Niche Tourism: Developing a Brand for the Irpinia Region

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Abstract

Based on a model developed by the author on interregional branding, the growing of a regional brand focusing on managing and promoting niche tourism for the Irpinia region is suggested. The paper synthesizes a variety of theories and recommendations in the field.

Introduction

As a result of an increased cross-cultural experience of tourists and saturated traditional tourism markets, more specialized, flexible and customer tailored offers are demanded. A required focus on niche tourism in Southern Italy is, for example, highlighted by Triunfo et al. (2006) who identified increasing market shares for niche tourism in Italy in general and a gap between the national development rates of niche tourism compared to that of Southern Italy in particular.

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Niche tourism and competitiveness

Niche tourism is a form of specialty tourism and has emerged as an antagonist to detrimental developments of mass tourism referring to environmental degradation and socio-cultural disturbance. From an ethical and moral perspective, niche tourism is connoted with development compatible with environmentally sustainability and social care (World Tourism Organisation and World Travel and Tourism Council in Novelli, 2005).

A niche is defined as an optimum location entailing resources to be exploited by an organism in the presence of its competitors (Hutchinson, 1957 in Novelli, 2005). Due to the fact, that niche tourism attracts more sophisticated high spending segments, it might very generate higher profits in relation to sales as mass tourism.

Niche tourism might be applied as differentiation strategies (i.e. to rejuvenate mass tourism offer or differentiation focus strategies concentrating on narrow micro niches within wider macro niches. This is illustrated by Novelli's (2005) model categorizing various niche tourism forms (see Appendix 1).

The New Tourists- the starting point

According to Novelli (2005) niche tourists as independent travelers choose specialized activities to engage with social life and to become cosmopolitans. Niche tourism is increasingly regarded as a way for identity creation via social encounters in authentic rather than staged settings (Novelli, 2005; Triunfo et al., 2006; Kaufmann et al., 2010). Choosing a holiday type and destination can reflect identity or identity search (Macleod, 2003 in Novelli, 2005; Kaufmann et al., 2009). This underlines that niche tourism is an innovative response to deeply rooted needs, better desires of a clientele characterized by enthusiasm and sensitivity. The continuous application of the identity concept in marketing is concisely summarized by Kaufmann et al. (2008). As tourism can be seen in the wider context of consumption, the influence of social identity is crucial (Kitisios and Kaufmann, 2009). In this context, niche tourism is a means to search for meaning, social bonds, social differentiation and distinction and status (Novelli, 2005; Siano et al., 2009; Hall, 1999). Due to the increased identity related experiences and more authentic cross-cultural relationships, niche tourism has a higher transformative power compared to traditional mass tourism.

Regional Branding- a Suggested Framework

The statement that the nation's brand appeal is decreasing (Triunfo et. al, 2006) calls for growing an Irpinia region brand. This nation brand appeal has to be revived in the medium to long term by creating a stronger region tourism lobby across the whole of Italy enhancing co-operation between the regions and trying to influence the government on the crucial importance of regional tourism. In this context, it should be emphasized that a rejuvenated nation brand should provide the fundament for competitiveness of both, inland and coastal areas. Furthermore, care should be taken to balance the flow of tourism revenues across the country (Kaufmann et al., 2010).

Appendix 2 provides the processual steps for developing an Irpinia region brand. To the knowledge of the author this is the only currently existing model describing the process of a regional brand development. It is based on Hankinson (2004) expanding on his notion of relationships, and uses identity as the overarching theoretical concept.

2. Applying the model (see Appendix 2)

2.1. Leadership/Organizational Board

The development of a regional brand is an ongoing process rather than a mere, short term image campaign. For this reason, an action research approach is suggested as a methodology as it allows an ongoing (spiral like) process of analysis, implementation and control with the objective of continuous improvement of quality levels. Considerable funds and resources should be recruited for the brand development. Leadership should also assess its level of experience and expertise in terms of brand development. In case of lacking experience and expertise, the co-operation with academic institutions and/or consultancies is suggested.

Members of the Organizational Board should be aware that, due to the variety of stakeholders involved, regional brand development is a complex undertaking and requires an integrating, charismatic, visionary and value orientated leader (i.e. coming from municipality and/or Destination Marketing Organization) being able to align all stakeholders behind the region's brand (Kaufmann and Durst, 2008). Tour operators as suggested by Triunfo et al. (2006) are not recommended as leading change agents due to a perceived lack of sociological know how.

As a kick off, leadership should provide a sense of urgency by highlighting the contribution of niche tourism and its related entrepreneurial activities (Novelli, 2005; Vigano in www.esade.edu; Wilde and Cox, 2008; Kaufmann, 2009) to economic prosperity and sustainability of the region. The convincingly communicated benefits relate to harmonizing competition for resources, investment and tourism and for addressing urgent social issues like social exclusion and cultural diversity (Kavaratzis, 2004).

A thorough situation analysis on the Irpinia region should be conducted. Information could be provided by both, quantitative (direct consumer surveys) and qualitative research (expert views). Research topics of interest could concern, for example, the tourists' provenience in the past and the desired provenience of the tourists in the future, a potential mix of macro and micro niches, de-seasonalization opportunities, the niche tourists' current region brand's associations, current media recognition of the Irpinia region, perceptions and attitudes towards the region's brand of residents, desired identity factors of tourists and potential residents, or measuring the actual brand utilization score (potential assets versus actual strength).

As part of the initial analysis, leadership also should assess the current level of development of the Irpina area based on Butler's TALC model (2006). Related to this stage, the required competitive factors should be assessed. Related to competitiveness factors, Ritchie's and Crouch's (1993 in Wilde and Cox, 2008) Calgary Model as well as Porter's various competitive models (diamond model, five forces model or generic model) could be used as reflective tools. Competitiveness competences gaps should be elicited to be bridged by education, training or

strategic alliances. A current coherent model interlinking the development stages of the tourism area with respective competitive factors, however, is still missing (Wilde and Cox, 2008).

Based on the research a vision and mission statement for the Irpinia Region Brand emerges, which has to be desired by the stakeholders.

As to deciding on niches to be offered as strategic business units, a combination of culture and nature niches might be recommendable for the Irpinia region taking the existing enogastronomic treasures of vine qualified as DOCG (i.e. Fiano de Avellino, Greco di Tufo and Tomasi), cheeses (scamorza and caciovallo), salami (subbursata and soppresata) or hazelnuts and nuts, the national beauty of its Appenine hills and valleys as well as the cultural and archaeological heritage (Sanctuaries of Montevergine and of San Gerardo a Maiella; archaeological sites in Avella and Eclano, the Lancelotti castle and the early Christian Basilica in Prata) into account. The challenge in providing cross-niche packages is seen to avoid tapping into the trap of over-standardization. Promising new niche tourism fields for Southern Italy as, for example, the enogastronomic, minor cultural itineraries, sport tourism (i.e aquatic sports), naturalist tourism ones, link between agritourism and rural tourism, cultural heritage (Triunfo et al., 2006; Vigano in www.esade.edu; Gronau and Kaufmann, 2009) should be considered as well.

2.2. Markets and Market segments

Research should lead to a clear quantitative assessment of market potential followed by a precise definition of the niches, prioritization and targeting of the tourists.

Relevant consumer profiles relating to identity and authenticity summarized, for example, by Kaufmann et al., (2009) and Novelli (2005) should be the basis for market segmentation and targeting.

2.3. Core Identity of the Region Brand

Congruence of values is the magic panacea for attracting resources. This refers to the congruence between desired values (i.e. character identity) of the internal and external market segments and the region's brand values. The core identity should be expressed by Corporate Design (i.e. symbol, logo, flag) to which other existing corporate brands of involved stakeholders should be aligned to.

2.4. Positioning of core Region brand identity

The positioning should be communicated in a believable, durable, relevant, simple, appealing, distinctive, communicable, and deliverable way and should be of salient importance to the target segment (Quin, 2008). The target is to create positive pictorial associations in the stakeholders' as the 'guiding stars' for all integrated communication mix activities.

2.5. Internal Brand Identity

Creating an internal place identity (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983; Breakwell, 2000 in Deaux and Philogene, 2001) refers, for example, to increasing the level of

identification with the region's brand. First of all, all the members of the organization board should be dedicated to the vision and mission of the City brand. It is strongly suggested to directly and continuously involve the population and all stakeholders in the branding project to assure continuous support and later authentic delivery of the brand and to design the tourism services for them as well. A number of public training and communication sessions will have to take place to achieve this.

2.6. External brand identity

When choosing alliances and partnerships care should be taken that compatibility as to objectives and values exists. Strategic Alliances could refer to towns, such as Salerno, or destination clusters integrating the offers of the Irpinia region as an added service value or international twin cities.

Promotion strategies have to be based on scientifically conducted consumer research to enhance customer knowledge (i.e. identity). A place image has to be created triggering favourable place associations (Keller, 2003). This, in turn, contributes to building powerful brand origins benefiting local (i.e. of the Ipinia region) products and services.

Creative, imaginative and inspiring promotional strategies based on uniqueness and typicality, conveyed in appropriate media, are suggested to be developed by advertising experts. Especially advertising image strategies are proposed in this context, but also tourism exhibitions and PR activities. The various promotion techniques are suggested to be 'down to earth', reflecting depth, values and emotions.

Although TV advertising (due to its reach and ability to create intimacy) is regarded as the 'queen' of the 'above the line' promotion, intensive CRM related 'below the line' promotion should forge close customer relationships, i.e. via loyalty schemes, marketing information systems, special events or city cards integrating multiple visits to trigger visit returns and the increase of the average duration of stay. In this case, branding and CRM, often seen as mutually exclusive, are perceived as twins.

Due to the high level of sophistication and individualism of the niche tourism segment, modern IT should be used to directly approach those applying modern social media.

2.7. Diffusion of Region identity

The diffusion of the City Brand identity requires continuous close co-ordination as well as efficient collective and individual communications and training. The Leadership/ Organization Board is suggested to employ a 'caretaker' for the coherent diffusion of the region's identity.

An increase in the penetration rate of the distribution system is seen as vital for Southern Italy (Triunfo et al., 2006). Important seems to initiate a mediating role of large tour operators mass and/or small scale specialist tour operators and a decision has to be made if co-operation is sought with large scale or specialist tourist operators. Taking entrepreneurial, specialist knowledge as well as local economic aspects into account, the latter ones seem to be preferable.

Past research points to a potential difficulty to align SMEs to the region brand objectives due to the diversity of corporate objectives inherent in entrepreneurialism. However, to build an efficient network of small firms is indispensable, for example to create a local hospitality and retailing system.

2.8. Authentic delivery of region brand's positioning

Authenticity requires the core identity of the region brand not only to be consistently communicated, but to be consistently 'lived and done' by all stakeholders. In this way, the positioning statement and core values are authentically and credibly experienced by the segments. A special emphasis is suggested to be put on training SMEs as they represent the lion share of companies which actually deliver the brand values in the various experiential service touch points.

2.9. Control of Region branding success

Quantitative and qualitative measures (i.e. increase of tourist figures, retention rates, aided and unaided recalls of core values and pictorial associations, improved perceptions, increased international media coverage) are put in place checking the overall success of the region's brand strategy in general and the authenticity of the region's brand identity in particular. Successful criteria for destination brand development might be derived from Anholt's index (2007) as well as Saffron's European City Brand Barometer (http://saffron-consultants.com).The ultimate region's branding success is achieved when the quality of life and the relationships have improved. Various TQM related assessment tools for the tourism service providers can be regarded as control mechanism as well.

Conclusion

The paper concisely suggests the steps to develop an Irpinia regional brand based on a synthesis of relevant models and criteria. It reflects the importance of leadership, creativity, identity and co-operation to create and authentically live the region brand both internally and externally. It also creates awareness that the region brand building process is not always ' a bed of roses'.

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Appendix 1 : Niche Tourism Component

Tourism activities

Mass Tourism

Conventional tourism involving
large number of tourists
in **staged** settings

Niche Tourism

Special interests, culture and/or activity
based tourism involving small number
of tourists in **authentic** settings

Macro niches

Cultural Others	**Environmental**	**Rural**	**Urban**
Heritage	Nature and Wildlife	Farm/barns	Business
Photographic	Ecotourism	Camping	Conference
Tribal	Adventure	Wine/Gastronomy	Exhibition
Small cruise	Alpine	Sport	Sport
Religious	Geotourism	Festival and events	Youth
Volunteer	Coastal	Arts and crafts	Art
Educational			
Dark			
Genealogy			
Research			
Transport			

Micro niches

Alternative tourism development

Source: Novelli (2005, p.9)

Appendix 2: Development and management of a city brand

Review and continuous improvement

Control of City branding success
Quantitative and qualitative measures; increased levels of quality of live for all

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Authentic delivery of City brand's positioning, claim and values
Growing the brand (e.g.marketing mix) by reflecting, communicating and living the core identity of the City brand by all stakeholders involved

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Diffusion of City identity
Co-operation, co-ordination and training; efficient collective and individual communications

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External brand identity
Compatible alliances and partnerships; city identity; coherence between internal and external identity; specificities of SMEs

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Internal brand identity
Internal relations (culture) amongst organization board members and all stakeholders involved

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Positioning of core City identity (Image)
Coherence of City brand and visitor/residents/potential residents' identities; brand portfolio: umbrella brand, alignment of other existing brands)

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Markets and Market Segments
Quantitatively assessing, selecting and prioritizing target markets and segments

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Core identity of the City brand
Coherence of regional, brand and visitor identities; brand portfolio: umbrella brand, alignment of other existing brands)

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Leadership/Organizational Board
Reflection (e.g.SWOT), Research, Vision, Identity as the central concept; Size

Source: based on Kaufmann and Durst (2008)