Imagine this—you are on vacation in a city that you have never visited before, and you take a bus tour. Do you think you would react more strongly to a tour with a special, or “peak,” event introduced as a surprise, or to one with a peak event that you were aware of and had been anticipating? Would your feelings change depending on when in the tour this peak event was introduced?

These questions, among others, are explored in “Surprise, Anticipation, and Sequence Tour sequencing, and what the research says about saving the best for last” by Sue Bengtson.

Unknown to the study participants, four of the five stops were designed to be neutral and one stop was designed to be a clear peak event—in this case, a famous restaurant owned by a celebrity. To gain a sense of customer expectations, the tourists were shown a tour outline and asked for their reactions before the tour began. The tourists then experienced the full virtual tour, with the peak event scheduled at one of the following places: at the first stop (early peak); at the third stop (middle peak); or the last stop (end peak).

“Participants overwhelmingly preferred the end peak scenario,” says Victorino. “If you’re in a service situation where there is a clear high point of the experience and there’s flexibility on where it can be placed, this is an interesting data point to keep in mind.”

The results showed when to place a peak event in order to enhance customer perception: last. But there was still the second question: do customers prefer to be surprised by the peak event, or does the opportunity to anticipate add something to the experience?

“Customer perception is reality, in the world of service,” Victorino explains. “There is nothing more important when designing experiences.”

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When to Hit the HIGH NOTE?

Effects in the Design of Experiential Services,” a study recently published in Production and Operations Management by Gustavson’s Dr. Liana Victorino and co-authors Dr. Michael J. Dixon, Ivey School of Business and Drs. Robert J. Kwontnik and Rohit Verma from Cornell University. Design strategy adopts a “service as theatre” metaphor that likens the design of an experience to a performance that can be directed and choreographed.

To explore how a peak event impacted customer experience, the researchers created an online storyboard experiment in which the study participants, or “tourists,” took a virtual bus tour in a hypothetical city.

The context of a city bus tour gave the researchers control over each piece of this service “performance” so that they could examine customer perceptions of two things: 1) the impact of the timing of the peak event and 2) the effect of the peak being a surprise or anticipated.

“Customer perception is reality, in the world of service,” Victorino explains. “There is nothing more important when designing experiences.”

The results have design implications for service managers in all areas but especially in a tourism context. Victorino explains that “there is an inherent experiential nature to tourism services and great opportunity to truly delight customers, as most are already in a happy and relaxed mindset, and are often searching to experience something new. In the right environment, our findings suggest that customers are most likely to be delighted when the highlight comes late in the experience—and is a surprise.”

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