



Customer Expectations Created through a Hotel Website

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Pine and Gilmores (2019) infamous exploration of customer experience puts today's market into one sentence - time is money. The selection of where to put one's money is so wide it creates higher demands for an exceptional customer experience to differentiate from other service providers.

The client with whom the thesis was conducted aims to expand their current customer base, given the seasonal nature of their current clientele. Website being the first step of the usual customer experience, the aim of this thesis is to help the client develop their website. This is done by collecting customer data of what customer expectations, the website creates in first-time visitors. The purpose is to help understand their customers better and hence master the customer experience which ultimately leads to expansion of the customer base.

Theoretical framework mainly revolves around customer expectations, customer experience and branding. The purpose and meaning of the website are briefly covered as well as elements of hospitality field and accommodation services. The biggest findings of the theory part are the financial profit it brings when investing in customer experience as well as the importance of making all decisions in developing the customer experience based on actual customer data since creating the memorable customer experience isn't guess work.

For the field research, nine semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted about target groups general buying behavior, general expectations for the accommodation field and specific expectations for the clients' services based on the website. The biggest findings were the importance of authenticity and uniqueness in accommodation services. As concrete steps for the client would be to have more pictures of the hotel, especially main building and the lobby, be more vocal about their actions towards sustainability and to emphasize their location and the actions they are taking in supporting the local businesses. Feedback from the client was positive. The development ideas were considered useful and the thesis well conducted and academically accurate.

Keywords: Brand Image, Customer Expectations, Customer Experience, Website

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1 Introduction

Succeeding in today's market is greatly dependent on the company's ability to create memorable experiences that truly exceed the customer's expectations. There is both a marketing aspect and practical aspect, meaning that the company needs to load the customer with thrill and excitement about incoming experience but also, deliver on promises and incorporate delightful surprises. Before being able to respond to the wishes and hopes, let alone go up and beyond expected, one must understand the real expectations of their customers. (Klaus 2015, 1-3.)

The client with whom this thesis was conducted is a spa hotel located in a summer city in Finland. They have a very strong and loyal customer base, yet they mostly come during the summer time. The city is fairly quiet during the winter and fall seasons and the current customer base - mostly elderly and middle-aged couples, are coming to enjoy the summery city atmosphere. They would be interested in finding more data about different customer segments to see if there would be marketing possibilities. The website was recently updated and as first step of the usual customer experience, the aim of this thesis is to help them develop it further by collecting customer data of what customer expectations the website creates in first-time visitors. The purpose is to help understand their customers better and hence better the customer experience which ultimately leads to expansion of the customer base.

This thesis explores the characteristics of the hospitality field and customer expectations to better understand the client's context. Also, the purpose of the website is briefly covered as well as the most important elements for consumers in websites. Literature about the importance of customer experience and its benefits for the service provider are covered. Light is shed on the many aspects that play a role in both the expectations and experience. Examples are given of companies that managed to create excellent customer experience and what there is to learn from them. Websites being a marketing tool, there is also some theory about marketing and branding. Explorations on what a successful brand is like and how it plays a role in the customer experience are provided. Examples are given of successful and unsuccessful branding experiences and what made them either succeed or fail in their attempt to pursue customers.

The thesis is divided into five main chapters. The first two main chapters are introduction to the thesis and field introduction. The third chapter is the theory part where various literature from books, articles, studies and peer-reviewed thesis works are reviewed. The topics of the theory part include the purpose of a website, the importance customer experience and

customer centric branding. Building on the theoretical foundation, chapter four delves into the field research methods and data-gathering process, findings and analysis of the data. In this chapter the concrete development ideas for the client are also presented. The final chapter concludes the covered subjects into main aspects, findings and results.

2 Field introduction

The client's field is hospitality. Hospitality field is a broad service branch providing restaurant, leisure, transportation, entertainment or accommodation services. According to Walker (2013, 4) the name hospitality comes from old French and it literally translates to provide, care or shelter for travelers. Hospitality field is basically all about taking care of customers and providing for customers. The demand for hospitality services has been on the rise since 1999 all the way to the pandemic years. Pandemic had a strong effect on the hospitality industry but in long term the field has positive future in terms of demand for the services. (Matkailu- ja Ravintolapalvelut 2023.)

Drawing upon the Article Hospitality Industry written by lonel (2013) hospitality answers to the most vital human needs - the need to eat and need to sleep. It provides fulfillment to these for people who are traveling away from their home. This makes hospitality industry a very vital one for society and humanity since everywhere people are and go, the basic needs remain the same. Although the phenomena of tourism have raised the importance of hospitality field, people have always explored and changed locations for one reason or another and that explains why hospitality and especially accommodation has been around even in the ancient times of Sumerian's.

lonel (2013) contends that accommodation is the cornerstone of the hospitality industry; without it, the entire sector would cease to exist. The author points out that today accommodation industry is a lot more than a roof over your head. It not only offers shelters, but also curates, experiences, activities, interior design, atmosphere, and security. It operates based on the need for nighttime protection and everything added builds up to the experience.

On this thesis, the concentration is on accommodation field. Accommodation is a broad field with multiple variety of the service such as resorts, motels, bed and breakfast, luxury hotels, tiny houses, apartments and even little huts. The client of this thesis is a spa-hotel. Accommodation centers usually provide activities and other necessities for customers such as gym, pool, restaurant, conference rooms and parking space. lonel (2013) would list three distinctives of the accommodation field: "Ensuring the security of life and property of

passengers”, “Absolute hygiene in establishments of tourist reception” and “Operation of equipment located in accommodation spaces”.

These characteristics represent fundamental requirements for success in the field. Walker highlights the importance of customer service and the service experience. The author asserts that to be the heart and soul of Hospitality. He defines serving as “provide goods and services for” and “be of assistances to”. What the customer feels and sees makes the service. Basically, hospitality is all about customer experience. (Walker 2013, 23-26.)

3 Role of brand image and website in customer expectations

This chapter covers theory about the purpose and importance of the website, the creation of customer expectations, importance of customer experience and how branding plays a role in managing customer expectations. These topics are both studied as theoretical ideas as well as through stories of successful implementations.

3.1 Website

In our research, the effects of website in the customer’s image of the hotel are studied. Before analyzing the importance of website, we need to understand the definition and the purpose of website. According to Harris’ blog (2022), the author explains that the purpose depends on the type of website you have. Harris lists seven types of websites - sales generator, lead generator, information-based, entertainment centered, service-oriented, connection-drawing or presentation-type of website.

Sales website being an e-commerce type. Sales generator are usually entrepreneurs with only very necessary information, phone number and email attached which requires a contact to close the deal. Entertainment examples could be YouTube and TikTok and information websites could be any news outlet for instance. Service websites could be used by government or city and presentation could be a straight link to a mock-up or a portfolio. Good example of a connection-based website could be LinkedIn or Facebook. (Harris 2022.)

For hotels, websites are mostly either e-commerce types or sales generator. There is either a link or phone number through which one can make a room or table reservation or straight up reservation. The hotel with whom the research is conducted has a reservation system only on their website. They have all the information that customer needs about the services. According to Harris’ definition of sales website is to drive sales to services presented online. The key to a successful sales website is a smooth and user-friendly payment process. (Harris 2022.)

Hassanzadeh & Rahimnia (2013) discuss the impact of website in their article *The impact of website content dimension and e-trust on e-marketing effectiveness: The case of Iranian commercial saffron corporations*. They argue that a good quality website is important factor in customer satisfaction. In today's world, it is usually the first touchpoint that customer has with the company, especially in hotel industry where most bookings are done online. It sends a signal of the quality and legitimacy of the company.

One of the big things Hassanzadeh et al. (2013) highlight in their article is how the website communicates the trust or distrust to the customer. The website can work for or against companies. Website is literally the heart and home of the company. It has all the information the customer needs. It sends a signal to the customer of either good or bad experience. Smooth service process unconsciously indicates a smooth offline process as well. Which brings us to the importance of both creating and keeping the promise of a good customer experience.

3.2 Customer experience

The term customer experience is defined as “the customer’s overall perception of the brand, including cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial, spiritual and social response” through each stage of the customer journey. It is ultimately about how customer feels during each step and that’s why it should always be studied from the customers point of view since it’s determined by their thoughts, feelings and expectations. (Suwelack, Stegemann & Xia Ang 2022, 5.)

The spectrum of previous literature about customer experience is vast and variegated. It’s been covered all the way from psychological, behavioristic, business, management, marketing, philosophic and economic points of view. Klaus discusses these vast perspectives in his book *Measuring Customer Experience* (2015, 3). He divides all these three aspects into three categories - content, process and practice as shown in figure 1. In the theory part, literature mainly from content category is covered, especially from experimental point of view, since it plays a big role in understanding customer expectations. In the end, some practice literature about services marketing perspectives is covered as well.

TABLE 1.1 Customer experience research foci

Category	Literature streams
<i>Content</i> – The concept of customer experience	Economic perspectives
	“Rational” cognitive theories
	Experiential “emotional” theorists and the role of affect
	Peak experiences
<i>Process</i> – How customer experiences arise and evolve	Unidirectional perspectives of customer experience
	Co-created experiences
	Dialogical perspectives
	Brand communities and customer experience
<i>Practice</i> – The portrayal of customer experience management literature	Consultant/analyst perspectives of customer experience
	Services marketing perspectives

Figure 1: Customer experience research foci (2015, 3).

Perhaps one of the most influential explorations of the concept of Customer Experience is found in “The Experience Economy” written by Pine and Gilmore, first published 1999. It explores the idea of experience being the most valuable asset in today’s market. The theory itself is revolutionary in comparison to the at that time ruling profit- and production-based concept. The kind of philosophy of industrialization where one must make as much products as fast and profitably as possible.

In this thesis the expanded version, published in 2019, is used as a source. It stresses the importance of time, even calling it the new currency. Meaning, the amount of time spent with your service is the indicator of how good the experience is. And the importance of experience is highlighted even more. Due to the number of options where to put one’s money, time and energy, customers have become even more hesitant to pay for just the product or just the service without some deeper value added to it through a holistically rewarding experience. (Pine & Gilmore 2019, x-xii.)

This idea is majorly subscribed in various literature afterwards. *Managing the Customer Experience* by Smith and Wheeler (2002, xi) start off their book with the sentence “Experience is everything”. They even use the expression “Experience economy” which is the title of the Pine and Gilmore’s book and ultimately the whole concept behind it. Klaus (2015, 1), contends that having a good product alone is insufficient to boost sales in the contemporary market.

He states that all companies need to assess and maintain customer expectations and experience throughout the whole buying process - before, during and after (2015, 1). He

basically argues that customers need to come in with expectance, stay pleasantly and leave satisfied or even surprised. It's not just about efficiency and handing the customer the product and shouting next. But is this way too time- and resource consuming? Is it truly a worthwhile investment?

If we look at data from real-life companies where this theory is put to practice, it proves to be quite the opposite- not just a worthwhile investment but a key to success. In *Starbucks Experience - 5 Principles for Turning Ordinary into Extraordinary* written by Michelli (2006) they dig deeper into how Starbucks has created its dominance in the market by multiplying its value 5000 % in stock market (2006, 4). It is the embodiment of the concepts created by Pine and Gilmore (2019, 5) of taking the most mundane good and creating a service, that ultimately is the product, around it.

Watkinson (2013, 3) in his book *The Ten Principles Behind Great Customer Experiences* tells a story that agrees with the explored literature about the value a good customer experience brings. In a rural town nearby him, is a coffee shop that doesn't just offer delish and affordable meals but an ambience like none other. Customers there feel cherished and invited by the staff through small details like water pots waiting for their dogs by the door outside. Most of their customers they know by name and people tend to stay loyal to places like this. The popularity of this cafe is not even comparable to other cafes or restaurants on the same region. They've indeed become so popular without any traditional marketing methods that high-exposure magazines like the *Independent* and *Waitrose* willingly do all the advertising for them in form of articles and covers.

Similarly, to Watkinson's example, Starbucks rarely puts millions on heavy marketing campaigns, although with their turnover, they could afford that. Instead, they put their emphasis on creating an inviting atmosphere and that they make by putting the well-being of their staff first, to ensure first class service. According to Smith and Wheeler in *Managing the Customer Experience* (2002, 5), Starbucks is rather concentrated on 'creating value and customer service'. Its strategy has proven the point that not even ads in between Super Bowl are comparable to the importance of mastering the customer experience.

Based on the customer experience literature, cafés seem to provide a lot of good examples since their market value is solely based on an experience they provide. Pine and Gilmore (2019, 3) talk about a friend who was visiting Italy and asked a receptionist to recommend some good coffee shops in town. They were directed to a local café located in the heart of ancient Venice. The authors draw appealing image of the café with expressions like "crisp morning air", "fully immersed by the sight and sounds of the most remarkable of old cities in the world". Apparently, people were more than happy to pay 15 dollars, not necessarily for the cup of coffee, but the experience and concept created around it.

They were willing to pay the extra 10 dollars because they believed it was a worthwhile compensation for elements they valued, not just a cup of coffee. This comes to prove that core of customer experience lies in understanding the customers and finding out what they value. It's all about getting in their heart and mind. The traditional view of seeing customers as numbers in a chart with the sole purpose of bringing profit doesn't really support this process. Watkinson (2013, 18) goes as far as comparing the number-based view of customers to their unhumanitarian. Similar to what Nazi's did to Jews in Holocaust to clear their conscience by changing names and identities to numbers.

Article written by Booth and McKnight (2010) discusses important aspects concerning customer-segment based customer expectations. They bring up the fact that there is no "typical library user". In our research of identifying customer expectations, we should categorize the users to types of users since services such as libraries and in this case hotels, can have huge variety inside their customer segments. They are all actual humans with deep motives, real fears and unique stories behind their motivation.

And that is exactly what Starbucks has done right with their customers - they have brought back the humanity of customers. Michelli (2016, 12) draws a heart-warming picture of how the customers feel personally encountered in Starbucks. They can very specifically personalize their drink with extra pump of this, non-something milk, non-sugar fat, extra ice and extra hot whip with, as a cherry on top, their name written on the cup. It's not uncommon to hear people discussing "my Starbucks order" and "my Starbucks" which mean their most common order and closest Starbucks station. It's because their needs and identity are met in there and they feel unity with the company.

Another interesting point Watkinson (2013, 7) draws is that since industrial revolution people's needs in the market has shifted from just basic manufactured goods to more handmaid products and unique experiences. Fromm and Angie (2018) discuss how traditional service providers aren't very interesting to Generation Z. Generation Z are people born in between years of 1997 to 2012. They tend to require something more surprising, interesting and unique within the context of traditional services. For them seamless and smooth service is a non-negotiable rather than a surprise since how seamlessly and fast services in internet platforms work have become their reality. (Angie & Readd 2018, 68, 112.)

This just proves that expectations are always changing. Like computer ones being an experience like none other and nowadays being the most normal item in the household. Expectations are always evolving. There might be a study done on customer expectations 10 years ago which is totally outdated in its accuracy. Expectations are changing factors which are influenced by the evolving environment. Something that was a surprising "wow"-effect two years ago, might've turned into a self-explanatory in the service field. In the article by

Booth and McKnight (2010), they give electric books as an example. It used to have such a hype around it and now it's more expected as foundational basic necessity of library and the lack of it could be considered as "irritant".

"Irritant" is another factor of customer experience that the article Booth and McKnight (2010) discusses. The so-called irritants are told to have bigger impact on the full experience than positive, surprising factors. Irritant comes when we expect something we consider as basic element of the service is either missing or poorly executed. As an example, the authors give hotel field and its inability to compensate for the dirty shower plug-hole and unemptied trash can with chocolates and sparkling wine waiting on the crisp's sheets. Based on this we could argue that responding to the very basic expectations is more important than the surprise factors. When basic needs are met, one can take a step to next level and provide something unexpected.

There is a saying about expectations killing experiences. Booth and McKnight (2010) are in agreement with the statement by indicating that the higher the expectations, the lower the chances of a satisfying experience. And vice versa, if the expectations are close to zero, every positive element can be a surprise factor. Based on the research customer experience could be divided into two levels - adequate and desired. Adequate service experience is something that the customer realistically could've expected and can accept but no surprise elements. In between adequate and desired they found a grey area which they named "the zone of tolerance".

There are several factors that affect how big the zone of tolerance. One of them is price; Berry, Prasuman and Zheithaml (1991) found out in their study that price plays a big factor in the zone of tolerance. A higher price will significantly narrow the zone of tolerance whereas a bargain creates flexibility and customers are more tolerant when paying less. Other big factor was found to be the amount of service alternatives in the market or area. If there is only one or limited options, customers tend to be more flexible. If there is a lot of service providers where to choose, they tend to feel like they can be pickier and it curbs the zone of tolerance.

Zone of tolerance can be also different based on the customer's general mood and the events leading up to the service. If the day has gone smoothly, customers usually have more patience left and naturally if they've already traveled through bumpy road, the smallest mistake can turn them completely down. Also, experiences with the particular field influence the zone of tolerance but also, experiences from different fields. If a customer is for instance well-off and generally used to high quality service and treatment, their zone of tolerance is naturally smaller, regardless of the field. And if customer's have had poor experiences with similar services, they aren't fazed by irritants. (Booth & McKnight, 2010.)

Lastly, Berry, Parasuraman and Zheithaml (1991) found that urgency in situations can make customers less tolerant of mistakes, delays or misunderstandings. As an example, if the mainframe is damaged, the response should be faster than in the case of broken copies. If the company fails in a critical situation, they break the most definitive factor - trust and after every failure and disappointment, the zone of tolerance just keeps shrinking.

As an example, let's take a pub from the same village as the café mentioned by Watkinson (2013, 4-5). The pub is overly careful with maintaining a good image - they put a lot of money on publishing good quality pictures of meals and writing advertising material on the internet. They are very into creating an illusion of the service experience by using money yet not interested in using the budget on the actual experience. Even in very unprofitable ways like in a situation where a compensation was promised to a customer upon complaint from a mistake made by the house. Customer was leaving the pub in somewhat satisfied sense until the owner called in to take back the compensation since "they can't afford that" and instead gave as a compensation for the unreceived compensation a few jars of jam.

In his point of view, it dangerous to be only concerned with profitability and numbers. As we remind ourselves of the pub and café example, ironically, having profitability as one's main goal, won't always bring profitability. The café was so centered on building the immerse customer experience that profitability followed. The point he paints is that not everything that company does will increase revenue right away but it certainly has effects on the customer experience which sure will have huge impact on the flow of revenue on its due time. (Watkinson 2013, 26.)

Watkinson compares this to an example of a movie where two characters are given a task together - one who's an emotional rollercoaster driven by feelings and one who's insensitive and driven by facts. This can be seen as a parable of companies and consumers - A lot of companies have to think logically and strive towards being profitable whereas most consumers make their decision based on emotions and impulsion. In order to be able to provide for customers, who companies in fact rely on, they need to get to the get to the consumers level and speak their language. (Watkinson 2013, 24-25.)

3.3 Brand Image and its effect on customer experience

Same goes to branding - building a brand image that supports customers' point of view will naturally more successful. Going back to the customer's core expectations and values regarding any service. The most core demand for customers was found to be reliability. In most other expectations the bar was lower. Reliability being distinguisher between bad and adequate. The customer wants to feel that they aren't tricked but genuinely served with the quality of service that they paid for. The so-called surprise elements which raise the bar to

desired are created by tangibles, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. (Watkinson 2013, 55.)

Since reliability is a non-negotiable, managing service promises is the key in managing customer expectations. It is a common mistake to “trick” customers through marketing and drop them once they’ve paid for the service. This doesn’t create reliability in customer’s mind. Berry, Parasuaman and Zheithaml (1991) said it well: “A brochure photograph of a beautifully appointed room may entice the traveler to make a reservation, but it is the room itself that contributes to the customer’s positive or negative assessment of the hotel’s service quality.”

Smith and Wheeler (2002, 50) agree with the importance of brand-reality by saying that a brand is a promise, but the promise is either kept or forgotten by the product itself - the experience with the product. The product is the one that either “conveys a feeling, experience of repeatable quality” or disappointment. Basically, they state that a brand is only as strong as their customer experience (2002, 75). Brändikäs by Suonio (2010, 17-20) describes why the word ‘brand’ often resonates negatively in consumers especially. Branding is too often understood as creating an attractive illusion of the product rather than carefully crafting a good gift to intentionally designed packaged.

Pine and Gilmore (2019, xxviii) agree with Suonio that people have become overly suspicious towards branding and marketing activity. Consumers are so used to seeing the image of the burger looking better in advertising than real life and companies concentrating on creating smarmy sentences and auspicious promises with no intention to keep them. It’s almost like marketing has turned into tricking customers to buy and leaving them with a bad taste of a promise unkempt.

Suonio (2010, 24) wants to make people see branding in a new light - in its original light. She compares a good brand to a family member - unique, sweet and intriguing but real. Too often companies forget that brand is not only the conception of the product but also the product itself. Like a person, a brand’s supposed to have both soul and the frame that supports the soul. There’s nothing left in a person when soul leaves the body - it’s dead.

Losing the soul of the brand has led many brands killing themselves in the ongoing rat-race of making and creating more and faster. Others have lost interest in product development altogether when being too occupied with maintaining a good image of the product. As we’ve discussed in the customer experience part, the expectations need to be carefully managed since when expectations are through the roof, so are demands about the experience. (Suonio 2010, 47.)

Of course, one shouldn't forget about the aesthetics and appealing communication since, as Jeffery puts it: "Branding is all about customer perception." He gives an example of bottled spring water from the Alps. The product itself is almost identical to any bottled water sold in a grocery store but the perception of fresh spring water from a beautiful mountain village stored in a package that conveys the vibe and atmosphere of the village makes it worth much more than just water in a plain blue bottle. (Suonio 2010, 75.)

This proves branding should be strategic and intentional, but it doesn't take away from the importance of the brand image being truthful to the branded concept. The water from springs of Alps is truly from there and actually fresh but doubtfully that much better than normal water yet it has history, feeling and uniqueness to it. The point is that appealing brand image is relatively easy to create but hard to sustain without truly a product wrapped in depth, feeling and historical relevance. (Suonio 2010, 21, 24.)

Bakker (2018) describes influencer marketing as one form of word-of-mouth marketing. If an influencer we look up to, tells us about how her hair was transformed through this hair oil and shows the before and after photos of a weight loss program. Somehow it makes the product more reliable. This doesn't apply to all influencers of course; it needs to be a person whose opinion we truly value. This also, serves our deep longing to belong to and identify ourselves with a group. If others are buying, liking and using something, we want to use it too. There is something interesting about brands that are more than a product, they represent certain lifestyle, belonging to certain group of people. (Smith & Wheeler 2002, 6-10.)

"People like being badged", Smith and Wheeler (2002, 2-3) write. They describe how people love to wear Timberland boots and drive BMW since these feeds their ego. The experience we create and hence the brand that follows should strive to fulfill this need. It should represent certain lifestyle. People are interested in self-actualization through your service rather than the service itself. Suonio (2010, 45) puts it well that the service itself isn't important, it is what the customer can achieve through it what sparks their interest.

Jeffery (2010, 92) explores a concept that creates the desired feeling of community and belonging called loyalty marketing. The author gives an example of Lexus which has 70 % brand loyalty. Their customers have such great benefits of staying with them that they are even willing to buy an older car model as long as its Lexus. Lexus has found the lifestyle their customers want to identify with and their loyalty benefits are aligned with it. They provide free breakfast on Saturdays with certain dealers, free subscription of Lexus lifestyle magazine, free touch-ups to their cars, free car wash, free loaner car and offers to golf events where new Lexus cars are launched. It is truly brilliant way of hooking the customers with their product whilst making them feel special in doing so.

To create something like this, we need to have real data about our target groups: what are their values? What they want to identify with? What drives them? What is the lifestyle they strive for? Creating the wanted customer experience and marketing plan around it, everything needs to be built on solid customer understanding. A story from "Marketing for Hospitality" by Kotler, Bowen and Makens (2014, 165) backs up this claim. In the 1990's women started doing more business travel and most hotels welcoming business travelers were both mainly run by men but also used to male visitors. They thought of starting a Lady program, creating different floors for women with girly products in the room.

After the unsuccessful efforts to appeal to female business travelers they conducted research that showed that women didn't want to be considered a different category than male travelers and neither receive special treatment. Had they done the research before launching they would've saved themselves a long penny (Kotler, Bowen and Makens 2014, 165). Similar stories by Morrison and Wearne (2011, 152) say that campaigns that were doomed to fail by research, actually failed when executed against the public opinion. This just comes to show that nothing steals from successful marketing like assumptions. The purpose of collecting data for marketing purposes is to reduce assumptions or lucky guesses from actual decisions. Even a carefully conducted survey for a group of twenty people from the right target group can give a cohesive insight into the mind of customers.

Even bold moves can be profitable when backed with research. Jeffery (2010, 87) tells another interesting marketing trick - testing. When your product and service is truly great, making it available for a limited period of time, makes customers rush to try it. Porsche was going through a low season in sales until they launched a test-drive campaign. According to their research, people who had tried the car had much stronger likelihood of purchasing one. This obviously led to masses of people, who generally would've considered Porsche to be out of their league, marching to the scene. This campaign generated sales that wouldn't have been possible without it. When they experienced the Porsche driving experience, it became irresistible to many. People don't know what they're missing until they experience it and this is especially true to products with high-value and quality, like Porsche.

Another brand that is always listed with the great and exemplary - Coca Cola had its big leap through testing. In Coca Cola Museum, one can read about their the first ever marketing campaign - walking around cities of the States offering free sample drinks. Since the product itself was a hit, the campaign was successful and people fell in love with the product. The rest is history. After that Coca Cola has mastered creating a positive perception through advertising campaigns without compromising the actual taste.

This all could sound wasteful, giving away so much for free. Often branding is considered an expense rather than investment. And due to the lie most companies have completely gotten

rid of all marketing and branding efforts. The truth is that it requires creativity above large budgets. Suonio (2010, 53) encourages companies to be intentional in orchestrating creativity to your organization and to be strategic and creative on how you do marketing.

For example, rather than using largely budgeted mass media campaigns she suggests publishing intentionally created content to carefully scoped target group through the right channels. Instead of picking the most influential and high-budget influencer, Suonio (2010, 57) highlights the importance of finding out who your target group truly listens to. It doesn't have to be one specific person but a group of people. For instance, moms listen to fellow moms and teenage girls listen to slightly older girls that they look up to. Finding out data on whose opinion your target group values is crucial in influencer marketing.

Similarly, to finding out the lifestyle and group of people the customers want to identify with, the theme of the service has to be in line with the values of customers. Pine and Gilmore (2019, xv) stress the importance of theme and how it can serve as a distinguisher between services. If a service has a theme that resonates positively in customer's mind the experience is more likely to be positive. The theme should be cohesive, intentional and carefully executed in the actual experience. It's important that the theme is not too general or wide. The theme is introduced in the website or social media, and needs to be apparent in the service itself. This can ease the marketing efforts since it narrows down the wide selection of channels and ideas to smaller but more intentional selections.

4 The interview process

When assessing the expectations of created through website, both accuracy and the ability to create positive expectancy should be taken into account. In this study it's not possible to necessarily to prove the accuracy of the website but how reliable it is perceived can be found out by asking questions that lead to how accurate or reliable customers would perceive the service based on the website. Website should create a feeling of trust and accuracy through actual reliability but it doesn't take away the importance of appealing to senses through appealing visuals, immersing sounds and advertising texts.

This chapter covers the whole interview process from beginning, creating the questions to insights and concrete steps. The chapter begins with theory about interviews and qualitative data which builds a foundation for understanding the purpose of interviews. From there the question planning journey is presented along with the preparation for the interview - including finding suitable participants and reaching out to them. The final interview questions are presented and the intention behind them are explained. The interview questions can be found in appendix both in Finnish and in English. Execution of the interview plan is briefly

covered. Finally, the results are analyzed in depth and concluded as insights and concrete development ideas at the end.

4.1 Interviews as a qualitative data gathering method

Key performance measurement (KPI) is used to measure performance like turnover, customer satisfaction or sales. There are measurable KPI's and non-measurable KPI's. Customer experience and expectations are more of a non-measurable KPI since the data tends to be non-numerical. There can be numerical factors about customer experience like ratings in numerical form but customer experience as whole cannot be measured as one determining numerical unit like turn-over. This is why in this thesis all data collected is qualitative. (Sarkar, P 2016, 6.)

Qualitative data can be examined and documented. Qualitative data is also called categorical data which comes from the fact that qualitative data can be categorized into different themes. For example, we could collect data from the quality of the website and categorize it into three categories: design and layout, user-friendliness and information. Different qualitative data gathering methods include interviews, focus groups, record-keeping and observation. (Yin, R 2016, 249.)

Interview is one of the most used methods gathering qualitative data. It is discussion between the researcher and the subject and its goal is to develop understanding of central themes regarding the research questions. Interviews contain three different stages - preparation, execution and analysis. Preparation includes defining the aim, choosing the scope and planning the questions. It also includes the process of choosing a suitable target group and inviting people from that target group. In this phase one decides whether they will give out a gift or a compensation for the interview or whether it's based on voluntary motivation. (Madondo 2021, 83.)

Execution means the actual conversation between an interviewer or interviewers and interviewee/interviewees. That can be either structured, semi-structured or unstructured. Structured interviews are usually quick and repeat the exact same pattern with questions. This makes the data easy to analyze but doesn't usually give as deep insight to the underlying motives and values of the interviewees. Semi-structured have the main questions that are planned beforehand, yet it gives freedom to explore the topic from a wider angle using the prepared questions as the way to organize the interview. Unstructured interviews are the most in-depth and might have prepared questions but mainly follows the style of conversation. The interviewee has the goal of digging as deep as possible into the theme aimed at. (Madondo 2021, 80.)

Interviews aren't just done for the fun of it. There should always be a reason for the data-gathering. After the execution phase, it's time to analyze the data. According to the chosen goal, the researcher/-s go through the given material trying to find re-occurring themes and answers. Then they analyze the accuracy of the data to see if it's valid and whether there needs to be more data collected before drawing any conclusions. After analyzing the data, it's turned into insights. Usually interviews lead to some sort of change or development in the studied aspect. In this thesis semi-structured interviews are used as the main data-gathering method and turning our insight into concrete and feasible development ideas for the client. (Madondo 2021, 87.)

4.2 Interview plan

The plan was to conduct 8-10 semi-structured interviews. The client's website was recently updated and the target group that they want to attract is young couples between the ages of 25 and 30. To get a non-biased view on the website, interviewees were picked who hadn't visited hotel before or otherwise weren't very familiar with the brand. Also, the English and Swedish side hadn't been updated yet, so a requirement was that the interviewees were fluent in Finnish.

The client's initial wish was to find interviewees outside of the capital region, mainly from Turku or Tampere. Due to lacks of networks in that region the plan was changed. After careful consideration a conclusion was made that the views on website won't significantly vary in between Helsinki or Espoo and Turku and Tampere. Since the initial plan was to mainly interview complete strangers and the interview time half- to one hour, the hotel promised a 50€ gift card as compensation and after changing target groups, the idea of compensation was kept.

Interviews were planned to be semi-structured, meaning the main questions were to prepared beforehand, but the conversation could sprawl within the framework of the question base. The plan was to mainly stick with the prepared questions but ask supporting questions or clarification when further explanation of the response is required.

4.3 The questions

The final interview questions and translated questions can be found in Appendixes. The goal of the interviewees was to dig deeper into what people from this target group value and think as well as learn about their previous experiences from the spa-hotel span. To be able to understand the aspects and details that truly created their best and worst experiences. What were the triggers and what created the whoa-experiences. This reveals the general expectations regarding hospitality services as well as driving forces in buying decisions.

After gaining insight on the driving factors, it was time to see how they were answered in the clients website. The intend was to find out what the website communicates to them and how they perceive the service in comparison to previous experiences based on the website - What aspects create positive expectations and what's draining the interest. The goal was to grasp the overall picture that the website paints of the hotel as well as test out the usability. The aim was to find out even small details that could potentially be developed on the website to perfect the first touchpoint in the service experience.

Since the target group was age- and relationship status based, the interview began by asking everyone their age and relationship status. It was continued with a warmup question to make them open up and get insight on what they value. The question was to simply talk about something that is currently bringing joy and happiness to their everyday life. These were the introduction questions.

After the introduction the interview was divided into two categories. The first category contained more general questions about their general thoughts on websites, branding and hospitality industry. This was to understand the general buying behavior. About websites and branding they were asked to give good examples, to describe what a good brand/website is like and to analyze the elements that really make it stand out. All big and broad questions were supported with smaller questions and some required a lot of on-the-spot supplementary questions to help the interviewees gather their thoughts. Also, their views on the importance of a website as part of the brand image and buying process were discussed

General expectations on the spa-hotel span were discussed. They were asked about good hotel experiences and what were some basic requirements for an adequate experience as well as possible surprise elements which really makes it a worthwhile experience. This is where the interviewees could tell their best and worst spa and hotel experiences. The aim was to help them pinpoint the exact elements and aspects that made them good or bad in the process. This was the end of section one.

The section two was more specifically about the target groups thoughts on the client's website. Each interviewee was sent a link to hotel's website and was asked to describe their first impressions as they explored. There was an option to explore it first quietly and then write about their thoughts but all interviewees chose to rather orally explain as they went on. After a while of scrolling and free description, they were asked about the visual image and usability of the website. Also, they were asked to analyze whether their expectations would be higher or lower in comparison to other hotel experiences based on the first look.

After that the interviewee was required to scroll through room options and "book" themselves a suitable room and "plan" a trip in their head while exploring the services more in depth. After that they were sent scenarios of each step of the general customer path in the

hotel - the check-in process, first impression of the room, spa section and the restaurant section. They were sent step by step along with a few questions regarding their assumptions based on the websites and possible expectations or wishes that weren't communicated on the website.

The initial plan was to make all interviewees write a miniature essay on their upcoming experience basing it solely on what they were promised on the website. Yet after the first interview, plans changed since the first interviewee suggested to let all interviewees simply explain everything orally as well as divide the whole experience into smaller steps - registration, getting to the hotel room, spa experience and restaurant experience. This turned out to be easier for the interviewees.

4.4 Execution of the interview plan

Figure 2 presents how the interview plan was put to practice

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Relationship Status	Asked	Interviewed	Duration
1	25	Male	Married	February 21st at 11AM	February 22nd at 12 AM	40 minutes
2	30	Female	Married	February 21st at 11AM	March 1st at 6 PM	1 hour
3	25	Male	Dating	February 21st at 11AM	March 3rd at 6 PM	1 hour
4	25	Male	Dating	February 21st at 11AM	March 7th at 6 PM	1 hour
5	28	Female	Married	March 10th at 4PM	March 12th at 7PM	1 hour
6	25	Female	Engaged	March 16th at 10 AM	March 24th at 10 AM	1,5 hours
7	27	Female	Engaged	March 16th at 10 AM	March 31st at 5 PM	30 minutes
8	28	Male	Married	March 14th at 10 AM	March 31st at 6PM	50 minutes
9	28	Male	Married	February 21st at 11AM	April 5th at 4PM	45 minuets

Figure 2: Interview matrix

Figure 2 visualizes the interview process. The plan was to interview 8 to 10 people. Nine were conducted and the answers started having a clear pattern which proved there was enough data to start analyzing. Especially, since the interviews were fairly long as the chart shows. Most of the interviews were held during March except the first and last. The invitation process started in late February. Each interviewee was reached by WhatsApp message explaining the topic of the thesis, intention of the interview and what kind of questions will be included in the interview. Everyone agreed without any hesitation. After agreeing, they were told that there will be a compensation.

The first interview was planned to be a “test-drive” interview where the interviewee can also give feedback on the questions as well as the way the interview was conducted. Based on that there were some changes in terms structure and wording, yet the topics and main idea stayed the same. The biggest change was in the last question. The initial question was to write a descriptive story of one’s visit based on the website. The first interviewee gave feedback that it’s a too demanding to ask to write a short descriptive essay. Suggestion was made to divide the hotel experience to smaller steps and give the option of explaining orally instead of writing the answer in chat. Similarly, a question where the interviewee was asked to write about their first impressions of the website was changed to oral explanation. The exact wording of the questions can be found in the appendixes.

Finding people turned out to be easier compared to trying to find a suitable slot for an hour interview, especially since people from this age group are usually in full-time work and so were everyone that was interviewed. Due to personal schedule differences with the interviews, some of the booked slots were changed up to four times before the actual interview time. This is why it took over a month to complete the process.

All interviews were conducted through Teams conference call. For each interviewee a calendar invitation titled” Opinnäytetyö haastattelu” was sent reserving an hour from the Teams calendar. All meetings were recorded and notes taken during the whole interviews. The notes ended up being precise enough that the recordings ended up being useless. From the interviewer’s point of view taking notes also helped give the interviewees enough space to think out loud and gather their thoughts without interfering.

The atmosphere was relaxed and people enjoyed the questions. When the suitable time was found, everyone seemed to have a lot of time to ponder the questions and people were motivated to be there. Some interviews, especially the latter ones where more efficient whereas in some interviews there were a lot of long tangents of previous hotel experiences, different hotel websites were surfed and hotel reviews read. Overall, the interviews went well. The final questions worked well and a lot of useful data was gathered from each interview.

4.5 Results

Nine people were interviewed from a group of 25-30-year-old people in a committed relationship where one could imagine traveling with their significant other. The main themes of questions in the general part were - brand, website and general experiences and expectations from the spa-hotel field. Part II of the interview consisted of more specific questions concerning the client’s website and expectations of the upcoming service.

The first question asked in the interview - what brings joy to their everyday lives. In asking this question the goal was to find out what they truly value in life but also use it as a conversation starter. To most interviewees the joyous elements were related to nature or relationships. Things like sunshine, ocean, messages from girlfriend or spending quality time with their spouse brought joy to the lives of the interviewees. Exercise, productivity and time management were also mentioned. One person enjoyed life pleasures such as going to sauna and eating delicious meals.

In the theory part the urgency of understanding the values of the customer was explored - Questions like “what drives and motivates the customer?” and “what do they want to identify with?” were given in the data driven marketing book where they shewed light on campaigns that worked and that didn’t. As in the Lexus example, they have taken into consideration what lifestyle the target group values and which they want to truly be linked with (2010, 92). This is especially important in today’s society as it is explored that people value companies more with responsibility and human values than just products.

These are elements that are important to take into account both in communication and the services. They both hook and catch the client by creating something that the customer truly feels happy to be part of, something that aligns with and nurtures their values. Other important values that were brought up later in the interview were uniqueness, authenticity, supporting local, sustainability and ethical aspects of the company. These values presented in the chart were evident through other answers given by clients. Hence these truly are aspects that bring value and joy to their life and should be attained through the hotel experience too.

Figure 3 displays things that were brought up as characteristics of a good brand by the interviewees



Figure 3: Characteristics of a good brand

“Brand is a promise of a repeatable quality,” said one of the interviewees. Each interviewee was asked to describe a good brand. The given characteristics showcased in a figure above. Out of nine interviewees eight people said visually pleasing or visually interesting. The brand’s visual image is very closely attached to the brand. Another important characteristic of a brand is that it stands out next to its competition and it’s well known for its repeatable quality. This was brought up five people.

One interviewee put it in these words:” A good brand is trustworthy. Kind of the purpose of the brand is that you know exactly what you’re getting”. When asked to give examples, answers included known brands like Coca-cola, Oatly and Zalando. Some people named categories like Scandinavian brands or Finnish brands. One person had an interesting insight on Aku Ankka being a really good brand since people love it and buy a ton of products with Aku Ankka stamp without even considering it as a brand. “Many people think Aku Ankka as a friend or a character rather than a commercial tool for stealing their money.”

This idea is in line with Suonio’s (2010, 17) point of Finnish consumers being allergic to the word brand. Especially older people who have seen the rise of consumer culture, attach it with asking overly high prices for the same product just because of the name. This is interesting taking into consideration that only two people interviewed acknowledged this phenomenon whereas others saw brand purely in a positive light of providing repeatable quality and being a trustworthy option.

When digging deeper into what actually are the elements that makes people appreciate a brand, it came down to two aspects - presentation and quality. Presentation meaning the

message of the brand, values, visual image, marketing campaigns and packaging. Basically, how the brand identifies and presents itself. Quality meaning the product itself, how well it functions, serves its purposes and how long it lasts. If the brand provides services, quality means the repeatable quality of the customer service and service experience.

Since a nice packaging is nothing without the inside, it was important to ask what is it to the interviewees that makes them consider a product reliable. Most people depended on their own experience or what the message behind the product. Other's experiences with the service or product played a role as well as the origin, meaning the country of origin and how the ingredients are produced. Sustainably, ethically and organically produced products strengthen the trust to a product or service. One person said that they only rely on research and fact-backed products.

When asked if the website has an effect on buying behavior, all interviewees agreed that the website does have an effect on their buying decision. Most people agreed strongly whereas a few others issued that it plays a more subtle role or only affects when comparing similar services to others. Most people said that if the website looks horrible, is too slow or information isn't accessible they leave the site pretty quickly. The idea of the website as the entrance of the company was commonly subscribed to. It was said to set the tone for the rest of the experience and gives the first impression of the company and as one interviewee put it: "The website reveals the values of the company, basically stating how they want to be viewed as".

However, each interviewee agreed that it plays a major role in hospitality services, especially in the accommodation sector. The amount and quality of pictures was highlighted as the most important element in accommodation service websites. The visual image of hospitality websites profiled how customer-oriented and high-quality experience is to be expected. Going back to the gift example, website is part of the wrapping. It could even be considered as the card which is usually read first before unwrapping the gift (Suonio 2010, 10). The card has both the written message and the beautiful aesthetic which usually is themed to be in line with the gift itself. The following figure shows what the interviewees value in the website.

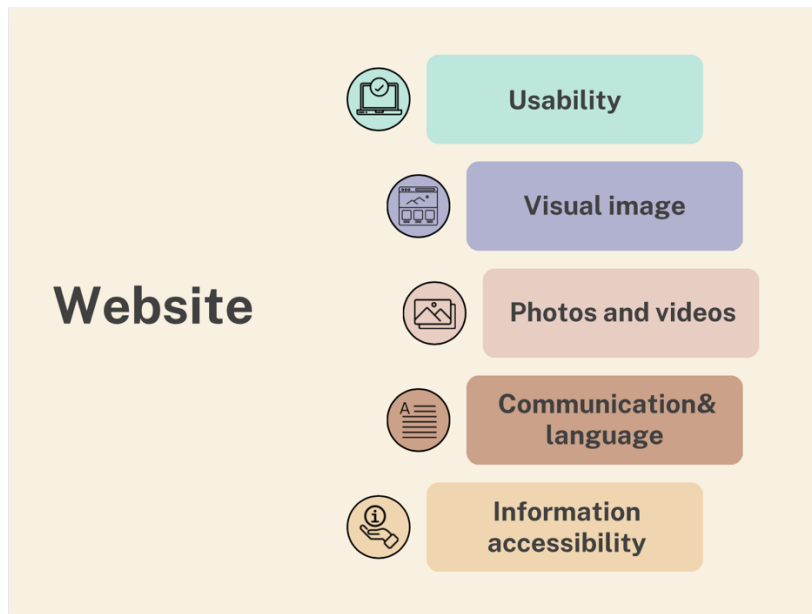


Figure 4: Important elements on websites

The figure above showcases all aspects brought up of a good website. The most emphasis was given on the navigation and usability of the website. One interviewee said it well: "website isn't really a showroom where cool effects are showcased but people go there with very specific purposes". The biggest reason for leaving a website was if the call-to-action button, like book a table or book a room, isn't accessible. For e-commerce filtering option and search button were considered must-haves.

Visuals played more of a role in how the customers view the company. They were said to communicate the values of the company and how modern they are. One person said the it "conveys the spirit of the company. For instance, fresh and modern look gives a message of a creative and innovative company whereas organized and traditional look on the other hand conveys a feeling professional and knowledgeable service." As said in the wrapping example, the website should be in line visually with the company's style, strengths and values. The website doesn't only speak for the website itself but for the whole company. The image of the company is mainly painted through first impressions.

Following figure concludes the interviewee's opinions on the client's website

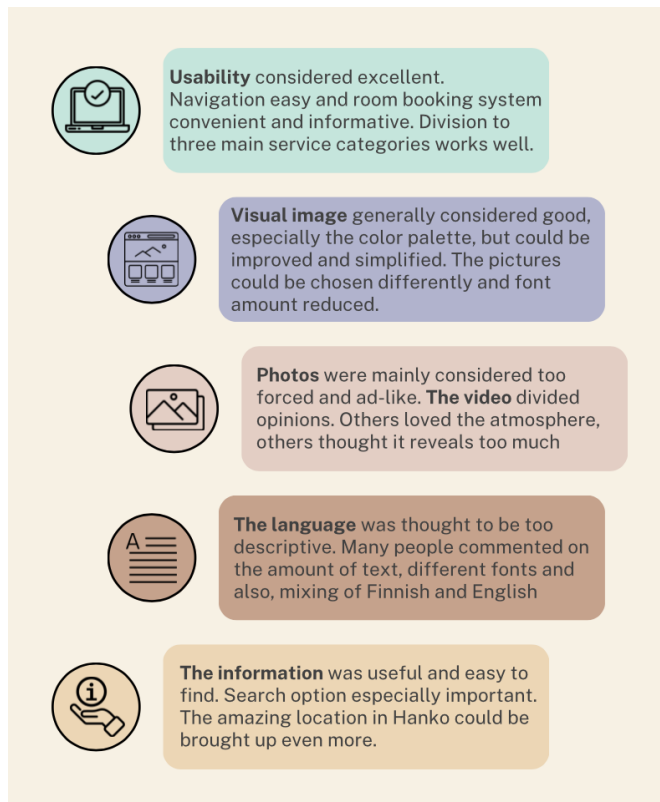


Figure 5: Interviewees thoughts on the client's website

As the figure showcases, the usability and navigation the client's website was considered great by the respondents. The division to hotel, spa and restaurant seemed to work and made the navigation process smooth. Also, information was accessible, especially in the booking, it had all the necessary pictures, price, availability- and feature information. This was considered really good.

Visual image was also generally liked. The color-palette was said to work well with the style of hotel. The main page brought up expectations of relaxation, luxury and peacefulness. It was said to look like it targets adults, especially with the video and picture choices since everything was quite traditional and the pictures very ad-like and arranged. No "wow"-effects or surprise elements were created through the website.

Especially when taking a closer look with the perspective of analyzing the visual image, the respondents started to see development points. One big theme was simplification. Simplification with the number of fonts and font variations could make the visual image more cohesive. Basic rule for graphic designers is to have max. three different fonts and variations which they use with the same logic. The three variations and the font should be chosen carefully to match the style of the hotel.

Many interviewees brought up the amount of descriptive language and amount of information. They said that it kind of takes away the surprise moment from the actual experience when someone already painted the picture for you. Also, it takes away the freedom of imagination and excitement from the upcoming trip and what it has to offer.

Instead, a surprise element was left where it wasn't necessarily needed, there were a lot of detailed pictures of the meals for example but not really pictures of the bigger picture of the main lobby, main building and the restaurant. This was especially said from the main page, when looking at the room pictures and digging deeper into the website they started finding beautiful pictures that they would've wanted to see on the main page instead of women laughing on the bed with bathrobes drinking sparkling wine.

When targeting millennials and gen-z, authenticity, inclusiveness and uniqueness are strong values. Most of the interviewees commented on the pictures that they only included women with the same look and were almost too photoshoot-like. Alongside the highlighted wellness theme, it was considered quite generic. Since many of the interviewees could find a lot of spa hotels with wellness facilities in bigger cities like Turku and Helsinki, they thought the location and activities surrounding the area could be a huge competitive advantage and should definitely be given more emphasis on the website.

Following figure concludes the interviewees development ideas on the client's website

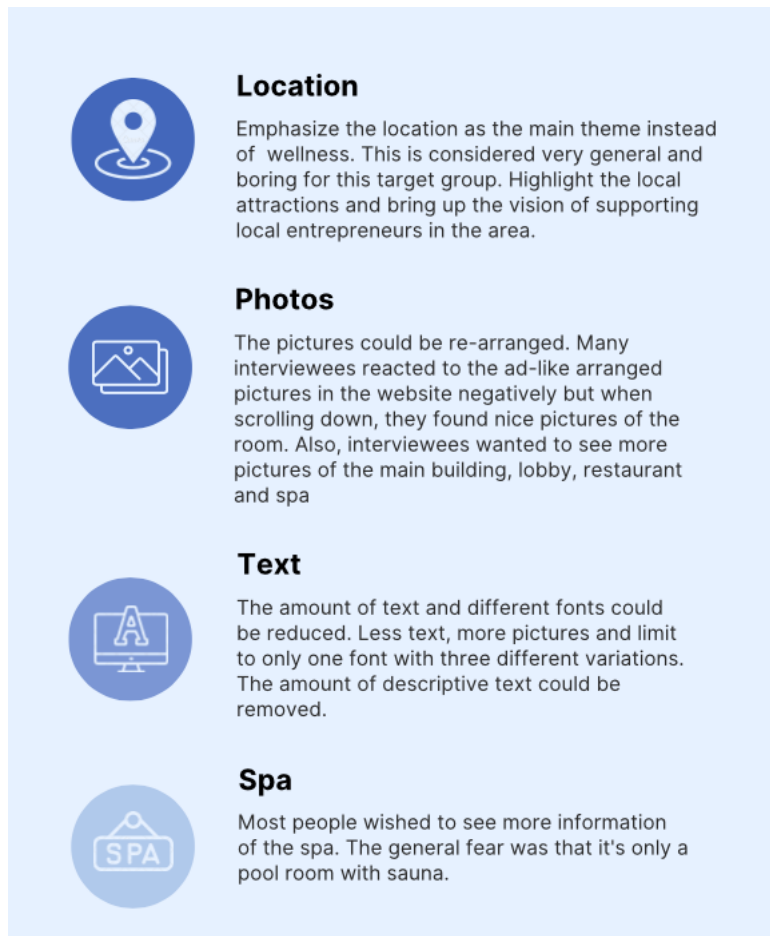


Figure 6: Development ideas for the client's website

When asked about good spa hotel experiences, turned out that half of the respondents either had no good spa-hotel experiences or only had one good experience. Only one person had had multiple good spa hotel experiences. Some had good spa experiences, but as one interviewee put it rarely one finds a spa that is both calming and comprehensive experience for adults with something interesting and diverse to offer. Many mentioned that spas are either boring and simple or full of screaming children with no peaceful space.

Six of the interviews resonated positively with the idea of spa hotel but turns out that three people, although they know the difference between spa hotel for kids and adults, still attach the word spa-hotel to their childhood experience in hotels with water parks. They already hear kids shouting and screaming while water is splashing everyone. They think of the wet floors and nasty changing rooms. What they would wish for a spa-hotel visit presented in the figure below.

When asked about what their hopes would be for a perfect spa hotel experience, 8/9 mentioned that the facilities should be first and foremost peaceful and clean. This is especially important in the spa section. Also, filthiness in the room, especially bathroom is

also one of the biggest minus points in the hotel visit. Noises at night or bad soundproofs in the room were said to break the good experience.

These are the main irritants, as mentioned in the customer experience section that irritants weigh more on the scale than positive attributes. If irritants occur in the experience, it can't really be compensated with additional surprise elements that wasn't asked for in the first place. Basically, irritants are the opposite of must-haves for at least a moderate experience (Booth & McKnight 2010.)

For the spa section the respondents wished it wouldn't be boring and too simple. In the wish list were some sport activities to do or facilities to use before relaxing. New experiences to try and some activities like reading whilst sitting in the poolside were also included. They wished for something more than what a swimming hall or home pampering session could offer. Heated lounge chairs, showers with multiple effects, salt room, special saunas, closed room for couples and dim lighting were mentioned as small touches that add to the experience.

Snacks, surprise gifts before entering, like a cosmetic product or drink and options for buying beverages was also listed. Having slippers and a bathrobe given was considered a must-have and not having it as included in the price would be considered an irritant. Other irritants would be big crowds, loud noises and complicated process of getting from the changing rooms to the pool area.

As for the hotel room, respondents value unique and cozy decorations as well as good sleeping facilities. Good pillows, blackout curtains and good air conditioning were considered a must-have. These were considered minimal requirements and if a hotel wants to exceed the expectations, they should offer something interesting and unique in the room or as the room. Good example of unique features would be big glass ceilings, interesting lighting, abnormal beds. Or as a good example of a unique room treehouse or a glass igloo were presented.

Options for personalization in the room also plays a role. As an example, was given an option to pick a pick a perfect pillow for one's preference from multiple levels of softness, different sizes and materials. Anything where a customer can have a say was considered positive. Similarly, to the example of Starbucks where one has many options of personalization for the drink from different milks and sugars, amount of sweetness to different base beverage options. Hotels could take more advantage of this, taking into consideration on how many stages of the day even, they provide for the customer to experience. During a 24-visit there are so many personal preferences that could be taken into account.

For instance, having a personalized breakfast as option could be not just affordable but sustainable idea. This would help in the process of picking, ordering and estimating the

amounts of ingredients needed but also gives the customer a feeling of autonomy. Breakfast was found to have major importance in the overall hotel experience among the interviewees. Nutritious, fresh and tasty breakfasts was a non-negotiable, especially the importance of good coffee and good fresh juice was highlighted.

4.6 Expectations created through the website

Although the website had its fair share of critique it gave a positive picture of the hotel itself. Based on the website interviewees perceived the hotel to be a peaceful and elegant hotel with good sleeping facilities. The interviewees imagined a calming and spacious building with sunlight peeling through big windows and the scent of ocean flowing in the air. This effect was probably caused by the video playing on the front page.

The hotel came off as a place for well-off adults from Helsinki and Swedish speaking regions to gather. They could already hear the wine glasses tinkling and sounds of softly flowing conversation mixed with the sound of waves as they entered the main lobby. A lot of interviewees said that it seems like a place for adults where the people act according to a certain amount of decorum and solemnity.

A lot of people commented that they know very little about what the main facilities in the hotel actually look like since the hotel website gives more information on the atmosphere promised than, for instance, the main lobby, restaurant and the spa section. To some interviewees, the main building remained a mystery even when they had surfed through the entire website. This was seen as a negative thing that one can't form a picture in one's head of the hotel. This also sent a signal of suspicion that the facilities aren't actually worth filming and that's the reason for the website to be filled with detailed "vibe"-pictures.

This wasn't true in the case of the rooms. There were a lot of pictures from the room which made it easy for the interviewees to visualize the room of their choice. They expect to get greeted with a gift, maybe something sweet they could grab with them before heading to spa. Some interviewees expected champagne or sparkling wine since there were pictures of people drinking sparkling drinks on the website. It was mentioned that the hotel seems very clean, so they expect the room to smell fresh and the sheets to be crisp. Some female interviewees pointed a wish for spa-quality cosmetic products in the bathroom with a special aroma.

As for the spa, interviewees assumed it to be peaceful and relaxing but maybe a little boring since the only facilities they could figure out from the website were two pools and two saunas. Most people wished they could have something to read, something to drink, get some exercise in before relaxing and many people mentioned that they truly wished to have a bathrobe while relaxing by the pool. The fact that bathrobe has an additional price tag rather

than being in the ticket was considered a major irritant implying that the hotel is stingy and not too customer service-oriented.

For the restaurant it was difficult for the interviewees to form a picture in their head of how the restaurant looks like, but they wish to see a view of the ocean. They expected to be served at least three courses. Meals could include some fish and seafood and the ingredients were expected to be high quality. An extensive wine and beverage menu was also mentioned a couple times.

Some interviewees considered the hotel breakfast to be more important than the hotel restaurant. It was not considered a favorable option in comparison to exploring local restaurants in the area. Their experiences with hotel restaurants had been that it's the easy and boring option for those who don't want to go out. This could be advertised more as an experience rather than a side hustle for the hotel.

4.7 Insights

The target group included people from ages 25-30. There is a lot potential branding and marketing wise. Especially since in this age group people haven't yet experienced a lot of high-quality spa experiences. They pointed out that they are especially interested in spas that offer a little bit more than just a pool. Sport activities, adventurous spirit and special treatments seemed to resonate with the target group.

Most of them seemed to value authentic, carefully throughout and personalized service experiences. Whereas the older generation values more traditional experiences over adventurous ones, this target group is into trying more unique and less traditional experiences. They usually find the traditional hotel a little boring and prefer more hidden bread and breakfast or Airbnb's over white bed, white walls and bread and eggs for breakfast.

Supporting local and experiencing local experiences is something that they also value based on the interview. The client's goal is to bring up customers to other entrepreneurs in town and they buy a lot services and ingredients from the restaurants from locals. Highlighting this with highlighting the location of the hotel is very important. For most interviewees it took a moment to notice the location of the hotel and when they did, their interest was up 100%. The location resonates so positively in people's minds so they could play more with that aspect and emphasize the authentic experience, rather than advertise with the wellness aspects that are too general to hook people from this generation. This is line with Pine and Gilmore's (2019, xv) point of creating a positively resonating theme around the services.

People also pointed out that the pictures look too inauthentic and generic. In fact, the pictures were the number one thing highlighted in the interviews. The factors that make the

pictures look inauthentic were the empty background, detailed arrangements and very forced and posed positions topped with the perfect studio lighting. Some interviewees even pointed out that they thought that they were from a picture bank which didn't resonate positively with their values of authenticity and uniqueness.

A lot of people also pointed out that it would be insightful to see more of the big picture of the hotel, such as more pictures of the outside building, the main lobby and the restaurant area. This could help create a picture of the hotel in the customer's mind so that they know where they are going. There are a lot of detailed and arranged photoshoot pictures that do work in Instagram but on the website, people would like to see pictures of the hotel itself.

The language used on the website was another thing that was brought up multiple times. There is a lot of descriptive language that is used to paint the picture in the customer's mind. Some people found this too advertising and demanding for customers since they would rather use their own imagination in creating their own vision of how their experience feels like.

4.8 Concrete steps

1. Interesting and informative pictures:

Most interviewees did find interesting pictures on the website, most of them wouldn't have to be re-taken, just re-organized. More pictures of the rooms, the main building and other areas to the website. As the customer goes on their website journey, they can be presented with more detailed pictures.

As for the advertisement pictures with the models, they could be taken off and replaced with more authentic pictures of the hotel experience. For truly authentic pictures, the client could even organize a campaign where the customers can share their own pictures and if they are published on their website, the customer gets 50% discount on their trip at some other price for that.

2. More surprise elements and less description of the upcoming experience

The website could reduce the amount of descriptive language used to paint the picture of the upcoming experience. This gives the feeling of inauthenticity and the need to excessively sell something, rather than just show and let it speak for itself. Less texts and less fonts could make the web experience feel more organized and cohesive.

3. Fonts - max. 2 fonts and a few sizes only used to follow the same logic where to use which font, size and boldness

Also, the mix of English phrases like “Eat well” with Finnish language was found confusing and disorganized. The mix of so many different fonts added up to that. Also, the website has a lot of going on text-wise, it could be simplified.

4. Location highlighted and the authentic experience over the generic spa experience, this brings more competitive advantage. Notice that although the client’s hotel is the only spa hotel in the city but people coming from bigger cities like Turku or Helsinki can find competitive spa experiences elsewhere. When coming to the city, they want something different and unique. This could be especially highlighted in the marketing and communication part since the location is highlighted in action already.

Also, the communication about the sustainability aspects and the actions the client takes to support local business should be emphasized more. This is very attractive to the target group and for all target groups becoming increasingly important. Especially, since they already do a lot about it, communicating about it and highlighting the focus on supporting the local as the client’s goal is to bring profit to others service providers in the area.

5. For the spa section, it could have a little more activity available such as books, DIY-treatments for more affordable price, gym or other sport facilities and with some touch ups like massaging chair or warming chairs they could create a feeling of a more diverse experience.

Many interviewees pointed out that there is both a lack of information about the facilities and other activities besides the beauty treatments on the website. These were listed activities that they wished to see and experience, yet don’t know what more the spa has to offer besides pool and the treatments that are too extensive for young peoples’ budgets.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, investing in customer research to improve the customer experience is a worthwhile investment. Studies have proved it over and over again as the most attainable and sustainable way of keeping one’s business profitable. It leads to loyal customers who advocate for your business and hence expands the customer base. No amount of investing in technology, events, furniture or marketing campaign can compare to the achievement of mastering the customer experience. Developing the customer experience should always be backed with research from the actual customers or customers from target group. Measuring the successfulness of current customer experience can only be attained by gathering actual customer data.

The primary objective of this thesis was to evaluate the customer experience expectations created by the client's website and identify areas for improvement. The aim of the thesis was to help them further develop their website as the first touchpoint of the customer experience which sends the first signal of the upcoming visit. The purpose was to understand the customer base to provide excellent customer experiences and hence expand the customer base. This was done by conducting nine semi-structured qualitative interviews from a target group of choice. The questions were designed to bring out the customers values and general expectations in the hospitality field as well as detailed descriptions of what the client's website communicates to them personally.

The website was generally considered good and the expectation for a hotel visit based on the website positive. In most interviewees mind the visit would consist of a spa day, restaurant evening and a calm morning after a good night's sleep. Although the hotel resonated positively, the website didn't bring out a wow-effect and it was expected that there would be no or little surprise elements. This effect was created through using a lot of detailed description of the upcoming experience and picture-bank styled pictures. Some important information on the other hand wasn't highlighted like the location or the number of pictures of the beautiful building. This left the interviewees wondering what is the added value in comparison to spa hotels in Helsinki, Turku or Tampere

This target group values unique and authentic experiences in the hospitality field. Generally, in businesses they value holistic sustainability and communication on the steps taken towards it. Some concrete steps the client could take in the website is even more emphasize the location and especially their vision of supporting other local businesses by bringing in customers as well as buying all possible ingredients from local entrepreneurs. This could help them differentiate from other spa hotels since the love for location is strong in Finland as well as the will to support local and domestic businesses. These are in line with the values of the target group.

The navigation on the website was considered good and the search option was well liked. As for visual image, it was generally considered good. The colors were considered suitable for the brand. Some simplification in terms of fonts and descriptive texts were also suggested as well as re-arranging the pictures in a way that customer would see first pictures of the main building, rooms, restaurant area, pool area and the reception to be able to form a picture in their head of the hotel.

The feedback from the client was positive. There was both data that proves some thoughts they've already been having as well as some surprising findings. The client was inspired about the thought of collecting more customer data when developing services. The point of view of the customer is so different especially in a project like website where one really works for a

long time. They are going to act upon highlighting the location and sustainability aspect. As for the pictures, a photoshoot day has already been arranged and they are going to go through the pictures on the website. Overall, the client considered this thesis well-conducted, academically accurate and useful for their needs.

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Appendix 1: Final interview questions

Ikä?

Aloitetaan tälle kevyesti, että voit kertoa jostakin onnellisesta asiasta, joka tuo sun arkipäiväseen elämään iloa:

Brändi:

- Millainen on mielestäsi hyvä brändi? Esimerkki? Mikä tekee siitä hyvän ja luotettavan?

Nettisivu:

- Mitä nettisivu kertoo mielestäsi yrityksestä? Voiko vaikuttaa ostopäätökseen?
- Miten omalla kohdallasi vaikuttaa asiakasodotuksiin? Minkälaiset tekijät nettisivuissa herättää positiivisia asiakasodotuksia? Entä negatiivisia?
- Onko jotkut nettisivut jäänyt erityisen hyvinä mieleen? Miksi?
- Yleiset odotukset hotelli/kylpylähotellivierailusta
- Toimeksiantaja on kylpylähotelli. Millaisia yleisiä odotuksia sinulla on kylpylähotellivierailuihin?
- Tuleeko mieleen joku erityisen hyvä kylpylähotellikokemus? Mikä teki siitä hyvän?

Osa 2

Lähetän linkin, mennään palveluntarjoajan sivuille. Voit joko selostaa ääneen tai rauhassa mikki ja kamera kiinni tutkia ja kirjottaa ensivaikutelmastasi chat-boksiin. Tarvittaessa apukysymyksiä: Mitä nettisivu viestii sinulle palveluntarjoajasta? Onko jotain erityistä mihin kiinnitit huomiota? Miten visuaalisuus? Mikä positiivista? Mitä voisi parantaa?

- Jos mietit yleisiä kokemuksiasi kylpylähotelleissa tai hotelleissa yleisesti, olisiko odotuksesi korkeammalla vai matalammalla suhteessa niihin nettisivujen perusteella? Miksi?

Tutki palveluita syvemmin sillä mielentilalla, että olisit menossa ja ”varaa” itsellesi mieleinen huone. Laitan chattiin skenaarioita. Kuvaile kokemusta, ajatuksia ja odotuksia tässä tilanteessa. Kirjallisesti tai suullisesti. Mitä näet? Mitä koet? Miltä tuoksuu? Mitä toivot? Mitä odotat?

- tulet hotellille. Mitä näet? Minkälainen tunnelma hotellissa on? Miltä siellä tuoksuu? Mitä toiveita odostat täyttyvän vierailun aikana?
- Saat avaimen ja menet huoneeseesi. Miltä huone näyttää? Miltä siellä tuoksuu? Onko sinulla jotakin erityistoiveita huoneeseen liittyen?
- Käyt kylpylässä. Istut altaan reunalla, saunot ja uit. Miltä tuntuu? Mitä värejä näet? Mitä ehkä kaipaat?
- Istut pöytää ja tarjoilija tuo menuun. Millaista ruokaa toivot? Millainen ravintola on? Miltä siellä tuoksuu?
- onnistuuko nettisivu välittämään tunnelmaan? puuttuuko jokin kohta?

Appendix 2: Translated interview questions

- Age?
- Warm-up question: tell me about something that brings joy to your everyday life.

Brand:

- What do you think makes a good brand? Any good brands in mind? What is it about them that make them reliable?

Website:

- What do you think the website communicates about the company? Does it have an effect on the buying decision?
- How does it affect your customer expectations? What factors on websites evoke positive customer expectations? What about negative ones?
- Are there any websites that have stood out to you? Why?

General expectations for hotel/spa hotel visits:

- The client is a spa hotel. What are your general expectations for spa hotel visits?
- Can you think of a particularly good spa hotel experience? What were the make-or-break points?

Part 2

I'll send a link, let's go to the service provider's website. You can either describe out loud or write your first impression in the chat box. If needed, some guiding questions: What does the website communicate to you about the service provider? Is there anything specific you noticed? How is the visual image? What's positive? What could be improved?

- If you think about your general experiences in spa hotels or hotels in general, would your expectations be higher or lower based on those websites? Why?

Explore the services more in depth with the mindset that you'd be going and "book" a room of your choice. Answer these questions in the chat:

- You arrive at the hotel. What do you see? What's the atmosphere like? What can you smell? What needs or wishes do you expect to be fulfilled during your visit?
- You get the key and go to your room. What does the room look like? What does it smell like? Do you have any special requests regarding the room?

- You go to the spa. You sit by the pool, go to sauna, and swim. How does it feel? What colors do you see? What would you wish for in the moment?

- You sit at the table, and the waiter/waitress brings the menu. What kind of food do you expect to see? What is the restaurant like? What does it smell like?

- Does the website succeed in conveying the atmosphere? Is there something missing?