

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. *The existing EU framework for the development of economic, social and environmental policies based on the Partnership for Growth and Jobs and the Sustainable Development Strategy provides an adequate background for achieving Objectives on the sustainability of the European tourism and challenges to be addressed to objectives of this “agenda”: economic prosperity, social equity and cohesion, protection of the natural environment and culture. These objectives should also guide European tourism stakeholders in their policies and actions affecting the impact of outbound tourism from Europe and in supporting tourism as a tool for sustainable development in host countries. To achieve these objectives, a number of tourism-specific challenges need to be addressed. Stakeholders should continue to anticipate and monitor changes. Policies and actions must take into account how demand and offer will be affected by environmental challenges – such as climate change and water scarcity–, technology developments or other current political, economic and social issues. Therefore, all challenges will be regularly updated in conjunction with all stakeholders. Achieving the objectives of this agenda and addressing the above challenges will require consistent action that can be supported by appropriate public policies: sustainable management of destinations, the integration of sustainability in the business environment and tourists’ awareness of sustainability. In a competitive global and more and more developed market nowadays, there is a great need for a powerful national branding of tourism management that could optimize the resources, could concentrate on a nucleus the interests - the public and private sector, the national, local and regional sector - and capture the tourists’ attention. This will need a certain type of interest for a coordinated approach to marketing and distribution through the internet in order to optimize the vision on Romania.*

Keywords: *Tourism; innovation; economic benefits; impact; sustainable development.*

Introduction

Despite all the “attacks” on the image of European tourism, the economic crisis, the immigrants crisis, the terrorist acts occurred on undeniable destinations (Paris and Istanbul, most recently Ankara), it is encouraging the fact that Europe remains the no. 1 tourist destination in the world with a market share of 52% in 2015, (directly and indirectly) generating 9.7% of the total GDP of the 28 EU countries, figure expected to rise to 10.4% by 2025.

A European destination of excellence, a well-deserved title won in 2008 following a pilot project of the European Commission, the Danube Bend, a blessed area in the South-West of Romania, is looking for a tourist image brand from the family of eco-friendly tourist destinations.

For this, the resilience of this destination due to the poor condition of some vital elements needed for a quality tourism act, such as poor infrastructure, with numerous and too often unforeseen (most recently, in February 2016, resulted in blocking the road by rocks, leaving the residents of 5 villages of Bend without electricity) and especially undesirable (floods, landslides, etc.) events, the minimum existence of spaces for entertainment, the Danube Bend wins instead due to the geo-diversity of the natural attractions, unique to the European destinations, which annually attracts thousands of tourists from the country and abroad.

Destination image

Attitudes, perceptions, and images have an important role in the decision to choose a tourist destination. The image is the sum of perceptions and beliefs that people have in relation to that destination (Stăncioiu, Părgaru & Mazilu, 2009). The image of a destination is not necessarily based on prior experience, i.e. a visit to that destination. All tourist destinations have a self-image and the marketer's interest is to clearly distinguish it from other destinations. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines destination image as “an impression that a person, an organization or a product gives to the public and/or a mental picture that you have of what something is like or looks like” (Hornby, 2011, p.748). The destination is a mental image formed by exposure to destination attributes (Baloglu, 1999; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) and United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) define tourism image as “ideas, conceptions held individually or collectively of the destination”.

The Romanian tourism offer will be primarily promoted in Germany, Italy, France, USA, Hungary and the UK. The Government has recently approved, by a memorandum, the Master Plan developed by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), and the money for tourism promotion are to be directed mainly towards the countries where most foreigner tourists come from, such as Germany and Italy, or to those on whose market Romania has a great growth potential, such as the USA. The change is very significant because until recently the Romanian state did not spend huge sums to promote Romanian tourism on markets where the offer was a rather doubtful success.

The ability to identify and promote value is the main factor of long-term competitiveness of the society (Mazilu, 2010). This requires to accurately and

realistically identify areas where there are prerequisites for performance and to stimulate the development of quality related to these areas, to identify valuable individuals and their areas of excellence, followed by channeling to education and training in line with their natural inclinations to harmonize their interests with those of the society.

In conclusion, the competitiveness of a destination (Cândea et al., 2009) is given by the rate at which it manages to exploit the valuable human heritage with which it is naturally equipped. This has two major components: mass education, training, and predisposition channeling, creating the conditions for the individual to manifest in that area. Although economically speaking the concept of competitiveness in tourism defined as “the ability to cope with competition in an effective and profitable manner on the tourist market” (Mazilu, 2010) incorporates that used in the literature, tourism specific content makes necessary a complex and multidimensional approach to this concept. This is necessary considering some particular aspects of the tourist product.

Firstly, we must emphasize that the multitude of components involved in designing and marketing a tourist product have made the achievement of its competitiveness to be a complex process in whose ensuring contribute: both the competitiveness of destination / resort, and the one made at each type tourist business: direct provider of tourist services: transport, accommodation, food, recreation, treatment, or intermediary: tour operator, travel agency, etc.

To this is added the fact that, from the tourist’s point of view, the product covers the complete experience of leaving home and up to the return (Stăncioiu, 2003), being sufficient that weaknesses manifest in a single component for the overall level of competitiveness to be affected. We must also highlight that often a tourist destination overlaps or is near a local community: a city or rural settlement whose economic, social, cultural life influences more or less tourist activity, being in turn influenced by it.

All these aspects highlight a large number of determinants that influence the competitiveness of the tourist product. Therefore, out of theoretical considerations, tackling the competitiveness of the tourist destination and tourist business will be made distinctly, although between the two there is mutual interdependence and inter-condition. A tourist destination cannot be competitive in the absence of competitive tourist businesses, while a tourist business cannot be competitive in an unattractive tourist destination. As a result, ensuring the competitiveness of tourist products and services must be based on **quality management**, it being a way to ensure competitiveness and hence business market credibility. “Professionals” in communication considers unanimously that any country’s international advertising campaign, whether it sells economy tourism or culture, is useless in improving the image, as long as the “product” is not competitive.

Competitiveness in tourism

Competitiveness in tourism should be treated in the new terms of globalization of economic life, highlighting the crucial elements that can influence and can become competitive advantages for Romanian tourism. The competitiveness horizon of

Romanian tourism is inextricably linked to elements of the strategy adopted by the Government through the National Tourism Authority, local governments, each economic agent. Starting from such an approach, we have defined and outlined two notions that those involved in the tourism industry must learn and at the same time apply to produce competitive market services such as competitiveness in tourism management and marketing.

Competitiveness in tourism suggests safety, efficiency, quality, productivity, adaptability, success, modern management, superior products, low costs (Mazilu, 2010). The competitive strength of a company lays in competitive advantages and distinctive competencies it possesses relative to other competitors. The success of travel agencies and others is determined by the process of attracting, winning, satisfying customer needs, and by gaining their loyalty, which is a key to quality of services / products offered; only in this way will the company get the expected profit.

The essential aim of quality management is to achieve in conditions of maximum efficiency and effectiveness of only those products that: fully meet customer requirements, comply with the requirements of society, comply with applicable standards and specifications, take into account all aspects of consumer and environmental protection, are offered to customers at the price and time agreed with them. Introducing a quality system benefits all parties involved: the country as a destination, entrepreneurs, consumers, and intermediaries. This includes ensuring a constant level of quality.

Therefore quality implementing is achieved by a set of requirements called **standards** and grouped by type, depending on the area in which they operate: performance standards, service standards, referential professional standards, standards that include specifications, standards with operating procedures (operational). Achieving quality does not involve only developing some standards and ensuring compliance with them, but quality performance should lead to requirements satisfaction and customer expectations on quality management.

In this context, the systematic analysis of quality of tourist services / products and taking the necessary measures is a priority of utmost importance at this stage.

Destination competitiveness – As a tourism product

Ensuring the competitiveness of tourist products is *the quintessence of the process of achieving competitiveness in tourism*. This is both the result of the competitiveness of providers directly involved in the production of tourism services included in the package, as well as of other determinants that have a bearing on the competitiveness of the tourist destination.

In this sense, marketers have defined the concept of “*product universe*” which summarizes very well these influences. Thus, the tourist product universe is represented by “the sum of perceptions that the tourist has concerning the product: visual images: colors, ambience, geographical and physical environment, atmosphere, smells, musical sensations, human relations (with the personnel, other tourists, people), comfort level, etc.” (Ambiehl, Aujaleu & Gallienne, 2002, p.18).

A *product / service is competitive* when it has the ability to impose itself on a particular market, to sell in large quantities comparable perhaps with those of similar products or services produced and sold by competitors (Rondelli & Cojocaru, 2005). As a result, the tourism product design is not confined to the combination of multiple variants of the two categories of elements: tourist resources and services, but also requires a *certain concept about the product*.

The ever-growing demands that tourists have to travel products have imposed a series of attributes that a tourist product must meet for it to be competitive: *satisfaction, accessibility, legitimacy, security, and safety, authenticity, transparency, harmony with nature*, in their achievement bringing their contribution alike both competitiveness of each tourist service provider to the tourist destination and other competitiveness determinants of tourist destination (Cândea et al., 2009).

The differentiation firstly results from *the value chain of the destination as tourist business* (Figure 1). As with any product, also in terms of tourist product, the value chain must be analyzed from two perspectives, namely: the business' value chain and the buyer's value chain.

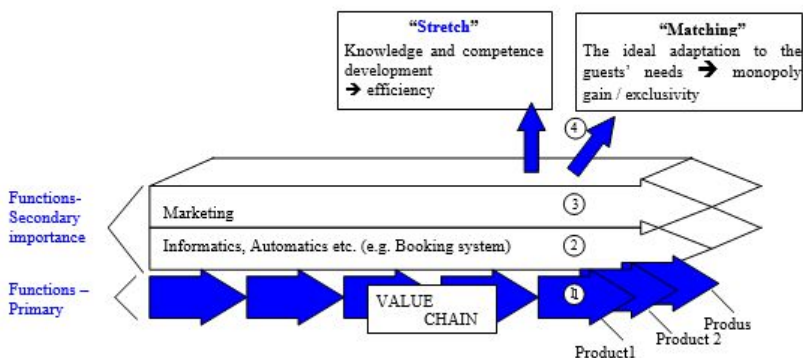


Figure 1. Destination value chain as tourist business

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

The evolution of the concept of quality, from quality assurance to total quality management, has required the use of working methods and procedures in all departments and at all the levels of the tourist product, with the establishment of indicators for all factors "creating satisfaction" (from quality ingredients for making food, respectively the quality of the linen cloth, up to the "quality of the destination", this also including service provider staff quality).

In other words, the concept of quality, approached from the perspective of the supplier / provider, found in all value-creating elements, is found in the form of the element of satisfaction for the buyer (e.g., degree of comfort - for accommodation, nutrition / taste value - for food, equipment degree, competence, etc. - for the destination as a whole). These, combined with the attractive natural resources, not necessarily unique, and

constantly referring to the needs and desires of the market / markets that they wish to aim, lead to the differentiation of the destination with sustainable competitive advantages.

Value creating elements - from the perspective of the supplier / provider, transformed throughout the consumption of "a tourist product, viewed from the perspective of the buyer, in elements determined for satisfaction, compose inter alia *the image of a destination*.

The image of a destination is the sum of information and impressions submitted to potential consumers about the population, infrastructure, climate, history, attractions, personal safety, etc. (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991) and is formed by perceptions and experiences.

Since the sense of sight is predominant in forming a positive image, the visual perception of a destination can be decomposed, for a deeper understanding of the attributes / variables of differentiation that form the atmosphere / ambiance, in *an artistic image* and *a psychological image*. Thus, intangible factors such as good weather, nature / scene, accessibility, turned into tangible elements, that is the pleasant environment, relaxing ambiance, infrastructure, can create an artistic image favorable to the tourist choosing the destination. Intangible elements such as local culture, the diversity of sports activities, restaurants, cafes, 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 "lots of things to do", and may create a favorable psychological image for the tourist returning to the destination. Transforming these attributes into benefits for the tourist, by which a destination can be differentiated, is held in a positioning strategy.

Besides the differentiating variables "product" and "image", for a tourist destination other variables are also used (e.g., staff, a variable that can increase or decrease the value of the tourist product offered) (Pârgaru, Mazilu & Stăncioiu, 2009). The destination **identity** is "the principal means of identification, but also the source of associations made by the consumer, which represent the links between values and brand" (Lindstrom, 2009). In the case of a tourist destination, the identity elements are those which are constituted most of the times in attractiveness elements (which add value and / or uniqueness to the destination) and, at the same time, in main motivation for choosing it. Criteria for choosing a destination depend on how it is perceived, namely the image that the consumer has established about it; at the same time, evaluation criteria of the quality of destination are also considered.

Seen from *the perspective of the buyer* (from the target-market to destination), *the value chain* consists of actual or perceived values, through which one can distinguish / choose a destination. Differentiation, in its most lasting form, results from the creation, in a unique manner, of a value for the buyer (Porter, 2001), namely criteria for purchase. They are classified, in turn, in criteria for use and criteria for reporting.

Criteria for use "measure" / assess the factors / elements that create value for the buyer, while the criteria for reporting reflect how customers perceive value, meaning that they are normally under the conditions of applying an effective marketing for the criteria for use.

Among the criteria for use are product quality, product characteristics (physical and geographical), and length of stay means of transport, etc. Among the criteria for reporting also important are image / identity / reputation of destination, market share, tradition / seniority in the field, the price as an indicator of quality, product appearance, etc. Another criterion for reporting is only important insofar as it contributes to the real perception of the value of the "acquisition" made by meeting criteria of use (Porter, 2001, p.78). Among the sources of sustained competitive advantage, mentioned in most of the literature (Porter, 2001, p.167), important are a distinction, quality (value chain and system), cost reduction, niche marketing, performance or advanced technology, management manner, culture and style of the organization. Because of the specificity of the tourist product or products (which, in turn, are composed of a multitude of services) that make up destination or are identified with it, and, namely, the existence of two types of constituent, base - natural and anthropogenic (reason for the company will work with comparative advantages resources or competitive advantage resources) resources, relevant for destination management are *its differentiation and quality*, the others being slightly included (cost reduction, culture, management style and organization manner) or determined by the two (marketing niche, performance, and advanced technology).

Increasing competition in terms of price and better and cheaper organized network of destinations from other continents accentuates the pressure on the European tourism sector and its traditional destinations. More destinations are competitive in terms of experience, and competition is strengthened by a greater market transparency in terms of prices and / or other characteristics comparable of destinations.

At the request of tourists to purchase products / services at prices permanently related to the level of offer, operators respond by increasing optimization of the quality / price ratio.

In this context, classical small and medium tourism enterprises are forced to fight for survival with the integrated competitive destinations, which working with world-class professionals of tourism, having a strong and functional organization and being able to achieve significant savings, superior to those of any small, isolated company. On the other hand, these small enterprises, in order to cope with increasing pressure, should move toward cooperation, innovation, specialization and creation of branded, high-quality products.

There are many studies that talk about the "anonymous state" in which our country is sinking, in terms of international tourist identity, of the symbols that define us. We never really knew how to become visible by what is individual to us, and not necessarily because we are missing features, but because it is possible that even we do not know, or no longer know, what really sets us aside. There have been many initiatives, some recent and expensive, to create and promote a brand of country, based primarily on tourism, but they have not had the expected impact.

Why? There are many reasons that can be mentioned, but one that should be considered as essentially beyond political games and arrangements, the poor communication and decision implementation, is perhaps the simplest and is therefore overlooked: do we know today what essentially represents us? Do we have an element / several elements that instill a lasting image, not temporary, for Romanian rural

tourism? Are adventure, culture, village traditions, gastronomy, authenticity, tourist identity elements, for the Danube Bend - village part of tourist offer? What symbols, values, ideas, feelings, places, emotions, characters, cuisine, and artistic expressions par excellence really Danube Bend destination?

There are many conceptual approaches about *Danube Bend* image destination (Figure 2).

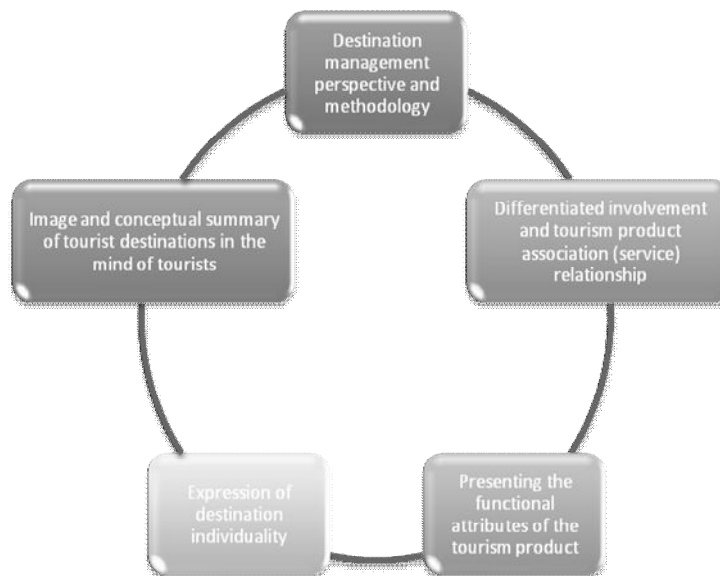


Figure 2. The tourism image - different conceptual approaches (Bădiță, 2013)

According to Bădiță (2013) for every tourist destination, the tourist image plays an important part that serves to strengthen the connection between the visitor and the destination of choice; Henderson (2007, p.262) defines *the destination image* as “multidimensional”, with cognitive and affective spheres (...) an amalgam of knowledge, feelings, beliefs, opinions, expectations and impressions that people have of a particular destination”. Crompton (1979, p.18) provides an integrated definition of the tourist image as a sum of beliefs, impressions, ideas and perceptions that people have of objects, behaviors, and events.

When a tourist discovers a destination, the overall image and the tourist image may be affected. Thus, the concept is a pertinent one since tourism can offer the single best opportunity to correct misunderstandings. Thus a connection arises between the resident and the tourist who form a certain type of tourist image about a certain tourist destination (positive, negative or neutral), which generates a certain behavior, attractiveness, indifference or aversion to that place (Bădiță, 2013) (Figure 3).

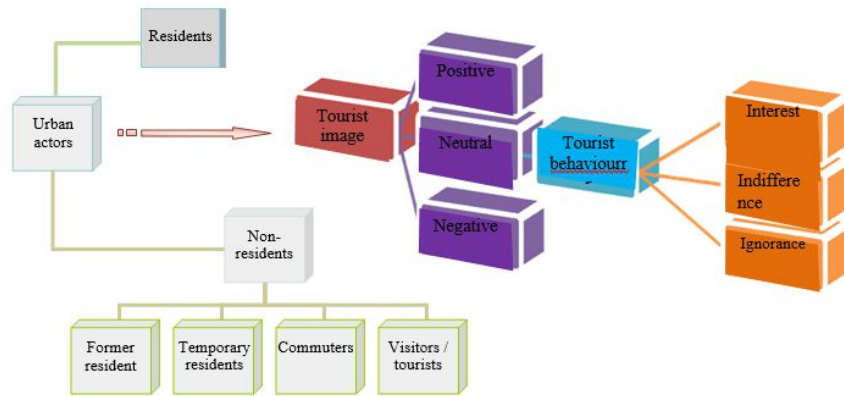


Figure 3. Relationship between residents/tourists, tourism image and types of tourist behavior (Bădiță, 2013)

Thus there is a series of factors which may *push* people into wanting to go on holiday to that destination, based on psychological, membership considerations or gaining knowledge, and the image, as a strategic management tool, can *pull* people to choose a destination, leading to the creation (construction) of a *primary image* of the destination (Bădiță, 2013) (Figure 4).

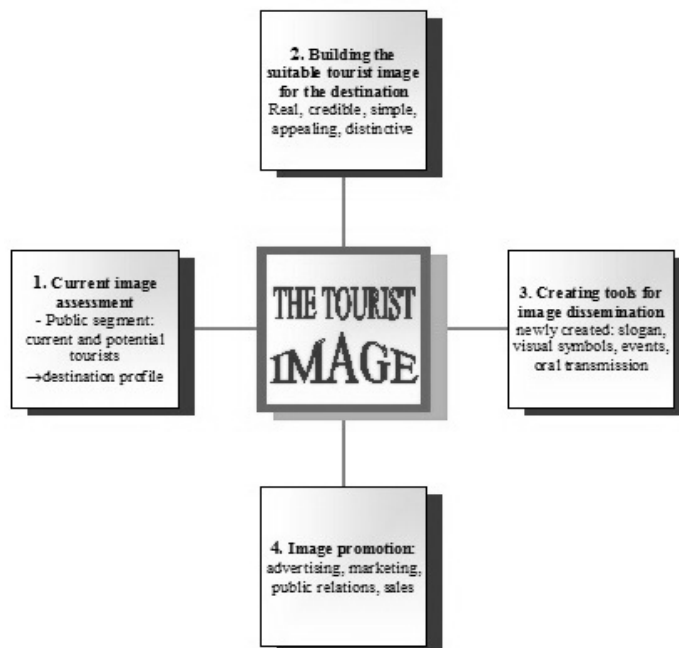


Figure 4. The tourist image building and dissemination (Bădiță, 2013)

Some theoretical approaches of the image believe that this can be pre-determined and shaped by personal and current experiences (Bădiță, 2013; Crompton, 1979; Gheorgheci & Mazilu, 2015). The research and understanding of present tourists provide a base of information from which one can build and customize marketing and tourism services.

Regarding the role of national or local public policies and initiatives in the strengthening and the promotion of tourism and competitiveness in the interests of citizens and the community as a major customer, in terms of creating economic and social value for society, Romania is also carrying out as a priority European programs aiming at increasing the competitiveness of tourist destinations. At the level of the local community, the Danube Bend, as President of the Mehedinti Association to Promote Tourism, since 2008, following a Pilot Project of the European Commission, has obtained the third rank, following the “Destinations of excellence” national competition, which honored us and, above all, required us to maintain the increased competitiveness of this destination. Regarding the creation of economic and social value for the community of the Danube Bend, the effects of these programs are constantly reflected in the increasing flow of Romanian and foreign tourists to the Danube Bend.

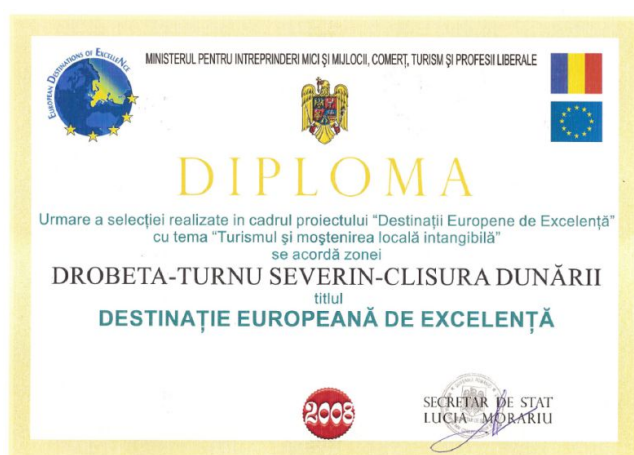


Figure 5. Diploma for a European Destination of Excellence/2008

Conclusions and implications

The image of the Danube Bend destination over time depends heavily on the involvement of this **trio: tourist - tour-operator - local population** of the destination, a trio that should join efforts and especially creativity, coupled with passion, to analyses brand image that fits the Bend, to make it regionally and internationally visible, along with a promotion targeted on the strong attributes of this complex potential of this destination.

We do not know if the optimism of a tourism researcher does not, actually, mean to believe that everything is easy and “will solve out of nothingness” immediately, but it also means to be convinced that any problem can find its solution to approach things positively, towards sustainability, because the ones who love this destination want to be able to take out grandchildren and have the same motivation, that of the tourist who loves and knows how to appreciate a unique tourism product across Europe. In this case, we, who work in tourism, are also responsible for providing a destination image to the extent of what it offers us with gratitude.

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