

VARIABLES OF THE IMAGE OF TOURIST DESTINATION

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The image of a destination is more than a distinguishing element; it is a component of the supply and brings more value to it. The image of a destination can be the decisive component, while the other elements are relatively alike (1). The image of a tourist destination is strongly connected to the image of a country, the image of a nation and the image of a place. The image of a place is formed for a receiver naturally by accumulating experiences with that place, the use of the sources of personal and impersonal information. For the transmitter, the image is the result of some direct and indirect actions. The branding of the place is the conscientious and coordinated process of an image achievement. In the paper there are presented some examples of actions of image research, an essential step having in view the branding or re-branding. It is presented a study of the citizens of Oradea regarding their perception of tourist Romania.

Key words: touristic destinations, brand, image

1. Conceptual delimitations

Defining *the image of the destination* is problematic and a variety of different interpretations has been issued. One of the widest definitions is the one issued by Echtner and Ritchie in 1991 (2). They concluded that *the image of the destination* contains qualities, attributes, holistic, functional, psychological, common and unique components. The image of a nation involves the image of a country altogether, covering political, economic, historical and cultural aspects. The concept is at the national, multidimensional level and dependent on the context.

The brand adds value to the product or service and differentiates it from the competition. In the industry of hospitality, branding is fundamental in obtaining the competitive advantage. There is not only one definition of a country branding. For some it is another effect of the origin country or of the place's marketing. For others, it refers to a consistent and multilateral branding strategy which determines a strategic vision for the country and by which it is ensured that this vision is enriched and re-strengthened by each communication act between the country and the rest of the world. A series of terms with sensibly distinct meanings is used: branding – product brand, branding – country brand, branding – nation brand, branding – tourist destination brand. There are inter-conditioning relations among these brands. Branding is an international term which could be equalled with branding in Romanian, but this correspondence does not catch all the connotations of branding.

2. Branding a tourist destination

Branding a destination contains a set of marketing activities which (3): they require the creation of a name, symbol, logo or other graphs truly *identifying* and *differentiating* a destination; they express consistently the holiday memorable *expectations* which are associated uniquely with the destination; which serve to *consolidating and strengthening the emotional connections* between the visitor and destination; and which reduce the *searching costs* of the consumers and *perceived risk*. Together, these activities serve to create an *image of a destination* influencing positively the *choice of the consumerism destination*.

In branding a nation, the aim is to create a clear, simple idea built around the emotional qualities which can be symbolised both verbally as well as visually and understood by different auditors and in different situations. To work, the branding of a nation must embrace the political, cultural, business, sport activities. What is even more important, the branding of a nation involves not only the marketing but also almost any characteristic of a nation. "The branding of a nation requires the application of the marketing and branding techniques in order to promote the image of a country". (4) The factors influencing the creation of the image of a country, according to Hans Sussmuth's classification (5) in 1993, are the following:

- the historical relation between two states,
- events with profound effects (such as wars, occupation, expel),

- the current policy and the international relations between the two states,
- well-known personalities and social groups,
- the image specific to the country,
- geographical surface and demography,
- the function of the enemy's image,
- the state of economic development (for example, the quality of the products),
- military potential (possible atomic threat) and the behaviour in solving the conflicts (diplomacy),
- culture, such as important cultural treasures,
- antagonistic ideologies, for example the East-West conflict,
- population (behaviour, rituals, etc.),
- politico-social system and home affairs policy (the way the immigrants are treated),
- moral reputation (for example, human rights).

The branding of a nation works with a wide variety of factors and associations: place – geographical, tourist attraction, natural resources, local products, people – race, ethnic groups, history, culture, language, economic and political system, social institutions, infrastructure, well-known people, images and photos. Depending on the context in which it is used, the branding of a nation can remind of a similar and sometimes intriguing combination of these factors.

The name or the symbol of a country can be used either by a single company or by an organization to promote the origin country. This form of a nation's branding has the clear aim to use the image of the country to promote the export and sales. The second form is actually the branding of the place – to promote the country (or maybe a city in that country), as a tourist destination. The branding of the place is a component of the tourism marketing and it is also called the destination marketing and it promotes a place not only for visitation and tourism, but also for home investments, creation of jobs. A country has several images. What image will receive depends on the audience and the context. For example, China can be associated with the country with the highest number of inhabitants, with the Chinese Wall, Panda bears, kung fu, cheap and low quality products etc. The time seems to be an important factor in determining the people's perception. In December 1989, Romanian was associated with the fall of Ceaușescu's communist regime, while in 1990 it was associated with the miners' revolts. National identity is very difficult to define and it is difficult to provide an image which satisfies a variety of auditors.

Another problems regards the fact that the branding of a country has an epochal dimension. If a country, a nation has its deep origins in history and this is deeply imprinted in the people's mind, a marketing campaign will not be able to erase easily this image. The branding cannot change the physical attributes but only the perception of the clients. Regarding the branding of a country, the full understanding of the clients' perception of that country is important. Their perception of that country is based on the following factors:

- personal experience – e.g. They have visited the country
- education or knowledge
- the holder or the user of a product manufactured in that particular country
- the image of the country perceived through mass-media
- stereotypes, etc

Defining the image of a destination was difficult to achieve, the literature having only a few vague references such as: “the impression of a place”, or “the perception of an area”(6). Jenkins (7) found the term *destination image* and it was used in a number of different contexts. The image of a nation consists in the first place in the *cognitive* opinion on the events, character and typical features of a country. The images of a nation gain clarity and a univocal character together with the increase of the amount of information regarding the country. It is absolutely necessary the defining of a marketing strategy to punctuate the match between the internal resources and the environment opportunities. For example, Wahab, Crampon and Rothfield provided the following definition of the tourist destination marketing: “the management process through which the National Tourism Organizations and/or the tourist enterprises identify their selected, real or prospective tourists communicate with them in order to notice, establish and influence their dreams, needs, their reasons, pleasant or unpleasant at local, regional, national or international level, and subsequently draw up and adapt their tourist products in order to get the optimal

tourist satisfaction, therefore the achievement of their objectives” (8). In an increasing competitive tourist industry, a challenging solution for the sellers of a destination is to make them heard and to attract the attention of prospective consumers-tourists towards their destination. Gunn (1972) (9) was among the first people who had identified the different ways by which the cognitive images of a country are formed. Gunn's theory is to build and constantly change the images which are perceived as a number of levels, names, organic, induced and changed-induced. The organic images are those images considered non-prejudices, such as: books, school, TV documentaries, friends and family experience. The induced images are those coming from the destination itself, and which are the results of the marketing policy, promotion materials, etc. The key difference between the organic images and the induced images is the control that the destination has on what it is presented. The most reliable sources of information regarding a destination remain personal recommendations and personal experiences. The satisfaction is warranted by providing the experience confirming the expectations and even surpassing them.

Chon (1990) (10) adopted a theory of the cognitive consumerism behaviour, known also as evaluative congruency, and created an integrated model of the destination image and a trip purchasing behaviour. The central point of the model is that the trip purchasing behaviour can be explained as an imagination changing frame with the entire experience of the trip. He found out that a positive image and a positive travelling experience will result a positive incongruence, a much more positive evaluation of the destination. The latter can show that the attractiveness of the destination has not been sufficiently described. The most negative evaluation would result from a positive image and a negative experience (negative incongruence) which shows that the destination has been over-evaluated but the tourists' expectations have not been met by far. This underlines the important role that the tourist industry should warrant the compatibility between image and experience.

3. The research of the tourist destination image

The research of the image draws the attention on the concept of beneficial image, a research containing five stages (11): *selecting the tourist destinations which will be studied, generating advantageous attributes; classifying the answers and selecting the final advantageous attributes; developing the main value dimensions* by classifying and grouping the 14, 16 respectively attributes into five value consumerism dimensions; and finally, *developing the open ending questions in order to evaluate the advantageous image.*

This model was proposed and followed (12) for the research of the tourist image of two countries: Thailand and the United States. The 14 advantageous attributes found for Thailand were: - for the *functional dimension*: the fascination of cheap purchases, exotic food, historical places, friendship, virgin tropical rural regions, gorgeous sights; for the *social dimension* the advantageous attribute found was that the destination is convenient for all categories of tourists; in the *emotional dimension* there is calm and relations; in the epistemic dimension it is emphasised the cultural experience, the climate and the experience and in the conditional dimension we have proximity, cheap travel and accessibility to other close destinations. Similarly, the attributes found for the United States were: in the functional dimension: the fascination of purchases, famous theme parks, well-known landmarks, big cities and gorgeous sights and scenery; for the social dimension it was popularity; for the emotional one: diversity, entertainment and modern; in the epistemic dimension we have the experience of destination, a lot of things to be seen and done; and as conditional attributes the advantages found were the lack of linguistic barriers, cheap and quality transport, special sporting events. After performing a simulation the research itself has been made, the application of the survey on a sample made up of 400 persons. The condition for the respondents was that they had not visited these countries and, therefore, they should not be able to answer for their own experience. The aim of the research was to measure to what extent the image of a country determines the visitation of this country and which advantageous attributes they expect to find there.

Referring to the United States of America, the things are slightly different. The majority of the attributes received a good appreciation that is all contained in the functional, emotional, epistemic and conditional dimensions. In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that Thailand can count on the advantageous image referring to the attributes in the functional, epistemic and conditional dimensions just like the United States can count on the underlying of the attributes contained in the functional epistemic and conditional value attributes in order to create an advantageous image for the public in Australia.

Another example of branding suggests another way to obtain the image that is based on the study and knowledge of the perceiving context of the image of the destination towards the consumers had in view. The study made by Anne-Marie d’Hautesserre (13) demonstrates how the tourist destination Disneyland had to define the decision to (re)brand based on a full understanding of the adversity of the consumers targeted, as well as the general political and cultural environment where they were located, rather than on the specific features of their destination or the specific attributes of their product.

An analysis of the tourist image that Ireland has on the French tourist market was made by Sinead O’Leary and Jim Deegan (14). They made a research to find out which are the attributes representing Ireland best and which will be introduced then in a survey. The list of the attributes could be set up by free expression of the persons questioned who had been asked to describe the first three words coming to their minds when they think of Ireland as a tourist destination. These attributes were divided into the following categories: *scenery/ nature/ localisation Irish people, pubs and breweries, green, tradition / culture, the type of destination, weather, activities* and others.

Another survey was applied (15) in May and June 2007 to a number of 300 inhabitants of Oradea, an average city of Romania (206225 inhabitants) situated on the West border with Hungary. The main purpose of this survey is to see what the tourist image of Romania perceived by the Oradea inhabitants is in the present, within some competitive close countries.

The results of the study are the following:

- “When we say tourist Romania which is the first word which comes to your mind? And the second?”

We divided the answers obtained into three categories, related to their character: neutral, positive and negative. Therefore, on a proportion of 72% of the respondents made a neutral statement as first and the second answer, approximately 12% made a positive statement and approximately 17% made a negative statement. The neutral statements refer to totally to a form of relief (mountain, sea, delta, caves) or a destination or tourist objective, anthrop resources (seaside, monasteries, traditions, Bran Castle, Sibiu, Sighișoara, spas, etc.). The biggest percentage was obtained by the mountain, then there is the sea, then the Danube Delta a.s.o. The conclusion would be that in the opinion of the Oradea inhabitants Romania means “mountain”. We mention that it is not mentioned any level of capitalisation, the satisfaction obtained etc. The positive mentioning are: “beautiful, natural, incredible, attractive, interesting”. The words with negative connotation were: poor, disastrous, bad services, disorganised, bad roads. We notice that the myth of Dracula so known abroad, maybe the only thing known about Romania by some people was mentioned only once.

- “Out of the following list of countries, where would you like to spend your holiday this year? (Only one answer is accepted)”. 63% chose Croatia, at a great distance there is Hungary with 12.66%, then Bulgaria with 8%, Russia with 7.33%. Romania obtained 4% before the Czech 2.66% and Poland with 2.33%. We can notice the orientation towards the newest promoted destination (seaside) out of those presented – Croatia. The lack of interest for Poland or the Czech Republic clearly results from the lack of knowledge about these countries.
- “Personally, what was your impression about the following countries as tourist destinations?” The result was an interesting one because it showed the fact that the Romanians appreciate more Hungary as a tourist destination (68% good and very good opinion) although it is not there where they would like to spend this year’s holiday (only 12.66%). Bulgaria is not known enough by the people of Oradea, 54% declare that they do not have any opinion about it as a tourist destination, this may be the reason why they opted in a small proportion (only 8%). It is the same situation for the Czech Republic. Data show that Croatia is a destination for which the interest of the people of Oradea is increasing, the most wanted from the suggested destinations.
- “Based on the information you have about Romania, how would you appreciate the following statements (related to the cultural character of the destination, the quality of services, personnel, etc.)”. The people of Oradea see Romania as a cultural destination (94% agreed and highly agreed with this idea). The Romanian dishes are very much appreciated (90 %). The personnel from tourism is criticised regarding their training (70.66) and the ration quality – price for accommodation (60%).
- “For you, what is the most attractive thing for Romania as a tourist destination?” Among resources the first position as attractiveness is held by the Danube Delta and the Danube with 97 %, followed by the mountain with 90.33 %, and towns with 89%. It is strange enough that the Danube Delta is considered the

most attractive area of Romania, even though it obtained a very small percentage as a capacity to evoke Romania. When we say tourist Romania we are not thinking at the Danube Delta, although we consider it the most attractive location.

- Mountaineering is the most compatible form with the resources of Romania, 40% of the people of Oradea say. The rest of the tourism forms obtained small values.

The people of Oradea are placing on the first place Romania (compared to Hungary, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria) regarding the natural resources, the second place after Croatia regarding the anthrop resources and on the last place regarding the quality of tourist services.

3. Conclusions

In the field of branding we cannot talk about precise recipes, the field still being fuzzy. The image of a country, nation or of a place is a component part of the supply, a part increasing its value and attractiveness. A country has several images, but they must be congruent. What image the country will receive, depends on the audience and the context. Branding a nation works with a variety of factors and associations: place – geography, tourist attractions, natural resources, local products, people – race, ethnic groups, history etc. Successful steps in finding a suitable image for a destination have proved to be those having in view: finding the advantageous attributes for a destination, their repartition on fields, classifying and weighing them according to the importance given and investigating the tourists' opinion regarding the extent to which the destination studied meets these attributes. The attributes' framing fields are: the functional field, the emotional field, the epistemic field and the conditional field.

The study about Romania had in view the research of the Oradea inhabitants' image of their own country, as a starting point in conceiving a reliable image for the foreign tourists. The study has identified interesting inadvertisencies between the Romanians' image of Oradea and the foreigners' image of Romania.

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