

The Role of Experience and Service Offerings in Tourist Information Centers (TICs) in Germany

Nancy Richter

Schmalkalden University of Applied Sciences
Correspondence: n.richter@hs-sm.de (N. Richter)



For Authors

Interested in submitting to this journal? We recommend that you review the [About the Journal](#) page for the journal's section policies, as well as the [Author Guidelines](#). Authors need to [register](#) with the journal prior to submitting or, if already registered, can simply [log in](#) and begin the five-step process.

For Reviewers

If you are interested in serving as a peer reviewer, [please register with the journal](#). Make sure to select that you would like to be contacted to review submissions for this journal. Also, be sure to include your reviewing interests, separated by a comma.

About Events and Tourism Review (ETR)

ETR aims to advance the delivery of events, tourism and hospitality products and services by stimulating the submission of papers from both industry and academic practitioners and researchers. For more information about ETR visit the [Events and Tourism Review](#).

Recommended Citation

Richter, N. (2022). The Role of Experience and Service Offerings in Tourist Information Centers (TICs) in Germany. *Events and Tourism Review*, 5(1), 55-62.

Abstract

A central question for the development of tourist information centers is what visitors expect of this institution. Does the offer of experiences play a role in the competitiveness of a TIC? A study based on qualitative interviews examines the perspectives of the most important stakeholders of tourist information centers: visitors, managers, and touristic service providers. The study shows that it is worthwhile to distinguish between pure service offers and experience offers and to use both in a targeted manner to ensure competitive advantages.

Keywords: Tourist Information Center, Experiences, Services, Qualitative Research

Introduction

The Tourist Information Center (TIC) is the focal point of the brand promise of a destination and should not be neglected by destination managers, even if its relevance is decreasing due to the use of digital technologies (Lyu et al., 2015). TICs represent a touchpoint for the most important target groups of a region and have a high potential for value creation (Burzinski, 2020). This requires on-going adaptation and renewal to serve the visitors' needs. According to a nationally representative online survey in Germany, the TIC is the first-place visitors' search for information during a trip. At 43.4%, it ranks ahead of personal advice about accommodation, city maps, Google Maps or comparable maps, interviews with locals, weather apps, brochures and flyers, recommendations from friends and acquaintances, books, websites, social media channels, various apps, messenger services, or local media (Burzinski, 2020). The TIC of the future will be thought of holistically and will be an essential source of information for tourists during their trip (Burzinski, 2020). The TIC provides important information and creates enthusiasm for a destination (Sung, 2019). This definition already shows the two most important tasks of TICs: service tasks and experience offers. Certain services and functionalities are taken for granted by the visitor. Experiential offers, on the other hand, offer emotional elements that the visitor remembers (Chen, 2017). A survey by Burzinski (2020) shows that when it comes to demands on the TIC, visitors more often or almost exclusively name functional and service aspects and rate experience-oriented offers as less important. If the TIC follows the existing visitor wishes derived from online surveys, then the focus should be on fulfilling the above-mentioned free and fee-based service offers. However, in recent times the travel industry has become more and more experience-oriented and customers seem to expect entertainment. The following research question arises: Do experience offers play a role in the competitiveness of a TIC?

Experience Design in the Tourism Industry

The TIC is a central facility for visitors during a trip (Burzinski, 2020; Sinus Institute, 2018; Fesenmaier, 1994). Like the tourism industry as a whole, TICs are changing towards targeted experience orientation and design (Wagner et al., 2019). In marketing research, experience is defined as the "individual perception, feelings, thoughts and observations during the consumption of

products, services, and activities, as well as the memories of these experiences" (Wagner et. al., 2019, p. 4). The concept of customer experience also highlights the opposition between services and experiences: "customers do not buy service delivery, they buy experiences; they do not buy service quality, they buy memories" (Hemmington, 2007, p. 749). Travelling operates as a counter-world to everyday life, and experiences and positive memories take on great significance. In recent decades, concepts such as the experience society by Schulze (2005) or the experience economy by Pine and Gilmore (2011) have found their way into tourism literature. These approaches proclaim a shift towards a hedonistic attitude in society (Schulze, 2005) or a call for a transition to an experience-oriented economy (Pine et al., 2011). In the experience economy, experience has the same status as a good, a product, or a service (Pine et al., 2011). An experience is created when producers consciously use services and products to produce unforgettable events for people. Disneyland is a prime example of an experience production. Early examples can also be found in the leisure and media industry: theatre, film, music, theme parks, etc. In the case of the TIC, how experience offers are defined is dependent on the destination brand (Burzinski, 2020). Destinations only have meaning for visitors if every single brand touchpoint is perceived by the customer as an experience. The experience economy tracks the customer experience across all interaction points to draw the right conclusions. In tourism, the concept of the experience economy seems to be of particular importance. It offers an opportunity to stand out from the competition and to create lasting emotional impressions. To evaluate the role of experiences, this research examines different target groups' expectations of a TIC.

Methodology

Within the framework of purely guideline-based online visitor surveys (e.g., Burzinski, 2020), visitors of tourist information centers rated functional factors as particularly important. As far as the demands on the space are concerned, aspects that are considered self-evident and describe the basic functions of a TIC were named above all. Experiential offers such as virtual reality, films on screens, children's play corners, interactive touch screens, attractive design/furniture, a café or bar, or a shop with souvenirs were rated as less important. The visitor survey thus contrasts with the assessment already presented in which experience design is becoming increasingly important in the tourism industry. To get to the bottom of this difference, an empirical method is used, in which visitors of a TIC are interviewed on-site in the context of their visit to a TIC. The selected 6 TICs already have a high experiential character and are equipped with one or more of the above-mentioned examples of experiential offers. In addition, stakeholders of the TIC such as tourist service providers, employees, and the managers of the respective TIC were interviewed and asked about the demands on a TIC. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews in the context of an explorative qualitative field study (Bortz et al., 2002). The focus of the chosen method was not the generation of objective-representative data, but rather to sound out a topic area and, if necessary, to form hypotheses. The environmental conditions of the respective persons were also in focus. The following table provides an overview of the interviewees.

Table 1: Interview Participants and Locations

Role	Tourist Information	Country/City
Visitor 1	Experience-oriented TI in a large city (100,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Erfurt

Visitor 2	Experience-oriented TI in a large city (100,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Erfurt
Visitor 3	Experience-oriented TI in a large city (100,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Erfurt
Employee TIC 1	Experience-oriented TI in a large city (100,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Erfurt
Employee TIC 2	Experience-oriented TI in a large city (100,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Erfurt
Employee TIC 3	Experience-oriented TI in a large city (100,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Erfurt
Manager TIC 1	Experience-oriented TI in a large medium-sized city (50,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Weimar
Manager TIC 2	Experience-oriented TI in a large small town (10,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Bad Langensalza
Manager TIC 3	Experience-oriented TI in a rural community (under 5,000 inhabitants)	Germany/Bad Liebenstein
Tourist Service Provider 1	Experience-oriented TI in a small medium-sized town (20,000 inhabitants or more)	Germany/Eisenach
Tourist Service Provider 2	Experience-oriented TI in a rural community (under 5,000 inhabitants)	Germany/Oberweißbach

Results

The distinction between functional factors in the expected service and aspects of experience design was evident. Experiences were not expected or mentioned by the visitors. Rather, visitors were emotionally surprised, pleased, fascinated and attracted by the environment in which they found themselves. They expressed their emotions and feelings, which were positive throughout. When asked about their concrete expectations of the TIC, no feelings were expressed, but purely functional facts were listed. This indicates that the significance of experiential offers can be evaluated within the framework of a field study or in the context of the individual visitor experience.

Table 2: Interviews with Visitors

Interviews with visitors	
Service/Functional Factors	Experience/Emotional Factors
"Well, first of all, I expect to get all the general information about tourist offers in the city, i.e., information about museums, leisure activities, opening hours and entrance fees. That's basically it" (Visitor 1).	"I'm here because my godchild told me about it and he thought it was so cool with the robot here in front and then we said, let's take a look at what's going on here and then we looked around and we were really fascinated" (Visitor 2).
"It would be good if you could also somehow get information on your own at a	

<p>computer desk or tablet or something" (Visitor 1).</p> <p>"I expect that they can give me information on everything, if I have questions about the city in particular and about certain events" (Visitor 2).</p> <p>"We expect information that we don't already know" (Visitor 3).</p>	<p>"Well, this place is really nicely furnished, nice seats and comfortable" (Visitor 2).</p> <p>"I think it's pretty ideal here with the beautiful shapes and colours" (Visitor 3).</p> <p>"I was amazed by this, with the VR glasses. Yes, there is a little film that runs and you can watch it. Yes, also how faithfully it is equipped, no, I think that's really cool. I didn't expect that at all" (Visitor 2).</p> <p>"It is always good when there is seating that is comfortable" (Visitor 1).</p>
--	--

The survey of the TIC staff shows a similarly clear difference between the requirements for services on the one hand and experiences on the other. The emotional reactions of the visitors were observed by the employees and evaluated as positive interactions. Similarly, the service aspects were seen as a natural part of the job. Service orientation sometimes goes beyond the actual tourism business. Experience-oriented offers should facilitate communication, be interactive, and make it easier to create individual offers.

Table 3: Interviews with Tourist Information Officers

Interviewing the staff and managers of a tourist information	
Service/Functional factors	Experience/emotional factors
<p>"Many visitors come and say we have just arrived and what have you got? Yes, that's where it starts. Where can we go in the evening? Do you have a city map?" (Employee TIC 3).</p>	<p>"Are you looking for a room for us or how do I get from A to B? Visitors just know that when they arrive at our place. [...] The task is simply to be inspiring and to give insider tips" (Employee TIC 2).</p>
<p>"It is at least assumed that we as a tourist information are informed about everything, that we know everything. Yes, of course that is not always the case, but of course we try our best. That is the actual requirement of a tourist information center" (Employee TIC 3).</p>	<p>"Yes, there are these interactive monitors here with presentations of event spaces, the visitors and I enjoy it. When I can show something to the visitors and then notice that it goes down really well, that's sometimes even a real aha effect, like 'OK, we wouldn't have expected that at all'" (Employee TIC 3).</p>
<p>"But there are also visitors who come with questions like 'How long does the parking meter run there or how much do I have to pay in the car park? Then I say ok, that's not really our main business, but of course we try to help" (Employee TIC 3).</p>	<p>"A very special highlight for us are of course the VR glasses and</p>
<p>"There are several motivations to seek out the TICs. One is actually the search for information. But also</p>	



<p>quite clearly the search for souvenirs or books, for example." (Manager TIC 1)</p> <p>"Yes, exactly, I find that our visitors like to be advised. So they like to come and ask what to do, what can you offer me? What else can I do this evening?" (Manager TIC 2).</p> <p>"Brochure material is still a big issue. Visitors come to take brochures and then, of course, advice about the whole region" (Manager TIC 2).</p> <p>"Digital communication with visitors is becoming increasingly important. I have already thought about using such chat functions for simple, fast communication with the visitor, or? (Employee TIC 2).</p> <p>"The landlords are not yet completely digital, we have many older landlords or landlords who do this on the side. I always try to argue that our landlords come into our booking system, that we also make them bookable online. But many of them are not interested in being bookable online [...] How do we do that? Well, we've always done it that way, that we call the landlords for the visitors, but a lot of tourist information centers tell me no, we don't do that anymore. The effort is too big and I would definitely sign that. The effort is huge, on some days we spend hours on the phone for visitors, especially now when everything is booked out, it's a pure catastrophe" (Manager TIC 2).</p> <p>"Very exciting is the idea of another tourist information office near here, which is planning an open area in front of the tourist information office, where there is a screen that is voice-controlled and can give information about available accommodation, where intelligent, uh, systems are behind it and where you can also search for an accommodation" (Manager TIC 2).</p>	<p>the VR glasses films. As far as I know, no one else in the area has that either" (Employee TIC 1).</p> <p>"Many people, when they come in here, are caught up by the atmosphere and say 'Wow, so beautiful, so modern, we've never seen that before', which is always a great way to start a conversation, and then of course the classic 'We want the city map, we want a tram map'" (Employee TIC 2).</p> <p>"It is also important to create digital offers that can actually be perceived intuitively, i.e., to lower the inhibition thresholds in dealing with digital elements as much as possible" (Manager TIC 1).</p> <p>"I see it as an important topic to make ticketing available online for the visitor, but also to make the experience even closer to him and to work even more individually for the visitor" (Manager TIC 3).</p>
---	---

The service providers also formulate their expectations of the TIC as both experience-oriented and service-oriented.

Table 4: Interviews with Service Providers of a Destination

Interviews with service providers of a destination	
Service/Functional factors	Experience/emotional factors
<p>My expectation of the tourist information is the service for us. I can't afford to know which restaurants are all open, which hotels are all open? Are there any new offers? Is there perhaps a new package to which we can refer, so I really see this mediator function between the tourist partners and the visitors as very, very important" (Service Provider 2).</p> <p>"Then, of course, it should be very modernly equipped so that visitors can download opening hours from museums, for example, via app or QR code. Especially because this information has changed again and again during the pandemic. TICs should always be equipped with good print media, i.e., city maps with identification of the places of interest and also the gastronomy. So that all the possibilities for the visitor are directly available" (Service Provider 1).</p>	<p>"Above all, a TIC should present the place with pride and also promote it beyond the region and present it at all kinds of portals and trade fairs. [...] I have observed that my visitors often extend their stay if it is possible and say how beautiful it is here" (Service Provider 1).</p>

Analysis and Summary

Without specifically asking about experiences or services, all interviewed stakeholders expressed the great importance of the experience and service offerings of a TIC. Visitors actively perceive experience elements and make positive emotional statements about their impressions. TICs should not only be designed to be purely functional and service-oriented but also emotional and experience-oriented. In tourism, people are convinced by emotions. Only in this way can a TIC stand out from the competition. Experiential offers are not expected or demanded by the visitors but are consistently evaluated as positive and memorable as soon as they are available. Those responsible for TICs have also recognized the importance of experiences and emotions.

It became clear that the stakeholders of TICs can only perceive and evaluate experience offers if they experience them personally. In comparison, functional service offers can be consciously mentioned and evaluated even without personal experience. The individual perception and context of visitors of a destination can also lead to different classifications of features. Interactive elements or VR films do not inspire enthusiasm and trigger positive emotions for every visitor. However, TICs can use the acquired knowledge to specifically integrate experiences into their offerings. The precondition is that they know their visitors and the expectations they have of the destination.

References

- Bortz, J., & Döring, N. (2002). *Qualitative Methoden*. In *Forschungsmethoden und Evaluation* (pp. 295-353). Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-540-33306-7_5.
- Burzinski, M. (2020). *Reisepuls Deutschland. Future.TI 2020 - Studie zur Zukunft der Tourist-Informationen*. Retrieved from: <https://shop.destinet.de/shop/Future-TI-2020-Studie-zur->

- Zukunft-der-Tourist-Informationen-p286651651.
- Chen, X. Y., & An, Y. G. (2017). *A Research on the Landscape Design of Beijing Tourist Information Center*. DEStech Transactions on Social Science, Education and Human Science, (aetms), DOI 10.12783/dtssehs/aetms2017/15887.
- Fesenmaier, D. R. (1994). Traveler use of visitor information centers: Implications for development in Illinois. *Journal of Travel Research*, 33(1), 44-50.
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F004728759403300106>
- Hemmington, N. (2007). From service to experience: Understanding and defining the hospitality business. *The Service Industries Journal*, 27(6), 747-755.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02642060701453221>.
- Lyu, S. O., & Hwang, J. (2015). Are the days of tourist information centers gone? Effects of the ubiquitous information environment. *Tourism Management*, 48, 54-63.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.11.001>.
- Pine, J.; Gilmore, J. (2011). *The Experience Economy*. Harvard Business Review. ISBN 1422161978, 9781422161975.
- Schulze, G. (2005). *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*. Campus Verlag. ISBN 10: 3593378884.
- Sinus Institut (2018). *Vertiefende Zielgruppeninformationen zu den Thüringen Tourismus Personas auf Basis der Sinus-Milieus®*. Befunde aus qualitativen Telefoninterviews. Internal Document.
- Sung, M. J., & Kim, S. I. (2019). A Study on Factors of TIC (tourist information center) in Seoul-Focus on Itaewon. *Journal of Digital Convergence*, 17(5), 347-351.
<https://doi.org/10.14400/JDC.2019.17.5.347>.
- Wagner, D., Schobert, M. and Steckenbauer, G.C. (ed.) (2019). *Experience Design im Tourismus – Eine Branche im Wandel. Gestaltung von Gäste-Erlebnissen, Erlebnismarketing und Erlebnisvertrieb*. Springer, Gabler. ISBN: 978-3-658-24513-9.