

FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR ORGANIZATIONAL OPTIMIZATION OF THE RECEPTION AT THE POUSADA PARQUE DAS GABIROBAS, IN RONCADOR - PR

Lucimara da Rosa

Bacharel in Tourism and Environment, University of Estado do Paraná – UNESPAR – campus Campo Mourão - PR
lucimararosasantos@hotmail.com

Simone Vassallo Monteiro

MSc in Tourism and Hotel Management, UNIVALI.
Professor of Tourism and Environment at UNESPAR
monteironovo@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify and propose improvement procedures for the reception sector at the Pousada Parque das Gabirobas, in Roncador, state of Paraná. The main focus is to evaluate the technological structure of the sector, and perceptions of the hosting service, as well as its physical structure and arrangement. The research methodology includes a review on the history of lodging services, the new accommodation services, rural tourism, and participative observation techniques. The analyzed data were collected through questionnaires applied to the guests, and non-structured interviews with the staff. The results clearly emphasize the importance of having a good reception service and a well-organized reception sector.

Keywords: Accommodation services. Reception. Organization.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the world economy. According to the Brazilian Tourism Department (MTur), Brazil earned around 6.7 billion dollars from tourism in 2013. The Confederations Cup took place in the country that year, and the government website Portal Brasil indicates that 73% of the tourists stayed in hotels, with 76% of the guests interviewed expressing a positive opinion of the services offered (Brasil, 2013).

With the major sporting events taking place in Brazil, especially the Rio Olympics 2016, any element of the accommodation industry that can be improved has become a priority. This is a growing field that offers many opportunities for small entrepreneurs.

According to the Brazilian Institute of Tourism (Embratur, 2014), “5.4 million of foreign tourist, out of a total of 6.4 million, visited states hosting games of the World Cup in 2014”. This figure represents a growth of 13.85% in the total number of tourists visiting Brazil, in relation to 2013. The Tourism Statistics Yearbook of the Tourism Department, based on information provided by the Federal Police, points that “during June and July, the months of the World Cup, the arrival of foreign tourists almost tripled, increasing from 350,000 in 2013 to 1.08 million in 2014” (Embratur, 2014).

Although the tourism industry represents a significant portion of Brazil’s economy, political and economic instability have created obstacles to the development of this sector, including accommodation services, increasing the financial cost for goods and services. On the other hand, private investments in the hotel industry continue to grow. According to Caio Calfat, CEO of Real Estate Consulting, who has worked as a consultant in real estate and accommodation services companies since 1996, and is now vice-president of Seconvi – the São Paulo State Housing Syndicate, the accommodation sector is still a fertile field for investments. He points to São Paulo as a potential consumer of the services, due to its increasing demands, based on Embratur forecasts (Embratur, 2014) and the qualification of services proposed by the Tourism National Program 2013-2016.

These federal parameters suggests a more profitable tourism development for the country, creating favorable factors for the growth of hotel businesses. The sector also invests in technological equipment, promoting economic growth at city and state levels, as indicated by SEBRAE – the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (SEBRAE, 2014). SEBRAE has also shown that “90% of accommodation enterprises are micro and small business”, leading the Tourism sector to focus its attention outside the urban centers, in order to take advantage of potential investments in small and medium towns (Brasil, 2013).

The main objective of this research was to identify possible structural improvements in the reception service at the Pousada Parque das Gabirobas, which was used as the sample for this study. The specific objectives were to evaluate the existing technological structure (hardware and software); to evaluate the perception of the accommodation services; and to analyze the physical structure and arrangement of the reception sector, guided by the research question “is the sector effectively fulfilling its attributions?”. The research hypothesis was that restructuring the reception sector would make the service more efficient.

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THEORETICAL LANDMARKS

Contextualizing Tourism and Accommodation Services

Tourism is often conceptualized as the opposite pole of productive work and/or social obligations, i.e., it is an escape from mandatory daily work carried out for financial, family and social maintenance. Trigo (2003, p. 11) defines it as “a legitimate necessity and a right of the human being, just like education, healthcare, transportation, and safety”. It involves the transportation of an individual to a place outside of his permanent home environment, with multiple objectives, and includes transportation, accommodation, food, recreation, leisure, and culture (Trigo, 2003). As the same author claims:

In the 19th century, tourism was defined as residential, i.e., people would spend some time or season of the year in a second residence. The trip, or the season, was motivated by healthcare issues, climate conditions, or as a rest of daily routine activities, and would last from a few weeks to a couple of months. A very common type of tourism was the thermal residential tourism, in which people enjoyed the water season in Europe, that originated the spas we know nowadays. (TRIGO, 2003, p. 14)

Furthermore, in recent decades:

New events, such as industrialization, urbanization, demographic expansion, science and technology development, the new economic structure, and the expansion of people's financial power, have all changed the relations between visitors and hosts. (GRINOVER, 2002, p. 27)

Considering the new lifestyle that has emerged alongside the changes in these aspects of society, Brazil has become a fertile ground for accommodation businesses, with the growing demand in the tourism field, which has had a positive effect on the economy. With government incentives for expansion and improvement of the accommodation infrastructure in the country since 1960, several national and international enterprises emerged in the area, allowing a high level of professionalization amongst people working with tourism and accommodation services (DUARTE, 2005; TRIGO, 20020).

Castelli (2005) defines modern hotel business as the commerce of accommodation, hosting and comfort. However, in modern society, the perception of hospitality appears to have changed into a profusion of different products and services. The needs are basically the same, but the desires have changed, and so a new range of possibilities are created in hotel businesses, to meet the new demands. However, despite all the new products and services, Aldrigui (2007) points out that "family hosting (to be accommodated at a friend's or family's house) still allows many people to practice tourism nowadays" (p. 21).

Traditionally, hotels are the most representative enterprises in the accommodation services business. However, data show that a higher proportion of tourists in Brazil still rely on family

hosting or private rentals, and even the use of “alternative” facilities, with hotels being more often chosen in cases of business travel and events (ALDRIGUI, 2007).

Historically, the expansion and development of accommodation services in Brazil have followed the demands created by the new dynamics of world tourism, which has become more accessible and faster. As a result, this market sector has been driven to seek more effective forms of business management.

The Brazilian Tourism Department states:

Segmentation is one way to face and organize tourism. It is a strategy to structure products and services, and to consolidate itineraries and destinations, based on regional identity elements. Such elements are the main segments of tourism offers contemplated by the tourism development program: Culture Tourism, Rural Tourism, Ecotourism, Adventure Tourism, Sports Tourism, Water Tourism, Healthcare Tourism, Fishing Tourism, Interchanges and Study Tourism, Events and Business Tourism, Beach Tourism, amongst other categories. (BRASIL, n.r. p. 68).

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The National Tourism Segmentation Program, proposed by the Tourism Department, aims to organize and consolidate the tourism segments by working with the departments and enterprises responsible, standardizing concepts, and promoting the creation of new itineraries, through associative structuring, in order to reinforce the tourism offer, and preserve the social, cultural and ecological values of every region of the country.

New Accommodation Services and Rural Tourism

Tourism is one of several opportunities for improving production and increasing income in rural areas. The specific practices of rural tourism have increased in number and profitability. Concerning this aspect, Pires (2003), states that

Brazilian rural space has a huge landscape potential, as a result of the combination of: great territory extension; natural environments diversity; and the cultural diversity visible everywhere in the country. (p. 129)

In the book *Turismo Rural e Desenvolvimento Sustentável*, Ruschmann (2000) states that “rural regions are spaces where human communities coexist and work”, therefore, they have the same role in the world as the other social scenarios, with the same rights and duties, and the search for valorization” (p. 143). Furthermore, in Froehlich’s (2000) words “there must be an alternative for rural population regarding rural tourism strategy development, other than turning its aspects into ‘living fossils’, or maintaining its precarious life and work conditions as symbols of rusticity and authenticity” (FROEHLICH, 2000. p. 187).

In 1998, in Brazil, Embratur was the official institution responsible for tourism politics. It adopted a market logic to define rural tourism, described as “a range of activities committed to agribusiness production, inferring value to the rural sector, and regaining and reinforcing the historical and cultural legacy of the countryside (SILVEIRA, 2003, p. 137).

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In the taxonomy presented by Law 11.771/2008, in its 23rd article, means of accommodation are defined as

The entrepreneurships and establishments which, disregarding its way of constitution, offer temporary lodging service, in units of individual frequency and exclusive use of the customer, as well as other services to supply customers’ necessities, named hosting services, under the register of a contract, implicit or explicit, and charged daily. (BRASIL, 2010)

To stimulate competition in the hotel sector, the Brazilian hotel rating System (SBClass) – in partnership with MTur, Inmetro, the Brazilian Metrology Society, and civil society – developed a new accommodation rating system containing all the information necessary to fulfill the classification requirements, establishing fairer competition. Therefore, according to the taxonomy proposed by SBClass (BRASIL, 2010, p. 7), an Inn is defined as “a horizontally-arranged establishment with a maximum of 30 habitation units and 90 beds, presenting a reception sector, food services, and temporary lodging, with a maximum of 3 buildings, including small houses”.

According to SUBCLass (BRASIL, 2010), “a one-star Inn must meet the minimum mandatory requisites of infrastructure, services, and sustainability” (p. 7). For each additional star, another series of requisites must be met, varying according to the categories. Following these parameters, Rodrigues (2003) defines a rural Inn as a means of accommodation that is “smaller and less luxurious, offering its guests enjoyment of the rural lifestyle, without all the sophistication of the urban centers” (p. 111).

The issue of sustainability, also known as conscious tourism, plays an important role nowadays, due to the intense discussions on climate change around the world. Means of accommodation that seek to draw customers’ attention through environmental politics – whether as a marketing strategy or due to actual concern over ecological practices – are very relevant to the tourism scenario. As pointed out by Swarbrooke (2000), some of the most important environmental practices are:

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- The development of a recycling system for product packages, paper, bottles, and correct disposal of organic wastes;
- The use of recycled supplies for offices and cleaning;
- The use of water saving devices in bathrooms;
- Low-power light bulbs;
- Electricity saving devices;
- Non-bleached and non-dyed fabrics for room linen;
- Adaptation to solar energy for heating.

For Pires (2002), “the increasing concern over the social, environmental and cultural impacts of tourism has led to large-scale events (e.g. seminars and international conventions)” (p. 36). However, not all concepts of conscious tourism and ecotourism are well understood by entrepreneurs in the area. Swarbrooke (2000), meanwhile, takes the

view that “ecotourism means simply that the main motivation for a trip is the desire to see natural ecosystems, its wildlife, and its native population” (p. 55), Pires (2002) proposes that:

Ecotourism is tourism that prioritizes the natural spaces where it takes place, and it places preservation before any other matter. The term ‘ecotourism’ is closely related to the concept of green tourism, but are not the same thing. The difference is not only conceptual, but also historical, in the sense that green tourism is a term forged before ecotourism, and much less employed nowadays. (p. 104)

From this perspective, a wide range of rural tourism modalities can be detected in the country, and the interrelations between commerce and tourism are complex. However, even in a rustic and bucolic environment, when it comes to accommodation, some of the practicality and modernity of urban life cannot be excluded in the offer of good reception and hosting services, including the professionalization of staff. All these aspects must be considered in any commercial hotel operation.

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Wada & Camargo (2006) affirm that “nowadays, it is acceptable to say that the main engineering methodology in hotel business is the attempt to find a way to be professional (objective, assertive) and welcoming at the same time (knowing how to start and maintain small talk and build rapport). For these authors, hospitality is more than just offering accommodation:

Some clients do not want hospitality. On the contrary, they want to remain anonymous – to get the keys, notes, clothing, all on its time and that is it. What to do then? Hospitality includes, thus, a wide range of practices and behaviors that the entrepreneur and staff must adopt with different clients: those who only want accommodation services – and the challenge here is to offer good reception and accommodation services –, and those who seek ‘the experience’ – and, in these cases, human connection is the main key for the service. (p. 53-54)

For this reason, the first major challenge in the field of accommodation services is to increase professionalization. Certainly, the professionalism offered by the large

international hotel chains will break the traditionalism in small family businesses, while the smaller businesses provide examples of innovation for the management of the larger chains (WADA & CAMARGO, 2006).

The Tourism Department (2010, p. 5) establishes that “Inn” enterprises must attend the mandatory requisite of offering “a reception service that is open at least 12 hours a day, and reachable by telephone 24 hours a day”. Furthermore, “the way the reception is managed and the constitution of the staff depend on the hotel standard, its segment, and size” (VALLEN, 2003, p. 93).

The reception sector is the “nerve system” of the accommodation and hosting service; it communicates with all the other departments, and performs a series of functions: such as controlling the “number of occupied units in the hotel, relationship with guests, registers and management, problem solving, customer feedback, retail, human resources, and accounts” (VALLEN, 2003, p. 94). From this point of view, the MTur proposes the Professional Qualification Program, which reinforces the need for continuing education, and proposes actions to qualify staff in the many sectors of accommodation and hosting businesses.

Davies (2007) points out that “the reception is considered the main axis of a hotel”. Many different communication methods are now available for use in this department, such as “information books, log books, messaging procedures, telephone services, standardization of procedures, and procedures for communication between the management and maintenance sectors” (p. 68-69). This corroborates the hypothesis that a well-structured and well-organized reception department is essential for the whole process to be efficient and profitable.

One last relevant factor to be considered is seasonality, which affects destinations and enterprises. Ruschmann (1995) defines seasonality as the concentration of touristic activity in time-space. Dias (2003, p. 28) goes further, explaining that at certain times, investments

are necessary to meet the tourism demand, while at other times “everyone goes away”, creating an imbalance in the local economy. Seasonality is usually associated with the climate and economic aspects, amongst others, which directly affect enterprises and their staff requirements, making it difficult to retain qualified professionals and ensure the required number of staff during the high season.

METHODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENTS

This research is mainly qualitative, based on a bibliographical review of accommodation services, especially Inns. As explained by Cervo & Bervian (2002, p. 67) a case study is, basically, a study on “a certain individual, family, group or community”. In this case, the object of study – the Pousada Parque das Gabirobas – was analyzed through techniques of participative observation which are, as Dencker points out (1998, p. 128), “focused on obtaining deeper knowledge of the group, allowing us to observe actions in the exact moment they occur”, and enabling a dynamic review of the interactional processes.

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Twenty-five questionnaires were also applied to the guests, to gather information and reviews from the customers who spent over two nights at the inn, especially their evaluation of the service. Questionnaires were also applied randomly and individually to the managers, in the form of informal interviews, which according to Gil (2007, p. 119), is “recommended in cases of exploratory study that aim to approach realities unknown by the researcher, and also offer a more approximate view of the problem to be analyzed”. The questionnaires aimed, specifically, to reveal the main difficulties relating to the management of the business.

The observation of the physical structure and descriptions of the arrangement were based on the concepts of system observation – or planned observation –, which is “mainly characterized by previous planning, and simultaneous annotations”, according to Cervo & Bervian (2002, p. 28), and the analysis was carried out in descriptive form.

Description of The Study Object

Reception is the front sector of an accommodation establishment. It handles check-ins and check-outs, and money flow – a key-sector – and its improvement can make a significant contribution to the growth of enterprises like the Pousada Parque das Gabirobas. This studied therefore carried out an evaluation of the reception sector, which can be profitable for the growth of the establishment, as well as contributing to further scientific research.

The Pousada Parque das Gabirobas is located six kilometers from Roncador, in the state of Paraná, where it is surrounded by agricultural farmland. The inn is situated in the heart of an Ecological Reservation of 180.03009 hectares, of which 48.40 is assigned to tourism activities; the rest is used for agricultural purposes. Of the space assigned for tourism, 0.3963 hectares is occupied by tourism infrastructure, including 15 accommodation buildings with 60 beds; 0.18 hectares of rustic, unpaved roads; and 1.20 hectares of grassland. The remaining 46.6237 hectares of ecological preservation area set aside for tourism include trails, lakes, and waterfalls, where guests can experience close contact with nature.

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RESULTS

The main objective of this research was to identify a way to promote an organizational improvement in the reception sector of the Pousada Parque das Gabirobas. With this objective in mind, guests were asked to respond to questionnaires in a practical and objective way, taking into consideration the period of their stay (minimum 48 hours).

The results obtained show that telephone communication was cited by 80% of the respondents as the main strength of the reception department. In relation to quality, 99% of the respondents said it was “Great”. 80% of the interviewed guests said that the information they received from reception was relevant. 99% considered the

accommodation service “Great”. When asked about the check-in process, 95% of the guests declared it to be “Great”, and 90% said the same of the reception services throughout their stay. 80% of the guests also considered the check-out “Great”. However, several of the responses included written compliments about the food service and hospitality.

The enterprise management routine was also evaluated, mainly through interviews with the managers, and the results show that there are some issues that still need to be resolved: seasonality affects the income of the enterprise, causing difficulties in relation to maintenance, human resources, finding qualified staff, and implementing new proposals. During the field research, the activities of the staff member responsible for reception (in person and on the phone) were also evaluated. It is important to employ qualified staff in the reception sector because, as pointed by Vallen (2003) and Davies (2007), this is the key department in any accommodation business.

The importance of having qualified people is also reinforced by the programs proposed by the Tourism Department of Brazil. This paper also indicates some theoretical demonstrations of the value of customer’s satisfaction in relation to accommodation services. The results collected in the business that is the object of this analysis show that the establishment and its management are close to achieving what Wada & Camargo (2006) call “hospitality”, i.e. a true understanding of how to remain friendly while respecting the guest’s anonymity, according to their wishes and demands.

In terms of the technological structure of the Inn, the following items were identified: computers, printer, credit card machine, and internet access, with a Wi-Fi connection available to guests. Although the reception has an online system, there is no specific software to manage the accommodation information. There are several software programs available on the market to facilitate the booking, organization and financial procedures. The lack of technological support for such tasks means that the reception department is limited to the use of hard copy logbooks and reminder books.

Nevertheless, there is an attempt by the management to improve these aspects in the reception department of the Pousada Parque das Gabirobas. The enterprise is driven by what Wada & Camargo (2006) describe as the acceptance of professionalism provided by the large international hotel businesses, and the exclusion of conservatism in small family entrepreneurships.

In terms of furniture and other items in the reception area, observation showed that a larger space is needed, and that some of the items of furniture are worn and in need of renewal. Although a rural Inn need not be highly sophisticated, as pointed out by Rodrigues (2003) - for whom the focus of rural tourism is the enjoyment of the simple life - the management must not neglect the interior environment, and ensuring that it is comfortable and cozy.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

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This research aimed to identify ways of improving the organizational structure of the reception department at the Pousada Parque das Gabirobas.

The results shown that although guests' perception of the services offered are mainly positive, the reception area could be better laid out, and some of the furniture is in need of renewal, to offer sufficient comfort and hospitality to the increasing numbers of guests during high seasons.

In relation to seasonality, this factor clearly influences the management of the Inn, posing obstacles in the equipment maintenance, due to the decrease in income in off-peak periods, and the reduction in quality of services in peak periods, due to the difficulty of finding qualified staff.

The implementation of specific software for the reception department would help optimize the procedures, promoting a more accurate and efficient service in relation to bookings, and providing information and customer assistance.

The results therefore confirm the initial hypothesis, that restructuring the reception sector would improve the services offered. Despite the scenic landscapes and the many leisure activities around the inn, the reception sector plays a key role in the development of the business, as highlighted by the literature review. The research proposes a renewal of the space in the reception department, and the implementation of specific software to optimize its management. Finally, the qualification of the staff members in hospitality is also important, to enable the business to grow, and boost the local economy.

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