GUIDELINE FOR DEVELOPING MARKETING STRATEGY FOR THE ACCOMMODATION BUSINESS IN SAMUTSONGKHRAM PROVINCE FOR THE NEXT NORMAL

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis in Thailand, this study examines the challenges faced by hotel businesses, particularly in Samutsongkhram Province. The focus is on developing adaptive marketing strategies for the "Next Normal" to ensure sustained growth. The purpose of this paper is to determine the most appropriate approach for developing marketing strategies for accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province for the next normal by examining the relationship between changing consumer behavior after COVID-19 and the 4Es of marketing. 400 respondents who completed the questionnaires were used in this study, which used the quantitative analysis approach. The standard deviation, mean, and percentage were the descriptive statistics employed. At a statistically significant level of 0.05, the study's findings indicated that travelers with varying genders, ages, educational backgrounds, occupations, and average monthly incomes make different travel decisions. To address the post-pandemic challenges, the study recommended a marketing approach using the 4Es framework: experience, exchange, everywhere, and evangelism. These elements are designed to enhance the customer experience, drive engagement, build brand advocacy, and extend market reach. In summary, the proposed approach emphasizes tailoring marketing strategies to the unique circumstances of Samutsongkhram Province. By prioritizing customer experience and engagement, hotels can navigate the complexities of the post-COVID era and ensure their resilience and growth.

Keywords: Marketing strategy, Marketing mix (4Es), Accommodation businesses, Next normal

INTRODUCTION

The previous global scenario brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on economies worldwide, causing many countries to face extreme economic challenges. Governments worldwide responded to the crisis by implementing stringent lockdown measures,

particularly those aimed at controlling international travel. Consequently, there was an unprecedented contraction in global tourist numbers, significantly affecting the tourism sector, which had traditionally been a substantial contributor to national income. This scenario necessitated a shift in tourism behavior, leading to the adoption of altered business models that prioritize modern technology and underscore attention to health and hygiene. (Chetanont, S., Yamjameung, B. 2014)

Over the past five years, Thailand has experienced significant growth in its tourism industry, attracting a diverse range of visitors. The nation's vibrant culture, picturesque landscapes, and historical attractions have contributed to a steady influx of tourists. However, the tourism atmosphere changed dramatically with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting various sectors, including the hospitality industry. The hospitality industry in Thailand, encompassing hotels and resorts, faced unprecedented challenges due to the pandemic. The financial risks escalated as travel restrictions, lockdowns, and safety concerns led to a decline in tourist arrivals Tripattanasit, P., et al. (2022). In response to this unprecedented challenge, entrepreneurs within the tourism and hotel sectors have been compelled to swiftly adapt their business strategies. This adaptation involves various measures, such as price reductions, a shift in service focus toward the domestic tourism market, cost-cutting initiatives, and diversification into related revenue-generating activities. Some hotels, particularly those in the 4-5-star category, have innovatively introduced "work from hotel" services, in contrast to the prevalent "work from home" trend. Additionally, collaborations with online food ordering applications for hotel restaurants have been established. (Phophan, K., et al. 2023).

Moreover, Thai tourist behaviors have undergone discernible transformations. Notable changes include a clear preference for local travel, driven by international travel restrictions and health concerns. Health and safety considerations have gained significance, influencing destination choices that prioritize hygiene measures Ninaroon, P., & Boonying, J. (2023). Embracing technology has become integral, with Thai tourists relying heavily on digital platforms for various aspects of travel planning. Flexibility in booking arrangements is paramount, reflecting the prevailing uncertainty, and a preference for nature, outdoor activities, and wellness experiences has gained prominence Weerasophon, W. (2021) Additionally, there is a growing interest in community engagement and cultural immersion, aligning with sustainable and responsible travel practices. Economic uncertainties have led to value-based travel choices, emphasizing budget considerations without compromising safety. This complex interplay of factors underscores the nuanced and evolving landscape of Thai tourist behavior in the post-pandemic era.

Samut Songkhram Province is the province with the least area in Thailand. It has an area of only 416.7 square kilometers, or 260,442 rai, approximately 0.08 percent of the entire country's area. Located in the lower part of the central region, there are only 3 districts: Mueang Samut Songkhram District, Amphawa District, and Bang Khonthi District. It is located on the shore of the Gulf of Thailand. Around the mouth of the Mae Klong River, Samut Songkhram Province has natural tourist attractions. History, architecture, culture, traditions, and handicrafts for Thai and foreign tourists to visit, such as Amphawa Floating Market, Tha Kha Floating Market, Chulamanee Temple, Bang Kung Camp, Siam In-Chan Twin Memorial, Don Hoi Lod, etc. During the outbreak of COVID-19, tourism and hotel businesses, as well as various tourist attractions, have been temporarily closed due to a lack of tourists. Including strict measures that greatly affect tourism activities. However, it is still a tourist attraction that many people are interested in, but it must comply with the established measures as shown in Table 1 Samut Songkhram Tourism Statistics: 2017-2021.

Table 1

Samut Songkhram Tourism Statistics: 2017-2021

Details	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
No. of Visitors	1,935,160	2,048,721	2,074,134	1 ,309,163	881,906
- Thai	1,886,356	1,997,484	2,019,338	1 ,300,410	881,252
- Foreigner	48,804	51,237	54,796	8 ,753	654
Revenue (Million Baht)	2,736.69	3,018.71	3,081	1,724	935
- Thai	2,665.03	2,939.46	2,996.46	1,707.78	933.71
- Foreigner	71.66	79.25	84.95	16.67	1.58

According to Table 1 Samut Songkhram Tourism Statistics (2017–2021), it shows the number of visitors in 2017–2021, which dramatically declined from 2020–2021, because of COVID-19. Although the floating market attractions in Samutsongkhram Province have already adjusted according to the measures in the future after this situation, adjustments to marketing strategies to present a new image of the floating market in line with the behavior and needs of tourists are still unclear. Despite the things that need to be accelerated to be used in the development of tourism, not only adjusting according to measures.

Even though strategic management is very important in hospitality businesses, few studies have focused on this issue Okumus, F., Altinay, L., Chathoth, P., & Koseoglu, M.A. (2018). Recognizing the imperative need for adaptive strategies in the "Next Normal," the research delves into marketing strategies tailored for the hotel industry. The focus is on adapting to evolving consumer behaviors and market dynamics. A theoretical framework guiding this approach is the marketing mix, specifically the 4Es—experience, exchange, everywhere, and evangelism.

Experience: This goes beyond the tangible features of a product and focuses on creating a memorable and positive interaction for the customer. It includes aspects such as the atmosphere, customer service, and emotional connections, aiming to provide a unique and favorable experience.

Exchange: While traditional marketing views exchange as a transaction of goods or services for money, in the 4Es model, it expands to encompass the overall value received by the customer. This value includes not only the product itself but the entire experience, perceived benefits, and emotional connection.

Everywhere: This could imply ensuring that a positive customer experience is consistently present across all touchpoints and interactions, whether online or offline. It emphasizes the need for a cohesive and integrated brand experience that extends across various channels, ensuring a seamless and uniform interaction with the brand at every stage of the customer’s journey.

Evangelism: Evangelism involves turning customers into brand advocates or ambassadors. Satisfied customers become promoters who willingly share their positive experiences with others. This word-of-mouth marketing contributes to building brand loyalty and expanding the customer base.

In conclusion, the most appropriate approach for developing marketing strategies for accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province involves a comprehensive understanding of the local context, utilizing the 4Es marketing mix as a strategic framework. Therefore, this paper delves into the profound effects of the COVID-19 crisis on accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram

province, Thailand, examining the appropriate strategies adopted by these establishments to navigate the unprecedented challenges.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To analyze the marketing strategies approaches of accommodation businesses in the area of Samutsongkhram Province.
2. To explore the attitudes of tourists towards the marketing strategies of accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to analyze the marketing strategy approaches of accommodation businesses in the area of Samutsongkhram Province as well as explore the attitudes of tourists towards the marketing strategies of accommodation businesses by studying the relationship between changing customer behavior after COVID-19 and the marketing mix of 4Es.

This study used the quantitative method of analysis by distributing a questionnaire to 400 respondents who were selected using convenience sampling. The sample group used in this research was visitors who stayed and experienced Samutsongkhram Province by using Taro Yamane's formula and determining the sampling error at the 95% confidence level. The descriptive statistics used in this research were percentage, mean and standard deviation, and correlation. The variables used in the research on the marketing mix of the 4Es are experience, exchange, everywhere, and evangelism.

RESULTS

According to the respondents' demographic profile, women made up 50.7 percent of the sample, while men made up 49.3 percent of the tourists. According to the age distribution, 41.8 percent of respondents were between the ages of 31 and 40, while 36.3 percent of respondents were between the ages of 21 and 30. Additionally, 12.8 percent of respondents were between the ages of 41 and 50, 4.85 percent were above the age of 60, and 1.75 percent were under the age of 20. In terms of marital status, married people made up the largest population (63.5%), followed by single people (32%), and widowed or divorced people (4.5%) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Basic information about respondents

Basic information	Number	Percentage
1.Gender		
• Male	203	50.7
• Female	197	49.3
• Others	0	0
2.Age		
• Under 20 years old	7	1.75
• 21-30 years old	145	36.3
• 31-40 years old	167	41.8
• 41-50 years old	51	12.8
• 51-60 years old	20	4.85

• Above 60 years old	10	2.5
3. Marital status		
• Single	128	32
• Married	254	63.5
• Widowed or divorced	18	4.5
4. Education Level		
• Below bachelor's degree	12	3
• Bachelor's degree	203	50.75
• Master's degree	178	44.50
• Doctoral degree	7	1.75
5. Occupation		
• Students	28	7
• Employees of private companies	125	31.25
• Government sector	175	43.75
• Business owner	72	18
6. Income		
• Below 15,000 THB	34	8.50
• 15,000 – 30,000 THB	180	45
• 30,001 – 45,000 THB	56	14
• 45,001 – 60,000 THB	68	17
• Above 60,000 THB	62	15.5

Travel Motivation: The majority of tourists, or 96 individuals, or 24% of the total, stated that they travel to revisit memories, which is followed by social media trends (94 individuals, or 23% of the total) and a preferred way of life (54 individuals, or 13.5%). 47 respondents, or 11.8%, reported engaging in fascinating activities next, followed by 34 respondents, or 8.5%, who reported trips, and 33 respondents, or 8.3%, who reported purchasing local goods. 31 individuals, or 7.8% of the total, based on their location of residence, and additional factors. consists of switching the working environment from the traditional style to a private one with 13 employees, or 3.3 percent of the workforce.

The preferred activities among tourists were examined to discern their primary motivations for travel. A predominant choice was dining out, with 28 percent of respondents, totaling 112 individuals, expressing a particular interest in culinary experiences. Following closely, 18.5 percent of tourists, equivalent to 74 people, favored engaging in photography at designated tourist service points. Lifestyle cruises emerged as another popular activity, capturing the interest of 67 respondents, or 16.8 percent. Additionally, shopping for souvenirs and local products garnered appeal, attracting 14.8 percent of tourists, accounting for 59 individuals. Visiting significant temples for religious observances constituted a preference for 9.8 percent, involving 39 respondents, while exploring important historical sites attracted 9.3 percent, involving 37 individuals. The act of purchasing local products, distinct from souvenirs, resonated with 8.3 percent of tourists, totaling 33 people. Finally, a minority, constituting 2 percent (13 individuals), expressed interest in miscellaneous activities such as observing the surroundings, engaging in conversations with local villagers, and appreciating riverfront architecture. This comprehensive analysis of favored activities provides valuable insights into the diverse preferences and motivations of tourists, serving as a foundation for further investigation in the study.

The analysis of mean and standard deviation of tourist demand with the marketing mix of accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province reveals an overall favorable perception, as evidenced by a high mean score of 3.93. When evaluating individual components of the marketing mix, the items are consistently ranked at a high level, in the following descending order:

Experience ($\bar{x}$ = 4.14): The component of experience garnered the highest mean score, indicating a particularly strong positive perception among tourists. This implies that tourists highly value and appreciate the experiential aspects offered by the accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province.

Safety and Hygiene ($\bar{x}$ = 3.92): Safety and hygiene considerations received a commendable mean score, signifying that tourists place a significant emphasis on these factors when evaluating the cleanliness and hygienic of the accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province, especially homestay, small hotels.

Increase Sales Opportunities (Everywhere) ($\bar{x}$ = 3.90): The aspect of increasing sales opportunities, encapsulated in the 'Everywhere' dimension, received a favorable mean score, suggesting that tourists perceive the market's efforts to enhance sales opportunities positively such as social media (Facebook, TikTok, etc.).

Evangelism ($\bar{x}$ = 3.84): The dimension of evangelism received a robust mean score, indicating that tourists exhibit positive attitudes toward becoming advocates or ambassadors for the accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province. So, they are prompted to revisit and turn out to be loyal guests.

Exchange ($\bar{x}$ = 3.83): The Exchange dimension received a noteworthy mean score, reflecting a positive perception among tourists regarding the value exchange associated with their engagement with the accommodation establishments. This dimension reflects the perceived value that tourists attribute to the pricing structure and overall exchange dynamics within the accommodation sector.

In summary, the findings underscore the overall positive evaluation of the marketing mix by tourists, with a notable emphasis on the experiential aspect. This nuanced analysis provides valuable insights into the specific dimensions that significantly influence tourist demand, offering implications for further enhancement of marketing strategies within the context of the accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In-depth analysis of the 4Es marketing mix shows that it has a significant impact on the needs of tourists seeking accommodation in Samutsongkhram province. Focus on experience, safety, and sales opportunities. Evangelism and exchange of values Identify areas for strategic focus and optimization within the marketing strategies of regional lodging businesses, as follows:

1. Create memorable experiences for customers. Safety of your stay: The rooms are clean and hygienic, certified by SHA+. The rooms are standard sizes. There are complete facilities, a good atmosphere, and good service standards. The staff are smiling and cheerful. Impressive service Consistent with the research of Natnicha Arakwanich (2021) and Anirut Phongpaew and colleagues (2020), the hotel provides room cleaning services every day and every hour in public areas. And also aligns with findings by Sasitorn Chetanont and Benjaporn Yamjameung (2014). Examining aspects of safety and hygiene reveals an overall high level of concern among tourists. The priorities, in descending order, include the insistence that operators and service providers consistently wear personal protective equipment. Moreover, over 50 percent of establishments within tourist attractions should adhere to Health and Safety Standards (SHA). Ensuring that attraction facilities meet SHA standards, including the installation of signs representing hygiene and safety precautions, as well as providing facilities for hand hygiene and temperature checks, is crucial to meeting tourist expectations and ensuring a safe and secure environment.

2. Easy access to customers Customers value the convenience of booking rooms through the official website and Facebook page, which is consistent with Puttinan's research. Panyaputtinun. (2017) the ability of customers to reserve rooms through the online system. It has the greatest impact on customer decisions. Hotels should have a reliable and accurate reservation system.

3. An assessment of tourist demand towards the marketing mix of accommodation businesses in Samutsongkhram Province, particularly within the context of customer motivation or Evangelism, reveals a consistently high level of interest. Tourists express their preferences in descending order, emphasizing the importance of establishing relationships with visitors. This involves initiatives such as contributing a portion of revenues from product purchases towards societal causes, facilitating workshops for hands-on experiences, and allowing tourists to engage in the creation of products they acquire. Activities such as accepting plastic donations for recycling further contribute to a sense of social responsibility among tourists, fostering sustainability at tourist attractions. Additionally, the creation of travel narratives through various service points, designated walking routes, and strategic zoning for product distribution aims to generate interest and enhance the overall convenience of purchasing products.

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