THE EXPERIENCE OF APPLYING A QUALITATIVE METHOD IN A HOSPITALITY RESEARCH

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Abstract: There are many ways of collecting data for performing research in the hospitality industry. Many researchers in this area are using both qualitative and quantitative approach to collect data for their relevant studies. However, the chosen method needs to be suited with what researchers need to find out and what kind of study they perform. Generally research can be classified as either an academic research and/or applied research. The former addresses new ideas and fundamental knowledge lead to new theories and the latter provides and stimulates interests to an industry practitioner. This paper explains one way of collecting data using a qualitative approach in the hospitality industry. To obtain qualitative data, an in-depth interviewing was utilized to critically investigate the perception of the industry practitioners towards the usage of the Internet as a marketing tool. Series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with the hotel managers at Langkawi Island to discuss issues such as online marketing strategies and their effectiveness in marketing hotel products and services to a global market. In the case of Langkawi’s hotel industry, there are factors such as hotel type, star rating, location and target markets that influence the uses of the Internet within hotels and resorts. There are few issues highlighted in the paper in terms of getting hotel managers to participate in this study, finding the suitable time for collecting data and convincing the owner or manager the value of this research. Working with hotel managers and interviewing them for the topic investigated are the most exciting process but yet very challenging. It is strongly felt that researchers need to work collaboratively with the practitioners to gain new knowledge and experience for the benefits of the hospitality industry.

Keywords: Qualitative research, semi-structured interviews, Internet marketing, Langkawi Island

1. INTRODUCTION

Performing research in the hospitality industry is very challenging. The hospitality industry consists of lodging establishments, food services and other travel related businesses. In comparison with other industries, hospitality being part of the tourism industry is considered to be heterogeneous and intangibles simply because the products sold include customers experiences and expectations (Davies 2003). Walsh (2003) suggested that the main objective of performing a research in this area is to gain new idea and insights for the hospitality community and at the same time provides strategies or ways to improve for a hospitality organization. Topic of research ranges from operations such as general management, support services like legal and financial aspect to people issues such as careers, education, training and human resource management (Ingram 1996). The characteristics of the industry also demand a researcher to be quick and efficient in collecting data and to analyze and present data in a manner that are concise, briefed and relevant to the hospitality practitioners (Jones and Phillips 2003). Nonetheless, academic research in
the hospitality industry is not well supported by the managers. According to Jones and Phillips (2003), ‘the culture of hospitality, the “management by walking about”, the operational “hands on” background of senior managers, in part inhibits the perceived need for research’. Besides, the existing gap between practitioners and academic community in terms of working collaboratively for finding solution to a problem faced by any hospitality organization has resulted in slower growth of research in this area. As a result, a researcher in this area needs to better communicate and to learn the key issues of the industry with the managers to gain trust and collaboration for the benefits of academic research.

This paper explains the issues of applying a qualitative method in performing hospitality research. Issues such as getting participation from the industry practitioners and the process of getting research project completed are highlighted through a research performed at Langkawi Island. This paper also addresses the tasks and challenges that hospitality researchers may go through in order to perform a qualitative research method in this area of discipline. It is not the main purpose of this paper to critically explain how the data are analyzed despite that data analysis techniques is the area that need most attention from hospitality researchers (Mehmetoglu and Altinay 2005) However, in response to the issues and challenges been discussed, this paper offers strategies and guidelines in preparing for undertaking a qualitative method such as in depth interview as an alternative to conduct hospitality research. It also gives a brief background of Langkawi Island as one of Malaysia’s growing island destinations and provides information about the use of the Internet within hotels and resorts on this island.

2. PERFORMING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN HOSPITALITY

The term hospitality research can be defined as a study to examine of aspects of the hotel and catering industry which is presently managed by private and public sector organizations in most economies (Wood 1999). Some of the elements to be investigated ranges from managerial issues to operational problems which are unique in terms of industry’s characteristic. Generally, like other disciplines, hospitality research can be broadly classified as theoretical or academic research and applied research. An academic research is commonly produced and circulated among academic members through academic journals and has been criticized for not being applicable to ‘real world’ situation (Sturman 2003). However, an applied research usually addressed issues and problems which are of most concerned to practitioners. Sturman (2003) suggested that this sort of research is much applicable in solving practical problems faced by an organization and is not contributing to a theoretical and to advance the level of knowledge.

Most researchers in this area apply both quantitative and qualitative methods in their research. However as pointed out by (Davies 2003) quantitative methods dominate most of the research methods in comparison with qualitative methods. Quantitative research also is honored as being rigorous and scientific (Decrop 1999). However, the role of qualitative research is recognized as to provide information developing further quantitative research (Decrop 1999). The lack of qualitative research in hospitality is contributed by a few factors. As highlighted by Decrop (1999), factors such as the domination of quantitative research which emphasizes more on number and objectivity and lacking rigor and validity of qualitative research have resulted in lower output of qualitative research. Therefore, to ensure the validity and credibility of qualitative research, any data collected through qualitative manner needs to be collected, analyzed and interpreted rigorously (Hampton, 1999). Therefore a researcher who is planning to apply a qualitative method needs to identify what are the objectives of their study, who and what the appropriate sampling method, research timeframe and the correct data analysis. Knowing such detail information may help a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of why a particular belief is held and at the end to clarify and help make sense of the underlying reasons which have led to the findings (Hampton 1999).
Some of the advantages of qualitative research in a hospitality research can be listed as follows (Veal 1992):

- The nature of subject being studied, the hospitality industry, is a qualitative experience
- People without a proper statistically trained background can simply utilise the findings
- The method is more likely to be able to encompass changes over time
- The characteristic of the industry itself as a service industry which demands close interaction between people favors a qualitative approach.

The abovementioned arguments by Veal (1992) are justified based on the tourism and leisure industry but they are all equally valid for a hospitality research as the hospitality industry is a major sector of the tourism industry (Hampton 1999).

Having briefly described the role and type of research typically conducted in this area of hospitality discipline, the following section is explaining what the researcher experienced in conducting a mini research project in relation to hospitality area. This research project was undertaken as part of the author’s requirement to complete a Master’s thesis for Master of Business in International Hotel Management. Due to the funding and logistic issues, the project had to be scaled down in terms of sample size and number of interviews conducted.

3. THE STUDY

This research was carried out in view of the report prepared by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTCD) on electronic commerce and tourism (2000). The report highlighted that marketing tourism products and services online provides huge opportunities for emerging tourism destinations in a developing country to capture a global international market. With that point of view, this research is performed to investigate the role and usage of Internet technology in marketing products and services for the hospitality industry in Malaysia. It critically analyses the effectiveness of online marketing for the hotel industry at Langkawi island. Focusing on Langkawi Island in studying Internet marketing for the hospitality industry was considered appropriate as the island is presently targeting international markets to sustain its tourism industry. Langkawi Island is very popular among western markets and Malaysia is increasingly promoting the destination as one of the major attractions for international and local tourists (WTTC 2001). The government is aggressively promoting the island as a tourism destination by improving the tourism facilities and inviting private investors to build the island as a popular destination. For the last ten years, about 320 million ringgit (approximately US$84 million) had been invested to improve the infrastructures and public facilities of the island (Kayat 2002). In year 2000, approximately 1.8 million tourists visited the island which included more than 200,000 foreign visitors (Rahim 2002). There are currently 6500 hotel rooms available including five and four star hotels as well as small hotels and chalets (Rahim 2002).

In order to achieve the overall objectives of this project, the following research questions are to be answered:

- What are the perceptions and attitudes of hotel operators towards using the Internet as a marketing and promotional tool for hotel products and services?
- What are the benefits and advantages to the hotel operators in terms of marketing the products and services over the Internet?
- What are the present Internet marketing strategies, if any, are utilised by the hotels on the island?
These questions are drawn from previous researches on the similar topic conducted at different geographical settings and areas. They are hoped to gather new insights, differences and similarities of data of such topic for new issues to be investigated.

After an extensive literature review for hotel marketing in Malaysia, there is little information available related to hotel marketing conducted in the island, let alone on Internet marketing for the hotel establishments. Therefore, as an exploratory study, it is necessary to perform a primary research to collect data on various hotel and resort properties in Langkawi Island. As an exploratory research, a primary data will be collected. The study will be mainly involved with relevant hotel establishments which utilize the Internet as one of their marketing tool for targeting their global market. To make it manageable, the study focuses on four and five-star rating hotels. All the star rating hotel and resort properties are registered with the Ministry of Art, Cultural and Tourism Malaysia and the star rating was granted and recognised based on hotels products and services, facilities and other amenities offered to visitors.

There are few key factors to be considered in determining which data collection and sampling methods should be used for the study. First, time is very limited, as the project should be completed within a six month period. Within that period, a researcher is expected to gather literatures on the chosen study and to make a literature review prior to the data collection. Based on the limitation, a secondary data will also be utilised such as facts and figures that are being collected for other related projects and followed by primary data. The primary data will consist of series of interviews from hotel managers which are going to be transcribed and interpreted with selected data analysis.

It is recognized that gathering information from the industry practitioners through semi-structured interviews are a very challenging process. Walsh (2003) suggested the following issues to be considered for conducting effective interviews:

- The varied language and culture of all participants
- Whom to sample (experts, individuals)
- How to present oneself
- Establish rapport and gain trust
- How to ensure that the ethical rights of respondents are protected such as the right of informed consent, confidentiality and protection for any harm

The issues put forward by Walsh (2003) are of utmost important for a researcher to consider prior to conducting in depth interviews. As a novice researcher, it is a major challenge to go out in the field and to collect data in the form of in depth interviews as a primary data collection.

A budgetary constraint has also resulted in a small number of participants to be analysed for this research. Due to the limited funding and logistical problems, it was envisaged that fifteen hotel and resort properties could be investigated, but in the end, there were only eight participants. The lower turnout was expected due to unavailability of managers to schedule the appointment and unfortunately the period during the interviews were conducted was a peak season for most of the hotels in Langkawi. The time constraints and the need to complete the project on time were also the other factors contributed to the small number of participants.
4. SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

It is decided that purposive sampling to be utilized and the study population will be the four and five star hotel rating in Langkawi Island, Malaysia. Using purposive sampling, a researcher is allowed to choose a study based on specific features and process which justified on the study to be made (Silverman 2000: p.104). Consequently, the selection of the sample population is more warranted based on specific set criteria that can be critically analysed accordingly. For example, Leong (2000) in his research on marketing practices and Internet marketing for Singapore hotels has chosen the sample of hotels listed in Singapore Tourism Board to measure the level of Internet usage and its significant for hotels marketing purposes in Singapore.

5. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

Considering the duration of the research project as well as the cost associated with it, it is recognised that depth interviews work best for performing the study. Based on previous studies, postal survey is not only costly but also time consuming. Besides, it will not guarantee a high response rate which can jeopardize the later stage of data analysis. The next part of the section provides detailed discussion of the chosen research method.

6. APPLYING A QUALITATIVE METHOD

Generally a qualitative method is appropriate for investigating a new phenomenon and exploring what and how people are doing and thinking (Strauss and Corbin 1998:11). According to Walsh (2003:67), “qualitative research refers to an interpretative method of collecting and analyzing data to explore and explain a phenomenon”. Patton (1990) explained that there are three types of data collection methods for adopting qualitative methods which are in-depth, open-ended interviews, direct observation and written document. For example, the data gains from conducting a series of interviews are “consist of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge” of a particular issue or topic (Patton 1990: 10-11). Therefore, a researcher can explore certain issues in detailed and combine a theoretical aspect with a practical situation accordingly.

As an exploratory research to critically analyze the level of role and usage of Internet marketing for hospitality establishments, ideally a qualitative research method can generate more insights and detailed information on such particular issues (Hudson and Lang 2001). For example, using in depth interviews, a researcher will be able to collect a detailed description of particular issues and identify different views and opinions from the hospitality managers through their own experiences. By going into the field and conducting a series of interviews, a researcher will be exposed to a real situation of how travel and hospitality industries are managed and this will further stimulate the theory building of a particular issue (Walsh 2003). A close encounter with hospitality managers through in depth interviews also gives the opportunity to a researcher to explore new issues and problems associated with a detailed description of it. Furthermore, using in depth interviewing, a hospitality researcher will able to find answer for the ‘why’ question and collect a detailed and rich description of a particular issue from an experienced hotel manager’s perspective (Kwortnik 2003).

By examining literatures on Internet marketing for the hospitality industry, a research performed by Hudson and Lang (2001) illustrates a good example of how in depth interviews are utilized for doing exploratory research of a particular destination. The researchers conducted 27 face-to-face interviews
with tourism operators to investigate online marketing efforts within hospitality organizations. Morrison and King (2002) also applied in depth semi-structured interviews in investigating the perceptions and the degree of which the tourism operators are willing to integrate online practices to their marketing strategy. They mentioned that using semi-structured interviews allow respondents to freely speak of their thought with consistency and flexibility.

7. DATA COLLECTION ISSUES.

The data collection was started in the mid February until early March 2004. Prior to that, an informed consent letter was sent to every five and four-star resort properties inviting them to participate in the research project. Fifteen letters were sent to the respective properties during the first week of February 2004 by fax and postage mail which followed up by telephone call to reconfirm of their participations. Eight hospitality establishments agreed to participate in the interviewing process. There are few issues to be discussed in terms of data collection process. It was experienced that recruiting the participants for the project within the time frame is a major challenge. Typically, most of the hotels on the island are going through peak season from November to April annually. Therefore, many hotel and resorts properties declined to participate in the project and some of them did not even respond at all to the information letters sent for them asking to be part of the study. During interview session, most of the hotel managers were reluctantly to disclose confidential issues such as budget and their strategies even though they were ensured of their confidentiality. A few of the interviewing sessions were also delayed and interrupted due to participant’s limited time and a tight schedule.

Based on the experiences, it is imperative for a researcher to establish trust and rapport (Kwortnik 2003) with hospitality managers before, during and after the research process in order to secure detailed information on data collection and to establish further collaborations for another research projects. The research topics should also be of major interest of the hospitality practitioners which are suggested by Sturman (2003) to focus on applied research targeting at specific management problems.

8. DATA ANALYSIS

For interpreting the results of the depth interviews and performing data analysis, content analysis will be used to organize and report the qualitative data. According to Patton (1990: 381), content analysis is “the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data”. As described by Kwortnik (2003), a qualitative researcher looks for categories, patterns, themes and meanings from the transcribed data generated by series of depth interviews. Using content analysis, a researcher also can make sense of the data by identifying related themes and patterns, discovering relationships among the themes and patterns as well as explaining the relationships in such a meaningful way (Walsh 2003).

A systematic coding will be utilised to interpret a large volume of data gathered through a series of interviews. According to Neuman (2000), there are two types of coding that are commonly used in content analysis which are categorized as manifest and latent coding. Manifest coding refers to information, which can be observed in the transcribed data and can be counted by observing a number of times a phrase or words appear. Latent coding refers to coding items by their underlying meanings, which demands an interpretation from a researcher through a specific criteria and framework. Latent coding commonly relies on more flexible definition and criteria due to lack of explicitness in performing coding scheme.
9. RESULTS

Based on the findings and results analysed, most of the respondents especially from the limited service four-star hotel properties may not be impressed with the usage of the internet as part of their overall marketing strategies because of their level of internet experience and financial reasons. Based on the analysis, it may be considered that most of Langkawi hotels and resorts are not fully aware of the potentials of Internet marketing to their organizations. From this study, the most important usage of the Internet for hotel operators in Langkawi would appear to deliver information about the hotel for guests and potential customers. Based on this research also, it was found that the location advantage of the five-star rated resort properties and the hotels’ exclusive amenities and services featured on their website, are the contributing factors of more travellers, especially from other countries, are using the Internet for seeking information and making online reservations compared to the four-star limited service hotels.

10. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paper explains the samples and data collection methods being used for research project undertaken. There are issues highlighted pertaining to getting participation from the hotel managers and finding appropriate time to perform data collection. It is felt that seeking participation from the practitioners for this project was a major task. In deciding which data collection methods work best for this study, as an exploratory research, the qualitative in depth interviews seems so have an advantage over other methods. A great deal and detailed information can be collected through interviews which a researcher is able to stimulate further discussion with the participants. Nevertheless, the reliability of the results depends on the correct data analysis and interpretation of the researcher. Having go through this research process and experiencing the tasks, it is of utmost important for a researcher in this area, to focus and combine issues that are more related to solving organizational problems in order to convince and to gains acceptance of the practitioners. Furthermore, performing applied research either qualitatively or quantitatively will be relatively easier if managers can understand the value and significant of a study conducted. For example, performing an in depth interview will not be a hassle if both researchers and managers appreciate the outcomes of a research.

REFERENCES


