MEASURING SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION PERFORMANCE METRICS IN CRUISING INDUSTRY

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Abstract

This article examines service quality in regard to cruise lines service performance from a customer perceived satisfaction perspective. The article provides a descriptive observation based on the empirical developments within the research community in terms of theory and practice underlining the service quality as a subjective trait, depending on a series of influential factors and market determinants. The first part of the article focuses on a theoretical explanation of the dimensions linked to service excellence within the cruising industry and the importance of market segmentation determinants in relation to building sustainable relationships with the customers in all phases of the service life cycle. This section is followed by a scrutiny of perceived value and quality management, from an efficient marketing mix perspective. Theories and thoughts of experts of the crosscultural field are highly regarded, providing a detailed look at the motivational factors of consumers purchase decision inspired by the four psychosomatic factors: learning, motivation, perception and attitude. Service quality, customer satisfaction and experiential travel receive outmost attention in cruise hospitality and travel organizations, as customers' preferences are influenced by the development of marketing tools and the impact of social media on travelers' behavior, top management makes it a priority of increasing their focus on diversifying the offer in order to make their products and services appear unique. Conclusions are drawn and discussed following a brief overview of cruising industry's' trends within the contemporary transformational global business context.

Keywords: Cruise lines, performance, customer service quality, perceived value, experience, intrinsic motivation.

JEL Classification: D81, D84, D91, Z32

Introduction

Although at the moment the cruising industry seems to be severely hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, over the last 10 years the cruise industry sector had become more competitive than all the global hospitality organizations and shore-side hotels, due to the unique variety of services offered on board in addition to the diversity of the exotic ports of call visited during the cruises. The cruising industry had been by far the fastest developing sector in the entire global hospitality industry and its contribution to the US economy in 2018 was \$23.95 billion, \$55.5 billion in 2019 and the demand for cruising worldwide has increased from 16.3 million passengers to 28.5 million over a ten-year period (CLIA 2019). Since 1990 the cruise industry has been developing rapidly transforming its identity and purpose from a mode of transport into a modern way of travel and lifestyle, as cruise ships are being considered luxurious resorts and impressive size floating hotels.

Cruise ships are majestic luxury hotels, decorated and designed in astonishing style and elegance. Millions of tourists from all countries around the world are attracted to cruise each year. Sailing towards various touristic attractions around the globe the floating hotels offer its passengers a memorable way to spend their holidays in a pleasant and enjoyable cruise travel environment.

Home to leisure and fun, wellness lifestyle and relaxation, the amazing mega-liners provide year-round unique experiences with their indoor malls, cinemas, restaurants, spas, swimming pools, live entertainment and a variety of organized fun activities. In addition to the on-board facilities and services cruise liners are well-known for visiting some of the most beautiful locations on earth,

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offering its guests the privilege of admiring breathtaking scenery and poetic landscapes, as well as modern metropolitan and multicultural port cities. The economic value added to the visited ports by the transit passengers is debatable comparing to that of home ports where the ships docking time is longer thus generating a more consistent economic value and local employment (OECD/ITF, 2016). The brands, which include the most recognized cruise companies in North America, South America, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain and Australia, provide a wide range of holiday packages attracting millions of visitors annually.

Comparatively, the land hotel resorts and other types of hospitality entities available to the general public are limited to operate on either single or multiple locations being regulated by the local laws that may diminish the business strategies and the spectrum of possibilities offered to their clients.

Before the current pandemic generated crisis traditional corporations and multi-leveled global organizations have been for the past years struggling to deal with uncertainty and maintain an optimized level of efficiency and profitability, while various private enterprises have ceased the opportunity and turned it into their advantage, by successfully launching their services and products (Gunther McGrath & MacMillan, 2004).

This ending decade witnessed everything around us evolving at a staggering pace and by far the rate at which technology changes had doubled in the last few years, essentially affecting industries, economies, markets, but most importantly, the way we live, we do business and how we position ourselves within the environment (Carnall, 1990).

Service excellence within cruising industry and the importance of market segmentation determinants

This study investigates and highlights aspects related to the dimensions of service quality within the cruising industry, making reference to the importance of identifying the cruise travelers' profile and their intrinsic motivation, factors seen as key determinants in their perceived satisfaction and overall rating of their cruise experience.

Re-engineering traditional industries, disruptive technologies, emerging markets are often sought out by passionate and relentless entrepreneurs who think outside the box and often manage to create new products and services referred to as quantum innovation or completely transform new business models (David, 2004).

According to (Neely et al, (1995) the measurement process of quantifying action using a series of metrics that leads to performance in hospitality industry is an important component of the decision-making process. As new emerging business entities increasingly develop achieving greater complexity, the strategic choices become more significant and impactful. The business context analysis may facilitate predictability to a certain extent, to the point where it triggers a proactive intent to shape the character of the business and its future evolution by making insightful and far-sighted choices (Krass, 1999).

Travelers profile analysis had been receiving increasing attention as cruise brands are designing their services based on their intrinsic motivation and behavioral aspects that differentiate the new cruisers from the repeaters (Kwortnik et al., (2018). Besides attracting the existing customers to re-purchase their services and continue to cruise the operators also focus on the younger niche and reconstruct the hospitality services as to appeal to their lifestyle and travel preferences by broadening the choice of onboard amenities, digitalize the booking, payment options, reward points system, etc. For the majority of cruise companies, identifying the characteristics of potential customers who might be interested in their services holds a tremendous importance in developing a convincing brand recognition and presence on the global market. Based upon the cruise tourists feedback received from the comment card systematic response, the major cruise line operators have the ability to assess the important determinants of the customers overall satisfaction level and forecast the probability of cruising again in the future, as repeat cruisers.

A series of measuring methods have been elaborated over the time addressing hospitality performance from a comparison perspective within the similar category of hospitality units (Vlăsceanu & Ţigu, 2020). However, an index guide designed to allow brand performance evaluation at different levels

and various locations is yet to be determined due to the diversity of variables that differentiate the brands. The dimensions of customer service quality are referred to as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, et.al., 1988) and encompasses tangible elements such as: food quality, reasonable price, entertainment quality, as well as intangibles: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, etc.

The **research methodology** focuses on reviewing the existing literature related to the dimensions of service excellence within the cruising industry. The article integrates findings and perspectives contained in previous empirical studies and various theories proposed by the current theoretical knowledge in the respective field are given consideration. Various aspects are analyzed relevant to the factors responsible for customer satisfaction performance.

1. Literature review

Over the last decade besides the geographical expansion leading to the exponential growth of the cruise line operators, their focus had been aimed towards consequently increasing their involvement in creating value and building customer loyalty. Previous academic research (Oliver, 1999; Pritchard et al., 1999; Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004;) highlights that the concept of brand loyalty remains undefined, however (Grönroos, 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1988) argues that customer service quality and satisfaction had been linked to the increase of customer demand and competitive differentiation particularly in hospitality industry being an essential factor in business success. (Gundersen et al., 1996; Oliver, 1997) determines that service quality leads to higher profitability and customer satisfaction. Consumer experiences have been categorized in two different levels by a study that addresses the differentiated behavior (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Based on the degree of customer involvement, passive vs. active participation has been identified and based on the desire with which the customer engages in the event or the performance, the level of absorption vs. immersion had been observed. The same study identified four types of experiences to which the above categories correspond, respectively entertainment (passive-absorption), educational (active-absorption), escapist (active-immersion), and aesthetic (passive-immersion).

In their committed pursuit to identify the differences in behavioral segments, cruise companies invested considerable resources into gathering valuable data in order to analyze the customers behavioral aspects as to enhance the decision-making process towards a more sensitive and accurate approach to service design and customization to better cater to the differentiated market segments. Various performance indicators are utilized in the cruising industry to reflect the overall brand performance such as Available Passenger Cruise Days (APCD), Gross and Net cruise costs, Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortization (EBITDA), Gross Yields which represent total revenues per APCD, Net Yields, etc. and over the past decade the cruising sector registered dramatic increase of these metrics.

Other indicators specific to the hospitality industry provide a more detailed picture of the occupancy rate ADR - Average Daily Rate or RevPAR, Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) other metrics focus on the operational output perspective offering valuable insight on the Gross Operating Profit Per Available Room (GOPPAR), Average Revenue Per Account known as ARPA, or Trev PAR also known as the Total Revenue Per Available Room, etc. (Vlăsceanu & Ţigu, 2020).

Literature review showed a number of previous studies performed, however the research pertaining to the accurate measurement of tourism experiences is limited, due to the lack of the tangible measure to capture its underlying dimensions (Carú & Cova, 2003). The aspect of identifying the variation of behavioral segments is essential to the major cruise corporations in the world managing a wide portfolio of cruise brands who serve every segment of the cruise industry.

Juhasz-Dora, 2015 proposed the GRA index (Grey Relational Analysis) a competitiveness pyramid methodology which focuses on analyzing the guest and the performance output in the top position, followed by the leadership performance and at the bottom layer the management, ownership, employees and the organization's internal capabilities.

There are other performance measurement methods employed by the various hospitality organizations, such as Performance Measurement Framework proposed by Phillips, in 1999 or Porter's Diamond

Model designed to examine the overall performance of the organization with the help of algorithms that calculate efficiency scores and departmental effectiveness.

Gilbert & Horsnell (1998) proposed an applied content analysis approach based on recording of findings analyzing a set of best practice criteria and subsequent comparison. This systematic survey approach GCC's (Guest Comment Cards) is performed on every cruise basis by the vast majority of the cruise line operators, being designed to primarily evaluate the service performance level correlated with the most important touch points of the cruise experience, whilst exploring behavioral differences between new and repeat cruisers and their major traveling motivation factors.

In their attempt to attract new customers and equally motivate the existing ones to re-acquire their bundled services, cruise lines focus their attention on analyzing the traveler's profile, their intrinsic motivation and behavioral aspects that differentiate the new cruisers from the repeaters Kwortnik et al., (2018). As customer satisfaction is subjective to their individual experience (Schmitt, 1999) defined the dimensions of customer experience as sensorial (sense), affective (feel), creative cognitive experiences (think), physical behavior and lifestyles (act), and social identity experiences (relate). This knowledge had facilitated the offer of a wide selection of customized services oriented to every imaginable preference differentiated according to cultures and languages, price option, territorial expansion, bundled services of flight, hotel accommodation, shore excursions and cruise, leisure or theme parties' cruises, etc. complementing each other in all the geographical areas of the world providing customers with unlimited vacation choices.

Cruise brands have been responding to the wishes of different cultures and to a broad consumer demographic, appealing to families, young couples and seniors alike, the common denominator among customers being the desire for pleasurable and unforgettable experiences. (Deloitte, 2018) surveyed three generation groups of cruise customers (millennials, Gen X and baby boomers) sailing on various cruise types: river cruises, romantic cruises, family cruises, spring break cruises and to senior cruises concluding that cruise passenger's expectations and level of satisfaction is higher comparing to the restaurant or hotel guests. According to the report, the cruise operator's hands-on performance is on par with their customer's expectations, merely due to the additional value created and importance attributed by the cruise brands to empowering and delighting the passengers of all age groups. It may be as simple as utilizing an app to survey their preferences on shore excursions, on board activities, menu suggestions and recommendations on ships itinerary – features that confer the customer a high degree of importance, a strong sense of empowerment and consideration – very well appreciated by the millennials.

Over the past decade neuroscience had been unveiling how the brain is wired to think and scientists have long studied the intrinsic motivation and what influences people to exercise their ability to take specific actions in opposition to other alternative choices. Knowing this, cruise companies show consideration towards their customers by attracting different nations and groups aboard the ships, providing different types of charter cruises in different areas of the world and personalized service to various groups in their native languages. Major cruise players highly prioritize branding and marketing through versatile themes which are abundantly promoted through all the media channels, television and printing of advertising materials, promoting the ships as the main destination, while the ports are framed as secondary destinations of cruises. The marketing strategies are generally in line with the objectives of attracting new customers and welcoming back the existing ones. Marketing specialists focus their campaigns to highlight the varied activities available on board the vessels directly addressing their services to the different age groups, lifestyles and segments of the population, attracting people who would not otherwise have considered to try the experience of a cruise in the past.

2. Findings

Literature review reflects that among the main reasons cruise passengers are motivated to travel is the attractiveness of the destination ports, referred to as 'ports of call' within the cruise line terminology, their desire to socialize and relax in a welcoming, enjoyable and comfortable setting Hailing et al., (1999).

Some of the other strong motivators highly rated in a cruise are often the quality of the onboard staff service and friendliness, the diversity of the food and beverage outlets available as well as the shipboard accommodation and the interactive programs organized throughout the cruise along with the amazing live shows and onboard entertainment.

In the past years the internet technology has brought tremendous opportunities for automated customer operations, internal business processes, as well facilitated business collaborations with associates or alliance members for both e-commerce activities, online cruise booking, advance reservation of excursions and activities, purchase of airline tickets for cruise passengers, etc.

Cruise companies are known for aligning their ITIL (information technology infrastructure library – a set of detailed practices) with the goals of the business, adopting an efficient IT Service Management system with the role of designing an effective service life cycle, with all its five corresponding stages: service strategy, service design, transition, operations and continual service improvement.

The facile navigation platforms allowing for process optimization through quick search, selection and online booking activities which determined millions of passengers each year to enjoy a dream vacation aboard one or more cruise ships, traveling to the amazingly beautiful exotic ports from the United States, Canada, Alaska, South America, Europe, Asia and Australia. Over the past years the cruising sector attributed significant importance to the young generation incorporating their preferences within the product diversification as well as the marketing and selling strategies. Given their consumer preferences and habits they drive online reservations by "encouraging innovation and interaction with fellow travelers through social networks, use of mobile devices and applications for planning and conducting travel etc." Șchiopu et al., (2016).

The ongoing development of digitization, meta-data management and the relevance of the advanced technology in global tourism had been widely researched by the cruise operators as well as academia Kuwornu et al., (2013) highlighted the importance of accurate interpretation of results based on compelling reports investigating elements related to cruise brand performance and competitiveness, providing considerable advantage to the marketing services and decision-making executives within the cruise corporations. The advanced IT service management systems are implemented within the organizations designed to focus on the critical aspects of performance and successfully manage all the marketing activities structured on the four pillars on the marketing mix: product/service, price, place and promotion. A powerful marketing mix in an attempt to make their product unique targeting specific niche has a double fold meaning: it may greatly reduce the cruise costs by advertising irresistible promotions and attracting a large volume of cruisers, on the other hand, introduction of a wide selection of cruise options bring along high costs associated with the regional expansion of the ports located in many countries around the world.

Nowadays, due to Covid-19 pandemic global cruise operators ought to rethink their previously set expansion strategies in accordance with the official regulatory instructions issued by CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) that majorly affects the entire cruise operations, its entire logistic supply chain and the ports of embarkation.

From the academic research perspective, the level of satisfaction pertaining to the market segmentation is limited and the cruise companies have to rely on acquiring the data directly from their customers, through the comment cards system deployed onboard in the last day of the cruise, while the customers are sailing back to the home port of embarkation. Cruise line's rating comment cards system targets the customer's feedback upon their onboard cruise experience at every point of interaction with the hospitality service and cruise products. Each comment card completed by the guests is registered into a specially designed feedback centralizing system, which compiles the data comprising it into shipboard statistic reports.

At the corporate level these reports are utilized to provide a comprehensive image of the customer service evaluation based on the guests' individual perceptions resulted from their personal experience at every point of interaction with the cruise services. The statistic reports have a crucial importance in providing valuable insights pertaining to the preferences of the diverse customer segments having major implications on the decision-making process.

The level of excellence and the quality of customer service aboard the cruise ships is world renowned and made possible by the cruise operators who have taken their clients feedback very seriously for the past two decades, designing their service portfolio and customizing their product offering based on the customers indicated preference. The marketing campaigns provide appealing advertising messages, creatively designed to attract the highly diverse cruise customer base Bhadauria et al., (2014).

Simultaneously, the survey reports are also disseminated among all the fleet vessels with actionable implications for the onboard senior management responsible for maintaining the shipboard operation welfare as well as improving the overall quality of the service provided for future cruises. 'Memorable vacations and magical cruise experience that exceeds the expectations of every guest' – it is the majority of cruise lines' legacy and no effort is spared to proof that cruise companies live up to this belief.

For the past decade Northeast Asia had been one of the fastest-growing emerging markets. Referring to the experiential traveling Xiaodon et al., (2019) studied the key elements of the cruise routes' attractiveness highlighting that connectivity, regional competitiveness, security and infrastructure, traffic, environmental management, etc. is having a major impact on the on-shore experience and tourists' satisfaction.

Neuroscience studies revealed that the intrinsic motivation determines people to actively influence their brain in such a way as to emerge, cope and achieve their ideals of overcoming limitations, exhilaration of solving problems and a desire to feel relevant that is generated by the psychological need to prove one's worth and make an impact in the world (Deci & Ryan, 1985). It is relevant to affirm that due to extensive scientific research in neuroeconomics, theories have been elaborated in reference to the differing behavioral patterns of new cruisers in opposition to the repeat cruisers, whose preferences vary in terms of cruise destination, length of itinerary chosen, cabin category and cruise fare paid, variety of pre-paid bundled services, etc. Glimcher et al., 2014).

For many years, scientists have been preoccupied with studying the markets and its influential factors in order to establish what are the main determinants in order to elaborate intricate forecasting models as to predict a possible evolution pertaining to the respective market behavior (Friedman, 1950). By analyzing cluster data available with the help of the latest technological advancements, researchers have determined that customers' expectations play an important role in their level of satisfaction, ultimately determining the customers perception of cruise line reputation.

Thus far, in spite of all the efforts made, there is still limited research performed on the international market segmentation criteria, as the cruising industry has been by far, the fastest growing, most dynamic and profitable sectors of the global tourism industry Brida et al., (2012).

As such, the majority of cruise line operators have adopted a differentiating approach aiming towards achieving a flawless match between their customers' expectations and the diversification of services rendered.

The availability of the meta-data made possible by the advanced technology, offers an important advantage to the marketing services within the cruise corporations, facilitating the complex task of generating compelling reports that allow for accurate interpretation of results with direct implications on the future marketing strategies and the overall decision-making process Kuwornu et al., (2013). Cruiser loyalty - prerequisite for a cruise liner's success according to (Juhee, 2020) especially in the highly competitive market of the cruising industry and its continuous customer switching between cruise brands. After a thorough analysis, the results recreate the basis of future branding and marketing campaigns targeting specific markets differentiated in behavioral segments based on either price sensitivity criteria, loyalty designed programs, passenger demographic criteria, etc. (Heesup & Sungyup, 2017).

Experiential travel had been for the past years the focus of hospitality research. (Juhee, 2020) highlighted that emotional benefits are generated when passengers enjoy extraordinary activities and unique experiences concluding that playfulness enhances customer's perception of well-being. According to Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007 defines well-being as consumers' perception of a brand's positive contribution to the enhancement of life quality.

Cruise passengers' experience contributes to their perceived quality of travel and Han & Hyun, 2018 noted that consumer well-being is enhanced when consumers receive superior value from their purchasing decision. Tewfik et al., (2018) considers customer satisfaction to be a key attribute to the development of tourism services determining the demand and a significant aspect of effective destination promotion affecting the consumption of tourism services and products (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000).

Empirical studies claim that successful marketing campaigns require thorough evaluation of customer preferences and their spending behavior as to accurately determine cross-country psychographic segmentation (Cleveland, 2011).

Perceived value is a concept that had been in depth studied and received much attention from the academic community as well as the contemporary business elite. World organizations such as CLIA (Cruise Line International Association) and FCCA (Florida Caribbean Cruise Association) are in tune with the father of the modern marketing Dr. Philip Kotler for defining the customer-perceived value as 'the customer's evaluation of the difference between all the benefits and all the costs of a marketing offer relative to those use of competing offers' (Kotler, 1980).

As companies are increasingly relying on crunching numbers to generate reports and interpret valuable information provided by the meta-data, considerable importance had been attributed to the perceived value, in other words what customers consider it to be an ideal rapport between price, quality and value of a product or service.

Depending on the companies' ability to understand their customers and adopt a high degree of product and service customization, perceived value had become a form of competitive advantage. To be able to achieve this, a multidimensional measuring tool had been developed based on primary data and complex algorithms that allow a measurement of the service perceived value.

It is referred to as SERV-PERVAL and from its inception it had been intended to serve the purpose of evaluating customer service satisfaction in order to elaborate predictions and forecast re-purchase (Petrick, 2002).

Parasuraman et al., (1988) defines SERV-QUAL – as a multidimensional instrument intended for measuring the level of service quality based on the customers post service feedback in terms of their expectations and perceptions analyzing the five dimensions of the service quality: reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness. Hung-Che et al., (2018) describes SERVPERF as a performance-based measure of service quality, an effective tool for providing cruise tourists' perceptions assessment of experiential quality. Particularly for the hospitality and touristic services Asubonteng et al., (1996) considered reliability to be the most important dimension of the service quality, while (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) elaborated a relationship theory between service quality, consumer satisfaction and purchase intentions.

On the downside, there is the threat of substitution of services having the effect of the tourists' option for cheaper offers available on land hospitality establishments instead of cruises, which does require a permanent evaluation driving a continuous development and change of the cruise services offered. The buyers have the ability to force the prices of the competing companies, as their primary purpose is to choose the least expensive package, which by default causes a price drop indirectly, ultimately affecting the company's overall profits.

Concentric diversification is one of the bundled services within the cruise brands portfolio where cruise companies include hotel accommodation and airline tickets along with the holiday packages, attaining a high degree of engagement among the various market niches, increasing the overall profit potential.

Conclusions

Cruise industry successfully recognized the importance of customer experience triggering demand pattern transformations over the years as the guests sailed over and over and became increasingly educated and knowledgeable in their selection process. Due to the competitive market conditions

cruise operators have focused their attention on the guests' desires conducting studies to explore their needs and preferences and engaging customers in the development of cruise products and services.

Customer experience or the degree of satisfaction had been the focal point of the global hospitality mainly due to the highly competitive character of the industry. Cruise travelers' behavior analysis received considerable attention within the cruising sector in order to create differentiating elements and maximize the brand reputation built on customers feedback and their service perceived value. Considering that a substantial number of cruise travelers are repeat customers who enjoyed multiple pleasant cruising experiences and became loyal to a particular cruise brand, customer satisfaction becomes an essential factor for maintaining sustainable development. Only high-quality services focused on experiential and emotional aspects of a cruise vacation that provide cruisers with a satisfactory travel experience continue to attract cruise lines and visitors. The research and development units in the cruise corporations have been constantly trying to improve the process optimization of the cruise brands, proposing various business strategies such as increasing the fleet by building larger and better performing ships, global expansion of exotic harbors variety aiming to fulfill the evolving expectations of the wide range of customer segments, although recently the cruising industry had been confronted with severe operational challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The last two decades of glorious development for cruise operators with their extensive fleet of megaliners had shown an increasing adaptation trend to the digital era, streamlining organizational operations on board to provide customers with a broad spectrum of intensively tech-enabled activities, such as 4D theaters and cinemas, Wi-Fi internet and wireless links, quick navigation system, etc.

The majority of cruise lines enjoyed a continued development of the mass tourism and economy of scale, benefiting from the profit margin obtained from the large capacity of cruise ships operating at a low cost of the unit/passenger. Cruise lines focused on providing affordable holidays, while small luxury operators concentrated on offering luxury boutique hotels and high prices. Above all, cruise companies' priority is to well balance the operations with the profitability rate, reflected in a higher profit margin compared to the competitors.

Regardless of the industry sector, innovation, reinvention of the business model, or operational design is essential in order to perfect the services offered, and this will continue to be the key to success, in addition to diversifying strategies to capture the imagination and interest of the new generation of passengers and appeal to their preferences whilst adhering to the newly issued industry Covid-19 compliancy standards.

The level of success of the cruise companies depends on their ability to respond to the tremendous challenges posed by the pandemic crisis, in such a way as to continue to attract different categories of populations while tackling critical factors tied to the cruise brands competition and efficiently managing the wide variety of services offered and cruise itineraries.

More than any other hospitality sector, cruise companies are increasingly forced to find the thin balance between sailing and operating in safe conditions while safeguarding the ability of competitors to duplicate their marketing strategies, concentrating resources and efforts towards the product diversification aimed to exceed the expectations of the cruise customers.

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