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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to gain a better knowledge of managerial and operational issues of resorts' animation and entertainment services. Animation programs provided by resorts are typically designed to meet the specific needs and wishes of two distinctive guest-segments – children and adults. Hotel businesses implement animation programs to increase market profile and attract repeat clientele; hence, from a business perspective. Since growing interest in active recreation and diverse entertainment is a persistent trend in the vacation industry, resort managers should, however, treat animation programs as an important service component with large potentials to enhance the overall resort experience.

**Keywords:** animation, activity, hotel, resort.

**Introduction.** The hotel industry is considered to be the most important branch of tourism and the most significant type of accommodation because of its ability to provide revenue and satisfy the needs of the guests. There is huge competition in the hotel industry so in order to be able to maintain or improve their market positions and reputations; hotels need to develop innovations. Because it is not difficult to copy the innovation ideas from each other, they have to think about building very special hotels for special target groups. Those who are working in this industry must be able to keep and attract new customers by satisfying their increasing sophisticated demands. Tourists in particular are more than ever before looking for “new” and “unique” experiences.

The word "animation" originates from Latin and has several meanings (soul, spirit, and feeling). So, "animation" determines enthusiasm, inspiration, involvement in the movement, activities to stimulate vitality.

Nowadays animation and entertainment services have become a constituent part and are playing an important role as a special function in hotel businesses. This is probably due to the constantly increasing requirements of hotel clientele for better service and an integrated holidays experience in resorts. Animation services encompass every activity offering movement, joy, leisure and spectacle, such as games, sports, shows, events, etc. From a business perspective, the main aims of resorts managing and operating such services are:

- to offer a wide spectrum of recreational opportunities to their guests;
- to enhance and improve their reputation, customer loyalty and, par extension, to increase occupancy rate;
- to gain a competitive advantage in a very difficult market [1].

Hotel owners and managers have discovered how important it is to give a lasting memory of each tourist's stay in their hotel, thereby creating a constant usage of facility and recommendation for other prospective tourist in future.

Literature suggests that animation and events contribute to enhancing visitor experiences. Resorts, museums, heritage sites, and theme parks all develop programs of events. Attractions and facilities all over the world have realized the advantages of animation. In this regard, hotel and other tourism related businesses often offer similar animation programs and events to render their guests' experience more enjoyable. Animation / recreational services have become a constituent part of the hotel businesses offering, aiming at providing an integrated holidays experience. Hence, it might be stressed that hotels have ‘borrowed’ some ideas from entertainment methods and techniques implemented since 1970's by holiday clubs and all-inclusive resorts. These activities are mainly classified into two areas: Performing Arts and Sports [2].

Obviously, the attainment of business objectives is function of adequate management, facilities, and human resources. Despite the importance of this segment of hotel/resort services, research on animation programs is very scarce, with only a few studies published in international journals. This fact can be seen as an indicator of a lack of awareness among both researchers and practitioners about animation programs as a powerful means to influence the tourist's overall resort experience and subsequent behavior, as well as a means with large potentials to differentiate from competitors, especially in tight markets. In this regard, the objective of this study was to contribute to the understanding of how tourists evaluate animation programs. Based on the world's experience, this study explored the main sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with three

types of recreational services commonly provided at resorts:

- sports activities;
- evening entertainment programs;
- entertainment programs for children.

Most customers who enjoy such services are young people who are mostly travelling on a family vacation and decide to participate on a social interaction level or for health and wellness purposes. This implies that young people not only see animation as a healthy activity or an entertainment action, but also as a link by which they can network with other peers from different parts of the world, who are staying in the same hotel and also using the opportunity to enjoy the hotel animation services rendered [3].

Great efforts should be made to monitor quality and track trends and innovations in this area, in order to attain high levels of guest satisfaction, as this is significantly associated with intentions to purchase/visit and to engage in positive/negative feedback.

**Literature Review and International Experience.** Despite the importance of this special function, research on animation and entertainment offering is very scarce. The issues of all-inclusive vacations and animation have not been explored by literature. Only few studies have investigated this topic, mainly from an operational perspective [4].

From a sociological perspective, we made use of critical theory to analyze all-inclusive vacations as a sociological phenomenon. This type of holiday should protect the consumer from anything to upset previous notions of a place or what a vacation should be about. The all-inclusive vacation keeps consumers within one kind of consciousness that is the one known at home [5].

Other related literature argues that vacationers are mainly motivated by health and social contact for leisure activities, as well as for hotel animation. Furthermore, it is estimated that sporting activities in hotel settings must have an entertaining and social character [6, 7].

The active participation of guests into entertainment activities leads to more significant psychological outcomes compared to a passive one. That is the reason why animation function efforts are mainly oriented to organize activities in which guests are actively involved. In this regard, the animators' role is crucial in two fields: make clients feel comfortable, participate, create and ensure groups dynamics [8].

Other scholars have investigated the topic of events and festivals. It is estimated that events are contributing to create a more attractive environment; helping attract and retain visitors; enriching the vacations' experience. Events produced for the explicit purpose of being 'consumed' by tourists are common. Some authors estimate that, from consumer or audience perspective, an event is an opportunity for leisure, social or cultural experience outside the normal range of choices or beyond everyday experience. These events must be of interest and attractive to potential consumers, so from a marketing perspective the product must be matched to carefully defined target segments. Finally, a very recent study was performed by Mikulic &

Prebezac (2011) on perceptions and satisfaction from the consumers' perspective. The primary objective of this study was to explore the key-drivers of customer experience with animation programs typically offered by resorts in the Mediterranean [9-10].

A resort is usually a hotel accommodation used for relaxation or recreation, attracting visitors for holidays; that's why resorts provide an array of amenities which typically includes entertainment activities. A resort generally contains, in and of itself, the necessary guest attraction capabilities. An all-inclusive resort is a resort that, besides providing all of the common amenities of a resort, charges a fixed price that includes most or all items. By definition, an all-inclusive resort is a holiday resort that includes all meals and most alcoholic drinks included in one, upfront price [11, 12].

All-inclusive resorts can provide a great vacation experience without any pre-trip stress to holidaymakers. Many also offer a selection of sports and other activities included in the price as well. Since CM established the 'all-inclusive' resort in the '50s, it has become one of the most popular types of resorts for millions of travelers. Some all-inclusive resorts are designed for specific vacation interests to cater for adults [13].

The most notable trends in business environment are professionalism and outsourcing. Professional animation teams (in-house or outsourced) are presenting and performing activities and shows in the daytime and night. They provide, amongst others, experienced and skilled staff, animation program. Concerning outsourcing, it is worth stressing that four and five star resorts are outsourcing animation function and companies have been established aiming to provide related services and recruit staff for animation.

Moreover some specialized consulting companies are active in the field and offer their knowhow and expertise in motivating guests of all ages into getting involved in some entertaining fun. The best-known and the first all-inclusive resort company is Club Med (CM), a French corporation of vacation resorts found all over the world. Its staff is 20,333 employees and its revenue € 1,360 billion (Club Med, 2013). In 2002 a new strategy was announced returning to a focus on the holiday villages and for up market vacationers. From 2001 on, the resort company worked to rebrand itself as upscale and family-oriented. Clientele today is affluent and 70% Family, 20% Couples, 10% Singles. In 2004, the hotel group Accor became the largest shareholder, but it sold most of its stake in 2006, announcing that it wished to refocus on its core businesses. Its main competitors include SuperClubs, Carnival Corporation, Sol Meliá, and Sandals Hotels. Each resort provides a list of services and activities in one single package. This includes lodging, food, use of facilities, sports activities, games, and shows. CM originally pioneered the 'all-inclusive' concept, but it has expanded to include a number of variants, some of which are not so all-inclusive. As of November 2014 the resort company operates eighty villages in Europe, Africa, North America, the Caribbean, South America, Asia, Australia, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean [15].

**Materials and methods.** The study employed a collective case study methodology. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Relevant data is gathered through the use of multiple sources including observations, interviews and narrative reports. The objective of this study was to gain a better knowledge of managerial and operational issues of resorts' animation and entertainment services. It is based primarily on documentary evidence derived from a number of sources, including soft and hard copies of informational report and promotional material of resort businesses.

A review of the related literature was performed. This is followed by a synoptic presentation of international experience. The main part of the study is dedicated to four case studies of worlds' best resort hotels; focusing on the main management issues, such as organization, program and activities, human resources, etc. The paper concludes by identifying the factors crucial to the successful offering of animation services and to the appropriate approach to link the local culture and production to tourism and hotel industry, and to create synergy between entertainment services and local culture.

The aim of this study is to explore various aspects and address various management issues related to the successful offering of recreational services.

**Results and discussion.** Hotel animation is a frequently used term to describe recreational services offered by resorts in sun-and-sea destinations. The term originates from club resorts in the Mediterranean region which provide organized sports activities for

groups of tourists who desire active recreation and interaction with other tourists while on vacation. A broader understanding of tourist animation encompasses a range of other recreational activities provided for groups of tourists, such as games, competitions and various entertainment programs. Besides in coastal club resorts, animation programs are also common service components on cruise ship vacations [7].

The aim of animation function is twofold:

- to meet the vacationers' needs for fun and sports;
- to provide them with opportunities for better social contact, interaction and communication.

The main criteria of classifying hotel animation services are three:

- age group;
- location of activities (indoors or outdoors);
- the degree of involvement of participants (passive or active).

According to the research, most customers who enjoy such services are young people who are mostly travelling on a family vacation and decide to participate on a social interaction level or for health and wellness purposes. This implies that young people not only see animation as a healthy activity or an entertainment action, but also as a link by which they can network with other peers from different parts of the world, who are staying in the same hotel and also using the opportunity to enjoy the hotel animation services rendered.

The first criterion encompasses a marketing component. According to this classification, there are two main market segments: children and adults (see fig.1).

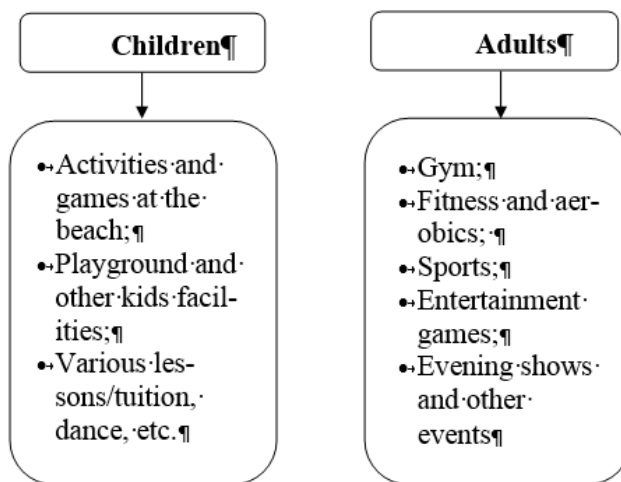


Fig.1. Main market segments

Children. However, since the interests/wishes of children tend to vary considerably according to their age, the children segment is usually further subsegmented to prevent the occurrence of dissatisfaction among participants (e.g. some hotels and resorts provide age-tailored programs such as mini-, midi-, maxi- and teen-programs/clubs). Accordingly, programs for the youngest guests may involve didactic games and swimming schools, whereas programs for older children may encompass daily activities, such as sports competitions, excursions and various work-shops, as

well as evening activities, like dance clubs, talent shows or miss/mister elections. It should be noted that such programs are, besides for the children/teenagers participating in them, also very attractive for their parents who wish to spend some time on their own while on vacation with their children.

Adults. The respective animation programs for adults frequently involve organized fitness activities in the morning, daily activities such as sports competi-

tions and guided excursions, as well as evening activities like dancing schools, live-music entertainment and various games [2].

Since growing interest in active recreation and diverse entertainment is a persistent trend in the vacation industry, resort managers should, however, treat animation programs as an important service component with large potentials to enhance the overall resort experience. Efforts should be made to monitor quality and track trends and innovations in this area, in order to attain high levels of guest satisfaction, as this is significantly associated with intentions to repurchase/revisit and to engage in positive/ negative word-of mouth.

**Management and operational issues.** Two of the most critical success factors for the hotel management wishing to ensure high levels of satisfaction within this service segment, are an attractive mix of activities and a professional staff. However, resorts are strongly affected by seasonality, why the provision of animation programs frequently relies on seasonal workers, which makes it difficult to control for the quality of services.

Hotel businesses implement animation programs to increase market profile and attract repeat clientele; hence, from a business perspective, the main objectives in operating such services are:

- to develop a wide variety of opportunities to guests;
- to work on improving hotel reputation;
- to get a competitive position on the market.

It's clear that an attainment of business objectives and customer satisfaction are function of three determining factors: facilities, human resources, and appropriate planning and management. Before going on, it is worth analyzing this function from a management and operational perspective. The hotel's benefits resulting by animation function are mainly twofold:

1. **Direct benefits:** resulting by paid services, such as sports tuition, baby sitting, children's special menu, and special events. The most significant benefits are food and beverage expenses during entertainment activities.

2. **Indirect benefits:** build up a competitive advantage and better market positioning, customer loyalty, attract new customers. It is estimated that indirect benefits are more significant.

It could be stressed that the most important managerial and operational issues are: planning, facilities, clientele, promotion, staff, and financial matters The

crucial pillar of any animation program is adequate planning, taking into consideration five issues, namely: guests, amenities, staff, promotion, and financial [6, 14].

Firstly, one key issue is the hotel's clientele features: nationality; clientele segment (families with kids, youths, and adults); the arrival day and duration of stay; and a balanced distribution and frequency of activities. Hotel management has to take special care of guests' needs. It should be noted that such programs are, besides for the children participating in them, also very attractive for their parents who wish to spend some time on their own while on vacation with their children [10].

Secondly, hotel management has to use the maximum of available indoors and outdoors amenities, make the hotel infrastructure profitable.

Thirdly, a crucial parameter is staff's volume and composition; it has been suggested that proportion could be around one animator per 100-150 guests. However, the determining factors are the variety of activities, age groups and nationalities.

Fourthly, the entertainment services promotion is an essential prerequisite for the program's success. At this end some techniques and methods are useful: animation desk at the lounge; welcome and information meetings with animation team; information board; leaflets in the rooms; personal contact. Professional and regulatory organizations recommend that the professional profile or resume of an animator should read: multi skilled, with an educational or sports degree and strong base in language skills, marketing management experience and advanced communication skills.

The last but not the least are financial matters. It is estimated that two issues are to be carefully considered:

1. **Extra charge:** Generally, the majority of entertainment activities are offered to guests free of charge, they constitute a part of the services package. However, hotel management might charge clients for some services; it is a matter of business option.

2. **Animation expenses** are composed of investments (amenities), equipment and operating expenses; wages being the most significant. Staff expenses (wages, catering and transport) are corresponding to about 90% of function's total expenses.

Generally, it has been observed that there is reluctance on behalf of resorts to operate animation function. This attitude might be due to these factors:

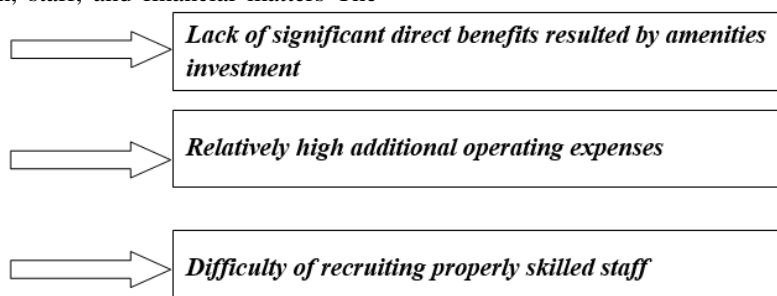


Fig. 2. Factors of reluctance to operate animation function

From the above analysis, a number of management questions are raised. Resort and hotels have to make some essential policy decisions, namely:

- Is it feasible to offer animation services to clientele?

➤ If the answer is positive, what kind of activities should be provided? Should they offer a unique animation program for all guests (one language) or a distinct program for each nationality?

➤ What would be the planning method and operational mode? The function must be operated by resort's management, or it would be completely or partially outsourced?

➤ Which method of customer feedback should be adopted and implemented? The management options are determined by the following crucial parameters: resort's capacity, clientele, and business general competitive strategy.

Eventually resort management can decide to, or not to operate the animation function. Nevertheless, the offering of entertainment services could be imposed by market conditions and business environment. It is wiser to properly plan this function instead of been forced to implement it by external factors.

**Conclusions.** The entertainment services constitute a significant function in resorts considered as being a business asset capable to offer direct and indirect benefits. It seems that many resorts realized this opportunity, and adopted and implemented tools used by vacation clubs. The study has shown that this function could have a significant contribution to attain business strategic aims, in the fields of management and marketing.

The study's conclusions are twofold. Firstly, there are management implications. One crucial issue and a major challenge suggested by related research have been confirmed. There is a requirement for efficient management; in other words, use appropriate approach and tools. This approach is imperative in order to consistently ensure high quality services and to appeal to ever more demanding customers. The management challenge is to create a customer focus driven by competent staff. Additionally, the study identified those factors which are considered crucial for successful offering of animation services. Main operational factors of animation programs affecting the efficient and successful offering are four:

1. Program: variety of activities, attractiveness, quality of performance.
2. Staff: skills and competence.
3. Facilities and equipment: quality and variety.
4. Ambience: atmosphere, participants, and location.

It is estimated that a well planned / balanced animation program and a competent animation team constitute the centerpiece for successful operation. Therefore, staff must possess the needed capabilities and skills, as well as knowledge and expertise. Other influencing factors are amenities and related equipment. Another important parameter is children's program and care. The use of appropriate sales promotion techniques and adequate tool for evaluating animation services are two issues requiring special attention. All these factors must be carefully considered in order to offer high quality service and a memorable experience.

Secondly, this study demonstrated that cultural and creative activities are not a priority for resorts business. In other words, the research findings showed that resorts management doesn't pay attention to local culture and production. It is our conviction that this is a serious deficiency. One idea / suggestion could be the organization of events jointly with other destination stakeholders. The positive contribution of these events has been stressed by related research. These events must be provided in such a way that commercial goals are made to fit cultural goals, stimulate both emotional and intellectual curiosity; offer culturally genuine goods and performances, such as local foods, dances, and crafts. The study's findings may serve as guidelines for hotel managers in planning, managing, implementing and evaluating appropriate animation programs.

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