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Abstract

This proposed study seeks to develop specific e-service (electronic service) strategies that could help enhance competitiveness of Abu Dhabi's tourism in the global market in general and in the Gulf region in particular. As e-commerce (electronic commerce) increasingly transformed business operations in the contemporary networked economy, services provided by these emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) became essential for global competition in tourism as well. With high growing number of luxury hotels, Abu Dhabi is in critical need of e-service framework that could help attract international tourists and better position itself in today's competitive global market. The proposed study could thus benefit the local hospitality industry in the following ways. It could first call for critical attention to e-service strategies that play a significant role in hospitality competition in many advanced economies but are seemingly overlooked by the local industry. Secondly, the framework that the proposed study intends to develop would systematically outline strategic guidelines that are tailored to the specific social and cultural needs of the local hotel industry and in turn help utilize these emerging ICTs for competitiveness enhancement. Consequently, an advanced tourism image that differentiates Abu Dhabi from other major cities in the region or in the world could be established.

Keywords: e-service, tourism, UAE, case study

Research Proposal

As information technology in general and the Internet and e-commerce in particular were increasingly advocated by researchers and practitioners in tourism [1-3], many believe that their positive effects could be rather promising for hospitality services [4]. Examples that study specific nations and advocate those positive effects have been found in Greek tourism industry [5], rural South Africa [6], northeast India [7] etc. In a rapidly developing country such as UAE (United Arab Emirates), those positive effects could be even more promising because UAE's economy has attracted growing attention in the global market [8-11] and inspired considerable tourist interests around the globe [12].

More specifically, tourism has been reported to contribute over 18% of Dubai's economy [12]; many online sources and consulting agency such as Deloitte & Touche LLP have confirmed that Dubai, the largest city in UAE, achieved the highest hotel occupancy rate in the world [13-15]. The number of luxury hotels in UAE, particularly in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, has outgrown that of any country or city in the world, even that of Las Vegas; an astounding growing rate is even expected in other Emirates such as Ras Al-Khaimah and Fujairah [12]. These reports clearly confirmed the promising future of tourism in UAE, which in turn inspires this research investigation.

Nevertheless, the notion of e-services has seemingly maintained at a relatively basic level in the hotel industry of UAE. Although most hotel businesses provide online booking and e-services, options are mostly descriptive and lacking interactive dynamics that are normally expected among international travelers. For instance, Le Royal Méridien Abu Dhabi[1], one of five star hotels in Abu Dhabi, merely provides plain toolbar menus and basic descriptions and photo displays for most e-services chosen. While its physical infrastructure and settings well fit the image of a five star hotel, the online appearance seemingly fails to do so. Similarly, the Armed Forces Officers Club and Hotel[2] (or locally known as the Officers Club) presents another example of a five star hotel with unfitting e-services. Despite its intriguing architecture and substantial endeavor to attract international tourists, its online system is also mostly descriptive and exhibitive without even a basic reservation option.

This proposed study thus seeks to accomplish the following objectives.

1. To understand strategic vision of e-service in Abu Dhabi's hotel industry: this objective could help the local hotel industry to articulate the organizational structure and the social and cultural contexts that shape individual hotels' perception of e-service provision. The local hotel industry could then better understand its strategic position in the global marketplace.

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[1] http://www.starwoodhotels.com/lemeridien/property/overview/index.html?propertyID=1900

[2] http://www.afoc.mil.ae/afoc/home.htm

2. To analyze obstacles and issues that hinder the development of e-service in Abu Dhabi's hotel industry: obstacles and issues derived from the completion of this objective allow specific social and cultural needs of the local industry to emerge. The local hotel industry could thus follow systematic guidelines that help overcome those issues and integrate social and cultural needs into its e-service strategy.

3. To raise awareness of and call for attention to the significance of e-service for the hotel industry's global competition: built upon objectives 1 and 2, this objective could help lead the local hotel industry to appreciate e-service strategies and integrate them into its regional and global competitiveness.

4. To develop e-service framework that help strategize the local hotel industry's market positioning and enhance the global competiveness of tourism: the framework developed will help the local hotel industry to maximize the potential of emerging information and communication technology (ICT) and in turn renovate Abu Dhabi's tourism image and elevate its competitiveness in the global market.

Potentially, major impacts of this proposed study might include: (1) enhance understanding of ICT significance in the contemporary networked economy, (2) address issues and concerns that have been largely overlooked in the local hotel industry's e-service models, and (3) develop a strategic framework that could help the local hotel industry to renovate its market positioning and lead the growing competition in the region and in the global market.

Proposed Methodology

A mixed research methodology will be deployed for the entire project with the first phase focusing on qualitative method and the second phase emphasizing survey method. During the first (current) phase, a case study will be conducted to compare and contrast different hotels in Abu Dhabi that demonstrate contrasting strategic vision of e-service. Case study is commonly recognized for its in-depth analysis of 'why' and 'how' questions [16]. It is considered a suitable methodology here because its research orientation is in line with the exploratory nature of this proposed study. Moreover, in addition to common factors that many hotels in UAE face, individual hotels might have different consideration for its e-service strategy. A case study research methodology will thus allow more contrasting issues among individual hotels to surface.

More specifically, I plan to visit those hotels on a weekly basis and conduct interviews with business and IT managers of those hotels to gain insights of their perspectives of and plans for e-services. Documents gathered from their websites and public sources will also provide fundamental background information. Interviews conducted will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Data analysis will thus primarily reply on transcripts and documents gathered. When available, qualitative analytical software such as NVivo might be used to help analyze necessary textual information.

As the proposed study is still under development, the second phase (survey study) will depend on the understanding derived from the first phase. Nonetheless, upon completion of the project, it is expected that practical relevance to hotel management in the region will be demonstrated, particularly in relation to strategizing e-services. Its potential contribution will in turn help UAE better face growing competition in the hotel industry from neighboring countries such as Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and others [17].

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