

Evaluation of a Public Relations Agency (PRA)'s Performance of Promoting Tourism Using Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA)*

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This article presents parts of the findings of a case study that evaluated the performance of a National Tourism Office (NTO)-appointed public relations agency (PRA) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Using importance-performance analysis (IPA), it highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the PRA based on the perceptions of its publics. In-depths interviews were undertaken with 38 media personnel and 14 travel agents/tour operators in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. The IPA grids showed that the PRA's strengths were in the areas of professionalism, responsiveness, and communication, while its weakness was in the area of efficiency of service and advice. It was concluded that the media personnel and travel agents/tour operators were basically satisfied with the PRA's performance, although there is still room for improvement. In other words, although the PRA seemed to perform well enough in the areas of responsiveness, professionalism, and communication, the materials it provided lacked in-depth information which reflected an inadequate knowledge of Malaysia needed by tour operators to be able to package and promote Malaysian tourism well.

Keywords: importance-performance analysis (IPA), public relations agency (PRA), media personnel, travel agents/tour operators, Malaysian tourism

Introduction

The number of Chinese outbound tourists has been increasing by leaps and bounds. Recent statistics reported that the total number of Chinese outbound tourists reached roughly 51.4 million in 2010, an increase of more than 20% over 2009 (The US-China Business Council, 2012). The World Tourism Organization (2003) reported that the number of Chinese outbound travelers has experienced an annual increase of 1 million from 1998 to 2001, and it forecasted China to have 100 million outbound travelers and become the fourth largest source of outbound travel in the world by 2020. China is the fourth major market of Malaysian inbound tourism. The Chinese tourists' arrival in 2011 at more than 1.2 million was a 10.6% growth from 2010 (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 2012). Recognizing the huge potential of the Chinese inbound travel to Malaysia, extensive marketing and promotion have been conducted, since Malaysia was granted

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Approved Destination Status, the fifth country to receive the permission by the People's Republic of China (PRC) government for her citizens to visit. Having made the move to tap the large Chinese market, the government has set up three National Tourism Offices (NTOs) in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou and appointed a marketing representative in Chengdu as well as Tourism appointing a public relations (PR) firm to better promote Malaysia to the Chinese market.

PR "is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" (Britain's Institute of PR, as cited in Jefkins, 1994, p. 7). In tourism, PR is about how people who matter to tourism firm, travel company, or destination think about it, and how their perceptions and behavior can be kept or made positive (Sheldon, 1994). In the context of promoting Malaysian tourism in the China market, PR plays a big role in winning support from the main publics necessary for its tourism promotion's success. How did the appointed public relations agency (PRA, name withheld for anonymity) perform in realizing a systematic PR promotion in China? This article presents the evaluation of the agency's performance as perceived by its main publics: media personnel and travel agents/tour operators using the importance-performance analysis (IPA).

Literature Review

IPA

In order to evaluate the performance of the PRA, the perceptions of its two primary publics were subjected to the IPA. IPA was pioneered by Martilla and James (1977) who applied the technique to analyze the performance of an automobile dealer's service department. The easily-understood technique had been used in many areas, such as financial services (Cheron, McTavish, & Perrien, 1989), food services (Almanza, Jaffe, & Lin, 1994), and tourism policy (Evans & Chon, 1989; Duke & Persia, 1996). IPA has become a popular managerial tool that has been used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of brands, products, and services in recent years. Martin (1995) used IPA to examine service providers' perceptions of customers' expectations of service quality in hotel industry. Chu and Choi (2000) compared the importance and performance of hotel attributes as perceived by business and leisure travelers in Hong Kong. Zhang and Chow (2004) assessed the performance of Hong Kong's tour guides. Considering that IPA has been applied in numerous environments, Skok, Kophamel, and Richardson (2001) stressed that the significance and reliability of the importance-performance mapping have been widely tested.

For IPA, the means of the perceived importance and performance of each service quality factor were calculated and plotted into a graphical grid. The two-dimensional grid displayed the importance of service attributes on the vertical axis from high (top) to low (bottom) and the performance of attributes on the horizontal axis from high (right) to low (left). The cross hairs (vertical and horizontal lines) to separate the derived factors into four identifiable quadrants were determined using the calculated overall weighted means of the importance and performance factors. Figure 1 illustrates the resultant graphical representations of the data that produced the four quadrants and the interpretations (Martilla & James, 1977; Chu & Choi, 2000; Zhang & Chow, 2004).

Quadrant Interpretation

Quadrant I: Attributes are perceived to be very important to respondents, but performance levels are fairly low. This suggests that improvement efforts should be concentrated here.

Quadrant II: Attributes are perceived to be very important to respondents, and at the same time, the organization seems to have high levels of performance on these attributes. The message here is to keep up the good work.

Quadrant III: Attributes are perceived to be of low importance, but performance levels are rated as relatively high. Respondents are basically satisfied with the performance of the organization. An organization's managers may consider extra efforts on these attributes as unnecessary or superfluous.

Quadrant IV: Attributes here are rated as having low importance and low performance. Although performance levels may be low in this quadrant, managers should not be overly concerned, since respondents did not perceive attributes in this quadrant as very important. Limited resources should be expended on this low priority quadrant.

Importance	Quadrant I High importance Low performance Concentrate here	Quadrant II High importance High performance Keep up the good work
	Quadrant IV Low importance Low performance Low priority	Quadrant III Low importance High performance Possible overkill
	Performance	

Figure 1. IPA grid. Sources: Martilla and James (1977), Chu and Choi (2000), Zhang and Chow (2004).

Method

The method used to obtain data was through in-depth interviews with selected respondents comprising two of PRA's primary publics: media personnel and travel agents/tour operators. The populations of the two primary publics were compiled from the lists of PRA's trade contacts. With the help of NTOs in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, all those residing in these three cities were randomly selected and interviewed.

Research Instruments

Interview guides prepared for the study had both closed-ended and open-ended questions.

Interview guide for media personnel. The interview guide asked information on the profiles of the media personnel, their media organizations, whether they have written articles on Malaysia, modes of information-seeking, their sources of information, their relationship with the PRA and NTO, and also perceptions of Malaysia in general. They were also asked to assess the PRA's performance by using the

importance-performance ratings. For this, they were asked to rate the perceived importance of 19 service quality statements and also the perceived performance of the PRA on the same 19 service quality attributes. Each service quality attribute was rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "least important (1)" to "most important (5)" for the importance part. Similarly, each performance attribute was rated from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)".

Interview guide for travel agents/tour operators. The interview guide asked information on the profiles of the travel agents/tour operators, their travel packages, modes of their information-seeking, their sources of information, their relationship with the PRA and NTO, and also their perceptions of Malaysia in general. They were also asked to assess the PRA's performance by using the importance-performance ratings.

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth interviews with the media personnel and travel agents/tour operators were carried out from December 19, 2005 to December 29, 2005. Interviews were carried out with the assistance of local interpreters. The interpreters were graduate students majoring in tourism studies at universities in China. Table 1 shows the number of interviews completed within the fieldwork duration.

Table 1

Total Number of Interviews Completed

Respondent	Guangzhou	Shanghai	Beijing	Total
Media personnel	10 (10)	11 (12)	17 (18)	38 (39)
Travel agents/tour operators	3 (3)	4 (4)	7 (8)	14 (15)
Total	13 (13)	15 (16)	24 (26)	52 (54)
Success rate	100%	94%	92%	96%

Note. Figures in parentheses are the targeted number of respondents.

Results and Discussion

This article only focuses on the application of the IPA on the research data. This section presents the findings of the study pertaining to the perceptions of the PRA's publics. The profiles of the PRA's two publics are presented first, followed by the results of the IPA.

Profile of Media Personnel Respondents

A total of 38 media personnel were selected for study. Ten (26.4%) represented media organizations in Guangzhou, 11 (28.9%) organizations in Shanghai, and 17 (44.7%) in Beijing. The majority (63.1%) of the media organizations the respondents worked for were relatively new, with 10 years of operations behind them. Only 15.3% of the media organizations were over 40 years. In terms of type of media, about half (55.1%) were newspapers, followed by magazines (23.8%) and web-based media (15.8%), while Internet TV and electronic billboard made up the remaining 5.3%.

Profile of Travel Agents/Tour Operators Respondents

Fourteen travel agents/tour operators were interviewed out of a total of 15 selected to be respondents, representing a response rate of 93%. Half of the respondents interviewed had their agencies in Beijing, while more than a quarter (28.6%) of them were in Shanghai and the remaining (21.4%) were in Guangzhou.

The majority (78.6%) operated as head quarters and only one as a sole operator that established its business about 30 years ago in Beijing. The majority (71.4%) of these establishments had more than 15

branches, and only 28.6% had fewer than seven branches. In terms of staff strength, these tour operators can be considered as big, since more than half (57%) hired more than 300 full-time employees. They were also experienced in their businesses in that about three quarters (71.4%) had been operating more than 10 years.

Evaluating the PRA's Performance Using IPA

The perceptions of the primary media personnel and travel agents/tour operators were subjected to IPA. The means of the perceived importance and performance of each service quality factor were computed (see Table 2) and plotted into a graphical grid (see Figures 2 and 3). The two-dimensional grid displayed the importance of service factors on the vertical axis from high (top) to low (bottom) and the performance of service factors on the horizontal axis from high (right) to low (left). The cross hairs (vertical and horizontal lines) to separate the derived factors into four identifiable quadrants were determined using the calculated overall weighted means of the importance and performance factors.

Table 2

Means of the Perceived Importance and Performance of the PRA

Service quality factor	Media personnel		Travel agents/tour operators	
	Importance ^a	Performance ^b	Importance ^a	Performance ^b
Professionalism	4.49	4.19	4.73	3.99
Service environment	4.10	3.80	4.00	3.47
Efficiency of service	4.53	3.95	4.69	3.56
Responsiveness	4.50	4.18	4.54	4.38
Empathy	4.19	3.95	4.36	3.96
Communication	4.47	4.33	4.49	4.39
Activity involvement	4.85	4.15	4.18	3.50
Overall weighted mean	4.41	4.09	4.43	3.94

Notes. ^a: Mean scale: 1 = Very unimportant, 2 = Unimportant, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important; ^b: Mean scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the results of the IPAs for the media personnel and travel agents/tour operators, respectively. One factor, "efficiency of service" was identified in Quadrant 1, the Concentrate Here quadrant. Media personnel rated this service factor as very important, yet the PRA's performance was fairly low. This suggests that improvement efforts should be concentrated here.

Three service factors, "professionalism, responsiveness, and communication", were identified in Quadrant 2. These factors were rated above average for both importance and performance. These results conveyed the message that the PRA, in general, had performed well in these areas; they are its strengths. Nevertheless, as all the mean score ratings for performance were lower than those of the importance ratings (see Table 2), the PRA should make some efforts to maintain and improve quality services in these areas.

Travel agents placed empathy in Quadrant 3, an area of possible overkill by the PRA. Media personnel, on the other hand, placed empathy in Quadrant 4, an area of low priority.

Finally, the IPA grid placed service environment in Quadrant 4. It shows that both media personnel and travel agents rated meeting rooms and office comfort and layout as less important relative to other service factors. Nevertheless, they also rated the PRA's performance on this service factor as below average. All parties seemed to consider this as a low priority area.

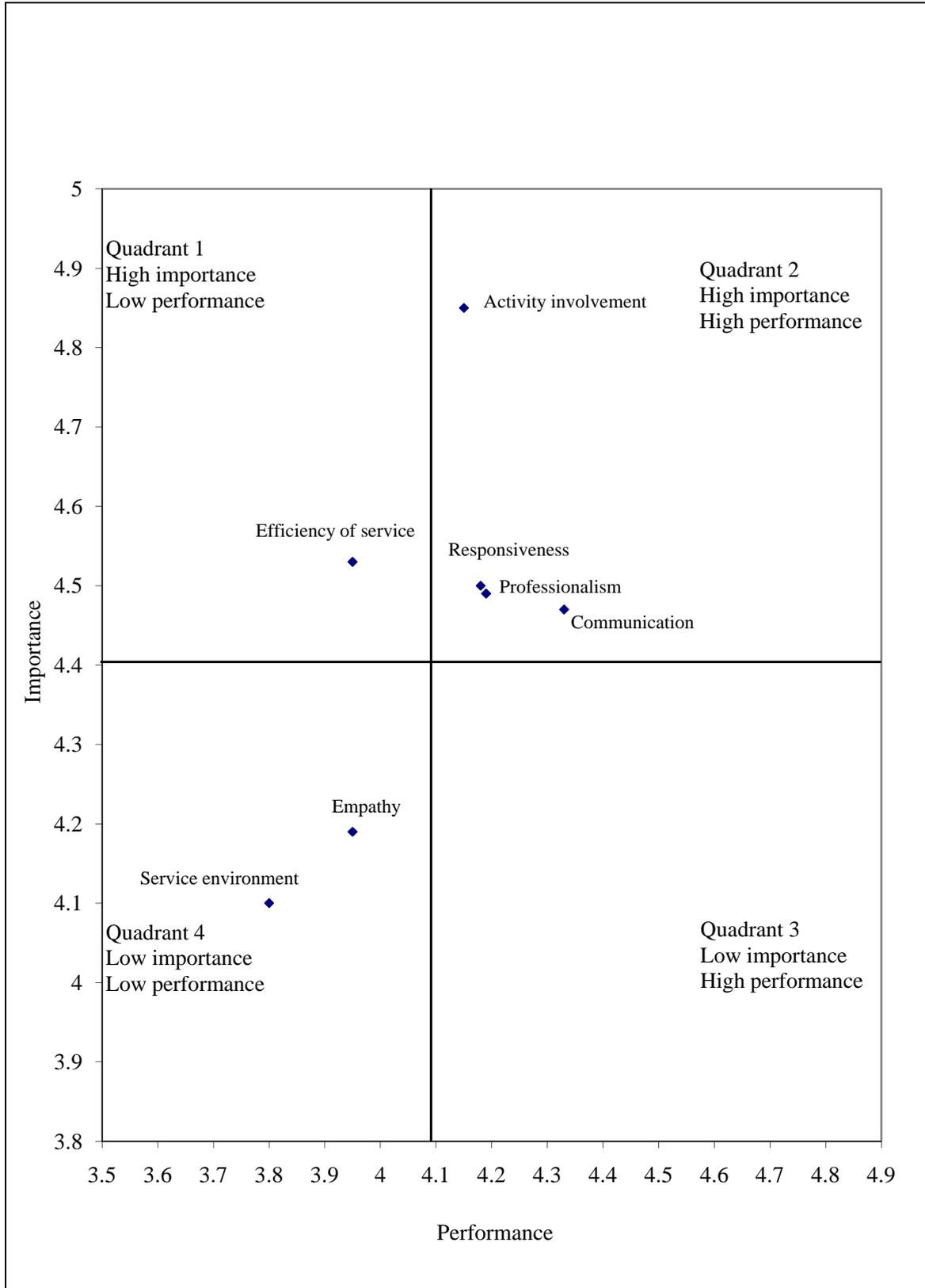


Figure 2. IPA grid as perceived by media personnel.

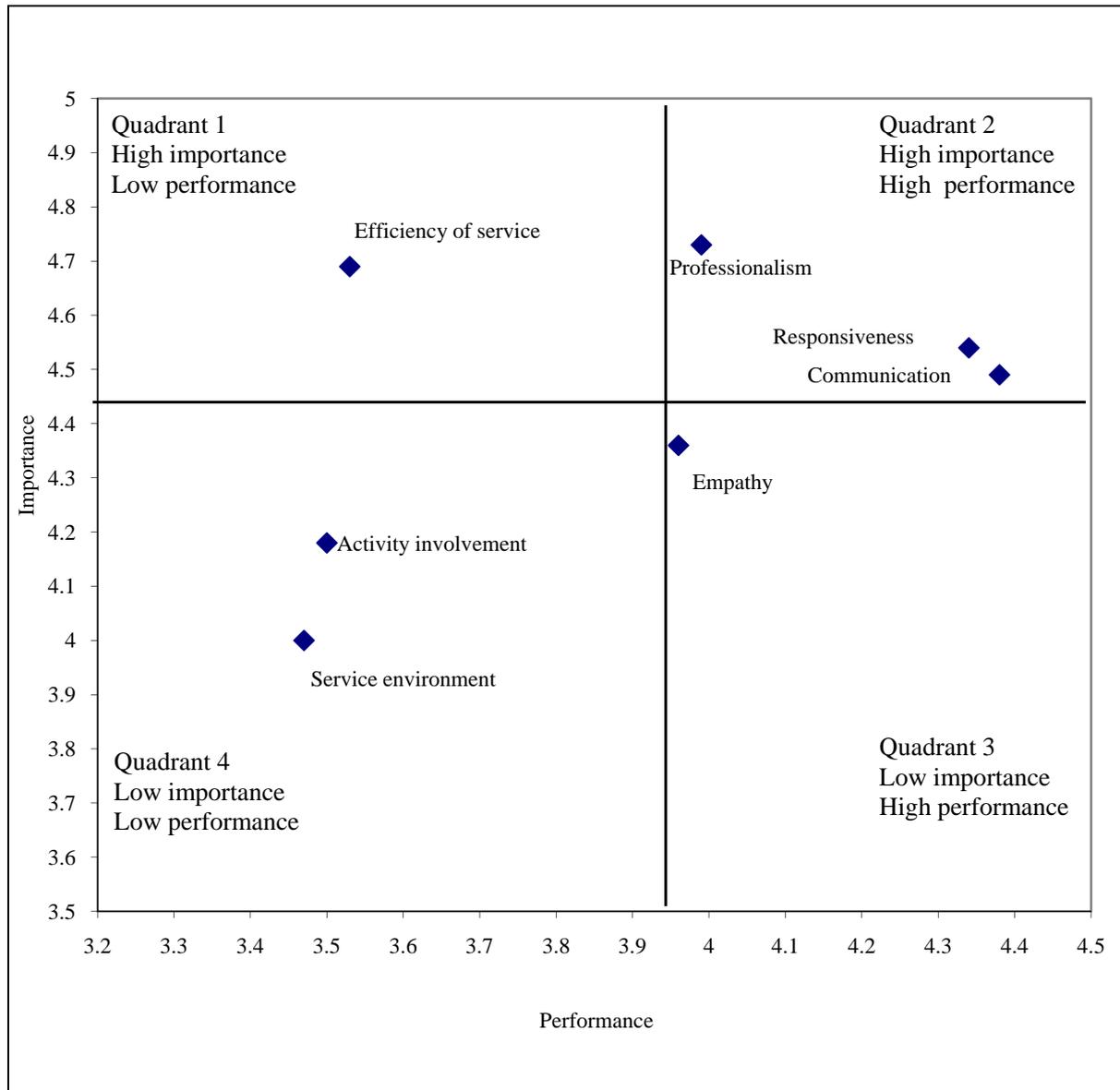


Figure 3. IPA grid as perceived by travel agents/tour operators.

Conclusions

This study identified seven pertinent service quality factors and used IPA to compare them according to their perceived importance and performance of NTO-appointed PRA by its publics, the media personnel, and travel agents/tour operators. The media personnel perceived all service quality factors as between “important” and “very important”. As for the PRA’s performance, they were satisfied enough to rate them as doing good in “professionalism, responsiveness, communication, and activity involvement”, although there was still room for improvement in these areas.

The area that the media personnel perceived the PRA to be the most lacking was “efficiency of service/advice”, denoting the PRA’s greatest weaknesses and thus most efforts should be directed in this area to rectify the inadequacy. The most common complaints from media personnel were that the PRA had an

insufficient knowledge of products and destinations and lack of quantity and quality of current information of Malaysian tourism.

Travel agents and tour operators also found the PRA to be lacking in the “area of efficiency of service or advice”. In other words, although it seemed to perform well enough in the areas of “responsiveness, professionalism, and communication”, the materials it provided lacked in-depth information which reflected an inadequate knowledge of Malaysia needed by tour operators to be able to package and promote Malaysian tourism well.

Considering the above feedback from its important publics, it can be concluded that the NTO-appointed PRA had both strengths and weaknesses that require immediate corrective actions in order to ensure that it plays the necessary and important role in promoting Malaysian tourism in China.

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