



When to Hit the HIGH NOTE?

Tour sequencing, and what the research says about saving the best for last

by Sue Bengtson

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

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. Kwortnik 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.

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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?

To evaluate this, participants were broken into two groups. Those experiencing the anticipation design received full

communication about the celebrity-owned restaurant and it was clearly marketed to them as the highlight of the tour, including good food, a signature drink, live music and an all-around great experience. For those participants testing the surprise condition, the celebrity restaurant was concealed; the stop was simply described as a visit to a city building. Each

tourist received written descriptions and three illustrations of each of the five tour stops.

Some participants were asked for their emotional response and feelings about the tour immediately afterward; others, a week later. Both

groups preferred a surprise ending.

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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Study participants were shown images of the “peak event,” a visit to a celebrity-owned restaurant