



COVER SHEET

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Tourism Destination Branding Complexity

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Abstract

Prior to completing a tourism marketing PhD the author spent almost two decades working in the tourism industry, mostly in destination marketing organisations (DMOs). In this paper he laments a significant gap in the literature in the area of tourism destination branding, a field that has only attracted academic attention since the late 1990s. While interest in applications of brand theory to practise in tourism is increasing, there is a paucity of published research with which to guide DMOs. There has been relatively little discussion on the complexity involved in capturing the essence of a multi-attributed destination with a succinct and focused brand position, in a way that is both meaningful to the multiplicity of target audiences of interest to stakeholders and effectively differentiates the destination from competitors. The paper summarises six issues that make the application of branding theory to destinations a complex undertaking.

Keywords

Tourism branding, slogans, destination marketing organisations

Tourism Destination Branding Complexity

There is a dearth of tourism destination branding research in the academic literature, with which to guide destination marketing organisations (DMOs). The topic of branding first appeared in the marketing literature fifty years ago, and most of the published research since this time appears to provide a valuable resource for consumer goods marketers. As noted by Jevons (2005) however, “the bottom line question that is often unasked is whether our understanding of what brands are, and what branding does, much clearer as a result of all the research that has been published...”. In this regard destination branding research has only appeared relatively recently, with the first academic conference session convened in 1996, the first journal articles appearing in the late 1990s, and the first book published in 2002. This is in spite of formal destination marketing organisations having been in existence since the late 19th century. The lack of research seems incongruent with suggestions that the future of marketing will be a battle of brands, and that destinations are arguably the travel industry’s biggest brands. Today’s travellers are literally spoilt for choice of available destinations, and within crowded tourism markets, places are becoming increasingly substitutable and difficult to differentiate.

The place name is in effect the destination brand, and yet in most cases will not provide an explicit association with the position sought in the travel market(s). Only on rare occasions has a place name has been changed to increase appeal to travellers, such as in the case of Elston, which was changed to Surfers Paradise in the 1930s. More recent exceptions include an island in the Caribbean renamed CuervoNation by the famous tequila brand owners, and another island changed from Hog Island to Paradise Island to appeal to the cruiseship industry. While it would be politically difficult, and many would argue inappropriate, for a DMO to influence any official change of destination name for tourism marketing purposes (Pike, 2004), simple brand associations have been used to expand the place name for promotional purposes. For example, Taupo and Ruapehu in New Zealand have been labelled Lake Taupo and Mount Ruapehu by the local regional tourism organisations (RTOs) to highlight their natural sources of comparative advantage. Likewise in Florida, Lee County has been promoted as Lee Island Coast, and in Australia, Queensland’s macro regions have been labelled with distinctive tourism names such as Sunshine Coast, Coral Coast and Discovery Coast.

For the majority of destinations however, a slogan is a necessary public articulation of a destination’s brand strategy. Almost every destination uses a slogan, an indication they are obviously considered important, and yet published research is almost non-existent. There have been many criticisms of destination slogans over the years, best summed up in Gold and Ward’s (1994) suggestion that they fail to achieve anything other than ephemeral indifference. In other words, the slogans are unlikely to differentiate the destinations over time. Alas, few solutions have been proposed, other than Richards and Cohen’s (1993) USP recommendations. However, brand positioning by destination marketing organisations (DMOs) is a complex and challenging undertaking for at least six reasons.

First, and arguably most significant, destinations are far more multidimensional than consumer goods and other types of services. To be effective, positioning theory suggests that reaching the minds of busy consumers requires a succinct message focussing on one or a few brand associations. Nowhere is this challenge better highlighted than in the development of a seven word slogan that encapsulates a destination’s diverse and often eclectic range of natural resources, built

attractions, culture, activities, amenities and accommodation. This is often reflected in slogans that appear to attempt to cover everything, such as 'Kenya – creation's most beautiful destinations, all in one country' and 'Ohio – so much to discover'. In other cases the difficulty appears to manifest in slogans such as 'Greece – beyond words'. Rarely does a destination have a focused slogan such as in the examples of 'Arizona – Grand Canyon state' and 'Snowy Mountains – Australia's high country'.

Second, the market interests of the diverse group of active stakeholders are heterogenous. Counter to a market orientation where products are designed to suit market needs, DMOs are forced into targeting a multiplicity of geographic markets to attract a wide range of segments that might be interested in the existing and relatively rigid products. Is one slogan, such as 'Idaho – great potatoes, tasty destinations' and 'Slovenia – the grown place of Europe' likely to be meaningful to all market segments?

Third, the politics of decision making can render the best of theory irrelevant. The issues of who decides the brand theme, and how they are held accountable, are critical. Reliant on government funding, DMOs are evolving into public-private partnerships, and the topic of who should be appointed board members makes for interesting debate. There is often mistrust that tourism businesses represented on tourism boards have unfair influence. In this regard the author witnessed one domineering attraction manager influence an RTO board to change the destination brand of five years, for no other reason than he had personally grown tired of it. This decision was made in spite of research indicating the existing theme was starting to gain traction in the destination's closest and most valuable market. At another political level, some DMOs, such as Louisiana and Valencia, have been legislated to change advertising agencies on a regular basis, subjecting brand message consistency to regular modification. Other destination brand campaigns have been derailed by influential intermediaries, such as in the case of Morocco, when European tour wholesalers forced the cancellation of a brand that did not fit their offerings.

Fourth, there is a fine balance to be struck between community consensus and brand theory and a top down approach to destination brand implementation is likely to fail. Critically, DMOs lack any direct control over the actual delivery of the brand promise by the local tourism community. Without buy-in from these stakeholders the strategy will flail. This initially occurred in the case of 'Oregon – things look different here' (see Curtis, 2001), where regional tourism organisations initially resisted a brand strategy imposed by the state tourism organisation. The host population also interact with visitors and, particularly in resort communities, should therefore feel that the destination brand represents their sense of place too. However, Henderson's (2000) survey found evidence to suggest the 'New Asia – Singapore' brand did not appear to correspond with the experiences of local residents. Thus, while consumer based brand equity is of more practical to DMOs than a balance sheet destination brand value, there is also a case for the concept of community based brand equity to enter the marketing vernacular.

Fifth, brand loyalty, one of the cornerstones of consumer based brand equity models, can be operationalised to some extent by measuring repeat visitation through a DMO's visitor monitor programme. Staying in touch with previous visitors is a powerful but untapped means of enhancing the destination brand, but DMOs have no access to the hundreds of thousands of visitors' contact details left at accommodation registration desks. How then can a DMO practically stimulate loyalty by engaging in dialogue with so many customers, in a meaningful way, as espoused in customer relationship management theory?

Sixth, funding is often a continuous problem for DMOs, in both scale and consistency. Even the largest DMO budgets pale in comparison to those of the major corporate brands, with which they compete for discretionary consumer spend. Since DMOs have no direct financial stake in visitor expenditure, they must continually lobby for public and private funding. A successful brand campaign leading to increased yields for local businesses does not translate into increased revenue for the DMO. Indeed the reverse situation has occurred at destinations where funding has been pulled by the government, such as in Colorado for example.

To summarise, will one brand positioning theme meet the needs of all market segments, suit the business interests of all local tourism operators and encapsulate the community's sense of place? While there is a rich resource of brand theory, there is has been relatively little published that addresses the complexity involved in capturing the essence of a multi-attributed destination with a succinct and focused brand position, in a way that is both meaningful to the multiplicity of target audiences of interest to stakeholders and effectively differentiates the destination from contiguous competitors offering the same benefits.

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