

Chapter 4.10

E–Tourism Image: The Relevance of Networking for Web Sites Destination Marketing

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ABSTRACT

The competitiveness of tourism destinations is a relevant issue for tourism studies, moreover, is a key element on the daily basis of tourism destinations. In this sense, the management of tourism destinations is essential to maintain competitive advantages. In this chapter tourism destination is considered as a relational network, where interaction and cooperation is needed among tourism agents, to achieve major levels of competitive advantage and a more effective destination management system. In addition, the perceptions of tourists are obtained from two main sources. The first one is the social construction of a tourism destination previous to the visit and the second one is obtained from the interaction between tourists and tourism destination agents during the visit. In this sense, the management of tourism destination to emit a homogenous and collective image is a factor that can reduce the gap if dissatisfaction from the previous and

real tourist perception. The authors specifically discuss the importance of a common agreement of tourism agents on virtual tourism images projected through official Web sites, considering that the literature focused mainly in how to promote and sell destinations through Internet but not in terms of exploiting a destination joint image. Finally, in order to analyze the integration of a tourism product and determine their consequences in tourism promotion an empirical research has been done, using the case of Girona's province. The main findings determine that, although interactions among tourism agents can improve destination competitiveness, little cooperation in tourism promotion on Web sites is achieved, as well as a few uses of technological resources in the Web sites to facilitate to tourists a better understanding of tourism resources in the area.

INTRODUCTION

Each tourism destination can be considered a market in itself. At these destinations tourism suppliers (i.e., accommodations, restaurants, museums, and tour-

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ism offices, among others) interact simultaneously with the tourists who consume these products or services. For that reason a market approach is more appropriate than a supply or a demand one.

A tourism destination is the geographical area where a set of tourism agents interact and intervene in tourism activities. These interactions, from a supply point of view, help develop a relational network at the destination. A relational network is the set of economic and personal relationships established among a number of agents who share goals, cooperation systems, knowledge, reputation, and image, among other elements, in common. These elements help the destination network generate collective learning and knowledge, and consequently, achieve greater levels of competitiveness than individual agents would obtain.

In addition, from the demand point of view, these interactions within the destination help minimize the existing gap between perceived and real images. All tourists have a socially constructed image of a destination (Urry, 1990; Galí & Donaire, 2005; Larsen & George, 2006), which conditions their decision-making, and it is important for the tourism agents involved in the network to control the image of a destination.

This control has two simultaneous benefits. The first one, related to the tourism demand, is the potential to influence tourist decision-making. The second one is related to the tourism supply chain: the competitive advantage brought to tourism destinations by projecting a real image.

Internet is a very important channel that helps tourism agents to achieve these two benefits derived from this control in three aspects. First, a number of authors assume the relevance of Internet as a tourism destination image generator (Baloglu & Pekan, 2006; Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007; Hashim, Murphy & Muhammad Hashim, 2007); although “research on the Internet as an image formation agent is still at an infancy stage” (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007, p. 118). Second, Internet brings a great number of opportunities to tourism image formation, contributing to destination im-

agery formation to consumers (Hashim, Murphy & Muhamd Hashim, 2007) and giving to tourism destination an opportunity to improve destination marketing through the use of “Internet’s unique features, such as geographical interactivity with audience, low-cost accessibility, world-wide, hyperlinks with other travel suppliers and design flexibility, to attract more tourists and better position their state in the intense competition for visitors” (Lee, Cai & O’Leary, 2006, p. 816). Third, Internet and destination websites, in particular, act as an information tool for tourists, being an influencing element in their decision-making. This article will discuss the attainment of these two benefits and the relevance of Internet in them using the tourism image and social network theories to clarify how supply and demand interact in a tourism destination. A conceptual model will be proposed as part of a theoretical market approach to tourism destinations, which integrates supply and demand, explains interactions between them and highlights the relevance of this scope of analysis to better understand the dynamics of a tourism destination and the possibility of improving its competitive advantage. In addition, the article demonstrates the necessity of using this integrated approach for planning and managing a tourism destination to improve its competitiveness and highlight this theoretical view.

One of the elements that can be planned with an integrated approach, mainly because it helps to establish scale economies in terms of promotion, it is the promotional website content of a destination. Usually different agents take part in this promotion, Destination Marketing Organization’s (DMO) local governments, private companies or associations creating different sources of information. Apart from these possible scale economies this will also help in terms of unification of the destination image. If this image is homogeneous gives also an extra value of competitive advantage preventing incoordination.

Finally, a case study is conducted in order to analyze network configuration through promo-

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