

The Modern Service Strategies to Create a Competitive Advantage of Travel Agents in the Mekong Provinces in the Northeastern Region

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Abstract

This research aimed to 1) study the factor analysis of modern service strategies to create a competitive advantage of travel agents in Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region and 2) examine the structural equation modelling of modern service strategies to create a competitive advantage of travel agent in Mekong provinces in the Northeastern Region. The data were collected by using questionnaires. The samples were travel agent entrepreneurs in Nong Kai, Buengkan and Nakhon Phanom amount 113 entrepreneurs. The research instrument was factor analysis and orthogonal rotation by using varimax method to study confirmatory factors with by maximum likelihood. The results of the test to examine the accuracy of the model through KMO was .784, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity showed a significant value of .000, which means the variables were related to each other and can be used to analyze with seven factors, including 1) building a service image, 2) improving service through innovation, 3) focusing on specific market segments to response customers, 4) cost, 5) public relations, 6) service management, and 7) creative innovation. The result for the confirmatory factor analysis was conformed to the empirical data and accurate according to the model structure by considering $\chi^2 = 566.273$, $df = 213$, $\chi^2/df = 2.6585$, CFI=0.986, TLI= 0.957, SRMR=0.040, RMSEA= 0.04.

Keywords: 1) Strategy 2) Competitive advantage 3) Tourism business 4) Mekong province 5) Service strategy

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Introduction

Nowadays, tourism is an important aspect of the country that can generate income for businesses and, result in, the community. In addition, tourism management must rely on strategic management principles, or the study of service strategies to meet the tourists' needs is an important part that must be understood or researched in Thailand. Ministry of tourism and sports (2015) said Thailand is aware of tourism as a key mechanism to help maintain stability and drive the country's gross economy. The National Tourism Policy Committee, who prepared the National Tourism Development Plan 2017-2021, stated the development results in the past National Tourism Development Plan. Although it is succeeded in terms of income and the capacity for competition, there are still several problems.

The study of modern service strategies was the study of patterns or guidelines to build a service image, utilize innovation, and invent innovation which is essential for modern service strategies. Competitive advantage refers to an organization's competency to outstand its competitors by producing goods or services that customers need with superior efficiency. The key to creating competitive advantage is superiority in efficiency, quality, innovation, and responding to consumer needs (Danthamrongkul, 2006, p. 85) According to the current situation, the government has encouraged each community to apply innovations to the community more, such as modern tourism strategies with new ideas, bringing innovations to reduce costs, or using technology to help publicize tourism. This study aims to study the competency of

travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region by emphasizing service studies. Currently, cultural tourism in the Mekong region is very popular. Many provinces have cooperated in tourism management, which gives them a competitive advantage. In addition, building a competitive advantage is very important to make travel agents survive. Since the competition is high, innovation is required. The competition is even more intense since it currently is the era of digital society. Weangsri (2016) stated that Thailand 4.0 is the era of an innovation-driven economy that restructures the economy from the Value-Based Economy by, first, shifting from commodity production to innovative goods, second, shifting from an industrial-driven country to driving technology, creativity and innovation and, lastly, shifting from the manufacturing sector to service sector with more emphasize. Therefore, Thailand 4.0 is the way that Thailand must change through the whole system in four key components: 1) shifting from the current traditional farming to modern agriculture that focuses on management and technology (Smart Farming) with the belief that farmers must richer and be entrepreneur, 2) shifting from traditional SMEs or existing SMEs and the state has to provide support all the time to Smart Enterprises and Startups with high potential, 3) shifting from Traditional Services which create relatively low-value services to high-value services, and 4) shifting from low skilled workers to knowledgeable, proficient, and highly skilled workers. According to the mentioned above, if each business or travel agent applies these things, it will create real competitive advantages.

The study of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages of travel agents in Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region is a study on travel agent entrepreneurs to study the strategies that will help entrepreneurs gain competitive advantages with competitors in the travel agent business. This study is quantitative research analyzing components to group variables, in which a structural equation model is obtained for confirmation with the sample. The study results can be used as a guideline for the travel agents to adapt and apply to develop better competitive strategies. Moreover, government agencies can use the results of this study as a model for training, and general researchers who are interested in applying variables can also use it to further the study.

Objectives

1. To study the components of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region.

2. To examine the modern service strategy equation model to create competitive advantages of the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region with the empirical data.

Research Hypothesis

The modern service strategy structural equation model to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region is consistent with the empirical data.

Literature Review

To study modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents, the researcher studied concepts and

theories of modern management strategies. Peawngam (2010, pp. 119-112) stated that modern service could be divided into two interesting criteria: 1) service innovation and 2) new product improvement. Wanvanich (2013, p. 5) stated that service businesses must consider these factors: 1) the economic condition of the country, 2) the competitiveness of the business, 3) the development of the country, 4) new technologies, and 5) living transformation. Service innovation or service improvement through innovation is a factor that will help develop a good travel agent.

The concept of quality service was studied from the results of customer evaluation on the service quality. Wu, et al., (2016, pp. 664-671) stated that a good service strategy must consist of clear information, details, good service image, and service must be full of know-how in fundamental IT and modern management philosophy and providing quality services in the tourist market. Ganski, et al., (2020) stated that differentiation in the modern tourist market was a modern service strategy that requires creativity or innovation to make a difference, especially creating a different and stand out corporate image from the competitors. It was another modern service strategy that must be applied.

The study of the competitive advantage in travel agents studies various opportunities to develop the business to have an advantage over competitors. Grönroos, C., T. Strandvik, and Heinonen, K. (2015, pp.69-81). stated a service comparison perspective with other strategic perspectives such as service, product, price, and image. According to the concept of Porter (2005), competitive advantages is created through these three main strategies:

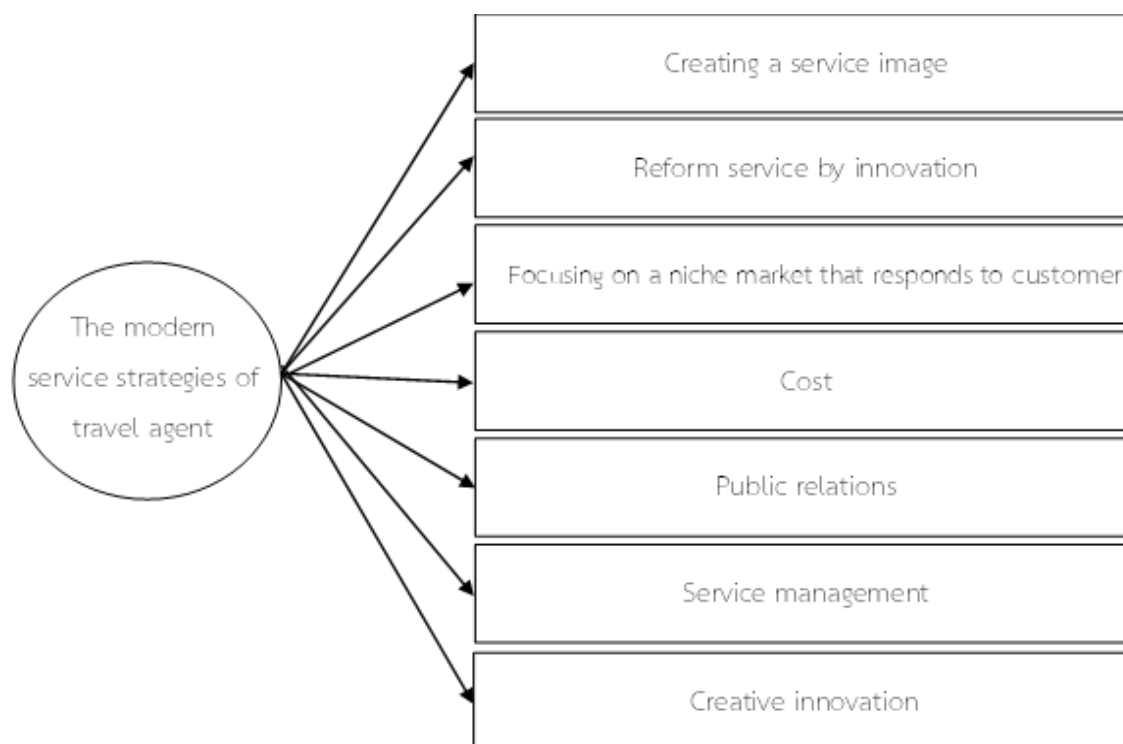
first, cost leadership strategy; second, differentiation strategy; and lastly, focus strategy. Services focusing on the specific market in order to build differentiation applied new service strategies to maximize its benefit. Chompukum (2010) revealed that managing to increase competitive advantages consisted of four components: 1) cost competitiveness, 2) quality, 3) innovation, and 4) speed. Cost management was another modern strategy to gain a good competitive advantage in the market.

The concept of Fehr and Falk (1999) stated that to obtain a competitive advantage,

an organization must implement six strategies:

1) first-market advantage, 2) advantages in product presentation or stand out service over competitors, 3) advantages in building a value chain or business system, 4) resource advantages, 5) alliance advantages, and 6) advantage of production cost saving.

It can be concluded that competitive advantage requires differentiation, specific market or focus, and innovation to create differentiation. According to the above literature review, the overview can be summarized as a conceptual research framework as shown in Picture No. 1.



Picture No.1 Conceptual Research Framework

Methods

The population used in this research was 184 travel agent entrepreneurs operating in Nong Khai, 110 people, Bueng Kan, 44 people, and Nakhon Phanom, 100 people (National Statistical Office, 2016).

The samples used in this study was travel agent entrepreneurs who were representatives to do a questionnaire totalling 113 people, or 62 percent of the total population, collected from the samples in the Muang district, which were 46 entrepreneurs in

Nong Khai, 25 entrepreneurs in Bueng Kan, and 42 entrepreneurs in Nakhon Phanom.

This study used a factor analysis method. In multivariate statistical analysis, identifying sample must specify approximately ten times of the observed variable using the criteria for determining the sample size according to Hair, et al., (1998, p. 529). They stated that the criteria standard to identify the minimum number of samples of the linear structural equation (SEM) model must be ten times of the observed variable. However, the population of this study was small. It may be a limitation of the structural equation model and data collection. Therefore, the researcher collected as much data as possible; as a result, 113 samples were conducted. These numbers can be used in stratified random sampling proportionally to get the representative in each province.

The sample group for collecting data was travel agent entrepreneurs. Most of them were female entrepreneurs aged over 50 years, single, graduated a bachelor's degree, doing business for more than six years, having one to ten employees, investing 500,000 baht or more in a business, the average monthly income (have not deducted business expenses) was 70,000 baht or more, staying in Muang Districtt, and running business close to the community.

The research instrument used in this study was a Likert questionnaire to find the reliability of the questionnaire through a try out method with 30 travel agents in Khon Kaen. Then, the power of discrimination in each question was examined. The power of discrimination of all questions were over 0.20 – which was an acceptable value; the

acceptable power of discrimination ranged between 0.454-0.777. The reliability of Cronbach's Coefficient of Alpha ranged between 0.693 - 0.902. It can be concluded that the questionnaire was accurate and can be used in the study.

Data analysis consisted of:

1. Modern service strategy's factors were analyzed to create competitive advantages for tourism business in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region through factor analysis and oblique rotation. The variables of the same factor must be related to each other varimax method was used for the axis rotation. The results of the analysis showed that the grouping of the variables in each factor was more clearly defined, and weights were determined. Each component must have a weight of 0.30 or more to be grouped (Hair, et al., 1998, p. 529). The criteria used to define the components consisted of:

1.1 Communality: h^2 is the value of the variance of each factor describing a variable more clearly. Generally, it should be at least 0.50 to indicate the variables of each factor.

1.2 Eigen value is a value to specify the criteria. The value must not less than 1.00 and consists of three variables. To be considered a true factor, it must also have a factor weight of more than .30.

1.3 Factor loading is the relationship value between variables and factors. The factor weight should be greater than 0.30, and if any variable has a significant factor weight, the variable should be placed in that factor.

2. The analysis of the confirmatory factor model is the confirmation of the factor number and the factor indicators using the



confirmatory factor analysis and estimating the model parameters through Maximum likelihood. Statistical criteria were used to examine the validity of the model. The value of χ^2/df should not exceed 3.00 (Kline, 1998), CFI (Comparative Fit Index) >0.95 (Bollen, 1989), TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index) >0.95 (HuandBentler, 1999), SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) <0.05 and RMSEA (Root

Mean Square Error of Approximation) <0.05 (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2000, p. 85).

Results

A factor analysis of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeast region was an analysis of the data to verify the appropriateness of the data.

Table No. 1 Assessment of the appropriateness of the information on modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region

Item	KMO	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity		
		Approx. Chi-square	df	p.
the modern service strategies to create a competitive advantage of travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern Region	.784	5737.816	780	.000*

Note *p.<.05

According to Table No. 1, The results of the information appropriateness test found that Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was at .784, the statistically significant value of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was .000, which was less than .05. It indicated that the correlation between variables of the data

of each factor of modern service strategies to create the competitive advantage for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region was appropriate for further factor analysis (Hair, et al., 1998 pp. 378).

Table No. 2 Results of factor analysis of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region.

Factor	Factor Name	Eigen Value	Percentage of Variance	Percentage of Cumulative Variance
1	Building a service image (IMG)	20.022	50.055	50.055
2	Improving service through innovation (SER)	2.956	7.389	7.389
3	Focusing on specific market segments to response customers (FOC)	2.205	5.513	5.513
4	Cost (COS)	2.018	5.045	5.045
5	Public relation (INF)	1.094	4.761	4.761
6	Service management (MAN)	1.212	3.030	3.030
7	Creative innovation (INN)	1.064	2.659	2.659

Table No. 3 shows factor analysis

Factor analysis of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region				
Factor		Factor Weight	CR	AVE
Factor 1 Building a service image (IMG)			.941	.638
Punctual and fast service (G2)		.758		
Quick response and meet the needs (G1)		.743		
Image improvent and politeness to impress customers (B5)		.729		
Customer satisfied with the after sales service (E4)		.623		
Building an effective communication system (D4)		.606		
Always build a good relationship between customers and organization (D5)		.584		
Obvious and simple service procedure (C1)		.577		
Providing fast service to customers (C4)		.554		
Reliable and polite service (E2)		.547		



Table No. 3 (Continued)

Factor analysis of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region			
Factor 2 Improving service through innovation (SER)		.935	.674
Improving and developing knowledge and expertise to employees (B3)	.811		
Wide range of services (A5)	.735		
Improving customer service procedure (B1)	.712		
Implementing online technology in service (A4)	.696		
Improving service according to customer satisfaction (B2)	.602		
Wide range of service to focus on customers' needs (E1)	.549		
Developing the concept of new services (A3)	.479		
Factor 3 Focusing on specific market segments to response customers (FOC)		.915	.644
Providing simple service procedure (G3)	.750		
Planning strategic to focus on target groups (H4)	.699		
Minimizing unnecessary procedure for fast service (G4)	.694		
Streamlined organization management (G5)	.626		
Designing service to response target group (H1)	.577		
Factor	Factor Weight	CR	AVE
Building relationship and familiarity with customers (H3)	.573		
Factor 4 Cost (COS)		.931	.639
Cost reduction ability (F4)	.908		
A service at lower cost than competitors (F3)	.804		
Having sources of or purchasing raw materials providing lower prices than the competitors' (F5)	.775		
Efficient use of internal resources (F1)	.707		
To maintain the level of business cost for a good cost reduction (F2)	.560		
Technological advances in full service (A1)	.468		
Factor 5 Public Relation (INF)		.723	.603
Planning public relations to inform customers (H5)	.861		
Focusing on advertising for specific target groups (H2)	.819		

Table No. 3 (Continued)

Factor analysis of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region		
Publicizing service by emphasizing differentiation (E5)	.724	
Polite and reliable service (E3)	.605	
Factor 6 Service management (MAN)	.848	.634
Customer Oriented Management (D1)	.714	
Always build a good relationship between customers and organization (C5)	.609	
Setting clear visions and missions (D2)	.600	
Simple services; customer can easily understand (C3)	.533	
Standard business (C2)	.404	
Factor 7 Creative Innovation (INN)	.828	.616
Using innovztion to facilitate customers (A2)	.688	
Opportunity for employees to share and co-create ideas (D3)	.518	
The business improved the work performance to provide services more convenient (B4)	.419	

Table No. 2 revealed the factor analysis results of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region, which can be organized into seven factors. Table No. 3 showed that based on factor analysis, there were seven factors when using Varimax. The value of all variables was over .30. Eigen Value shown in Table No. 2 was higher than 1.00 in all factors. It can be concluded that all variables studied in this research can be included in the factor of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region, which consisted of:

Factor 1: Building a service image (IMG), 9 variables

Factor 2: Improving service through innovation, 7 variables

Factor 3: Focusing on specific market segments to response customers, 6 variables

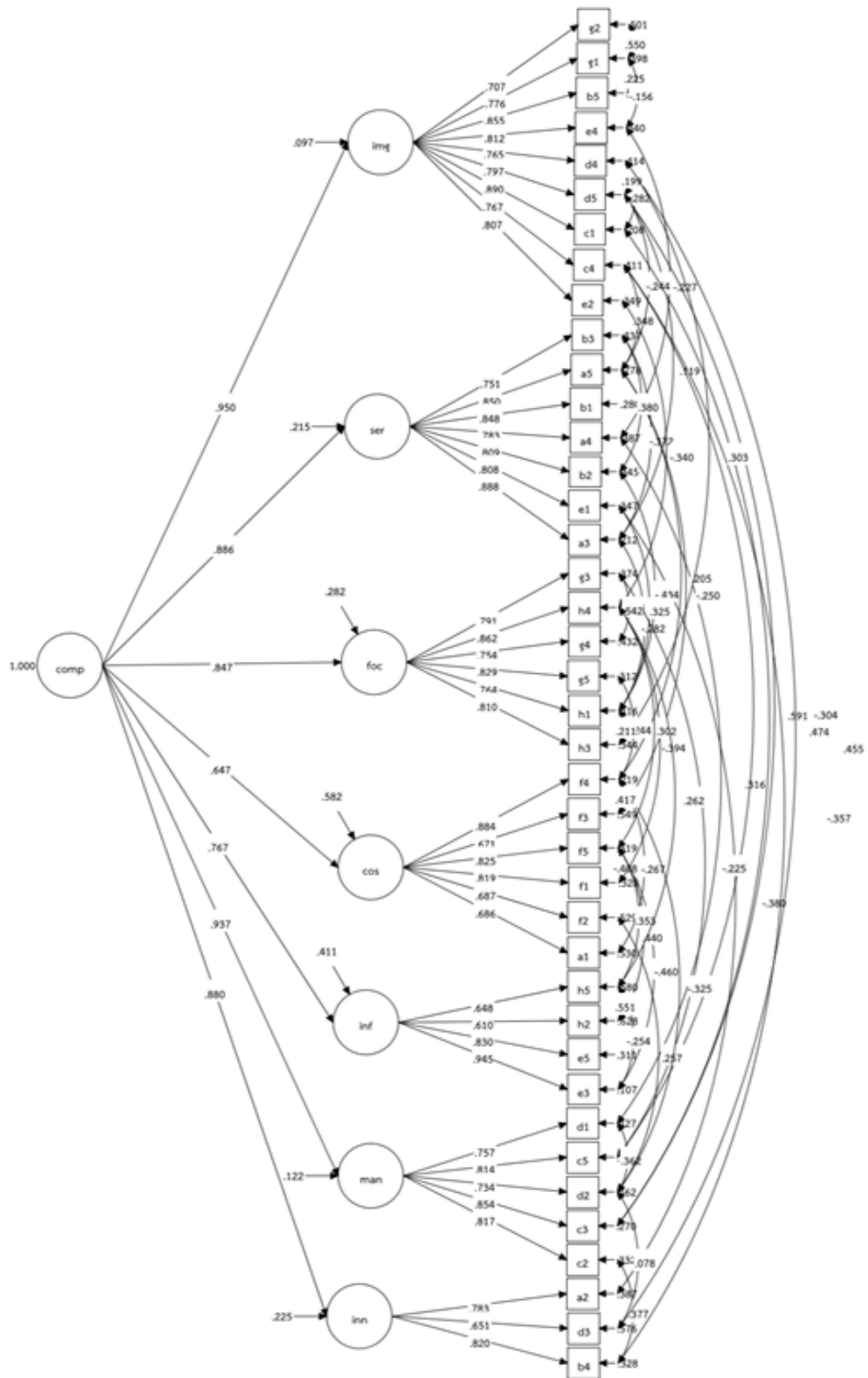
Factor 4: Cost, 6 variables

Factor 5: Public Relation, 4 variables

Factor 6: Service management, 5 variables

Factor 7: Creative Innovation, 3 variables

Composite reliability (CR), the optimal value should not be lower than .50 and the internal reliability based on the average variance extracted evaluation or AVE; the optimal value should be higher than .50. According to Table No. 3, all CR and AVE values were higher than .50 in all variables, which indicated that the research instruments and developed models were accurate.



Picture No.2 The structural equation modelling of modern service strategy to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region

Examining the structural equation modelling of modern service strategy to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region with empirical data as shown in Picture No. 2, revealed that SEM based on the research hypothesis was consistent with the empirical data. Considering $\chi^2 = 566.273$, $df = 213$ and $\chi^2/df = 2.6585$ which was no more than 3.00, CFI = 0.986 and TLI = 0.957 were higher than 0.95, the values of SRMR=0.040 and RMSEA=0.042 were lower than 0.05. These values were analyzed to describe the coherence between the studied theory and the actual samples based on the criteria. In conclusion, the structural equation modelling of modern service strategy to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region was consistent with the empirical data and the assumptions.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study results on the factors of modern service strategies to create competitive advantages for travel agents in the Mekong provinces in the Northeastern region consisted of 7 factors, including 1) building a service image, 2) improving service through innovation, 3) focusing on specific market segments to response customers, 4) cost, 5) public relations, 6) service management, and 7) creative innovation. These seven factors were essential to be a strategy to create a competitive advantage.

Creating a service image was to create an image for tourists to impress products or services, which was consistent with the study

of Jankingthong (2014). The study stated that creating and managing tourist attraction images to be attractive and stay in the mind of tourists, especially in terms of services which was similar to the result of this study; good service will help build loyalty to customers. Improving service through innovation was an essential factor that must be developed to keep the business moving forward. Samani (2019) stated that service innovation was important to differentiate in the hotel industry, particularly improving service by introducing technology or innovation. Khunthanan and Nurittamont (2019) stated the factors affecting the success of small and medium enterprises: one of them was the factor of service innovation. These two pieces of research were similar to this current study because innovation-based improvements will give businesses a good competitive advantage when the travel agent creating a good image such as service image, and taking care of customers: understanding customers and providing services that impress customers.

Focus on niche segments that respond to customers, penetrate niche markets, and find new markets to meet customers' specific needs. Jadesadalug and Chaiya (2018) discussed that a niche-market strategy that creates customer satisfaction was essential to building a competitive advantage. Promchat and Jadesadalug (2017) stated that a niche market strategy was used to create a competitive advantage for businesses. These two studies shared similar ideas. Focusing on a specific market was a crucial strategy for a business. Focusing on the tourism industry niche market can be adapted and applied. For example, focusing on senior citizens who were



civil servants with pensioners will be a niche with financial potential and make different tourism.

The cost aspect was essential to creating a competitive advantage. If the cost is low or can be reduced significantly, the business will have a higher profit margin. The cost understanding in this study was consistent with the study of Chantararnamchoo (2012), and Petsiri, et al. (2017) revealed the cost of transforming economic development strategies from creating a low-cost competitive advantage to cost-benefiting business enabling business operations. Similarly to this research, the cost was an advantage over competitors because the cost was one of the strategies that will give the business an advantage over other competitors, causing a competitive advantage. The cost was the essential factor to run the business. Reducing costs in the business, such as saving electricity in which the organization may have the campaign to save electricity; where there is no need for electricity, it should be switched off or turn off the power immediately when the work is done. Public relations was another strategy that would help a business be successful. Presenting business using various social media channels will encourage customers to be aware, consistent with Panthura (2013) and Sriyothin (2018). These studies addressed public relations, emphasizing the value of goods and services as an organizational tool. One such tool was public relations advertising, which will help the business to survive. Public relations nowadays is something that helps to communicate products or services to consumers quickly. For example, tourism

businesses have created a website that is interesting and can communicate services to consumers directly.

Service management was essential for each business. Competing in service was creating an impression on customers consistent with Wimonchaileuk, T., Sansom, K., and Chotechoei, N. (2019) and Patcharachotsuthi (2018), mentioning good service. Service quality will positively influence competitive business advantage, and the use of service innovation with good service improvement will make the business a competitive leader. Creative innovation had a competitive advantage because the inventing of new services created novelty in customer service, bringing technology to enhance the convenience of customers. In line with Nakkasem and Pasunon (2018) and Songsuntonchiwong (2016), service innovation and innovation management gave businesses a competitive advantage. Good service and service that meet customers to create maximum satisfaction was the management of good service, especially service improvement, which was the use of innovations to improve the tourism business.

Research Suggestions

The results of the study can be summarized as follows:

Implementation of modern service strategies from this research has seven factors. These factors can be used to train travel agent groups to strengthen entrepreneurs' knowledge to gain an advantage. In addition, the government may use the factors mentioned above as a guideline for educating

by training and providing knowledge. Practice writing a business plan that will make the travel agents generate income, and develop and adjust their business better. This research will benefit researchers and students interested in modern service strategies, which various strategies will give them a competitive advantage.

Suggestions for Future Research

This research was to conduct research on travel agents in the Mekong provinces. Those interested in applying the concepts or

methods to be applied in studies and research with other groups or districts. In addition, this research is quantitative research. Guidelines or principles to use in qualitative research for the next research to obtain in-depth answers. In addition, this research has limitations on time and place of data collection in future studies may collect data in the northern region or other regions to compare the results. This research is limited in terms of small population groups. Further research should also take into account the number of samples.

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