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The professional profile of a leisure time animator in tourism and recreation services

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abstract

- Background** Leisure time animation services are a common feature of packages provided by tour operators and hotels. In Poland this type of service is still treated as novelty. The purpose of this study is to identify the important elements of the professional profile of a leisure time animator in order to support the introduction of these services in Poland.
- Material/Methods** Research based on a diagnostic survey method was used. 100 tourists and 100 animators participated in the survey. Two separate on-line questionnaires were prepared for each group of respondents.
- Results** The results of the survey show that the expectations of tourists towards animators are higher than the predispositions declared by animators; they also indicate which attitudes and skills of a leisure time animator are the most important for each surveyed group.
- Conclusions** The study shows that there are several differences between tourists and animators concerning their abilities and personal traits. In addition, the study points out that leisure time animation services are still not very popular among Polish tourists. A model of a professional leisure time animator is presented to help Polish hoteliers in introducing animation services in their offer.
- Key words** Leisure time animator, professional profile, tourism, recreation, tourism market

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays an important role in the dynamic changes undergoing in many aspects of contemporary reality; participation in tourism activities has an important influence on people's behaviour, personality and identity. A substantial part of our time is dedicated to leisure and tourism activities. Although many people tend to organize holidays by themselves, there is a large group of tourists who use the services of travel agencies, tour operators and hotels to facilitate this task. The contemporary tourism product does not stand only for accommodation, gastronomy and occasional leisure or cultural activities; it involves many additional services including hotel animation. The presence of leisure time animators is now a fixed element of the services provided by most hotels in the world. It is an especially important element of the all-inclusive offer, where free-time animation is accounted for, together with accommodation and food services. Animation programs are also an element of cruises, where large-scale stages and entertainment venues give passengers a possibility to participate in evening shows, cabarets or musicals [1]. Animators are also involved in providing day-time activities like games and contests. In hotels leisure time animators are named "Hotel Animator", "Entertainer" or "Guest Relations Officer" [2]. The responsibilities of animators employed in hotels include: "leisure time organisation, moderating evening programmes and shows, creating animation programs, informing guests of hotel and tourist attraction offerings, advising guests about animation programs and taking care of guests with proper programme selection" [3:267]. It is interesting to notice that for potential guests in the process of selecting a destination and accommodation, factors of excellence and special care (resulting from high quality animation programmes) are more important than the traditional sun, sea and sand elements [4].

In Poland, leisure time animation is not very common. It is still considered as a luxurious service both by hotel owners and by other accommodation professionals who are not willing to employ animators to provide leisure time activities. This situation is different in most western European destinations, where leisure time animation is a fixed element of everyday activity programmes. The lack of interest in animation services among Polish accommodation providers is due to a short season dependent mostly on weather conditions. In addition, the quality of tourism and leisure infrastructure in many Polish destinations still needs improvement. The situation is different among tour operators and travel agencies operating on the tourism market in Poland. Their offer of outbound holiday packages is rich in hotel animation programmes. There is a possibility that the contemporary Polish customer, observing the services provided by foreign hotels, will influence the local market. We can expect that free time animation will soon be a common service in the offer of hotels in Poland and will help to attract and keep the customers [5].

Introducing animation programmes in hotels and other accommodation venues does not generate severe costs but it can add great value and attractiveness. Accommodations with leisure time services are leaders on the market. Not only do these services improve the quality of the offer but they also have a positive influence on the tourist's psycho-physical well-being. It is important to notice that a satisfied, willing to come-back client will have a positive effect on the economic situation of hotel owners. A well-performed leisure time animation gives long-term positive effects [1]. In order to discuss the professional profile

of a leisure time animator, there is a need to present the basic characteristics of this profession as well as the theoretical considerations presented in the literature.

The profession of leisure time animator is based on practical knowledge, but it also requires engagement, commitment and a unique set of qualities. Personality is one of the very important characteristics of a leisure time animator. According to Hall and Lindzey [6], it is possible to group the different meanings of the term “personality” in two main areas. Each of these areas can be found in the profile of a leisure time animator. The first area includes interpersonal skills and communication abilities. In this area, a leisure time animator will have a possibility to use his ability to create positive reactions among different people and in different circumstances. In the second area personality is understood as the most clear and characteristic impression an animator gives to other people [7, 8]. Animators willing to work in well-known tourist destinations need to fulfil several requirements according to the role played and the form of animation being performed:

- Kids Entertainers – animators for the youngest participants.
- Young and Sports Entertainers – animators for school youth and young people.
- Show Entertainers – animators responsible for artistic performances, shows and cabarets.
- All-round Entertainers – animators capable of performing each of the roles mentioned before. They are the most needed professionals on the tourism market [9].

Among the many qualities of an animator we can name the ability to engage in contact and to communicate with others as well as the ability to plan the tourists’ free time in a way to fully satisfy their needs. Working in free time animation can be a part-time job, but in destinations with an extended tourist season it is a year-round occupation. The best animators have a good chance to receive interesting job opportunities from high category hotels.

It is crucial for a true and good leisure time animation candidate to encourage tourists to participate in activities. This quality is based on optimism, energy and creativity. Leisure time animators are responsible for the unforgettable time tourists spend during their holidays. The perfect free time animator has to be cordial and available, with a high level of personal culture and in a good physical and psychological condition [1].

The animator guides the participants into the various possibilities in offer and in addition helps them interact with each other. Hiring of animators requires special attention; as stated by Tekin, each animator should be a leader, educator, instructor, organizer and activator [10]. According to Tekin and Zorba, the basic qualities of animation personnel in resorts include leadership abilities, hospitality, mentality, knowledge of foreign languages, communication skills, knowledge of animation (theoretical and practical), adjustment to new situations and knowledge about the culture of the region [11]. Tekin further expands the set of characteristics of a professional leisure time animator by naming the attributes of an effective animator. In his opinion each animator should:

- be likeable, genial, tolerant, forbearing, trustworthy, contemporary, humanist;
- have an excellent communication and perception skill and a sense of humour;
- represent the group, the establishment, and the country;
- be devoted to the establishment from the heart;
- be a source of information;
- consider both formal and informal relations;
- have the skills to teach and demonstrate the activities;
- have the ability to solve problems;
- notice that the guests are from different nationalities and have different cultures;
- be open-minded and objective [10].

Experience is an important asset when hiring a candidate for the position of an animator. Companies hire animators for the period of three to four months, and during this time they are employed abroad. For that reason it is important for them to fulfil all the requirements from the beginning. Some companies organize additional courses to verify and improve the skills of hired animators. During these courses candidates take part in sport activities, learn dance animations choreography and practice the performance of games and plays offered for tourists. The animator has to be a well-organized and responsible person. Once in the destination, they have to take care of all the work-related activities on their own. They are also the representatives of the hotel and of the animation company that hires them; for that reason, their image has to be perfect [7]. In case of critical events, the animator has to evaluate the situation and react appropriately. They need to be patient and calm in order to solve or appease conflicts if needed. The position of leisure time animator is not suitable for people who are shy, prone to stress or with low self-esteem [13]. A good knowledge of at least one foreign language is an important asset for an animator. Leisure time activities are open for all tourists. It is impossible to predict or assume in which language the participants will communicate.

Self-presentation is an important element of the professional profile of a leisure time animator. People tend to yield to eye perception, and first impression plays a key role in the way we are seen by other people. Animators have to accept themselves and their appearance, which is crucial in every job performance and in everyday life. Other characteristics that create our image in the eyes of others are: the tone of our voice, eye contact, the way we express ourselves and gesticulation. The ability to communicate and to receive non-verbal communication is very helpful in the performance of leisure time animation activities [1]. Among the criteria that need to be assessed during the recruitment process of a leisure time animator, Lazanski proposed: common knowledge, personality, organisational skills, abilities and communication skills [3]. Communication skills based on information exchange (receiving and transmitting information) are very important in the work of every animator. Monologue, dialogue and artistic expression are the core elements of communication during animation [14].

In view of the above, the aim of the study was to determine the essential personality traits and professional predispositions of a leisure time animator on the tourism market in Poland. In order to obtain a complex image of these

characteristics, the research concentrated on two groups of respondents: the tourists and the animators. Based on the results an exemplary model of the professional profile of leisure time animator in a hotel is presented. The main research problem of the study was to identify whether there are differences between tourists and animators in perceiving the profile of a professional animator. The conduct of this study was based on the following research questions:

What is the level of interest concerning leisure time animation among tourists?

What courses and trainings have been completed by the surveyed leisure time animators?

What are the traits of a leisure time animator in the tourists' opinion?

How do leisure time animators estimate their own personality traits?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research was based on a diagnostic survey method, which is often used in physical education and tourism research. It is an appropriate method to characterize the current and future behaviour and activity of a given group [15].

The subject group comprised tourists and leisure time animators. Each group answered a different questionnaire prepared for the purpose of this study. The questionnaires were available on-line via a private, direct link. Leisure time animators were reached throughout special professional groups in social media covering employees of different tour operators. Tourists were reached throughout social media as well, but they were selected regarding their age, family status and experience of leisure time animation services abroad and in Poland.

The questionnaire dedicated to tourist focused on three subjects: the availability of leisure time animators at the destination, the level of interest tourists had in the service of leisure time animators and the traits and abilities expected by tourists regarding leisure time animators' work.

Answers to those questions helped to determine the expectations that responding tourists had regarding leisure time animators, including their most significant professional predispositions.

The questionnaire dedicated to leisure time animators was aimed at gathering information concerning the professional career path of young animators. A part of the questions concentrated on self-evaluation of the respondents' personal traits and skills. Answers to this questionnaire helped to characterize the actual professional profile of a leisure time animator. In total 200 respondents, 100 per each questionnaire, participated in the research. The detailed results of both questionnaires will be presented in the following sections.

RESULTS

Among the surveyed animators 38% are current or former students of the tourism and recreation field. 11% studied pedagogy. Other fields of study indicated by respondents were physical education, management and international relations (4% of respondents for each field). 39% of respondents indicated other fields of study (without naming them).

Most of the surveyed animators (89%) have completed a leisure time animation training course. It has to be noted that candidates willing to work for the most important leisure time animation providers are required to present a course certificate. Respondents were graduates of leisure time animation courses offered by different companies active on the Polish tourism market. 81% of the respondents took part in a first aid training course during their leisure time animation training. Respondents noted that there was a better job opportunity on foreign markets than in Poland. Regarding employment choices 38% of the respondents chose job opportunities abroad versus 10% for domestic jobs. Almost 40% of animators declared that the vacancies available in Poland are only temporary ones.

Almost half of the respondents (46%) declared they had knowledge of the English language, other foreign languages mentioned by respondents were: German (21%), Spanish (12%), French and Russian (respectively 6%), Italian (5%) and other languages (4%).

More than half of the surveyed tourists (57%) spend their holidays in Poland; 43% of respondents travelled abroad. During their holiday 40% of tourists had an interaction with a leisure time animator. More than half (57%) did not use the services of a leisure time animator, 3% of respondents did not know that there was a leisure time animation service provided in their place of stay.

When planning their holiday trip, respondents never (26%) or rather not (41%) take into account the presence of a leisure time animator at the destination. Only 9% declared that the availability of animation services was always as important for them as other services.

70% of the surveyed tourists declared that leisure time animation was more common abroad than in Poland; 24% declared that the availability of leisure time animation services was comparable.

One of the aims of the study was to confront the image of a professional animator in the eyes of tourists and animators themselves. Both groups of respondents were asked the same questions concerning the personality traits and abilities of leisure time animators. The set of personal traits of leisure time animators subject to evaluation included: energy, smiling attitude, openness towards others, responsibility, availability and readiness to help. Artistic predispositions and physical fitness were evaluated as well.

The first trait put into consideration was the animators' energy. Being always energetic was declared by the largest group of animators (45%). 40% declared that they are almost always energetic, 15% of animators are energetic only from time to time. According to 65.4% of the surveyed tourists, animators should always be energetic. 23.1% of tourists declared that animators should

usually be energetic; only for 6.7% of tourists this should be from time to time, and for almost 3% never.

Half of leisure time animators say that they are always smiling, almost 40% of the animators smile very often, only 10% do this rarely. A significant majority of tourists (75%) would like the animators to always smile, for 16.3% the animator should usually smile. According to 5% of tourists, the animator does not need to smile at all.

Among surveyed animators, 50% evaluate themselves as always open to other people, 30% declared that they are usually open, and 18% that they are open only sometimes. According to 69.2% of tourists, animators should always have an open attitude. For 21.2% this can occur usually, and for 3% of respondents respectively an open attitude can occur rarely or never.

More than half of the surveyed animators declared that they are always responsible. More than 30% declared "usually" and 10% of animators are responsible only sometimes. A considerable part of the surveyed tourists (64%) think that animators should always be responsible, for 25% of tourists this is important only usually. 5% think that an animator should be responsible only sometimes or never.

More than 40% of leisure time animators are usually available and 33% declare to be always ready for activities. 18.2% of animators declare to be available from time to time, 6.1% are almost never available and 2% never. According to 38.5% of tourists, animators should always be available; for 35.6% this can happen usually, and for 18.3% only rarely. 3.8% of the surveyed tourists consider respectively that animators could be available very rarely or never.

61% of animators declare that they are always ready to help others, 25% are helpful very often, 13% of animators declare to help others only rarely. In the opinion of 52.9% of surveyed tourists animators should always be ready to help, for 28.8% this could happen very often. For 12.5% of surveyed tourists animators should be ready to help only rarely, and for 4% they don't need to be helpful at all.

Another set of qualities evaluated by tourists and leisure time animators was vocal and dance abilities as well as physical fitness. 36.1% of animators declared that they are not talented vocally and they never sing; however, 27.8% say that they happen to sing, but very rarely. Some value their talent as average (15.55%); 13.4% declare to be good at singing very often, 7.2% are sure of their vocal talent. For 33.7% of responding tourists, vocal abilities at an average level are sufficient for animation work. 28.8% declare that vocal talent is not always needed, 17.3% have a different opinion - they declare that an animator has to be able to sing very often. For 13.5% of tourists animators do not need to have the singing talent at all, but 6.7% expect the animator to be always vocally talented.

More than 30% of animators declare to have dance skills. 23.3% of animators stated that if needed they are able to prepare for dance animations. 20% of animators declare to lead dance animations despite a lack of dance skills. Almost 20% think they are good dancers but 7.1% evaluate their dance

skills as very low. In the opinion of 35.9% of surveyed tourists, a leisure time animator should show his/her dance abilities from time to time. Almost 20% of respondents think that the animator should usually be able to dance and 9.7% expect the animator to be always able to dance. For more than 25% of respondents the animator should always have dance abilities, for 9.7% of respondents he/she does not need to have these abilities at all.

35% of animators declare to be always in a good physical condition, more than 30% declare to be in a good physical condition very often. 27% of animators maintain an uneven level of physical shape. A small group of 5% of animators declare that they are very rarely able to maintain a good physical condition. For a quarter of responding tourists, the animator should always be fit, for 30.8% he/she should be fit very often. For another quarter of tourists the level of physical fitness of the animator depends of the animations he/she is leading. 16.3% of tourists declare that the leisure time animator could very rarely be fit, and for 3.8% of respondents he/she does not have to be fit at all.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the research was to evaluate the importance of a set of personal traits of leisure time animators and to present the dependencies regarding the expected professional profile of a leisure time animator from the point of view of tourists and leisure time animators. Another objective was to assess the basic characteristics of both surveyed groups. The results of the survey show that opinions concerning the choice of tourism destinations are divided among the surveyed tourists. More than a half (57%) chose Poland over a foreign destination. This decision is probably influenced by financial and organizational aspects. The survey shows that animation is still an undiscovered service among Polish tourists, especially for those who spend their holidays in Poland. The availability of animation services at destinations is important only for a small group of tourists, and tourists rarely notice the presence of animators at the destination. This fact may be the result of the previously mentioned lack of interest in this type of services or perhaps it is the effect of a lack of appropriate (and effective) promotion. An emphasis put on animation services in the promotion materials of hotels and resorts could result in greater satisfaction among clients. Lazanski noted that there is a trend (e.g. in the Sol Meril Hotel chain) showing that leisure activities and animation programmes are important if guests are to become repeat customers, resulting in higher profits for the company [3].

The research confirms that formal education in the field of tourism and recreation, in addition to training courses in animation, is valued in this type of services. In Winiarski's opinion each graduate from the tourism and recreation studies could become a leisure time animator if he/she is able to use verbal methods and his/her own example. By doing so, he/she should be able to practically lead an inexperienced person to undertake recreational or tourism activities [16]. Formation in the field of tourism and recreation is also a source of educative skills; as shown in a study undertaken by Wartecka-Ważyńska, in which she evaluated preparation for professional work of tourism and recreation graduates [17]. Educative skills are especially needed when the leisure time animator has to lead a programme with young participants. Studies undertaken in Bulgaria by Deliverska show that the most common field of study

among sport animators is Tourism (50%), followed by Economics (20.83%) and Pedagogy (16.67%) [18]. This is confirmed in the present study, where 11% of surveyed animators graduated from pedagogy, and 4% respectively from management and international relations. The same study by Deliverska shows that 20.82% of surveyed sport animators have invested in professional courses: 12.5% trained in animation companies, 16% received training in the sport animation field at universities and 8.18% at college. 42.55% of respondents did not graduate from any professional courses or other forms of education in this field [18]. Cankov and Penkova indicate that competence and training of the animator are the key to high quality animation activities; in addition, excellent teaching and additional training courses are sources of improved qualifications [19].

Results show that tourists have higher expectations concerning leisure time animators' qualities than are the predispositions self-declared by animators (Table 1). This statement refers to the qualities and attitudes always expected. Only the quality of being helpful is ranked higher by the animators than the tourists.

Table 1. Attitudes and qualities of a leisure time animator in the respondents' opinion

| Type of attitude or quality | Percentage of tourists always expecting the attitude or quality | Percentage of animators declaring to always have the attitude or quality |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Smiling attitude | 75.0 | 51.0 |
| Open attitude | 69.2 | 50.0 |
| Energetic | 65.0 | 38.0 |
| Responsible | 64.4 | 57.0 |
| Being helpful | 52.0 | 61.0 |
| Available | 38.5 | 33.0 |

Lazanski presented a ranked list of the vital criteria in selecting candidates for the position of a hotel animator. This list includes: personal and professional honesty, sense of humour, service orientation, treating animation as an art, trustworthiness, high emotional intelligence, reasonability, excellent mental and physical health, enthusiasm, organisational abilities, tactics, excellent memory and communication skills [3].

Lazanski underlines that personality is the most important criterion for choosing a candidate. In his opinion, it is possible to gain new knowledge and skills in the other criteria throughout training [20]. Lipičnik confirms that the main human mobilization forces to enable successful achievement are knowledge, abilities and motivation [21].

Professional tasks of an animator are often based on leading different forms of physical recreation, organizing sports games and plays or performing fitness activities like aquafitness or stretching. Regarding vocal and physical abilities, the study shows that among animators there are those who are always ready to sing or dance and those who are never good at this. Thanks to this differentiation in a team of employed animators, each of them can play a different role during the animations. As stated by different researchers [22, 23], aerobic-step is also very popular in hotels and holiday villages and sport animation is gaining importance as well. Surveyed animators declare that they are usually physically fit, and tourists have a similar opinion. In Tekin's opinion,

recreation if formed by tourism on one side and sport and physical activities on the other, but there is constant interaction and relationship between these forms [24]. Physical activity is a source of positive effects on psychological condition [25], and recreational sports have an especially good influence when getting rid of anxiety and stress [26]. Tekin evokes a survey conducted by the Marriott International indicating that despite the dominant role of traditional beach and sightseeing activities during holidays, for 22% of the respondents it was important to have a chance to participate in sports when choosing a vacation destination [24]. In Brooks's opinion, tourists are satisfied not only with the typical holiday activities like resting, dining-out, sightseeing and sunbathing, but they would also like them to be more diversified. In addition, for many tourists, being on holidays does not mean the necessity to abandon sports or other activities. Including recreational sports in the tourism industry is a key factor when achieving organizational goals [28].

The attitudes and qualities evaluated during the present research might be introduced in a new professional profile model of a leisure time animator (Fig. 1). This new model, together with the evaluation criteria introduced by Lazanski, could help hotel managers in the hiring process of leisure time animators.



Fig. 1. Proposed model of the professional profile of a leisure time animator in hotels

In the proposed model the dominant trait of the animator is leadership; this proposition follows a statement by Costa, Glinia, Goudas and Antoniou [29] that the responsibilities of animation staff in hotel resorts are not restricted to delivering recreation activities. Leisure time animators should support guests in different situations and inspire them to undertake art or sport activities.

Corbaci underlines that the "marketing effects" of resort animation result in changes in the length of stay, room sale increments and increased income from food and beverage sales as an effect of consumer satisfaction (induced by the quality of animation services). Moreover, the image, quality attractiveness and advertisement of a resort destination could also be improved thanks to the provided animations [30]. Van Dooorn points out that "recreational activities

are amongst the significant factors affecting the extension of length of stay of tourists" [31].

CONCLUSIONS

the most desirable professional trait of an animator is "smile", which also means inducing a smile among tourists. To achieve this, the animator needs to be energetic. Animation is a perfect profession for people who like to play the role of leaders; the animator is a "showman", a charismatic person who people tend to follow. Public performances, acting, dancing or singing are not unfamiliar to him. Each animator is expected to be open to others, to see their needs, to be friendly, kind, polite and to have a high level of personal culture. One of the many tasks of animators is to popularize physical activity and encourage guests to be active. It is impossible to perform this task without being dynamic and physically fit. In addition, the animator needs to have an uncommon imagination and be very creative. He also has to know how to use persuasion and how to lead people. Passion and engagement are crucial in the performance of leisure time animation.

Animation services are still a new trend on the Polish tourism market. This situation might be a cause of a poor interest and knowledge tourists have about what animation is and who the leisure time animator is. On the other hand, respondents who participated in recreational activities have positive impressions, which could suggest that there is a great potential in using recreational activities as elements of publicity. It would be advisable for the hotel and destination resort industry in Poland to increase the promotion of leisure time animation activities at the stage of accommodation reservation.

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