

Towards A Model of an Optimal - Sustainable Tourist Destination

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Abstract: Destination, or the terminus of tourists' holiday, is a complex link between geography (with all the resources - human and natural - it offers you) and tourism (with all the activities they can undertake and services they can consume during the stay). The services forming the tourist product/products offered/given at a destination, and which must be differentiated from those offered by competitors, are the ones "forming" the brand.

By tourist destination one can understand a country, a region within a country, a city, a village or a resort. Whatever the type of destination, the marketing tasks are the same: creating a favourable image of the destination in the target segments of visitors, the design of tools to support and promote the image and, not least, promoting the image of the destination in the regions of origin.

Tourist destinations with limited financial resources for marketing activities face many difficulties in producing an impact on the tourist market. It is therefore vital for Romania to adopt a policy of marketing such as "hitting the bull's eye", thus directing the efforts toward clearly defined goals and using the most effective marketing tools.

Key-Words: sustainable tourist destination, competitiveness, destination identity and image, positioning, destination marketing, brand destination.

1 Introduction

Given the balance of different marketing activities and promotion of the tourist destinations, travel experts and consultants believe that there is an overriding need to move the focus from launching Romania on the market to bring the tourism market in Romania. This recommendation takes into account two factors:

- first, the low current level of knowledge of Romania and its tourism potential among consumers from the main tourist-generating markets - as highlighted by the conclusions drawn from the 15 market surveys conducted on behalf of the NTA (National Tourism Authority), the last two years, namely that Romania has not a clear picture on the market, positive or negative

- the second factor, another finding of these surveys, namely that those who come to Romania are pleasantly surprised by the variety and quality of the attractions, the facilities and the entire experience.

Considering these two factors together, it can be recommended that Romania should focus on activities to bring a greater number of tourists in the country, so that they are personally convinced of what the country has to offer and thus act as "ambassadors of Romania", upon their return to their countries.

Therefore, the provision of a higher level of support for organizing information and familiarization visits is proposed for the staff in the travel sector and the staff in the media, which could generate editorials in both the general interest media and in the special interest media of the potential source countries.

Another primary means of "bringing the market in Romania" is setting up a website, all online. The best destination websites successfully transmit the experience of being in Romania, of travelling to attractive objectives and to visit various tourist accommodations.

2 Problem Formulation

Thus, intangible factors such as good weather, nature/scenery, accessibility, transformed into tangible elements, respectively pleasant environment, relaxing ambience, infrastructure, may create an artistic image favourable to the tourist's choice of a destination. Intangible elements such as local culture, diversity of sports, the restaurants, cafes etc., which may increase the value of a destination, turned into tangible elements, namely historical sites, events (cultural events, festivals, etc.) form an environment in which "there are a lot of things to do", they may give a positive psychological image favourable to the

tourist's return to the destination. Translating these attributes into benefits for tourists through which a destination can distinguish itself, is held within a positioning strategy¹.

Besides differentiating variables, "product" and "image", for a tourist destination other variables are used as well (e.g. employed staff, variable which may increase or decrease the value of the tourist product offered).

Researches to assess the image of a destination should have as a starting point the perceptions of several types of "public", namely: the perceptions of the local people (as participants in some activities), of the strangers (tourists or visitors, the temporary visitors), of the people who return (those who keep certain images in memory which they then compare with existing image) and of the professionals (those who find, analyze and create images and technical or humanist prerequisites). In addition, the experiments must be performed regularly, since the image can be formed and/or change (because of the multitude of factors - primarily emotional - which influence it) whenever the consumer sees, hears, feels, interacts and interrelates with the "climate" of a destination.

Since the destination may represent several tourist items, that *form of tourism* that distinguishes the respective destination from others should be established and then strengthened, respectively the one which ensures the competitive advantage for market/markets for which it is targeted (and/or positioned). In this context, to identify the reasons/benefits of non - visitors/tourists and the perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the competitive destinations can easily fail because of, on the one hand, although the declared reasons of the tourists (including above), regarding the choice of a destination are some; other elements, often emotional, are the basis for the choice, but also create a positive image (perception) of that destination, and, on the other hand, since between the moment of the purchase and the moment of the use of the tourist product there is a time when the people studied (including non-visitors) accumulate different experiences, the terms of reference and comparison are not the same, making it more difficult to interpret the research results.²

¹ Stăncioiu F., Părgaru I., Mazilu M., *The destination brand, some conceptual methodologic guidelines in the destination marketing*, in Proceedings of The 2nd International Tourism Conference: "Sustainable mountain tourism - local responses for global changes", Drobeta Turnu Severin, 2009, Universitaria Publishing House, Craiova, pg. 283-289;

² Stăncioiu F., Părgaru I., Teodorescu N., Talpaș J., Răducan D., *Image and identity – positioning instruments in the destination marketing*, in the Conference organized

The attraction objectives of the destination: determine decisively the choice of the destination by tourists and influence the behaviour of tourists at the destination. Those assets that tourists can find at a destination must be presented either in a promotional brochure or on the website of the respective destination. These elements are actually the "driving force" of any tourist activity. Taken together, they make up what is called the environment of the destination: natural, economic, cultural, and social.

The facilities and services at the destination: in relation to those heritage assets, these facilities are only component parts of the tourist product. This does not mean that they are not required, many of which are even indispensable. A comprehensive list of facilities that can be found in a tourist destination should be available at the reception desk on any destination.

Access roads: the items mentioned here affect the length, cost and convenience with which the tourist reaches the destination: infrastructure (roads, railways, bridges, airports, ports, etc); transport equipment (the capacity and speed of transport vehicles); government regulation of transport.

The image of the destination: The image of a destination is not necessarily based on prior experience, a visit to the destination. All tourist destinations have an image and the interest of the marketers is to clearly distinguish it from the other destinations.

Romanian tourism offer will be promoted primarily in Germany, Italy, France, USA, Hungary and Britain. The government has recently agreed, through a memorandum, the Master Plan prepared by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the money for the tourism promotion are to be mainly directed to countries where most tourists come from, such as Germany and Italy, or to those on whose market Romania has great potential for growth, such as the U.S. The document recommends that the markets considered a "source of tourism" should be classified based on the opportunity they represent to Romania on short, medium and long terms. Such countries as Germany, Austria, Italy, France, Britain and Ireland, Hungary, the Baltic States and the U.S. should be given priority in the promotion of Romanian tourism, and the Scandinavian countries, the Iberian Peninsula, Russia, Israel and other countries in the EU should be considered secondary.

The ability to identify and promote the value is the main factor of competitiveness of the society on a

by the National Institute of Research – Tourism Development, Ighiu; 2008

long term. The competitiveness of a destination³ is given by the rate at which it manages to exploit the dowry of human value with which is naturally gifted. This has two major components: education and training in media and channel predisposition, creating conditions for individuals to manifest in that area.

Although the economic concept of competitiveness in tourism defined as "the ability to meet competition in a cost effective manner on the tourism market" is integrated in the one used in the literature, the specific content of tourism requires a complex and multidimensional approach to the concept. This is necessary in view of a series of particular aspects of the tourist product.

First, we must mention that many components involved in designing and marketing a tourism product have made the achievement of competitiveness a complex process to help ensure that: the competitiveness of the destination / tourist resort and that obtained in each type tourism business: a direct provider of travel services: travel, accommodation, food, recreation, treatment or an intermediary: tour operator, travel agency etc.

To this it is added that, in terms of the tourist, the product covers the complete experience from the moment of leaving home and to the moment of returning⁴ being sufficient to show weaknesses in one component for the overall level of competitiveness to be affected.

We also must point out that most times a tourist destination overlaps or is near a local community: urban or rural settlement whose economic, social, cultural life influences to a more or less extent the tourism activity, being in turn influenced by it.

All these aspects highlight the large number of determinants that influence the competitiveness of the tourism product. Therefore, from theoretical considerations, tackling the business competitiveness of the tourist destination and of the tourist industry will be made separately although the two are interdependent and mutual. A tourist destination can not be competitive in the absence of competitive tourism enterprises, while a tourist enterprise can not be competitive in an unattractive tourist destination.

Therefore, ensuring the competitiveness of tourism products and services must be based on *quality management*, which is one way to ensure

competitiveness and thus the company's credibility on the market.

3 Problem Solution

Communication "professionals" unanimously believe that any international campaign to advertise the country, whether it sells the economy, tourism or culture, is useless in improving the image, as long as the "product" is not competitive.

Competitiveness in tourism should be treated in the new conditions of globalization of economic life, highlighting the crucial elements that can influence and can constitute a competitive advantage for Romanian tourism. The horizon of the competitiveness of Romanian tourism is inextricably linked to elements of strategy adopted by the government through the National Tourism Authority, the local government, each operator, elements that must combine the organic with sustainable development objectives.

Starting from this approach, we have defined and outlined two concepts that the ones involved in the tourist industry must also learn and apply them in order to deliver competitive services on the market, namely: the competitiveness in tourism management and marketing.

Competitiveness in tourism suggests safety, efficiency, quality, high productivity, adaptability, success, modern management, superior products, and lower costs. The competitive strength of a company lies in competitive advantages and distinctive competencies they possess relative to other competitors.

The success of travel agencies and not only is determined by the process of attracting, winning, satisfying customer needs, and especially winning their loyalty, this being the key to the quality of the services / products offered; this is the only way in which the business may obtain the expected profit.

The essential aim of quality management is to efficiently and effectively achieve at maximum level only those *products which: fully meet customer requirements, comply with the requirements of society, comply with standards and specifications applied, take into account all the aspects of consumer protection and environment, offered to clients at the price and moment agreed with them.*

Introducing a quality system brings benefits to all the parties involved: the country as a destination, entrepreneurs, consumers and intermediaries.

This involves ensuring a constant level of quality. Therefore quality implementation is achieved by a set of requirements called *standards* and grouped by type, depending on the area in which it operates:

³ Căndea M., Stăncioiu F., Mazilu M., Marinescu R., *The Competitiveness of the Tourist Destination on the Future Tourism Market*, in WSEAS Transactions On Business And Economics, VOL.6, Issue 7, 2009, pg. 374-384;

⁴ Stăncioiu F., *Tourist Marketing*, SITECH Publishing House, 2003, p 104

performance standards, service standards, referential professional standards, standards that include specifications, standard operating procedures (operational).

Obtaining quality involves not only developing and ensuring compliance with these standards, but also the quality of performance which should lead to customer satisfaction and meeting the expectations of quality management.

In this context, the systematic analysis of the quality of the tourist services / products and taking the necessary measures represent a priority in this current stage.

The competitiveness of the destination – as a tourist product

Ensuring the competitiveness of tourist products is the essence of the process of achieving competitiveness in tourism. This is both the result of competitive providers directly involved in the production of tourism services within the package, as well as of other determinants that mark the tourist destination competitiveness.

In this sense, marketing specialists have defined the concept of "universe of products" which summarizes these influences very well. The world of the tourist product is the whole perception that tourists have about the product: visual images: colour, ambience, geographical and physical environment, atmosphere, smell, musical sensations, human relationships (staff, other tourists, and people), comfort level etc.

A product / service is competitive when it is able to impose on a particular market, to sell in large quantities comparable to those of any similar products or services produced and sold by competitors.

As a result, tourism product design is not confined to combine the multiple choices of the two types of elements: tourist resources and services, but requires a certain concept about the product.

The increasingly large demands that tourists have related to the tourist products, have imposed a series of attributes, which must be met by a tourist product for it to be competitive: satisfaction, accessibility, legitimacy, security and safety, authenticity, transparency, harmony with the natural environment, to their achievement contributing equally the competitiveness as carried out by each service provider of the tourist destination as well as the other determinants of the competitiveness of the tourist destination⁵.

The clear differentiation results, firstly, from the value chain of the destination as a tourist business. (see Figure 1). As with any product, and in terms of tourism products, the value chain must be analyzed from two perspectives, namely: the enterprise value chain and value chain of the purchaser.

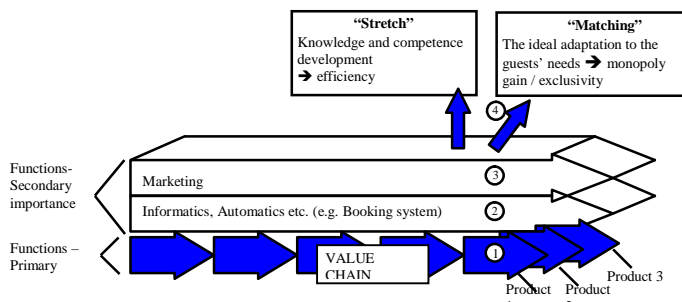


Fig. 1 The value chain of the destination as a tourist business

From the perspective of the enterprise, the value chain includes the value margin and the value activities, each of which being a potential source of uniqueness. In turn, the value activities (classified as primary activities and support) are divided into direct, indirect and quality assurance activities.

The evolution of the concept of quality, quality assurance to total quality management has imposed the methods and procedures required for work in all the sectors and at all the levels of the tourist product, with the establishment of indicators for all the actors, "creators of satisfaction" (from the quality ingredients for the preparation of the products, from the quality of the bed linen fabric, and to the "quality of the destination", thereby including the quality of service personnel).

In other words, the concept of quality, approached from the perspective of the supplier/provider, found in all elements creators of value is reflected in the form of the element of satisfaction to the buyer (e.g., the degree of comfort - for accommodation, the nutrition value/the taste - for food, level of equipment, expertise, etc.. - the destination as a whole). These combined with the attractive natural resources, not necessarily unique and referring constantly to the needs and desires of the market/markets which it wishes to target, lead to the differentiation of the destination, with sustained competitive advantages.

The elements creating value - in terms of the supplier/provider, processed over "the tourist product consumption", viewed from the perspective of the

⁵ Căndea M., Stăncioiu F., Mazilu M., Marinescu R., *The Tourist Destination - the Competitive Tourist Unit on the Future market of Tourism*, in Proceedings of the 2nd

buyer as the decisive factor in satisfaction, compose among others *the image of a destination*.

The image of a destination represents “all the information and impressions transmitted to potential users about the population, infrastructure, climate, history, attractions, personal safety etc.”⁶ and is formed by perceptions and experiences.

As the sense of sight is predominantly in formation of a positive image, visual perception of a destination can be decomposed to a deeper understanding of the attributes/variables of differentiation forming atmosphere/ambience, in the *artistic image* and *psychological image*. The intangible elements such as good weather, nature/scenery, accessibility, transformed into tangible elements, respectively pleasant environment, relaxing ambience, infrastructure, may create an artistic image through the tourist’s favourable choice of a destination. Intangible elements such as local culture, diversity of sports, the restaurants, cafés etc., which can increase the value of a destination, turned into tangible elements, namely historical sites, events (cultural events, festivals, etc.) form an environment in which there are “a lot of things to do”, may give a positive psychological image favourable to the return to the tourist destination. Translating these attributes into benefits for the tourist, through which a destination can distinguish, takes place within a positioning strategy.

Besides the differentiating variables, “product” and “image”, for a tourist destination, other variables are used as well (e.g. the employed staff, variable which may increase or decrease the value of the tourist product offered).⁷

The identity of the destination is the main means of identification, but also the source of associations made by the consumer, which represent the links between the values and the brand⁸. In case of tourist destinations, the elements of identity are those that are, most times, the elements of attractiveness (giving value and/or uniqueness to a destination) and, at the same time, the main reasons for choosing them.

The criteria for choosing a destination depend on how it is perceived, the image that the consumer has made about it, at the same time, they are also considered criteria for assessing the quality of a

destination.

Seen from *the buyer’s perspective* (from the target-market to the destination), the *value chain* is composed of the actual or perceived values of it, through which one can distinguish/choose a destination.

The differentiation, in its most durable form, results from the creation, in a unique manner, of the value for the buyer⁹, respectively the criteria for the purchase. They are classified, in turn, in the criteria of use and the criteria of signal.

The criteria of use “measure”/evaluate factors/elements that create value for the buyer, while the criteria of signal reflect how customers perceive value, stating that they follow naturally, in terms of applying an effective marketing, the criteria of use.

Among the criteria of use, we mention: product quality, product characteristics (physical and geographical), the duration of stay, means of transport, etc. Among the criteria of signal, important are: image / identity / reputation of the destination, market share, tradition / experience, price as an indicator of quality, appearance of the product, etc. A criterion of signal is important only insofar as it contributes to the actual perception of the value of the “purchase” made by meeting the criteria of use¹⁰.

Among the sources of sustained competitive advantage, given in most literature¹¹, important are the differentiation, the quality (chain and value system), the cost reduction, the niche marketing, the performance and the advanced technology, the type of management, the culture and the style of the organization. Because of the specific tourist product or products (which, in turn, are composed of a multitude of services) that constitute or identify with the destination, and the existence of two types of constituent resources, basic - natural and anthropogenic (reason for which the company will work with the resources of comparative advantages and resources of competitive advantage), relevant to the destination management are the *differentiation and its quality*, others are somewhat included (cost reduction, culture, type of management and organization style) or determined by the two (niche marketing, performance and advanced technology).

I have accessed a program, launched by the European Commission - DG Enterprise - Tourism Unit, a new funding appeal for the tourist destinations

⁶ Echtner C., Brent Ritchie J.R., *The meaning and measurement of the image of the destination*, Journal of Tourism Studies, 1991

⁷ Adapted after Stăncioiu F., Părgaru I., Teodorescu N., Talpaș J., Răducan D., *cited article*;

⁸ Lindstrom M., *Sensorial Brands. Build Powerful Brands using the 5 Senses*, Publica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009;

⁹ Porter M., *The Competition Advantage. Handbook for the Survival and Growth of the Companies in the conditions of the Market Economy*, Teora Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001;

¹⁰ Adapted after Porter M., *cited article*;

¹¹ Porter M., *cited article*;

of excellence. 2009. DG Enterprise and Industry hopes that through this appeal to develop the tourist destinations of excellence in the European Union.

The overall *objective* of this grant is to draw the attention to the value, the diversity and the characteristics, the European tourist destinations and to promote economic growth, the objective being to continue it in a way as to ensure social, cultural and environmental integration offered by tourism.

The *actions financed*: developing a more affordable offer and a better quality; respect of the local population; added value to various destinations; development of social responsibility; promotion of biodiversity and natural heritage of destinations.

In conclusion, many elements that contribute to ensuring the competitiveness of a tourism product requires use of complex instruments to ensure on the one hand knowledge in the fullest possible measure of the needs, the demands of the tourists, and on the other hand to allow a prediction of future developments, on which to draw "the outline of the most effective products". At the same time the number of actors involved in creating a tourism product requires permanent cooperation, establishing a common framework for action.

The acronym EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence ") has been chosen to describe the European destinations of excellence. This project promotes sustainable tourism development models in the European Union. The project is based on national competitions held each year and within which "a tourist destination of excellence" is selected in each participating country. By selecting destinations, EDEN focuses on the values, the diversity and the common characteristics of European tourist destinations. This project increases the visibility of the emerging European destinations, creates a platform for sharing good practices in Europe and promotes the building of a network between the awarded destinations.

The European competition for excellence in tourism is developed based on an annual theme chosen by the European Commission in collaboration with the national tourism authorities.

The main feature of the selected destinations is their involvement in promoting sustainable social, cultural and environmental models. The winners of this award are emerging European destinations, least known, of the 27 Member States and candidate countries. The EDEN project contributes to the dissemination of sustainable practices in EU imposed on the chosen destinations and to their transformation into successful tourist destinations. This process aims at the decongestion of the prominent tourist destinations.

This project is supported by the European Commission, which launched in 2006 and which still plays a fundamental role of coordination. The Commission's tasks consist in encouraging the dialogue between stakeholders, co-financing the selecting procedures, organizing the awards ceremony (the first two years, within the [European Tourism Forum](#)) and coordinating a comprehensive campaign for communication. We have received this type of support, here referring to the area in which we operate and, as President of the Association for the Promotion of Mehedinti County, occupying, following the international selection, the fourth place, a tie score (94) with the third runner up from 32 competences.

As a direct benefit of this gain is the free promotion at the European level of the European tourist destination: Drobeta – Ponoare - the Danube Bend, at the European tourism fairs and other events, receiving in this regard the visit of foreign journalists who have helped by promoting the above mentioned destination to revive the tourism in the area. The tourist destination is accompanied by a short bilingual description and a presentation CD.

A favourable impact on the entire area, considered as an "open door" for future funding, the area being heavily promoted in the European Union, becoming one of the main destinations of foreign tourists coming to Romania. We also have had the chance to participate in three tourism fairs abroad having our own customized stand, as well as the participation in the Tourism Fair of Romania in the autumn of 2008. ([economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-eurofonduri-4437193-depresiunea-horezu-premiata -comisia-europeana-destinatie -excele ...](#))

4 Conclusion

Among the imperative objectives of tourism defining Romania as a sustainable tourist destination in 2010: (these will be achieved if the Master Plan is successfully implemented) we mention:

- Creating a positive perception of Romania as a tourist destination both at national and international level, as well as a brand of country
- Ensuring the sustainable development of tourism to promote the natural and cultural potential, but also its preservation for future generations
- Ensuring the recognition of tourism as key to the development of economy and as a generator of new jobs
- Creating awareness on the Romanian people on the tourism potential of our country and their desire to present it to the visitors

In conclusion, we may assert that the Romanian tourism covers a broad range of products and

destinations and involves many different stakeholders, both public and private, with much decentralized areas of competence often at regional and local levels.

Maybe, all these in collaboration with the specialist's conscience, doubled by the actual training to whom reality should prove once more that the well done thing will always last, will show us that Romania, as a tourist destination is not a ghost, but on the contrary a tourist area with unknown values which wait to be revaluated by a trained hand and by an imperative Destination Management, rigorously elaborated, but especially rigorously applied.

A basic rule for the quality existence and permanency of the tourism destinations in Romania is to remain competitive. The actions done in this purpose should be considered as part of the process to create a sustainable character, a factor which represents one of the most important competing advantages. So, in order to ensure its competitiveness, viability and prosperity on a long term, the tourism destinations should emphasise more the full integration of the preoccupations regarding the sustainability within the decision making process.

A prerequisite for the existence and continuity of the quality of the tourist destinations in Romania is to remain competitive. The actions taken in this respect should be considered as part of establishing a sustainable feature, which is one of the most important competitive advantages. Therefore, in order to ensure competitiveness, sustainability and long-term prosperity, tourist destinations should place more emphasis on the full integration of sustainability concerns in the decision-making and the management practices and their instruments.

The European Commission has asked all the Member States, citizens, economic agents, social partners and all "key players" in tourism to focus and concert their efforts behind this strategy of increasing the quality of tourism services, to achieve a major change, mandatory for of sustainable tourism in all its components.

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