

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION LEADS TO SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE LALIMOU ECO-TOURISM CAMP IN NAMERI NATIONAL PARK

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ABSTRACT

The present day business scenario is all about providing the most unique service or the product which serves the greatest value to customers. In other words, the product or the service provided by the seller should be of competitive advantage. However, merely competitive advantage would not serve the purpose. The brand should be sustainable as well.

Nameri National Park is an exclusive tourist destination in Assam. But because of its lower popularity, it has not been a high revenue earning tourist destination. This study is an attempt to evaluate the sustainable competitive advantage of Lalimou Camp situated in Nameri National Park in the district of Sonitpur. It also aims to check the strategies of the eco camp and see if it has the potential capacity to establish a tight grip in promoting eco-tourism in the national park.

KEYWORDS: *Lalimou, Nameri National Park, Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA), Resource-Based View (RBV)*

INTRODUCTION

In this cut-throat era of competition, only those firms can survive that keeps its customers happy. It is all about providing the most unique service or the product which serves the greatest value to customers. In other words, the product or the service provided by the seller should be distinctively different from that of its competitors so that it can establish a competitive advantage. However, the merely competitive advantage would not serve the purpose. The brand should be sustainable as well. It means that the particular brand should lead the organization to stay ahead in the race of competition for a long period of time.

Tourism in Assam is a very lucrative revenue earning sector where different companies have put their hands into. Resorts, hotels, eco-camps are the best examples in this regard. Large organizations like the Taj group of Hotels, Radisson Blu etc have also recognized Assam as a potential tourist destination. The government of Assam has also launched a chain of resorts named 'Prashanti' in different places of the state to promote tourism.

One such place which is an exclusive tourist destination in Assam is Nameri National Park in the district of Sonitpur. The place is blessed with a number of resorts and camps for the convenience of the tourists. But because of its lower degree of popularity, it has not been very high revenue earning tourist destination. However, one of the existing eco-camps near the National Park named 'Lalimou Camp' has been trying significantly to boost the beauty of eco-tourism and attract more and more tourists to the national park.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Sustainable Competitive Advantage: Porter characterizes SCA as “the fundamental basis of above-average performance in the long run” (1985; 12). Similarly for Hill and Jones an organization “has a sustained competitive advantage when it is able to maintain above-average profitability over a number of years” (2004; 76). While Hill outlines that “companies have a sustainable competitive advantage when they consistently produce product/delivery systems with attributes which correspond to the key buying criteria for the majority of the customers in their targeted market” (1992; 135). The core premise upon which ‘sustained’ competitive advantage is founded upon is reflected on a time continuum. In simple words, Sustainable Competitive Advantage refers to the ability of a firm to continuously satisfy its customers by maintaining a competitive edge in the market by producing and delivering distinctively different products and services that can add value to customers.

Ecotourism definition: Ngece (2002), stated that ecotourism is that kind of tourism where the environmentally responsible people visits natural places to enjoy and appreciate nature which in turn can promote conservation and create a chance for local people to join in socio-economic activities. According to Tao, et al., (2004), ecotourism can happen only in natural surroundings which can provide environmental education with an aim of integrated sustainable environmental management. In other words, ecotourism is a kind of travel that focuses on a tour to destinations where the scenery, flora, fauna and cultural heritage that are the primary attractions.

SERVQUAL

The SERVQUAL method adheres to Reliability, Assurance, Tangibility, Empathy, and Responsiveness as dimensions for service quality measurement. It is in fact a comparison between service perceptions and service expectations. Here, 22 statements measure the performance across these five dimensions, using a seven-point Likert scale measuring both customer expectations and perceptions ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree making it a set of 44 questions.

The Perception Threshold of Customer Service Satisfaction: Azim (2008) has justified the assumption of 80% perception threshold as the benchmark of customer satisfaction in his study on the customer service assessment of Shahjalal Islami Bank Limited. He has based this 80% threshold level on the arguments put forth by Heskett, Sasser and Schlesinger (1997). Whereas Ferdous has based his view in his study on a private sector bank, the concepts of loyalty, customer retention and adding new customers apply to the present study of the urban cooperative bank too with equal depth. The gamut of banking services provided by both types of banks is similar. So, the present study also assumes 80% perception threshold as the customer satisfaction benchmark. 80% perception threshold would mean a score of minimum 5.6 out of a maximum possible score of 7 for any dimension as well as for each subcategory of the dimension. If the score comes to be less than 5.6, then it is rated as a non-acceptable level of satisfaction for that dimension or that subcategory.

Nameri National Park: Nameri National Park is a national park in the foothills of eastern Himalayas in the Sonitpur district of Assam, India about 35 km from Tezpur. The nearest village to Nameri is Chariduar which is about 9 km away. Nameri shares its northern boundary with the Pakhui wildlife sanctuary of Arunachal Pradesh. Together they constitute an area of over 1000 km² of which Nameri has an area of 200 km². The park was declared as a reserve forest on 17th October 1978. It was established as a national park on 15th November 1998.

The most attractive site of Nameri is the Jia Bhoroli River as the endangered species of Golden mahseer (a kind of fish) is found there. Speaking about the flora, the vegetation type of Nameri is of semi-evergreen, moist deciduous forests with cane and bamboo brakes and narrow strips of open grassland along rivers. The forest has over 600 species like Amari, Bonjolokia, Agar, Bhelou, Hollock, Naahor etc. Another significant aspect of the national park is the fauna of it. It is an excellent elephant country and is considered to be an elephant reserve. It is an ideal habitat for a host of other animals like Tiger, Leopard, Sambar, Dhole, Indian Wild Bison, Clouded leopard, Himalayan Black Bear, Capped Langur, Indian giant squirrel, Pygmy hog, Wild boar, Sloth bear etc. It is also a birdwatcher's paradise with over 300 species. The Hornbill, White-winged wood duck, Black stork, Ibisbill etc are notable ones.

Lalimou Camp: Lalimou Camp is basically a tourist camp which was established in December 2015 by a group of six entrepreneurs from Guwahati. With the sole intention of providing exposure to rural tourism, this camp was established. It is about 37 km away from Tezpur, Assam and is about 25 km away from Bhalukpong, Arunachal Pradesh. It is a comfortable and relaxing eco-resort, located close to Nameri National Park. One can feel the essence of village lifestyle and the warmth of a traditional Assamese village there. It is a true sense eco-resort that has its own solar plant. The camp has six cottages that can accommodate 2 persons each, two luxury tents which can accommodate up to 4 persons each and one alpine tent that can accommodate two persons. The resort has been designed in the way of a small village with multiple huts as cottages and a common dining hall.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Huy and Khin (2015) studies the concepts of Eco-tourism, its benefits to a country and also about the concept of Resource-Based View (RBV). The study is conducted with the objective of studying Sustainable competitive Advantage for ecotourism in Phu Quoc Island.

Gannon et. al (*n.d*) discusses the evolution of strategic management and explains how it can help in the sustainability of an organization. The paper also analyses the various strategies regarding how a competitive advantage can be achieved in an organization. The paper also checks if such a competitive advantage is sustainable in nature or not in the tourism sector. Further, the paper analyses how the internal resources of an organisation be utilised to gain this level of competitive advantage.

Sinitsyn (2015) in his study analyses the phenomenon of nature-based tourism in Finnish Lapland and checks the possible ways of developing nature-based tourism products. The author adopts a qualitative research method based upon a case study of a destination management company called Safartica and interview with the sales manager of the company in order to substantiate the study. The study acted as a guide towards understanding the concepts like tourist motivation, peculiarities of tourist behavior etc. The study further explains the concept of nature-based tourism and its allied areas like its demand, complications etc. Sinitsyn also adds that culture plays a very important role for the development of tourism in a particular place.

Goowalla and Neog (2011) in their paper study the scenario of tea tourism in the state and also provide necessary suggestions in this regard. The paper is a SWOT analysis of the various places of Assam rich in tea culture. The paper also studies about the various factors that mold the people to be potential tea tourists in the region.

Schroeder Kent (2015), in his paper studies the case of Bhutan and its Gross National Happiness (GNH) strategy as it is applied to sustainable tourism policy. The study is based on semi-structured interviews and the focus groups with 57 state and non-state tourism actors in Bhutan. It studies whether Bhutan's GNH governance framework successfully tallies the competing interests in respect of sustainable tourism policy. The paper is of the opinion that the implementation of Bhutanese tourism policy is characterized by diverse and unexpected applications of power by a class of policy stakeholders.

Das Runumi (2017) reviews the various tourist destinations in Assam and their potentialities. It also unearthed the problems which affect the tourism industry in the state. The paper highlights the various existing tourist destinations and potential destinations in Assam segmented as places of nature, religion and historical. It also highlights the possibility of developing Ecotourism, Ethnic tourism, River tourism etc.

Kalita and Gogoi(2015) observes the present scenario of tourism in Assam and also explain its various ails and accordingly recommends some steps for future promotion of tourism in the state. The authors mention about ten different kinds of existing and potential tourism sectors like sports tourism, Geo-tourism, MICE tourism etc and accordingly describes the pros and cons of each kind of tourism. The paper further proposes a list of requirements that Assam desperately needs to adopt for developing the tourism sector in the state.

Lekharu (2017) elaborates the concept of ecotourism and examines the present scenario of ecotourism in Assam and tries to find out the prospects of the state in this regard. Lekharu explains the biodiversity of Assam and provides relevant statistics. He further explains the various specialities in the different national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and bird sanctuaries in the state.

Nigam (2008), describes about water-based tourism and the maintenance of its infrastructure. He cites various types of water activities that generally attract tourists from all over the world and accordingly provides certain parameters for the activities to be allowed in the water bodies. The author further proposes for an Inland Maritime Legislation Act which is applicable to all water bodies more than 0.25sq.km area within the national boundary.

Todorovic (2014), in his paper, gives a brief review of the concept of sustainable competitive advantage in the field of tourism and also consolidate its ecological, economic and sociological dimension. The study showcases examples of good practice, analysis of existing policy documents on the development of tourism in Montenegro. The findings of the study states that sustainable development refers to the economic and social growth which can be achieved only by providing a balance between the economic and social capacities of a place and also respecting and integrating the environmental principles.

Research Gap

Although there have been studies done regarding Eco Tourism in Assam, the researcher has not come across any studies in Nameri National Park of Assam or any of its eco-camps. Nameri National Park is one of the most promising national parks of the region with abundance in nature that can boost tourism.

Objectives of the Study

The basic objectives of the study are-

- Analyze the Eco Tourism sector of Assam.
- Evaluate the strategies adopted by Lalimou Eco Camp for gaining Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for carrying out the study has been primarily analytical and descriptive in nature. Analysis of Objective No.1 is based on secondary information whereas Objective No.2 is based on primary data collected from the customers of Lalimou Eco Camp. The primary data has been collected using SERVQUAL questionnaires wherein the researcher has opted to approach 100 people out of whom only 89 could be reached. The contact information of the respondents was collected from the records of the eco camp. The sample size is being selected on a random basis using a random number table. The analysis of the primary data has been done in the following way-

- The Gap score is calculated as Perception Score – Expectation Score.
- The unweighted average gap score is being calculated for each dimension by dividing the sum of the gap scores by a number of statements for the particular dimension.
- The weighted average score is being calculated by multiplying the values of the above step with the weights assigned to each dimension by the customers out of 100.
- Average SERVQUAL Perception score is being calculated by adding the perception scores for each dimension divided by the number of statements. 80% threshold is been checked here i.e. if the perception score is above 80% (5.6) then it is assumed the customers to be satisfied or vice versa.

Limitation of the Study

The basic limitation faced during the study was that contacts could be established only with 89 respondents out of 100 prospective respondents.

Periodicity of the Study

The study was being conducted for a time period of 2 years i.e. from 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2018.

Analysis and Interpretation

As stated earlier, Objective No. 1 intends to “Analyze the Eco Tourism sector of Assam.” After the extensive review of a literature, the researcher has identified the prospects for developing ecotourism avenues in Assam.

The state of Assam can broadly be classified into three geographical areas viz. the Brahmaputra Valley that covers the main body of the state in the north, the Barak Valley in the narrow protruding south and the state’s Hilly region that separates the two valleys. The state is immensely rich in flora and fauna. The state is one of the world's richest bio-geographic areas. Besides its massive wildlife, mighty rivers and immense greenery can be the sparkles for one’s eye in Assam.

A few of the existing places of ecotourism importance in Assam are as follows-

Table 1

Sl. No.	Name of the Tourist Place	Speciality
1	Bhairabkunda	A place with scenic beauty in the border of Arunachal Pradesh.
2	Bhalukpong	A place by the side of river Jia Bhoroli which is famous for angling and water sports.
3	Chandubi	A natural lagoon, mesmerising picnic spot.
4	Dibru-Saikhowa	National park, the habitat of elephants, buffaloes. It is famous for wild horses
5	Haflong	A hill station in Assam with unsurpassed sylvan beauty.
6	Jatinga	A beautiful hilly place, where birds behave in a mysterious way. The local people call at the that birds commit suicide here on certain specific days.
7	Kaziranga	Internationally famous national park, the home of great Indian one-horn rhinoceros, tigers, elephants, buffaloes, deer, wild ducks and geese, breeding place of pelicans, habitat of reptiles and monkeys more particularly golden langurs and host of other species.
8	Manas	Situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, one of the magnificent national parks in the country, the Manas river flows through it, famous for the tiger project, a habitat for various wild animals.
9	Orang	A wild life sanctuary, known as a miniature Kaziranga.
10	Pabitara	A wild life sanctuary.
11	Potasoli	38 km from historic town of Tezpur, near the picturesque river Jia Bhoroli. It is famous for the eco-camp set up jointly by the Department of Forest and Assam Anglers Association.
12	Majuli	The largest river island in the world, centre of Vaishnava culture, seat of many Satras which are known as the centres of Assamese art, dance, drama, music, a safe haven for various migratory birds
13	Surya Pahar	Situated on a hill surrounded by innumerable statues of Durga Devi, Ganesha, Surya, Chandra, Buddha.

Source: Directorate of tourism, Guwahati

There has been a constant growth in the total number of tourists to the state every year. People from different parts of the country as well as from different parts of the world seem to recognize the place as a potential tourist destination and accordingly the desire to visit the place amongst them are rising.

A fact sheet of the tourist inflow in Assam during the time frame from 2009-10 to 2015-16 is presented below-

Table 2

Year	Tourists Staying in Tourist Lodges		Tourists Staying in Other Accommodations Like Hotels Etc.	
	Domestic	International	Domestic	International
2009-10	25665	664	38698	14030
2010-11	25831	594	41016	15039
2011-12	26439	696	43818	15964
2012-13	22057	711	45226	16997
2013-14	23890	579	44205	18507
2014-15	21092	422	48427	19583
2015-16	42988	1077	55999	25243

Source: Statistical Handbook Assam 2013, 2014 and 2015 and 2016

As stated earlier, Objective No. 2 intends to "Evaluate the strategies adopted by Lalimou Eco Camp in alignment to the RATER model." To fulfill this objective the sample respondents were asked questions relating to the five aspects of SERVQUAL.

Table 3: SERVQUAL Importance Weights

Features	Points
1. Tangibles: The appearance of the Eco Camps; its physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials, interiors etc.	40.20
2. Reliability: The eco camp's ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately	22.40
3. Responsiveness: The Eco Camp's willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.	13.58
4. Assurance: The knowledge and courtesy of the eco camp's employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.	12.07
5. Empathy: The caring individual attention the eco camp provides its customers.	11.75
Total	100

Table 4: Calculation of SERVQUAL Scores

Dimension	Statement	Expectation Score	Perception Score	Gap Score	Average SERVQUAL Perception Score	Unweighted Average for Dimension	Weighted Gap Score
Tangibles	1	2.06	1.21	-0.85	3.82	0.14	5.62
	2	5.16	5.56	0.40			
	3	4.08	5.02	0.94			
	4	3.85	3.50	-0.35			
Reliability	5	4.81	5.02	0.21	5.95	0.18	4.03
	6	6.02	6.19	0.17			
	7	6.02	6.45	0.43			
	8	5.97	6.15	0.18			
	9	6.03	5.98	-0.05			
Responsiveness	10	6.82	7.0	0.18	6.69	0.35	4.75
	11	6.44	7.0	0.56			
	12	5.87	6.70	0.83			
	13	6.22	6.07	-0.15			
Assurance	14	5.19	5.27	0.08	5.95	0.29	3.50
	15	6.02	6.07	0.05			
	16	5.55	6.27	0.72			
	17	5.90	6.21	0.31			
Empathy	18	6.11	6.77	0.66	6.34	0.20	4.06
	19	6.57	6.68	0.11			
	20	5.90	6.21	0.31			
	21	6.01	6.04	0.03			
	22	6.10	6.02	-0.08			
Average SERVQUAL score:					5.73	0.20	4.39

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing discussions, it can be said that there is the immense scope of ecotourism in Assam. There are a various beautiful scenic places scattered across the state which has the potential to grab the tourism market and attract tourists from far and wide.

In alignment to the second objective, the study reveals that the overall perceived SERVQUAL score for the 5 dimensions of customer satisfaction is more than the threshold level of acceptable satisfaction. This means that the customers are satisfied by the quality of services delivered by the eco camp to them. From, the above table it was observed that the average SERVQUAL perception score on an average seems to cross the 80% threshold i.e. it scores 5.73 out of 5.6

which means that the customers are satisfied with the services of Lalimou camp. However, improvements can be made in case of the tangible items where the perception score shot only upto 3.82. The basic reason for this is the fact that the respondents have assigned this dimension the maximum weight out of 100 points among all 5 dimensions. Therefore, the tangibility dimension is the one, where the eco camp needs to take steps on priority to improve the service delivery quality and try to reduce this gap in a serious manner, because, it is the dimension which has come out to be the most important for the customers in the study.

Similarly, the average unweighted gap score for the overall dimensions of customer satisfaction comes out to be 0.20. When the total dimension weight of 100 is factored in, the weighted gap score increases to 4.39. For both the cases, the survey results reveal that the respondents' perception rise above their expectations. If the data is interpreted on one to one basis for the five dimensions, it could be observed that in all the dimensions the unweighted gap score is positive which is indeed optimistic for a small eco camp like Lalimou.

In fine, it can be concluded that Lalimou Eco Camp has been significantly playing a dominant role in Nameri National Park by attracting a significant number of tourists and catering to their needs and wants in a very innovative way right from being a solar-powered eco camp, to a mini village environment amidst the jungle, to providing good quality services. It seems to attract many tourists in the last few years and has immense scope to spread its roots to other fields of quality service delivery. The competitive advantage that Lalimou has been playing for the last few years makes it one of the most desirable eco-camps in the region.

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