

Marketing of Nature-Based Attractions of Gauteng Province, South Africa: Potential Contribution of Networking

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ABSTRACT: *Visitor attractions (VA) represent a very diverse and complex field, and there is no doubt that they are facing a challenging present and future. Organizations and businesses are nowadays required to implement drastic management and marketing changes; they must adopt a systemic approach and become actively involved in formal and informal partnerships and alliances in order to increase efficiency, to gain a sustainable edge and face the competitive environment. Increasingly competitive market conditions are serving as a catalyst for the adoption of more common approaches to VA marketing. The paper's aim is to explore the potential contribution of networking in the field of marketing nature-based attractions. Firstly, a review of the related literature is performed aiming at highlight the main issues and challenges. A methodology of case study is applied in investigating marketing issues of the three most significant (in terms of visitation) nature-based attractions of Gauteng Province, South Africa (SA). The present study allows gaining insights and deeper understanding on potential contribution of networking. The paper is concluding by suggesting the most critical factors in the field of networking and related recommendations to attractions managers and marketers.*

Keywords: *Nature-base attractions, Marketing, Networking, Gauteng SA, Case study.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a general definition, an attraction is a focus for recreational and, increasingly, educational activity, undertaken by both day and stay visitors, and frequently shared with the domestic resident population. According to Swarbrooke (2002:4) attractions 'tend to be single units, individual sites or clearly defined small-scale geographical areas that are accessible and motivate large numbers of people to travel some distance from their home, usually in their leisure time, to visit them for a short, limited period'. There is no doubt that Visitor Attractions (Vas) are facing numerous day-to-day challenges in respect of their management and marketing. Increasingly competitive market conditions are serving as a catalyst for the adoption of more common approaches to attraction marketing. Within this framework a crucial topic is the role of collaboration and partnership in VA marketing in response to the changing business environment (Leask, 2008). This paper takes a marketing approach to examining the potential contribution of networking in addressing marketing challenges. Hence, the paper's aim is to explore the potential contribution of networking in the field of marketing nature-based VA. Firstly, a review of the related literature is performed aiming at highlight the main issues and challenges to be addressed nowadays by VAs. Secondly, the general context is outlined by presenting the business environment. The next section handles with study's methodology and findings. A methodology of case study is applied in investigating three most significant (in terms of visitation) nature-based attractions of Gauteng Province, South Africa (SA). The paper discusses marketing implications and concludes by suggesting the most critical factors in the field of VA networking.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the definition suggested by Walsh-Heron and Stevens (1990), a VA 'is a feature in an area that is a place, venue or focus of activities and does the following: sets out to attract visitors, is a fun and pleasurable experience and is developed to realize this potential, is managed as an attraction to provide satisfaction to its customers, provides appropriate facilities, and may or may not charge for admission'. VA may range in size from very small to the enormous (like Kruger National Park, SA), be free to enter (a national reserve) or expensive (a Disneyland theme park), and be based on natural features (Botanical Gardens), built features (a Museum) or a combination of the two (Lew, 2000). Marketing is a theme of considerable importance to all VAs. It is clear that the nature of marketing varies between large and small VAs and between public and private sector attractions. However, they all have to deal with similar marketing deficiencies (e.g. lack of suitable marketing information, limited marketing research-base, limited use of branding, etc.) having implications for their

management, severely limiting the scope for effective marketing. Furthermore, pressures in the funding and visitor marketplaces are serving as catalysts for a more collaborative response from many VAs (Swarbrooke, 2002; Fyall *et al.* 2008).

Literature suggests that business alliances (partnerships and networking) are a valuable management and marketing tool. The activities of networks are developed and implemented into two main areas - Management and Marketing - offering opportunities for synergy and mutual reinforcement (Saxena, 2005; Lazzarotti & Petrillo, 2006; Kokkonen & Tuohino, 2007; Soteriades, 2012). The benefits resulting from networking / clustering are: introduction of innovative procedures concerning promotion; the improvement of supply, knowledge transfer through expertise and resources exchange; experience exchange and joint marketing actions; skills enhancement; establishing inter-linkages between local produce and tourism; synergies; branding; and efficient marketing. It is worth stressing that a common branding is beneficial to better market positioning, joint marketing and promotional activities, efficient distribution (through a central distribution system), and operational standards. Additionally, a network would constitute a means of establishing a quality scheme, contributing to the improvement of service quality. Thus a brand name could be a component of a quality chart. A commercial collaboration is one of the most obvious outputs of network / cluster, since operations are encouraged to operate in a progressive form of business network in order to work for their own interests (improved visitation and sales) and for the visitors' benefits (improved product/experience) (Benini, 2009; Soteriades *et al.* 2009). It is estimated (e.g. Middleton, 2001) that effective collaboration may make the difference between success and failure in the field of VAs. Middleton (2001) suggests three forms of collaboration for VAs; association, strategic alliances, networks. Fyall (2008) explored the extent to which collaborative marketing strategies offer a potential solution to problems and challenges faced by VAs. More specifically, he explored the situations where collaborative strategies are most appropriate and desirable, and introduces a set of guiding principles for effective collaboration. Literature indicates that the crucial issue underpinning any collaboration is the extent to which VAs can best achieve the potential advantages of collaboration. What are the potential benefits and drawbacks arising from collaboration? The likely potential benefits are: opportunity to collectively brand, theme and/or package the VA product within a geographic area; pooling of human and financial resources; reduction of uncertainty through the sharing of market information; opportunity to enhance promotion and distribution; chance to launch joint marketing research and campaigns; occasion to develop more effective 'collective' representation with industry and political bodies. On the other hand, there are some drawbacks: mutual distrust and bad feeling among VAs with contrasting visitor numbers; possible apathy, due to the potential tension between competitive and collaborative forces in the marketplace; inertia, owing to the failure or inability of VAs to advance at the same pace; unhealthy competition from non-participating VAs; and conflict between VAs with various ownership backgrounds and objectives (Canadian Heritage, 2006; Fyall, 2008). It is estimated (Canadian Heritage, 2006; Fyall, 2008) that the advantages of collaboration outweigh the drawbacks. Additionally, it is suggested that the appropriate and desirable strategies must be developed and implemented into the adequate fields. Areas of collaborative strategies are three, namely: (i) Product development and Visitor Experience (develop appropriate services and innovative products, experience's interpretation and enhancement); (ii) Management (resources-sharing, knowledge management, share information and expertise, management of human resources); and (iii) Marketing: communications and promotion (joint marketing activities and collective promotional activities; research; revenue generation; collective theming, branding and packaging of groups of VAs; relationship marketing; distribution and booking channels (Middleton, 2001; Saxena, 2005; Fyall, 2008). Furthermore, a crucial issue is collaboration dynamics and effectiveness (Mackellar, 2006; Novelli *et al.* 2006). Before adopting any collaborative approach, it is recommended that operators of VA consider the likely dynamics of collaboration and the potential effectiveness of collaborative strategies (Canadian Heritage 2006; Fyall 2008). In evaluating the dynamics of collaboration, it is suggested that VA operators consider the following issues of collaboration: (i) Motives: reasons behind the adoption of collaborative strategies. (ii) Membership: the nature, scope and spread of participants. (iii) Mission: identify the strategic direction, mission or purpose of the collaboration; and (iv) Structure and outcomes: identify the desired or likely structure and the planned or desired outcomes of collaboration. Similarly, Mackellar (2006) suggested that (i) in a network having stable, long-term, and trustworthy relationships the operational uncertainty decreases and, consequently, the internal efficiency increase; (ii) a network operating without collaboration, i.e. not working towards mutually desirable ends, it results in internal inefficiency. In all of the above, the ultimate goal is the achievement of collaborative compatibility, in other words the effectiveness. Which are the factors contributing the most to long term, mutually beneficial relationships? A variety of factors are suggested as integral for the achievement of effective collaborative relationships, namely (Fyall, 2008): the involvement of key stakeholders; a chemistry of good interpersonal relations and the development of trust among participants; a suitable inclusive management style and organizational culture; domain similarity and goal compatibility among participants; effective contractual conditions and exit barriers; an equity share arrangement; the balance of management resources and power; a well-planned project, carefully chosen partners, and balanced structure; decisive leadership; sound administrative support; a tight focus; and the transparent implementation of policy. It is suggested that different factors will carry more weight in different forms of collaboration.

3. VISITOR ATTRACTIONS: CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

This section outlines the conditions and the challenges in the VA industry. The main features of VA business environment include (Swarbrooke, 2002; Fyall *et al.* 2008; Leask, 2008): a very competitive environment, and increasingly difficult

competitive market conditions are serving as a catalyst for the adoption of more common approaches. There is a continued slowdown in visitor demand and an acknowledged oversupply of VAs in some regions. Predominance of the small-medium enterprises / attractions is important. A diversity of management objectives, a lack of commonality in objective setting continues to generate conflicting management pressures. It also continues to provide a diversity of challenges and impediments to the effective management of VA. There is a need to adopt a more strategic approach to managing their activities in order to ensure a lasting future. The privately owned VAs continue to experience the displacement effects of the 'free-admissions' policy to the national museums and galleries. Conditions in the market are seen to impact heavily on the quality of the visitor experience and would determine the long-run survival of existing and new attractions, most evidently those in private sector. Additionally, Martin and Mason (1993: 34) identified three key elements in the successful operation of VAs: how to draw new visitors and repeat business; setting standards of performance and monitoring how the business is doing; and being prepared for future changes in visitor needs and expectations. Success would only come by focusing on product, people (staff), pricing, and marketing (communication mix). In the same rationale, Swarbrooke (2002: 134) contends that there are a number of factors which contribute to the success of VAs. The main factors fall principally in the marketing field: (i) the product (ii) the market / customer; and (iii) the management: effective management. Perhaps the most crucial function of VA management, and often one of the most ignored, is marketing. Within this business environment and market conditions, it is estimated that the challenges to be surmounted by VAs are considerable. The main challenges include (Fyall *et al.* 2008; Leask, 2008): Market is fast-changing, competition both from within and outside the VA industry is intense. Changes in consumer demand; changing patterns of leisure time and use. Consumers are becoming increasingly sophisticated and demanding, their expectations continue to rise. New technology affects mainly product developments. Mobilization and effective use of resources are crucial to VAs' success, both in terms of their planning and with respect to their operational aspects. VAs arguably need to adopt a more strategic approach to managing their activities, and gain local community involvement and support. Need for widening of the marketing approach to include people, programming, and partnership. Lastly, it is crucial to develop collaborative partnerships in the marketing efforts of VA; investing in partnerships will be a key factor in determining success of strategies to secure a prosperous future for the VAs. Fyall (2008) contends that VAs need to adopt a less proprietary and more holistic approach to management and marketing, viewing competitors not as a market threat but as a source of potential future strength and collaborative survival.

From the above literature review and outline of attractions context, it seems that two are the crucial issues to be explored: (i) the attraction operators' perception regarding the potential benefits and drawbacks arising from collaboration between similar attractions; and (ii) the factors contributing to effectiveness and failure of networking (intra-sectoral collaboration). These issues have been explored by our study.

4. THE STUDY

This section presents the empirical study. It discusses its methodology and findings, and attempts to determine the crucial factors in VAs networking.

4.1 Methodology

The study employed a collective case study methodology in investigating the issues of networking the three most significant (in terms of visitation) nature-based attractions of Gauteng Province, SA. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin 2003). In the field of tourism, a case study has become increasingly an accepted research method for gaining a better knowledge and understanding of marketing issues of tourism industry. The objective of this study was to explore the potential contribution of networking between VAs. It is based primarily on documentary evidence derived from a number of sources, including hard documents, narrative reports and websites. Such documents are a rich source of data and commonly used in case study research. Moreover data was collected through semi-structured interviews with managers. The research explored three SA nature-based VAs, the rationale being that this should produce insights into the field of VA marketing. Current knowledge in this area is either incomplete or shallow (Fyall *et al.* 2008). Hopefully, however, the three cases studies discussed in this paper will contribute to a better understanding and may even provide a platform for further research.

4.2 The SA nature-based attractions

The three nature-based VAs explored are: (i) Pretoria National Botanical Gardens (PNBG); (ii) Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve, Krugersdorp; and (iii) the National Zoological Gardens (NZG) in Pretoria, all situated at Province of Gauteng, SA. Pretoria is the SA's administrative capital.

4.2.1 Pretoria National Botanical Gardens: This 76 ha urban oasis is one of the nine NBG of SA. It offers a lot of opportunities to visitors, mainly: walking around, sightseeing, hiking, bird watching, picnic, exercise, and socialize. Above all, it provides them with the opportunity to learn more about nature, to appreciate the natural, to enjoy the environment, and get gardening tips. It successfully bridges the divide between scientific research and the recreational environment. Fifty hectares of the total area are devoted to developed garden, using almost exclusively South African plants. All the flowering plant species to be seen including 50% of the country's tree species make this Garden a botanical tapestry. It is home to

more than 198 bird species and a number of reptiles and small mammals. Major infrastructure development has taken place since the 1990s and includes the construction of the Visitors' Centre. Other developments include the Environmental Education Centre, Medicinal Garden, concert stage, lapa and the Biodiversity Building, which houses the Head Office of the SA National Biodiversity Institute.

4.2.2 Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve, Krugersdorp: The Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve (RLNR) is a privately owned and non-subsidised 1,200 hectare nature reserve with a full range of activities and services. Situated in the heart of the 'Cradle of Humankind' a declared World Heritage Site, is at north-west of Johannesburg. It is a wonderful getaway from the city and offers many attractions for the whole family. It has an extensive animal collection. With roughly 600 head of game within the reserve, a visit is bound to include almost all of the reserve's species: Kruger Lion, White Rhino and Buffalo. Wild Dog, Cheetah, Hippo, and Crocodile and more than 20 species of antelope can also be seen. Rare White Tigers, Siberian Tigers and Bengal Tigers are toothy imports while an active breeding program exports zoo animals globally. It was awarded best Nature and Game Reserve in the Gauteng Province in 2007. Today, it features not only wildlife and birdlife, but guests will find recreational and accommodation facilities for their enjoyment and comfort. Savannah country surrounds the park where experienced animal handlers track hoof prints on private game drives (www.nature-reserve.co.za/)

4.2.3 National Zoological Gardens of SA: More widely known as the Pretoria Zoo, the National Zoological Gardens (NZG) in Pretoria, is not only the largest zoo in SA and the only one with national status, but is also rated as one of the top zoos in the world. More than 600,000 people visit the Zoo annually (www.nzg.ac.za). The total length of the walkways in the Zoo is 6km. The NZG boasts the largest inland marine aquarium in the country, as well as a reptile park. The Aquarium is the largest inland marine aquarium in the country. The third largest collection of exotic trees can be found at the Zoo. The NZG is a facility of National Research Foundation, of which it is very proud. It participates to the programme of environmental enrichment, i.e. it is the process of improving or enhancing the environment of zoo animals and has become a prerequisite tool with regard to the management of animals in zoos worldwide. The 85-hectare Zoo in Pretoria houses thousands of specimens of mammal, bird, fish, invertebrate, reptile, and amphibian species. The zoo also has the third largest collection of exotic trees. There is an 'adopt an animal scheme' that helps provide support for the animal's food and care for a full year. (www.sa-venues.com/attractionsga/national-zoological-gardens.htm). The three VAs' main features are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Nature-based attractions - Features

	PNBG	RLNR, Krugersdorp	NZG of South Africa
Category	Gardens, Flora and Fauna, Animal sanctuary	Animal sanctuary / Big Game / Nature Reserve	Zoological Gardens (Aquarium, Reptile park, Aviary)
Year of establishment	In 1946, officially opened in 1958. NBG opened to the public in 1984.	In 1985	Originally established in 1899, became the official NZG in 1916.
Stakeholders	Public (South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI))	Private business	Public (NZG, and National Research Foundation, SA)
Facilities / Venues / Amenities	Two restaurants: one outsourced privately operated, and cafe & conference centre. Gift & Book Shop (privately operated).	Restaurant, Conference room, Shop, Pool, Picnic spots, Playground, Self-catering accommodation.	Restaurant, Cafeteria and four kiosks (snacks). Numerous picnic spots / areas with facilities. Ample parking
Services / Activities / Programmes	Wildlife & Biodiversity. Research and Education Programmes: Environmental Education Centre offering (i) Garden-based programmes (ii) Capacity development programmes of teachers (iii) Greening programmes. Resources Room: environmental education.	A variety of wildlife recreational, visitor-friendly activities: Day and night game drives, horse trails cave excursions, Hiking trails, 4x4 adventures abseiling interactive animal attractions. Accommodation	Programmes: (i) Education (holidays children courses; daily school programmes; Zoo Club). (ii) Research: infrastructure to facilitate, co-ordinate and conduct research. Golf carts and Children's carts. Aquarium and night tours.

Sources: www.sanbi.org/gardens/pretoria; www.nature-reserve.co.za/rhino-and-lion-nature-reserve.html; www.nzg.ac.za/index.php

It is worth pointing out that at PNBG and NZG the main focus is on learning and education for sustainable living. There are a variety of programmes on ecology; all programmes are facilitated by trained education staff.

4.3 Study's Findings: The formation of networks is routed in the desire of business and organisations to create a synergy and business opportunities. Through a network VAs are encouraged to operate in a progressive partnership form in order to work for their own interests (improved sales and profits) and for the visitors benefits (improved product/experience). The present study explored the potential contribution of networking in VA marketing and allowed gaining a deeper understanding in this field. The main study's findings are presented hereafter. The three VAs collaborated with other similar attractions only once in 2010 (UEFA World Cup), in *ad hoc* association, targeting international tourists and aiming at

providing a better visitor experience and the outcomes are considered to be positive. They offered outlets in their premises to African craft market aiming at create a synergy / complementarily with local crafters and offering an opportunity for more pleasant and safer shopping experience. They all estimated that this informal association 'generated an improved quality experience' and 'is better to cooperate than compete'. What is surprising is that this positive experience has not been exploited, they have not taken further advantage and there was no continuation. Study revealed that the strategic marketing orientation of all three VAs is targeting the tourism market in addition to the local market. However, the marketing activities undertaken are exclusively in sales promotion, and only one of the VAs has conducted a marketing research (a visitor survey). This attraction has analyzed the visitor experience and considered that the aspects been very important or/and important are: setting, auxiliary services – amenities (catering, shops), educational activities, location, staff (skills and capabilities), core product services, other services (events), and recreational activities. The perception of managers regarding collaboration is positive; all of them are positive to collaboration with other VAs. The areas (fields and concerns) of potential collaboration being rated as very important are: management (monitor results and human resources); distribution channels; collective bargaining and buying; relationship marketing; visitor experience (interpretation and enhancement); management resources-sharing; joint marketing activities; collective theming, branding and packaging; revenue generation; pricing incentives. As for the form / type of collaboration, the alliance / partnership and networking are considered to be the most adequate.

Their perception about benefits and drawbacks of VA's collaboration is as follows. Benefits being considered as very important are: collective theming and branding; enhancement of promotion and distribution. Benefits considered perceived as important are: package of the VA product; pooling of resources; reduction of uncertainty through the sharing of market information; launch of joint marketing campaigns; and conduct joint research. As for the drawbacks / disadvantages, mutual distrust and bad feeling among VAs with contrasting visitor numbers are seen as very important. VA managers perceived as important drawbacks resulting from collaboration: the possible apathy, due to the potential tension between competitive forces in the marketplace; unhealthy competition from non-participating VAs; conflict between VAs with various ownership backgrounds and objectives. As for the collaboration dynamics and effectiveness, it is worth noting that none of the factors mentioned was considered to be not important at all and/or not important. The factors perceived as been very important in collaboration effectiveness are: chemistry of good interpersonal relations and the development of trust; suitable management style and organizational culture; balance of management resources and power; decisive leadership; sound administrative support; and transparent implementation of policy. The factors perceived as important are: involvement of key stakeholders; effective contractual conditions; an equity share arrangement; carefully chosen partners and balanced structure. Four factors are perceived to be very important in collaboration failure: lack of clear objectives; slow decision-making process; responsibilities not sufficiently established; and lack of communication and vacuum of objectives. Other two factors are seen as important: changes in personnel; and lack of new ideas/ new initiatives. One of the key findings of our study is that there is no systematic collaborative approach in the SA attractions industry. The general perception *vis-à-vis* the networking is positive; although there is a lack of collaborative projects.

5. CONCLUSIONS: MARKETING IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our study allowed confirming the main issues and aspects suggested by related literature. It indicates the main benefits and drawbacks resulting from networking and shows the most significant collaboration dynamics and effectiveness factors. The study of the three SA nature-based attractions has shown that the networks as business alliances can improve their marketing activities and efficiency, by adopting and implementing the appropriate tools. The study's findings confirmed the suggestions formulated by Fyall (2008) indicating that VAs need to adopt a more holistic approach to management and marketing. The study's conclusions are twofold. Firstly, two crucial issues and a major challenge suggested by related research have been confirmed: (i) it is imperative to adopt a strategic approach to networking in order to appeal to demanding visitors and to consistently ensure marketing effectiveness. This approach effectively creates business synergy and opportunities. Within this framework, a much-improved marketing research is needed to provide network management information for decision-making. (ii) There is also a requirement for efficient management of networks (i.e. leadership, clear objectives, responsibilities, plans, etc) in order to prevent the likely possible drawbacks resulting for collaboration. (iii) The challenge for VAs is to adopt a customer focus driven by innovation. It is estimated that in order to achieve efficient marketing and successful operation of VAs must have an increased focus on three areas (i) product (manage quality of visitor experience and satisfaction); (ii) marketing: adopt an integrated communications marketing (not just sales promotion) to communicate with the market / customer; and (iii) management: adopt a more strategic approach to managing their activities (e.g. set standards of performance and use of benchmarking) and improve staff's skills and capabilities. Secondly, the study highlights those factors considered as crucial for success and which influence the effectiveness of networks at local destination level and VA context. The VA managers must pay attention to collaboration dynamics in order to achieve the desirable effectiveness. Above all a well-planned project (a business plan) is an indispensable prerequisite; the collaborative initiative and project must be carefully planned. The factors considered as critical to successful networks in the field of VAs' marketing are four, namely: (i) Precisely determine the partnership's purpose, strategic direction, and objectives in order to work towards mutually desirable ends; (ii) Clear network structure: choice of the most appropriate participants (good blend, goal compatibility), adequate balanced structure, develop a common platform of interests, and

determine the desired outcomes of collaboration. (iii) Management of network: decisive leadership, suitable management style, development of trust among participants; equity share arrangement; balance of management resources and power; sound administrative support, transparent implementation. (iv) Marketing action plans with aim and objectives. It is suggested that theming and/or branding may be the driving force to attain improved outcomes.

It is suggested that the above four factors must be simultaneously met; otherwise the partnership would have dysfunctions and internal inefficiency, resulting in ineffectiveness. However, it should be stressed that our study encompasses some limitations. It is an exploratory research, the method used is a case study and further testing with other cases would confirm and highlight crucial success factors. The present study attempted to explore the networking issues and aspects in nature-based VAs in SA. Findings cannot be generalized to any VA, geographical area or country. Further investigation is needed to make it more robust. More extensive empirical work is needed to acquire a better understanding in the dimensions, properties, aspects and dynamics of VA's networks. This knowledge is necessary to develop appropriate strategies for network management and marketing activities.

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