

FROM E-BUSINESS TO C-COMMERCE: COLLABORATION AND NETWORK CREATION FOR AN E-MARKETING TOURISM STRATEGY

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The role of networks has been recently associated with tourism planning. It may lead to a win-win situation for the promotion of a destination, since all parts involved cooperate to promote a uniform and complete tourist experience. Visitors, residents and business organizations who are associated directly or indirectly with a market destination need to develop dynamic relations through co-operation. The paper argues for the necessity of public and private collaboration, an issue that needs to be taken into consideration when networks are created for tourism marketing. National tourism organisations can have a significant role to play in these networks. To this end, the role of social media and information technology is of significance for destination marketing. Incorporation of information and communication technologies and the adoption of c-commerce in a marketing tourism destination strategy may strengthen networks and alliances between the public-private sector for the implementation of a successful tourism development.

Keywords: *networks, c-commerce, private-public sector collaboration, tourism, communication and social media*

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of international tourism is closely related to its ability to use computerised systems (Fuchs et al., 2010), as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) through the generation, gathering, processing, application, and communication of information, becomes very important to all travel and tourist stakeholders for day-to day operations of their business and can help them in creating strategic benefits (Buhalis,



1998). The latter are mainly caused because of flexible pricing and reduced communication and distribution costs, better specialised and differentiated services, close relationships with customers, smart enterprise networks, established entry barriers, and knowledge acquisition (Go, 1992; Buhalis, 1998; Fuchs et al., 2010).

Key stakeholders in the tourism industry can promote the destination's economic development by collaborating with the use of ICTs (Katsoni, 2011). Taking into consideration that destinations compete with each other in order to attract the potential visitors, -who have time and resource limitations-, destinations need to differentiate themselves to assert their unique and distinctive characteristics (Pritchard and Morgan, 2001; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Kavoura, 2013; Kuscer, 2013).

Destination stakeholders include public sector and governments, residents, tourism industry sector, destination management organisation and other groups-such as the most important categories which may influence and determine the management and marketing; these groups develop dynamic relations with the aim to cooperate and collaborate rather than compete (Goeldner and Ritchie in Konečnik, 2004).

This paper argues for the necessity to shift emphasis on the role of networks' cooperation and collaboration through the incorporation and use of ICTs, for a better and holistic tourist strategy approach. We argue that alliances are necessary for the implementation of a successful tourism marketing strategy and we emphasise the importance of a public-private sector cooperation.

COOPERATION, COLLABORATION AND NETWORK CREATION FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A SUCCESSFUL E-MARKETING STRATEGY

Tourism is a fast-evolving economic activity which contributes immensely to employment, economic growth, sustainability and competitiveness and has therefore consequent social, cultural and environmental implications (Katsoni, 2013b). Tourism is part of a global cultural economy, a complex process that 'produces places as material natures, social relations and discursive conceptions' (Bærenholdt et al., 2004: 26). Tourism is also a typical cross-cutting industry, as it caters for a variety of economic branches, such as accommodation, gastronomy, transport, and a wide range of cultural and recreational facilities. In order to create and implement a total strategic marketing plan and advertising of

a respective area, a holistic identity of the area with specific dimensions and characteristics is necessary.

Rainisto (2003) argued for a number of critical success factors in destination marketing utilised for a successful destination development, such as the creation of a planning group, which may determine the value of the destination. Based on the destinations' resources, a unique selling proposition is created depending on selected attractions of the destination, promoting the physical and soft or immaterial attraction factors (Kotler et al. in Rainisto, 2003: 70). In that way, the sum of characteristics that differentiate one particular tourism destination from any other are important to be identified and communicated to target groups (Rainisto, 2003) and the creation of networks can facilitate such a promotion. Coordination of these activities is necessary to implement the marketing plan and the communication message of the tourism destination in order to safeguard commitment among key tourism stakeholders and avoid conflicting actions (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Sartori, Mottironi and Antonioli, 2012).

Tourism destinations typically comprise numerous autonomous suppliers, often Small- Medium Tourist Enterprises (SMTEs). Cooperative programs go a long way in blending various stakeholders in the hospitality community into a unified marketing presence. They develop mutual respect and appreciation regarding the needs of each actor by maximising membership participation and destination exposure. Different public agencies encourage the establishment of small medium enterprises in order to develop tourism activities in rural areas for example (Chatzigeorgiou, Christou, Kassianidis & Sigala, 2009: 147); museum groups and the management of museums (private or public) associated within a specific area may also initiate network co-operation based on their attractions and visitors' interests in order to fully employ destination marketing management (Vasiliadis and Fotiadis, 2008: 29).

Limited research has taken place to examine the role of networks for the promotion of a destination (Saraniemi, 2009; McGehee et al., 2010). Networks reinforce 'bonding' and 'bridging'; the former is associated with cooperation inside the enterprises of the community whereas the latter is associated with external cooperation, as is for example the coordination of activities between entrepreneurs in a region and the contribution of an external cooperation, such as an advisor from another country or a private sector stakeholder who has experience in tourism marketing and planning (Jones in McGehee et al., 2010: 489). Networks create teams. Mickan and Rodger (2000) present characteristics of effective teams. The features of teams that create a network are associated

with “complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable” (Katzenbach and Smith in Mickan and Rodger, 2000).

Cooperation and network formation between tourist operators, who are independent but at the same time, interdependent, may add value to the tourism destination product and could serve as a type of ‘one-stop shop’ for a tourist destination (Gartrell, 1991; Kotler, Palmer and Bejou, 1995; Mickan and Rodger, 2000; Bowen and Makens, 2003; Leiper, 2004). Networks can offer a workable structure for cooperation. Networks could be a strategic alliance improving the product/services offered by the tourism destination, improve overall performance and increase competitive position, as sometimes it is difficult for a single firm to cope with the risks, complexities and constant changes of its environment (Cravens et al., 1993; More and McGrath, 2003; Petrou et al., 2007).

A systems theory approach is associated with the elements of interdependence and relationships, coordination of activities between and within teams and at the same time, distinctive roles for the implementation of the superordinate goal that is clearly defined and shared among the network team (Mickan and Rodger, 2000). Nonetheless, this is not always the case since personal expectations for example, or the way others perceive the roles of the members in the group may influence the way networks function and the results of the network (Mickan and Rodger, 2000; Ooi and Pedersen, 2010). Leadership is also significant for the network’s successful implementation and in addition, the establishment of trust among members of the network or team, which in turn, influence team’s processes and interaction such as coordination to perform different tasks; in that way, conflict is avoided (Mickan and Rodger, 2000). Nevertheless, at times, relationships may be loose among stakeholders or teams who form part of a network and may not be symbiotic who may not even want to co-operate (Ooi and Pedersen, 2010). Furthermore, social network theory argues that the attributes of individuals are less important than their relationships and ties with other actors within the network (Mickan and Rodger, 2000; Povilanskas and Armaitienė, 2010).

We could mention examples from different countries regarding existence and operation of networks. Joint initiatives of various communication federations and associations, independent companies and important personalities in Greece such as the Hellenic Advertisers’ Association, the Association of Advertising and Communications’ Companies, the Greek Association of Branded Product Manufacturers created advertising campaigns to promote Greece’s tourism abroad in

2010; it is the first time in Greece that the private sector volunteered to support Greek culture and tourism and 24 radio and TV adverts were produced (On Board, 2013: 192).

Another typical example of network creation which promotes the unique characteristics of a tourism region, is TUI Viagens, Portugal; specifically, in regard to the island of Sao Miguel, Azores, local tours are advertised and synergies and networks are created such as Azorean circuits, whale watching, scuba diving, tracking tours, rent-a-car and English and German guides, offering a total experience to the tourist (<http://www.tuiportugal.com>).

Public and private cooperation is also an issue that needs to be accounted for in the creation of networks. Public authorities can not only help in establishing networks between various tourist stakeholder, but they can also assist in developing and maintaining products on a long-term and sustainable basis. Networks can enhance the co-operation of all stakeholders in a tourism destination, as they can provide flexible and valuable marketing information, they encourage innovation, resource development and access to knowledge, unite the existing fragmented nature of tourism supply and finally provide a total tourism product (Augustyn and Knowles, 2000; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Saxena, 2005; Novelli et al., 2006; Daskalopoulou and Petrou, 2009). National Tourist Organisations can be accounted as public for example. "The role of National Tourist Organisations...is increasingly supported by the involvement of the private sector towards a collaborative and entrepreneurial set of values" (Wight, 2013: 135). A typical example where public and private sectors can cooperate is the recent effort for promoting the tourist product in Greece. More specifically, Greek Law 4070/2012, refers to the creation of an organisation which will promote Greece, -in paragraph 1 it is stated that an anonymous organisation is created entitled "Marketing Greece Anonymous Organisation of Promotion and Development of Tourism" and with the title "Marketing Greece A.E.". Its sole Proprietors are the Association of Greek Tourist Enterprises (SETE) and the Greek Public...where the Ministry of Development, Competitiveness, Shipping, Culture and Tourism and SETE will be in charge to sign all important decisions taken.

Greek Law 4070/2012, mentions in Article 5, that the aim of the abovementioned organisation is the development and adoption of promotion and advertising programmes of Greek tourism, internationally and nationally. In addition, its aim is the research of international and domestic tourist market, for the creation, development and adoption of a branding system for Greek tourism at national, peripheral, regional

level...as well as activities related to the support of tourism. SETE will participate with a 70% and the Greek Public will participate with 30% to the capital of the organisation. It is the first time that public and private organisations cooperate together in Greece in order to promote the Greek tourist product, allowing for us to argue for the creation of synergies among the private and public sector.

Tourist boards and strategic authorities are important for the businesses involved as they encourage entrepreneurship on accommodation, food, services, attractions; they may provide a voice on industry issues and implement the marketing of the country (Wight, 2013). Their role can be significant because they may interact with interest groups and support the industry in tourism policy issues (Wight, 2013).

The abovementioned efforts of tourism networking in Greece that have been mentioned above have not been successfully implemented so far, since the characteristics of effective teams have not been developed. Greek Laws are continuously changing and there is tension between the different agents involved -tensions exist between the Ministry of Culture and the Greek National Tourism Organization which interchangeably change names, merge, then again change names in short periods; at the same time, there is conflict and mistrust among its members over who has the administrative power and should be responsible for management issues such as the management and organization of cultural activities in heritage sites (Kavoura, 2001; Kavoura, 2013). Contrary to what network theory dictates about collaboration and team working, cooperation among the public and private Greek sector does not seem to be implemented.

THE ROLE OF ICTs ON NETWORKS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A SUCCESSFUL E-MARKETING STRATEGY

Collaboration around ICTs may help the promotion of the tourism destination and enhance economic development. Principals for tourism development should incorporate ICTs into their strategic marketing policies, addressing issues that affect them such as collaboration, co-operation and competition.

The way tourism stakeholders choose to promote and disseminate information for a tourist destination varies tremendously, since sometimes the destination is presented by multiple websites through the actual tourist operators themselves, whereas centralised bodies such as tourist bureaus

try to demonstrate the total tourist experience on that location, but they have the characteristic of being bureaucratic and mainly “hierarchical tourist boards” (Palmer and McCole, 2000). In addition, tourist companies among three European countries were found to have differences towards the adoption of e-business technologies and applications (Vlachos, 2013) which may in fact influence the way information and communication technologies are implemented. The importance of demonstrating a comprehensive and unified tourist experience in a holistic profile of the tourist destination is not widely acknowledged by the tourist stakeholders. We argue that an understanding of the necessity of member participation and cooperation is vital to tourism marketing destination marketing.

According to Werthner and Klein (1999: 261), “most of the destination sites are purely informational servers, where booking is mostly not supported”; they further assert that this reflects a lack of agreement for a holistic business cooperative destination strategy, suggesting that a number of issues should be addressed, such as forming co-operative strategies and covering the entire product range, particularly regarding the airline sector.

The creation of collaborative commerce (c-commerce) refers to collaborative management of information flows between businesses through ICT use and enables the formation of partnerships in new expeditious ways, in order to keep up with or to access unique or innovating resources, based on trust and business culture that values partnerships and ongoing dialogue between the public and private sectors can also be encouraged, for example, on the future need for training places (Ring and Van De Ven, 1992, Holsapple and Singh, 2000; Fairchild and Peterson, 2003; Levy et al., 2003; Turban et al., 2004). Trust, rather than competition with each other is the objective since networks deter competition (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; McGehee et al., 2010: 486). The emphasis is on cooperation among businesses; rather than on spending energy, time and money to observe how to ‘compete’ other businesses, everyone works as part of a group with multiple benefits and results for all.

A network with great potential for tourism development, which has really revolutionised communication, interaction and business in general, is the ‘virtual’ or ‘social’ network. ‘Virtual’ or ‘social’ networks can be defined as permeable structures without physical borders separating them from the environment, comprising a multiplicity of autonomous, interdependent, and self-organizing actors that rely on the internet infrastructure to integrate and exchange value (Poon, 1993; Pollock,

1998; Romano, Eliva and Passiante, 2001; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004; Zhu et al, 2005; Katsoni, 2013a).

Online travel communities have no restrictions of distance and time and has become an effective customer relationship management (CRM) tool by enabling tourism stakeholders to manage and attract customer relationships through its integration with the new communication media, by providing in-depth, focused, and member-generated contents, engaging tourists through interactions with other members based on common attributes and interests, (by allowing them to maintain existing social ties and form new connections), and retaining them by facilitating relationship building with other members (Wellman et al., 1996; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004; Zhu et al, 2005).

Blogs are virtual forms of networking among tourist as they act as media through which individuals and organisations present opinions and/or information about specific topics that are useful for the tourist destination, such as images, photographs, links to related sites, critique, variety of activities, reviews and opinions (Pühringer and Taylor, 2008). DMOs and other tourist stakeholders can benefit from the existence of blogs, as they can provide them with valuable information into the types of 'e-word of mouth' messages (Bickart and Schindler, 2002). Specifically, blogs can help them identify and monitor tourist trends in the destination, and they can also provide them with specific performance reviews, product and event evaluations, reviews of service standards. In addition, blogs can help a marketing competitor analysis by providing identification of product or infrastructure gaps (Pühringer and Taylor, 2008).

The tourism sector virtual organisation is a network of independent tourism sector competitors linked by ICT to share skills, costs, assets and broaden access to markets. Palmer and McCole (2000) argue that the 'virtual organisation' structure or collaboration around ICT by SMTEs is a more effective way of promoting tourism destinations since it is flexible and responsive to business changes that occur in their operating environment. The use of ICT thus facilitates the rapid interchange of business information and reflects the actual product offer and activities that the tourist will experience associated with online brands. The online brands have the following characteristics; they have users, they promise a price benefit, they prove their value with experience, they continuously adjust, their globalisation is easy; they have a relational and experiential character since each person develops a personal relation and has a unique experience with the brand (Kapferer, 2013).

The perceived image of the tourism destination is created by the tourist's virtual experience of the content of tourism destination Websites. An analysis of the Destination Management Organisations' (DMOs') website emphasises that there are two main functions: firstly, general publicity in terms of providing Web presence, information and interaction; and secondly, advertising, including publication of the tourism products or services without prices, provision of e-mail addresses and e-mail booking, online selling with credit card payment, capability for customers to acquire an account identity for direct purchases and other services, such as call for information, tourism guide services, etc. (Gretzel et al., 2006). Thus, a specific whole is created and advertised electronically. To make a step further, the promotion of such virtual experience via the website may include more than one participating businesses which create a network that aims to promote a unique and consistent identity destination message.

A typical example is Azores, Portugal. Businesses that operate in the tourism industry such as hotels, tourist guides, rent car companies, trips, local restaurants are in cooperation and initiate advertising and promotional campaigns in order to attract tourists; this takes place via the traditional print media, such as leaflets (see for example, Panazorica Tours, 2013) and via the internet where a website is provided where all the activities are consistently promoted in a uniform way (<http://www.panazorica.pt>). Another example for Portugal is the network created by 5 star hotels. 'Stay close to Azores' is their slogan, their logo is an open ended circle connected with another open ended circle and hotels from Portugal and more specifically from Lisbon and the islands of Azores -Sao Miguel, Terceira and Faial- promote their businesses; a website is provided with all the necessary information regarding reservations made to the participating hotels in addition to a central email address (<http://www.bensaudehotels.com>; <http://www.bensaude.pt>). This information is also promoted in the print promotional material of the destination (see for example, The Azores Tourist Guide 2013). Lack of cooperation among the participating groups may result in the limited usage of communication and information technology (Borges-Tiago, Couto, dos Santos Natário and Braga, 2007) because tourists make purchase decisions based on the totality of the experience available at a destination (Williams and Palmer, 1999).

A tourist portal is defined as an information gateway to the Internet and is an example of collaboration between tourist stakeholders allowing the exchange of business intelligence and information relating to a specific tourist destination, and by providing a single point of content

management for the available information. (Turban et al., 2004). Portals can also initiate customer relationship management (CRM), by allowing tourism stakeholders to push value-added products to targeted customer segments at the customer portal (Turban et al., 2004: 322). Web service technology with respect to information travel systems facilitates “interoperability among many heterogeneous systems such as flight reservations and hotel bookings” (Dogac et al., 2004: 21), as tourist sites’ hyperlinks regarding car rentals, airlines, accommodation and the like, facilitate the concept of destinations’ holistic view on behalf of the tourist (Palmer and McCole, 2000).

Cultural tourism presents an area’s cultural heritage, ranging from environmental attractions to historical, artistic, archaeological and folkloric features, and is a good example of the way in which online technologies, such as the portals discussed above, have influenced the tourism industry. The MEDINA (Mediterranean by Internet access) project (2002 to 2007) was one of the first European established cultural web portals for fourteen Mediterranean countries, where access to the portal was achieved through mobile devices (e.g. personal digital assistants or smart phones) (Garzotto et al., 2004) and network creation can add to the whole process.

The evolution of Web 3.0 or Semantic Web as a “mesh of information linked up in such a way as to be easily processable by machines, on a global scale” (Siau and Tian, 2004), by using a ‘common and minimal language to enable large quantities of existing data to be analysed and processed’ (Gutierrez et al., 2011: 250), suggest that tourism organisations experience continuous change and the uncertainty that has defined it (Mistilis and Buhalis, 2012). The existence of the Semantic Web, where meaning of content is recognised and understood by computers, enabling machine to machine interaction (Mistilis and Buhalis, 2012) and interoperability-centric capability, reinforces the role of networking, as it leads to an enhanced product creation, greater efficiency in matching tourism supply and demand, reduced dependency on third party intermediaries, facilitation in consumer choice and improvement in B2B networking (Mistilis and Buhalis, 2012 :53).

The incorporation of information and communication technologies to the marketing tourism strategy is significant for further strengthening networks and alliances for the implementation of successful tourism development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT: THE CONTRIBUTION OF NETWORKS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ADVERTISING COMMUNICATION PROGRAMME AND AN E-MARKETING TOURISM STRATEGY

This conceptual paper argued for the significant role of networks for a successful e-marketing communication and advertising strategy. Rather than basing their relations on competition, the actors involved in the promotion of the distinct characteristics of a destination, can offer and enhance the whole created system.

Networks may include public and private alignments. National Tourist Organizations may unite and bring the private entrepreneurial activities together, 'extinguishing' the disagreements that may exist. Industry contribution may add to the marketing and advertising campaigns (Wight, 2013: 135) especially in periods of economic crisis as is nowadays where there is limited budget that a destination may have for its promotion.

Synergies and interdependence among those involved can reinforce relations and coordination of activities when all parts involved cooperate to promote a uniform and complete tourist experience.

To this end, the role of social media and information technology is of significance for destination marketing. Communication in marketing needs to be coordinated and networking among all important tourist stakeholders could facilitate the ultimate goal of providing a holistic and coherent message towards tourists.

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