

Country Image, Destination Image, Brand and Destination Management: “A Malfunctional Family”

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Abstract: *Usual consumer products are generally connected directly to their manufacturer and their manufacturer’s country and image. Yet, many products may not be connected to the image of the country they are actually produced in, but the country where the company originally started business, even though that most of such products are made in third countries. Tourism is by far more complicated: products have to be produced at the same time and place the tourist and the destination co-exist.. Furthermore, products themselves cannot be separated from the image of the place they are produced in. Tourism products can get an even harder riddle: a destination image may not even be compatible with the image of the respective country!*

The same problems apply to destination branding as well. Whereas in consumer products, companies can affect their brand and image, destinations can hardly do so. Even where a Destination Management Organization exists, it usually acts just as an advisory commission and it rarely has any actual authority.

This paper will address the unexplored complication of tourism destination, and it will try to suggest a step-by-step policy framework targeting onto achieving communal cooperation in destination management and destination / country image and branding.

Keywords: *country image, destination image, branding, destination management, tourism stakeholders.*

1. COUNTRY IMAGE

As vast bibliography and rigorous research interest suggest that the importance of *country image* is great when it comes to product marketing (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1987; Martin & Eroglu, 1993). After extensive bibliography review, Martin and Eroglu (1993) note that individuals and financial organizations that consume have adopted stereotypical images for certain countries, and that image affects their buying behavior regarding products coming from those countries.

The image, someone could adopt, can be broken down into three levels. The *organic* image is the one that can be shaped when people are only subjected to information that is neither driven nor fabricated. The *augmented* image is created by both objective and biased information. Finally, when image is only based on predisposed and marketing oriented information it is called *fabricated* (see fig. 1). According to Kim and Chung (1997), the same pieces of information can lead people in adopting one, two or even more images for the same country, under the different circumstances of demand, competition, or companies based within that country.

A country image that is created systematically and in the long term can become a very valuable asset for the respective country, since it affects sales, market share and marketing variables positively (Kim & Chung, 1997). Furthermore, studies have proven that a country image acts in two ways: on one hand it *idealizes* and on the other it *summarizes* the stimuli a consumer is exposed to. The phenomenon of idealizing suggests that a consumer comes to conclusion regarding the quality and brand of a product based on the image he/she holds for the country the product was created in (Bilkey & Nes, 1982), whereas summarizing suggests that consumers sum up all characteristics of the country and the products and categorize them in order to make them easier to “access” when they have to make a decision regarding a product (Miller, 1956).

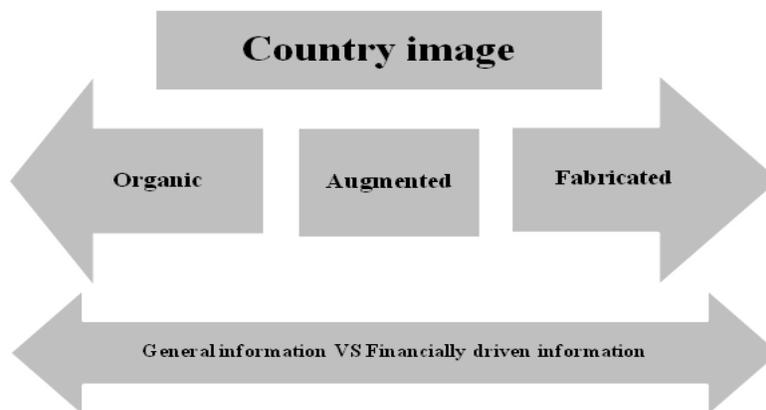


Figure 1 Country Image Continuum

Furthermore, Lee and Ganesh (1999) suggested the *categorization theory*, according to which the country image can act as a criterion in order to categorize and summarize information regarding a product that comes from a country. In other words, consumers “package” information in order to make it easier to decide whether to buy a product or not.

However, most of the studies, arguments and research have focused on how a country image affects tangible products, namely goods. Yet, their results can be safely and successfully transferred into services providing. Consequently, a country image can affect consumers positively or negatively as far as a destination is concerned. Moutinho (1987) goes further and underlines that a destination’s attractiveness is based primarily on its own image and on the image of the country it belongs to.

2. DESTINATION IMAGE

Although the previous discussion may imply that image refers mainly to the commercial brand a destination may have created, it also refers to the entire country’s image as well and definitely vice-versa. Echtner and Ritchie (1991) support this remark saying that many of the dimensions of a country image are implanted in the *destination image* too. That is why most of the potential visitors do carry an image for a specific destination in their minds even though they have never been there before. These destination images are direct reflections of the respective country image.

Destination image plays a key role in both understanding and conceptualizing consumer’s travel behavior. Additionally, it has been proven to be a great lever in developing successful marketing strategies capable of strengthening a destination’s competitiveness and its market share (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). One of the main advantages of destination image rises from the opportunity to make good use of market segmentation and to develop specialized communication programs towards the most receptive target groups. After all, we should not forget that market segmentation is indeed a vital element of marketing strategy (Sigala, 2001) that is followed for a good or a product, given that it serves in a better and more efficient use of limited resources and funds (Court & Lupton, 1997).

Furthermore, an additional function of destination image emerges from the close connection between a potential visitor’s perceptions on a destination and his/her final decision to visit it or not. According to James, Durand and Dreves (1976), creating of an as preferable as possible destination image is a safe method in order to cultivate a competitive advantage that will differentiate it from the rest of the competition. That is why the more positive and preferable a destination image is, the better the odds to attract more visitors than its competitors.

Research on tourism marketing has underlined the large importance of destination image concerning promotion strategies (Woodside & Jacobs, 1985). Creating a positive destination image in consumers’ minds has also great effect on the country image; and, at the same time, a positive or a negative destination image could be of defining importance regarding the destination’s success or failure (Christou, 2003).

Destination image comes as a result of a complex information processing procedure (McInnis & Price, 1987). The image of a destination, a product or a person matures when people start to shape beliefs, ideas, perceptions about a place, a good or a service, or a personality. This way, image acquires significance through a creative route where selected impressions and information get processed, categorized and transformed (Reynolds, 1965). Finally, a successful, realistic and impressive destination image can undeniably be the first step towards a winning and recognizable brand creation.

3. BRAND

Probably, the most important stage of *branding* process is to fully understand the great importance of brand itself for the consumer. Embedding branding within products manufacturing process -especially in the services- has transformed label in one of the defining elements of consumer behavior and of consumer decision making process. In most of the cases, brand is the motivating and steering force behind the final consumer decision whether to buy or not.

Branding, as a concept, has been present for centuries (Keller, 1998· Murphy, 1987), however, the reasons that gave it birth have slightly changed (Jacoby, 1971). The term “branding” originates from the word “brandr” (an ancient Norwegian verb meaning “to burn”). “Brandr” was a task of farmers when trying to distinguish their flocks from each other’s by marking their animals with a burning metallic stamp (Keller, 1998). Producers used, and they will continue to use in the future, their brand in order to discern their products from competition (Jacoby & Kyner, 1988).

What manufacturers actually do is to create a brand for their products so as to enhance it with a differentiating and recognizable identity, thus helping consumers to distinguish it from competition and pin point it. This way, consumers buy this specific product, not only once but repeatedly, and suggest it to others (Murphy, 1990).

Murphy (1990) continues, saying that branding has evolved in three dimensions:

1. A brand can offer legal protection to manufacturers against competition, counterfeiting and business espionage (Sitkin & Roth, 1998).
2. Branding can also offer legal protection to services providers, given that they can differentiate their products from those of their competitors.
3. Manufacturers can use branding in order to augment their products with tangible (design, fabric, shape etc.) and intangible (aura, excellence etc.) characteristics.

Nowadays, branding embodies intangible and tangible product specifications together in such a way that goods and services can be told apart when they come from different producers (Murphy, 1987). One of the most important innovations in marketing during the last century was the adoption of branding in services design, production and marketing strategies and policy. As Taylor (1987) suggests, branding has ideal applications in services and intangible products such as business and financial consulting, commerce, hospitality and catering etc. Keller (1998) also argues that branding can be a very useful tool for service providers, since it can help them overcome problems having to do with the subtle nature of their product. Furthermore, they can use symbols and symbolisms in order to boost the demand for their product and make it more complete and concrete, and finally organize their advantages and distinguish themselves from the competition.

After branding was successfully adopted in services production and marketing, more and more marketing managers started to think about how they could implement its unique effectiveness within destination marketing (Zucker, 1986). According to De Chernatony and McDonald (1992), it has been a long time since common sense amongst marketing academics and practitioners supported the theory that destinations can be branded, just like goods and services do. Finally, Kotler, Haider and Rein (1993) also claim that branding is used in persons, places and nations as well

4. DESTINATION BRANDING

Brands are in some cases used as symbolic or expressional means when consumers try to externalize their personality (Urde, 1999) since they are loaded with social values and meanings (Sheth, Mittal & Newman, 1999). De Chernatony and McDonald (1992) define the role of a brand as a set of muted communication tools, connected to the product, that help consumers communicate with their environment. A brand also empowers connections amongst people belonging in the same social or other group (Bearden, Netemyer & Teel, 1989). Clarke (2000) adds that tourism, as a mainly service oriented industry that is usually used by groups, acts for tourists as a means of communication with the rest of the world. Additionally, UNWTO (1997), in “Vision 2020” report, suggests that choosing a destination will increasingly be the main accessory of trend, and travelers will use it so as to develop a personal identity and distinguish themselves from the others. A branded destination can undoubtedly play this key role.

There are six main facts stressing the high importance of *branding for tourism*:

1. Tourism is a very complex product and branding can facilitate simplifying and summarizing the decision making process (Clarke, 2000).
2. Branding can aid a destination in promoting a series of images and values towards potential visitors and help them overcome problems that arise from a tourism product’s intangible nature (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Shepard & Wanhill, 1998).

3. Branding can secure quality standards connected to product characteristics and minimize effects deriving from services inseparability (Clarke, 2000).
4. Branding is a valuable tool of business risk diminution (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1992).
5. Branding can also play a key role in standardizing the production method, especially within services, since it can distribute tasks and regulate the results (Clarke, 2000).
6. Finally, branding facilitates vertical or horizontal production line integration (Clarke, 2000), so as potential consumers get a complete image of the destination.

However, despite the unanimous recognition of *destination branding* advantages, serious concerns have been expressed regarding how effective branding could be in an actual marketing long term plan. The biggest problems result from the fact that destination branding requires a high level of cooperation amongst the stakeholders, something that is not always an easy case.

5. DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

What distinguishes a place from a destination is the tendency of visitors and tourists to travel towards the second one. Attractions, hospitality and local people willingness are key elements for a destination to get and stay on the global tourism map. Furthermore, any destination should be perceived as a composite product, consisting of accommodation, catering, attractors, natural environment, cultural venues etc. (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998).

Even though the vast majority of destinations became such ones by chance, nowadays highly competitive environment can easily exclude them from tourists' selection list. Contemporary destinations need to develop and establish an operational and functional framework; otherwise they risk losing their competitiveness and their ability to attract visitors. A vital element of tourism *destination management* is the several stakeholders living and operating within its area. The United Nations World Tourism Organization identifies as stakeholders the local individuals, the local community and the local and central government. Moreover, stakeholders can be seen as groups or individuals having specific interests in a destination and the ability to affect it. For this reason, it is necessary to specify: a) the role and the expectations of the tourism stakeholders, and b) the essence and status of the destination itself as an entity. A *Destination Management Organization* is thus suggested to be created, in order to organize, facilitate and summarize all the aspects of the holistic tourism product. A DMO should also monitor, improve and evolve production methods, as well improving and promoting tourism training and education.

The legal status of a DMO can be public, private or a hybrid of those two. From the budget point of view, a public DMO may have more financial sources, yet a private one is usually more effective, since it can react to market and environmental changes easier and faster. According to international bibliography, DMOs consisting of both public and private sectors are more often, especially within Europe (Karamanidis et al., 2011). What a DMO is created for and expected to achieve is to (Ritchie & Crouch, 2005):

1. Improve destination competitiveness
2. Standardize and boost destination performance
3. Guarantee destination success
4. Monitor destination sustainability

5.1 A “malfunctional” family

Some destinations have already made good use of branding tools, especially those dealing with promotional and advertising actions. Nonetheless, integrated branding plan applications have only emerged during the last two decades. However, whereas, results and advantages of branding are more than obvious, there are some factors that deprive extensive application of destination branding on global level.

The main problem of generic branding implementation comes along with the extremely complex nature of a tourism destination, especially compared to goods or core services. Branding of destinations becomes an even harder task if someone takes into consideration that destination managers are rarely in position to control the entire -or even a small part- of the tourism product manufacture line (Zand, 1982). After all, we should not let aside that destination image can also be events taking place within a country or a region, and these events could have a direct impact on its brand name.

Finally, it is not rare intensive political confrontations to occur between local and governmental stakeholders, between private and public sector, or even between separate groups of local citizens. Such conflicts of interest can easily thwart any effort on common vision deploying and sharing, let aside that they can also trouble safety conscious tourists.

6. CONCLUSION

The inability to control the production of the total tourism product within a destination makes it really hard for a brand manager to align the final product with the desired image and the consumers' expectations. After all, in many cases the desired image to be developed may not be compatible with the image local communities already hold for the destination. Furthermore, one should not forget that in the majority of the countries there is a vast number of different factors that affect directly a brand image promotion (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). These private or public sector factors are usually extremely hard for a destination brand manager to deal with.

Nevertheless, destination brand management can offer an extensive tool case towards image and brand name development in favor of a given destination. A successful destination brand name can improve a destination's competitiveness, widen its market share, attract more visitors and secure repeated visitation, improve promotion success and make it easier to choose.

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