

Analysis of Service Marketing Strategies in the Senior Study Travel Tour Market

Rui Ye*

Chongqing University of Science and Technology, Chongqing 401331, China

*Corresponding author: Rui Ye, yerui3369@163.com

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Abstract: Senior study travel, as an emerging form of tourism, combines the dual characteristics of educational learning and leisure travel. It not only meets the elderly's desire for spiritual and cultural life and self-fulfillment but also promotes the construction of a healthy aging society. This study comprehensively uses methods such as literature analysis, interviews, and case studies to analyze the current status and existing problems of the senior study travel market. Based on the 7Ps service marketing model, it explores service marketing strategies for the senior study travel market, aiming to provide reference and guidance for related tourism enterprises to supply more attractive senior study travel services.

Keywords: Senior tourism; Study travel; Service marketing; Market strategy

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1. Introduction

With profound changes in the global population structure, aging has become an undeniable social phenomenon. China, as the country with the largest elderly population in the world, shows a more significant aging trend. It is estimated that by 2035, the population aged 60 and above will exceed 400 million. This not only reveals the severe challenges of population aging but also provides vast opportunities for the development of the senior market. In particular, the senior tourism market is gradually becoming a new growth point in the tourism industry.

In this context, senior study travel, as a new form of tourism that integrates senior education and senior tourism, has enormous market potential. However, compared to the traditional tourism market, the senior study travel market has its unique attributes and demands. Senior consumers pay more attention to the comfort and safety of the trip, as well as the personalization and professionalism of the services. These characteristics impose higher requirements on the formulation of service marketing strategies.

Therefore, an in-depth exploration of the particularities of the senior study travel market and its demands for service marketing strategies is of great significance for promoting the healthy development of the senior study travel market and meeting the diverse needs of senior tourists. Currently, research on service marketing strategies in the senior study travel market is relatively scarce. The existing service marketing strategies in the

market often lack specificity and effectiveness, making it difficult to meet the actual needs of senior tourists.

Hence, this study aims to address this research gap by conducting in-depth market research and literature analysis, combined with service marketing theory models, to systematically analyze and discuss the service marketing strategies of the senior study travel market. The goal is to provide beneficial references for the continuous development and optimization of the senior study travel market.

2. Service marketing theory

The 7Ps service marketing theory was proposed by Booms and Bitner in 1981. It extends the traditional 4Ps marketing theory (Product, Price, Promotion, Place) by adding three elements closely related to the characteristics of services: People, Process, and Physical Evidence. The specific content of each element is shown in **Table 1**^[1]. The 7Ps model focuses on the product itself while placing greater emphasis on services, fully considering the unique characteristics of service products, such as intangibility, variability, inseparability, and perishability. Senior study travel, belonging to the tertiary industry, conforms to these characteristics. Therefore, using service marketing theory as the entry point for this study provides strong theoretical guidance.

Table 1. 7Ps marketing theory element content

Elements	Specifics
Products	Fields, quality, standards, brands, service offerings, guarantees
Price	Discounts, payment terms, perceived customer value, quality-price ratio, differentiation
Channels	Location, accessibility, distribution channels, scope of distribution
Promotion	Advertising, staffing, publicity, public relations, sales promotion
People	Staffing, Attitude and Behaviour, Reliability, Responsibility, Communication
Physical presentation	Environment, facilitation tools, effective guidance
Service process	Policies, procedures, employee discretion, activity flow, customer engagement, after-sales service

3. Overview and analysis of senior study travel market

3.1. Concept definition and market overview

Currently, there is no unified concept of senior study travel in academia. With the improvement in living standards, seniors increasingly focus on health and exercise, and the elderly group shows a trend of becoming younger. Based on the analysis and definition of the concepts of “seniors,” “study travel,” and “senior tourism,” this study defines seniors as those aged 55 and above. “Senior study travel” refers to tourism activities undertaken by seniors for learning and research purposes. This form of travel not only provides traditional sightseeing experiences but, more importantly, incorporates educational elements such as cultural learning, skill enhancement, and historical exploration to enrich the spiritual and cultural life of seniors.

Through literature analysis and research, it was found that compared to Europe and the United States, the development of senior study travel in China is relatively late, and related research and market development are not yet mature. The current domestic market status is as follows: Firstly, senior study travel products are diverse, including sightseeing, cultural experiences, nature exploration, health and wellness, and skill learning, but the market still primarily focuses on leisure sightseeing. Secondly, senior study travel is mainly carried out by senior universities and community organizations, with travel agencies and some private enterprises beginning to launch study travel products, but the market concentration is low. Thirdly, brand building has just

started, and local senior study travel brands have not yet formed a significant presence, and the market is still in need of cultivation.

The characteristics of seniors participating in study travel are diverse. In terms of time, most are retired and have flexible schedules, making it easy to travel during off-peak seasons and for long periods, facilitating deep experiences. Economically, most have pensions, savings, and support from children, making them financially independent. Younger seniors, in particular, have a significant demand for upgraded consumption, with varied hobbies and a strong willingness to spend on leisure and entertainment. In terms of needs, they tend to seek projects that combine in-depth historical and cultural experiences with health and wellness, value safety, comfort, and social interaction, prefer slow-paced, deep travel experiences, and show high demand for personalized and customized services. They are also gradually accepting the integration of technology into travel to enhance the quality of the experience, generally pursuing a high-quality study experience that emphasizes both knowledge growth and psychological satisfaction ^[2].

3.2. Problem analysis

3.2.1. Insufficient development momentum

The senior study travel market lacks momentum mainly due to a small number of participants, a shortage of professional talent, and low market awareness. Currently, senior study travel is mainly led by senior universities and communities, lacking sufficient motivation and investment in resource integration, product development, and market promotion. Additionally, the industry-specific talent training system is immature, the profession lacks attractiveness, has high interdisciplinary requirements, and lacks clear career development paths, resulting in a shortage of professionals with education, tourism knowledge, and understanding of the physical and mental characteristics of seniors. This is a key factor limiting the improvement of service quality. Lastly, some seniors may not fully understand the concept and value of study travel, leading to low participation willingness and misconceptions, limiting the market's growth potential. Market education is needed to enhance their awareness and participation willingness.

3.2.2. Product design and service deficiencies

In terms of study travel course settings, domestic senior study content focuses on wellness and arts, neglecting re-employment and professional humanities subjects, with knowledge updates and course designs being relatively monotonous compared to international standards. Products do not fully consider the special needs of seniors, such as physical limitations, health conditions, and interests. Program designs often lack innovation and depth, mainly offering superficial sightseeing rather than meaningful learning and exploration. The professional levels of lecturers and tour guides are uneven and lack an in-depth understanding of gerontology, education, and tourism management. Furthermore, the service quality management system is not well-developed, lacking effective monitoring of service processes, customer feedback, and continuous improvement. These issues lead to a weak overall experience of senior study travel, hindering brand development.

3.2.3. Market irregularities

While the senior study travel market is expanding rapidly, it lacks unified industry standards and regulatory mechanisms, resulting in inconsistent service quality. Many projects exhibit "travel without learning" phenomena or are overpriced and subpar, merely offering regular tourism services under the guise of study travel, failing to meet seniors' deep-seated needs for knowledge exploration and cultural experiences. Moreover, insufficient market regulation leads to frequent issues such as false advertising and low price transparency, harming senior consumers' rights.

3.2.4. Cost control challenges

Ensuring the health and safety of senior travelers and providing high-quality service experiences require substantial resources, including professional medical support, customized course designs, safe and comfortable transportation, and accommodation facilities, all of which increase operational costs. Additionally, due to the unique nature of the senior study travel market, service providers need extra investment in market research, product development, and talent training to meet seniors' personalized needs and ensure service quality. However, seniors are generally price-sensitive, which may limit profit margins. Balancing cost control with uncompromised service quality to achieve both economic and social benefits is a critical issue for senior study service providers.

4. Service marketing strategies for the senior study travel market

4.1. Product strategy

Senior study travel product development should segment market needs and deepen customized services. For example, Road Scholar, the largest senior study travel organization in the United States, hires experts to meticulously design 62 categories of learning topics, allowing each participant to choose courses and travel routes according to their interests and needs. Additionally, companies should design courses and activities of varying difficulty and depth based on the learning levels and interests of the senior group to meet personalized needs. Road Scholar also considers seniors' physical conditions, categorizing each project by activity level and content, allowing seniors to choose based on their physical status. It classifies activity levels into four grades, with Grade 1 involving minimal activity, mainly car travel or indoor activities, and Grade 4 involving outdoor adventures. Furthermore, study travel products should be regularly evaluated, and feedback collected to continuously optimize and iterate products and services based on seniors' actual experiences and changing needs.

4.2. Price strategy

Price strategy should fully consider seniors' economic conditions, perceived value, and payment habits. Set prices based on the overall value of the travel experience rather than just costs, ensuring that the educational content, cultural experiences, health promotion activities, high-end accommodations, and dining services reflect high cost-performance value, making seniors feel they are getting their money's worth. Additionally, offers different levels of service packages, such as basic, comfort, and luxury packages, clearly defining service content and prices for each tier to cater to different budgets and needs. Encourage advance planning by offering significant discounts for bookings made months or even a year in advance, reducing operational uncertainties while securing customers. Establish a membership system, rewarding returning customers through points accumulation and repeat participation discounts to enhance customer loyalty.

4.3. Channel strategy

Channel strategy should consider the special needs and behavior patterns of seniors, building a comprehensive, convenient, and considerate contact and service system. For distribution channels, they can be divided into social media and online platforms, direct channels, and cooperative channels. For direct channels, companies can provide sales and consultation services through their own websites, apps, or physical stores. For cooperative channels, companies can distribute senior study travel products by partnering with travel agencies, senior communities, and retirement institutions, expanding market coverage. Additionally, use social media and online travel platforms with large user bases to quickly reach potential customer groups through big data analysis.

Regularly evaluate the sales effectiveness and customer satisfaction of each distribution channel and adjust and optimize resources and strategies accordingly.

4.4. Promotion strategy

When developing promotion strategies, focus on building trust, conveying value, and stimulating the interest of the target group, considering seniors' specific information reception habits and preferences. Advertise on media platforms frequently visited by seniors, such as non-prime time TV slots, senior magazines, and radio programs. Moreover, as of December 2022, the number of elderly internet users aged 60 and above in China has reached 153 million, indicating that more seniors are embracing digital convenience. Companies can promote online platforms active among elderly users, such as Meipian and WeChat, by creating warm, positive videos or graphic content, sharing real senior study travel stories and experiences, and showcasing the physical and mental benefits and social interaction value of travel ^[4]. For word-of-mouth marketing, encourage participating seniors and their family members to share positive feedback, using satisfied customers' recommendations as powerful promotional tools, incentivized through a referral reward mechanism. Additionally, establish partnerships with communities, senior universities, and retiree associations to promote through their events or set up promotional booths, increasing trust and visibility. Organize free or low-cost "experience day" activities, allowing seniors to experience part of the study content firsthand, such as cultural workshops or short trips, to attract sign-ups.

4.5. People strategy

The strategy for service personnel should ensure that every individual interacting with elderly customers provides an experience that exceeds expectations. First, the senior study travel service team should be diverse and professional, composed of education experts, travel consultants, and health advisors to offer comprehensive and professional services. Retired teachers and industry experts can be introduced as guest lecturers or consultants to enhance the authority and appeal of the courses. Second, encourage seniors to actively express their interests and needs during study tours by establishing "assistant" roles, filled by young students or volunteers, to promote intergenerational exchange and increase the interactivity and enjoyment of activities ^[5]. Lastly, emphasize the positive impact of employee motivation and care on service quality by recognizing employees who provide excellent service and receive high praise from senior participants, thereby boosting team enthusiasm and loyalty.

4.6. Physical evidence strategy

The key to the physical evidence strategy is to create a safe, comfortable learning environment and provide clear, convenient auxiliary tools to enhance the seniors' perception of the study tour arrangements. First, ensure a safe, detailed learning environment with elder-friendly learning spaces. Establish visible service standards, such as safety measures and health services, and provide equipment suitable for seniors, like magnifying glasses, hearing aids, and easy-to-read printed materials and display screens. Second, provide detailed study tour manuals and materials, including information about the destinations, course schedules, and safety precautions. Use multimedia materials such as videos and pictures to showcase the highlights of the study tour, increasing the seniors' engagement. Design certificates and souvenirs as tangible proof of the seniors' study tour experiences ^[5].

4.7. Process strategy

In terms of the service process, companies should establish a standardized service procedure, covering

every stage from customer inquiry, registration, travel preparation, and on-site service to post-activity feedback collection, with clear guidelines and quality standards to ensure consistent and high-quality service. Empower employees with decision-making authority to flexibly handle various unexpected situations, such as customer health issues or special needs, thereby improving service responsiveness and customer satisfaction. Additionally, enhancing customer participation during activities is crucial. Use interactive forms such as group discussions and role-playing to promote communication and cooperation among participants. For after-sales service, establish a long-term care system, including follow-up calls or emails after the study tour to understand the participants' subsequent feelings and suggestions. Create exclusive social platforms or alumni groups for participants to share their study tour achievements, maintain the learning community's activity level, and regularly push related learning materials or invite them to online seminars, extending the educational and social functions of the study tour.

5. Conclusion

This study, through investigating and analyzing the senior study travel market, reveals the problems and challenges in its service marketing strategies and proposes corresponding strategy recommendations based on the 7Ps service marketing model. Although a systematic analysis of service marketing strategies for the senior study travel market has been conducted, there are still some limitations: the research is mainly based on literature analysis and interviews, lacking large-scale empirical surveys and data analysis, which may not fully reflect the actual situation of the senior study travel market. Moreover, since the domestic senior study travel market is still in its early development stage, there is insufficient empirical research and long-term tracking data, making it difficult to verify the effectiveness of certain strategies. Future research can deepen in the following directions:

- (1) Strengthening empirical research by combining quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews to collect more data, thereby more accurately depicting market contours and consumer preferences.
- (2) Innovating theoretical models by exploring service marketing theory models more suitable for the market's reality, considering the senior study travel market's uniqueness and development needs, to provide more effective guidance for its service marketing.
- (3) Monitoring market dynamics continuously, adjusting service marketing strategies promptly according to changing policy environments and market demands, which is key to the sustainable development of the senior study travel market.

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