

THE BRAND – AN INCREASING FACTOR OF A TOURIST DESTINATION’S COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract:

The increase in external pressures upon competitiveness makes companies quickly adapt to the criteria of modern competition. One of these criteria is the brand which has proven in developed economies the main competitive advantage and it influences to a certain extent the demand for any service. In these circumstances, the concern for a brand is a need, not a custom. Yet, the decisive influence shall belong to consumers – as their new life style includes the right to choose and to be somehow cynical when being able to give up a brand as soon as it does not fulfil its duties.

Accomplishing the task to increase an area’s competitiveness requires the improvement of actions meant to develop and promote an area as a tourist destination both nationally and internationally as well as to develop a sustainable tourist industry. The sustainable growth of tourist promotion, the design and promotion of a tourist brand are a basic constituent both to achieve at normal, best levels the image of an area as a well-customized tourist destination, different from other competitive destinations on the national and international market, and to attract investors and other strategic partners for the growth of tourist industry.

Key words: brand, competitiveness, tourist destination, strategy

Introduction

In a more and more complex world, with more and more demanding consumers, where media become more and more diverse and the Internet tends to cover all fields of activity, developing a powerful brand means a challenge aiming at recognition, growth, development and competitiveness in the future.

One is surrounded by brands that influence buyers’ consumption behaviours more or less (Morgan N., Pritchard A., Pride R., 2002). Yet, the lack of brands is an obstacle in any activity, since a brand makes one think of what one sees, it develops and gains confidence in the long run and has more often than not such a strong effect upon people.

A brand’s capital is one of the most important topics in current management. The Institute for Marketing Sciences has recently taken soundings among its members (Abimbola, T., 2008), and its results have proven the existence of increasing concerns related to branding, as well as trying several organization forms in order to improve and better protect brand capital. A brand is the starting point for all marketing decisions and all media creations (Aaker, D. A., 2005). Creating a brand is defining and expressing the personality of an organization or destination, not only creating a logo, but also creating verbal and visual identity at the same time building a brand by its strategic platform and by all its marketing and communication activities.

Branding conveys information about what a product is and can be, it can render value to a product, it is the set of methods by means of which an organization or product communicates, symbolizes and differentiates itself towards its audience. According to Temi Abimbola (2001), branding means "identifying and/or creating, then exploiting certain sustainable competitive advantages".

Creating a brand supposes defining and expressing the personality of an organization (Ries, Al., 2004) or a destination, not only creating a logo, but also creating verbal and visual identity, at the same time *building* a brand by its strategic platform and by all marketing and communication activities. A powerful brand renders a strong relationship with customers.

The competitiveness background of a tourist destination

The current context marked by the globalization of phenomena and the widespread recognition of interdependence has imposed new rules: nations' prosperity supposes competitiveness on international markets and enterprises should access world value chains.

Accomplishing the goal to improve an area's competitiveness requires more and more actions that aim at the national and international improvement of an area as a tourist destination along with the development of a long-lasting tourist industry at national level.

Growing a destination's competitiveness must start from the good knowledge of tourist supplies in all their aspects: resources, valuation level, as well as of the economic, social and political context that influence tourism growth. A useful analysis pattern is the diagnosis analysis achieved by means of the SWOT matrix which synthesizes certain information regarding the current state of tourism in an area, allowing the

identification of proper strategies (Morgan N., Pritchard A., Pride R., 2002). This implies on one hand an analysis of the domestic/local market in order to emphasize the strengths and weaknesses of tourism and on the other hand an analysis of the market's external environment which shall lead to the identification of opportunities and threats in tourism development.

The two constituents, the internal and external environment, are to be analyzed according to their reference elements, as such:

- *the strengths and weaknesses* of the system are to be emphasized according to: tourist resources, tourist infrastructure, product and service supply, tourist demand, marketing policy;

- *the opportunities and threats* of the general external environment: economic, political, social, cultural, demographic environment as well as those of the environment typical of tourist markets as regards global tourist demand and competition on domestic and foreign tourist markets.

To a destination that has tourist values, tourism means the economic sector that has a major growth potential and can become an attraction source both for foreign investors and tourists. Yet, this is still difficult because of the ample issues related to tourism competitiveness in a certain tourist region (Evans N., Campbell D., Stonehouse, G., 2003), in general.

The most significant elements of a tourist destination's competitiveness are mainly rendered by:

1. *Factor conditions*, respectively: natural and cultural resources, capital resources, infrastructure, human resources;

2. *Suppliers' status and structure*: natural status (environment conditions), material status (hotel and dining equipment, transportation, trade, cultural, sports equipment, shows etc.),

non-material status – software (services, management/administration, organization, education etc.);

3. *Market structure, distribution networks;*

4. *Conditions in which demand occurs and supply meets it* generated by the dimension and structure of a market (the share of a specific tourist market, the level of incomes, social level, surfeit level etc.) and by travellers' expertise as to the new products and norms;

5. *The ability to make itself known* both on the national and international market, using an active promotion policy in the middle of which a strong brand with unique and attractive features should be placed.

The extent to which these elements may contribute in creating a competitive position depends on destination types, respectively on the level of social and economic growth, topographic traits, climate, culture, political regime, special factors etc.

The brand – determining a tourist destination's competitiveness

The increase in competitiveness' external pressures requires companies to quickly adapt to the criteria of modern competition. One of these criteria aims at the brand which in developed economies has proven to be the main competitive advantage and influences in various ways the demand for any service. In these circumstances, the interest in a brand is a must, not a custom. Yet, the decisive influence is the one of consumers' – as their new life style includes the right to choose and to be somehow cynical which allows them to give up a brand as soon as the latter does not meet their demands anymore.

In order to develop a brand, it is very important how it is placed on the market (Temi Abimbola, 2008). Placing a brand's image means identifying its

position on the market, the position it should have to a certain consumer segment as compared to competitors, taking account of buyers' needs and the level of their cultural background. Placing a brand must comply with functional, emotional and cultural needs of the targeted segment and convey the advantages it is to get and the time stability of the brand's elements. It must:

- *be highly popular* not only from the perspective of the tourist percentage knowing its name, but also from the perspective of its attributes, features, values, essence etc;

- *be trustworthy*, namely it must reflect the potential of a destination, its unique resources and sights, specialists' ability or skills in launching a new tourist product or in bringing forth a new destination on the tourist market;

- *be relevant, distinct and easy to remember.*

To a certain extent, every destination is differentiated but not every different feature is important and taken into account by tourist consumers (Evans N., Campbell D., Stonehouse, G., 2003). Therefore, a destination must carefully choose differentiation direction in compliance with the following criteria:

- *Importance.* It is a pretty attractive and important advantage to most tourists (along with relaxation and entertainment, one can benefit from health treatments as well);

- *Genuineness.* This attribute is either not used by competitors, or it is used in a specific form (the only region where one can cure a certain disease, for example);

- *Superiority.* It is a feature superior to all other ways to get the same advantages (one can have several activities in the same place, for example).

In an environment where there are several similar models of business, products and services, where the

struggle to be the best in a world of similarities is harder and harder and consumers are provided with enough options, being different can mean the major factor in a customer's decision taking.

It is known that the most famous tourist destinations are very well placed to a tourist consumer and that is why it is difficult to influence opinions that already exist. In order to create and promote the image of a destination as to tourists, the following strategic alternatives can be applied:

- Strengthening the current position as related to tourist consumers;
- Finding and occupying the free position that might be recognized by most tourists;
- Outdoing competing destinations or repositioning them.

Accomplishing the goal of competitiveness growth in an area requires more and more actions that aim at developing and promoting an area as a tourist destination at national and international level as well as developing a sustainable tourist industry.

The sustainable growth of tourist promotion, the design and promotion of a tourist brand are a basic constituent both in order to reach normal, best levels regarding the image an area has on the national and international markets as a well customized destination, distinct from other competitive destinations, and to attract investors and other strategic partners for the growth of tourist industry.

The efforts to place itself as an attractive destination from the tourist perspective is difficult to an area especially in an age when consumers are more and more skilled and competition is becoming harsher and harsher. An area's ability to win in this "struggle" is firstly connected to becoming aware of the strengths and weaknesses that tourism has, to its

better organization and its efficient promotion.

In order that a tourist region should become an important tourist destination, it is necessary that adequate marketing elements should be intensely used as well as proper distribution channels should be set up (Evans N., Campbell D., Stonehouse, G., 2003).

When accomplishing competitive tourism, new elements and promotional materials' quality contribute a lot, in correlation with the best choice of distribution networks. Marketing means setting up a strong brand as seen by potential tourists. If one can build a strong brand, one shall have a strong marketing programme.

Sales are done by brands. In our age dominated by media, the verbal acknowledgement of a tourist destination and its guarantee are represented by the "brand" denomination rather than by the personal recommendations of tourist agents.

A high position in the brand-based purchasing activity is held by the Internet. Tourists purchase tourist products on websites, without even being sure they are real or the quality-price ratio is what they expect.

Promoting a tourist destination on the Internet requires potential tourists' awareness of destinations, attracting tourists by special offers and rendering them loyal by using new instruments. Tourist companies' interaction in the destination with potential tourists leads to the development of direct marketing and face-to-face marketing.

Among the instruments used to promote a brand on the Internet, one can mention: (Iordache C., Ciochină I., Andrei A., 2007):

- *E-mail marketing*. Its low production cost, easy usage and quickness make this instrument the ideal response when customizing a destination brand on the Internet.

- *Marketing interaction.* Websites such as "destinatieturistica.com/ro" or "produsturistica.com/ro" should introduce from their very first page the respective destination brand followed by the promotional offers available from ... till ...

- *Cyber promotion.* The "game" to launch a website of a destination brand, the various contests organized, customized spots, specialized lists are some Internet promotion techniques used by enterprises in the tourist industry.

Competitive success in the restrictive circumstances of market economy and a product that meets the same demands but is more attractive than competitors' can be emphasized by promotion.

Generally speaking, developing a national tourist brand and a destination brand in particular are both a general priority by the contribution in achieving a country's brand having as effects the attraction of foreign investment and the balance of current accounts, and a specific priority if one has in view tourism growth and its effects which, although few at present, especially because of poor infrastructure, can have an important role on medium term in the increase of the overall competitiveness of the economy. The European Union accession should bring about the strengthening of traditions, authenticity and national customs, as these attributes can be the best to make the difference between many national destinations and European ones.

Promoting a tourist destination on the domestic market by a national campaign is also another way to support national companies from the competitive perspective.

The actions indicated in this respect include:

- *Creating the image of a region as a tourist destination* by the definition

and promotion of the area's tourist brand;

- *Developing the domestic market of tourism* by the sustainable improvement of tourist products and specific marketing activities in the area;

- *Developing the area network of Tourist Information and Promotion Centers* and setting up a computerized tourist data base including an integrated system to collect and distribute them.

A tourist destination needs a strong tourist brand created in compliance with the genuine, authentic strengths of advertising on national and foreign channels according to its tourist potential that should be able to persuade visitors that it is a unique, customized, competitive destination. It is necessary to set up a real, complex tourist image by the introduction of new elements to promote and diversify promotional materials (brochures, CD's, films, maps, study-tours, road-shows etc.).

That is why the authors believe that a brand is the starting point for all marketing decisions and all media creations.

Branding conveys information on what a destination is and can actually be, it can render value to a destination, it is the set of methods by means of which a destination or a product communicates, symbolizes and makes itself different to its audience.

Conclusions

A destination's success is also dependent on the tourist products provided by the enterprises in the respective region – the former should have certain quality, meet tourists' real needs and last but not least, have a market. The quality of the new product or destination should be at least at the same level with the one of the product introduced by the national tourist brand. Otherwise, no matter how famous a national brand might be and no matter

how beautiful its image, the destination extension shall fail. Moreover, the poor quality of tourist services rendered in a tourist destination shall reflect in its turn upon the national tourist brand. Beyond the dynamics between the national brand and its extension, a product that does not supply quality cannot simply sell.

Country branding means state-centralized management. It primarily means coordinating macro-economic policies in order to get the country's competitive advantage. In order to have a country's brand, there should be value as well, and value should be

accomplished with devotion and after some time.

Diminishing a national tourist brand is the highest risk of an unsuccessful or exaggerated extension which eventually leads to losing consumers' loyalty. The decrease process may occur due to various causes. Thus, if a new product has low quality, it will make consumers think negatively, therefore having an impact upon mother-brand and this will eventually make them wonder whether producers will worsen the quality of their original products one day.

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