

SERVICES EXPERIENCES IN SOUTH-CENTRAL SIBERIA: DISCOVERY, DELIGHT, DISMAY

Lynnette F. Brouwer
University of Wisconsin-Stout

INTRODUCTION

“The Russian language does not have a word for maintenance” (personal communication, Maria Schweikert, Russian language professor, November 12, 2001). In the world of services management, that says a great deal. In their analysis of Russian citizens working in Russia for a Danish company, Michailova and Anisimova (1999) observe that “Russian middle managers and specialists do not respect long-term plans with uncertain outcomes” (p. 12). This stance toward planning and ambiguity create a challenging service industry environment, especially considering Patterson’s (2001) characterization of the service delivery process as “intangible [and] ephemeral”, and Berry’s (1995) emphasis on creating a concrete service strategy, leading toward a deliberate strategic direction.

Numerous other values and traditions complicate the planning and execution of quality service in the Russian Federation. Examining challenges facing management education in the Czech Republic, Marcic (1995) notes the Czech culture, not unlike Russia’s, “has centuries of punishments for ‘wrong thinking’”. It would be surprising, then, to find creativity at its peak, or inventive solutions to be commonplace” (p. 5 of 9). This tradition flies in the face of the core service value of innovation observed by Berry (1999) in excellent service firms. Trust is another such concept. While Berry (1999) notes trust-based relationships are a core organizational quality in excellent service firms, Russia has a long history of its citizens being unable to trust either formal leaders or colleagues (e.g., Curtis (Ed), 1998; Freeland, 2000; Ginzberg, 1981; Kets De Vries, 2000, 2001; Kort, 1998; Puffer (Ed), 1996; Solzhenitsyn, 1978). Groonroos (1994) notes, “service management . . . makes quality of service, as perceived *by the customer* [italics added], the number one driving force for the operations of the business” (p. 6). In a centralized command economy historically characterized by chronic shortages of goods (e.g., Barner-Barry & Hody, 1995; Service, 1998), service has not even been part of the equation, much less a *customer* focus emphasizing such elements as responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy noted in Berry (1995).

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A SERVICES CONSUMER IN RUSSIA

Through the author’s recent travels to and in south-central Siberia via stopovers in Moscow, she truly experienced this usually fascinating, yet often frustrating, cultural service awareness and execution gap. In this abstract, she analyzes her experiences against three services management frameworks:

- Service Package (e.g., Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 1998),
- Service Dimensions (e.g., Berry, 1995),
- Success-sustaining Values (Berry, 1999).

The author’s travels have taken her through Moscow (population 8,717,000 (statistics accessed from Centre for Russian Studies web site)) to both rural and urban areas in south-central Siberia, including the cities of Irkutsk (634,000) and Ulan Ude (386,000), as well as through the country side and to remote villages. She purchased numerous services in a wide variety of settings, including:

- Transportation—air, train, local taxi, private driver, river ferry
- Lodging—hotel, bed and breakfast, homestay, train

- Food and beverage—bed and breakfast, restaurant, room service, roadside café, private homes
- Retail sales—open community market, indoor market, kiosk, street vender, shops

Specific examples which place her experience in the frameworks referred to previously are abundant. For the purposes of this abstract, four themes are discussed.

When promises are few, then *reliability* as “the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately” (Berry, 1995, p. 79), is almost a moot point. Essentially, Siberia service providers do not advertise—do not boast their quality, amenities or value. With no claims to deliver on particular services, there are no promises to be broken. However, international travelers may bring with them *reliability expectations* from their countries of origin or from previous travels, thereby *perceiving* poor reliability. The author found herself in this position when she took note of her reactions to the complete absence of public toilet facilities in Ulan Ude, a city of nearly 400,000, and the systematic lack of hot water (all summer, beginning the day after she arrived) even in the best hotel in town. The explanation for public consumption is that the city’s central water heater is turned off to conserve coal; in fact, the director of the Buryat Opera and Ballet, who lived in an apartment at the center of the city previously reserved for top party officials, was apparently on a different water circulation system as she *did* have hot water. Such discrepancies in service, acknowledged as normal by our Russian hosts, further negatively impact the *reliability* assessment of many international travelers, especially those who come from cultures low on the power distance dimension as identified by Hofstede (1983).

The author has experienced safety not so much as a security issue, as a maintenance and capital investment one, inextricably linking *tangibles* with *assurance*. While she had already spent two weeks in south central Siberia in 1998 and was well into her second two-week trip in 2001, and had witnessed buildings, vehicles and roads in dismal disrepair, she was still taken aback upon seeing the ferry linking two key roads, which would transport her across the fast and wide Selenga River. A region clearly in a preindustrial or subsistence economy (e.g., Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 1998), and therefore characterized more by raw muscle power than machines and technology, there is neither the capital to invest in a bridge (or a modern ferry), nor the value and awareness which might see such contemporary transportation links as vital to a thriving economy. Instead, a very old little boat with a very old big rumbling engine, tied with cables to a sort of ramshackle pontoon, made a Herculean effort to keep the current from carrying the ferry and its passengers downstream while capitalizing on that same current to push the ferry across the river. The author didn’t have the presence of mind to be scared on the way over; it was on the way back with the river swelled from flooding in the mountains that she wondered if the little boat and the cable would hold up under the pressure. And she knew that if they didn’t, she and her traveling companions would just be among the many anonymous citizens who fall victim to the elements every day in this rough and romantic place called Russia.

The *implicit service* frequently, though unintentionally, delivered was the sense of adventure and discovery sometimes resulting in delight and other times in fear and exhaustion. Nearly a year later, the author is only now gaining a deeper understanding of the reasons she was exhausted for the remainder of the summer after her May 2001 trip. While some of it was physical exhaustion due to the rigors of the trip (with a four-year-old!), that’s not all of it. It is the author’s contention that much of that exhaustion has to do with the implicit services she experienced, some anticipated but many others not. *Implicit services* can be thought of as the “psychological benefits that the customer may sense only vaguely, [e.g.] status . . . privacy . . . and worry-free [services]” (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 1998, pp. 26-27). One might add to this notion of implicit services that, just like explicit services, they may be positive, negative or simply confusing. Such were the implicit services the author experienced, among them being feelings of mystery, awe, magic, shock, fear, joy, oneness, isolation, love, rejection, relief, anticipation, and as noted in the title of this paper, discovery, delight and dismay. Just as physical exercise requires energy and with over-exertion may result in exhaustion, so emotional

exercise. While a certain amount releases positive endorphins, overwhelming emotional demands can result in collapse, leaving the system in deficit and a state of chronic or acute fatigue which is debilitating. As the author anticipates another two-week trip in May of this year (2002), she feels much better prepared to encounter these implicit services equipped with this level of understanding of their potential impacts.

Russian history and culture is mysterious and scary, enchanting and enticing (e.g., Dabars & Vokhmina, 1995; Kennan, 1891/1958; Taplin, 1998). There are many dimensions upon which one can analyze it; the *values* framework discussed by Berry (1999) is one. He describes *joy* as “uplifting the human spirit” (p. 26) and *integrity* as “fair play” (p. 34), and further discusses trust-based relationships as key to sustained success in the service firms he analyzed. “Relationships are important to companies because they are the link to the future . . . [and] trust is important because a company cannot build true relationships without it” (p. 124). Neither joy, integrity nor building a basis for trust are embedded in Russian culture; in fact, quite the opposite (Kets de Vries, 2001). Yet it’s more complicated than this, with the public persona in this regard quite different from the private one: sober, cool and guarded in public; playful, warm and candid in private. “The fact that everyone divided their lives into public and private parts gave the Soviet way of life legitimacy” (Markowitz, 2000, p. 213). This is reflected in the contrast in fair play between the public and private face, which can be characterized in this common Russian expression: “We pretend to work; they pretend to pay us” (e.g., Kort, 1998). If Russians could carry their personal persona over to the business-place, much progress could be made in building a services infrastructure based on the values discussed by Berry. Yet this culture is generally characterized by high power distance as identified by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) justified by a complex and historically-imbedded perception of the individual in which rulers and landowners were seen as inherently good, or at least smart, and serfs or peasants seen as, if not inherently bad, then at the very least inherently unable to determine good from bad, hence a good decision from a bad one (e.g., Curtis (Ed.), 1998; Kort, 1998). It is a huge leap to fair play and trust across Russia’s social and hierarchical strata. And if the shocking history of torture and murder under the czars and, more recently, Stalin weren’t enough to make joy a scarce commodity (e.g., Ginzberg, 1981; Lincoln, 1993; Sano, 1997; Solzhenitsyn, 1978), the challenges of life in the rigors of Siberia (e.g., Taylor, 1999) ensure that whatever joy is expressed is well-earned!

CONCLUSION

As east and west continue to build economic and social partnerships, it becomes more critical that we examine service delivery across a wide variety of cultures. The result of such an examination in developing economies like the Russian Federation and Newly Independent States can be *new service development* as defined by Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2000). This might include services which are additional offerings, radical changes in the existing delivery process or incremental improvements which customers perceive as being new. Further, an analysis of services using such standard frameworks as service dimensions (Berry, 1995), the service package (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 1998), and values-based analysis (Berry, 1999) will help bring the Russian service industry, a phrase which is now almost an oxymoron, into membership in the emerging global service economy (e.g., Barner-Barry, 1995; Clark, 1999; Conquest, 2000; Remnick, 1997). This, in turn, has promise to help a struggling preindustrial economy emerge toward a postindustrial one, characterized by quality of life measured in terms of health, education and recreation (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 1998).

There is much room for growth in existing services offered in the Russian Federation, as well as great opportunity for both radical changes and incremental improvements to the sparse landscape of current services. Russia has a history and culture grounded not only in preindustrial raw muscle power and industrial machine technology (e.g., Curtis (Ed.), 1998; Lincoln, 1993;

Service, 1998), but also in postindustrial qualities such as artistic and creative use of human labor (e.g., Art Center College of Design and Gosudarstvennyi russkii muzei, 1998; Bown, 1991; Bowlt (Ed.), 1976; Buerman, 1979; Buryatia Ministry of Culture, 2001; Lincoln, 1999) and the community (or collective) as the recognized unit of social and economic life (e.g. Barner-Barry & Hody, 1995; Puffer (Ed.), 1996). *Privacy* is another word which does not exist in the Russian language (Markowitz, 2000). With these foundations there is tremendous promise for the building of a strong services infrastructure in this great nation.

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