

Importance of Destinations Branding- Case Study of Shkodra Region

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to understand the importance of branding destinations and the creation of a brand for Shkodra Region. The growth in demand for tourism makes tourist destinations develop and design brands in order to gain competitive advantage. Based on this, the study presents a process (previously tested by other countries) to understand and create tourist destinations brand of "Shkodra Region".

Maximum attention will be dedicated on the involvement of stakeholders in the process of creating the brand, their attitudes, experiences, perceptions and collaborations among them. Search contains primary and secondary data were used quantitative and qualitative methods, specifically descriptive and exploratory sketches. Shkodra Region is located in the north - west of Albania, is a destination that is known for its culture and natural resources.

Key words: Shkodra Region, brand creation, logo, slogan, collaboration of stakeholders.

1.LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Destinations

A destinations is a place which attracts visitors for a temporary stay to participate in the touristic activities or in the lack of

activities (Pike and Ryan, 2004). It could be a city, a village, a spot or a resort. It must include touristic products as supporting services and attractions, and also have the physical and administrative boundaries which imply its management, images, perceptions and define its competition in the market (Pike and Ryan, 2004). Buhalis (1999), state that a destination may be considered as the combination of a brand of all the products, services and experiences offered in a local level. Buhalis, (1999) have developed the frame “6 A” for the analysis of the touristic destinations:

- Attractions: natural, man-made, built, artificial, heritage, special events.
- Accessibility: the whole system of transport made by the roads, terminals and vehicles.
- Amenities: lodging and food facilities, rentals and other touristic services.
- Available Packages: Touristic packages established by a mediator.
- Activities: All the available activities that the customers could do during their visit.
- Ancillary Services: Services which could come handy to the tourists such as banking, telecommunication, post-office, news-agents, hospitals etc.

Mill and Morrison (1998) define the destinations as a part of a tourism system in this way: ‘A destination contains a mixture of coordinated elements. The elements coordinate in order to produce a pleasant period of vacation, and all of them have to be present. The destination consists of: Attractions, Facilities, Infrastructure, Transport and Hospitality. The do not concentrate only in the geographical boundaries of the destination, but in a mixture of elements in order to produce satisfactory experience for the visitors. (Framke, 2002) on the other hand, includes the issue of the geographical borders: “A touristic destination is defined as a geographical area which

offers the landscape and the cultural characteristics, and which is in the position to offer touristic products which imply a broader range of transport facilities, lodging and food, and at least one distinguished activity or experience” (Buhalis, 1999).

1.2. Marketing of the destinations

The marketing of destinations has been defined as: “The process of management through which the National Organization of Tourism and/or the touristic enterprises identify their tourists, be them selected, actual or potential, are able to interact with them to establish and influence their desires, needs, motives and preferences at a local, regional, national and international level by tailoring their touristic products to the function of the optimal achievement of the touristic satisfaction and fulfillment of the expectations” (Pike, 2004)

Because of the complexity of the relations among the local stakeholders, and the variety of the stakeholders involved in the development of the touristic products, destinations are one of the toughest subjects to be managed and sold (Buhalis, 1999). In many cases, destinations are represented by stakeholders whose business covers different components of the overall offer (Wang, 2007). In order to be competitive, there is a need for collaboration in the destination marketing. If it is carried out individually by different actors, the destination’s image will not be complete and the destination might not be successful in the long run (Wang, 2007). It must be inspired by a spirit of optimism for the impacts of tourism and the maximization of the profit for the entire region (Buhalis, 1999). Collaboration has been defined as “The process of sharing the decisions among stakeholders for a given territory and its future” (Wang, 2008). In the framework of the tourism industry, it could be the joint decision-making between the stakeholders of a destination and the other parties which might have an

interest in its development and tourism marketing (Wang, 2008).

Sheehan (2005) defines the word stakeholder as “a group or an individual which could be affected or has already been affected by the achievement of a corporate goal. The stakeholders stand for the local and national government, their agencies, the private sector, the environmental bodies, the chambers of commerce, the trade associations, the civil society groups, and the organizations of marketing of the local and regional destinations (Morgan, 2003).

Building of a destination brand is a long process which might take years to establish a brand image and awareness for the destination or the product. The branding process can encounter serious obstacles such as the political stakeholders whose agendas may provide only a short-term support.

Bornhorst (2009) brings the argument that the efficient management of relations is key to all the stakeholders who directly affect tourism in a given destination. Through research work with stakeholders, Sheehan (2005) found out that their most frequent problem was the financial threat followed by poor collaboration and communication, differences in opinion concerning the methods of promotion, and a lack of interest in understanding. The research also showed that it was particularly difficult to manage the stakeholders when there was poor communication, when the strategies of reactions of one or more stakeholders had changed, or when they had been expelled from the programs or decisions of the brand development.

Bornhorst's (2009) research concerning the success of destination tourism by the perspective of the stakeholders, revealed what the stakeholders consider as a success factor when it comes to the creation of a brand:

- 1) The relations between the suppliers (community support is recognized as the second important factor concerning the inner relations of the stakeholders)

- 2) Efficient management
- 3) Strategic planning
- 4) Being focused and having motivating objectives
- 5) The necessity to proper financing and staff

The local and regional activities must play a crucial role in the implementation of the state policies concerning tourism, regional marketing and destination branding, and consider the interests of the tourism business, the local community, the institutions of environment protection, the professional associations (syndicates), the local institutions of education and formation. We must stress that the target community is an important integral part of the destination system. It is fundamental to understand their evaluation, their behavior and attitude in order to achieve the coherent development of a destination. This derives from their participation and interaction within the area. The main issue is to bring together different interests (public, private, touristic etc) with the tourism products on one hand and the destination identity on the other in order to create an integrated system of the touristic offer.

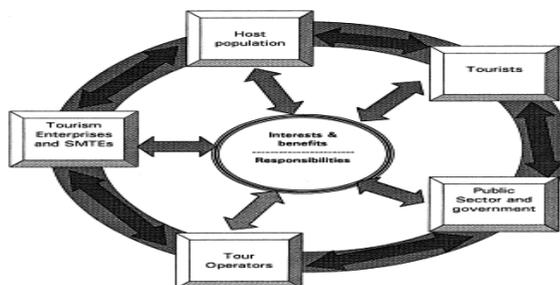


Figure 1: The dynamic map of the stakeholders of tourism. Source: Buhalis: 1999.

Marketing of a destination serves to satisfy the stakeholders of such destination given that they are ones who offer the touristic products and services and primary agencies of financing

including the governments and the local community of the destination. Buhalis, (1999) states “A perspective on marketing is basically a general orientation of the corporate management by reflecting the attitudes which, in the case of tourism and traveling, must balance the interests of the stakeholders long term interest owners of a destination, and in the same time meet the expectations of the customers”. This reflects the importance of the local sources as focal assets to the destinations and tourism suppliers, and their stability as a crucial factor in tourism marketing (Buhalis, 1999).

Therefore, the most important challenge to the destination marketing is to get the individual stakeholders to work together, rather than compete each-other, to develop a mixed and integrated marketing and a system of distribution (Buhalis, 1999). As the tourism industry is becoming more and more competitive and tourists are more and more aware on stable tourism, it is necessary for the persons in charge of marketing to address all the factors which might affect the destination (Buhalis, 1999).

Buhalis (1999) have suggested four strategic objectives in the destination marketing:

- Long-term development of the local community prosperity.
- Maximization of the customers` satisfaction
- Maximization of the profit of local enterprises and the multiple impact
- Optimizing the impacts of tourism by ensuring a stable equilibrium between the economical profit and the environmental and social/cultural costs.

The strategies must target the increase of the destination`s competitiveness. Buhalis, (1999) define competition as “An effort and achievement of long-term profit which stands above the average of the industry in which they operate” and “as an alternative to investment opportunities in other industries”.

The competitiveness of touristic destinations must also rely on the stability of the local resources to ensure the maintenance of long-term success as well as the increase of the sources used to satisfy the stakeholders (Buhalis, 1999).

2. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

2.1 Methodology

In the realization of this study we used two types of research: the primary and the secondary one. The secondary research has been realized through analyzing an extensive literature of destinations` marketing and the process destination brand creation. The primary research contains quality as well as quantity data. They have been realized through two methods: interviews and questionnaires. In-deep interviews have been realized with key persons of the organizations which have been selected, and who have the right information to answer our questions on the efforts being made to mark the destinations of the region of Shkoder. The questionnaire was served to the main and potential stakeholders such as: the public sector, the private sector, the local community, tourists, tour operators and NGO-s in order to include as many of them as possible. Around 61 questionnaires have been filled out in Shkoder and Tirana. The questionnaire has been drafted in Qualtrics , and sent out by e-mail. The report was also made using the program Qualtrics. It contains yes/no questions; multiple choice questions; importance ranked questions and open ones.

2.1.1.Hypothesis

1. Destinations branding is an added value and makes it known in the international arena
 - 1a. Involvement of stakeholders affects the destinations branding

2.2 The process of creating the brand of the destination

In this study we used the branding process used by public and private organizations for building the brand of Brazil. As it was considered very successful, we decided to implement it in the region of Shkoder. The stakeholders were involved in the branding process of “The Region of Shkoder”.

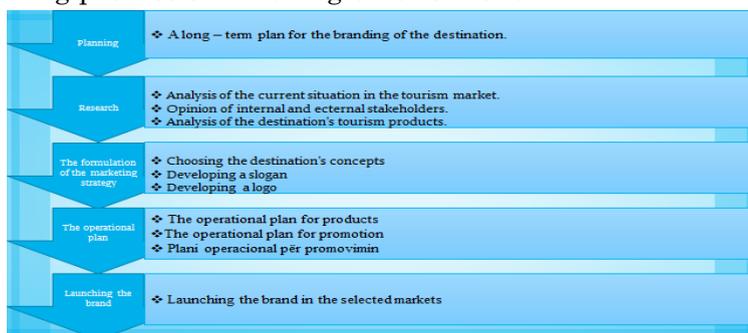


Figure 2. The process of creating the brand of a destination:. Source: Antonsen, 2010

2.2.1 Phase I and II: Planning and Research

In order to build the stable and acceptable brand, the process must start with planning and research. As far as the Region of Shkoder is concerned, we realized the study in which we have made two interviews with persons who know very well about the region`s destinations and branding.

2.2.1.1 Interview Analysis

From the interviews it resulted that there have been strategies of promotion the region of Shkoder. There have been several initiatives and practices such as the case of the program Art Gold by the UNDP or other bodies such as GIZ. Nevertheless, these initiatives remained at the “attempt” phase. The importance of branding for the regional image and identity is crucial. As far as a common slogan and logo are concerned, they are hard to be accepted and conceived by everyone. There are some territorial very successful small brands, but there is no such thing as an inclusive one for the whole region. The region

of Shkoder does not have a territorial logo or slogan, and a real study was never made on this issue. There have been attempts to territorial branding, but not in the touristic sense. Stakeholders have been included in the decision-making for purposes of promotion, but this was done in the small local level and not yet in the regional one. This is because we do not have a typical characteristic product protected to represent the region in the Balkan/European network. The slogan and the logo are extremely important in the region branding process and marketing. The creation of a specific slogan and logo is thus an imperative duty to promote and represent the region for purposes of tourism.

2.2.1.2 Analysis of the questionnaires

Demographic characteristics of the persons questioned

Around 77% of the participants in the study belong to the female gender while 23% to the male one. The great part of participants, 65% to be precise, are students who received the questionnaire by e-mail. 11% of the questioned persons are managers, and there is a 7% of teachers in Shkoder and Tirana. Another 17% of participants have other professions such as: businessmen, touristic agents, financials, economists, tourism consultants and engineers. The participants` level of education is high because 50% of them have post-university education and 48% have university education. This is a strong point of this study because it indicates high rates of availability credibility.

In these phases we could define exactly the elements, or better say the attractions of the region which could serve in in the process of tourism development. According to the participants in the survey, the Rozafa castle is the most important destination because it represents in the best way possible the city of Shkoder with its ancient history and culture. It is widely regarded as “the doorway” to the region. Thethi ranks in the second position because of its beautiful virgin

nature among the Alps. Afterwards there comes the lake of Shkoder as an excellent indicator of the biodiversity of the flora and fauna of the region.

Another entry is the assessment of the level of service and facilities. Seems that 70% of them needs improvement. This 70 % includes public services, public transport, public parks, local infrastructure, recreations and sports. 15 % classifies as insufficient and it includes: the possibility for parking (especially for the downtown because there is much more parking space available in the periphery) and the young people`s facilities who lack spaces to play out (in the city).

Concerning the importance of the activities which help the promotion of the region of Shkoder, the fairs of tourism and handy crafts were considered as the most important (70%) because they are organized a lot in the region. The cultural activities are also an important aspect because they enable all the stakeholders to participate in events with cultural themes in the region. The great number of the artistic shows at the theater "Migjeni"- Shkoder is considered as "the cradle of culture" – is the living proof of this. Exhibitions are another aspect which includes in the most part students who promote the region with their art, and the last but not the least, there are sports. There any many local sportsmen who are famous in the international arena and promote the region so well that make proud even those who don`t live in it.

2.2.2 Phase III: Drafting the marketing strategy

This phase has been created on the results of the analysis of phase II. Based on research, we chose the positioning. We chose the concept the destination brand wants to highlight and a slogan. Based on the destination identity, we also designed a logo.

The strategy of marketing was based on the creation of a global message for all the segments and it is represented by three elements:

- Concepts: the reasons and values which influence the decisions of the potential tourists to visit the destination.
- A permanent message: the slogan which encompasses all these reasons and values
- The identity of tourism as a brand and the recognition in the national and international market.

In the branding process of this touristic region, it was very important to include in the survey questions such as: “Is the region of Shkoder promoted properly?”. Around 80% responded that it is not promoted properly; 13% responded that yes and only 7% don't know.

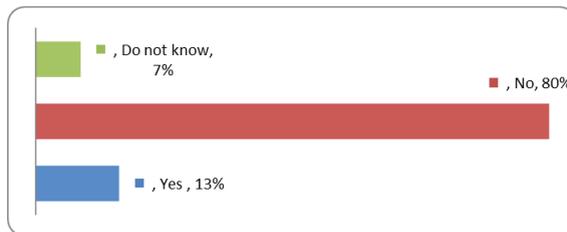


Chart 1: The proper promotion of the region of Shkoder

Another question asked whether there is an efficient branding for the touristic destinations of the region of Shkoder, and the responses suggested that there is not. There was some positive feedback to this question, but it related more to the local branding or specific products. This point was also very important because since there is no regional branding, we have the opportunity to promote it as the only regional brand of the Shkoder region in the market.

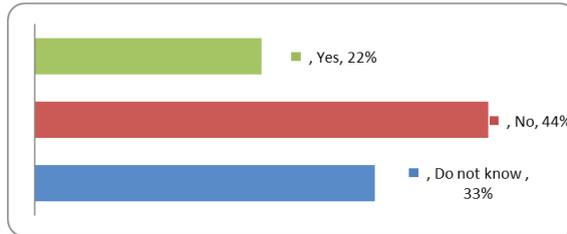


Chart 2: Efficient touristic destination brand of the region of Shkoder

During the research, the stakeholders shared their opinions on their image for the region of Shkoder. The results showed that their image is positive because the region offers everything one could ask for such as nature, culture, landscapes, hospitality, respect etc. We collected opinions on how important is for them the destination branding, and it resulted that it was very important. The question; “Could the destination branding be useful in the international context?” received various replies such as:

- It would enable the identification and increase the probability of receiving foreign visitors.
- It would strengthen and improve the image in the international market and draw in foreign tourists.
- It would increase the financial income and the living standard.
- It would inform the broad public which perhaps knows nothing but the name of the city.
- We need to be represented by an image in the eyes of the tourists.

The stakeholders were also asked what type of brand could the region have to be promoted in the national and international context, and we had various opinions such as; ‘Positive’; ‘inviting’; ‘a mystery to be discovered’; ‘a region of opportunities’; ‘white as a snow flower’ etc.

In order to choose the touristic logo and slogan of the region, it was important to include in the survey questions

which make branding easier i.e. the brand colors to identify the region of Shkoder. The dominant colors were green(54%), blue(44%) and white(26%).

In order to differentiate the destinations and the touristic products, we posed the question what do they consider as unique (attractive/authentic) in the region of Shkoder. The answers were various and some of them were: “the Museum Houses, the Characteristic Neighborhoods; the Intertwining between two religious faiths with churches and mosques; Art, the combination of river, lake and sea within a small space”.

Based on the conclusions achieved above, we decided on the slogan and the logo of the region. The slogan is:

“STAIRWAY TO EUROPE!”

We came up with the concept of the gate because the geographical position of the region, in the North-West of Albania is a physical border to Europe. First of all, it is geographically closer to most of the European countries and second, since the history of the region of Shkoder has been very tightly link and influenced by Europe, the Albanian integration in Europe would never be complete without the inclusion and the “blessing” of Shkoder. Third, the relief of Shkoder is very diverse. It starts with the sea shore and ends with mountain peaks of the Alps. This is a huge potential for tourism that not many countries have. This is also where the concept of the stairway which brings closer to Europe in each step stemmed from. The stairs have a metaphorical meaning which implies the difficulty of climbing them up. The ascend up these stairs wouldn't be possible without including the beautiful, rare and yet underdeveloped region of Shkoder.

We realized a total of 9 logos which, in order to receive the confirmation of the stakeholders, were e-mailed to several reputable professionals to give their opinions. After we received

a great deal of quality feedback we chose the logo below to represent the region of Shkoder.



The chosen logo is suitable and represents very well the region of Shkoder because Hortencia is a beautiful flower of perfect shapes. The logo represents life, vividness, culture, nature, light, infinity, green, fluidity (of water and life) and the region's destination. The region of Shkoder must be positioned between nature and culture. The idea for the Hortnecia flower (snow flower) has been taken by the replies of the people questioned in the survey.

The chosen concepts for the destinations according to the desired positions of the potential stakeholders are:

- Nature – biodiversity, landscape, mountains, hills, rivers, lake, caves, woods, flowers, animals, wild life, climate, water, air, land, agriculture.
- Culture – historical heritage, traditional art (art craft products), traditional lifestyle, values and behavior of the local population, language, religions, feeling, hospitality, safety, faith, humor.

2.2.3. Phase IV and V: The operational plan and launching of the brand

The operational plan is divided in two parts:

- The operational plan for touristic products which describes the products to be promoted.

- The operational plan for the policies of promotion which will be followed and which concern different segments of the market. (Antonsen, 2010)

The operational plan for touristic products:

The touristic products to be promoted are ecotourism, sun & beach, culture, sports, business and events.

The operational plan for the promoting policies:

Segmenting of the market is made in two ways: Segmenting based on the used information and segmenting based on the status. The information-based segmenting consists in: geographical distribution, age, family status, income, needs, duration of stay and travel budgeting. The status-based segmenting consists in: the local community, retired people, families, newly married couples, school expedition's students, conferences and international visitors.

Segmenting of the market has been made on the basis of actual and potential tourists.

Through the operational plan for the promoting strategies, we want to empower the tourists and the agencies.

For the visitors and tourists, the channels of distribution are the tour operators and the touristic agencies with their advertising campaigns, events, direct marketing (newspapers), public relations and internet. Events are organized for the agencies in touristic destinations of the region as well as advertising campaigns in the social media, direct marketing, public relations and internet. The information and communication methods for the branding process function through e-mail accounts, Facebook pages, Twitter and Instagram.

The involvement of the stakeholders in the initial phases of the study has consisted in gathering their opinions and decisions for the creation of the brand. As a part of marketing, now there is also the collaboration with stakeholders . In other

words, the stakeholders are actively involved in the promotion process.

Now that the brand, the segmenting and the promotion methods have been set, everything is ready to be sold to the tour operators and be launched through an advertising campaign.

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that the region of Shkoder does not have a specific brand of tourism. It has only small local brands for specific destinations or products. The involved stakeholders had a high level of education. The stakeholder group which participated most actively was the public sector.

The results of the survey indicated that the attractions which could contribute to the development of tourism in Shkoder are: the castle of Rozafa, Theth and the Lake of Shkoder. The most important activities which contribute to the promotion of the region of Shkoder resulted to be the handicraft fairs and the cultural activities.

From the results we understood that the region of Shkoder is not properly promoted and that an efficient brand of regional tourism is lacking. The image that the key stakeholders have for the region of Shkoder is positive because it leaves a positive impression at every visitor, investor or community member.

The regional branding importance was considered as high because it would contribute to the identification and would increase the probability of being visited by foreign tourists. It is necessary to strengthen and improve our image in the international arena because this way we would attract more tourists and increase the living standard.

The colors which would better identify the region in terms of national and international branding are the green, the blue and the white.

The best brand seems to be something what unifies the whole region by including: the mountain, the sea, the city, the rivers, the culture and characteristic flowers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

- Educate the stakeholders for a stable development of tourism. This implies a continuous communication with the stakeholders
- To influence the media to speak positively for the Region of Shkoder in: movies, TV, books, touristic newspapers, touristic website etc.
- The innovation through technology which could transmit everything beautiful that the region has to offer.
- To make as many efforts for marketing as possible in the internet. Updated and coherent information must be published in the social media. The tourists themselves could post pictures or videos of their experience in the region.
- To stimulate the circulation of information through “gossiping” as one of the most efficient ways to increase the number of visitors in the region of Shkoder.
- The local community must interact in closer terms with the tourists by showing them our traditions, teaching them some utility word in Albanian; introduce them to the traditional gastronomy of the region etc. In short, give the tourists a whole load of reasons to fall in love with the place and come back next time.
- To promote the region in different ways in the national as well as international market through: internet pages, advertisements, personal sales, promotion of the public relations etc.
- To appeal to the awareness of the visitors for the environmental issue by preserving the natural habitat, by exploring alternative sources of energy, by managing the wastes and by encouraging the recycling initiatives.

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