THE ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR
IN RELATION TO A GLOBAL BRAND
IN THE LODGING INDUSTRY, ACROSS EUROPE
AND NORTH AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

The world is changing at a fast pace and more concepts related to globalization emerge. Like, for instance, global marketing which implies an increase pressure to understand consumer behavior and its underlying changes, at a much broader level. Research, nowadays, has to uncover and comprehend certain issues like how customers in some countries are the same and different in others; how they respond positively to a particular brand, but not to umbrella branding; how they perceive quality and how they spend their available resources (of time, money, effort), giving the current economic situation.

As this paper covers a case study based on a multinational corporation in the lodging industry, we will further explore certain consumer behavior dimensions in relation to the perceived image and the buying pattern of the global brand examined.

KEYWORDS: *consumer behavior, market segmentation, primary research, global brand, differentiation*

Introduction

The field of consumer behavior covers a lot of ground: it is the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy needs and desires (1. Solomon, 2007, p. 7).

Consumers have a number of enduring perceptions, or images, that are particularly relevant to the study of consumer behavior. Products and brands have symbolic value for individuals, who evaluate them on the basis of their consistency (congruence) with their personal pictures of themselves (2. Schiffman, Lazar Kanuk, 2009, p. 170).

1. Achieving market segmentation and differentiation within global brands

It is said that companies do not choose to go global, rather that the market forces them to do so. One of the main reasons for growth in global brands is consumer and business demand. Certain consumer segments buy global brands as

badges of membership to a „global mall", and to reflect a cosmopolitan consumer culture or a global consumer culture (3. Klein, 2010).

In many respects, the word brand can be used to encapsulate the achievement of marketing management. Well-regarded brands, acquire strong customer acceptance and value – indeed, the word brand can be viewed as a mnemonic which summarizes marketing activity, encouraging customers to Buy Regularly And Never Desert in favor of a competitor's brand (4. Kotler, 2009, p. 421). For market offerings to be successful in current buyers' markets they need to be developed and differentiated against competitive offerings, if a company wants to achieve a sustained competitive advantage.

Once established, a brand is a standard that needs to be continually updated in the light of consumer requirements. Hence, the importance of certain concepts like: market segmentation, differentiation and tailoring the offerings to fit the segment's needs and wants.

Compared with manufacturing firms, service marketers face several unique problems in positioning and promoting their offerings. Because services are intangibles, image becomes a key factor in differentiating a service from its competition. Thus, the marketing objective is to enable the consumer to link a specific image with a specific brand name. Service marketers have developed strategies to provide customers with visual images and tangible reminders of their service offerings. Many service companies market several versions of their service to different market segments by using a differentiated positioning strategy (Schiffman, Lazar Kanuk, 2008, p. 175).

For instance, Marriott PLC, which represents the subject of the research presented in the next section, has a diverse portfolio of 18 brands. Each brand of this major lodging company has its own segment precisely defined: Marriott's Hotels and Resorts brand claims to provide customers with „superior service" and „genuine care"; Renaissance Hotels and Resorts brand provides „distinctive decor, imaginative experiences and delights its customers' senses"; the Courtyard brand provides „essential services and amenities to business travelers"; the Bvlgari Hotels and Resorts provides „contemporary luxury in hospitality"; and The Ritz Carlton promotes its guest experience with the motto „we are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen".

2. Researching certain consumer behavior dimensions in relation to the tourism-related services offered by Marriott PLC, across Europe and North America

The preliminary phase of the research begins with the development of the problem definition, and this refers to a detailed understanding of the changes occurred in the purchasing and consumption behavior of tourism products and services, due to certain alterations in the social and economic environment, at a global level. Furthermore, for the consumer behavior analysis for Marriott's offered services, we established the main purpose, the objectives and hypotheses:
- The main purpose: Determining the consumer behavior dimensions in relation to tourism products and services, at a European and North American level.

- Objective1: Determining Marriott PLC's image, both among those who have purchased its services, and among those who have not done so.
- Hypothesis1: The image formed among existing and potential clients is positive, in the highest proportion.
- Objective2: Determining Marriott's clients' attitude, in terms of service quality.
- Hypothesis2: The quality of Marriott's services is above average for more than 70% of the responses.
- Objective3: Studying the respondents' purchase and repurchase intention, for those who have stayed at one of Marriott's hotels, and those who have not done so.
- Hypothesis3: A small percentage (25%) of respondents expressed their intention of buying a Marriott travel package, while Marriott customers (in a proportion of 60%) expressed their desire to repurchase.

In the design phase of the research, the sources of information, the research unit and the survey unit were chosen (tab. 1), and afterwards, the variables were defined (tab. 2).

Table 1 The typology of the information sources, used in this research

No.	Criterion	Types of sources	Explanations
1.	Original source of information in relation to the organization requesting it	External sources	In this research, we seek to understand certain distinct characteristics of the survey's respondents, regarding tourist behavior, in relation to the products and services offered by Marriot PLC.
2.	Type of information provided by the source	Sources of primary information	This type of information relates to those specially acquired in order to achieve the main purpose of the research; and this data is obtained from individuals, via the internet. We targeted customers of the Marriot hotel chain, but also future prospects. This research aimed information from geographically dispersed potential tourist customers, from North America and Europe.
3.	The identity of the source	The individual	The individual is the basis of research in order to obtain data about his/her purchasing and consumption behavior of tourism-related products or services, and to track consumer behavior dimensions underlying the purchase decision.
4.	The cost of the information provided	Sources that offer information, on a commercial basis	In this case, the online research was accomplished through FreeOnlineSurveys(.com), in exchange for a sum of money, and through networking sites, like Facebook and MySpace.

Table 2 The conceptual and operational defining of the variables

The value's denomination	Conceptual defining	Operational defining
Q1. Image	The way in which Marriott's services are perceived by potential customers or clients of the chain.	☐ Marriott 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ☐ JW Marriott 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ☐ Renaissance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ☐ Courtyard 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ☐ The Ritz-Carlton 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ☐ Bvlgari 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
Q2. Custom of purchase	The constancy with which the respondent purchases Marriott's services.	☐ Yes ☐ No
Q3. Purchase intention	A planned action to acquire Marriott's services, in the future, of those who have not purchased.	☐ Yes ☐ No
Q4. Attitude	A learned predisposition linked to the quality of Marriott's offered services.	☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor
Q5. Repurchase intention	A planned action to reacquire Marriott's services.	☐ Yes ☐ No
Q6. Reason for not purchasing	The drive that justifies the rejection of Marriott's services.	☐ Their prices are far too high. ☐ I developed a tendency toward saving, giving the current economic situation.
Q7. Sex	Sex of the respondent	☐ Male ☐ Female
Q8. Country	The country in which the respondent lives	(Opened question)
Q9. Age	The respondent's age	☐ 20 or younger ☐ 21 to 34 years old ☐ 35 to 50 years old ☐ 51 to 65 years old ☐ 66 or older
Q10. Income	Annual household income before taxes	☐ Less than 20 000 $ ☐ 20 000$ - 40 000$ ☐ 40 000$ - 60 000$ ☐ 60 000$ - 80 000$ ☐ 80 000$ - 100 000$ ☐ More than 100 000$

The data was collected using a primary research, which involved getting original data by conducting a field research. In this case, the information was collected directly from respondents via the internet, from February 22 to April 18, 2010, and the data analysis was of quantitative nature. Also, this paper is based on an exploratory research whose primary objective is to provide insights into and an understanding of marketing phenomena, namely the identification of the respondent's consumer behavior dimensions in relation to tourism. The present research uses as a method the pilot survey, for which the sample is small (150 respondents), not statistically representative and not determined based on an established formula (5. Cătoiu I., 2009, p. 216).

In the data analysis phase of the research, the data was collected via the Internet (FreeOnlineSurveys, Facebook, MySpace), and for the information's preparation and processing we used the statistical analysis program SPSS (v.16.0)

For the analysis of consumer behavior related to Marriott's offered services, we examined the responses differentiated, by dividing the database based on the respondents who purchased Marriott packages, and those who did not meet this criterion.

In a first phase, we used Question 2 ("Have you ever stayed in one of the accommodation facilities stated above?"), which shows the respondents who have stayed in one of Marriott hotels, and those who have not. And then, depending on their response, we conducted a separation of the database, in order to analyze the other questions. For those who have stayed at one of Marriott's hotels, we achieved another division in order to study their intention to repurchase (Question 5 – "Would you purchase their services again?"). Regarding the fact that these questions (2 and 5) are dichotomous, they will be investigated in accordance with the attitude of respondents in relation with the quality of Marriott's services, reflected in the question 4 ("If you did, how would rate their services, in terms of quality?"). The data obtained is listed in Tabel 3.

As shown in the table above (tab. 3), 49 respondents met the two criteria and their attitude, in relation to Marriott's offered services, is favorable in proportion of 98%. This can be observed in the first half of the table above (tab. 3), by reporting the standard deviation and variation values to the mean of the sample. Thus, due to a low standard deviation value, one can say that the mean reflects well the recorded data.

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics and the related frequencies used in order to detect
the quality of Marriott's services, among the respondents who have bought
and expressed their intention to repurchase**

N	Valid	49	
	Missing	0	
Mean		1,47	
Standard Deviation		,544	
Variation		,296	
Skewness		,530	
Kurtosis		-,915	
	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Excellent	27	55,1	55,1
Good	21	42,9	98,0
Fair	1	2,0	100,0
Total	49	100,0	

Afterwards, we examined the respondents' attitude, related to the quality of the services offered by Marriott, for those who stayed in one of the chain's hotels, but do not intend to repurchase. As can be seen in the table below (tab.4) those who met these requirements are in number of 22 and only 4 (18.1%) of them considered the services of fair or poor quality. Therefore, because 81.9% (18 observations) did not choose the low quality of the services as the reason for which they do not intend to lodge in any of the Marriott hotels; it can be stated that there are other reasons for not purchasing.

**Table 4: Descriptive statistics and the related frequencies used in order to detect
the quality of Marriott's services, among the respondents who have bought,
but do not wish to repurchase**

N	Valid	22	
	Missing	0	
Mean		1,82	
Standard Deviation		,853	
Variation		,727	
Skewness		,884	
Kurtosis		,421	
	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Excellent	9	40,9	40,9
Good	9	40,9	81,8
Fair	3	13,6	95,5
Poor	1	4,5	100,0
Total	22	100,0	

In the next phase, we studied the responses of those who did not stay in any of the Marriott's chain hotels (Question 2 – "Have you ever stayed in one of

the accommodation facilities stated above?"), and then we related the "no" responses to their purchasing intention (Question 3 – "Do you intend to, in the near future?"). Thus, among those who have never stayed in the Marriott chain, 10.66% (16 respondents from the total sample of 150 respondents) expressed their intention to purchase a travel package in one of Marriott's hotels.

Afterwards, we divided the responses of those who have not purchased, nor do they intend to, in order to explore the reasons for not purchasing, reflected by question 6 ("If you did not buy their services and do not intend to, which of the following would best describe your reason?"). Thus, we obtained the following data (tab. 5):

Table 5: Descriptive statistics and the related frequencies used in order to detect the reasons for not purchasing among those who have never stayed in Marriott's hotels nor do they intend to

	Valid	63			
N	Missing	0			
Mean		1,63			
Standard Deviation		,485			
Variation		,236			
Skewness		-,574			
Kurtosis		-1,726			
			Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Their prices are far too high.		23	36,5	36,5
	I developed a tendency toward saving, giving the current economic situation.		40	63,5	100,0
	Total		63	100,0	

The conditions stated above were met by 63 of the people surveyed. A percentage of 63.5% (40 observations) chose as a reason for not purchasing the tendency toward saving, giving the current economic situation; while 36.5% (23 respondents) believe that Marriott's services are too expensive. The dispersion indicators have low values, compared with the recorded mean, which demonstrates the data's accuracy.

After the analysis of the ordinal and nominal variables, used for a better understanding of consumer behavior for tourism-related services, particularly for Marriott, we studied the respondents' image regarding the international hotel chain examined. This dimension of consumer behavior is explored with a nine-point semantic differential question ("How would you rate the following hotels and inns (based on your image you have regarding them)?"). Then, we divided the database based on the dichotomous question 2 ("Have you ever stayed in one of the accommodation facilities stated above?") and question 10 (the respondent's annual gross income). Furthermore, we used the TwoStep Cluster method in order to achieve clusters of positive or negative image, regarding all of the 6 hotels from Marriott's portfolio, at a European and North American level.
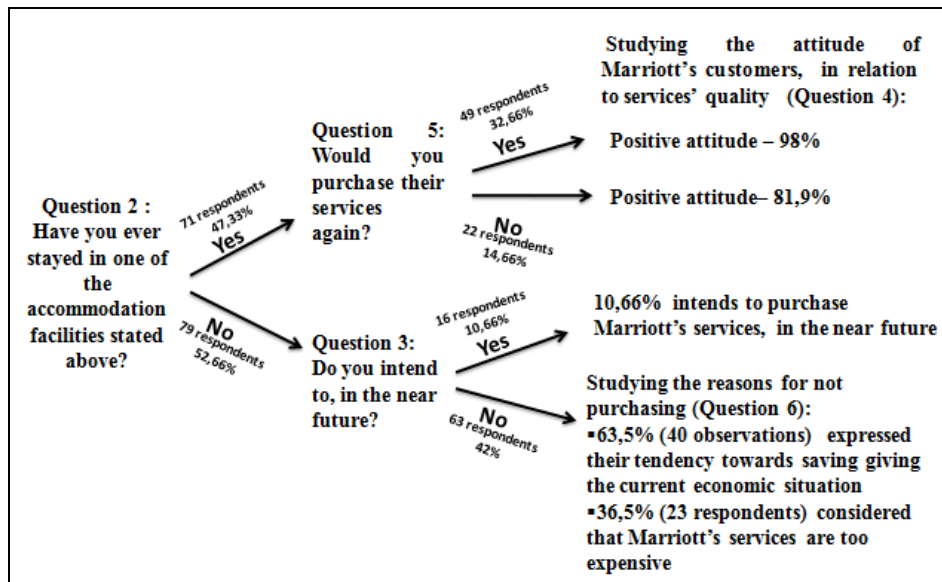
Figure 1: The criteria according to which some consumer behavior dimensions have been studied in relation to Marriott's offered services

Table 6: Studying the image for the formed clusters of the respondents who have purchased Marriott's services, according to their gross income

No. of clusters	No. of observation in each cluster	Level of annual gross income - $ thousand	*Marriott*	*JW Marriott*	*Renaissance*	*Court-yard*	*The Ritz – Carlton*	*Bvlgari*	Mean for each cluster
1	6	<20	6.5	6.67	7.00	6.67	6.83	7.17	6.80
1	6	20- 40	6.83	7.17	6.50	7.17	8.00	7.67	7.22
1	9	40 – 60	5.56	5.11	6.44	7.00	7.78	7.44	6.55
1	18	60 – 80	6.28	6.61	6.44	6.00	8.28	8.11	6.95
1	8	80 – 100	7.00	6.75	6.38	6.25	8.38	8.38	7.19
1	24	>100	6.75	6.83	7.25	7.08	8.50	7.75	7.36
Mean for each hotel			6.48	6.52	6.67	6.69	7.96	7.75	-

The table above (Tab. 6) shows a number of 71 respondents (i.e. 47.3%, from a total of 150), who bought Marriott packages, and their distribution was accomplished according to the annual gross income.

Overall, the image of the Marriott chain is a positive one, giving the fact that there is no recorded score below 4.5 (the question was measured using a semantic differential with nine points). Thus, the least favorable image, though above average, was reported for JW Marriott, within the annual gross income range

of $40,000 to $60,000. In the same income level, it is noted the least favorable overall image for all of the chain's hotels examined in this research, of the respondents who did stay at Marriott PLC. Also, the hotel with an image that tends to be unfavorable is Marriott Hotels and Resorts, which registered an average of 6.49, followed by the JW Marriott with 6.52.

The highest scores, in all the clusters formed, were recorded by the two luxury hotels in Marriott's portfolio (Bvlgari and The Ritz-Carlton). Also, in the segment of respondents with incomes of over $ 100,000 per year, the most favorable image was reported, with an average of 7.36, giving 9 possible points.

Table 7: Studying the image for the formed clusters of the respondents who have not purchased Marriott's services, according to their gross income

No. of clusters	No. of observation in each cluster	Level of annual gross income - $thousand	Marriott	JW Marriott	Renaissance	Courtyard	The Ritz – Carlton	Bvlgari	Mean for each cluster
2	31	<20	7.03	6.45	6.23	6.55	7.94	7.87	7.02
	2	<20	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1
1	18	20- 40	6.17	5.89	6.22	6.22	7.89	7.61	6.67
1	12	40 - 60	6.17	5.92	6.17	6.58	7.25	8.08	6.69
1	8	60 - 80	6.00	6.25	5.25	6.13	8.50	8.75	6.81
1	3	80 - 100	5.00	4.33	5.33	4.33	6.00	4.33	4.88
1	5	>100	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.20	5.80	6
Mean for each hotel			5.33	5.12	5.17	5.25	6.39	6.20	-

Tab 7. presents the image of the respondents (79 in number of respondents, i.e. 52.7%) who have not stayed in the lodging chain explored, according to their annual gross income.

Under this distribution, two clusters resulted for the income level lower than $ 20,000 per year. The first cluster has the most respondents, and overall, presents the most favorable image among those who have not purchased Marriott's services. The second cluster contains only two responses, with an unfavorable image. By interpreting the data, we observed that this cluster includes two entries, for which the respondents accounted a mark of 1 for all of the hotels. Therefore, this cluster is not relevant. Consequently, by excluding it, it emerges that the next cluster with the least favorable image of the company, is equivalent to the cluster formed within the income range of $ 80,000 and $ 100,000.

The hotel that has recorded the lowest averages, in all of the formed clusters, is JW Marriott (with an overall average of 5.12), which has also registered the lowest scores from the perspective of those who have purchased Marriott's services. Regarding a positive image formed for the listed hotels, like before, the luxury segment of Marriott has achieved the highest scores.

With reference to the hypotheses developed for the consumer behavior analysis for Marriott's offered services, the first two have been confirmed, and thus the two related objective have been achieved. Concerning the third hypothesis, this one was not confirmed because the numbers initially stated proved to be too large in relation to what was actually recorded. Thus, initially we specified a percentage of 25% for respondents intending to purchase and 60% for those with an intention to repurchase, while the data analysis showed a rate of 10.66% and 32.66% for the two dimensions, respectively.

Conclusions

Peter Drucker stated that "the sole purpose of a business is to create a customer". This statement seems much harder to accomplish by companies operating in a global environment, giving the current economic situation. The rise of global marketing means that even smaller companies are looking to expand overseas, thus multinational companies have to do a better job in pairing their brand with what customers want. The essence of successful marketing is the image that a product has in the mind of the consumer - that is, positing.

In this respect, we tried to detect the image of Marriott's common brands in Europe and North America, but also to achieve an understanding of certain consumer behavior dimensions (like attitude regarding the services' quality, the intention of buying or repurchasing) and how the current economic situation has changed the purchase of travel packages offered by Marriot's brands.

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