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The experiential approach

Aims and objectives

This chapter presents the experiential approach, looking at its foundations and the reason why this theory emerged. After explaining the limitations that some researchers identified with utilitarian approaches in understanding consumer behaviour, the chapter then explains the foundations of experiential marketing. This approach evolved has tremendously throughout the 1990s, especially with the emergence of the experience economy. The chapter also looks at the important role of emotions in understanding hedonic consumption and provides several examples that highlight different facets of the experience in various tourism contexts. Those examples include wildlife watching encounters, the Paris Syndrome, and the art of storytelling.

After studying this chapter readers should be able to:

- Understand in which consumption contexts the traditional utilitarian approach encounters its limits.
- Define the aims of the experiential approach and explain what it implies for marketers.
- Appreciate the role of emotions in creating a memorable experience and understand how it can be managed to generate a worthy experience.
- Understand the various senses involved in an experience and what might trigger them.
- Comprehend the various steps involved in setting up an experience and be able to apply this knowledge to different experiential contexts.

The knowledge of consumer experience is very important in determining the success of destinations and products' marketing. Studying the experience implies analysing what an individual goes through during the pre-experience, experience and post-experience stages. In this regards, an in-depth exploration of psychological concepts such as decision-making processes, attitudes, emotions, experience and satisfaction and loyalty is necessary for understanding the consumer experience in tourism, hospitality and leisure (Crouch and Ritchie, 2005). 'For researchers in consumer behaviour, an experience is above all a personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance, founded on the interaction with stimuli, which are the products or services consumed' (Cova and Cova, 2006 p.4). In the first part of this chapter, the marketing approach to the investigation of the experience will be detailed (experiential marketing) and in the second part its implications for tourism marketing will be addressed.

■ The limits of the utilitarian approach

Over the years, researchers have identified a number of limitations to the traditional consumer behaviour approaches, such as the information processing theory. This vision, in particular, has been heavily criticised on the grounds that it has concentrated mainly on consumer cognitive processes, relegating affective dimensions to an unclear and secondary role (Derbraix and Pham, 1989; Westbrook, 1987). The main criticism of the traditional and cognitive approaches lies with the fact that they mainly focus on a utilitarian logic. This logic has prevailed among marketing and consumer researchers who view the consumer as a rational economic actor: an idea that follows the 'homo economicus' philosophy. The cognitive and behaviourist models have indeed dominated the marketing research for decades (Cova and Cova, 2002).

The recognition that motives other than utilitarian ones could exist in the consumption of products has long been acknowledged by the consumer behaviour literature. In 1959, Levy had recognised that the evaluation of products could not be limited to their tangible attributes since they portrayed meanings to individuals beyond those tangible specificities: 'People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean' (p.118). Levy (1959) stated that products had personal and social meanings beyond their functional qualities: 'all commercial objects have a symbolic character, and making a purchase involves an assessment – implicit or explicit – of this symbolism, to decide whether or not it fits' (p.119).

In 1980, Sheth criticised traditional consumer behaviour models for their conceptualisation of consumers as rational thinkers. This author suggested that such conceptualisation did not allow for a clear understanding of various unrational behaviours, such as compulsive behaviour and fashion purchases. Sheth (1980)

suggested that in order to better understand consumer behaviour, other elements needed to be taken into account, such as habits and conditioning, situational effects, group behaviour and motivations.

Baudrillard (1970) showed that consumption practices are represented as social activities, in which consumers produce meanings and exchange symbols. Thus, consumers do not consume products in order to satisfy a given biological human need, but rather in response to the meaning of these products and the image they reflect. Research topics focusing on aestheticism and hedonism in the everyday life of the consumers have formed one of the major domains of study for marketing and consumer researchers (Lipovetsky, 2006). These studies have contributed to the re-conceptualisation of the consumer role, behaviours and needs. Indeed, the consumer is seen as an emotional actor looking for sensitive and hedonistic consumption experiences (Maffesoli, 2006) within the marketplace.

Schmitt (1999) used the term 'traditional marketing' to refer to the cognitive approach, which views consumers as rational decision makers who care about functional features. For Schmitt, the concepts and methodologies of traditional marketing are organised according to three aspects: the nature of products, the behaviour of consumers and the competitive activity in the marketplace. This logic does not take into account the emotional part of the consumer behaviour and the experiential dimensions that emerges within his marketplace experiences. In summary, traditional marketing is based on a rational and analytical view of consumers in the industrial era and 'is hardly a psychological-based theory about customers and how they view and react to products and competition' (Schmitt, 1999, p.55). The key features that differentiate traditional marketing from experiential marketing are shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Traditional marketing versus experiential marketing

| | Traditional marketing | Experiential marketing |
|-----------|---|--|
| Focus | Focus on functional features and benefits | Focus on customer experiences |
| Products | Product category and competition are narrowly defined | Consumption is a holistic experience |
| Customers | Customers are viewed as rational decision makers | Customers are irrational and emotional animals |
| Methods | Methods and tools are analytical, quantitative and verbal | Methods and tools are eclectic |