**A customer-focused approach to distribution: the case of SANParks**

**Abstract**

While the importance of distribution has been recognised in tourism literature, research has mostly been approached from a supply side with very little attention given to the customer. To date, even less focus has been placed on the distribution channel requirements of National Park customers. The purpose of this study is thus to examine how the various distribution channels used by National Parks, in this case South African National Parks (SANParks) perform toward satisfying customers’ distribution channel requirements and to identify whether there is a relationship between certain variables and the level of satisfaction that customers experience with the various channels. Web-based and paper-based questionnaires are distributed to customers who have made use of the distribution channels of South African National Parks before. The results show that although the SANParks website is the most frequently used channel, it is not necessarily the channel with which customers are most satisfied; in fact, they are more satisfied with the satellite walk-in reservation offices and satellite call centres. While the majority of research studies in the context of tourism distribution channels have shown the importance and popularity of electronic distribution channels amongst customers, this paper cautions suppliers, such as National Parks, not to assume that they know the distribution channel requirements of their customers and urges them to continuously assess their distribution strategies to become more customer-focused in their approach.

***Keywords:*** *channel performance, customer-focused, distribution channels, SANParks, satisfaction, supplier.*

Classification number: L83

**INTRODUCTION**

Distribution adds to the competitiveness of tourism businesses and has an effect on other elements of the marketing mix, for example, price, product and promotion (Pearce, 2002), while at the same time influencing the profitability of the tourism value chain members (Buhalis, 2000; Coelho & Easingwood, 2008). Buhalis (2001: 8) explains the primary distribution functions for tourism as: “information, combination and travel arrangement services. Most distribution channels therefore provide information to prospective tourists; bundle tourism products together; and also establish mechanisms that enable consumers to make, confirm and pay for reservations”. Middleton and Clarke (2001) add that the core distribution functions are to extend the amount of points of sale or access away from the location at which services are performed or delivered and enable the buying of products even before their production.

Even though researchers are increasingly focusing their attention on tourism distribution, literature on the topic continues to show considerable gaps (Schott, 2007). Pearce and Schott (2005) and Schott (2007) note that the focus of distribution studies has mainly been on supply-side issues such as the relationship between suppliers and intermediaries (for example travel agents, inbound and outbound tour operators, as well as tour wholesalers), and their efforts to reach customers (O’Connor 1999; Buhalis, 2001; Alcázar Martínez, 2002; Crotts, Aziz & Raschid, 1998; García-Falcón & Medina-Muñoz, 1999). Far less attention has focused on customers and how they perceive and make use of various channels of distribution (Öörni 2003; Wolfe, Hsu & Kang 2004), even though many authors have identified the need for distribution research to be more customer-focused. As far back as 1987, Buckley became convinced of the importance of the customer when he adopted the transaction chain analysis and asserted that an analysis of transactions should start with the “main actor” – the tourist and it should study all the “actor’s” transactions (Pearce & Schott, 2005:50). Pearce and Schott (2005) emphasised that research investigating the channels suppliers use (Lituchy & Rail, 2000) should be supplemented by related studies from a demand-side. Pearce (2009) urges suppliers to be customer-focused by taking the distribution requirements of customers into consideration, while Pearce and Schott (2005) identified the need to extend work on consumer behaviour in tourism past the information search process to include a more comprehensive study on booking and buying behaviour so that a more thorough understanding of the process of distribution from the customer’s perspective can be gained. When visitor behaviour and use is better understood, it will allow suppliers to serve their customers more successfully, by either confirming their current distribution strategies being used or recommending ways of improving these leading to more effective distribution of products in a marketplace that is becoming more competitive.

In order to gain a better understanding of the distribution process from the customer’s perspective, the focus of this study will be on examining customers’ use of the various distribution channels of SANPark. More specifically, the study aims to: assess the frequency with which customers use the distribution channels of SANParks; measure the extent to which the distribution requirements of customers are being satisfied and identify whether there is a relationship between certain variables and the level of satisfaction that customers experience with the various channels. SANParks is known to be the leading authority in conservation within South Africa (Saayman & Saayman, 2008), and is responsible for 22 National Parks, covering 3 751 113 hectares of protected land (SANParks, 2013). SANParks represents the fauna, flora and landscapes, indigenous to South Africa. It is closely associated with the cultural heritage and historical aspects of the country. The Parks offer various accommodation facilities and activities that cater for visitors’ different needs and wants (SANParks, 2013). SANParks was selected as case study for the following reasons: first, research into the area of tourism distribution in National Parks is almost non-existent. Sharpley and Pearce (2007) explored marketing and marketing perspectives in encouraging sustainable tourism in National Parks in England, while Tsai, Chou and Lai (2010) analysed the websites of National Parks in Taiwan, but to date, no studies have investigated the use and performance of various distribution channels in the context of National Parks. Second, when taking the visitor demographics of SANParks into consideration, it is evident that the majority of visitors are from an older age group (Scholtz, du Plessis & Saayman, 2014 – it should be noted that even though this age profile was drawn from overnight visitors to the Southern part of the Kruger National Park, it still provides an indication of the general age profile of SANParks visitors). Even though research shows that the popularity of electronic distribution channels is increasing (Frontur, 2010), it is also known that the older generations prefer more traditional channels (Beldona, Racherla & Mundhra, 2011), which warrants the need for this study to ascertain whether this is true in the case of SANParks. The paper has three parts: First it reviews the extant literature relevant to distribution of tourism services from a demand side approach and then the research methodology is presented. Finally, the results are discussed and summarised.

**TOURISM DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS**

As far back as 1992, Stern and El-Ansary viewed distribution channels as a coordinated system that must produce value for the user or consumer through the creation of form, possession, time, and place functions. Arranging this system can be a “balancing act”, when considering the variety of channel members who are all interdependent involving numerous functions (Pearce, 2009), where compromises and cooperation is needed to line up the supplier’s resources with what is needed to gratify the consumer and stay abreast of its opponents (Anderson, Day & Rangan, 1997). This implies that the customers’ requirements should be the foundation when a distribution channel is being designed, but that these requirements should be considered against other factors. Pearce (2009) confirms that the design process must be customer-focused and take the distribution requirements of customers into account, while at the same time considering the business’s own requirements, which would result in attaining the best possible match between these two sets of requirements.

Pearce and Tan (2006) describe the distribution mix in tourism as ‘‘the combination of the direct and indirect distribution channels that a hospitality and travel organisation uses to make customers aware of, to reserve and deliver its services’’ (Morrison, 1989; Pearce & Tan, 2006). In an effort to sell their services more efficiently, most suppliers use a mix of traditional and electronic channels (Morosana & Jeong, 2008). Some tourism researchers claim that traditional distribution channels could be under threat or even be substituted by electronic channels (Chiappa, 2013), while others feel that traditional channels can complement electronic channels. Yet others (Bennett & Lai, 2005; Law, Leung & Wong, 2004) take both opinions into account by stating that traditional and electronic distribution channels can complement each other to deliver the ultimate satisfaction to travellers (Huang, Chen & Wu, 2009). SANParks uses both traditional and electronic distribution channels, namely a supplier website, a head office reservation office, a call centre, a number of satellite reservation offices and a satellite call centre (as depicted in figure 1). These channels, their functions and use by customers will be discussed subsequently.

**Figure 1: SANParks’ distribution system**

SANParks

Customers

Supplier website

Satellite call centre

Satellite reservation offices

Call centre

Head office reservation office

**Reservation office (Retail travel agent)**

SANParks distribute their accommodation offering through a head office reservation office together with a number of satellite reservation offices situated across South Africa. These offices act as reservation agents, and the reasons customers would make use of them, would be similar to the reasons they would choose a retail travel agent. Many researchers (Palmer & McCole, 1999; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Tsai, Huang & Lin, 2005) are of the opinion that even though the number of online travel transactions is increasing, travellers still depend on travel agents to offer a human touch and professional services. Walle (1996) feels that a core advantage of travel agencies is their capability to deliver personalised information and assistance to travellers on an on-going basis by answering questions (Furger in Cheyne, Downes & Legg, 2006) handling problems (Gajilan in Cheyne et al., 2006) and preserving a relationship with clients (Fastie, Garris, Cohen, Dawes, Leger, Rabinovitch, Munro & Lidsky in Cheyne et al. 2006). Law, Leung and Wong (2004) contend that the role of travel agencies will stay secure if the ability that they have to give advice is supported by the Internet, instead of simply functioning according to the more negative image of being only a ‘‘booking agency’’. Cheyne et al. (2006) agree and add that the travel agent must be more than simply a reservation office for tickets, they must deliver more added value to the information and guidance they give clients. Kim, Lehto and Morrison (2007) argue that the more multifaceted travel products will continue to be distributed through traditional distribution channels since consumers still favour the use of traditional distribution channels and continue to value things done in the old traditional way (Lang, 2000).

**Call Centre**

Those customers preferring the old traditional way of doing things still find the conventional telephone a popular channel to use (Buhalis & Licata, 2001) and for this reason SANParks still facilitates the distribution of their services through a call centre and satellite call centres. According to Pearce, Tan and Schott (2007), call centres provide a “concentration of expertise”, which increase sales opportunities by extracting more out of clients when dealing directly with them, through up-selling and cross-selling. Even though consumers’ confidence in online booking is increasingly growing, they may prefer to confirm their reservations or ask questions to a call centre agent. In the leisure market, many consumers feel that they are not technologically advanced to conduct an online purchase. Call centres in fact support a supplier’s Internet distribution (Buhalis & Licata, 2001).

**Supplier website**

SANParks also makes use of its own website to distribute its offering. There has been a significant growth in the number of bookings directly on supplier websites (Phelan, Christodoulidou, Countryman & Kistner, 2011). Starkov and Safer (2010) are of the opinion that the supplier website should be the focus of any distribution strategy since consumers who book on the supplier website are more loyal, spend more and are likely to travel more frequently. The internet allows consumers to have access to trustworthy and correct information, in addition to having the opportunity of completing bookings faster and cheaper, with fewer problems when compared to traditional methods. Supplier website users can be placed into two categories, namely browsers (lookers) and buyers (bookers) (Law & Hsu, 2006). Even though the internet is used as an important tool when searching for information and buying products, consumers still utilise diverse distribution channels when making decisions. Although some consumers may look for information online, they may still end up buying offline (Crnojevac, Gugić & Karlovčan, 2010). According to Bai, Law and Wen (2008), website quality has a direct and positive effect on a customer’s satisfaction as well as on their commitment to buy online, making it imperative for suppliers to satisfy their customers, in order for them to be e-buyers and not only e-searchers (Crnojevac et al., 2010).

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that different distribution channels appeal to different customers. In order for suppliers to serve their customers more successfully, they need to understand the distribution requirements of their customers. What will ultimately lead to the successful use of a specific channel by customers is whether the supplier will manage to satisfy the consumers’ distribution requirements with the particular channel. A customer’s satisfaction with a channel will ultimately depend on how they measure the performance of the channel. According to Pearce and Taniguchi (2008) the development of an efficient distribution system in a market that is becoming more and more competitive asks for a careful evaluation of the performance of specific channels as well as the whole distribution mix. They further noted that other authors such as Kotler, Bowen and Makens (1996); Anderson et al. (1997); Middleton and Clarke (2001) and Green (2005) have also emphasised the need to assess the performance of specific channels, but very little direction has been given on how such an evaluation should be conducted, resulting in published empirical work on the topic being almost non-existent. In the airline industry, for example, the development of online direct sales systems, has enticed a lot of interest and has apparently been built on thorough assessments of channel benefits and disadvantages, still, these studies seem to relate to the outcomes of the development of these channels and not on the methods by which these assessments have been conducted (Lubbe, 2005; Alamdari & Mason, 2006). The next section will thus focus on channel performance and the measurement thereof.

**CHANNEL PERFORMANCE: FROM THE CUSTOMER’S PERSPECTIVE**

Pearce (2008) note that when visitor behaviour and use is better understood, it will allow suppliers to serve their customers more successfully, leading to more effective distribution of their products in a marketplace that is becoming more competitive. Crnojevac et al. (2010) opine that when a supplier wants to increase the quality of their online service, they should constantly adjust their online marketing strategy to the requirements of customers, centred on measurements of their satisfaction and experience and on features of their behaviour. Even though this statement was made in the context of electronic distribution, the same rings true for traditional distribution.

Customers measure the performance of distribution channels based on the channel’s ability to satisfy their distribution requirements. Available literature identified requirements that are of importance to customers when measuring the performance of the distribution channels as used by SANParks. Table 1 indicates these requirements as well as the item in the questionnaire (to be used in the empirical part of this study) that corresponds with the customer requirement.

**Table 1.** Customer requirements used when measuring the performance of distribution channels

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **TRAVEL AGENT** | **Corresponding item in questionnaire** | **CALL CENTRE** | **Corresponding item in questionnaire** | **SUPPLIER WEBSITE** | **Corresponding item in questionnaire** |
| SECURITY OF PAYMENT PROCESS (Cheyne et al., 2006)RELIABILITY (Cheyne et al., 2006)ASSURANCE (Cheyne et al., 2006)SOMEONE TO CONTACT WHEN THINGS GO WRONG (Cheyne et al., 2006)INDIVIDUALISED SERVICE (Cheyne et al., 2006)RELATIONSHIP (Novak & Schwabe, 2009)PROVIDE ADVISORY SERVICES (Novak & Schwabe, 2009)OVERCOME UNCERTAINTY (Pavlou, 2003)TRUST (Izquierdo-Yusta & Marti’nez-Ruiz, 2011)LOCAL KNOWLEDGE (Cheyne et al., 2006)SAVING TIME (Cheyne et al., 2006) | Security of payment processReputation (credibility of reservation channel)Reputation (credibility of reservation channel)Personal contact provided by reservation staffPersonal contact provided by reservation staffPersonal contact provided by reservation staffKnowledge of reservation staffReputation (credibility of reservation channel)Reputation (credibility of reservation channel)Knowledge of reservation staffTime taken to make the reservation; Waiting time in queue | LACK OF QUEUES (Dean, 2004)FRIENDLY MANNER (Dean, 2004)PROVISION OF INFORMATION (Jaiswal, 2008)QUALITY OF INFORMATION (Jaiswal, 2008)RELATIONAL EXPERTISE (Burgers, Ruyter, Keen & Streukens, 2000)RESPONSIVENESS (Keiningham, Aksoy, Andreassen, Cooil & Wahren, 2006)EMPATHY (Keiningham, Aksoy, Andreassen, Cooil & Wahren, 2006)RELIABILITY (Keiningham, Aksoy, Andreassen, Cooil & Wahren, 2006)ASSURANCE (Keiningham, Aksoy, Andreassen, Cooil & Wahren, 2006) | Time taken to answer your call; Time taken to make the reservationOverall professionalismKnowledge of reservation staff; Availability of accommodation requestedKnowledge of reservation staffPersonal contact provided by reservation staffOverall professionalism; Ease of booking (hassle free)Overall professionalism; Simplicity of booking processReputation (credibility of reservation channel)Security of payment process | PERCEIVED PRICE (Golmohammadi, Jahandideh & O’Gorman, 2012)PERCEIVED RISK (Golmohammadi, Jahandideh & O’Gorman, 2012)CONVENIENCE (Jun, Vogt & Mackay, 2010)TIMELY AVAILABILITY OF INFORMATION (Jun, Vogt & Mackay, 2010; Sabiote, Frías & Castañeda, 2012)TRUST (Jun, Vogt & Mackay, 2010)EASE OF USE (Kim & Lee, 2004; Sabiote, Frías & Castañeda, 2012)INFORMATION CONTENT (Kim & Lee, 2004; Sabiote, Frías & Castañeda, 2012)SECURITY (Kim & Lee, 2004; Sabiote, Frías & Castañeda, 2012)PERSONALISATION (Kim & Lee, 2004)WEBSITE DESIGN (Musante, Bojanic & Zang, 2004)NAVIGATION (Kim, Chung & Lee, 2011) | Price of accommodation chargedReputation (credibility of reservation channel)Ease of payment process; Time taken to make the reservationAvailability of accommodationReputation (credibility of reservation channel)Simplicity of self-help processFind information; Read the news releasesSecurity of payment processRecognition of your personal detailsEase of finding the SANParks online booking facility |

It is necessary to note that certain variables influence the way in which customers view some of the channel requirements as mentioned in table 1. Akhter (2003) and Powell & Ansic (1997) for example found that men and women are significantly diverse when it comes to the way in which they view the usefulness and user-friendliness of the internet. In comparison to women, men are generally less opposed to risk, more at ease with technology, and are open to online purchases. Beldona, Racherla and Mundhra (2011) also found that frequency of travel influences the measurement of performance for example perceived risk. Weber and Roehl (1999) found that perceived risk of the product and the channel seems to be less for travellers that travel frequently. One of the objectives of the study is to see whether these variables, such as gender and frequency of travel also play a role in the performance of SANParks’ distribution channels as measured by their customers.

The above discussion scrutinised the functions of various distribution channels from the customer’s perspective and identified the requirements that they use when measuring the performance of these channels, in terms of their level of satisfaction with the channels. In order to gain a better understanding of the distribution process from the customer’s perspective, the focus of this study will be on examining customers’ use of the various distribution channels of SANPark. More specifically, the study aims to: assess the frequency with which customers use the distribution channels of SANParks; measure the extent to which the distribution requirements of customers are being satisfied and identify whether there is a relationship between certain variables and the level of satisfaction that customers experience with the various channels.The next section aims to provide a breakdown of the methods followed to achieve these objectives.

**METHODOLOGY**

Past visitors to SANParks, who had made use of their distribution channels, were selected. A self-administered, web-based questionnaire was developed and the link to the questionnaire posted on the SANParks website, with an invitation to participate in the research. In total, 418 usable responses were gathered from the online survey. Paper-based questionnaires were also distributed at the head office walk-in reservation office, as well as a satellite walk-in reservation office where 121 paper-based questionnaires were collected, which resulted in a total number of 539 responses. The purpose of the questionnaire was to examine how the various distribution channels used by SANParks perform toward satisfying customers’ distribution channel requirements and to identify whether there is a relationship between certain variables and the level of satisfaction that customers experience with the various channels. In this paper, the results of five channels of distribution covered in the questionnaire will be discussed: walk-in reservation offices (both head office and satellite), call centres (both head office and satellite) and the supplier website. SANParks’ own walk-in reservation office is situated at their head office in Groenkloof, Pretoria. They also have a number of satellite walk-in reservation offices across South Africa. These satellite offices act as reservation agents for SANParks, and earn commission from SANParks on the reservations they make. SANParks also operate their own call centre, if the volume of calls is too large to handle, they are transferred to satellite call centres, who once again earn a commission on the reservations that they make. Data were analysed using descriptive frequency analysis and measures of central tendency and dispersion to determine the visitors’ use and experience with these channels. Furthermore, inferential statistical analysis, namely independent sample t-tests, ANOVAs and Chi-square tests were done to investigate differences and relationships between variables of which only those that proved significant are reported in this paper.

**RESULTS**

A description of the profile of respondents is presented in table 2. An equal number of males and females responded to the questionnaire. All adult age groups were represented in the sample, and almost all respondents visit one of the SANParks at least once a year.

**Table 2.** Respondents’ profile

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Demographic profile** | **Percentage** |
| ***Age***18-3536-5051-60Over 60 | 17.1731.1124.6827.04 |
| ***Gender***MaleFemale | 5050 |
| ***Frequency of visits***More than once a yearOnce a yearI haven’t stayed at any of the SANParks in the last two yearsI haven’t stayed at any of the SANParks in the last five years | 65.3430.463.570.63 |

**Customers’ use of the various distribution channels of SANParks**

Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they use the various distribution channels of SANParks. In addition to being asked how often respondents used the SANParks website, they were also asked to show the frequency with which they conduct other activities on the website, such as checking availability and finding information. What is interesting is that almost twice as many respondents said that they always used the website to check availability as opposed to those always making reservations on the website. Respondents were then asked to give reasons why they do not make reservations on the website, the reasons most frequently quoted were: “I prefer to use other booking channels; I don’t like paying over the internet; pensioners do not receive discount when booking on the SANParks website; I don’t like providing my personal details over the internet and the SANParks website only allows me to make a booking 10 months in advance, with the other channels I can book 11 months in advance”.

**Table 3**. Frequency percentage with which SANParks distribution channels are being used and activities conducted on the SANParks website

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Channel** | **Always** | **Most of the time** | **Sometimes** | **Rarely** | **Never** |
| **Call Centre** | 18.29 | 10.74 | 15.31 | 21.47 | 34.00 |
| **Satellite Call Centre** | 16.19 | 13.36 | 12.15 | 9.11 | 49.19 |
| **Head Office Reservation Office** | 2.27 | 2.89 | 8.47 | 7.64 | 78.72 |
| **Satellite Reservation Office** | 11.25 | 10.21 | 9.38 | 5.63 | 63.54 |
| **ACTIVITIES ON WEBSITE** |  |
| **Find information** | 52.14 | 23.35 | 19.26 | 2.14 | 3.11 |
| **Read the news releases** | 39.88 | 24.79 | 21.07 | 7.85 | 6.40 |
| **Check availability** | 67.66 | 11.71 | 9.33 | 3.77 | 7.54 |
| **Make a reservation** | 34.76 | 10.77 | 15.24 | 12.60 | 26.63 |

**Performance of distribution channels**

A number of variables (unique to each channel) were used to measure the levelof satisfaction with the five channels, with the mean score of each variable given in table 4 below. Level of satisfaction was measured on a 5 point likert scale, where 1=very satisfied and 5= very dissatisfied. The composite mean score measuring the overall level of satisfaction with each channel is also provided. From the table below it is clear that seven of the items corresponded across all the channels. The composite mean score for these seven items are also provided below. In order to compare levels of satisfaction across all the channels, the remainder of the results will be based on these seven items. The Cronbach Alpha’s of these items guaranteed internal consistency (reliability), with all the channels measuring above 0.85.

**Table 4.** Level of satisfaction across channels

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Website** | **Head office Call Centre** | **Satellite Call Centre** | **Head Office Reservation Office** | **Satellite Reservation Office** |
| Finding the SANParks page | 1.5284 |  |  |  |  |
| Ease of finding the SANParks online booking facility | 1.8521 |  |  |  |  |
| Simplicity of process | 1.9377 | 1.9901 | 1.6034 | 1.8723 | 1.4201 |
| Availability of accommodation  | 2.2375 | 2.5875 | 2.2170 | 2.5106 | 2.1000 |
| Price of accommodation charged | 2.5665 | 2.6818 | 2.5214 | 2.5761 | 2.3176 |
| Ease of payment process | 1.9749 | 1.9412 | 1.7241 | 1.8043 | 1.5089 |
| Security of payment process | 1.9925 | 1.9767 | 1.7792 | 1.8280 | 1.5789 |
| Time taken to make the reservation | 2.0075 | 2.1201 | 1.6738 | 2.0761 | 1.4793 |
| Recognition of personal details | 2.0677 |  |  |  |  |
| Reputation (credibility of reservation channel) | 1.9359 | 2.0331 | 1.6638 | 1.9140 | 1.5118 |
| Time taken to answer call |  | 2.3691 | 1.6301 |  |  |
| Ease of booking (hassle free) |  | 2.0556 | 1.5865 | 1.8925 | 1.4118 |
| Knowledge of reservation staff |  | 2.1770 | 1.5837 | 1.9239 | 1.4643 |
| Personal contact provided by reservation staff |  | 2.2295 | 1.5923 | 1.9895 | 1.3787 |
| Overall professionalism |  | 2.0820 | 1.6085 | 2.0211 | 1.4142 |
| Waiting time in queue |  |  |  | 2.1778 | 1.4968 |
| **COMPOSITE MEAN (ALL ITEMS)** | **2.0101** | **2.1870** | **1.7653** | **2.0488** | **1.5902** |
| **COMPOSITE MEAN (CORRESPONDING ITEMS)** | **14.5535** | **15.2371** | **13.2377** | **14.4659** | **11.9222** |

For the remaining results, the composite mean for the corresponding items will be used. This mean across the seven items has a minimum possible value of seven and a maximum value of 35. Only 9 respondents indicated that they have made use of all the distribution channels before, which meant that satisfaction levels could not be compared across all the channels simultaneously. Paired sample t-tests were used to measure whether significant differences exist between the levels of satisfaction experienced with pairs of channels (in terms of their composite means). The results are given in table 5, and show that there are significant differences between the level of satisfaction with the website and the head office call centre (with respondents being more satisfied with the website than the call centre), the website and the satellite call centre (with respondents being more satisfied with the satellite call centre than the website), the website and the satellite walk-in reservation office (with respondents being more satisfied with the satellite walk-in reservation office than the website), the head office call centre and the satellite call centre (with respondents being more satisfied with the satellite call centre than the head office call centre), the head office call centre and satellite walk-in reservation office (with respondents being more satisfied with the satellite walk-in reservation office), and the head office walk-in reservation office and satellite walk-in reservation office (with respondents being more satisfied with the satellite reservation office).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Table 5.** Paired Samples t test Statistics |  |
|  | **Mean** | **N** | **Std. Deviation** | **Sig. (2-tailed)** |
| Pair 1 | Website | 14.3220 | 236 | 4.7819 | .000\*\* |
| Call Centre | 15.3051 | 236 | 4.9834 |  |
| Pair 2 | Website | 15.7716 | 162 | 4.6429 | .000\*\* |
| Satellite Call Centre | 13.3210 | 162 | 4.6847 |  |
| Pair 3 | Website | 14.7755 | 49 | 4.7093 | .878 |
| Head Office Reservation Office | 14.6531 | 49 | 5.5548 |  |
| Pair 4 | Website | 16.0000 | 101 | 4.4362 | .000\*\* |
| Satellite Reservation Office | 12.3564 | 101 | 4.3831 |  |
| Pair 5 | Call centre | 15.6968 | 155 | 4.8555 | .000\*\* |
| Satellite Call Centre | 13.5097 | 155 | 4.8314 |  |
| Pair 6 | Call centre | 14.9500 | 60 | 4.9486 | .838 |
| Head Office Reservation Office | 14.8500 | 60 | 5.3261 |  |
| Pair 7 | Call centre | 16.0723 | 83 | 5.0432 | .000\*\* |
| Satellite Reservation Office | 12.6988 | 83 | 4.4578 |  |
| Pair 8 | Satellite Call Centre | 15.1053 | 38 | 5.1925 | .158 |
| Head Office Reservation Office | 16.2895 | 38 | 5.5406 |  |
| Pair 9 | Satellite Call Centre | 12.6303 | 119 | 4.6484 | .127 |
| Satellite Reservation Office | 12.2437 | 119 | 4.7478 |  |
| Pair 10 | Head Office Reservation Office | 15.1429 | 28 | 5.2473 | .029\* |
| Satellite Reservation Office | 13.0714 | 28 | 4.0728 |  |

\* The mean difference is significant at the 5% level, \*\* significant at the 1% level

**Differences and relationships between variables**

Next, a number of ANOVAs and Independent sample t-tests were conducted to see whether a respondent’s level of satisfaction with the channels differs between males and females, between their choice of preferred channel, between their level of skill in using the internet and between their frequency of use.

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 6.** Gender and level of satisfaction |
|  | **What is your gender?** | **N** | **Mean** | **Std. Deviation** | **Sig. (2-tailed)** |
| **Website** | Male | 197 | 14.5482 | 4.8785 | .807 |
| Female | 151 | 14.4172 | 5.0535 |  |
| **Call Centre** | Male | 152 | 15.9868 | 5.1802 | .009\*\* |
| Female | 124 | 14.4274 | 4.4942 |  |
| **Satellite Call Centre** | Male | 116 | 14.0603 | 5.0978 | .006\*\* |
| Female | 101 | 12.2673 | 4.2400 |  |
| **Head Office Reservation Office** | Male | 55 | 15.4000 | 5.2054 | .042\* |
| Female | 30 | 13.0333 | 4.7086 |  |
| **Satellite Reservation Office** | Male | 92 | 12.8152 | 4.7876 | .003\*\* |
| Female | 71 | 10.7746 | 3.6963 |  |
|  |

\* The mean difference is significant at the 5% level, \*\* significant at the 1% level

Firstly, an independent sample t-test was done to establish whether males and females differ with regard to their level of satisfaction with various channels. The results show that there are statistical significant differences in the level of satisfaction that males and females experience with the call centre, satellite call centre, head office reservation office and satellite reservation office. From the composite mean scores it appears that females experience higher levels of satisfaction with all the mentioned channels. Next, an ANOVA was conducted to ascertain whether differences exist between a respondent’s choice of preferred channel (when making any accommodation booking) with regard to their level of satisfaction with the various channels of SANParks. In the case where the ANOVA test could not be used due to group sample sizes being too small, the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test (one way analysis of variance by ranks) was used to determine if statistical significant differences existed. From table 7 it is evident that there is a statistically significant difference between the choice of preferred channel and the website, satellite call centre and satellite reservation office. By closer inspection, one can see that respondents were generally more satisfied with the channel that they perceive to be their preferred channel. For example, when a respondent indicated that an establishment’s website was their preferred channel when making any accommodation booking, they rated their level of satisfaction with the SANParks website higher than an establishment’s call centre or reservation office respectively.

**Table 7**: The difference with regard to the level of satisfaction with a specific

channel and between the choice of preferred channel

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Satisfaction with Preferred channel | n | Mean | Std. Deviation | Sig |
| Website | Website | 164 | 13.2561 | 4.34074 | .000\*\*(ANOVA) |
| Email | 36 | 14.6111 | 5.68847 |
| Call centre | 63 | 15.9365 | 5.39974 |
| Reservation office | 67 | 15.8806 | 4.51772 |
| Call Centre | Website | 95 | 15.4842 | 4.52620 |  0.666(ANOVA) |
| Email | 29 | 15.5517 | 4.93230 |
| Call centre | 63 | 14.9206 | 5.35303 |
| Reservation office | 69 | 14.6377 | 4.64939 |
| Satellite Call Centre | Website | 46 | 14.5217 | 4.76440 | .000\*\*(Kruskal-Wallis) |
| Email | 13 | 15.8462 | 4.96397 |
| Call centre | 45 | 14.0222 | 4.13680 |
| Reservation office | 89 | 11.5955 | 4.75471 |
| Head Office Reservation Office | Website | 19 | 15.1053 | 4.17525 | .514(Kruskal-Wallis) |
| Email | 9 | 16.4444 | 4.97773 |
| Call centre | 21 | 13.3810 | 4.99476 |
| Reservation office | 28 | 14.2500 | 5.71952 |
| Satellite Reservation Office | WebsiteEmailCall CentreReservation office | 25 | 12.3600 | 3.95685 | .000\*\*(Kruskal-Wallis) |
| 7 | 13.8571 | 4.48808 |
| 32 | 13.6875 | 4.44636 |
| 76 | 10.6053 | 4.26795 |

\* The mean difference is significant at the 5% level, \*\* significant at the 1% level

An independent sample t-test was carried out to determine whether a difference exists between a respondent’s level of skill in using the internet and their level of satisfaction with the various channels of SANParks. As expected, the only channel that showed a statistical significant difference, was that respondents who regarded themselves as having a high level of skill when using the internet (M=14.2853), rated their level of satisfaction with the SANParks website significantly higher (P < .001) than those who regarded themselves as having a low level of skill (M=17.7826).

 A series of ANOVAs was also conducted to see whether differences exists between the frequency with which a channel is being used to make a SANParks booking and the respondent’s level of satisfaction with that specific channel. Table 2 shows the frequency with which specific channels are used to make SANParks bookings. Table 8 indicates the results of the ANOVAs. The results consistently show that the respondents that use a specific channel more frequently are also those that tend to be the most satisfied with that specific channel.

**Table 8.** Frequency of use and level of satisfaction

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
| **Satisfaction with** | **Frequency of use** | **N** | **Mean\*\*\*** | **Std. Deviation** | **Sig** |
| **Website** | AlwaysMost of the timeSometimesRarelyNeverTotal | 16145695540370 | 12.6957a12.8889b15.7681ab17.3091ab18.1500ab14.5676 | 4.45964.32344.53793.53755.33764.9136 | .000\*\* |
| **Call centre** | AlwaysMost of the timeSometimesRarelyTotal | 82 | 13.6463a14.4118b14.7612c17.3295abc15.1667 | 4.9024 | .000\*\* |
| 516788288 | 4.59645.20224.28234.9478 |
| **Satellite call centre** | AlwaysMost of the timeSometimesRarelyTotal | 69635532219 | 11.0725a12.5397b15.1455ab16.4375ab13.3014 | 4.30574.05934.71184.47894.7815 | .000\*\* |
| **Head office reservation office** | AlwaysMost of the timeSometimesRarelyTotal | 1112352886 | 11.090915.250013.400016.857114.4884 | 4.36934.35114.81545.26855.1672 | .009\*\*(Kruskal Wallis) |
| **Satellite reservation office** | AlwaysMost of the timeSometimesRarelyTotal | 51494023165 | 10.1176a11.693913.1000a14.1739a11.8909 | 4.14083.86874.06864.86784.3645 | .001\*\* |

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

\*\* The mean difference is significant at the 1% level

\*\*\* Superscripts with different letters indicate a significant difference between means at the 0.05 level.

Lastly, Pearson chi-squared tests of independence were used to test the relationship between the frequency with which various channels are used to make SANParks bookings, and a respondent’s choice of preferred channel when making any accommodation booking. The Pearson chi-squared test is a non-parametric test that is applicable in situations where the researcher wants to examine the relationship or association between two nominal variables. In the case where the Pearson chi-square values could not be used as more than 20% of the cells had expected counts less than 5, the value of Cramer V (a measure of the strength of association between nominal variables) and its associated significance was used to determine if there existed statistical significant relationships. It is interesting to note that when respondents indicated that they used the SANParks satellite call centre “always/most of the time” to make a booking with SANParks, they were more likely to choose an establishment’s call centre or reservation office as their most preferred option when making any accommodation booking (P < .000). This was also true for the SANParks call centre (P < .000) and the satellite reservation office (P < .000). On the other hand, when respondents specified that they used the SANParks website “always/most of the time” to book with SANParks, they were more likely to prefer an establishment’s website when they make any accommodation booking (P < .000). This shows that human contact is still very important to some respondents when they make accommodation bookings, and that they will choose a channel based on the level of human contact that the channel provides.

**DISCUSSION**

Even though tourism literature has acknowledged the significance of distribution, research in this area has mostly been approached from a supply side with very little attention given to the customer’s requirements. Connolly and Olsen (2001) say that the performance of hotels and their competitiveness is meaningfully reliant on their capability to meet the requirements of customers in an efficient and effective manner. The purpose of this study was thus to assess the frequency with which customers use the distribution channels of SANParks; measure the extent to which the distribution requirements of customers are being satisfied and to identify whether there is a relationship between certain variables (such as gender) and the level of satisfaction that customers experience with the various channels.

The results showed that the SANParks website was the channel most frequently used. More interestingly, was that looking still does not necessarily result in booking, with almost twice as many respondents agreeing that they used the website to check availability, than those agreeing that they have made a booking on the website before. Reasons for not booking online ranged from: preferring to use other booking channels; to pensioners not receiving discount when booking on the SANParks website. Furthermore, it was revealed that even though the website was used most frequently, it was not necessarily the channel with which respondents were most satisfied, which raises the question of whether a supplier should develop their distribution strategy according to most used channels, or channels with which customers are most satisfied. It was interesting to note that respondents were consistently more satisfied when making use of intermediaries to facilitate their bookings. This is in line with what Pearce and Tan (2006) say, they are of the opinion that indirect channels often offer a better service simply because of their specialisation and scale of operation. Since they are specialised, Pearce and Tan (2006) feel that intermediaries may be more advantageous to use, in addition to the fact that they might appeal more to the requirements of the customers. Satisfying the needs and wants of suppliers and customers should be the main motivation of intermediaries (Pearce & Tan, 2006).

When asked about the security of the payment process, the website was rated the lowest of all the channels. Respondents who do not use the website for bookings mentioned the following as reasons: “I don’t like paying over the internet” and “I don’t like providing my personal details over the internet”. Buhalis and Law (2008) suggest that business organisations should put a greater emphasis on guarding themselves and their customers against damages related to online crimes. They mentioned that if customers have privacy concerns, it might lead to a situation where they use the internet to look for information, but still buy offline. Kolsaker, Lee-Kelley and Choy (2004) said that privacy concerns have a significant influence and inhibits the buying of online travel products. This might also be the case with SANParks, where respondents indicated that they look for information online, but rather prefer other channels to book. Chen (2006) and Bauernfiend & Zins (2006) encourage website owners to take note to ensure customers feel comfortable and safe to conduct online bookings.

The results further showed significant differences and relationships between variables. Males and females differ in their levels of satisfaction, with females consistently showing higher levels of satisfaction across all channels than males. The results also showed a significant relationship between a customer’s preferred channel when making any accommodation booking, and their level of satisfaction with SANParks’ channels. Not surprisingly, the results indicated significant relationships between a respondent’s level of skill in using the internet and their level of satisfaction with the SANPArks channels as well as between the frequency with which a channel is being used to make a SANParks booking and the respondent’s level of satisfaction with that specific channel.

Like all studies, this paper is not without limitations. Perhaps the biggest limitation relates to the use of a non-probability sampling method. This means that the results of this study only apply to the selected respondents, and cannot be generalised to the broader population. The findings do nonetheless show some significant trends that could indeed probably be an indication of the requirements and satisfaction levels of the global population of visitors who use various distribution channels for accommodation bookings. Despite these limitations, this paper makes a significant contribution to the limited research available on the importance of the distribution function of tourism suppliers from the customer’s viewpoint. What is more, it adds to the – almost non-existent - literature available on the topic of tourism distribution channels within South Africa, National Parks and more specifically SANParks. It also provides knowledge on the South African customer and their distribution requirements. It shows that even though tourism suppliers believe that electronic channels are the future, some customers, in this case the customers of SANParks still value the personal touch as provided by traditional channels, and are more satisfied with certain traditional channels than with the electronic channels. Even though no significant relationship was shown between the age of the respondent and their distribution channel preference, it is necessary for suppliers such as National Parks to consider the demographic profile of their customer when deciding on the distribution channels to use. Furthermore, suppliers, such as National Parks, should pay attention to the distribution requirements of their customers, and make sure that the channels they promote satisfy these requirements. They should ensure that their electronic distribution channels are developed in such a manner that they still provide some form of personal contact and personalisation to customers.

**CONCLUSION**

While the majority of research studies in the context of tourism distribution channels have shown the importance and popularity of electronic distribution channels amongst customers, this paper cautions suppliers, such as National Parks, not to assume that they know the distribution channel requirements of their customers and urges them to rethink their distribution strategies and become more customer-focused in their approach to distribution. According to Elliot and Joppe (2009), even though ICTs (including supplier websites) have become a crucial tool for the current tourism industry, they have not substituted the human element of the industry. Future research could focus on other tourism suppliers within the context of South Africa, to see whether the distribution requirements of SANParks customers differ when compared to South African customers in general.

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