

# Exploring the Customer Experiences in Bosphorus Zoo

Taşkın Dirsehan

**Abstract**—The main purpose of this study is to explore current and possible customer experiences in Bosphorus Zoo. Since there is no previous research conducted on Turkish zoos' customer experiences, we conduct an exploratory research taking the form of depth interviews. Then, we group the experiences according to strategic experiential modules (sense, feel, think, act and relate).

**Keywords**—Customer Experience, Experiential Marketing, Services Marketing

## I. INTRODUCTION

ZOOS connect the wild life with the citizens who lose their natural sides in cities. Nowadays, there are more children growing up without having any contact with nature. Zoos play roles in three essential areas: education, conservation and research [1]. For the survival of a zoo, particularly for a private zoo which is not supported financially by the government, the customer demand is the most important source of revenue. This study aims to explore the customer experiences in Bosphorus Zoo, unique Turkish private zoo, which are the basis for the recent marketing concept, experiential marketing. We aim to discover the existing experiences and also we aim to discover the possible experiences as suggestions for marketing managers of the zoo, which can be implemented in the zoo in order to improve customer experiences in the zoo.

Nowadays consumers don't care only with the functional features and benefits of the products but also they give importance to the emotion it provides for them. Consumers are frequently emotionally as well as rationally driven [2]. In parallel with this statement, customer loyalty can be improved thanks to an emotional tie between a firm's brand and its' customers, which is promoted by a positive customer experience [3]. Experiences have positive effect on the emotion which has a positive effect on satisfaction. Furthermore, positive satisfaction leads a favorable behavioral intention, to return and to recommend. Therefore, experiential marketing plays an important role for visitors' satisfaction and their behavioral intention [4]. With reference to this finding, our research aiming to explore and to improve customer experiences is important to increase customer satisfaction and to develop favorable behavioral intentions towards the zoo.

Anything that can be perceived or sensed or noticed by its absence represents an experience clue carrying a message. The

composition of all the clues forms the customer's total experience [5]. There is no previous research conducted on customer experiences in Turkish zoos. Our study aims to explore them in Bosphorus Zoo. We conduct an exploratory research among new graduated people from Business Administration and people continuing their master degree in marketing. The results can be considered as a guide for Bosphorus Zoo's and as a resource for other zoos' marketing plan, additionally this study is a base for further researches on Turkish zoo customers' experiences.

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Services performance's perception is based on quality of offerings and visitors' experience which will provide to returning visitors and increase of word of mouth communication [6]. The zoo is also a service and there are many researches in the literature for several tools to increase visitors' experience such as territory planning [7], interpretive labels [8], exhibits' design [9], animal welfare [10], environmental enrichment [11] and other zoo facilities [12].

Zoos represent a big laboratory to explore in behavioral principles [9]. In our study, we focus on the customer experiences in Bosphorus Zoo. To do this, firstly we look at the experiential perspective of marketing and its' characteristics, then we discuss its importance including its relationship with behavioral intentions and uniqueness for every customer. We continue with different types of customer experiences and we conduct an exploratory research to identify existing and possible customer experiences in Bosphorus Zoo.

"Commodities are fungible, goods tangible, services intangible, and experiences memorable." [13]. The experiential perspective reveals a product's symbolic meanings of more subjective characteristics rather than its' utilitarian functions based on objective features [14]. While traditional marketing defines the consumers as rational decision makers concerning the functional features and benefits, the experiential marketing reveals the consumers' wants to relate to products as consequence of their feelings [2].

The Fig. 1 summarizes four key characteristics of experiential marketing; first of all, experiential marketing focuses on customer experiences; secondly, according to experiential marketing, consumption is a holistic experience; thirdly, customers are rational and emotional animals on the part of experiential marketing; and finally, the methods of experiential marketing are eclectic. As the first characteristic,

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experiential marketing focuses on customer experiences.

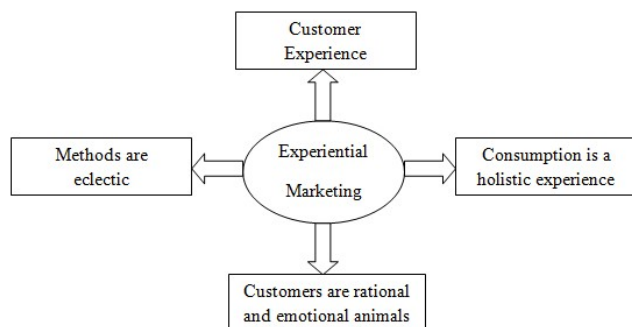


Fig. 1 Characteristics of Experiential Marketing

Source: Bernd Schmitt, "Experiential Marketing", Journal of Marketing Management, 15, 1999, p. 58.

Experiences take place as a result of encountering, undergoing or living through things and they provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and relational values [2]. "Experience involves acting and being acted upon, sensing and feeling both, and transforming them into something emotionally and intellectually meaningful" [15]. Anything that can be perceived or sensed, or noticed by its absence represents an experience clue carrying a message. The composition of all the clues forms the customer's total experience [5].

Second characteristic of experiential marketing which is a focus on consumption as a holistic experience, stands for a movement from thinking about an isolated product along the socio-cultural consumption vector into the customer's broader space of meaning. Third characteristic of experiential marketing emphasizes on two aspects of customers; customers are emotionally as well as rationally driven and they can be thought as animals, because their physical and mental tools creating sensations, thoughts and feelings evolved by natural selection to solve the problems of their ancestors. Fourthly, the methods of experiential marketing are mentioned as eclectic because some methods and tools of experiential marketing may be analytical and qualitative or they may be intuitive and qualitative and also they may be verbal or they may be visual [2].

Customer experience is important to develop the satisfaction which leads to recommendation and revisit. Harrison and Shaw tested the relationship of service elements (which are facilities, staff services and experience) with satisfaction and intentions (to return and to recommend) as shown in the Fig. 2.

The results of this model on museum visitors reveal that a satisfied visitor will have the intention to behave in two positive ways. Extremely satisfied visitors may return and revisit the museum and they intend to recommend it. Additionally, another important result tells us that, the experience is the most important variable to develop the

satisfaction [16]. Thus, in order to create consumer satisfaction, the marketers have to focus on improvement of the experience.

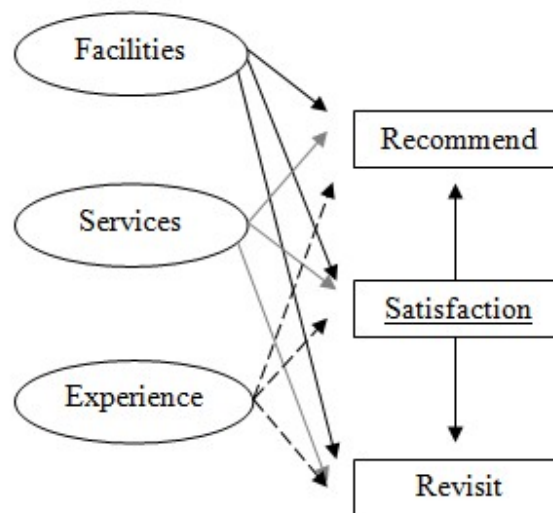


Fig. 2 Model of the Relationship among Service Elements, Satisfaction and Future Behavior Intentions

Source: Paul Harrison and Robin Shaw, "Consumer Satisfaction and Post-purchase Intentions: An Exploratory Study of Museum Visitors", International Journal of Arts Management, 6, 2, 2004, p. 26.

The interactive experience model of Falk and Dierking (2002) created on museum experience shows us that all experience includes three contexts:

- 1) The personal context which includes motivations, expectations, interests, beliefs, prior knowledge and experiences.
- 2) The social context which includes social interactions within groups, between visitors and staff.
- 3) The physical context which includes institutional rules, architecture, layout, activities and facilities.

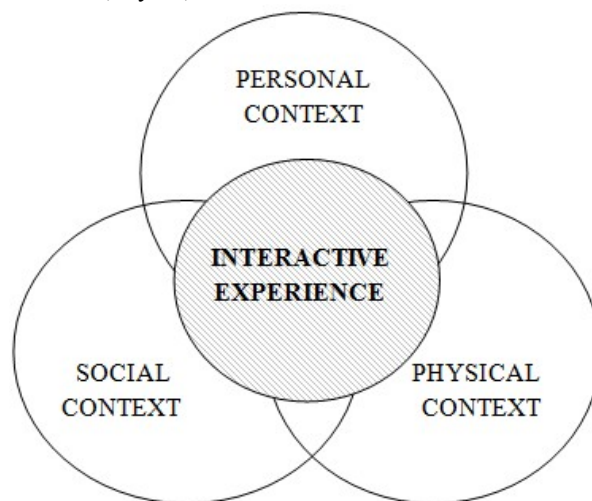


Fig. 3 Model of the Relationship among Service Elements,

#### Satisfaction and Future Behavior Intentions

Source: Paul Harrison and Robin Shaw, "Consumer Satisfaction and Post-purchase Intentions: An Exploratory Study of Museum Visitors", International Journal of Arts Management, 6, 2, 2004, p. 26.

The interactive experience model involves the interplay of these three contexts as shown in Fig. 3. This model explains that each of these contexts is constructed by the visitor and the interaction of them creates the visitor's experience. This constructed reality is unique to the individual; therefore two different people never see the world in the same way. For instance, three people in a dark room each focusing on the same object with their own lights will illuminate differently the object, because of the difference of their beams (personal context), the difference of their angle of light (physical context), and the benefits of shared light (social context). In a similar way, three people standing in front of an exhibit, each will have a different experience [17]. At any time, one of these contexts could have more importance in visitors' experience in different proportions in different cases. This leads us to see that the consumers have their own experience different from each other [18]. Therefore, experience management requires focusing on all the concepts in visitors' experience.

With a strategic framework for managing experience, Schmitt (1999) proposed the concept of strategic experiential modules (SEMs) which can be used by managers to create different types of customer experiences. These experiential modules include sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), creative cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyles (ACT), and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE). Marketers should try to create integrated experiences possessing at the same time, SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT and RELATE qualities. Schmitt (1999) describes each SEM as follows:

*"SENSE marketing appeals to the senses with the objective of creating sensory experiences, through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell.*

*FEEL marketing appeals to customers' inner feelings and emotions, with the objective of creating affective experiences that range from mildly positive moods linked to a brand to strong emotions of joy and pride.*

*THINK marketing appeals to the intellect with the objective of creating cognitive, problem-solving experiences that engage customers creatively.*

*ACT marketing enriches customers' lives by targeting their physical experiences showing them alternative ways of doing things, alternative lifestyles and interactions.*

*RELATE marketing contains aspects of SENSES, FEEL, THINK and ACT marketing. However, RELATE marketing expands beyond the individual's personal, private feelings, thus relating the individual to something outside his/her private state."*

These definitions of strategic experiential modules are used

in the same way in our study. We will analyze each experience in Bosphorus Zoo. There are six zoos in Turkey; they are located in Ankara, Antalya, Gaziantep, Bursa, Darica and Izmir. We will consider the first and unique private zoo in Turkey which is Bosphorus Zoo in Darica. There is no research previously conducted on Turkish zoo's customer experiences. Therefore, the results will be a base for further researches in this area.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this study is to explore the customer experiences in Bosphorus Zoo, the first and unique zoo in Turkey without having the government financial support, so the unique zoo in Turkey with obligation to finance itself completely.

Since there is no previous research conducted on Turkish zoo's customer experiences we conduct an exploratory research taking the form of depth interviews with ten people graduated from Business Administration in last two years and five people continuing their master degree in marketing in Istanbul. The sample selection procedure is non probabilistic, convenient people and people believed having the chance to provide more information is selected. So, convenience sampling and judgmental sampling are used to determine interviewees.

Open-ended questions were used in the interviews to gather as much as information possible. The interviews were semi-structured where the discussion was flexible and informal. Average time passed in interviews was approximately 35 minutes. These interviews are accomplished in January 2010 in Istanbul.

The first question in the interviews was a filter question whether the interviewee had ever visited the Bosphorus Zoo. Three people graduated from Business Administration in last two years and two people continuing their master degree in marketing had not visited the zoo before. The second question for zoo visitors was to determine the general customer experiences in Bosphorus Zoo without any help. The answers were noted down.

Then, the definitions of the strategic experiential modules (SEMs) are given to the interviewees (as written at the end of the literature part). However, no examples were given in order to not orient the respondents. Then, the question was repeated for every SEM and noted down the existing experiences for every SEM. The same question was repeated again to collect possible experiences as suggestions in the zoo and the answers were noted down apart. At this point, non visitors of the zoo are considered also for their suggestions. The interviewees were allowed to not answer in the case of not remembering any experience.

Then, to collect more information the respondents were given examples for every SEM for another sector than zoo. Absolut Vodka's freshness (for SENSE), Clinique's "Happy" campaign (for FEEL), Microsoft's campaign "Where do you want to go today?" (for THINK), Nike's "Just do it" (for ACT) and Harley Davidson identity (for RELATE) were the examples for SEMs identified by Schmitt (1999). After these remainders, the interviewees are asked again for the experiences for each SEM. (Non visitors of the zoo are replied only for their suggestions for SEMs.)

Afterwards, the examples of SEMs in Taipei Zoo [4] were given to participants: Fierce animals' roars (for SENSE), warm service for visitors (for FEEL), educational tours (for THINK), recreation areas (for ACT) and organizing ecological conservation groups (for RELATE). After these remainders, the interviewees are asked again for the experiences for each SEM. (Non visitors of the zoo are replied only for their suggestions for SEMs.)

Finally, the answers were reviewed and the responders were asked whether they had something to add to the responds. The interviews were terminated by thanking the participants.

#### IV. FINDINGS

All the responses gathered from interviewees are organized as in the table 1. General statements are divided into SEMs, same statements are not replicated and similar statements are unified. The first column represents strategic experiential modules (SEMs). The second column includes the existing experiences in Bosphorus Zoo. The third column consists of the possible experiences (suggestions to marketing managers of the zoo) cited by the respondents.

Existing experiences of SENSE Marketing and FEEL Marketing contain some undesirable experiences (written next to these statements) and possible experiences are always on positive side by nature.

Intensity of experiences may vary depending on the sector. Our study reveals ten existing experiences of SENSE marketing and six experiences of FEEL marketing which are the most intense experiences in Bosphorus Zoo. Most suggestions are made for SENSE marketing and THINK marketing (seven statements for each). A total of 25 different existing experiences and 21 different possible experiences in Bosphorus Zoo are identified in our study.

TABLE I  
 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES IN BOSPHORUS ZOO ACCORDING TO SEMS

SEMs	Existing Experiences	Possible Experiences (Suggestions)
SENSE Marketing	1. Appearance of Various Animals	1. Forest Ambiance
	2. Appearance of Greenness	2. More Clear Environment in Animal Exhibitions (without Feces, Garbage and Animal Foods)
	3. Birds' Sounds	3. Organizing Animal Shows
	4. Animal's Roars	4. Feeding Animals
	5. Appearance of Animal Feces (undesirable)	5. Touching More Animals
	6. Appearance of Animals' Foods (undesirable)	6. Appearance of More Various Animals
	7. Animal's Smell	7. Appearance of Animals without Cage Fences
	8. Feeding Apes	
	9. Children Noise (undesirable)	
	10. Mounting Pony	
FEEL Marketing	1. Numerous Animals providing Happiness, Pleasure and Surprise	1. Clean Environment providing Pleasure
	2. Good care of Animals providing Happiness	2. Creating Park Areas without Cages providing Happiness
	3. Variety of Animals providing Excitement	3. Service to Photograph as Souvenirs providing Happiness
	4. Nearness of the Zoo providing Happiness to Bring Kids in the Family	
	5. Cages causing Sadness (undesirable)	
	6. Numerous Animals of same Species (such as Birds) causing Boredom (undesirable)	
THINK Marketing	1. Interpretive Labels providing Rich Information about Various Species of Animals	1. Bringing More Animals from Varied Species (such as Elephants) and Giving Information about Them
	2. Educational School Trips to the Zoo	

TABLE I (CONTINUED)  
 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES IN BOSPHORUS ZOO ACCORDING TO SEMS

SEMs	Existing Experiences	Possible Experiences (Suggestions)
THINK Marketing		2. Showing Videos Explaining the Animals 3. Professional Guidance Service 4. Building an Educational Center in the Zoo to provide General Information about the Zoo before Visiting 5. Preparing Informational Brochures and Books about the Zoo 6. Preparing Documentary TV Programs about the Zoo 7. Giving Information on Web Site of the Zoo about the Animals
ACT Marketing	1. Numerous Variety of Animals Makes the Interpretive Labels more Interesting to Read 2. Reducing Cat Fear after Seeing Lions in the Zoo 3. Numerous Animals providing more Zoolatry 4. Recreation in Cafeterias and Children's Park	1. Constructing of a Specific Walking Path in the Zoo in order to Tour more Effectively the Zoo 2. Installing a Navigation System to Cell Phones of Visitors to provide Them Alternative Tour Ways according to Their Interests
RELATE Marketing	1. Spending Time with Friends and Family in the Zoo as an Alternative Entertainment Place 2. Feeling as a Part of Environmentalists 3. Different Animals from Different Countries Creating Interests to Visit These Countries	1. Organizing a Theatre of Fable with Children Participation (Using Animal Costumes) 2. Specific Areas for Family/Friends Weekend Picnics

## V. DISCUSSION

We gather from table 1 that Bosphorus Zoo contains a rich customer experience to the visitors. But still there is a wide lack of experiences to offer.

Sense is the most primary response for customers in an experiential environment. Bosphorus Zoo creates sensory experiences through sight (appearance of various animals, greenness, animals' feces and foods), sound (birds' sounds, animals' roars, and children noise), touch (feeding apes, mounting pony) and smell (smells of animals). There are three undesirable experiences in SENSE marketing which are appearance of animal feces, appearance of animal foods and children noise. On the other hand, our study suggests that the zoo should offer more sensory experiences through sight (forest ambiance, clear exhibitions, animal shows, feeding animals, appearance of more various animals, and appearance of animals without cage fences) and touch (touching more animals). These suggestions can be also considered as expectations of customers, so especially Turkish culture has a touching experience so the zoo should consider this and should find a way without hurting animals.

Existing affective experiences of Bosphorus Zoo are intended to the feelings of happiness, pleasure, surprise, excitement (numerous and various animals, good care of them, nearness of the zoo) and undesirable experiences are devoted to sadness (cages) and boredom (numerous animals of same species). The suggestions made for FEEL marketing are the experience to increase happiness and pleasure.

Interpretive labels reading and educational school trips are the main experiences of THINK marketing in Bosphorus Zoo. At the beginning of the study, we said that zoos play roles in three essential areas: education, conservation and research [1]. According to educational role of the zoo, we suggest more creative cognitive experiences for the zoo. This SEM is underlined by the interviewees who are all graduated. As we said before, most suggestions are made for SENSE marketing and THINK marketing (seven statements for each).

ACT marketing consists of changing reading behavior, fear behavior, sensibility towards nature and recreation areas which are physical experiences and behaviors in Bosphorus Zoo. Suggestions for this SEM are devoted to have more efficient tour in the zoo.

RELATE marketing in Bosphorus Zoo relate the visitors to their friends, family, environmentalists and different cultures where the animals originate from. Suggested experiences for this SEM are intended to increase the relationship among children, family and friends.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study identified different customer experiences in Bosphorus Zoo according to different strategic experiential modules. Marketing managers of Bosphorus Zoo should consider firstly the existing experiences to develop them and try to minimize the undesired experiences explained in findings. Then, they should consider the suggestions which

are possible experiences that can be offered by the zoo. We believe that the table 1 prepared conveniently to our purpose, should be an important guide for marketing managers of Bosphorus Zoo and other zoos, and also for the researchers of experiential marketing in zoos.

This study had several limits. First of all, due to its exploratory structure, our sample doesn't represent all the population (all the visitors of Bosphorus Zoo). However this research provided insights into and understanding of customer experiences in Bosphorus Zoo. Additionally, one on one interview technique provided us the respondents' thoughts in detail. Secondly, judgmental sampling does not allow direct generalizations to a specific population such as convenience sampling by nature and this method is subjective and its value depends on the researcher's judgment, expertise and creativity [19]. Another limit of the study was that we focused only on the service offered in the zoo. For instance, the experiential marketing is useful also in the campaigns or for other promotional activities that can be subjects to further researchers. Our research reveals only the experiences in Bosphorus Zoo. Different zoos may include different customer experiences, but other zoos may benefit from suggestions of our research.

Future researches complementary to this study may be exploratory to identify the experiences of promotional activities of the zoo or the experiences of other zoos and compare with the findings of this study. Additionally, an exploratory research may be conducted to identify the customer experiences in other sectors. Conclusive researches may be conducted also using the findings of this study to measure for instance the behavioral consequences of the experiences in the zoo or to identify most memorable experiences.

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