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# Customer- Involvement in New Service Developments: Insights from Spanish Tourism Firms

*La implicación del cliente en el desarrollo de nuevos servicios: lecciones de las empresas turísticas españolas*

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is a wealth of empirical evidence that underlines customers as valuable contributors to service innovation activities (i.e., Gordon et al., 1993; Alam and Perry, 2002; Magnusson, 2003; von Hippel 2005; Matthing et al., 2006; Edvardsson et al., 2006; Kuusisto and Riepula, 2011; Kristensson et al., 2008; Sundbo, 2008). Customers have traditionally been considered one of the basic, inherent and most common partnerships for service innovation (Miles, 1999). New developments in services often arise from the close collaboration between the provider and its customers (Gallouj, 2001), as person-to-person interaction is a constitutive element of the service provision itself. As a matter of fact, service innovation is said to result when a firm is able to focus its entire energies to think on behalf of the customer (Kandampully, 2002), that is, when the business unit obtains and uses information from customers, develops a strategy that meets customers' needs, and implements that strategy by being responsive to customers' needs and wants (Ruekert, 1992).

The intangible nature of most innovations in the tourism sector makes the interaction between organizations and their customers



### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines customer-involvement in service innovation developed by Spanish tourism firms. This is done on the basis of a broad array of management tools targeted at engaging customers in new service developments (NSD) in an effective and systematic way. A multiple case study is performed across eight innovative tourism firms in Spain. Results show a limited awareness of formal customer-involvement methods. Some firms also underline how clients may lack the necessary knowledge to be co-participants of NSD. Innovation networks are highlighted as an important source of knowledge on new business opportunities.

### RESUMEN DEL ARTÍCULO

Este artículo examina la participación del cliente en la innovación de servicios desarrollada por empresas españolas del sector turístico. Esto se lleva a cabo sobre la base de un amplio conjunto de herramientas de gestión dirigidas a involucrar a los clientes en el desarrollo de nuevos servicios (DNS) de una manera efectiva y sistemática. El análisis sigue un enfoque de estudio de caso múltiple en torno ocho empresas innovadoras de turismo en España. Los resultados muestran un conocimiento limitado de métodos formales para la integración de los clientes. Asimismo, algunas empresas subrayan cómo los clientes pueden carecer de los conocimientos necesarios para ser co-creadores en el DNS. Las redes de innovación se destacan como una importante fuente de conocimiento sobre nuevas oportunidades de negocio.

closer than for many other types of service provision (Hjalager, 2010). Tourism firms operate in an highly competitive sector and thus largely depend on their innovation capacity in achieving new or improved outputs that meet the demand requirements of potential clients (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000; Sundbo et al., 2007). However, in comparison to their peers in other economic activities, most of them are only moderately – if at all – innovative (Hjalager, 2002), as mainly innovation-imitative and -adaptive organizations prevail in the tourism sector (Gallouj and Sundbo, 1998; de Jong et al., 2003). This limited innovative profile partly relates to structural features of the sector itself (Hjalager, 2006), which is represented by an important share of small firms, leading to scale diseconomies (Pikkemaat and Weiermair, 2007) that hamper their innovation activities, market research, competence acquisition and knowledge transfer (Orfila-Sintes et al., 2005; Pikkemaat and Peters, 2006; Shaw and Williams, 2009). Among other factors, literature also evidences a potential knowledge mislaid as result of sector seasonality, continuous personnel renewal and unskilled management (Lafferty and van Fossen, 2001), that hinders the adequacy between the incorporation of knowledge and the transformation of that knowledge into innovations.

***...the aim of this paper is to provide a picture of customer-involvement in the process of new service development (NSD).***

Research on innovation in tourism services, particularly for the case of customer co-creation, is still relatively scarce, (Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). The inclusion of consumers in innovation processes is a topic that deserves further attention (Hjalager, 2010) and managerial awareness and strategies may still be required (Faché, 2000). Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to provide a picture of customer-involvement in the process of new service development (NSD). It first revises a range of management tools useful for effectively and systematically engage customers in service innovation processes. Then, on the basis of these methods, an assessment is carried out across eight Spanish tourism firms by means of a case study approach. The evidence collected is expected to yield some insights for knowledge management in tourism providers.

The remaining structure of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews management tools and practices for customer-involvement in service innovation. Section 3 discusses the research design (e.g., questionnaire, interviewing process, etc.) and the

methodological aspects of the qualitative technique followed. Section 4 discusses the main findings. Finally, we conclude with a number of closing remarks.

## 2. METHODS FOR CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT

Customer-involvement and interaction can be viewed as a bridging strategy to secure access to a critical resource of information (Gruner and Homburg, 2000; Campos et al., 2018) that harnesses creative potential and expertise into firms seeking for renewable competitive advantage. For instance, Grisseman and Stokburger-Sauer (2012) find that customer co-creation of travel services positively affects satisfaction with the company, customer loyalty, and service expenditures. In the context of hotels, recent evidence also suggests a direct impact of customer-involvement and customer co-creation on NSD speed and market outcomes, which in turn increase service quality (Santos-Vijande, et al., 2018). Therefore, tourism organizations are able to strengthen their competitive position by expanding innovation process outside the firm in order to exploit the valuable knowledge and skills of their customers (Santos-Vijande, et al., 2018). In doing so, innovative organizations need to develop and establish new routines that help to integrate customers into the service development process (Kuusisto et al., 2013).

The importance of the external information collected from customers to the NSD process has given rise to different types of analytical tools. These management methods aim at understanding how customers create value in their every-day practices or when they use service provider's offerings (Kuusisto et al., 2013) in order to produce significant new departures for service innovations. Such methods can be grouped around three main categories: (C1) Building in-depth customer understanding; (C2) Involving customers as participants; and (C3) Making use of customer-generated content.

The first category (C1) comprises management tools that focus the attention to latent needs of which customers are unaware or that they are unable to articulate if directly asked. **Table 1** summarizes some previous literature (i.e., Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Holtzblatt and Beyer, 1993; Beyer and Holtzblatt, 1995; Leonard and Rayport, 1997; Ulwick, 2002; Korkman, 2006; Bettencourt and Ulwick, 2008; Anderson, 2009; Segelström et al., 2009; Konu, 2015)

### KEY WORDS

customer-involvement; new service development; tourism firms, management tools; Spain.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

participación del cliente; desarrollo de nuevos servicios; empresas de turismo, herramientas de gestión; España.

around a range of methods useful for building an in-depth customer understanding: (i) ethnography; (ii) empathic design; (iii) contextual inquiry; and (iv) contextual interviewing. All these tools are strongly based on predicting and interpreting customer needs in certain contexts to identify new starting points for firms' innovation activities. That is, the value of a service is thought to be highly embedded within the context of its use.

**Table I. Management methods for building in-depth customer understanding**

<b>METHOD A: ETHNOGRAPHY</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Roots in anthropology;</li> <li>● Many forms of open-ended qualitative data gathering (participatory observation and interviews most typically) to gain understanding on customers' actions, practices, experiences and social meanings in their own natural settings;</li> <li>● The role of the ethnographer is particularly important in data analysis as he/she tries to understand the experience of other people by sharing the experience and making perceptions with a 'different set of eyes and ears'.</li> </ul>
<b>METHOD B: EMPATHIC DESIGN</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Particularly established for service development purposes;</li> <li>● The key idea is to combine insight gained from watching people using a service with the company's knowledge of its capabilities and/or observing customers while they are using the service in their own physical environment;</li> <li>● Based on unobtrusive observation, it aims to generate information on questions such as: 'What circumstances prompt people to use the product/service?'; 'How does the product/service fit into customers' own systems?' and 'How do users reinvent or redesign the offering to serve their own purpose?'</li> </ul>
<b>METHOD C: CONTEXTUAL INQUIRY</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Developed in the field of systems design;</li> <li>● Observation and interviewing as key data collection methods;</li> <li>● The purpose of the method is to make sure that observer really understands what is happening by asking simple 'interrupting questions', e.g. 'What are you doing now?'; 'Is that what you expect to happen?';</li> <li>● It emphasizes the idea of 'joint discovery', i.e., user and interviewer discover together something that was 'previously implicit in users' mind'.</li> </ul>
<b>METHOD D: CONTEXTUAL INTERVIEWING</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● It argues that customer needs are tightly linked to customers' functions; customers are able and willing to reveal their needs when interview focuses upon the particular task the customer is trying to get done and on metrics customers use to measure how successful they are at task;</li> <li>● Its applicability lies on breaking down the task the customer wants done into a series of discrete steps, which can visually presented as a 'a job map'</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The second category (C2), for involving customers as participants, gathers management methods in which customers are directly engaged in one or several phases of a firm’s innovation process and in different roles set by the innovative organization. Based on previous evidence (i.e., Magnusson, 2003; Kristensson et al., 2008; Buur and Matthews, 2008), **Table 2** illustrates three strategic methods used to involve customers as participants in the NSD process: (i) in situ customer identification of needs; (ii) participatory design practices; and (iii) conversational approach. Customers may be persuaded to act in a highly active role such as a co-designer of new solutions together with the development team of the innovative firm. However, it is more typical that customers participate in less active roles, such as observing a simulated service delivery process and suggesting improvements. Despite the level of engagement, customers are regarded as a valuable source for innovators providing certain ‘outputs’ through their participation in the innovation process.

**Table 2. Business methods for customers’ involvement as participants**

METHOD A: 'IN SITU' CUSTOMER IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● This method is based on the analysis of customer-involvement at the idea generation phase;</li> <li>● Customers are not interviewed or observed;</li> <li>● Instead they identify needs by themselves (when these needs arise and/or when they face difficulties) and generate new ideas in the course of their normal daily activities;</li> <li>● Customer-involvement should be supported and encouraged by providing customers information about potential opportunities and limitations, as well as a physical platform upon which customers can elaborate their ideas.</li> </ul>
METHOD B: PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Developed particularly in the context of systems design;</li> <li>● The key idea is to engage end-users as stakeholders throughout the development process e.g., active dialogue and collaboration between designers of new technology and its users should ensure the meaningfulness of innovations to their users;</li> <li>● A five step procedure to be followed throughout the innovation process: ethnographic field studies, sense making of the results, co-ideation, establishment of new concepts, and co-design of development phase.</li> </ul>
METHOD C: CONVERSATIONAL APPROACH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The basic tenet of this approach is that new ideas are not ‘to be found’, but language and conversation are key processes by and during which new ideas arise and are co-created (in dialogue between provider and customer); then, neither of the parties would be able to figure out new ideas in isolation.</li> </ul>

Source: Authors’ own elaboration.

Finally, the focus of the third category (C3), in order to make use of customer-generated content, is to systematically look into customers' potential as innovators on their own. The research by von Hippel (1986; 1988; 2005), for instance, is particularly influential at this stage. Businesses may aim to benefit from user innovativeness either by using customer-generated content as building blocks of their innovation activities, or by building quite new business models around customer-generated content. To this respect, there are a number of methods and practices that are available for service providers seeking to build upon and to commercialize customer-developed content, such as: (i) the development of intensive relationships with user communities in order to obtain a flow of content over time; (ii) the provision of 'innovation toolkits' to potential customers to both support and to learn from their innovation efforts and; (iii) the supply of service 'components' for customers to undertake their own versions of the service offerings.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to assess the engagement of customers in tourism service innovation, this article conducts a case study across eight Spanish tourism providers.<sup>1</sup> The use of multiple case studies as the research method is primarily explained by the exploratory nature of the analysis. Accordingly, most of the indicators that guided the research focused on 'how?' and related questions. As suggested by Yin (2009), when a 'how' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control, the use of case studies is an appropriate methodology. Moreover, case studies are thought to be particularly well-suited to investigate contemporary phenomena within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009), and in early stages of research on a particular topic (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The research design posed a set of research questions as shown in **Table 3**. The corresponding questionnaire<sup>2</sup> introduced different propositions of the literature on the subject so as to facilitate respondents the appropriate course throughout the different research topics. Hence, a theoretical and an inductive approach was employed (Yin, 2009) and previous evidence on the matter was used as a template with which to compare the empirical results

of the case studies. As in previous investigations (i.e., Kuusisto and Riepula, 2011), data was mainly obtained by retrospectively interviewing key persons who had been involved in NSD. In total, 20 business representatives from the tourism industry– heads of innovation departments or directors/owner-managers – were face-to-face interviewed to reach out information on managerial practices and challenges related to the involvement of customers within the innovation process; that is, the unit of analysis. As shown in **Table 3**, the engagement of customers in service development process is analyzed on the basis of the three-level classification previously discussed (C1, C2 and C3).

**Table 3. Research questions**

<b>C1) BUILDING IN-DEPTH CUSTOMER UNDERSTANDING</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Could you please describe the practices and methods that you use in order build up a better understanding about needs of your customers?</li> <li>● How do you explore the latent needs (i.e., needs that are hard to explain or communicate) of your existing and potential customers?</li> <li>● How do you make sure that you understand what is truly important and valuable to the customer now and in the future?</li> </ul>
<b>C2) INVOLVING CUSTOMERS AS PARTICIPANTS</b>
A) Customer-involvement in different phases of NSD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Could you start by describing how customers are participating in the initiation and idea generation of new services at present?</li> <li>● How about the evaluation of initial ideas?</li> <li>● The next phase consists of activities related to development and testing of new services. Could you please describe how customers are involved in this phase?</li> <li>● Finally, we have a market launch – what kind of role customer-involvement is playing on this phase of the development process?</li> <li>● On your opinion, in which phase(s) of the NSD process, the interaction with customers is the most vital?</li> </ul>
B) Purpose/Benefits of customer-involvement in NSD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How would you describe the importance to integrate customers in NSD?</li> <li>● What are the benefits you are expecting to receive through customer integration?</li> </ul>
C) Problems of customer-involvement in NSD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What sort of obstacles arises when integrating customers in NSD?</li> <li>● Could you please describe some situations or circumstances when customer engagement should be avoided?</li> </ul>
<b>C3) MAKING USE OF CUSTOMER-GENERATED CONTENT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Do you have tools/methods/procedures that enable you to systematically monitor and investigate innovative ideas and contents that are developed outside your company?</li> <li>● Have you developed 'development platforms' or 'innovation arenas' (e.g., on-line communities) that enables you to benefit and to utilize the innovativeness of your customers?</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' own elaboration.



The number of cases included in the sample aims at providing a replication logic, and thus external validity, to the research. Each case is considered as an experiment in itself, and not a case within an experiment. The pre-screening of potential cases has been realized on the basis of prior external consultancy to official tourism bodies' advisors in Spain. Any of the interviewed organizations is recognized as highly innovative. The innovative profile of the different institutions was determinant regardless the way in which customers were or were not involved; that is, the researchers did not pursue to select innovative organizations having already customers on board, but innovative tourism agents regardless their initial customer-involvement in the NSD process in order to avoid potential selection bias. In the same vein, in order to avoid an overrepresentation bias, the selected organizations ranged from traditional spot services to ICT (information and communication technologies) tourism services. Cases were selected as expected to yield similar results (literal replication).

All interviews, conducted either in Spanish or English, were recorded for later transcription and analysis. The aim was to get the participants to talk as freely as possible and in their own terms (Patton, 1990). Ad-hoc interviewing with each expert lasted from 45 minutes up to more than 2 hours. In total, empirical data contained 22 hours of material. The questionnaire was pre-tested to ensure its content robustness, while the internal validity was addressed by engaging three experienced researchers in the analysis. The data collected (including case study notes, documents and transcripts) was indexed, coded and analyzed in tabular displays, in which the researchers reused constructs from earlier literature. Hence, the investigators aimed to act as commentators (Yin, 2009) in representing and interpreting the case in a way that relates to previous theory.

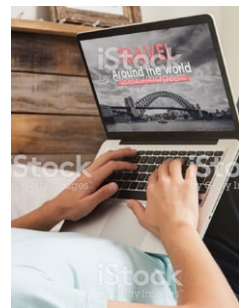
#### 4. FINDINGS

Most of the interviewed organizations consider essential to capture information on their customers' needs to develop successful innovations. However, the engagement across the different management methods, as previously described, is rather irregular. Interviewers report and recognize a more common use of methods in categories 2 and 3. Still, the awareness (and use) of management



methods targeted to provide a contextual approach of customer needs (C1) is relatively rather limited; managers recognizing the almost total absence of a systematic approach for building in-depth customer understanding. In accordance with Chathoth et al. (2014), it is perceived a limited effort by organizations to proactively engage with consumers to identify their latent needs and wants. Instead, the use of traditional or informal customer-oriented management tools (e.g., face-to-face contacts) still prevail. To this respect, the interviewed organizations are hardly able to provide a wide-ranging example in which, for instance, ethnography or empathic design methods were implemented at firm-level NSD process. Only two out of the eight firms in the analysis report some sort of 'contextual inquiry' for developing new services. In particular, this method was applied for reaching in hotel industry advanced conference services and a new environment-friendly solution for bed-sheet management. On the other hand, management tools targeted to engage customers as participants in different phases of the firm's innovation process (C2) are used intensively by firms included in the sample. Even though such methods are not 'purely' applied in a systematic basis, all respondents recognize some sort of implementation. They all consider that it is highly risky to launch a new service to market without any customer-involvement process. Customers are typically engaged in the innovation process at a phase when a new service is ready to be tested. Some examples of effective engagement of customers in NSD regards: the creation of a large community of pilot users for testing new service concepts in hotel chains, the launch of a e-booking system able to include restaurants with no computers, the implementation of a SMS-based hotel express checkout system for business travelers, and the provision to customers of free access to apps not yet launched into the market so that they can test and interact.

Additionally, the use of management practices targeted to making use of customer-generated content (C3) is found to be only partially explored. Management methods used to maximize the value of customer's contributions in the NSD are mostly based on the development of platforms (e.g., on-line communities) or on the use of advanced Web2.0 applications (e.g., Web 2.0-based communication and interaction tools). To this respect, one of the organizations highlighted the development of an advanced tool to engage customers in virtual travels, where their role is crucial



in the definition and use of the innovation in itself (the project requirements and the operational manuals are continuously developed by customers around wiki systems). Other examples regard the creation of a portal service (designed to facilitate the interaction between site users enabling them to share experiences, opinions, etc.), or an application to inform a member of a social network whether some of his/her friends has bought a flight ticket (to redirect the member so that he/she can buy a ticket to the same flight). Having a process in place to support and facilitate co-created value is considered particularly important at the beginning and the definitions of the innovation phase (e.g., development of operational manuals around wiki systems).

Finally, networking with other sector peers at the front-end phase of the innovation process (i.e., when new business opportunities are explored and initiated), appears as a common practice for approaching potential customers' knowledge. This is in line with literature underlying the importance of networks as a determinant of innovation in tourism firms, particularly for the case of Spain (Sundbo et al., 2007). This relates to the fact that consumers may somehow lack the necessary knowledge or be limited in terms of conceptualizing total value creation (Chathoth et al., 2014). Particularly around complex technology-driven tourism services, firms in the analysis recognize that intensive collaboration with customers may be merely unnecessary or even unfruitful. Furthermore, firms also report a number of barriers hampering the integration of customers within the NSD process. These refer to: (1) the lack of a suitable innovation culture; (2) the lack of formalization of internal innovation processes; (3) the lack of skilled management and motivated personnel; and (4) the increase in associated coordination costs.

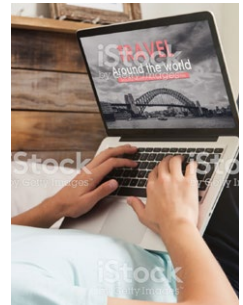


## 5. FINAL REMARKS

This paper provides an exploratory analysis about the role played by customers in NSD processes. In doing so, the work revisits a range of management methods/tools targeted at assisting businesses in making optimal use of customers during the innovation process. Also, it tries to detect the extent of implementation of this sort of techniques in a sample of tourism service firms in Spain. Results from the multiple case study exercise reveal the fundamental role that firms pose to customers' participation on innovation processes in this sector. However, formal and systematic management methods to reach an effective customer participation in NSD seem not to be widely or extensively implemented across firms in the analysis. When put into practice (even on informal basis), those methods aiming at involving customers as participants (C2) and of making use of customer-generated content (C3) are relatively more used. On the other hand, firms report that the application of tools for building in-depth customer understanding (C1) are relatively more unusual. As a matter of fact, only two out of the eight firms in the analysis are aware of this sort of practices for NSD.

Results also indicate that, even though consumer's ideas may be more innovative (in terms of originality and user value) than those of professional service developers (Matthing et al., 2004), some firms perceive that consumers may lack the necessary knowledge to be considered co-producers of innovation. Innovation networks, instead, are considered a major source of knowledge, especially at early stages of the NSD process (e.g., when new business opportunities are explored). There is still a huge room for incorporating customers in innovation processes undertaken by Spanish tourism providers. This often requires abandoning existing business models and/or working practices. Otherwise, it might happen that customers' inputs from traditional customer-involvement practices lead to less innovative solutions (Christensen and Bower, 1996; Ulwick, 2002). Traditional methods used by tourism firms to communicate with customers are somehow the cause of chronic waste and missed opportunity, most often resulting only in minor improvements and new services with relatively modest distinctive features that can be easily imitated by competitors (Ulwick, 2005).

Transitioning from older models of low-customer-involvement entails a host of new concepts and managerial decisions (Desouza et al., 2008). Thus, the strong support from top management is crucial when a business is to transform its inward NSD practices. This



support may include issues related to personnel training, motivation (Padilla-Meléndez and Garrido-Moreno, 2014) and incentive systems, but also the implementation of a more open innovation strategy (e.g., engagement in collaborative arrangements), along with the maximization of synergies between ICT and non-ICT led innovations. On the whole, this is a challenging learning process that typically requires businesses to acquire new competences and skills to succeed.

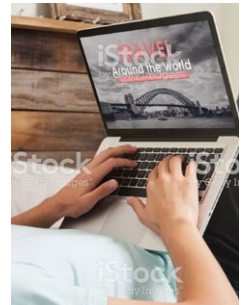


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## NOTAS

- 1 For a description of organizations' main activity, see **Table A1** in the Appendix.
- 2 The questionnaire is available from the authors upon request.

**APPENDIX**

**Table A1. Organizations' main activities**

ORG N#	DESCRIPTION
ORG1	Management system development services; Database and Web sites design and development; Web promotion; Online marketing.
ORG2	Business hotel specialized in conferences and events organization.
ORG3	Hotel chain specialized in cultural and nature tourism.
ORG4	Reservation management services for restaurants.
ORG5	Management solutions; Mobile content services; Mobile marketing; Notification, communication and promotion of campaigns services.
ORG6	Online marketing (SEO, search advertising, affiliate marketing, display advertising, Web analytics, and conversation optimization).
ORG7	Meta-search engine development; Application development for distribution and sales management.
ORG8	Hotel chain focused on design and providing unique customer experiences.

