

Aqua Park Facilities as an Attraction Tool to Family Market: A Case Study on Hurghada's Hotel Properties – Red Sea, Egypt

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Abstract

Purpose– hotel business is facing an increasing competition in the hospitality market, especially where this competition is not taking place over the local market, but it is evolving all over the competitor destinations. That is why they are required to develop unique recreational facilities that would appeal to families and leisure travelers. Recently, Aqua Parks are vastly becoming one of the most popular recreational facilities in this business. It is wonderful fun-filled places, where families can spend their vacations splashing or lounging in carefree enjoyment, meanwhile, ensuring the required safety for them and for their children. Water has an ability to change the way people experience places through the enjoyment, peaceful and refreshing it brings.

This study examines how Aqua Park facilities can be considered as an attraction tool to families and how it can lead to customers' satisfaction and influence hotels with water park customers' repeat business.

It will also highlight how these properties can have a competitive edge that can attract families with children, and it might be used to enrich their experience through tailoring up a variety of programs that can suit this growing market needs and expectations.

Design/methodology/approach– the data were collected via a questionnaire addressed to regular customers in these Hotel properties with aqua park facilities in the Hurghada - Red Sea region.

Research limitations/implications– the research focused on a sample of hotel properties with aqua park facilities in the Hurghada - Red Sea, Egypt.

Keywords: Aqua Park, hospitality experience, repeating business, customer satisfaction, continuous patronage

Introduction

"If there is a magic on this planet, it is contained in water" (Eiseley, 1957). Many people are stressed by living in work-obsessed, time-pressured, materialistic and over individualistic societies that is why there is an increasing need for wellbeing and wellness services (Laing & Weiler, 2008; Sheldon & Bushell, 2009; Smith & Puczko, 2009; Konu & Laukkanen, 2010).

Designing the service process to deliver what customers' expect from the hotel is a crucial component that always encounters marketing and customers' needs. Hotels need to embrace the changes and ensure that their internal processes are aligned not only to the target market, but also to the expected market in future (Epuran, et al. 2015; Ivasciuc & Epuran, 2015). Diversity in the hospitality business has been expanding at a rapid rate, and the demand for water parks has increased accordingly. There are numerous possible elements link to people's decisions when choosing among hotels and one among of them is Aqua Park (Kemperman, et al. 2000; Bigné, et al. 2005; Kao et al. 2008; Lee, et al, 2014). The segment of water parks in the hospitality industry all over the world has enjoyed steady growth in attendance in the past decade, and it is rapidly becoming one of tourists' most popular activities (Kim, 2006; Kwak, et al. 2010). Therefore, a need exists to identify the key elements that influence future operations within the water park sector, especially consumer tastes and preferences so that venue operators can maximize profits.

Today, Aqua parks represent a huge and rapidly growing sector and a popular facility in the hospitality and recreational facilities around the world (Kim, 2006; Kwak, et al. 2010; Paul Jin, et al. 2015). Due to the need to expand hotel's market share especially in crisis time and with the growing competition in this recreational business, an understanding about the proper activities and designing of factors that lead to attract family market and Aqua park customers' are essential (Paul Jin, et al. 2015).

Literature review

Aqua/water Park is an amusement park that features water play areas, such as swimming pools, water slides, splash pads, spray grounds (water playgrounds), lazy rivers, or other recreational bathing, swimming, and barefooting environments. Their popularity has increased due to facilities that offer indoor/outdoor attractions and amusements. Visitors to a water park will travel up to 25% of the time they plan to spend at the water park. The young and pre-teen age groups are considered the target market for water parks. Aqua parks may also be equipped with some type of artificial surfing or boarding environment such as a wave pool flow rider. It is a facility for enjoying a pool and related water features, and it is sometimes referred to as a leisure space with various recreational features (Kim, 2006; Kwak, et al. 2010; Paul Jin, et al. 2015).

Aqua parks have grown in popularity since their introduction in the late 1940s and early 1950s. United States has the largest and most concentrated Aqua park market, with over a thousand water parks and dozens of new parks opening each year. Major organizations are IAAPA (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions) and WWA (World Waterpark Association), which is the industry trade association. Aqua/waterparks are a popular component for hotels seeking to attract families and organized groups by selling the promise of entertainment at one unique place. While once strictly an outdoor activity, their popularity has increased due to facilities that offer attractions and amusements (Lai, et al. 2009; Golden, et al. 2011).

This growth is driven by a number of factors. First, waterparks offer a relatively high level of safety and security that appeal to guests for aquatic recreation. Second, waterparks can take advantage of their primary appeal to children and teens. Waterparks are increasing their appeal to the aging baby-boomer generation by not only providing entertainment options for children and grandchildren, but by providing older adults with access to hydrotherapy, aquatic fitness, and spa services (Lee, 2010; Golden, et al. 2011; Paul Jin, et al. 2015).

The key success of the water park is its safety and security appeal for a family vacation. And the water park industry has an excellent safety record. Safe clean water in a well-protected environment for children and adults of all ages well supervised by lifeguards and attendants are hallmarks of water park advertising and their track records. And park design has become sophisticated in design flexibility with computer controls, corrosion free materials, and efficient recovery and use of recycled water, geothermal heating, solar heating, secondary recycling, and efficient water valve and filter systems (Smith & Puczkó, 2009; Paul Jin, et al. 2015).

Water parks continue to offer increasing consumer appeal for a number of reasons. These include increased disposable incomes, less desire to swim in natural bodies of water, and the appeal of "thrill" rides to younger citizens (Solomon, 2002; Smith & Puczkó, 2009).

Quality control in Aqua/Water Park

Prior to participating in any waterpark ride or attraction, participants should read all signs and listen to all audio instructions provided by staff. Those instructions are about the suitability of

participants' weight and height. Small children or people who do not meet these requirements should not participate on some rides. Unlike a traditional amusement park ride, most water rides do not have harnesses or head restraints. If a rider does not meet height and weight requirements, they risk falling off a mat or tube, which can lead to bodily injury.

There are many factors that linked the successes of Aquatics facilities to the hotel's operation and increasing its revenue;

1. Diversity in its activity
2. Suitability for a wide range of ages. The age range appeal huge with aqua and water facilities especially when spas and hydrotherapy are included with non-physically demanding rides such as lazy rivers.
3. Another key to the success of the water park is its safety and security. Safe clean water in a well-protected environment for children and adults of all ages well supervised by lifeguards and attendants are hallmarks of water park advertising.
4. Contaminated water is another safety concern existing in aqua park facilities. The most common cause of water contamination is from small children. The U.S. CDC (Centers for Disease Control) "recommends that all swimmers be vigilant & Practice good hygiene and shower before swimming.

Aqua Park Customers

Aqua Park customers could be defined as; "A market segment that is composed of a group of buyers who share common characteristics, needs, purchasing behavior, or consumption patterns." Customers of Aqua Park looking for the "WOW" factor that takes them away from stress and reality (Anderson and Srinivasan 2003; Golden, et al. 2011). According to Armstrong and Kotler (2009), the purposes of marketing have changed from "telling and selling" to satisfying customer needs. In other words, marketers should focus on obtaining information about what customers need and want, find solutions to satisfy these needs and wants with the help of marketing mix tools and as a result build strong customer relationships (Armstrong & Kotler, 2009).

Aqua/Water park is in an always need to improve their image; as their customers' overall perceptions may be influenced by prior experience or vicarious information about a water park. Previous researchers demonstrated that diverse emotional factors can influence the relationships between customers' experiences and behaviors by extending the means-end theory (Gutman, 1982; Zeithaml, 1988; Gardial, et al., 1994). Therefore, the image of a water park refers to the overall perceptions of customers of water parks, in particular those arising from emotional responses and those influenced by prior experience or vicarious information about a water park. In addition, theories of attitude suggest that evaluations of services impact perceptions of corporate image and direct experiences are the leading causes for future behavior (Lai, et al. 2009).

Since a family is the core subject of this study, it is necessary to give highlight and explanations for a better understanding of family decision-making and consumption related roles. Therefore, marketers should be aware of new emerging needs and demands that families nowadays have to be able to design products, services and other market offerings to satisfy these needs (Schiffman, et al. 2008). Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard (2002) shared the same opinion by noticing that nowadays children play important roles in family consumer decision-making process gaining more responsibilities as consumers in their own right. Among top items that children have influence on family purchases are food, places to go out and electronic devices (Schiffman, et al. 2008).

Aqua park design and facilities

Water has an ability to change the way people experience places. The most important thing to be remembered about Water Park is that it is a park. At any given moment there are many people playing, eating, lounging and strolling. They might also be swimming, splashing, squirting, sliding, plunging and peddling or simply enjoying their day. A water park with a strong and unique identity is one that guests will remember (Sangree, 2016).

Hotel & Leisure Advisors (H&LA) defines waterpark resort as a lodging establishment containing an aquatic facility with a minimum of 10,000 square feet of indoor waterpark space and inclusive of amenities such as slides, tubes, and a variety of indoor water play features. A resort hotel with outdoor waterpark is a hotel with three or more water play features, such as slides, lazy rivers, or wave pools that require lifeguards. All Aqua park facilities should be safe and designed for all ages. It should meet all guests' needs. It was explained that security and safety are two major issues that must be considered when building an aqua park in your community (Sangree, 2016).

The most important factor in aqua park design is the budget and the daily maintenance of its' equipment. It is a recreational area designed for interactive water play. Some Planning Considerations Issues should be discussed through the designing phase such as;

- Safety & Security
- Signage
- Age Appropriateness
- Guests seating & shade
- Foot and Body Showers
- Fountains
- Environment
- Trash Receptacles
- Footprint.

The waterpark industry has produced an excellent track record of delivering safe family recreation. In fact, a visit to a waterpark is the safest way for families to play together in the water. Achieving these results is not as effortless as floating down a lazy river attraction, however – it takes a great amount of dedication and teamwork each day (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) (Sangree, 2016).

Creating water parks that are exuberant, spacious, bright and memorable as well as functional takes more than clever engineering. It requires an understanding of what many personalities of water and the ways that people interact with it. Water is one of the most powerful tools a designer has to work with. People are drawn to it. It plays to all of guests' basic emotions and it fills them with a gratification that exceeds the delight of the senses (Lai, et al. 2009; Paul Jin, et al. 2015).

To accommodate typically large water park crowds and to guarantee their comfort and safety, careful master planning is crucial. The master plan should describe the park's organization and circulation, along with the relationship of its individual parts, allowing some flexibility overtime. The master plan serves as a foundation and a source of reference for design and construction, and finally for the parks' evaluation and growth (Sangree, 2016).

Creating water parks that are elegant, spacious, light-filled and functional requires more than simple engineering; architectural finesse is required. For hotels aqua parks, the enclosures are transparent and adaptable for cold/warm weather conditions, in outdoor parks; structures must be attractive and human-scaled. Water Park should balance function, technology and comfort. There

is a strong connection between waterparks and landscape architecture. The design and construction of water parks involves many backstage elements; administration, mechanical systems, safety considerations, hydraulics and structural engineering (Golden, et al, 2011; Sangree, 2016).

Methodology

Research question

With the previous background, the study sought to examine the following research questions:

1. What are guests' perceptions to Aqua park facilities as an attraction tool to families?
2. Can Aqua Park facilities lead to customers' satisfaction?
3. Do Aqua Park facilities can be considered as a competitive advantage for hotels to keep repeat business?

Research design

Choosing a method for collecting primary data is another important step in a research process, which simply helps the researcher to decide how to gather necessary information. In leisure and tourism research the method of questionnaire-based surveys is the most commonly used technique to gain information about individuals' attitudes or accounts of their behavior (Solomon, et al. 2008; Veal, 2011; Brunt, 1997).

Concerning the definition of quantitative research, (Creswell, 2003) defined it as: "*A quantitative approach is one in which the investigator primarily uses postpositive claims for developing knowledge (i.e., cause and effect thinking, reduction of specific variables, hypotheses and questions, use of measurement and observation and the testing of theories*". Researchers who adopt this type of research collect data which measures observation or attitudes and analyses information by using statistical procedures and hypothesis testing.

Questionnaire is considered one of major methods used to collect data (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Researchers use questionnaire to obtain information about the attitudes, feelings, behaviors, perceptions, experiences and personalities of participants. There are two important aspects for designing a questionnaire as indicated by (Siniscalco and Auriat, 2005); [1] the structure of the question and [2] the decisions on the types of response formats for each question. In terms of questionnaire structure, (Bryman and Bell, 2007) stated that questions can be classified into two main structures which are: [1] close-ended questions and [2] open-ended questions. Both types of questions were used in this study in order to get more information and also to achieve the aim and objective of the research.

For this study a self-administrated questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire was comprised of three sections. All items from the first to second sections were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree) for the most of questions. After confirming the construct of the questionnaire, a pilot test estimated the adequacy of the measurement by using data from actual customers at resorts with water park facilities. According to the pilot test results, a few items required slight modification. The goal was to find trends in the industry and to find water park sizes and attractions that are appropriate for the research. The final section of the questionnaire included respondents' relevant personal information, such as age, gender, household income, and dining motivation.

Sample selection

According to Veal (2011) population is where the sample is chosen from. The author defines population as the total category of subjects which is the focus of attention in a particular research

project. A reliable accessible accommodation information source for the city of Hurghada was used to make preliminary hotel selections (The Egyptian Hotel Guide, 2015/2016). The sample involved is five star hotels, in the area of Hurghada.

A self-administrated questionnaire was designed and distributed to a random sample of hotel customers via Internet. About 250 samples of the electronic survey were sent to 250 guests who visited Hurghada recently and discussed the importance of aqua/water park facilities, its' safety consideration and programs, by sending them an e-mail invitation with a link to the electronic guest survey. The researcher received 220 valid responses of the guests who had been invited to participate. Also, around 230 of samples were distributed manually, 180 were received and only 160 were valid. So the total number of valid questionnaire were 380 forms (n=380). The results obtained from the valid forms were statistically analyzed whenever needed by using SPSS version 16. Data and information found in the study were analyzed and discussed in accordance with the stated objectives.

The questionnaire included 14 questions providing information about the importance of aqua/water park facilities, its' safety consideration, programs and how it could be an attraction tool to family market and also its role in supporting loyalty attitude from the regular guests. The last part of the questionnaire was about general information questions and personal data (i.e. age, gender their level of education. All items from the first to second sections were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree) for the following: "Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement". At the end, the research offers recommendations based on the gathered data.

Results

Analysis and Findings

A questionnaire analysis offers the following findings according to participants. Statistical results illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: Hotel Guests perceptions about Aqua Park Facilities		
	N= 380	%
1. Guests perception towards visiting		
a. Resorts with aquatic facilities	290	76.3
b. Resorts without Aquatic facilities	90	23.7
2. Core of using Aquatic facilities		
a. The effect of water use in releasing pressure	248	65
b. Playing	130	34
c. Swimming	10	2
3. The main design considerations		
a. Safety & Security	140	37.8
b. Signage	45	11.8
c. Age Appropriateness	120	31.6
d. Guests seating & shade	24	6.37
e. Foot and Body Showers	30	7.9
f. Footprint.	21	5.5
4. Attitudinal loyalty		
a. The level of emotional attachment to resorts with Water Park is high.	210	55.2
b. The level of emotional attachment to resorts with Water Park is moderate.	133	35

c. The level of emotional attachment to resorts with Water Park is low.	37	9.7
5. Environment		
a. Clean environment.	102	26.8
b. Safety considerations & maintenance	116	30.5
c. Quality of service	26	6.9
d. A comfortable environment.	15	3.9
e. The design of the Aqua Park.	93	24.5
f. Food and beverage menu.	28	7.4
6. Aqua Park activities		
a. Lazy River	5	1.3
b. Wave Pool	34	9
c. Toddler play area	133	35
d. Slides	26	6.8
e. Youth play area	132	34.7
f. Aquatic Games	50	13.2
7. Guests opinion about the required training programs to Aqua Park's staff		
a. Training to lifeguards and aqua park animation about dealing with troubles	129	34
b. First aid	119	31.3
c. Customer Care	115	30.3
d. Others	17	4.5
8. The research tools that guests may use to allocate the aquatic facilities		
a. Hotel Guide	40	10.5
b. Internet (Hotels' website, hotel page on social media, Trip-advisor and hotel.com)	290	76.3
c. Tourists companies	50	13.2
9. Can Aqua Park facilities lead to customers' satisfaction		
a. Yes	285	75
b. No	95	25
10. Do Aqua Park facilities can be considered as a competitive advantage for hotels to keep repeat business		
a. Yes	338	89
b. No	42	11
11. Age of the respondent		
a. Less than 30 years	90	23.4
b. 30-35 years	165	43.7
c. 36-40 years	102	26.8
d. More than 40 years old	23	6.1
12. Gender		
a. Male	185	48.7
b. Female	195	51.3
13. Marital Status		
a. Single	53	13.9
b. Married with children	223	58.7
c. Married without children	104	27.4
14. With whom participants are sharing their experience in the water park		
a. Friend(s)	86	22.6
b. Family	212	55.7

c. Couples	75	19.7
d. Colleague(s)	4	1.05
e. Alone	3	0.8
Source: Researcher		

A total of 480 distributed surveys, only 380 questionnaires were collected; so total response rate was 79.2%. Male respondents constituted 48.7% of the sample while 51.3% were female. The demographic profile of respondents revealed that more than 55% of the participants came to the water park with family followed by friend(s) (22.1%), couples (19.9%), colleague(s) (1.3%), or alone (.8%). Marital status found; Married with children customers represent the majority (58.7%), followed by (22.1%), and Married without children (27.4%).

When asking participants about the core of using Aquatic facilities; 65% of them revealed that using of water in releasing pressure was the most important reason followed by playing in water with 34%. According to participants opinion; the main design consideration are safety and security with 37.8% and age appropriateness of all games and activity with 31.6% and signage with 11.8%

55.2% of participants saw that the level of emotional attachment to resorts with water Park was high and 35% saw it was moderate. According to participants' point of view toddler play area, youth play area, aquatic games and slides were the most required activities.

Most of participants (83%) were strongly agreed on the importance of giving regular training to lifeguards and aqua park animation team about dealing with troubles, (80%) first aid and (65%) customer care. Some of participants gave recommendation that owner and operator of the park must have a number of scenarios to deal with crisis and troubles.

76.3% agreed that Internet (Hotels' website, hotel page on social media, Trip-advisor and hotel.com) was the main research tool that guests may use to allocate the aquatic facilities. Participants mentioned that safety signs are the most important information that hotels should present for their guests, followed by information about the dressing code and instructions about using waterproof sunscreen and drink plenty of fluids.

75% of guests agreed that Aqua Park facilities could lead to customers' satisfaction and 89% agreed that Aqua Park could be considered as a competitive advantage for hotels to keep repeat business.

Hotels Name	Average occupancy in 2016	Rate in 2016
Steigenberger Aqua Magic	50%	480
Steigenberger Aldau Beach Hotel	78%	750
The Desert Rose Resort	57%	630
Ali BaBa Vilage	50%	750
Albatros Gardens	62%	139
Albatros Aqua Vista	56%	121
Sindbad	53%	450
Sun Wings Makadi	64%	687.86
Aqua Magic Jaz	71.2%	692.5
Pick Albatros	45%	178.22
Coral Beach	19.84%	193
Sonesta Hurghada	20%	389
Citadel Azur	42.50%	485
Movenpick Hurghada	44%	436
Source: Researcher		

A comparison among five stars hotels who serve aquatic facilities and other who don't have this kind of facilities revealed that; those hotels with aquatic facilities enjoyed a higher average occupancy and a higher rate. The results of the comparison matched with guests' opinion in the questionnaire.

Conclusion

The popularity of Aqua/waterpark facilities in hotel services continues to grow bigger and better, it has the ability to attract customer, especially families with children. Resort hotels in Hurghada that do not have their own Aqua Park facilities should consider the vast growing demand of this kind of service. Meanwhile, those properties enjoy having their own Aqua facilities; will also enjoy applying a higher rate strategy. Nevertheless, properties located on the second line (without their own beach), may use the Aqua Park facilities as a competitive advantage to keep track of the market demand.

Recommendations

1. Regular training should be conducted to lifeguards and those employees involved with the Aqua park facilities such as; dealing with emergencies, first aid and so on. The owner and operator of the park must have written procedures in place to deal with a number of scenarios that may occur.
2. Rules and Regulations shall be obligatory for all the visitors of the Aqua Park regardless of their age. A person must carefully read these rules and regulations and to comply with them while using the Aqua Park facilities. Regulations about dressing code and warning signs should be hanged on wall to be visible for every guest.
3. Any periodical or preventive maintenance taking place in the Aqua Park should be announced in advance.
4. Hotel properties and specially those who are located near by the beaches should do their best to have their own aqua park facilities to ensure attracting family business.
5. Hotel properties should put into consideration that children might be the decision maker for the whole family especially when it comes to the location they will spend their holidays.
6. Tailoring up new kids games will ensure a long term patronage between hotel properties and family business. Recruiting experienced candidates mastering kids' treatment will allow hotel properties to differentiate their product. Also, animation team and especially kids' animators should be involved with kids during the daily aqua park operation hours.
7. Aqua park facilities and games should be highlighted on the hotel properties website and brochure. Hotel owners and operators should keep track of the latest aqua park games in order to guarantee keeping that piece of business.
8. Hotel owners and operator should allocate short video films on their websites that show the daily kids' interaction with parents especially when enjoying the aqua park facilities and using these videos as an attracting marketing tool for family members.
9. Hotel owners and operators should guarantee "safety first" concept before planning the aqua park facilities. Preferably to use signs conveying the proper edge for using each game.
10. A certain match should be applied when choosing aqua park games serve kids with disabilities according to the ADA (American with Disabilities Act), ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism) and the IAAPA (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions).

11. Those who would like to survive among the other competitors are likely to have their Aqua facilities even though a group of independent hotels would share owning Aqua park facilities.

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