the place persuaded visitors not only to visit once but also to revisit and share experiences with friends and relatives.

Fig.1. Map of Goa



With prior experience of more than a decade in ecotourism, the owner set out on his mission to start a new project in the pristine forest at the entrance to the reserve Bhagwan Mahavir, very close to the famous Dudhsagar waterfalls. The property is spread over a vast expanse of land, adjacent to the river which adds a breath of freshness. The resort and its surrounding areas are blessed with immense, rare and unique flora and fauna which add color and life to the peaceful and tranquil habitat. The added attraction is the close proximity to the tribal settlements that dwell in the forests. The layout and eco cottages are designed with enough comfort and luxury, ensuring that it blends with its surroundings and nature. The eco resort attracts international, national and local tourists who come to experience a different Goa situated far away from the clutter and beaches. The experiential activities enriches tourist's lives by targeting their physical experiences, showing them alternative ways of doing things, alternative lifestyles and creating experiences related to the tourist's physical body, longer-term patterns of behavior, and lifestyles so that they can acquire social identity and belonging sense.

The success of ecotourism lies in the careful selection of recreation sites, nature loving cultivation and respect for local residents' life and culture which has been the mission of this resort which offers a diverse range of experiences to visitors (Rentschler, 2007) which might be visual, sensory, esthetic, recreational, educational, celebrating and enchanting (Kotler & Kotler, 2000). The following are some experiential activities at the resort.

1.1. Trekking :Escape into the wild

The smell of fresh air, lush greenery was beautiful, relaxing and engaging. Listening to the chirping of birds was music to the ears and watching the birds and animals eating, sleeping and playing in the natural habitat created a sense of respect for them. The treks and nature walks into the jungle to learn about the varied bio diversity stimulate interest and curiosity. Exploring the Dudhsagar, one of India's largest waterfalls through streams and pebbles of varied sizes and color was a memorable experience. The waterfalls wind their way across hills and provide ample opportunity to get soaked and drenched. The camp site consisting of eco cottages in a vast plantation with elephants located in the Sayadri hills sets the mood for fun, adventure and escapism. Events were staged to increase the attractiveness and potential of the place. The beautiful, relaxing & engaging camp site, trek and waterfall is a treat to ones senses while the long & thrilling nature walks, breathtaking waterfall & lively camp site make the tourists feel fresh & alive.

1.2. Custodian of Heritage and Culture

The resort takes pride as the custodian of heritage and culture and disseminator of knowledge of heritage and culture. Encountering primitive ways of living of the tribal people and simple lifestyles of the locals was a treat for the urban dwellers. The tourists touched base, especially the younger generation by learning about the skills, food habits, craftsmanship, and survival tactics of the tribal and local people. The locals took pride in interacting with the tourists and were very welcoming to them. The tourists got perception and information from sight, sound, scent, taste, and touch when they lost themselves to the natural beauty & habitat, learnt about the skills & lifestyles of the tribes and locals, got acquainted with the Goan & Portuguese cuisine, spices, techniques & processes. They felt a sense of identity & connection and get cheerful & knowledgeable which in turn attracted them to explore, join and participate in the various experiential activities staged especially for them.

1.3. Extraordinary experience with the elephants

The main attraction of this place is a large group of elephants who take part in a number of activities. The tourists could sit back and watch an entertaining elephant show or could participate in a long elephant safari ride or even take a bath with the elephant. They took pride in bathing the elephants and getting soaked themselves with a trumpet shower from the elephant. It did not end there, tourists could entertain themselves with the famous in house painters i.e. the elephants busy painting with huge brushes on canvas, which one could take home as a souvenir. The international tourists found this experience truly mesmerizing. But unfortunately now with the new rulings by the Supreme Court, using animals for entertainment is stopped. Personalized & surprise element creates positive & engaging memories resulting in emotional attachments.

1.4. Engaging Farm Activities & Adventurous Zip liner

The resort has its own farm which houses cows, pigs, goats, ducks, cats, dogs and varied ornamental, water and hanging plants. The resort engages fruitfully with

the tourists by concentrating on creative experience designs (Williams, 2006). Tourists can keep themselves busy by feeding the animals, taking the goat for a walk or just watching the attendant milking the cows. There is no scope for boredom. For the adventurous lot the zip liner which extends across the property surely brings thrills. The simple farm activities were engaging & exciting. The design & layout of the resort & farm amidst lush greenery enables the tourists to escape from everyday pressures & gets family & friends closer. Pleasure, enjoyment & satisfaction creates positive memories

“Takeaway” Impressions

The resort masterminds creation of experiences which are memorable by forging new relationships between tourists and the environment and between tourists with varied lifestyles and age groups. The stay at the eco resort is a holiday to remember, revisit and share experiences with colleagues, friends and relatives. The tourists felt and experienced differently and got associated with like minded people. The experiential events and activities excited their emotions and made them feel fresh and alive and revealed something about themselves. It brought them closer to nature and also to their friends and family. The friendly and helpful nature of the staff coupled with the breathtaking ambience at the resort encouraged bonding and friendly interactions.

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