# REVISITING THE SERVICE MARKETING MIX: THE CASE OF THE SMALL HOTEL IN SAMUI, THAILAND

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***Abstract:*** This study investigates the service marketing mix that is appropriate for small hotels according to travellers who use the hotels. The study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. A questionnaire was created after interviewing eight small hotel operators. A total of 325 Thai and international travellers were selected to complete the questionnaire. A principal factor analysis indicates that not all service marketing mixes are appropriate to use in the Samui context, but four marketing strategies are: 'People and Physical Evidence', 'Promotion', 'Process' and 'Place'.

***Key Words:*** marketing mix, marketing strategy, small business, hotel business

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the Thai government included tourism as part of its national agenda, the number of visitors to Thailand has increased. In 2012, 22.35 million foreign travellers visited Thailand and contributed almost one trillion baht to the country's economy. The number of tourists increased to 30 million in 2015, generating a total contribution of 1.44 trillion baht in travel and tourism to the Thai economy (Department of Tourism, 2016). The country has enjoyed the dramatic rise in total income from tourist activities. The increased demand for tourism has resulted in a growing number of tourist-related businesses, including hotels.

Samui is a popular tourist destination in the south of Thailand. It is located in Suratthani. In 2013, 1 million foreign tourists visited Samui, and this number increased to 2.2 million in 2015 (Department of Tourism, 2017). In 2015, 556 hotels were operating in Samui which is a 42 percent rise from 2009 (Ministry of Tourism and Sport Thailand, 2010; Department of Tourism Thailand, 2016). This increase has intensified the competitiveness of the hotel business in Sumui. Smaller hotels and resorts generally have fewer resources and smaller budgets compared to large chain hotels, so the smaller hotels may find it difficult to stay in business. Since small hotels comprise the majority of the market, the survival of small hotels is important for sustainability and profitability for the local people and the tourism industry.

Small business marketing is different from marketing for larger competitors. Large businesses tend to focus on sales maximisation and generating profit; small businesses, on the other hand, operate with limited financial resources, human resources constraints, and lack of specialised marketing expertise (Gilmore *et al.*, 2001; Buddhichiwin, 2015). Because of these differences, it may not be appropriate for small businesses to imitate the marketing practices of large businesses or treat it as just a scaled-down version of a large business (Friel, 1999; Morrison and Thomas, 1999). In fact, Thomas (2000) argues that more research on small tourism business is needed to understand its behaviour and business dynamics since it has become an important sector and a distinct category in the tourism industry. Furthermore, research on small businesses in the hospitality industry in developing countries lacks focus since most research has been done in developed countries (Ahmed and Saber, 2015). This is the case in Samui, Thailand. Understanding the marketing strategies of small businesses will improve knowledge of marketing practices and keep small businesses competitive in the market.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The marketing mix concept has been accepted as a fundamental marketing idea (Ivy, 2008). Borden (1964) was reportedly the first to use the term 'marketing mix' in his article 'The Concept of Marketing Mix', in which he presented a list of 12 elements. Later, MaCathy (1964) regrouped and reduced Borden's idea to the classification '4Ps', namely, product, price, place and promotion, and this became the most popular marketing mix framework.

Although the 4Ps was popular, many scholars suggest that it may not be appropriate as a generic marketing framework. For example, it may be too simplistic and misleading (Kent, 1986). Cowell (1984) argues that McCathy's 4Ps does not fit with the service characteristics because the original 4Ps were based on Borden's research on manufacturing companies (teaching and consulting experiences.) A group of scholars also questioned that the traditional 4Ps may not fit to apply as a generic marketing concept for service marketing (Ivy, 2008; Nicholls *et al.*, 1995; Harvey and Busher, 1996; Rafig and Armed, 1995; Boom and Bitner, 1981; Constantinide, 2006).

Various modifications have since been developed. McGrath (1986) suggests that three more Ps, namely, personnel, physical facilities and process management, must be added to McCathy's 4Ps model. Bruner (1989) attempts to reformulate the 4Ps into 4Cs, which comprises the concept mix, cost mix, channel mix and communication mix. Boom and Bitner (1981) propose that another three Ps (participants, physical evidence and process) should be added to the original 4Ps to apply the marketing mix concept to service. The study by Rafig and Ahmed (1995) presented empirical research to support the notion that the Boom and Bitner's 7Ps has a high degree of acceptance as a generic service marketing mix framework among marketing academics.

In relation to the service sector, *'People'* is a key success factor because people provide service to customers. Customers evaluate service by if they are satisfied with it (Kotler and Keller, 2012). Constantinide (2006) found that in service marketing, the human element is often included as a parameter in the service marketing mix because service is delivered by people. He concludes that 'the personnel is a powerful element tool of customer persuasion and a major parameter affecting customer's perception on the delivered service quality' (Constantinide, 2006, 421). Employees are one of the key success factors in the hotel business, which has been supported by many studies (Aggett, 2007; Radisic *et al.*, 2010; Rafig and Armed, 1995; Mariarty *et al.*, 2008; Stoke, 2000; Boltonet *et al.*, 2014; Yazici *et al.*, 2016).If hotel owners have good relationships with their employees and keep them happy, the employees in turn will keep the customers happy (Yazici *et al.*, 2016).

The second element in the framework is *'Process'*, which refers to the implementation of action and routine function of the service business so that hotel management delivers consistent service at all times to customers. Process is more important to customers in the service industry than business that selling ordinary products because it ensures availability and consistence of quality (Khan, 2014). Hotel managers must be sure that each customer receives an accurate and speedy check-in and check-out every single time he/she stays at the hotel. Bolton *et al.* (2014) found that most high-quality organisations paid attention to the service process that focuses on customer expectations. These small details make a big difference because they can create an exceptional service experience for customers. Mucai *et al.* (2013) found that the quality of the service process has a significant impact on customer satisfaction in non-star hotels in Kenya.

'Physical Evidence' includes the physical environment in and around the hotel such as hotel buildings, greenery, atmosphere, layout, décor etc. It is important because customers assess the quality and level of service provided through physical evidence (Rafig and Ahmed, 1995; Khan, 2014; Salman *et al.*, 2017).

It seems the adaptation of the service marketing mix is not yet complete. Recently, Salman *et al.* (2017) proposed a new marketing mix in the service industry comprised of 12 Ps, namely, product, price, place, promotion, people, physical evidence, process, programming, partnership, perception, purse string and policy.

## III. OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to examine the appropriate service marketing mix for small hotels in

Samui, Thailand. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in this study. Initially, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight small-hotel owners(see Table 1). The in-depth interviews will help the researcher verify and refine the variables identified as small hotels' marketing activities. From the interviews, 27 variables were found in addition to the three that were identified in the literature review (e.g. Hirankitti *et al.*, 2009; Ivy, 2008). Hence, the questionnaire covers all the major marketing activities of the traditional service marketing mix that small hotels currently use.

**Table 1**
**Interview Information**

| Respondent | Gender | Years in Business | Location |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Female | >10 | Bophut |
| 2 | Female | >10 | Bophut |
| 3 | Male | >10 | Maret |
| 4 | Male | >10 | Maret |
| 5 | Male | >10 | Maret |
| 6 | Female | >10 | Borpud |
| 7 | Female | 3-5 | Borpud |
| 8 | Female | >20 | Maret |

After the highly structured questionnaire was developed using the Likert scale, it was piloted with 30 international tourists to improve the correctness and effectiveness of the questionnaire prior to its administration (Bryman, 2008). A Cronbach's alpha of 0.914 indicates that the questionnaire has acceptable reliability for research (Hair *et al.*, 2010). The questionnaire was also translated into English and translated back into Thai to enhance the research quality and validity (Sperber, 2004).

The questionnaire was distributed to foreign and Thai customers of small hotels in Samui. Convenience sampling was used in this research, and 325 questionnaires were returned to the researcher, representing a 65 percent response rate. Data were analysed using exploratory factor analysis, which is a technique that explains the correlation between any number of interrelated variables being measured (Ivy, 2008). It is commonly used to reduce the number of factors into a smaller set to obtain a more manageable set of information (Pallant, 2007). All 30 attributes of the marketing activities of small hotels in Samui were subject to principle component analysis

because the aim in this study is to examine the most appropriate sets of marketing strategies used in small hotels. This helps to group similar variables into a new marketing mix so that the researcher can gain an understanding of the underlying structure of the data (Zikmund, 2009; Wheeler *et al.*, 2004). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin result is 0.934, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was highly significant ($p < 0.01$), which supports the factorability of the matrix. The sample size of 325 cases in this study also exceeds the minimum requirement of 300 cases for factor analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). Next, Kaiser's criterion and the scree test were used in combination to assist in deciding on the minimum number of factors to retain. The scree test helps the researcher not to retain too many factors (Verlicer and Jackson, 1990, Hair *et al.*, 2010). For interpretation factor loading, a cut-off was set at 0.4 (Stevens, 1996).

In this particular case, varimax rotation revealed the presence of six components with eigen values exceeding 1 and representing 62.1 percent of the variance. However, after the scree test, the researcher decided to retain four components to represent the best fit to the data for the factor analysis. The four final rotated factors derived from principle factor analysis are shown in Table 2. Reliability analysis was also conducted (Cronbach's alpha) to test the reliability and internal consistency of each component. Cronbach's alpha for the four components range from 0.722–0.915, which exceeds the recommended value of 0.7, indicating adequate internal consistency (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

## IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The results of the factor analysis illustrated in Table 2 show a clean factor structure with relative high loadings for the factors. The four-factor solution explains a total of 54.851 percent of the variance. The names of the factors are based on appropriate variables represented in the factors, and the selection of factor names were more influenced by the highest loading variable than the lower loading variables (Ivy, 2008; Hair *et al.*, 2010).

**People and Physical Evidence**

This factor accounted for 37.618 of the total variance explained by all factors. It comprised 10 marketing

strategy attributes related to customer service such as 'Friendliness of service from staffs and/or owners', 'Staffs pay attention toward their guests', 'Hotel staffs dress clean and neat at any time'. It also included four attributes related to physical evidence such as 'Well-managed spaces and zones in the hotel', 'A welcome and relaxed, ambient environment that you can enjoy over your stay', 'The cleanliness of your hotels' etc. The inclusion of two statements related to the product's attribute in the factor seems less significant as it was given a lower score than people and physical evidence. Hence, this factor was labelled 'People and Physical Evidence'. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.915 suggests a very robust factor.

## Promotion

The second factor comprises eight attributes and explains 8.62 percent of the variance. Five of these attributes are related to promotion. Two attributes related to product and one attribute related to price were also included in this factor, but all had loading factors of less than 0.6, indicating a less significant factor. This supports labelling this factor 'Promotion'. A Cronbach's alpha of this factor is 0.845, showing an extremely robust factor.

**Table 2**
**Exploratory Factor Analysis**

| Factor | Variable | Factor loading | Eigen Value | Percentage of Variance | Cronbach's alpha |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Friendliness of service from staff and/or owners. | .763 | 11.285 | 37.618 | 0.915 |
| | Staffs pay attention toward their guests. | .741 | | | |
| | A welcome and relaxed, ambient environment that you can enjoy over your stay. y over your stay. | .708 | | | |
| | Hotel staffs dress clean and neat at all times. | .704 | | | |
| | The cleanliness of the hotel. | .696 | | | |
| | Quick response in all matters from hotel staff. | .669 | | | |
| | Feeling comfortable throughout your stay. | .640 | | | |
| | Well-managed spaces and zones in the hotel. | .639 | | | |
| | Well-managed facilities in hotel's rooms. | .626 | | | |
| | Well-decorated hotel buildings. | .526 | | | |
| 2 | Flexible and negotiable offers you can ask for. | .765 | 2.586 | 8.620 | 0.845 |
| | Hotel promotes itself by advertising via many media channels. | .753 | | | |
| | Hotel promotes itself by advertising via travel fairs/ exhibition.tratravel exhibition. | .704 | | | |
| | Hotel was recommended by friends. | .656 | | | |
| | Discount is offered for extended stay guests. | .600 | | | |
| | Price is in the same standard as other hotels within the same size. | .592 | | | |
| | You can enjoy restaurants, spa and fitness while stay at your hotel. | .570 | | | |
| | Variety of rooms from which to select. | .493 | | | |
| 3 | Payment system is easy and quick. | .675 | 1.381 | 4.602 | 0.851 |
| | Accurate and quick check-in at the hotel. | .662 | | | |
| | The booking system is easy. | .627 | | | |
| | Problems can be solved quickly and efficiently. | .585 | | | |
| | Internet booking is available. | .546 | | | |
| | Hotel's service system is in the international standard. | .502 | | | |
| | Travelling to the hotel is convenient. | .465 | | | |
| 4 | The location is not far from the village's centre. | .646 | 1.203 | 4.011 | 0.722 |
| | The location is not far from the beach. | .636 | | | |
| | Price is suitable for the location of the hotel. | .477 | | | |
| | Price is reasonable for your budget. | .472 | | | |
| | Hotel is located in a safe area. | .465 | | | |

## Process

The third component explains 4.6 percent of the variance and was dominated by five factors related to the service process and two factors related to place. Examples of attributes include 'Payment system is easy and quick', 'Accurate and quick check-in at the hotel' and 'Problems can be solved quickly and efficiently' etc. This factor has a high level of reliability as Cronbach's alpha was 0.851.

## Place

The final factor comprises five attributes. Three are related to place and two are related to price. Since strategy related to place has a loading factor higher than 0.6, it is named place. The Cronbach's alpha score of 0.722 shows acceptable reliability for the place elements.

## V. DISCUSSIONS

All 30 attributes were fit into four categories, namely, People and Physical Evidence, Promotion, Process and Place. All have robust Cronbach's alpha scores. To understand which factor is more important than others according to small-hotel customers in Samui, further investigation was done. The mean score of each factor was tested and is shown in Table 3. Place was the most important factor (mean=4.02; S.D.=0.79), followed by People and Physical Evidence (mean=4.00; S.D.=0.84) and Process (mean=3.99; S.D.=0.85). Promotion was the least important factor among the four components (mean=3.63; S.D.=0.95). Place, People and Physical Evidence and Process had very close mean scores (mean=4.02, 4.00 and 3.99, respectively), so they do not differ much in general. Meanwhile, it is clear that customers of the small hotels see promotion as less important than the other three factors. This may be caused by promotion method did not match target customers. At this point, the use of proper promotion strategy such as internet platforms that are increasingly used in promoting strategy in hotel sectors may be a benefit for small hotels (Ahmad and Saber, 2015; Jaafar *et al.*, 2012).

Place or location was found to be most important. Because Samui is a famous island in Suratthani, the hotel location, which is not far from the beach or the centre for convenience, may be an expectation of people who

**Table 3**
**Mean of each factor**

| Factor | Mean | S.D. | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| People and Physical Evidence | 4.00 | 0.84 | 2 |
| Price and Promotion | 3.63 | 0.95 | 4 |
| Process | 3.99 | 0.85 | 3 |
| Place | 4.02 | 0.79 | 1 |

want to stay in Samui. The location is one of the critical marketing factors that affects the growth of the hotel business and has been reported on by researchers (Rigall-I-Torrent *et al.*, 2010; Yang *et al.*, 2014).This is also supported by Yazici *et al.* (2016), who found that hotel owners view location as one of the most important factors, hence, it is important to give special consideration when choosing where to build hotels.

The second most important factor is 'People and Physical Evidence'. Since staff or people are involved in the service process and have direct contact with a hotel's customers, the degree of service they deliver to customers is associated with customer satisfaction. Staff service is the key to success for hotel operators and it has been found to be most important by numerous researchers (Aggett, 2007; Radisic *et al.*, 2010; Rafig and Armed, 1995; Mariarty *et al.*, 2008; Stoke, 2000; Yazici*et al.*, 2016). Physical Evidence is also an influential strategy according to customers of small hotels. Customers use physical evidence as a clue to evaluate or judge the quality of service provided (Rafig and Ahmed, 1995; Khan, 2014). The relaxed ambience, the cleanliness of the hotel, as well as managed spaces and zones in the hotel make customers pleased with their stay. The items that make up the physical evidence have been researched in many tourism studies (e.g. Sohrabi *et al.*, 2012; Mucai *et al.*, 2013; Salmon *et al.*, 2017).

Although the hotels are small, they should not neglect the service process delivered to their customers. Speed and accuracy in the service process need to be implemented concurrently (e.g. handling problems, payment system, booking system, security system). Many chain hotels have an integrated information system process or professionally trained staff to create a customer-centric experience. These delicate process

systems differentiate the hotels from competitors (Bolton *et al.*, 2014).

Small hotel customers view promotion as the least important marketing strategy. For small businesses with limited financial resources and a lack of specialised marketing expertise, finding an appropriate promotional method is challenging for managers/owners. Promoting hotels via magazines or travel fairs may not be budget-friendly in terms of time and money for small-hotel operators. Many scholars recommend using low cost but effective technology such as the internet to help small businesses with promotion and sales (Ahmad and Saber, 2015; Jaafar *et al.*, 2012). Avcikurt *et al.* (2011) and Baloglu and Peckan (2006) found similar results in that managers/owners obviously realise the advantage of the internet to communicate with their customers. The use of a website that is well designed and easy for customers to access can increase their competitive promotion strategy as well as generate revenue by acquiring more customers (Akincilar and Dagdeviren, 2014; Salmon *et al.*, 2017).

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to investigate the marketing mix of appropriate strategies in the context of small-sized hotels in Samui. The original service marketing mix (7Ps) of Boom and Bitner (1981) is accepted as one of the most influential frameworks for the service sector; however, the findings of this study suggest that it is not suitable for small hotels in Samui. The principle component factor analysis showed that the best marketing strategy has four important parameters to apply to Samui's small hotels: Place, People and Physical Evidence, Process, and Promotion. It appears that two parameters (place and promotion) came from the original marketing mix (4Ps). The other two parameters (People and Physical Evidence and Process) are a combination of the three service aspects (3Ps).Even if they are not new, the re-adjusted version of the 7Ps framework will provide information and understanding about marketing according to the customers of small hotels in Samui.

The study also found that Product and Price did not have support as marketing strategies. This is confirmed because most of the attributes related to product and price generally received a loading factor of less than 0.6.

Although Friel (1999) found that small firms in tourism and hospitality use a variety of pricing methods to reach their target customers, this study found that Pricing may not be appropriate in this context. This is probably because the target customers of the Samui accommodation sector are from overseas, so price is not a strong emerging factor since they may appreciate the currency exchange. One possible reason product strategy did not have support is the character of the sun and beach hotels in Samui, and customers enjoy outdoor activities as much as they can (e.g. sunbathing, swimming, motorcycling and day spa). Hence, they may not use or pay attention as much to the rooms or rooms' facilities.

The findings are useful for hoteliers in prioritising marketing actions that suit their target customers. Hotel managers now have empirical evidence suggesting that they should not focus on all marketing elements as they previously had. Rather, they may adopt the elements into 4Ps: Place, People and Physical Evidence, Process, and Promotion. By doing this, they can save time and money by making the right market decisions. The findings of this research may be of interest to government agencies that support small operators in this sector, for example, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, to find solutions to induce more tourists into the country and to Samui.

This study also has some limitations. First, while the results are based on both qualitative and quantitative methods, the beginning of the research included interviewing a group of eight small-hotel owners. This is due to constraints of time, budget and people. Interviewing more owners will give researchers a better understanding of marketing activities that small hotels currently use. Secondly, this study collected empirical data from only one famous island in Thailand. Hence, the results may not be generalised to other hotel businesses located elsewhere. Future research can collect data from small hotels in different islands across the country or in neighbouring countries to confirm the validity of the findings. Finally, it is suggested that further research to conduct similar studies in other service sectors, e.g. tour operators, airlines etc. would be useful. The research findings can be compared and contrasted with these results to gain a deeper understanding.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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