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Prosumers in the tourism market: the characteristics and determinants of their behaviour

Abstract: The goal of this article is to characterise the prosumer as a specific consumer category in the tourist market. The author presents the general characteristics of a prosumer and how his/her behaviour is conditioned as a result of general social trends as well as specific features of the tourist market. In order to empirically illustrate the issues involved the author presents results of a direct survey conducted with 3 representatives of various types of tourist companies (a tour operator, a travel agent, an airline representative). The interviewees noted their customers' intensified activity. While customers have greater expectations and requirements, their knowledge does not translate into cooperation with tourist agencies. The respondents claimed that the new customers interested in new forms of the product included primarily young people as well as business people acquainted with new technologies. It was emphasized that customers as we know them are active but not always professional. Individual customers consider themselves professionals yet oftentimes their professionalism is limited to the transactions' convenience (e.g. only telephone contacts and bank transfers) accompanied by a low price found on the Internet rather than a general knowledge of the market.

Keywords: prosumer, tourist market, social trends.

Jel codes: M10, D83, Z13.

Introduction

The phenomenon of prosumption is related to the process of withdrawing from the traditional mass production and customization (i.e. mass individualization of products) which may be interpreted as a preview of a return to the former stage of the consumer-company relation. The process of customization results from the

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contemporary market's excessive disintegration; there are few market segments or niches which are sufficiently large to be profitable [Kotler & Trias de Bes 2004, p. 207]. The goal of this article is to provide a profile of a prosumer in the tourist market. Special attention will be paid to the conditions and characteristics of the tourist market which affect behaviour in this consumer category.

According to A. Toffler [2001], prosumers form a category of customers taking part in the process of co-creating a product so that it satisfies the customer's needs in the best possible way. This stems from the fact that the more people differ in respect of their jobs, the less similar their consumption needs are and the more they demand to be treated like individuals. Consumers start to make choices not only because a particular product fulfils specific functions but also because the product reflects a consumer's lifestyle, personality, identity and image and fits into a broader pattern of purchased products and services. Therefore, consumer goods partly lose their typical use value to the benefit of symbolic values [Bylok, 2012, p. 346]. These processes result in consumers' increased interest in managing tasks previously attributed to other market players. This may include purchases in a supermarket (the customer performs the work of a seller), booking a hotel through a website or an independent air ticket booking. Toffler noticed the growing prestige of self-sufficiency [2001, p. 416]. While at the time when the capitalist market developed some people (at least the middle classes) referred with disdain to any physical work, in modern times people tend to be proud of doing things single-handedly. As a result, hobbies are flourishing together with the consumers' own efforts in designing goods and services. The differences between the producers and the consumers are blurring when the latter are increasingly involved in the production process. In the context of the relations between consumers and producers, prosumption takes place when products are tailored to the consumer's specific needs by making it possible for the consumers to get involved in designing the products [Bylok 2012, p. 353; Tapscott & Williams 2008, pp. 215–218]. This train of thought can be followed when we assume that potential customers may experiment when creating a product while their suggestions of changes are taken into consideration by the market. By this token customers are treated as partners.

1. A prosumer's characteristics

At present, a "prosumer" is defined as an active consumer involved in the production process and consumption to a larger degree than an average buyer. A consumer's market activity may refer to cooperation between the consumer and the producer in the process of creating goods and services. It may also refer to creating a network of other consumers, fulfilling the role of opinion leaders, etc.

According to J. Wójcik [2009, p. 370], a contemporary prosumer may be defined as follows:

- a professional consumer
- a proactive consumer.

An active consumer does not need to be professional as activity may be limited to looking for information. This holds true for reading other consumers' opinions in online chat-rooms and taking advantage of this information in purchase decision making. Therefore, the notions of an active and a professional consumer are not mutually exclusive yet they do not need to overlap.

Prosumerism as we know it today relates also to cooperation between many consumers who act jointly, exchange information, help each other and as a result benefit from it [Staniszewski 2013, p. 2]. Owing to a quick exchange of information through the Internet, consumers may organize themselves in groups which act as advisors. An information network (a conglomerate of individual activities of independent Internet users) is increasingly common yet also increasingly anonymous [Kozłowski 2009, p. 41]. Consumer networks make it possible to take advantage of other people's experiences and become independent from corporate information.

Prosumers may therefore be defined as extra-active consumers who take advantage of their own work but do not mind if others benefit from the results of their efforts. A prosumer is therefore likely to be more competent and knowledgeable about a product. C.K. Prahalad and V. Ramaswamy [2005, p. 8] predict that B2B and B2C companies operating in the market (where the producer is most important) may be replaced by C2B2C (consumer to business to consumer) companies.

One should accept the opinion of J. Wójcik who emphasized that a consumer could not be included into the group of prosumers solely on the basis of the consumer's activity. It is necessary to evaluate the results of the activity [Wójcik 2009, p. 376]. The mere act of looking for opinions about a product in the Internet does not make the searcher a member of the prosumer category. However, it is difficult to establish a limit which, once passed, clearly indicates that an individual's activity allows use of it in the production process.

To sum up, the following definition can be suggested: a prosumer is a more-than-average active consumer who is aware of his/her individual needs, is knowledgeable about the products, shares that knowledge with other consumers and is active in designing (creating) the product. A prosumer is involved in the process of creating and selling a product by spreading information to other consumers. Therefore, a prosumer may also be deemed an opinion leader because he/she tends to set trends of general consumer behaviour.

While prosumers do not form a homogenous group they have some features in common, namely involvement in the process of disseminating information and an innovative nature.

2. Features of the tourist market as a determinant of prosumers' behaviour

Prosumption in the tourist market is affected by both general special processes typical of contemporary markets as well as the specific features of the tourist market. The general processes include:

- increased amount of free time,
- withdrawal from the so-called synchronization defined as a combination of work rhythms, mobility and relaxation,
- individualization of consumers' behaviour and the corresponding individualization of the product,
- consumers' knowledge developed about products stemming from experience and education,
- increased requirement for product quality.

Free time is the time beyond professional work to be used discretionarily and in line with one's interests, used for relaxation, developing one's interests and participating in the achievements of our civilization, cultural events, etc. [Gołembski & Niezgodą 2012, p. 172]. A consumer's activity in creating a product for his/her own use stems from the fact that he/she has limited free time and wants to use this time as effectively as possible [Byłok 2012, p. 342]. A majority of tourist activities takes place in free time. Withdrawal from synchronization resulting from the so-called "third wave" [Toffler 2001] allows the prosumer to combine professional activity and relaxation in the tourist market. As a result, the difference between free time and work time blurs [Kachniewska et al. 2012, p. 144]. A case in point is making use of recreation services during a conference or touring a city where congresses or trade fairs are held. The effect of synchronization is the so-called "planned spontaneity". It blurs the differences between private, spontaneous and seemingly selfless activities and those focused on benefits. Consumers post online information about their stays, holidays, etc. and in return, they expect others to recommend venues worth visiting (where to eat, sleep, what to do in your free time etc.).

As for tourist supply, the tourist market is **dominated by services while the tourist product is complex**. This complexity stems from tourists' extraordinarily diversified expectations and needs, the complicated structure of the tourist product and, finally, the great diversification of entities involved in providing services and goods valued by tourists [Kachniewska et al. 2012, p. 57]. Another trend typical of the tourist market is **individualization** which results in tourists looking for new packages of services and types of relaxation. This trend may bring about certain tourists' aversion to famous venues and resorts. This is because tourists know these venues and will be looking for their own sets of services ("build up their own holidays"). Searching a tourist offer single-handedly results in the growing signifi-

cance of the Internet in promoting regions. As an increasing number of individual tourists resort to the Internet, their decisions about the destination and the services depend on the offer's online availability as well as other consumers' opinions. The tourist market is very susceptible to changes brought about by the Internet. An observation of buyers' behaviour, including e-readiness, encourages tourist agencies to intensify online activities. Research into the Polish tourist industry has revealed that 99% of travel agents use the Internet on a daily basis [Kachniewska et al. 2012, p. 144].

In the tourist market consumers interact with other website users and co-create value not only with one company but also with entire communities of professionals, service providers and other consumers. As C.K. Prahalad and V. Ramaswamy put it [2005, p. 24], **co-creation replaces the process of exchange**. For this process to be completed the following prerequisites must be fulfilled: existence of a forum for dialogue between the consumer and the company as well as the existence of rules regulating participation in the forum to ensure orderly, effective interaction. The opportunities provided by an online exchange of information focus the dialogue between various users and between users and producers on issues of interest to both parties. Service providers make use of the content placed on websites by service users (e.g. an employee of a travel agency helping a customer to find a hotel resorts to information placed on social portals and in online chat-rooms). The process of co-creation results in the customer's improved specialist knowledge and leads to self-respect.

During research into tourist demand, **the buyers' ever-increasing new needs and requirements** were noticed which may trigger off more involvement in the search for and exchange of information as well as the creation of a tourist product. Increase in affluence enhances the individual quality of life. Tourists tend to manage their time more independently and more frequently decide to organize their holidays individually. Tourists want to use time "effectively". This means that when they are on holiday they want to see and experience as much as possible. People tend to maximise experience per time unit [Nieżgoda 2010, p. 26]. The requirement of a quick choice of many experiences involves the so-called "chameleon behaviour" [Roth & Schrandt 1992]. During a single trip a tourist may play many roles, resort for example to very expensive accommodation and very cheap means of transport, save on food and at the same time buy very expensive clothes, etc.. Resorting to many options of diversified services also necessitates increased activity, looking for information, knowledge and flexibility in behaviour. These are the characteristics of prosumers.

Contemporary consumers tend to care more about their health; this is related to **environmental behaviour**. As a result of growing environmental awareness a new consumer has emerged, willing to purchase ecological goods and services, to change his/her lifestyle, habits and consumption in order to protect the natural environment.

An active Internet user the modern tourist who is highly aware of environmental issues may encourage others to be environmentally friendly and communicate to tourism service providers the need for an offer compliant with the requirements of environmental protection [Nieżgoda 2011, p. 37]. The complexity of the tourist product calls for the cooperation between many entities affecting the product's shape. As a result of the need for cooperation the level of environmental education needs to be comparably high for all stakeholders [Byrd 2007, p. 8]. Interaction between prosumers and service providers may be conducive to the transformation of the tourist product into an environmental one.

An analysis of the segments of potential buyers in the tourist market indicates that **the significance of stable customers is growing** as they generate a relatively large (stable) income yet are more demanding [Nieżgoda 2010, p. 25]. This stems from the fact that former experiences are the most frequent factor affecting stays in famous and popular locations [Franch et al. 2006]. If a consumer actively shares information, looks for similar participants in the tourist market and consciously creates his/her product, he/she may be included in the prosumers category.

Global standardization is an important trend resulting from general globalization processes; as a result, traditional reference groups like the place of work or the family are decreasing in importance. As a result of standardization the contemporary tourist is increasingly more aware of the opportunities for satisfying his/her needs and requirements stemming from world service standards. In the location this may be facilitated by numerous options of attractions, services and the possibilities of spending time [Nieżgoda 2010, p. 23]. A tourist may purchase a standard package of services yet in the final destination he/she may look for a diversified offer, for example an opportunity to purchase local products, take part in a trip organized by a local agency, take up a fashionable sport, etc.. One could therefore assume that as a result of general globalization individualization processes are at the same time confronted with the growing significance of standardization throughout the world. The consequence of the simultaneous occurrence of individualization and standardization is that presumption seems to be a solution referred to by Tapscot and Williams [2008, p. 194] as a “win/win situation”: customers will get what they want whilst companies may take advantage of their knowledge in research and development. To summarise, the features of the tourist market affecting prosumers' behaviour include:

- the complexity of the tourist product and an opportunity to individually create packages;
- the diversification of consumers' needs and an emergence of an unlimited number of ways to satisfy these needs;
- the renewable (restitutional) nature of demand.

These features affect the behaviour of individuals purchasing comprehensive services (tourist packages) as well as partial services (e.g. hotel accommodation).

3. The prosumer as viewed by service providers in the tourist market – empirical illustration

The tourist market is an arena for processes which result in treating consumers as prosumers. A question arises which consumers in the tourist market may be referred to as prosumers. In order to illustrate such considerations investigative research was conducted by means of a direct standardised survey. It was a qualitative survey while the respondents included employees of 3 types of tourist companies: travel agencies i.e. an operator who acts like a middleman in selling tourist services (company A), an operator selling air tickets (company B) and a tour operator (entity C). The qualitative research is of explanatory rather than decisive nature whilst the goal of exploration research is to identify the phenomenon in question. The selection of the three representatives of supply in the tourist market enables the illustration of a specific issue and to highlight detailed issues which could be verified by means of more detailed research. The selection of the three interlocutors also allows the method to be considered a case study.

An increase in consumers' requirements and expectations was observed in the past 10 years in the surveyed companies. Customers of travel agents expect a ready-made and detailed offer. The customers tend to know the market better and therefore their expectations are higher. However, these expectations relate primarily to competitive prices and acceptable sales conditions. Customers demand that returns are accepted and complaints acknowledged. Customers are much more experienced and have more "purchase courage". When buying air tickets, consumers expect "product range diversity" i.e. more diversified connections, different and convenient flight times, departures at a specified time of day, the shortest possible travel time or even selection of a specific airline alliance. On top of that customers demand better booking conditions, air ticket cancellation, larger luggage allowance without an extra fee, changes to the ticket, etc.. However customers' knowledge is not always professional. A representative of an air ticket seller says:

Oftentimes customers conceal the fact that they know better connections. They come to an agent and check if we suggest the least expensive offer. Various institutions confuse the customers so that they demand unrealistic conditions like the return of money for a ticket cancelled one day before the flight. The Internet encourages unrealistic expectations and misleading interpretations of the regulations by the customer.

Sellers of holiday packages and airline connections alike are of an opinion that the Internet makes customers "turn their backs on agencies" and look for offers single-handedly. Travel agencies are visited by customers who cannot organize their holidays themselves, do not have the time, cannot arrange the organization or want

to “avoid problems” and do not want to make an effort to plan a trip on their own. A tour operator noticed: *we have had stable customers for more than a dozen years who choose the same destination every year and accommodation in the same place.* Such attitudes could not be further from the notion of prosumption.

Oftentimes, customers are informed by a travel agent about a hotel they are interested in and then book it on an online portal, be it a booking portal or a tour operator’s website. The interviewee added:

The customers who keep coming back to a travel agency are those who have problems with organizing holidays on their own. If they do not have difficulties they ask about a hotel and organize everything single-handedly without visiting the agent again.

Customers make use of social platforms; many tourists choose hotels or sellers influenced by opinions in online chat-rooms. However, sometimes consumers’ opinions (e.g. on services rendered in a hotel) placed in the Internet vary. Customers do not understand that expectations may be different and therefore the perceived product quality will also vary. The tour operator stated:

We also have customers who look for “something” that is reminiscent of what their friends told them. They cannot present their expectations in a specific way.

“Backpackers” are extremely active in looking for cheap airline connections. They look for promotions and the cheapest tickets; within an hour of finding an offer online they can notify other people. Unfortunately, this offer is also an inconvenient one. The interviewee added:

Customers do not understand that the connections they have found are more onerous, oftentimes “unacceptable” or even unsafe. They do not understand that we cannot fulfil their expectations. They find it irritating that airlines follow certain rules which cannot be breached. The worst scenario is when the price is the main criterion adopted by tourists.

Resorting to online portals and social platforms also raises expectations of technical amenities. Some customers check information in the Internet many times and then visit a travel agent in order to make the ultimate decision. There are also customers who are so used to online purchases that they do not want to visit a travel agent even if only to collect travel documents. What is more customers who buy air tickets want to minimize contacts with the agency personnel or any other service providers. This is why they even want to *check in at the airport by phone*. Looking for new solutions in a travel agency may come down to a requirement to create new sets of services. Following numerous bankruptcies of travel agents in Poland in the summer of 2012 some customers grew suspicious of ready-made packages. Instead

they look for packages consisting of a scheduled flight + accommodation in a specific hotel. This behaviour is also evidence of the customers' growing experience and ability to take care of their own comfort.

A prosumer's very important trait is cooperation with the service provider which in turn makes use of solutions suggested by customers. It turns out that the interviewees do not use tips given by customers. The tour operator did not take any notice of any suggestions from the customers except for price comparisons, oftentimes referring to different tourist destinations. On top of that, service providers think that information placed by consumers online *is not reliable*.

The following comment was made in a travel agency:

When a customer finds an interesting offer he/she forgets about the agency and organizes the trip single-handedly. It is the agency that looks for information for the customer but the customer does not come back and therefore does not share the information.

Customers are educated, they want everything ready-made but often come to the agency with an intent of making a complaint. As if they were on a lookout for mistakes and wanted to make complaints. This indicates, however, that their knowledge is greater and expectations higher.

A similar attitude was presented by a representative of an air ticket seller:

The agency does not use the consumers' suggestions, does not trust information found by them in the Internet because we know it is unrealistic. When a customer demands a most inconvenient if not unsafe connection, we are very reluctant to comply with the request.

This situation is related to the characteristics of tourist services which are related to satisfying the needs of the customers who sometimes are less knowledgeable about the ingredients of a tourist product than the service provider. A customer may not realize that his/her requirements may be in conflict with his/her efforts to spend holidays safely. Care for the customer is also reflected in the fact that an agency employee resorts to the Internet in order to check opinions about hotels, the general situation in the country of destination, the prices offered by other service providers. The interviewee emphasized that he was especially interested in various information that could be of use to the customers when the interviewee did not visit the destination chosen by the customer. One could therefore state that the service providers under scrutiny do not make use of customers' knowledge when preparing an offer yet this knowledge proves helpful in estimating the general situation in the tourist market.

To sum up, the interviewees noticed the customers' increased activity. The customers have greater expectation and requirements of the service provider's offer. However, their knowledge does not translate onto cooperation with the agency.

Generally greater interest in the Internet was noted (not only in tourism). The decreased interest in direct services affects the general drop in interest in ready-made packages. The first stage following the system transformation in Poland has passed leaving Poles enthusiastic about travel, often failing to request specific travel conditions.

The respondents claimed that new customers interested in new product forms included primarily young people as well as business people acquainted with new technologies.

The respondents emphasized therefore that customers tended to be active but not always professional. Individual customers consider themselves professional yet frequently their professionalism is limited to the convenience of the transaction (e.g. only telephone contact and a bank transfer or a low price found in the Internet) rather than general knowledge of the market. An institution is an altogether different type of customer. Very frequently contacts with travel agencies are initiated by experienced employees in charge of travel arrangements in the company. The interviewees refer to this type of contact as a very professional cooperation.

Conclusions and discussion

The tourist market is an arena of processes as the result of which a new type of consumer has emerged which can be dubbed a prosumer. His/her major characteristics include more widespread activity in looking for offers, resorting to the Internet, official websites of service providers as well as booking and social portals. Prosumers demand more convenient conditions of transactions. This holds true for possible cancellation, exchange of offers as well as convenient technical conditions i.e. booking online, over the phone or by e-mail. Many prosumers no longer want to enter into direct contact with agencies.

Compared with other products and services the tourist product is accompanied by some obstacles in using solutions suggested by customers. Safety requirements and rules of international exchange often make it impossible to make use of a customer's offer. On the other hand in their operations travel agencies often resort to consumers' projects in preparing the offer. A case in point is the creation of a product tailored to a customer's needs. Consumers' activity and knowledge does not always translate into cooperation with the service provider. The customer does not share his/her experiences with the service provider but can share them with other consumers using an online platform.

An analysis of prosumer behaviour in the tourist market sheds light on a bilateral relation i.e. the characteristics of the tourist market affect consumer behaviour and consumer behaviour enforces certain changes in tourist supply. As a result of con-

sumers' online activity, companies have access to information about consumers' private lives through social media like Facebook and Twitter. This is why they are able, for example, to send special travel offers before a planned wedding. Companies may analyse recommendations posted online and respond with tailored price strategies.

As online activity or an ability to look for an offer have become notions of a modern lifestyle, companies will be forced to create online or real-life status symbols of their customers by making it possible for the customer to present his/her achievements online. One may expect a growing number of individuals interested in using, posting, recommending and sharing information with other web users. If the exchange relates to a hermetic, own group, the consumers are referred to as twinsumers [Bzdyra, Maciorowski 2011, p. 77]. As a result, companies should search for channels of information targeted not only at potential consumers in the broadly-defined web but also at precisely defined groups. This leads to a blurring of the differences between institutional and individual customers. Depending on a company's skills and response these self-organizing communities of prosumers may either create great opportunities or pose a threat.

Willingness to share information about one's experiences is related to creating one's image. It serves to represent individual traits which may be emphasized by selecting a unique set of tourist services. Therefore, image creation and positioning play an increasingly important role in an offer. However, one should not confuse prosumption with focus on the customer; the latter consists of companies deciding about a product's basic structure whilst customers have an opportunity to modify some of its elements.

The fact that in online communities and prosumers share information and exchange tips on the product's shape allows innovations to spread more quickly. According to Tapscot and Williams [2008, p. 187]: "The new generation of prosumers treat the world as a place of creation rather than consumption. The world is an arena where one's innovative solutions can be presented". However, the dramatically growing number of prosumer communities leads to the question that if all innovations initiated by consumers are right, ethical and in line with the company's interests. Such problems should be pondered before the innovations are introduced. However, if a company does not respond to prosumers' ideas with an offer it may be disregarded as a potential service provider.

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