

Saimaa University of Applied Sciences  
Faculty of Business and Culture, Imatra  
Degree Programme in Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management  
Tourism and Hospitality

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**Marketing Communication and Personal Sales in  
Timeshare and Leisure Property Sales for Russian  
Clientele in South Karelia Region**

Thesis 2014

## **Abstract**

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Marketing Communication in Timeshare and Leisure Property Sales for Russian Clientele in South Karelia Region, 53 pages

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This thesis project is dedicated for non-commercial market research which can and will be used to promote current Finnish sales strategies used on Russian tourists. To be more precise, the goal is to direct all attention towards the sales situation where the customer and sales person are sitting opposite of each other. The research is here presented in topic by topic fashion where it establishes a firm understanding or key elements and terminology of the material for the reader. Final part includes the interviews conducted for this thesis and the evaluation of the results and prospects for future studies. The object here is to find out what Finnish sales professionals are doing to get the best sale, how they prosper and how they fail. Ultimately the common good is the key, to make all the readers whether professional or not to have better assets towards their future sales and as helping factor for their marketing strategy.

The focus of the project is the determining the potential risks and flaws in personal sale marketing strategies for Russians in timeshare and leisure time property buying situations. Thesis is supposed to answer questions such as: are Finnish people comfortable with marketing situations with foreign nationalities? What are they doing correctly at the moment and what are the segments that needs improvement? The easiest way to acknowledge the current situation is to talk to people who are in responsible jobs like this and are constantly accompanied by Russian clients. Mostly, the viewpoint here will be the perspective of the sales person and not clients' view simply because of the huge effort needed to collect adequate amount of reliable data.

As the research part gets closer to finishing the reader will learn the surprising results of the empiric and theoretical part of the thesis study. The most interesting part might be that most of the interviewed people gave the impression that their current sales tactics seem to work pretty well already and there is not so much need for improvement, at least in the sector of Finnish tourist services that are specifically dedicated and designed for Russian clientele. The reader should know the marketing tactics and terminology and how the industry works by end of the thesis - from the of realtors' and timeshare marketers, point of view. However, the studies were pretty conclusive the reader is left in the state where he has to decide his own viewpoints to the problem and issue in general and form his own opinions.

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## Terminology

Russian - In this thesis, by the word Russian, the author means native Russians who travel to Finland either for business or pleasure.

Timeshare - a property that can be rented by more than one individual for a certain time period with a fixed price.

Face-to-Face interview - an interview where interviewer and interviewee are actually physically in the same room facing each other as in any other everyday situation when two business people or casual friends meet.

Crimean Crisis - the Ukrainian unrest that started in 2013 and is still in progress and especially the part when Russia reclaimed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine attracting a lot of negative attention in Western countries and media. Also partial cause for the current down fall of Russian economy.

Leisure Property - any house, cottage or apartment which is bought for only part time use. Mostly, these properties are used just like timeshare; they are places to hide from everyday life and enjoy holidays with family and friends.

Real-Estate - any property that is sold or bought and used for living or investment purposes.

## **1 Introduction**

Finland has gained a tremendous peak in inbound tourism from Russia in past few years. This has given a lot of pressure for tourism and other service markets to answer the growing demand so that supply and demand are on the same level. The overall number of overnight stays of Russians was just below 160,000 in December, a decrease from previous year but still being, by far, the largest group of foreign visitors. In South Karelia, however, there was 8 percent rise in incoming tourists and no doubt most active group of foreign nationals are Russians. On yearly basis Russian tourists bring one billion euro to Finland. They are a very influential group of customers in South Karelia and are the only factor keeping some grocery stores near eastern border running and profitable. "In the beginning of the year 2013 Russians owned 6,000 residents, holiday villas and timeshares." (Orjala 2013, p.1; Hautala 2014, p. 1; Statistics Finland. 2013)

What is key to success when dealing with Russian customers and how to keep the business going? These are just the tip of the ice berg of questions that will be answered in the following thesis work. The most importantly the thesis will focus on the explanations and analyzing the current situation, and gives potential feedback for improving business plans in the related businesses - what are we doing right, what wrong and what should we do better?

### **1.1 The General Stages of the Process**

The following thesis project is a research based thesis about timeshare and leisure property related marketing communication that happens between a client and a sales person, in short, it tries to give deeper understanding about personal sales work when different cultures collide. The particular topic here is the analysis of the sales procedure when a Finnish timeshare or real estate company sells their product to a Russian consumer or is interested in expanding business beyond the Finnish borders to Russia. How an average sales person in Finland has to be trained and how they should act to achieve a successful sale when they are facing foreign language, culture and manners?

Strong theoretical background and introduction chapters allow the readers to understand the necessary background about subtopics like marketing communication, cultural differences, timeshare selling as a concept, Russian culture and buying behavior. Once a firm understanding has been built, it is time to go into details and more complicated issues.

Next stage will be the actual field research part of the thesis: the author will interview timeshare professionals. Each interview will be a face-to-face interview and is estimated to last anywhere between half an hour to one hour. These interviews are the backbone of the whole thesis and will be supporting the theory part as they provide an in-depth look at the everyday sales process, research and activities that designated people deal with.

## **1.2 Limitations**

Due to time and resource associated reasons, the process has tight limitations and criteria for it to be sensible to complete. The geographical area of the research will be strictly limited to South Karelia of Finland. In addition the demographics will be exceedingly narrow: mostly this research will be relevant towards those Russians who travel to Finland within a 300 to 500 kilometer radius from the border of South Karelia. Majority of the people are in the area of Saint Petersburg and Vyborg.

The other demographic group is the sales personnel in local timeshare companies. The author has decided to use as examples companies who do not provide timeshare services but are potential to begin business in this segment - mainly this means real estate or tourism companies which have not yet expanded to international sales.

Financial issues will be viewed as they often influence buying decisions and create imbalance in supply and demand. Are there problems to get funding from local banks if a foreigner without nationality needs an account or credit? Is the price and quality better than somewhere else? What fees and mandatory documents and permits need to be proclaimed?

As it is difficult and nearly impossible to interview the target audience, the author chooses to limit his research project to only Finnish or English speaking professionals and/or individuals who have a key role in the research.

The interview process and theory research will both exclude any matters concerning legislation issues, unless, they have something to do with permits and appeal of investing in timeshare. Taxing issues may also become an issue if they have a matter in the case.

## **2 Timeshares**

This chapter introduces the terminology and concept of timeshare selling in Finland. It includes a short history of the business and issues that separate it from other relatable industries. It is inevitable that the reader knows the term and where it derives from in order to understand the unique characteristics of timeshare business. Most people have a very shallow understanding and stereotyped view that has to be remodeled so that topic may be objectified. There is much more to timeshares than buying overpriced lodges or hotel rooms for part time ownership and getting ripped off by some shady sales people who are looking for easy victims to fool. The business has come far and left those days to past.

Nowadays these timeshares are a very seriously taken branch of business that investors use to protect their money from financial fluctuation. It is now respectful business and one of the few striving ones with a constant climb despite the bad economy in Finland and rest of the world.

### **2.1 Definition**

According to World Tourism Organization timeshare products are locations that are intended for recreational purposes during certain designated time periods of the year. They include amenities and services. The timeshare product consists of three dimensions; the real estate itself, up keeping of it and the exchange right. The single reason why this product exists is the need for solitude in



crammed holiday destinations and shortened time spend for recreation. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, p. 8.)

Timeshares are owned by corporations that build these premises to be sold forward for shared usage. They are responsible for up keeping, maintenance, designing the product concept ready for marketing and selling the product to prominent buyers. These assignments or mandates can be outsourced if the owner of the timeshares should choose to do so. If these services are outsourced, usually, the assignments will be handled by several different organizations. The key thing here is the shared ownership and time limitations; timeshares have several owners who each pay for the right to use the property at a designated time period. The time period has to be decided long before actually visiting the property because of other users. ( Powanga 2007. Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 8-11.)

The timeshare system is commonly tied to one specific time period and place. However, both of them can be changed - time is easier to switch and needs only negotiation with other users. The temporary change of timeshare is a more complicated process. The owner who controls the timeshare can annex his shareholders to an exchange system that allows them to change their timeshare destination temporarily with another shareholder, even from another company. This of course makes timeshare more appealing and safe investment; they are always in mint condition and there is a shared responsibility over them. Compared to normal property there is much fewer things to be afraid of and the risk of losing money is lower.(Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 8-11.)

Even though many people talk about timeshare ownership they could not be any further away from the truth. The timeshare ownership actually does not mean that the shareholder would actually own the timeshare. He does not have rights to do any alternations - furniture and appliances are chosen by the owner, not by the shareholder. And no personal items can be left to the apartment after the holiday period is over and next person will be moving in (before next time the current shareholder revisits). Currently there are two main types of timeshare owning options; the deeded property ownership and the right of use ownership. The first option means shared property that can be booked for

certain time period as if the share owner actually owned the property during this time making him able to rent this right forward or sell it. The second option is very close to a full ownership; a shareholder has exclusive right to use property for a fixed time period, let us say twenty years after which his ownership is no longer valid. (Powanga 2007 ; Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 8-11.)

## **2.2 Brief History**

The history of timeshare industry is not unanimously clear but two possible origins have been confirmed. The timeshare business either started in Switzerland in 1960s or in 1950s in Spain. Two different companies began selling rights to timeshares, much like modern days, so that people could buy a right to visit an apartment for holiday purposes for certain time of year. However, the major breakthrough happened only in the 1980s in Spain when timeshares gained the popularity and attention of a larger consumer group and became a phenomenon. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 11-14.)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the timeshare industry started as early as in 1950s, it became financially significant business thirty years later in the United States in the state of Florida. The push came from the oil crisis in 1973 when the real estate business plummeted, especially, in Florida. Now the realtors had to figure out how to sell empty holiday apartments for consumers who no longer afforded to buy them. They decided to sell them for part time use only, with marginal price tags. It worked, but with a delay. Due to very aggressive marketing strategies of these realtors the buyers were distrusting and had a negative image of timeshare ownership. The introduction of a more flexible system and legislation changes, the image of timeshares started to get better and growth season started in the 1980s in the US, and followed in Europe, ten years later. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004. pp. 11-14.)

The next stage of timeshare business was the maturing - a special point gathering system was introduced. It allowed the shareholder to use all the different timeshares within the system as they had collected adequate amount of points. New timeshares kept rising and the industry became more versatile than before. The reason for the success after a rocky road was the legislation

concerning timeshare business and the less brooding sales tactics. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 11-14.)

Currently, the amount of trust in timeshares is higher than ever and the amount of companies selling them is decreasing. Much of this is to blame for large corporate monsters such as Marriott International destroying the competition. Big companies like this can afford to use nicer and more pleasing sales tactics than smaller ones which is making them more successful in the long run. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 11-14.)

### 2.3 Common Factors and Differences with Fractional Real Estate Business

Both timeshare and real-estate business are relatively complicated series of paper work, bureaucracy and money issues. When talking about housing cooperative systems they are nearly identical - both the clients or shareholders have the decision power. The difference is the amount of responsibility - timeshare shareholders are specifically paying the service provider to relieve themselves of most of the pressure. In normal housing cooperative the owners do the same but have to take care of their home; the housing cooperative is only responsible for some general issues like renovations and paper work. In timeshare business the owner company's responsibility is more extensive - they make most of the decisions considering similar issues(Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 11-14.)

As said earlier the biggest problem was the "shadow of distrust" that was covering the industry. The false and misleading marketing strategies procured lots of disappointments among the shareholders along with the unreasonable conditions of the timeshare agreements. Some of the timeshare companies even advertized the possibility to switch the timeshares with another shareholder, without actually organizing the possibility to do so. In some extreme cases the companies even tried to sell destination that did not even exist. This type of selling usually happened from country to another. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 11-14.)

Negative image was also coming from the poor maintenance and up keeping of timeshares as they were extremely costly for the companies who owned them if

they stayed empty for long periods of time. Now timeshares have a relatively positive image and they are considered as good investment targets. However, they are good for keeping money safe from economy fluctuations but not if one's desires are high return for income. The clear downside of them is the fact that they cost a lot, possible earning stays very marginal unlike in property investments where risks are higher but the return of investments is more concrete.(Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, p. 14-17; Hovey 2000, pp. 15-17)

Despite the drawbacks of the early phase timeshares, they had plenty of positive sides to them. The most obvious of them was the cost affectivity. It was an affordable choice for those who wanted an out-of-town stay-over place where they could relax a few weeks a year but could not purchase themselves an entire house. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 14-17.)

A timeshare owner could switch his timeshare whenever he decided to, unlike a real-estate owner who did not have this flexibility. In addition these timeshare products had furniture and commodities that were top of the line. This meant that the shareholder did not need to spend capital on these types of procurements like normal house buyer would. Also worth knowing is that timeshare buyer is entitled to cancel the purchase decision within a certain time period after purchasing it. (Timeshare Secrets 2010; Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 14-17.)

A possibility to rent, hand over or give as legacy for the grand children existed and made it a very appealing option for normal estates. Pricing options of timeshares also helped to avoid inflation problems as the shareholder would buy the holiday period long before it. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 14-17.)

A timeshare was also a better option for companies who sold them comparing to hotel services - as the shareholders had invested their own capital, they would take much better care of the timeshare and treated it like they owned it which meant savings on maintenance expenses. Another benefit was that a timeshare reimbursed the owner faster than traditional real estates. This of course depended on the location and timeshare itself, but generally speaking it had better counter value. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 14-17.)

Diversifying the tourism industry was the biggest influence that timeshare business had on it - a hotel could sell rooms the normal way and have timeshare apartments according to the demand and supply. Some hotels even changed their hotel rooms permanently to timeshares to ensure a more stable flow of customers. Extra income came also for new services like administrative services. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 14-17.)

### **3 The Product**

"Mainly, the timeshare product is an entity that consists of various different services of which should be mentioned such as reception services, room services and different recreational activity services " (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 8-11). The other popular products are also normal real-estate properties that are used just like timeshares but are bought for full ownership. In this context we of the author refers to popularity among Russian consumers. In this particular case they can be referred to as similar products, and will be referred during the interviews. The use of normal properties as part of research will make sure the data is uncorrupted and gives a more realistic picture of present situation in South Karelia. Another reason is that there are so few timeshare providers in the region that the author is forced to widen the criteria for thesis project.

" A form of shared property ownership, commonly in vacation or recreation condominium property, in which rights vest in several owners to use property for specified period each year" (West's Encyclopedia of American Law 2008).

In order to work properly the product should have all-year service provider, high standard premises and pleasing environment. To create a product that is successful in all of these a substantial amount of market research has to be made to define the needs of the customers. Every product is a package of small services which the customer chooses to buy, or not. The appealing factors are the facilities themselves, services, accessibility, image and price tag. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 48-49.)

### 3.1 Facilities

Different facilities belonging to a timeshare product are hotels, camping sites, villas and other accommodation options. Restaurants and bars, the facilities that serve food and beverages for the shareholders. Third group is the different transportation methods: buses, taxis, rental cars, trains and airplanes. Then come the activity facilities such as sport centers, golf courses and culture centers. Other facilities like schools and health care facilities are needed especially if the shareholders are using the timeshare for longer periods of time. Information services along with everyday services like grocery stores should be available within a reasonable distance from the timeshare. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 46-47.)



Picture 1. A Holiday Club Saimaa company's typical timeshare facility in Rauha, Lappeenranta.

An example of a timeshare that is possible to purchase for shared ownership in South Eastern Finland. Property in the picture is owned by Holiday Club Resorts.

### **3.2 Accessibility**

A good timeshare location is easily accessible. The key component that defines it is the infrastructure; roads, parking spaces, railroads and airfields or any transportation hubs. No matter how good the infrastructure is, it does not necessarily mean that the system works. A working transportation system also requires modern operational units - taxis, buses, trains - and operative factors that regulate the traffic and routes. The prices are also important, if the system works but is exceedingly costly to use, it will lose its appeal. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 46-47.)

### **3.3 Image**

The image of the company means everything because people will judge companies based on their image, even if they had no idea what the facilities and service are like. The problem of a negative image of timeshare products is still a nuisance in the 21st century mainly because of terrible pre-marketing methods and poor follow-up marketing. In Finland this bad image still exists at some level, however, the interest of large companies towards timeshares has helped the creditability of the products in the long run.

Image, in short, means the audience's perception of the company, products and service when they hear the name of the company or for example see their logo - what is the first thing that comes to mind. If the image is well structured and well maintained it should always be a positive one or, by the least, neutral.

### **3.4 Pricing**

A visit to the timeshare destination costs a solid price that has to be paid if the shareholder wishes to use his right to visit the timeshare. The price itself consists of the travelling expenses, accommodation and services that the timeshare company provides for its residents. These prices may vary a lot depending on the season, additional services and the length of the time period spent there. Obviously, the size of the timeshare and location affect the price as well.

The timeshare business is generally speaking quite costly and not usually available for the poorest part of the population and there are some risks involved which may be scary for wealthier folks as well. If the timeshare becomes useless, it might be really hard to sell forward. During the time the shareholder is not using the timeshare, he still has to pay an annual maintenance fee that might be several hundred euros.

There are some services that arrange these sales but customers should keep in mind that these companies have lots of scam artists among them who charge advance fees and disappear without leaving a trace. The upsides are the savings from travel costs, no need to eat in a restaurant everyday nor go out. Sadly, however, these savings are not enough to make timeshares available for everyone.

## **4 Russian Tourists and Travelers**

According to a research article made by Minna Malankin(2012) Finland's popularity as a travel destination for Russians is in danger to diminish as other countries are gaining popularity a lot quicker. One reason that Finland is still a desired destination is its Visa application procedure that is considerably less complicated and faster than in other Schengen countries. In order to travel more and renew their Visas, Russians have to stay in Finland for longer periods of time - an ideal reason to purchase a timeshare, for instance. Finland has recognized the potential in Russia, fairly marginally in tourism sector and just specific areas like South Karelia, some parts of Lapland and capitol area have put effort on marketing for Russians. This poor organizing and slow reaction will cost Finland a great deal of potential resources, money and connections. It also loses an opportunity to broaden its horizons as tourism destination and chance mentality for a more open minded direction.

### **4.1 What is the Motivation?**

Just now the most significant of Russian consumers group is baby boomers that cover twenty percent of population and the next younger generation which both



have plenty of purchase power. This latter segment is slightly bigger, 27 percent in total. Russians travel for the same reasons as Finnish people, to relax and get away from their routine lives. In Finland they have trouble accessing some information about their destination and services, airgo, lots of potentiality in making business happen is lost. Travelling habits vary from spontaneous surprise trips to one to two weeks ahead planned holidays. In common the mentality is to live for the moment and not to worry too much about future, whether work or private time is concerned. Astonishingly one third has not planned their trip ahead, in any way. After planning their holidays so carefully in advance it probably comes to no-one's surprise that Russians do value efforts to make the stay worthwhile; they are used to standing in queues in larger cities in Russia so it exotic for them not having to do that in Finland. They also value if, for instance music and television programs are provided on their language. Even if they would not plan their trips carefully it does not mean that they are careless, for example, Russians are very price conscious people and value products that have price tag visible and reasonable quality price relation. A good impression of the product is possible to make by adding some perks to it. If there are two relatively similar options available with about the same cost the product that has more within it gets the deal far more often than the option that seems too plain. The general appeal of the trip is to seek for comfort and meet new people in the process. These are the desires of Russian middle class. The richest Russians do not usually spend their holidays in Finland as it lacks the exclusivity they seek but might offer a place for weekend hideaway. They are a great target group for timeshare sales since they most likely already own few of them, so one more could not hurt. Finland has underestimated the hidden potentiality in richest percent of Russian population who are not currently travelling to Finland as it is not seen as an interesting destination. The author believes this could be changed - and so far, some progress has been made. The greatest potentiality is of course in Helsinki since it offers plenty of high end services this customer group seeks and desires. So far, however, there are only few luxury and world class shops and restaurants that would attract these rich individuals. The lack of services and, simply, things to do will keep Helsinki and other parts of Finland as an undesirable place to travel to. The South Karelia area has tried to uplift its profile but still only manages to appeal to middle class

Russians, only. The radical input of investment money might help the situation a bit. (Malankin 2012, pp. 5, 19, 25-27.)

#### **4.2. What Is Needed from a Good Destination?**

Many people make the mistake of raising the prices, as they know Russians can afford to buy their commodities with higher prices, than instead increasing the selection. This will eventually make more money in the long run because they want various different items like clothes for souvenirs and appreciate if they have comprehensive selection to choose from. It also means immaterial products - amenities that they need during their holiday, for example, in their timeshare, the services should be available any time of the day as Russian prefer to sleep late and stay up late once they are on their holiday. It does not always mean nightclubs or restaurants but also other unusual activities they would not normally do back home. Everything said before is taken for granted but really plays a big role when there is talk about money. Good service and experience will be valuable for the service providers. A typical Russian tourist spends up to eight times as much money on their holiday as typical European. (Malankin 2012, pp. 27; Pesu 2013, pp. 7-10.)

#### **4.3. Different People, Different Habits**

There are three major consumer groups in Russia that can be considered as high potential consumers; first there are the innovators who represent the younger generation who have adopted "enjoy-the-life" attitude and do not hesitate to spend their money on different novelties. The second largest group is the achievers who are not so experimenting as innovators and usually choose the safest option for purchase. For these, Finland could be that one safe bet when choosing a travel destination without too much fuss but still enjoy the trip. Third are the stable who are least experimental. They still purchase products and services but only when needed. Not possibly the best chance for timeshare or free time property owners but they might be able to be persuaded to make a safe investment, like for instance, a timeshare. (Malankin 2012, pp. 27; Pesu 2013, pp. 7-10.)

Most Russians have enjoyed a steep rise in average incomes and low tax rates during the twenty first century. Modern Russians typically have loads of disposable incomes making them very potential buyers in any consumption related matter either domestically or abroad. Wildest predictions claim them to be the largest consumer group by 2025 in Europe. This rise incomes rise has created a very demanding customer group who accept only the highest quality. For example, if they are acquiring a cottage in Finland or even a timeshare it should be close to all the major services like restaurants and night clubs. What comes to quality only highest level of luxury is accepted. (Pesu 2013, p. 23; Ranta 2008, p. 21. )

An ideal timeshare has some basic common factors that "all" Russians seek; The concept of going to a cottage for a weekend is equally popular in Finland and Russia. The difference is that when Finns can deal being with no running water nor water closet Russians could not stand the idea. For them it is not a holiday if the cottage does not have basic commodities like shower, electricity and television. To balance this out, more traditional elements of cottage, like darts, swing, board games, grill and sport utilities can be found in the accessory list. When Russians go on a holiday it should feel easy and effortless and even the lady of the house, who usually takes care of the chores, needs her time off.

A relatively recent article on Russia Today's news release said that Russians are shying away from expensive travel options and at the same time trying to be experimental. The idea is to find a trip with a bargain price. This might explain why Finland is a popular travel destination; it is close, so there is no need for expensive plane tickets, it is easy and has all the necessary basic services they seek in a destination. The weird part is that Finland is not exotic, in any possible way measured, it is not adventurous or exciting, especially in South Karelia region where only some small towns are located without any particular epicenter. Maybe it is also the reason for repetitive trips; it will never disappoint when there are no high expectations. The appeal are the affordable shopping options and peaceful environment which gives a nice change from a hectic city life in St. Petersburg. (Saarinen 2011; Russia Today 2012. ; Malankin 2012, p. 28.)

The search for a perfect holiday destination happens more and more often in Internet. However, still a large portion of the information comes from traditional sources like friends, social networks and brochures. The people who choose to use a travel agency for help are most of the time inexperienced individuals who select a trip that is preplanned by a travel agency. The emerging of Internet as a tool for product display is still under progress but already shows the same trend as everywhere in western world. This is why the online material about timeshare companies has to look presentable and suitable for its target audience and its needs. For some reason studies indicate that people searching material from web pages and online material are more likely to spend more money during their holiday than a comparable non-Internet user. Now, when times are becoming more technology filled and people have easier access to discovering different, even distant or remote destinations, Finland has a light threatened feeling of losing most of the Russian tourists once they get too familiar and accustomed to the country and will travel somewhere more exotic. (Malankin 2012, pp.81-83; Ranta 2008, p. 21.)

Russians belong to a group of multiactive nationalities; they are talkative, extroverts, have strong body language and tend to put feelings in front of rational thinking. Based on author's personal experiences most of this is true and they really do seem to behave like this but it is really hard to tell whether it is because of the influence of other people or is it something that is natural for them. Anyways, they are good at relaxed communication with strangers and are very keen to meet new people and are therefore easily approachable compared to for instance Finnish people who tend to be more inwardly focused and shy. (Häkli 2014, pp. 2-3.)

The biggest potentiality, so far, lies in mobile services. At the moment Russia is still growing in net sales and other electronic services and the opportunities there are just waiting for their takers. For instance most of the Russians would prefer to use mobile services for checking in at a hotel or for booking the stay. The possibilities to apply this in timeshare business are endless. Mobile phones that support Internet connections could monitor the timeshare markets in Finland and announce when suitable destination appears on sale. For younger Russians Internet is the only channel of information and quite possibly the

situation will not change when they reach the age and monetary independence when they can purchase their own timeshare. Older ones still prefer to have a physical brochure in their hand and detailed information when they are making decision. Both, rough, age groups have something in common - they need a sales pitch. The sale will not prevail unless there is not a real live person to sell to them. (Malankin 2012, p. 82.)

#### **4.4 How to sell Finland to Russians**

A perfect sales speech is given by a Finnish person who is fluent in Russian because Russians tend to trust Finnish people more than their own countrymen. The sales negotiator or whoever takes care of marketing communications should portray passion in his business and show belief in the product he is trying to sell. Then again this applies to all sales people and anybody who they are trying to sell something. Nobody will ever buy the product if there is no spark in the eye of the sales person. A good sales person can sell even a poor product with great speech and sales work. The product will be appealing if the positive sides of it are emphasized and the negative sides minimized. (Malankin 2012, pp. 25-27.)

The most trusted source of liable information is friends when Russians need a recommendation of a destination or simply an unbiased opinion. The second most popular and trustworthy source is different web forums that discuss about the destination. The website of the service provider, timeshare company or some other relatable service besides travel agencies and outsourced marketing companies are considered reliable. A key for successful business is building trust, especially first timers are afraid to get scammed and betrayed and like to do some extra research just to be sure. Those who have previous experiences of Finland have gained full trust. A good tip to avoid trust issues is to ad a Russian discussion or feedback forum on the website of the destination, as researches show that a slight majority prefers to read experiences of other service users and base the purchase decision on this. This feedback will most likely turn out to be most important factor for beating the competitors as everything else except good service can be copied. If a Russian gets good

service he will let others know as well. The winner is the one who can balance the service quality and expenses perfectly and will treat customers as individuals and take good care of customer relation before, during and after the actual service situation. In this case when most customers are foreign it is especially important to be aware of the cultural differences and act accordingly when a tricky situation presents itself. The simplest example is the problems arising in communication; what language is most natural for the customer?(Ranta 2008, p. 26, 31.)

## 5 Russian Culture & Buying Behavior

"Russia is not and has never been a " nation state", where the geo-political boundaries and ethno-cultural boundaries coincide" (Franklin & Widdis 2004). Russia is the largest country in the world and there is no reason to expect it to be anything less than a pool of various subcultures, nationalities and manners. Despite this, there is a sense of group and family in the minds of Russians, no matter the background, they are still one huge family. So far based on author's personal life experiences this is true to every word, Russians are family and group oriented folks who do not like spending time alone.(Kwintessent. 2013, p.1.)



Picture 2. Russian travelers exiting a train somewhere in Russia.

Currently Russians are travelling to Finland by train and by car; train ride is easier for those who are going all the way to Helsinki or meeting relatives. Car

is a popular choice among those who are keen to do heavy shopping in Finland and need plenty of space for purchased commodities.

Because of emphasis on agriculture in the past, the country has a strong remainder of community and collectivity as a national personality. The easiest way to detect this in modern days is that Russians prefer not be alone and will rather sit in the same table with complete strangers than, for instance, dine alone, in a restaurant. They do not simply attend other peoples company, they like to intervene with their business as well, it is considered to be normal behavior. (Kwintessent 2013, p. 1.)

Russians are extremely patriotic people and expect other cultures to admire theirs, especially as they are managing to survive in, sometimes, rather difficult circumstances where others could not do the same. This general atmosphere of pride can be seen in numerous songs and poems that praise their homeland. Some younger generations seem to be less patriotic and tend be more casual about politics and morale views. There is still a trend of somewhat old fashioned way of thinking and seeing the world amongst them but changes are there to be seen. .(Kwintessent 2013, p. 1.)

What comes to the family culture they are very family oriented and it is not uncommon for up to three generations to share one apartment. However, family sizes are fairly small, usually just one child. It is because women who are responsible for child care are also expected to work full time outside the household. There is no room and time, normally, for larger families. (Kwintessent 2013, p. 1.)

## **6 Current Business Situation**

Since 1985 the growth of timeshare industry has not showed any signs of weakening. As a matter a fact, the business has been growing twelve percent a year on average between the years 1990 and 2003. The United States are the biggest individual region holding over thirty percent of the entire market. Second largest is, probably to no-one´s surprise, Europe. Combined, these two regions hold sixty percent of the whole world timeshares. Rest of the world has only

marginal ownings, mostly less than ten percent per geographical area. For comparison, the third largest timeshare owner is South America, holding only 7.2 percent of the markets. The shareholders are situated in only twenty individual countries, the United States being the leader by 44 percent. There are more than 5,000 timeshare resorts now worldwide in 110 countries. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 17-23; Hovey 2000, p. 3.)

In Europe most of the destinations are beach or ski resorts and countryside timeshares - two thirds of which are located in Southern European countries like Spain and Italy. All destinations are roughly divided into these categories; beach, lake, city and ski destinations. (Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 17-23.)

In Finland, timeshares have reached a huge popularity. Finnish destinations are mostly beach, lakeside or ski destinations depending on the location. The Finland's Weekshare Association has all the major timeshare companies working under same roof, figuratively. These companies are Aurinkolampi Inc., Holiday Club Finland Inc., Honka Holida Inc. and Vierumäki Country Club Inc. In 2004 these companies controlled 96 percent of the Finnish markets. At that time, a staggering 80 percent of all timeshare products in Finland were sold. Compared to population the Finns are the second most enthusiastic users of timeshare products in the world. They are also very likely to eventually buy the product. Now the popularity of timeshares is higher than ever in Finland; there are a total of 50,000 owners and a questionnaire made by finance publication TalousSanomat showed that one of out five people are interested to purchase one. It seems that timeshares have finally gained enough positive reputation in Northern Europe and people have realized the same as everyone else in the world - timeshares are a safe investment for money. (Kokko 2007, p. 1; Sorsa & Sanchez 2004, pp. 26-27.)

## **6.1 The Fall of Ruble**

Since the end of last the year the price of the Ruble has plummeted to one of its all time lows. Since last year's January the drop has been a total of 16 percent compared to US dollar and 17 percent to Euro. Specialists believe the dive will go on throughout the year 2014 and floating currency is expected during 2015.



The sole reasons behind the fall are disbelief on financial growth and the fear of the future, which unfortunately, is feeding itself. In a Russia Today news channel's online article the Russian Minister of Financial Development stated that the weakening of the Ruble would boost the country's exports and bring high competitiveness for Russian products everywhere. (Russia Today. 2014. p. 1.)

The weakening shows already on Finnish markets; people do not travel as much as before and are using less money. The situation is especially bad in South Eastern Finland where Russians mostly travel. Since most travelers from Russia are middle class, the low Ruble can still affect their buying behavior unlike wealthier Russians who do not travel to Finland in the first place so often. (Manninen L. 2014.p. 1.)

## **6.2 Crimean Crisis**

"The Russian stock market has tanked 10 percent this month, wiping out billions in market capitalization. Economists have slashed growth forecasts to zero this year and foreign investors are pulling money out of Russian banks." (Vasilyeva 2014.) It is clear now that recent turmoil between Russian Federation and Western world over crisis in Crimea has indeed had a negative impact on economy of Russia. Sanctions made by the United States have already started to pinch the economy and most influential oligarchs in Russia are now on their toes as President of Russia has given them no reassurance over their investments. As the economy was before the incident already in bad shape, now what little expectations over financial growth existed are now gone. The unrevealed threat lies in future sanctions that the West might impose on Russia if it continues to back out from negotiations over Crimean peninsula's tenure. (Vasilyeva 2014, p. 1.)



Picture 3. Secretary of the State John Kerry shaking hands with Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Lavrov in Geneva Switzerland in emergency meeting over Ukrainian dispute.

Picture above symbolizes the ongoing dispute between Western world and situation in Eastern Ukraine where Russian involvement in foreign politics has brought a shadow on its very own economy that is currently suffering from distrust both from within and outside. The West has introduced a series of economic limitations to Russia and slow down of local trade is not showing any signs of recovery because of this.

The national bank of Russia had to raise the interest rates sharply, hurting the economy even further, as it will be more difficult now to acclaim a loan from the banks. In addition the investors have been estimated to pull out up to 50 billion US dollars from Russia when and if the financial sanctions get tighter. The imprisoning of one Russian oligarch some years ago has now scared the wealthiest individuals to question Russian President's authority. One way these people are trying to divide the risk is to use multiple currencies as there is not much else they could do. (Vasilyeva 2014, p. 1.)

## **7 A Tip Guide to Building an Appealing Website**

A fully functional and appealing website is the number one tool in reaching one's clientele as most people use Internet as the source of information and tool for shopping. The meaning of conventional paper marketing and other than high technology based marketing solutions have decreased as the world has moved towards digital age. Here are some key factors that have to be considered while building a website.

In order to construct a fully functional website that is appealing to look and use is essential to build a picture of perfect customer service. First thing to keep in mind is unity as when it comes to working community and customer service quality; the staff should promote positive attitude as they serve as the brand and trademark of the company they work for. A person who can reach the trust of the customer by showing expertise and critical way of thinking is the ultimate customer servant. The servant also needs to provide good social service skills to work fluently with different personality types and nationalities. (Ranta 2008, pp. 22-24.)

On average Russians seek through and compare destination on five different websites before making a final decision. That is why it is vital to have one's website appearing in the top five search results of online booking service pages. Once they find a suitable website they start to investigate. The service provider should make sure they tell only essential information to avoid frustration on their customers' behalf. To no one's surprise this is common with all web users, as the faster way of associating with online businesses makes them impatient and demanding consumers who want to know everything that there is to know about the destination right away. "People don't notice banners. It's been found in eye tracking studies their gaze literally avoids settling on any area that looks like an advert, instead it seems people actively try to avoid looking at them. This effect is called banner blindness." (Dunn 2013, Malankin 2012, p. 82.)

The Russian website layout differs less and less from Western designs as times go forward. These days the main differences come from the structure of the website; Russian design tends to be free of straightforward patterns and strict

grids. Their touch to the design stays this way very fresh which is especially important since Russia is the fastest growing Internet user country and has already 5th place on the pedestal. Up to eighty percent of Internet user are online everyday and most of them prefer to book their trips online. The trend is that travel agencies are quickly moving to online platforms. (Grebennikova & Mukranova 2013, p. 7.)

The language of the page is the most crucial factor - most people switch to another page if they see the language is English or other than Russian. This applies also to the subpage when actual purchase and exchange of money is made. A notable tip is to write the language straight to Russian to avoid phrases that might sound stupid in Russian. The best option is to use a professional translator as the better language structure and vocabulary might be a decision changer if the customer is hanging between two similar options. (Malankin 2012, pp. 86-87.)

Naming things on the website is very crucial as it might prove to be difficult to find the hotel or the restaurant if the Russians have only seen the name in Cyrillic alphabets. The name of the place should have two versions, Russian and Finnish. The Finnish name should have an explanation with it, so Russian will recognize what services the company is providing. The meanings of different words, especially appearing in the name, should be checked for alternative purpose in Russian in order to avoid unpleasant or funny accusations. (Malankin 2012, p. 87.)

Designing a website solely for Russians is different from designing it for Finnish. But truth is there is no single right way to design a website for any particular group of people. Russians like more colors, beautiful patterns and simplicity at the same time. The designer, if Finnish, should try to make the website look more flamboyant than he normally would and use mystical and ambience lifting themes. It is good to keep in mind that there is not just one simple type of people that are Russians, these instructions simply replicate majority's desires on what comes to appealing website outlines and gives some direction. Most of the people are already thinking beforehand what they are going to do once they access a website and their vision becomes narrow and they will not see

anything else besides their "mission", which here is booking a trip as easily and effortlessly as possible or simply scrolling to see the options. (Dunn 2013; Malankin 2012, p. 88.)

The pictures of the website may serve as a feedback forum - other Russian customers often allow to take pictures of them for commercial use. This helps to create trust. And even better if the pictures are related to the topic they advertize. Colors being used should be warm and interesting but convincing, for example, using a lot of pink is not a good idea. This actually makes a lot of sense since the only source of trustworthy information on foreign products and foreign country is recommendations of others. It creates trust and ease and guides towards a positive decision. (Malankin 2012, p. 87.)

Contents of the website ought to be similar to any other modern website; it should have information about refund options, a phone number for help line, seasonal pricing changes, instructions on how to get to a destination with a map, local legislation, introduction videos, links and information about the surroundings of the destination. The distances, especially, should be written accurately avoiding descriptive terms like "walking distance". This is because Russians have very different perception of what is far and what is close. (Malankin 2012, pp. 89-90.)

Final elements that a good website requires are live chat link between customer and customer service personnel, preferably with a picture of the person. The link should be open all the time but if not, it should at least have the information about when it is open. As Russians like to compare prices it is recommended to put a graph of the hotel's or restaurant's prices compared to comparable options. Once the customer has bought the service it is good to save all the information he has given to a customer profile database and keep sending personalized emails as after marketing to keep the customer's interest. (Malankin 2012, p. 91.)

The fact when building a successful web page, is that one has to keep in mind that when Russians travel abroad they do not seek services customized specifically for them. This gives the web design a challenge because the

language still has to be Russian but the whole picture has to appear foreign, in a way everything has to look exotic and interesting at the same time. Russians seek the same safety as Finnish people when they were only booking package trips in the 1990s.

## **8 Etiquette in Business and Customer Relations: Finland versus Russia**

Different cultures have different ways for doing business successfully. One method may not be considered a good one in another culture. Luckily this chapter will enlighten the problem and gives some ideas how to solve awkward situations with class and how to deal with other cultures with respect and ending up closing the deal with both parties happy.

First the general process is explained, stage by stage and the writer moves on to explaining the different nuances that these two relatively close cultures, Finnish and Russian, have in common and what the main differences are. If one of the parties does not recognize the differences once in an international business interaction, the end result will not be the best possible.

### **8.1 Marketing Communication - stages of sales process**

When people talk about marketing communication it is relatively difficult for them to narrow down the term just to the communication part. People easily associate all kind of marketing as communicational marketing. The truth is that this term rules out marketing as most people understand it - as television commercials, website banners, magazines that are covered with advertisements or perhaps even the planning of marketing strategy.

"Marketing communication has two objectives. One is to create and sustain demand and preference for the product. The other is to shorten the sales cycle." a direct quote from a company called MaRS(2014). It offers marketing related help to the companies who struggle with their marketing issues. The definition tells us that like in any situation the sale is tried to be made as quick as possible as soon as the interest towards the product is raised and maintained. The

question is, how do you do this? In this case the term is narrowed to the part of it that covers the personal sales. (MaRS 2014, p. 1.)

There are several different elements to personal sales such as prospecting and evaluating, which means the pre work done before actually contacting the customer. The next stage is preapproach, covering the needs of the customers and preparing for the sales situation. After that sales personnel normally approaches customer by phone, through internet or some other way and strives to create a good relationship before actually starting to sell the product. Once the trust is gained it is time to do a sales presentation or display of the services or product. After finishing this part of the project it is time to close the deal and make the sale. Still once the sale is made it is good to keep in contact with the customer and make sure he is satisfied with the product and help him if he needs any assistance with use or has some other difficulties. The author has recognized the same pattern in his sales duties and acknowledges that the process, indeed, goes like this source has explained. (Brown 2013.)

## **8.2 Finland in Business Situation**

According to travelers guide Culture Shock Finland (Swallow 2011) Finnish people do not have any idea what is customer care. The book presents this issue through examples from real life customer service situations. Finnish people have been and are traditionally poor at communicating with foreigners and do not possess universally acceptable view of appropriate customer service. The reason for this is hidden in Finland's historical background, as it is a relatively young country with slightly plain cultural history; throughout its history Finland has been ruled by other nations and has been nation of peasants, never high culture which has resulted in negative attitude towards authority figures and respect for tight network of social rules and laws. There have never been too many tourists or foreigners who could have enriched the nation's culture and behavioral ways, as for instance has happened in most parts of Central and Western Europe. Therefore, it is difficult for a Finn to recognize the customer as an authority figure who has to be respected and never questioned.

Unlike most other cultures eye contact with a customer is considered to be an invasion of privacy which sounds ridiculous to some nationalities and can lead to misconceptions about the service. Another thing that they tend to lack is the most important factor in customer service business - they are not very servient by nature and do not really know how to handle situations where they are expected to behave in such way. For example, problems arise when they have to handle a complaint. This roots to the very foundation of the society, egalitariry. This attitude or way of living is often judged as arrongance from foreigner's point of view. (Swallow 2011, p. 7.)

The Finns have very highly developed etiquette when it comes to official situations, like in this thesis's case, meeting with a client. It all starts from a handshake - in Finnish Culture it is customary and normal to shake hands with everybody in the same room, including women and children; once when entering a "situation" and once when leaving it. This is the only "invasion of privacy" when two unrelated people meet for the first time. There will not be hugging nor kissing and even fairly long physical distance is kept to conversation partner throughout the meeting. Same applies to eye contact. It is used mainly during the initial handshake and kept to a minimum after it. Among younger people this type of openness is considered more normal and it is slowly becoming fashionable once these younger generations grow up and reach adulthood. (Bosrock 2014, p. 1.)

Punctuality is something very important to remember, however, in some situations the sales person needs to ignore the usual terms of socializing and give slack for tardiness to some extent. And once the sales situation, along with any other business meeting, is engaged there will not be any small talk because Finns lack the skills for this and get right down to business, without exceptions. Some longer pauses in conversation are typical and not a sign of uncomfortness but a normal part of conversation. The general structure is blunt; the talking part is kept to a minimum but the message is still very clear and transparent. In comparison Americans, for example, tend to talk a lot, confront their opponent, argue, use sarcasm and are loud by nature. The only similarities are that both want to close the deal as soon as possible but Americans do it with a wider level of communication. It is imperative that a



Finnish person knows that his normal sales strategy will most likely fail with foreigners and it is time to update the tactics before trying to win over new markets. (Bosrock 2014, p. 1.)

### **8.3 Russia in a Business Situation**

Russian business etiquette is almost the opposite to the Finnish one. That is why it is important that the reader has understanding how both countries work in this context. The main difference is the way time is perceived. In Russia business colleagues' tardiness is considered to be normal behavior. Time is even more important in the process of business negotiation, high pressure talking and pushing people to make decision is viewed unprofessional and rude - Russian people are very patient and like to take their time when they are making important decisions. However, if they are in customer's role they are very demanding and want full service all the time. In this case when parties are not equal the higher person, here the customer, takes the lead and he has to be respected more and treated well from now on. (Foreign translations. 2014, p. 1.)

Language is another grand issue that might be a decisive factor in sales situation; everything, or at least business card, should have Russian translation available. This is not an indication that Russians do not know English language skills but a sign of determination from the sales person's side - it displays a desire to do business with Russians - a sign of respect. (Foreign translations 2014, p. 1.)

To be taken seriously a sales person should remember to shake hands firmly, just as in Finnish culture, and wear formal, traditional business wear. Ladies should wear skirts rather than suits( Foreign Translations 2014). What comes to the business talks themselves it is good to remember the history of Russia. A book by Richard D. Lewis called *When Cultures Collide*(1996) states that since Russians are traditionally suspicious about authority figures and behavior, it is suggested to make very straightforward conversation with them as they get uncomfortable about Europeans' overly smooth and formal way of talking. This still does not mean that they would not appreciate polite manners and kind talk.

Russians will appreciate hospitality as they have a reputation of being extremely hospitable toward strangers and other visitors. (Lewis 1996, pp.261-266.)

"The way how Russians negotiate displays not only the peasant like cautiousness, stubbornness and restraint, but also the profound experience from good education and skillful organization" (Lewis1996, p. 261). Mr. Lewis has listed some great tips for a successful business negotiator, who is considerate when dealing with foreign cultures: for starters if sales person or business man is facing more than one person in business talks he should remember to focus on the group and avoid talking to one individual for too long and not pay attention to some possible irregularities in their behavior. Russians tend to claim they have understood what they are being told, even if they actually do not. Another thing is that they might be a little, even overly, passionate at times. This is not a sign of bad direction of negotiation and should not be paid too much attention to. To lighten the mood and atmosphere light small talk is recommended. To ease the negotiation some situational humor can help the process along if the person with humour has adequate language skills to go with. The only rule is not to use jokes that somehow relate to sex - it is considered as taboo among even friends. If by chance the negotiator manages to upset his Russian clients he can offer a discount to calm them down, usually it works. (Lewis 1996, p. 261; Malankin 2012, p. 25.)

It is good to keep in mind that this particular book offers tips and perspective for very formal business situations and some of the instructions might be too much for a less formal situation like selling a timeshare , where most likely the sales person is facing a couple with children rather than a group of Russian investors or an oligarch.

### **8.3 How to Read the Client´s Body Language?**

Body language is on strange waters when a Finnish person is asked to judge some basic indicators that are normal for other cultures. They are good in the linguistic part but they need deeper understanding to "read" what the person opposite them is saying with their bodies, not with their mouths. The challenge comes from other cultures where it is imperative to be able read the body

language and make the sales or service accordingly. Younger generations are more open to new behavior trends and are more likely to overcome these obstacles better than their predecessors. They will have most likely grown a better, stereotype and attitude free, view towards them than older generations who are still struggling to forget the negative history that Finland and Russia share from the early twentieth century. (Lewis 1993, p. 174-176.)

The first sign of interest is spotted from the way the client is sitting on his chair - if he is leaning back, he is uninterested or bored and it will be difficult to make the sale. If he is leaning forward there are much better chances - he is interested the offer and conversation itself. Even the way they wear their clothes is a clear indicator of eagerness; if the coat is unbuttoned, there is a chance but if not, the case is lost. The position of legs works a lot like the coat: closed legs is bad sign but open are good. (Lewis 1993, p. 182.)

## **9 Results**

This chapter is all about the research itself; what was the context, who were the people and from which companies. Each interview was slightly different from one another and method used did not follow any certain pattern. The only common factor was the questions.

Each of the interviews are described here in detail and each answer replicated with as much accuracy as possible. Later on in the thesis the results will be analyzed. This chapter merely explains what actually happened and what was being said in order to help the reader to understand the context.

The interview processes did not have too many differentiating factors except that one of the interviews had to be conducted via cell phone because of logistic reasons. This did not affect the process itself except the fact that it was not recorded but only written down simultaneously as the interview went along.

## **9.1 Interview Format**

Here is the standard format of every interview the author conducted for this thesis. Each interview had individual structure and some questions may have been left out but the overall structure stayed the same throughout the interview process.

Introduction of Interview Companions

Interview Structure

Background Information of The Attendant

Name:

Gender:

Education:

Profession:

Education:

Working history in your current workplace: how long have you been here, in which positions, other?

The Company; characterization by the employee/manager

Target Group Background

Marketing Communication Methods and Strategies

The nature and number of timeshare facilities, if any?

Services & Amenities

Established:

Number of units and employees:

Services available(timeshares, real-estates, other?)

The nature and number of timeshare facilities, if any?

Customers

How many percent of your customers are Russian?

Short opinions of Russians as customers:

Give a short customer profile.

What is your connection with Russians; none, native language, other...?

The main customer segment(age, gender, income, region)?

The desires of customers?

Your supply and demand?

Marketing and Competition

How do you market your products?

Give an example of a meeting with a customer step by step

Do you train your staff for foreign markets?

How do you monitor your competitors? How many competitors do you have?

Do you practice Business to Business marketing? Share some details?

What supporting services do you offer? Booking, reception, cleaning, restaurant or maintenance?

Please list the amenities you offer for your customers. If none, why?

Do you have international co-operatives?

Could you share some statistics about your progress: what is the revenue brought in by Russians, how many purchases does one customer make, what kind of feedback do you get from them etc.?

## 9.2 The First Interview

The first interview the author conducted took place in a spa hotel in South-Karelia with a sales negotiator who sells real-estates, chalets and villas for Russians who wish to purchase a place for leisure. The sales negotiator has worked in this industry for 2.5 years of which 1.5 years for a major Finnish contractor. Her general duties are personal sales, working as a translator and as a consultant advising customers with different issues and posting at a desk in this spa hotel during day time and that way being available for customers. She has had studies in philosophy and tourism but none in the field of sales. She had no background in Russia or any relevant connection to this country before she started her current line of work.

The company she works for has a total of 1,500 people working in its Russian offices in St. Petersburg and has over fifty years of experience in Russian markets. They have several different building projects under progress in South Karelia region as well as in Russia. The sales for Russian recreational tourists have only started in recent years as Russian tourists' inflow to Finland really began. The customers of the contractor in South Karelia are Russians and Finnish with equal shares. The negotiator however, only associates with Russians.

The marketing methods are simplified from a normal sales situation - the negotiator has a desk where customer come to her either spontaneously or instructed from the Russian office. This means that she does not have to acquire the customers herself, they find her and the situation is quite informal as Russians, according to her, dislike the idea of sharing personal information with total strangers. The Russians who visit her are middle class, over forty years old, usually families, with an income ranging anywhere from 3,000 euros to 10,000 euros a month. The significant majority of them comes from St. Petersburg or nearby regions. During busy weeks she can get up to ten customers a day but slow days offer only few people coming up to her.

The negotiator describes the Russians to be more difficult in the sense of being suspicious and reluctant to share information before getting to know the person

they are talking to, better. She always skips the part where she has to ask the needs and wants because of this and simply tells what her company has to offer. Only after making a little small talk she dares to ask more personal questions. Also she reveals that she acts just as she would act around Finnish people except when addressing people, as it is more formal in Russia. She says they are very respectful and pleased to be served as customers and simply wonderful people. She also mentioned that it would be impossible to work with them if she had some sort of stereotypes or attitudes towards them. This was asked because South Karelia has a reputation for having some attitude towards Russians. Of course this does not apply to all residents.

Services or amenities that are attached are not provided by the contractor but the spa hotel that is right next to the apartments and real-estates they have nearby. They actually have not outsourced these services but made a co-operation contract, or agreement. The only services the contractor offers are decoration and furnishing packages that are optional. Standard package is "ready to move in" apartment with kitchen supplies and other commodities except washing machine.

The author asked to describe more needs and desires of her customers. She told that they want discounts, ease and comfort of being near services while they are on their holiday. According to her, despite the political unrest with Russia's Eastern Europe politics and bad economic situation the supply and demand meet well. Some even like the service so much that they may even purchase more properties in the future.

The marketing of the contractor is made in various different channels such as leaflets, websites, radio programs, billboards, magazines both in Russia and Finland. Surprisingly, the main marketing decisions concerning Russia are made in Helsinki. The lack of commercials in social media and television commercials and quite much simplified advertising can be explained with the good reputation of the contractor and current customers telling other Russians about their experiences and so far relying mainly on word of mouth advertising.

The process from making a contact to an actual sales takes maximum of one month as she will take the customers on location, make all introductions about the property, making all the paper work and getting a bank loan and letting the customers process their purchase decision. She says she received some training courses for foreign markets but most of her expertise comes from experience.

### **9.3 The Second Interview**

The next sales expert was a real estate agent from a known Finnish chain corporation. She has worked for the business for only less than two years and has a versatile educational background; for example a degree in accounting and other business studies and an ability to speak fluent Russian. This interview took place in her workplace in Lappeenranta. The company itself is not specialized in timeshare sales but offers a specialized website for Russian markets and provides them with normal real-estate properties for free time use in Finland. The agent interviewed is working in this particular department and is the only employee in Lappeenranta department who specializes in Russian markets in addition with Finnish. The company has operated in Finland for several decades and is originally a family owned business. It has only recently generated a marketing channel for Russia.

South-Karelia has only one unit for this particular chain and mere three employees currently in the office. The business is mainly focused towards Finnish clients - only five percent of customers are Russian. The lack of volume is replaced with tenacity, vibrant networks, training programs and customer oriented service style. The company is soon expanding its visibility online as their own Russian website has deemed itself to be inadequate.

The focus group is similar to previous interview; as the people are mainly from mid-income group and usually fifty years or older with the exception of some young couples. The customers want to find a safe investment that allows them to protect their money from the fluctuation of the Ruble. They usually seek a place where several generations of family can enjoy themselves at the same time. Generally speaking the variation in this company's clientele is larger than



in previous interview. The similarity is the desire of what customers want which is ease, good and central location and space. As the company does not provide any amenities or other timeshare-relatable services the customer wants to find, mostly, a block-of-flats apartment in the center of Lappeenranta or something similar close to where all the action is.

Marketing communication starts with greeting the customers once they step inside the office and remember to ask them to sit down or if they choose to stand. She tends to be physically closer to them than when affiliating with Finnish customers. The agent first tells the customers what she has to offer and asks how she can help them. Then she asks about issues such as opening a bank account in Finland in order to purchase a house. She told author that Russians are oblivious to Finnish real-estate legislation and therefore need to be informed about all small details. If a problem arises from non-ideal destination she asks politely to join her for visiting a destination, and often they will agree to do so.

The destinations or the properties the company sells are offered for Russians if Finnish sellers and Russian house owners in Finland give permission for specially targeted marketing in Russia. Mostly these sales are made in Lappeenranta as only translation experts are there and basically all Russian sales are handled through that office.

When the author asked about the personal opinion about Russian customers she told that they are far more demanding than their Finnish equivalents and want every destination to be introduced thoroughly, sort of like window shopping for property. Meaning that they usually want an introduction about every property they deem potential for purchase. According to her the Russians appreciate the whole service package without any distinctions to product or service or other entities. In short they have to be taken through the whole process of purchase by carefully advising them and making the most of the work for them. The problem is that currently the situation is that there is more demand than houses and apartments to offer. Current marketing strategy is also considered to be too marginal because of low visibility website. However,

there are some bright sides - there are extremely few competitors in this sector and the markets are extremely segmented.

The reason behind choosing a career in Russian business came from grandfather's good experiences and a long history of studies in Russia. The profession itself did not matter so much as long as it had something to do with Russia. It had to have use of Russian language skills and experiencing their rich culture.

#### **9.4 The Third Interview**

This interview was the first one managerial position so far. The company was one of the largest real-estate traders in Finnish markets and the interview was conducted with an executive director in Lappeenranta unit. There are several other units in the South Karelia region besides the one in Lappeenranta. Unfortunately the company does not provide timeshares but does sell houses for recreational purposes for Russians who wish to purchase a house or a cottage in Finland.

The customers used to be wealthier, back in the day, but current financial blow on Russian and world economy has taken its toll on expensive real-estate sales. Now most of the people are middle class people who buy mid price houses. The only common factor in customers is the age, most of them are middle aged and older. Generally speaking the customers are families who seek a place for the whole family to spend time together on a holiday. Some of the customers are those who want to move to Finland permanently, usually those who are already employed and have spent time a lot in the country.

Usually they even have a middle man taking care of translation and paper work as this company does not have Russian speaking staff who could deal and serve the Russians. According to the executive, this is crucial for both parties of the deal to have full understanding of local legislation and the purchase process itself. The director estimated a rough 5 to 10 percent of the company's customers to be Russians. The customers seek comfort and solitude but places

where services are nearby, the trend is the same as in previous interview results.

In his personal opinion the old attitudes towards Russians, or foreigners, need to be changed as the history between Finland and Russia will not, or at least should not, affect the business and the way of doing it. He has had some relatives in the war and has no relation to Russia in his family tree - despite all this he thinks the neutral way of dealing with this customer group is the modern way of doing business and prejudices have to be thrown aside. He said that Russians are mostly attracted to the safety of Finland, as destination for investment - the price of Ruble will not have so much influence on real-estates of which the value is measured in euros and is seen as a better way of "hiding" their money from fluctuations in Russia.

Unfortunately the demand has lowered dramatically since the recent economic changes and surprisingly the demand has stayed higher in a smaller municipality Imatra, which is just nearby Lappeenranta, also a popular travel destination among Russians. This company does not advertise itself nearly as much in Russia as the author expected, they have recently started printing a brochure in Russia about their products and do not have any connection abroad to promote them. Competition in the business comes from every other real-estate company in the area. He estimated the relation between customers and agents to be one agent per thousand residents in Lappeenranta. He follows the competition, not intensively but knows enough about statistics to be well informed. He has no interest in doing co-operation with Russian partners but does not rule out a nationwide corporation in the future.

The sales process is more difficult with Russians as it is harder to build trust and make them open up about their personal needs. Most presentations stay brief as the first impression of the destination is not enough to convince the buyer and quite often the customer wants to reserve the whole day for visiting different houses as it is difficult to find out what they seek and just try desperately to offer something and hope they like it. According to the director some will not even exit the car if they do not like the house on first sight. Most of sales work is made by the middle men who are fluent in Finnish and Russian.

They try to arrange the meeting and try to convince the client of the purchase and the Finnish real-estate agent will mostly deal with the paper work and taking the customers to see the destinations. The customers often contact the real estate agent before-hand and want to meet at the destination and will not even come to the office or act the same as Finnish people - seek through the web for ideal places and then arrange a meeting but will not come to office and ask for a house or a cottage.

He told he had a long career in the business and had to build his way up from the bottom and only some years ago he became an executive. Now he mostly deals with managerial duties but still manages to deal with selling houses and doing sales representatives work.

### **9.5 The Fourth Interview**

This interview was conducted with one of the biggest real-estate agencies in Lappeenranta. They have unfortunately outsourced the timeshare services so the interview focused only on the normal properties marketed for Russians as leisure purposed real-estates. The chain itself is one of the oldest ones in the business and has one unit in South Karelia and fewer than ten employees.

The interviewee was manager in the local company unit and had worked there for several years. He had worked in different offices and had started his managerial career in Lappeenranta in 2010. He also dealt with Russian customers occasionally and understood the language but was unable to speak it. He did not have any particular connections to Russia besides some connections through co-operation partners there.

This company's clients from Russia are small families and couples between the ages of thirty and fifty years of age. There were also a significant number of property sellers, actually a lot more than buyers. Most of them are long term customers who seek peace and privacy in a property and contact this office through international partners which mostly are other similar agencies in St. Petersburg.

The advantage they had was a Russian born real-estate agent who taught the office everything about the cultural differences between Finland and Russia. Surprisingly they had noticed that it was a major factor for distrust among Russians if the person who sold them properties was Russian, they saw Finnish people more trustworthy people in general. The person who spoke Russian fluently but was still a native Finn was considered to have the best assets towards successful sales.

Around one third of the leisure time real-estates have interest among Russians and during recent years the taste has switched from high class and high price apartments to more reasonably priced, investment homes. Currently these buyers covered an estimated five percent of the whole sales of the company and some of them have Finnish nationality or at least a work place in Finland. Mostly, the customers are middle class, averaging to 3,000 to 10,000 monthly incomes. During the best time the percentage of sales revenue brought in by them was about twenty percent but during this year it was only between five to ten percent. Most of them make repetitive purchases and express their appreciation and gratitude by bringing the agency some gifts.

During the sales situation the customer is given additional picture material to view every destination in detail and take them to visit places they deem fit to buy. The customers also want to have maps of route to the destination as they are in a foreign country and do not know their way around. The people who came straight to the office often have Russian speaking consultants and are rarely very certain about what they are seeking in a house. The problem used to be the poor skill level of these consultants, however, now they are more professional and know the business better.

Competitors are the other real-estate agencies in the area in the order of market share. To fight the competitor they trained their staff to be able to handle Russian customer service at its basics. Probably the biggest advantage is the connections in Russia who deliver customers and their information to office in Lappeenranta and the interesting properties are automatically distributed to their websites. Downsides of this were illegal distribution of sales material and buying and forward selling of properties resulting in double sales.

## 9.6 The Fifth Interview

Last interview was different from previous ones in many senses; the interview had to be done by phone and the company was the only one that actually sells timeshares and is one of the major ones in Finland and has also internationally recognized status. The products are villas and chalet apartment that can also be bought for permanent ownership. Russian markets were entered first in 2011 and two years later the whole system was scaled up to meet the grown demand.

The contact person was a sales manager who had been working for this company already during the early nineties, resigned and joined the force again in 2013 after several years break. He does not have any particular training besides the basic training courses that company has organized for its employees. He has several connections to Russian markets - he has lived in Russia for some years and actually had a Russian born wife.

The company targets its business towards families and couples over the age of thirty, up till around sixty years of age. There is now a special income group that uses their services, at this poor economy everyone who has money and is interested is considered a customer and usually these people do not need to be pursued too much. Most of their clientele come to Finland for a holiday and get an invitation to get acquainted with these timeshare services.

Typical meeting process with a customer is fairly straightforward; the customers arrive at the office and are being offered coffee or other refreshments as the employee makes all the proper introductions, in Russian of course. Then next stage is that the employees, the sales negotiators try to establish a need for a timeshare if the customer does not already have it and gives a two to three hour presentation on them. After that the customer is taken to see the timeshare facilities, and once they have seen them they will make the decision to purchase one or decline. Everything happens within twenty four hours of the meeting, usually even on the same day.

The product that is advertised to Russians is the Saimaa region, not the timeshares themselves so much. Need of the customers is to purchase a

timeshare that has everything included; maintenance, cleaning, restaurant, sport and shopping services nearby along with spa treatments. Good location and high standard decoration, furniture and home appliances that are top of the line. Several co-operators both in Finland and abroad ensure the high level of services available.

In Russia the marketing is on a very professional level; an office in Saint Petersburg, websites, road side advertisements, special stands on Finnish-Russian border, travel agencies and also large scale commercials on television and radio - on the last two ones relatively seldom and mainly used to promote the image of the company. The thorough training of the staff for Russian markets helps to compensate for cultural differences.

Currently the company is doing extremely well and demand and supply meet. According to the sales manager the company actually made its all time record this year despite the market down fall - total increase for last year was around 5%. At the moment 35 percent of customers and revenues are coming from Russia, and the percentage is expected to rise all the way to fifty in the next couple of years. The future seems bright also from the Russians' point of view as the company plans to increase the amount of their timeshares from current 500 to 6000 by the year 2020. The majority of current customers actually make repetitive purchases and are extremely pleased with products and service they get. The biggest surprise is the quantity - there are only somewhat over ten employees in the South Karelian region and only one sales unit.

## **10 Conclusions**

As mentioned in the interview chapter this will be the part where all of the information harvested during interviews and materials searches will be analyzed and simplified. What is the end result of thesis and what was actually found out. To specify more the whole concept of this thesis will be questioned from its foundations to its trustworthiness.

The writer does not concentrate on the issues raised themselves but the process of making the thesis itself. The use and applications for business use

where considered in the previous chapter. Here is explained what was not visible for the reader in the writing process, for instance keeping the anonymity of the interviewees for guaranteeing uncorrupted data.

### **10.1 The Foundations**

This study had to be revised once the interviews were completed as it turned out that most of the companies in South Karelia region do not actually offer straightforward timeshare options or have outsourced these services to some other enterprises in the territory. The survey only included one company the prime business idea of which timeshare sales. Four out of five companies interviewed either outsourced these services to other companies or simply sold mere normal leisure properties to Russians occasionally. The new turnout is that this thesis will be about general sales of free time properties and marketing communication involving an example of timeshare marketing. However, this will not alter the thesis otherwise except for the theory part being exclusive about timeshare properties, as now it has to cover this new segment of sales.

### **10.2 Reliability**

The reliability of the interview results is most likely unquestionable as all of the interviewees were long term professionals in their own line of work and even some of them were acting as managers. Each and every one of them were informed about the strict confidentiality rules concerning publication of the information they had shared with the author. They knew that no-one of them would be named or in any way identified in the thesis or the company they worked for. The voice records that author had to make to ease the interview process, were destroyed by the request of the interviewees as they were mostly discussing business secrets. The author even tried to avoid sharing information about his current line of work as it might have endangered the trustworthiness of the responses as they would have understood the author was somehow in the competitive business with them – in one occasion he even had to reveal his profession but still got the permission to proceed with interview before even meeting the person. In other words – everything that could have been done to



protect the identity of the respondents was carried out and therefore there is no reason to question reliability of the answers themselves.

### **10.3 Common Factors in the Process**

The process of acclimating potential candidates for interviews was conducted via web and phoning search as the timetable was strict and it was considered, by the author, to be easier to get people to participate in the research and simply because the timetable and dates were more convenient to organize on the phone.

All the interviewed people were somehow working directly with Russians, some more some less but each one of them had some sales experience in the matter. Two out of five were women and all them were middle aged or older. Each interview was carried out in similar manner to each other; by building up some trust by small talk and sitting down in some private place where both parties could feel relaxed and equal with the interviewer. Every single one of the interviews was recorded with a cell phone recorder as it would have been impossible to write everything down manually during the interviews. The time lapse for each interview was approximately from half an hour to sixty minutes. None of the interviewees knew beforehand anything about the material or topic except the headline and most generic issues to be discussed. The details of the interview were only revealed as the interviews began and there was no time to prepare for any of the questions.

### **10.4 The Differentiating Factors**

Like in every qualitative research every interview is somehow different from one another as every process is individual despite similar questions – some questions could not be answered or some were just left out or formatted to an alternate form. The main differences in this process were in the backgrounds of the interviewees, some were managers and some had only few years of experience in the field. Educational background was personal for everyone and there were interesting stories of how and why they ended up doing the business they were currently in. Someone had been married to a Russian wife and

someone just accidentally realized that sales work might suit them even if their educational background would not exactly support it.

### **10.5 Future Prospects**

After making these interviews the author sees several potential continuums if he chose to do further research. The research about foreign customer markets is not a new topic but is greatly underestimated as the neighboring country, Russia is becoming a more and more influential factor in Finnish economy - only during a couple of recent years Finland has begun to establish background as tourist attraction. Despite recent drop down of markets there is room for growth and even some intense competition as there are only few entrepreneurs in the timeshare markets. Normal real-estate sales are badly crowded and there is room for more competition. Timeshares seem to be a relatively safe bet if one should decide a new business in the area - the competition would be fierce, no doubt, but there is no lack of buying power since the properties get sold even now and the business is still booming, against all reason.

There are few factors that were researched relatively narrow here, for instance finding out how the other countries other inbound tourists are affecting the Finnish markets and how stable the future growth of the tourist inflow will be? The possibility of educating workforce to Russian market's demand is an interesting horizon as the education currently seems to be relatively shallow and most of the success of businesses is based on experience. All the interviewed people had different attitudes about Russians as people and customers, none of them mentioned doing any market research on them, at least on an extensive level. They all were hung up on the same group of customers and are nearly direct competitors with each other when they could be exploring the new possibilities like Russian youths or elderly people or even the wealthiest one percent of Russians - now there are no attractions for them in Finland but maybe if someone created an option and supply there would possibly be demand as well.

Another possibility lies in the social studies; this thesis had some about Russian buying behavior. The application of these findings in practice would be an

interesting option for future study as now entrepreneurs do not seem to have a very deep understanding of the Russian mentality and how it should be taken into account when trying to mingle with the customers.

Timeshare business is remarkable on what comes to market growth. At a time when other segments in the hospitality industry are struggling, vacation ownership resort companies have performed reasonably well, (Naidu 2013.) Apparently timeshares are, during these economically difficult times, a still better investment target than hotel business. An Indian hospitality company reported to have performed all-a-round better than local hotel industry. This type of resistance to economical uncertainty will certainly create trust from the investors' point of view. Timeshares have proved themselves to be a safe investment. The growth, compared to hotels, is outmatching when measuring balance and cash flows. Timeshare companies in India have virtually no dept. The reason for this is the domestic customer base - hotel industry takes a bigger blow as people have started to neglect travelling abroad during bad financial situation. Timeshare purchase may be a better pick for investors than hotels. (Naidu 2013, p. 1.)

During past few years timeshare business's only problem has been the lack of financing, not lack of customers like in hotel industry. In fact timeshare business keeps growing despite the recession. Now the financing is stable and the future looks very promising, in the US at least. Based on previous article and this combined it seems though that a trend exists, for the benefit of timeshare industry. (Bilbao 2012, p. 1.)

A Finnish newspaper Kaleva wrote also a similar article last year about how timeshare business seems to be unaffected by financial instability in the world. "Leading Finnish timeshare company Holiday Club reported to have had a seven percent growth between year 2008 and 2009." They suspected the reason to be the products' affordability, they offer timeshare with a wide price range starting from a few thousand euros, reaching up to tens of thousands of euros a piece. (Kaleva 2013.)

## **Pictures**

Picture 1. A Holiday Club Saimaa company's typical timeshare facility in Rauha, Lappeenranta. p. 14.

Picture 2. Russian travelers exiting a train somewhere in Russia. p. 22.

Picture 3. Secretary of the State John Kerry shaking hands with Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Lavrov in Geneva Switzerland in emergency meeting over Ukraine dispute. p. 26.

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