



services

case study

#3 – Tourism in Tunisia

(ISO 17680, *Thalassotherapy*)

ISO Strategy
for Services
Case study
3





Introduction

The ISO strategy for service standardization

Trade in services is expanding at a faster rate than trade in goods. Based on this observation, ISO anticipates that market demand for service standards will steadily increase and we want to make sure that the organization and its members will have the necessary tools and knowledge to respond to this demand, and to the challenges and opportunities it brings. This is why ISO adopted, in February 2016, the *ISO strategy for service standardization*. Our mission? Raising ISO's profile as a provider of service standards while continuing to respond to market expectations and helping our members to do the same.

For those not familiar with ISO, we are a membership-based network of national standards bodies that come together to develop International Standards ensuring products, processes and services are fit for purpose. ISO standards provide practical tools for tackling many of today's global challenges, bringing tangible benefits to business, society and the environment. ISO has already published more than 700 standards related to services in various sectors, including finance, business, brand valuation, customer contact centres, outsourcing, assessment services, IT services, marketing, network billing and many more.

ISO defines a “service” as the “result of at least one activity, necessarily performed at the interface between the supplier and customer, that is generally intangible”¹. However, the concepts of “services” and “service standards” are broad, and many different definitions and classifications exist. Some standards purely support the provision of a service. Others may support the infrastructure (e.g. IT or financial) necessary for the provision of a service. And then we have horizontal standards such as management system standards that can be applied to the provision of a service, but also much more broadly.

Rather than concentrate on questions of definition or classification, ISO has chosen to develop case studies to illustrate the use of these different kinds of service standards and to give real-life examples of how standards are being implemented in different industries, citing tangible results in terms of service delivery and consumer satisfaction. By looking at success stories of how standards are opening up new areas of business and improving quality and consumer trust, this case study will try to understand where standards are being implemented, how they work, and why the benefits more than outweigh the investment.

Note: This case study is part of a series, which includes ISO/TS 13131, *Telehealth services*, ISO 24510, *Activities relating to drinking water and wastewater services*, ISO 17680, *Thalassotherapy*, ISO 20121, *Event sustainability management systems*, and ISO 20022, *Universal financial industry message scheme*.

More information on ISO’s strategy for service standardization and ongoing work can be found at www.iso.org.

1) Definition from ISO/IEC Guide 76:2008, *Development of service standards – Recommendations for addressing consumer issues*.



Analysis

Presenting ISO 17680, *Thalassotherapy*

Over the past six decades, tourism has experienced continued expansion and diversification to become one of the world's fastest-growing industries. During this time, it has shown virtually uninterrupted growth. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals grew by 4.3% to 1.133 billion in 2014, garnering USD 1.5 trillion in export earnings, and they are expected to increase by 3.3% a year by 2030¹.

Tourism is now completely integrated into countries' development strategies and is a recognized contributor to the successful implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals². Not only is it a reliable source of income for many societies, it is also a large purveyor of both skilled and unskilled jobs, helping to revitalize local economies.

Its importance for economic development and international trade can hardly be overstated. Yet this diversification of activities implies fierce competition among tourist destinations, which can result in conflict of information or misunderstanding between consumers and suppliers. In this changing socio-economic context, beautiful landscapes are no longer enough for long-term

1) World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), *UNWTO Tourism Highlights*, 2015 Edition: www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284416899

2) UNWTO, Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284417254



success. This is where ISO comes in, striving to respond to the field's growing demand for standards that ensure quality, safety and customer satisfaction.

It is easy to see why standards for tourism are a popular commodity. In 2015, ISO technical committee ISO/TC 228, *Tourism and related services*, published no less than five new standards in a variety of areas, including the subject of this case study – thalassotherapy. The term has its origins in the Greek word for “sea” and refers to the medicinal use of seawater as a form of therapy. Offering a spa-like experience, its emphasis is not only on relaxation and beauty, but also on healing. Thalassotherapy comes in various guises, including hydrotherapy, such as mineral-rich showers, seawater baths and hydro-massage, and algotherapy, comprising seaweed, mud baths and wraps, all of which help restore the body's natural balance. It further includes aromatherapy, inhalations and drinking therapies. What's more, the sector holds unique potential for securing a broad base of clients – mixing business with pleasure.



Published in 2015, ISO 17680, *Tourism and related services – Thalassotherapy – Service requirements*, establishes the requirements for the provision of quality services in thalassotherapy centres, for the enjoyment and comfort of customers. The standard has a particular focus on hygiene and safety, while ensuring the respectful use of the thalassotherapy concept as an integrated package of therapy, prevention and overall health promotion. By placing quality, safety and customer satisfaction at the core of its requirements, the standard guarantees that suppliers fulfil certain conditions. As such, ISO 17680 can be described as a Business-to-Consumer (B2C) type of service standard, having a direct effect on the modalities of the services while prioritizing the satisfaction of users and their safety.

The strength of a service standard like ISO 17680 is its ability to have a direct bearing on a company's core activities and provide a benchmark for measuring performance against other service providers in the sector. In other words, it levels the playing field, ensuring fair and transparent competition for the benefit of the consumer.



Case study:

Optimizing thalassotherapy centres in Tunisia

Tunisia began its therapeutic tourism in 1994 and has expanded this particular health sector by combining the comfort of lavish thalassic hotels with the rejuvenation of mineral-rich seawater treatments, achieving second place among the world's top thalassotherapy destinations. To maintain its leading position in the industry, it was important to maintain impeccable services at all times.

No sooner had ISO 17680 been published than it became the focus of a country-wide project to improve Tunisia's thalassotherapy centres. On the initiative of INNORPI, the national standards body and ISO member for Tunisia, the country had been at the forefront of the standard's development, which drew on the Tunisian national standard NT126.05, *Services touristiques – Bonne pratique en thalassothérapie* (Tourist services – Good practice in thalassotherapy).

What's more, taking stock of the increasing demand for this type of service, and fearing the strain this would place on the country's 60 thalassotherapy centres, the national standards authority took a proactive approach to make sure the existing suppliers would be able to continue delivering the wide diversity of personalized treatments its customers were used to.

Customer baiting

The plan was to differentiate Tunisia from other thalassotherapy destinations, highlighting both the diversity and the quality of its services as a way of enhancing the positive perception of the product and reinforcing its role as a “main leader”, i.e. a baiting strategy whereby a “popular” article is used to entice business and build a broader customer base. In this scenario, the standard is used not only as a benchmark for service excellence, but as part of a wider publicity campaign to promote consumer trust. The belief is that by strengthening the country’s image as a dynamic tourist destination, with a diverse range of quality services, it will attract more visitors to Tunisia. The approach is therefore local (sector-specific) and global, aimed at raising the country’s profile on the world stage.

With ISO 17680 being so new, Tunisia’s thalassotherapy project is still in its infancy and INNORPI is in the process of developing a national action plan for its implementation. The main objectives of the plan include ensuring good marketing of the standard among professionals, rallying thalassotherapy centres to the implementation movement and subsequent certification to ISO 17680, and supporting the establishment of potential new centres. Above all, reaching out to local stakeholders and helping them comply with the requirements of the standard are the steps that feature most prominently on the national agenda in pursuit of these objectives.





The gentle approach

To get the ball rolling, a national coalition was created involving INNORPI, the National Office of Thermalism and Hydrotherapy, the National Office for Tunisian Tourism, the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Tourism, and professionals from the sector. The coalition's first action was to organize regional training courses for thalassotherapy centres in the coastal towns of Tunis, Hammamet, Sousse, Mahdia, Monastir and Djerba. It then proceeded to contact local professionals, explaining the requirements and benefits of ISO 17680 and preparing them for the implementation process.

As part of this controlled step-by-step approach, a couple of thalassotherapy centres will then be selected for pilot testing and ISO 17680 rolled out, from implementation to certification. A special certification programme is also under development to help centres get “audit ready” and offer additional support during the certification stage. The plan's gentle approach clearly reveals the coalition's sensitivity to the local contexts of thalassotherapy centres and the desire to include them as much as possible in the implementation effort.



Five pillars of excellence

ISO 17680 focuses on five main areas that will guide local authorities in their implementation activities. First on the list is the quality of the infrastructure, which includes reception and treatment rooms and technical areas, followed as a close second by facilities and equipment. Human resources are of course equally essential to any successful strategy; this involves checking that all employees possess the necessary qualifications and are properly trained to ensure a quality service. Best practice also receives special consideration to ensure methods and knowledge on medical treatments are kept up to date, while emphasis is placed on conducting regular checks to ensure the good functioning of the installation. Last but not least, the transportation, storage and handling of raw materials used in thalassotherapy treatments, such as seawater, mud and algae, are all given particular attention to minimize health risks.



All five pillars of the standard require specific conditions to be fulfilled across the whole service supply process. Some of these relate specifically to customer relations, which are key for boosting a product's attractiveness, particularly in the services sectors. For example, guidelines are given for reception, information and booking facilities, complaints management and processing potential compensation claims, in order to meet the highest levels of customer satisfaction. Similarly, the safety of guests is crucial and the standard requires that a set of rules and good practices be put in place to manage potential risks linked to thalassotherapy activities. As previously stated, self-control and sanitary checks are key to ensuring that a thalassotherapy centre always satisfies the requirements of the standard – a prerequisite to consistently good service.

A two-pronged approach

For Tunisia, implementing ISO 17680 has a twin objective. Not only is it a national strategy to maintain Tunisia's world ranking for thalassotherapy, it is also a global undertaking to raise the country's profile as a major tourism destination. By embedding the highest standards in one of its main tourist activities, Tunisia intends to win customers over to its quality services. In turn, visitors' positive perception of thalassotherapy services is expected to spill over onto the country's tourist sectors, giving each of these an economic boost.



Far from being constrained to a given company in a given region, the benefits of ISO standards can have a much broader reach, enhancing the image of the country as a whole and giving the economy a dynamic thrust. As a main employer, and one of the most important sectors in global services, tourism will undoubtedly continue to attract the attention of business leaders and decision makers around the world, who will be relying on the quality and excellence of ISO standards to support their forthcoming business strategies. Because quality, ultimately, has one major goal : satisfied customers who are pleased to come back again.



Our sincere thanks for their support:

- ▶ **Chokri Makhoulouf**, *Responsable des normes fondamentales et de service, INNORPI*
- ▶ **Nawel Daghma**, *Sous-directeur, Responsable des relations extérieures, INNORPI*



ISO standards used everywhere





Conclusion

ISO service standards and the 2016-2020 strategy

As this case study demonstrates, service standards not only set a much needed framework for the supply of services, they also provide an opportunity to drastically improve the quality of the services offered, contributing a growing share to the added value of a product. The more diverse and competitive a market, the more guidance consumers need to be sure they are purchasing the service they want at the best price. International Standards will help to maintain a healthy competition in the marketplace by ensuring that those companies which have already invested considerable amounts of money in order to offer better quality at affordable prices are rewarded accordingly.

As mentioned in the introduction, these case studies are part of ISO's strategy on services, which was adopted in 2016 with the aim of further developing the field of service standardization. They belong to the first pillar of this strategy on "communication and outreach" that looks at ways ISO can help its members engage with their stakeholders in the services sector and in particular with small businesses. The objective is to make a clear business case for service standardization and to position it as a natural extension of product standardization.

This will help identify the market interests of the business community, which, in turn, will help determine where (in which sectors) services are being traded, and which sectors and stakeholders could benefit most from the development of International Standards. Moreover, while preparing these case studies, we were able to consult the various committees that developed the standards, to learn from their experiences with different economic actors and to get their market feedback.

Of course, the *ISO strategy for service standardization* does not stand alone and it is worth recalling the bigger picture surrounding ISO's efforts in this area. ISO recently adopted its *ISO Strategy 2016-2020*, which will guide the organization's decisions over the next five years. Among its strategic directions is a communication pillar that aims to build recognition among the public and private sector of the value and impact of International Standards. This will help us to achieve our ultimate objective of "ISO standards used everywhere". For although you may not yet see it, ISO is already working hard to make your life easier and the world a better place.





About ISO

ISO (International Organization for Standardization) is an independent, non-governmental international organization with a membership of 161* national standards bodies. Through its members, it brings together experts to share knowledge and develop voluntary, consensus-based, market-relevant International Standards that support innovation and provide solutions to global challenges.

ISO has published more than 21 000* International Standards and related documents covering almost every industry, from technology to food safety, to agriculture and healthcare.

For more information, please visit www.iso.org.

*May 2016

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ISBN 978-92-67-10673-1

