

# Using design thinking to improve the travel customer experience

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Customers have changed over time. Today, customers are looking for a meaningful and exceptional experience, not just lip service from their various platforms or providers. Customers now have access to various choices of services all over the world, so a standard offering of a hotel room or a cheap international flight is not enough to stand out from other destination marketing organisations (DMOs).



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The emergence of real-time data has changed the playing field, giving customers immediate access to information on price and quality of service – with user perception around the quality of service a major contributing factor in decision making.

The tourism industry is one of the oldest industries in the world. Queen Hatshepsut made her first cruise for peace and tourism to the Land of Punt in 1480 BC, then travel grew steadily with advancements in rail, automobile and coach travel until another milestone changed travel forever – Lufthansa's first scheduled air service in 1918. Destinations have opened up around the world, and tourism is now a significant driver of socio-economic development through job creation, infrastructure development and provision of income.

Design thinking in tourism is an approach for improving and revolutionising the way service providers provide travel services. The key to this approach is that it keeps the customer at its core. The process of enhancing customer experience is all about creating a superior service experience for the customer and, at the same time, offering a clear and viable advantage.

## Benefits of design thinking in improving the customer experience

The tourism industry is a service industry. Each service within the sector is "a useful human-centred activity" which meets a specific need and should be built around empathy, reliability, response to customer expectations, professionalism and trust.

According to Tim Brown, President and CEO of IDEO, design thinking is "a methodology that imbues the full spectrum of innovation activities with human-centred design ethos". Which means that service providers can't drive innovation and deliver customers the kind of experience they are looking for, if they don't have a thorough understanding of what customers need, want, like and dislike.

Unlike many industries which place the organisation at the centre, the tourism industry is customer-centric. It is not enough to have a regulated sector, it's about questioning those regulations from a customer point of view and then creating solutions that will improve customer experiences. If achieved, service providers can build trust, relevancy and superior customer experience.

Design thinking serves as a significant answer to the "experience economy". It is no longer a question of how smoothly you have your office running, it is about differentiation, which brings the focus to learning by doing, prototyping, creating new ideas, gaining insights and moving forward.

## Co-creation process in creating a lasting experience for the consumer

An impressive amount of services are provided within the tourism industry, and none of them can stand alone. Many are part of a network, dependent on direct and indirect partners to provide a lasting experience. The "interconnection" within the industry can make it difficult to deliver the desired experience for the customers. Hence the need for co-creative involvement of partners and stakeholders to map out the consumer journey and experience.

Service providers cannot continue to work in isolation. It is time to work together with partners and competitors, to ask for help and to pool resources. Co-creativity is pivotal to creating a lasting customer experience through the sharing of knowledge and know-how.

According to Thomas Sprangers of Destination Think: "For a DMO, having all stakeholders speak the universal language of their visitor is invaluable for actually influencing the destination experience and will work wonders for relationships with your stakeholders and also the relationships between stakeholders. With design thinking, your DMO becomes the glue that holds your destination together."



### Design-thinking as a strategic advantage

Rirhandzu Shingwenyana 27 May 2019



## How design thinking can help service providers

It is no longer news that service providers are losing their relevancy and customers because of the pace of change, reach of technology, and a new way of thinking. Information regarding a planned trip can be found quickly and easily without the consumer leaving the comfort of his or her home, car or office. It is time service providers start looking at a "mobile centre" rather than brick and mortar office space, which will be more productive and reduce administrative costs.

As much as customers desire a "worth it experience" during their trip, design thinking can help service providers plan and design the "before the trip experience" and "after the trip experience."

The tourism industry is a service industry and cannot be treated as a product-based industry. Design thinking leads to a more innovative approach in the creation of relevant, timely and cutting-edge services. For service providers to be successful, they need a customer-centred method that uses design thinking to have a better understanding of the customer journey.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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