

SERVICE PERSPECTIVES IN HEALTHINESS AND SPORT TOURISM IN LITHUANIA: CASE OF SPA

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Abstract

The Paper disclose the actuality of spa services as one of the most popular services of healthiness and sport services' class that enable the country, the region to become to be more popular, more attractive for foreign tourists, population of this region. Regions, that have large spa centres or spa centres with exclusive resources (as mineral water, etc.), attract more people who come here and leave them money at hotels, restaurants, transport companies and other relative business enterprises. The Paper consists of representing of spa services; also a model on which background the spa service should be improved, developed. Three main points are excluded: focus on a spa customer, permanent improvement of the assortment of service (depending on the wishes and expectations of customers), also teamwork of spa centre. Results of survey of suppliers are represented. At the end of the paper the perspectives of spa services are enumerated.

Keywords: healthiness and sport services, spa services, focus on customer.

Introduction

Relevance of the topic. Healthiness and sport tourism industry becomes to be more popular not only in Former European Union countries, but also in the new members. People are looking for possibility to rest, relax from the stressful life, get mental rest from the busy working life, and forget such situation that appears in the world economics because of financial crisis covering all developing and underdeveloped countries. Spa services are a group of services that are ascribable to health and sport service industry. The services are not restricted such factors as mild climate that is necessary for tourists who are looking for holidaying at the seaside, or mountains that is an urgent factor for skiers, other natural resources. Spa services industry even rare uses necessary mineral water for their procedures, baths, and swimming pools. It could be provided by other providers. Spa service industry that covers a lot of services, as beauty, water entertainment, body care, etc., becomes very important not only for satisfying the customer expectations, but also for increase the competitive abilities of all the region, as any new spa centre attracts the customers both from the local and wider market. New term as spa tourist established already.

Spa service industry as a possibility of increasing competitive abilities of hotel industry is analysed by M. Madanoglu, & Sh. Brezina (2008). It becomes an attractive tool for any resort, region or even a country. Several authors (D. Thwaites, S. Chadwick, 2005) also notice that spas increase the room occupancy in far-off districts hotels. T. J. Dickson, J. Huyton (2008) emphasizes the importance of employees of healthiness and sport tourism companies for providing the service for a customer in relation with organizational objectives. M. Ismert, J. F. Petrick (2004) affirmed that the main aspect of competitive advantage of service is customer satisfaction that is related with quality of services provided by supplier. M. Fontanai, A. Kern (2003) in their study states that spa industry is very dynamic. And if spa organizations want to retain competitiveness in long-term duration they should find particular specialization distinguishing themselves with a clear profile among others.

As scientific works mentioned above shows, that spas is very dynamic, more researches should be organized in order to foreseen wishes, expectations of customers, demand for spas and its leading supporting services. The possibility to survive in very limited market in a case of global economical crisis is awarded by the identification of very clear perspectives of spas industry, grounded on wishes of customer, permanent survey of changes of their demands. Spa's service perspectives should be foreseen not only evaluating wishes of customers, ability of services providers to focus on customers and actions trying to achieve a goal to satisfy them. Considering expectations of customers, spa services suppliers should have strategic thinking, flexibility, agility, continuous improvement of their activities in order to create the biggest value to their customer. Thus seeking to indentify spa sector's perspectives in Lithuania it is important to evaluate which enablers from service suppliers' side determine the fundamental principles for providing the service for a customer.

Objective of the Paper is to identify what are perspectives for expanding the spa service business in Lithuania.

Research methodology is the analysis of scientific literature and survey of spa service suppliers.

Spa – as one of the most perspective healthiness' and sport' services

One class of services to whom an attention is nowadays arising is a class of healthiness and sport services. People are looking for ways how to relax from their busy life, from any other problems arising at the situation of financial crisis covering all world. There is no discussion that people are going to save money, to calculate them as situation in economics is not very favourable. But also we should notice that people do not refuse from all the leisure activity. They go to a cinema, to sport and fitness centres, to spa. They are going to travel to Alps, to other mountains for skiing purposes; to mild climate countries for holidays at seaside and etc. Thus a demand for healthiness and sport activity still remain.

There are different opinions what services depends to healthiness and sport services' industry. Briefly it could be described as services related to improvement a health state of customer and sport activity. *Spa* services analysed in this article is a class of services related both for *healthiness and sport activity*. Analysing authors' works, we notice that Sh. E. Spivack (1998) resumes that health spa services are services that's rapid growing is very visible. Spa services usually relates to vacation of customer, leisure time. This author analyses health spa as one of sport tourism services sector that enables to diversify an activity of tourism. A country that could provide spa tourism could diversify from others; a new value for a region is added. Spa tourism development may have many beneficial consequences, both economic and environmental. Thus, Sh. E. Spivack (1998) is ready to name spa as *health spa tourism service*.

J. C. Henderson (2003) spa service refers as one of *healthcare tourism service*. To the same class of healthcare tourism services a medical tourism, alternative therapies are attached. As Sh. E. Spivack (1998), J. C. Henderson (2003) identifies great challenges for a region that is able to promote healthcare tourism, and particularly spa tourism.

Other authors, as H. Müller, E. L. Kaufmann (2000) are inclined to believe that spa services are a one of branches of *wellness tourism*. A term wellness is widely used in Swiss tourism, accordingly to them. Authors state, that wellness services industry identified as one of the most important factors for increasing competitiveness of all the country. Paying attention to spa as one of wellness tourism branches is one of the general tasks of managers not only for enterprise, but also for state policy. M. Fontanai, A. Kern (2003) spa tourism and health tourism are ready to distinct, although they approve that these services are related between themselves and a lot of similarities are noticeable.

J. Woolf (2008) notices that healthiness and sport supplier is competitive in case if he support services augment, the value of core service's, provide points of differentiation and in such way creates competitive advantages before competitors. Grounding on this opinion, spa service is a service covering a core services and various supported services provided. J. Woolf (2008) studies represent that customers wants supporting services and distinct bundles of supporting services could be identified. One of customers wants to relax, in this case a bundle of services covering relaxing points will be provided: bar, chairs long in heating zone, etc. Other customer wants a distinct bundle of supporting services, for example, training samples, trainers, consultants because of healthiness program. Thus, spa services could be various and dynamic.

Lithuanian authors N. Langvinienė, J. Sekliuckienė (2008) also refers that spa services are services which are grounded on improvement a health of the customer. Tourists from other countries are attracted to a country by regions where spa centres are located. New, modern spa centres are able to attract people both for medical or relaxing purposes. Scientific research paper (*Sveikatingumo ir poilsio kompleksų poreikio ir plėtros Lietuvoje studija*, 2007) made on the order of Lithuanian Economic Ministry refers, that spa services in all the Europe refers more to treatment and health, to procedures using water as the main element of spa; while in US spa is approached to health state of lifestyle. Countries with natural mineral water resources are able to provide distinctive spa services and attract visitors not only from the local region.

Summarizing, the spa service is one of services of healthiness and sport class that consists of a few of core services and supporting services. The concept of spa is understood as a profit for a customer trying to achieve health state of the body using water procedures, equipment and consultations of spas staff. A region that is able to provide a distinctive spa tourism services could become to be very competitive comparing with other regions. Not necessary medical mineral water, mood are used. Consequences developing of spa services industry have both economical and comparative benefit for providers, for the entire region, for the state of all country's economic.

Factors having influence on spa services' customers' satisfaction

In these latter years scientific researchers give their attention to service quality and quality management. Seeking to analyse particular service quality various models are used: SERVQUAL (A. Parasuraman, V.A. Zeithaml, L.L. Berry, 1988, 1991), Ch. Grönroos (1985), SERVPERF (J. Cronin and S.A. Taylor, 1992), Quality function development, Service attribute score and Customer satisfaction measurement (CSM) models. The main points of all models, mentioned above, are a customer and customer satisfaction. According N. Langvinienė, J. Sekliuckienė (2008), one of the most popular SERVQUAL model describes an estimation of customer that evaluates a gap between expected quality and perceived quality. Thus services quality is predicated as that expectation has had a customer. Customers are main estimators of services quality. Customers of SPA services are individual persons, families or organizations that make an agreement with a club for providing services to their employees.

Service quality direct related is not only with customers, but also with services suppliers and employees. Employees providing services are the connection between customers experience and satisfaction and organisational goals. Having good employees and high level managers offering exceptional services may be main factors seeking to achieve service quality and maintain competitive advantage. That's why quality management is very important. According to A. Rönnbäck and L. Witell (2008) quality management is a business philosophy or a company ideal. J. Dean and D. Bowen (1994) include three principles of providing the quality for a service:

1. Customer focus.
2. Continuous improvement.
3. Teamwork to improve product and service quality.

Principles defined as a set of underlying assumption of how to view the organization and its relation to customers, competitors and suppliers (A. Rönnbäck and L. Witell, 2008). Other authors include more different principles in their definition of quality management. According to B. Bergman and B. Klefsjö (2007) quality management include: focus on customers, focus on processes, base decisions on facts, improvement continuously, let everybody to be committed and top management commitment. S. Lagrosen and Y. Lagrosen (2007) developed a fitness quality management framework that includes quality dimensions (what the customers need, want, and appreciate) and elements that warrants a quality - enablers (the elements required if the company is to create quality for its customers). They divided enablers to direct (technical competence, relational competence) and indirect (training, facilities and equipment, evaluation, empowerment, climate, leadership, organisational consciousness, recruitment and service design). In a conceptual model proposed by M.C.G. Davidson (2003) organisational culture and community culture impacts service quality, customer satisfaction and ultimately organisational performance. Organisational culture consists of organisational climate, empowerment and training, operating procedures and resources. M.C.G. Davidson (2003) emphasis in him works the importance of employees and their welfare seeking to achieve organisational goals and support customer satisfaction.

Summarizing service quality and quality management models and their relation with customer satisfaction from the point of view of spa services providers we present a framework in Figure 1.

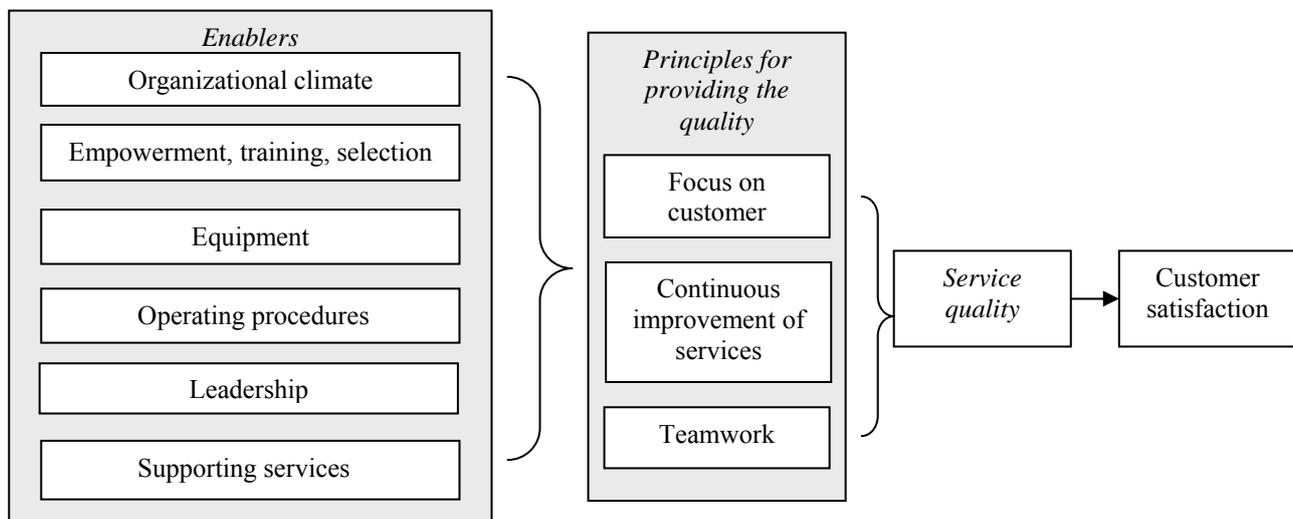


Figure 1. Framework for spa services customer's satisfaction: services provider's view

For spa services, as people-oriented sector, focus on customer is essential thing for good organizational performance. Interaction between customers and employees starts from the first intention to try spa services; it is trying to find information from spa centre website, booking entrance ticket to a spa centre, communicating with instructors, trainers, taking consultations about individual procedures, booking and choosing supporting services such as accommodation, nutrition, beauty services, etc., trying equipment of spa centre.

Equipment of spa centre sometimes is crucial in customer selection process, when customer compares different spa centres. Equipment (facilities) includes: equipment of pools, saunas, baths, slipstreams (security of them, layout and comfort of premises). Equipment could be described as all services (package and assortment of services) that are provided by spa centre, all activities and exercises here, inside and outside the centre. All spa activities relating to contact personnel, not to equipment, provide spa centre employee.

Spa services providers could be classified as front line service workers, like instructors, trainers, consultants, etc., and managers. Working face – to – face with a client required kind communication and willingness of personnel, advises that procedures should be used, unpaid information. Managers have to empower their employees to adapt the services as required to attend to the needs of customers. They do not need a permit from manager or doctor for consulting a customer, because they possess the necessary information themselves. It is very important to have skilled, committed employees. Instructors of SPA centres, trainers must have appropriate education; they have to improve their knowledge systematically. Therefore recruitment and selection of employees demand providence from managers. Correctly selected and empowered employees could easily work as one team. Teamwork directly interacts with spa service quality and customer satisfaction. Leadership is directly related to organizational climate, teamwork, as well chosen direction for giving consultation, partnership with a customer increases satisfaction both customer and provider. Motivated personnel are prepared to do their best providing a quality for a service, satisfying the customer, their wishes. Thus, leaders are obligated to identify customer's desires and to do everything for empowering the personnel to satisfy that customer wants.

Empowerment and training of employees', selection of new employees' closely related with organisational climate, because favourable organisational culture and environment create employee satisfaction, which in turn empowers creates customer satisfaction. M.C.G. Davidson (2003) describe organisational climate as a climate of service, a climate for innovation and a climate for human resources or employee welfare. That means good climate to create new services for customers, to create supporting services, to create good conditions for employees.

Continuously improvement is one of the most important things for strategic thinking about keeping the customer, providing the qualitative service for spa services buyer. Increasing wishes of customer forces the spa services provider to think how to satisfy him, to surprise him again and again then he/she comes to the centre. TQM (Total quality management) philosophy (Zu, 2009) state that the main points of politics of quality management in organization is continuously improvement of services quality taking into account new desires, new wishes and claims of customer. Organizational climate, training of the staff at the centre motivating them to look for new possibilities to satisfy the customer are very important. Continuously improvement do not relates only with tangible assets of the spa centre, as equipment, new supporting services and other extra value. Of course, supporting services are attractive thing for visitors, but management of these services quality is more important, as unsatisfied customer doubtless will not return to the same spa centre.

Summarizing it should be repeated that three principles are crucial for a supplier who wants to satisfy customer wishes: 1) focus on customer, it is providing the quality desired by him; 2) continuous improvement of services that covers both tangible and intangible assets; 3) teamwork with a goal to improve a spa product. Trying to satisfy a customer six groups of enablers should be warranted by a provider: a) organisational climate; b) empowerment, training and recruitment; c) equipment for spa operations; d) operating procedures; e) leadership; and f) supporting services.

Research methodology

Earlier researches (Woolf, 2008) on spa services shows, that situation differs depending on customers' demographic and psychographic profiles. The level of revenue of customer, frequency of visiting of spa centres, experience of customer also have an influence on customers' spa services expectation and desires (Langvinienė, 2008).

Our goal of this research was to study the view of the spa services suppliers seeking to identify perspectives for expanding the spa services business in Lithuania. For empirical research of created framework in Lithuanian spa centres qualitative research direction was selected. By using the experts' survey –interview, there it was investigated the importance of principles for providing the quality, and identify what enablers are crucial for spa business.

Research questionnaire was made corresponding to parts of framework. The questionnaire was used using semi – structured interview method. The first block of questions was formulated on general characteristics of centre, identifying the main philosophy of the organisation. The second block of questions was grounded on principles for providing the quality, seeking to find, how strong they are in organisations. We tried to identify what is influence of enablers on customer focus, continuous improvement of services and teamwork, trying to find what is the most important for customer satisfaction, according to opinion of the employees of spa centres. Later respondents were asked to identify the perspectives of spa business in Lithuania.

Four experts, representing the largest Lithuanian sport and wellness centres, providing spa services took part in the research. Interviews were organized with managers of “Vichy” Aqua Park (Vilnius), Tourism, Healthiness and Entertainment Centre “Trasalis” (Trakai), “Druskininkai Aqua Park” (Druskininkai), “SPA Druskininkai” (Druskininkai). It should be noted that all four centres are new entrants to the market. Druskininkai Aqua Park was opened two and half year ago. Latter Vichy, Trasalis and SPA Druskininkai were opened. It is difficult to say that managers of these centres have long year experience in their business. But a survey of their opinion let us imagine do they no the really wishes of customer and what are their perspective depending on capabilities to satisfy customer desires, demands.

In the research the biggest target Lithuanian spa centres, offering the widest range of services, were interviewed. Smaller spa centres such as “SPA Vilnius” (Vilnius and Druskininkai), “East Island Oriental Spa” (Vilnius and Druskininkai) and spa centres, located in hotels or close to them, e.g. “Vanagupe SPA” (Palanga), “Pajūris SPA” (Klaipeda) and other smaller spa centres, offering narrower range of services, did not take part in this research.

Findings of the survey

Results of interview showed that business philosophy of the largest Lithuanian spa centres differs a lot. “*Druskininkai Aqua Park*” is spas centre which main philosophy – to provide as many services, spa activities providing various baths, saunas, pools, etc., as possible. It keeps the strategy to remain the largest water entertainment park in Lithuania. A lot of various services are provided here. The establishment of this centre had a task to attract more tourists to Lithuania for one day, weekend or longer time trips, and increase the competitiveness of the entire region.

The second of the spa centres “*Vichy*” philosophy was related more with local region of capital of Lithuania. Entertainment using water procedures, swimming pools, were advertised. Event, parties, music evenings were emphasized. Specialization to visitors – families with children, also young couples was expressible.

An expert of the third (by chronological range) tourist centre “*Trasalis*” underlined that their philosophy covers a lot of tourist services, as hotel, transportation of passengers, local touristic journeys, conference centres, restaurants, spa centre, baths, pools, massages, etc. Philosophy does not underline one of the activities. All elements creating the attractiveness for tourists coming to Trakai, culture town of Lithuania, are important, according the opinion of expert.

The fourth – “*SPA Druskininkai*” – spa centre appears firstly near the hotel. Managers of this centre see a spa as an attractive tool for tourists, guests of this hotel. The main vision of the centre is to create an extra value for hotel guests, people coming from foreign countries for medical purposes, too. Foreigners wishing quiet surrounding consuming spa procedures are welcome.

Main principles demonstrating suppliers' view to a crucial factor of satisfying a customer are presented in Table 1.

Reviewing the findings of interview, the most important principle enabling to satisfy customer according spa services provider is focus on a customer. Individual approach to a customer is used in “*Spa Druskininkai*”. New and new services are included since the opening the spa centre. Teamwork as one of the most important element of successful spa business was underlined, too. “*Druskininkai Aqua Park*” supplies a lot of services, but they are not capable to provide something new. They started from the opening a centre

with a lot of services inside. Thus, they have no capabilities to devise something new for spa service's customer. Partnership not only inside the centre, but also outside is favourable. "Vichy" specializes on relaxing activities, demanded by specific groups of visitors who want more to relax that is to bath, swim, sport, etc. Extra services on entertainment purposes are added. "Trasalis" does not pay attention to one of services provided to tourists. Teamwork is not preferable at all. However, "Trasalis" starts to cooperate with outside partners attracting new visitors, adding new value to services: discounts for visitors of Trakai castle's museum, other sport centres, banks. Strategy of "Trasalis" covers involvement of customer in all tourists visiting points in Trakai region.

Table 1. Main principles providing the quality for spa service

<i>Supplier</i>	Principles		
	Focus on customer supplying the quality	Continuously improvement of services	Teamwork improving the product
<i>Druskininkai Aqua Park</i>	Keeps the position that customers want variety of services, pools, baths, and slipstreams. Focus on average of customer, it is <i>on mass consuming</i> .	Usually limits by <i>improvement of equipment</i> used inside the centre. No extra services are included.	Extra relations with outside partners trying to provide for customer extra retailing services, restaurants, hotels, etc. As a centre is big close teamwork is impossible.
<i>Vichy</i>	Keeps the position that visitors are looking for attractions, joys, relax. Focus on families, couples; it is <i>several groups of customers</i> . Separate focus on <i>business events</i> inside the centre.	Usually limits on providing <i>new programs for entertainment</i> , concerts inside the centre.	New strategies for attracting visitors are looking for. All member of team should be involved.
<i>Trasalis</i>	Keeps the position to supply extra value for tourists, inviting to spa. Focus on <i>one-time visitors</i> , tourists coming to the region.	Assortment of services is rather narrow, as no priority to spa is given. Improvement of services covers <i>cooperation with outside partners (touristic agents, restaurants, museums)</i> .	No close relation between different members of centre is necessary as spa is one of a lot of services provided by centre.
<i>SPA Druskininkai</i>	Keeps individual approach to visitor – excellent services for <i>individual people</i> . Focus on patients, foreigners coming for medical purposes.	New spa procedures related to supporting services as massages, consultations, make-up, etc. are involved. Bundles of services are supplied adding <i>new supporting services</i> .	Teamwork is urgent, as close partnership enables to identify that customer wants and to consult to use one service after other.

Looking for spa perspectives in Lithuania all interviewed experts see that spas market is not overstocked at the moment. Only a few of regions have clear positions for them suppliers. There are two spa centres in Druskininkai now. Possibility for new entrance is not visible. However, except Vilnius other largest cities of Lithuania haven't a large spa centre. We are not talking about small spa room, swimming pool or baths near the hotel, etc. We are talking about a separate one from the other business activities, it is a large spa centre that are capable to provide a lot of services in one place and manage their quality, satisfying customer wishes, not about separate sport and training, wellness centres.

Specialization to one-two specific groups of visitors is necessary in case if services are not mass-consuming. A centre is not allowed to stop improving the service, not allowed to sleep and do not organize surveys of customers' wishes. Market is changing as wishes of customers are dynamic, too. Teamwork is a key factor enabling to improve all far-off supporting services that often are extra value for extra money. It is not enough to sell an entrance ticket to a centre. Consultants should do those best for persuading the

customer to use other services, as massage procedures, hamam-baths, salt room, bars, etc. Managers of spas should look through the strategy to supply all the bundle of services as accommodation (if possible), feeding, water entertainments, baths, massages, cosmetologists, etc. It is possible “to forget” the individual approach to a visitor only in case if a centre has no task to get loyal customers. But all spa centres what are existing only two or less years are wishing to remain be successful and develop them activity despite the difficulties in economics of all surrounding countries.

Spa centre that are located rather in large population territories as Vilnius, etc., tries supply also a lot of services, organizing events attracting visitors during weekends, holidays, Christmas time, etc. Individual approach to a customer is more welcoming in smaller centres located near other resorts, sanatorium, or hotels. Tourist, culture centres are able to supply minimum set of spa services at centres that have much more than spa. As there are few spa centres in North or West of Lithuanian region, new members should think about that they want and who their customers are going to be. Klaipėda has a lot of possibilities to attract a lot of tourists, so providers are able not specialize the activity. But, for example, Kretinga, Anykščiai are touristic regions attracting specific visitors, so strategy should be very clear and specific.

Conclusions

Concluding the Paper several thesis should be underlined. Lithuania is a rather small country, so politics of country's economics should cover a search of ways how to add extra value to specific services what we are able to provide for tourists from neighbouring countries. Tourists to Lithuania are coming for visiting tours, medical and water-cure purposes, business trips, etc. Establishment of spa centres – one of ways how to attract more tourists to come here. It should be noted that Lithuanian spa centres offer high quality services, also there is well developed infrastructure, that is very important to customers of spa services.

Competitive abilities of regions having spa centres are increasing year after year. Paying more attention to this kind of services business should be one of priority politics of our country. An experience of Finland, Poland and other countries shows that people are ready to go for hundred kilometres for visiting a spa. Thus, identification of spa customer wishes is one of key factors for successful business of spas.

Customer's satisfaction of supplied services depends on services suppliers and employees. Quality of spa services is directly related with employees' competence offering and providing exceptional services and goal of organisation, oriented to customers' satisfaction. Organisation's conditions provided to their employees, i.e. clear organisation's values, good organisational climate, training of employees and leadership, are one of the most important enablers that empower employees to provide high quality services. Satisfaction of employees working in motivating, modern and constantly learning organisation empowers to create customers' satisfaction. Other elements that warrant quality of spa services are equipment, operating procedures and supporting services.

Three main principles, that depend on enablers, for providing the service for a customer hoping to satisfy his wishes are urgent: focus on customer identifying that are key factors forming the qualitative spa service and creating a value grounded on expectation of customer; improvement of services which could not be stopped by manager hoping that customer gets already what he or she wants; teamwork trying to achieve organizational goals – to get more money trying to find what customer want and which are ways for getting more profit for both of participating sides.

Further research should cover an interview with spa centres that did not participate in the interview, smaller spa centres in Lithuania and managers of new spa centres that are going to enter to the market. Also new quantitative and qualitative surveys of customers are appreciated. Trying to disclose the perspective of spa services in Lithuania, other countries experience and comparable analysis of findings would be useful.

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DOI: 10.5755/j01.em.1.14.9414