
CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF ROMANIA'S TOURISM BRAND

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Abstract

Given the fact that until 2010 Romania didn't have a national tourism brand that followed a long-term plan, it is important that the current program, developed under the slogan “explore the Carpathian garden”, to succeed in creating and maintaining a coherent and positive image of the country as a unique tourism destination, based on its competitive advantages. The sustainable development of the national tourism brand of Romania aims at creating a long-term program, during which Romania's tourism brand is desired to evolve and not be subjected to major changes. This way, Romania could have the capacity to stand out and differentiate among the competitors in the region and in Europe and to maintain an attractive image among Romanian and foreign tourists. In this context, the main objective of this article is to present the methodology, main results and conclusions of a qualitative research that was conducted among various specialists in the tourism field in order to support the sustainable development of Romania's tourism brand. The information presented in this paper emphasizes that the objectives pursued so far were not completely fulfilled and for the future it is important to take new measures in order to improve the evolution of Romania's tourism brand.

Keywords

Tourism brand, national tourism brand, tourism destination, destination brand, tourism destination branding, tourism marketing.

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M31

Introduction

In 2010 the Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism launched a new national tourism brand under the slogan “explore the Carpathian garden”. Until then almost all the promotional actions regarding the national tourism brand of Romania had a

relatively punctual character and did not followed a long-term plan. Thus, the objective of the new program was to create a long-term positive image of Romania's tourism brand by increasing its attractiveness at a global scale. In order to achieve that objective, many researches were conducted and contributed to the establishment of promotional strategies and marketing communication actions meant to improve Romania's image among both Romanian and foreign tourists.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to offer a perspective over the national tourism brand's capacity to achieve the objectives that it pursued so far and to offer some contributions to its future development. First, the paper presents a short literature review regarding the particularities of tourism destinations and it emphasizes the meaning and main features of this concept. Further, the paper focuses on the concept of national tourism brand and it presents the development and the characteristics of Romania's tourism brand. The next part of the paper is dedicated to the presentation of a qualitative research that aimed at analyzing the opinions expressed by various specialists in the tourism field, such as employees of various public institutions involved in the development of national tourism brand, managers of travel agencies, university professors and passionate travel bloggers, regarding Romania's tourism brand. The research results, presented in the final part of this paper, can offer some directions for the future sustainable development of Romania's tourism brand.

Tourism brand – the tourism destination's mark

Defined as “the place or the geographical area where a visitor or a tourist stops for either overnight stays or for a period of time, or as the terminus point of a tourists' journey” (Stăncioiu, 2004, p. 67), the *tourism destination* can be a country, a city, an area or “a wider region that includes territories of several countries, a province or other administrative entity” (Băltescu, 2010, p. 113). At the same time, not every city or region can be considered a travel destination. A given area must meet certain conditions in order to be considered a tourism destination, including “to have an adequate touristic potential and to meet, at the same time, other infrastructure, complementary goods and services related requirements which may increase its attractiveness” (Stăncioiu, 2004, p. 67).

Likewise, a destination not only refers to the geographical area but it also has a socio-cultural intangible component, comprising all the inhabitants of that area, with traditions, customs, culture etc. and it also represents “the image created in the minds of potential consumers about the tourism product” (Stăncioiu, 2004, p. 68). All these elements are also the factors by which the uniqueness of the tourism destination is assessed (Beunders in Băltescu, 2010, p. 113).

From the promotional perspective, destinations have a life cycle similar to tourism products, and destination marketing aims at creating and maintaining the interest and popularity of the destination in the minds of consumers. These actions are based on the *destination image* which “represents all the information and impressions communicated to potential consumers about population, infrastructure, climate and environment, history, attractions, personal safety etc” (Echtner and Brent in Stăncioiu, 2004, p. 71). Moreover, the concept of tourism image is complementary to the positioning concept, and in terms of tourism marketing by positioning we understand the efforts for customizing a country's image in the spirit of potential travellers. Also “it consists of correlating the image that a tourist has made about a country and the unique and original realities of that country” (OMT, 1979 in Gherasim and Gherasim, 1999, p. 43).

Therefore, the *destination brand* is defined as “a name, a symbol, a logo, a keyword or any graphic sign that identifies and therewith differentiates a destination; furthermore, it expresses the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; [the brand] serves to reinforce the emotional connection between visitor and destination” (Ritchie and Ritchie, 2008 in Stăncioiu et al., 2011, p. 140). Similarly, Leisen (2001 in Marzano and Scott, 2009, p. 248) sees the destination brand as a powerful tool that has the ability to appeal to the emotional, and he considers that the brand image plays a crucial role in the success of the marketing program for a certain tourism destination.

Seen from both the perspective of visitors and the natives’ perspective, the destination brand refers to the personality of that place, to the emotional relationship between the destination and visitors (Handbook on Tourism Destinations Branding, 2009 in Briciu, 2013, p. 11), but the values perceived by consumers should also be acknowledged by locals. Ideally, these two perspectives – the visitors’ and the locals’ – complete one another (Handbook on Tourism Destinations Branding, 2009 in Briciu, 2013, p. 8). Therefore, the destination branding is a powerful marketing tool (Morgan et al., 2004 in Park and Petrick, 2006, p. 262) which guarantees the quality of the experience, reduces the costs of finding the destination and simultaneously provides a way for destinations to establish a unique offering (Blain et al., 2005 in Garcia, Gomez and Molina, 2012, p. 647).

In conclusion, a destination is a complex concept because it is a sum of tangible and intangible elements at the same time. The destination can be a tourism product or an aggregate of tourism products, and one of the elements that makes it unique consists of all the services that differentiate it (Nedelea et al., 2014, p. 105).

Romania’s tourism brand

The project that regarded the creation and implementation of a national tourism brand started in 2007, the date on which Romania became a EU member and in order to develop this new program received European funds worth 75 million euro for the period 2007-2013 (MRDT, 2012). The project aimed at creating a positive image of Romania as a tourism destination by defining and promoting the national tourism brand. Since 2010, Romania has begun to promote itself as a tourism destination under the current visual identity (fig. no. 1) and under the slogan “explore the Carpathian garden”.



Figure no. 1: Romania’s tourism brand logo

Source: MRDT, 2010

The second step in the process of creating and promoting the national tourism brand was represented by the implementation of the Strategic and Operational Tourism Marketing Plan of Romania for the period 2011-2015. The campaigns developed by The Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism in order to promote the national tourism brand of

Romania aimed at building a positive image of the country as a tourism destination, both internally and externally, presenting its competitive advantages and also aimed at strengthening the brand image so that Romania could stand out among all other competitors in the region and in Europe. Based on a series of researches that emphasized the main attributes and benefits that Romania offers, it has been created a brand identity and personality that reflects both Romania’s image abroad and Romanians points of view, including tourists and specialists working in the field of tourism. A total of six key tourism products were identified among which there are: rural tourism, wildlife and natural parks, health and wellness, active and adventure tourism, circuits and city breaks (MDRT, 2010, p. 9). The main competitive advantages that our country possesses are: the intact nature in many areas, the specific quiet rural lifestyle, the many medieval towns and the Latin-Byzantine cultural legacy, reflected especially through the monasteries paintings. The complete list of objectives pursued by this program, set for completion by the end of 2020, is presented in table no. 1 (MDRT, 2010, p. 27).

Table no. 1. Romania’s tourism brand objectives

Information	Raise awareness	Internal: Increase from 40% to 75% the number of Romanians that are aware of most of the sights in Romania. External: Double from 30% to 60% the number of people who can think of something unique about Romania.
	Improve understanding	External: Double from 27% to 50% the number of people who can name one of Romania’s unique features (especially focusing on culture and nature).
Motivation	Improve image	Internal: Increase from 26% to 45% the proportion of Romanians that prefer spending their holidays in Romania rather than abroad. External: Increase from 45% to 65% the proportion of international tourists who have a positive image about Romania.
	Explain the attributes and benefits	External: Double from 26% to 50% the number of people that spontaneously mention positive associations about Romania rather than negative associations.
	Create preference	Internal: Increase from 26% to 50% the number of tourists who prefer Romania to other destinations. External: With reference to the six key products, Romania will be perceived as more attractive than all its competitors.
Action	Increase sales	Internal: Increase by 50% the number of Romanian travel agencies that are selling destinations in Romania. External: Increase by 25% the number of tour operators that are selling destinations in Romania.
	Stimulate repetition	External: Increase from 56% to 75% the proportion of visitors who will return to Romania.
	Stimulate recommendation	Internal: Increase the proportion of Romanians who recommended the country as a destination to other tourists. External: Increase from 50% to 70% the proportion of international visitors’ recommendations.

Source: MRDT, 2011

In order to become an attractive destination at an international level, the Master Plan for national tourism development (2007-2026) envisions a series of concrete actions implemented both internally and externally until the end of 2026. As mentioned in the Master Plan, “the development of tourism does not happen automatically, as it is related to image and reputation. Successful and sustainable tourism requires both cooperation between all responsible entities and the formation of partnerships between the public sector, which should support tourism, and the private sector, which should provide facilities and services for different markets and market segments. Without understanding the objectives and issues at a mutual level, it will not be possible to develop touristic actions in a satisfactory and beneficial way.” (MRDT, 2007, p. 85).

Research methodology

Referring to Romania as a tourism destination with a huge potential, a qualitative research was conducted, aiming at exploring the experts’ opinions in the field of tourism about the current tourism brand of Romania, as promoted under the slogan “explore the Carpathian Garden”.

The objectives were to find out, in a first phase, the experts’ opinion on the importance and, generally, the role played by the tourism brand of a country, then in the second phase, about how the programs meant to promote the national tourism brand can influence the perceptions of tourists, and in the last phase, to carry out a SWOT analysis of the promotional program for Romania’s tourism brand. In the selection of participating experts, we aimed at achieving a diversified segment of experienced people in this field (employees of various public institutions involved in the development of national tourism brand, managers of travel agencies, university professors, passionate travel bloggers etc.). Therefore, the group of experts participating in this research was composed of eight individuals with positions in various branches of tourism in Romania.

Data collection for this research was performed by using the structured individual interview, which was chosen given that this type of interview allows to obtain factual information from specialists in the field.

The research was conducted between April 5th to May 10th 2016. The interview guide consisted of 10 open questions, ranked by research objectives.

Analysis and interpretation of research results

The first objective of the research sought to *determine the experts’ point of view on the role played by a country’s tourism brand*. The answers given highlighted that the role of a country’s tourism brand is very important, and its designing and developing presents significant implications at both touristic and macroeconomic levels of a country.

Creation, development and support of a tourism brand has strong connections with both a country’s identity and positioning which it can pursue, but also with the image that it projects in the mind of tourists or of potential tourists. Creating a tourism brand of a country should focus on highlighting the identity of that country and on exploiting its tourism potential. The role of a country’s tourism brand must also be interconnected with the positioning that is intended to be obtained, and also with the image that is supposed to be created in the minds of tourists, creating associations of trust and security to that country. All efforts to develop a country’s tourism brand should aim to attract flows of tourists, which is reflected in benefits to both the tourism sector and the macroeconomic sector of a country.

The second objective of the research aimed at *knowing the opinions regarding the ability of the national tourism brand promotional programs to influence the perceptions of tourists/potential tourists*. The opinions expressed by experts have shown that the national tourism brand promotional programs is significantly influencing the perceptions of tourists, but their ability to influence must be supported by continued efforts of promotion and communication to the target group. These programs can pursue the objectives of tourist information, and also objectives which involve the modification of certain perceptions and associations created in relation to a country.

The third objective of the research aimed at *knowing the experts' opinion regarding the Romania's tourism brand promotional program, "Explore the Carpathian Garden"*. It was analyzed by three discussion topics.

The first topic of discussion aimed at *identifying the experts' opinion regarding the promotion achieved so far for Romania's tourism brand*. According to the expressed opinions, although the efforts made so far have succeeded to bring certain developments regarding Romania's positioning, they were however insufficient, especially in terms of financial investments, and not all opportunities were fully exploited.

The second topic of discussion sought to *assess the efforts to promote the national tourism brand communication programs to the internal target audience*. The interviewed experts expressed an unanimous opinion that these programs were not sufficiently promoted so as to fulfill their aimed objectives, the main problem being the lack of complex and diversified communication operations, especially for the internal target audience.

The third topic of discussion sought to *assess Romania's ability to position as an attractive tourism destination generated by the promotion programs of the current national tourism brand*. In this case, the experts' opinions are divided between those who believe that the efforts are positive, but they cannot be considered as sufficient for better positioning of Romania, and those who think that the efforts were not enough.

The fourth objective of the research aimed at *identifying the strengths of Romania's national tourism brand*. The main strengths highlighted were represented by the fact that the communication programs of national tourism brand identified and promoted forms of niche tourism that Romania can support successfully, and it also promotes natural tourism resources, anthropogenic, and tourist destinations unique and representative for Romania (promoting the mountain area, with all of its attractions, with all forms of tourism that we find in this area; promoting activities taking place rather in the summertime - hiking, adventure, sports, exploration, circuits etc., promoting hospitable people, traditions and customs).

The fifth objective of the research aimed at *identifying the weaknesses in Romania's national tourism brand*. In this case, the main weaknesses derive from non-inclusion of important destinations or forms of tourism that could have highlighted Romania's tourism potential in the program of the national tourism brand of Romania, the fact that the programs were not sufficiently promoted, but also that this program has been associated with several scandals, the most important being related to plagiarizing the logo.

The sixth objective of the research aimed at *identifying untapped opportunities of the promotional campaigns of Romania's national tourism brand*. The mentioned untapped opportunities are either related to some tourism destinations in Romania that have not been highlighted by the program, or to some forms of tourism that have a high potential (such as balneotherapy and medical tourism and wellness tourism).

The seventh objective of the research aimed at *identifying the threats in terms of the image promoted by Romania's national tourism brand*. A category of identified threats may result from the fact that the national tourism brand seeks to project a certain image of Romania, which may not be shaped properly and can set high expectations which after the direct experiences of tourists will not be met.

The eighth objective of the research aimed at *identifying the most appropriate means of communication and promotion of Romania's national tourism brand*. In this case the experts' opinions expressed the fact that both traditional and alternative means of communication can prove their effectiveness, and also the current ones which are implemented in the online environment, the key of success being the permanent adaptation to the specific target audience concerned.

The presence and promotion through as many means cannot guarantee, however, the success in attracting a large number of tourists, so the experts stressed that the programs should be built on the basis of strategies, of holistic approaches that would highlight the specificity of the national tourism brand, being able to transmit it to the target audience in a manner as easy as possible.

Another important element related to the programs promoting the national tourism brand is the fact that communication actions should aim at strengthening an accurate image of the country, and in this sense not only appealing to the classical or modern media can be useful, but also to direct promotion through freely expressed opinions of tourists.

Conclusions

After analyzing the feedback from the experts participating in this research, a number of important conclusions can be drawn. The opinions expressed in the interviews reveal unanimously the importance of creation, development and management of a country's tourism brand. The benefits of designing such a brand are reflected both in the tourism industry, in particular, and also at the macroeconomic level, in general. Creating a flow of tourists toward a certain destination undeniably contributes to the development of that area, both economically and socially, because they generate additional income and stimulate the investments.

Regarding the development of a tourism national brand, the experts noted that it must interconnect a number of key concepts, starting from the identity of Romania and continuing with the pursued positioning, the image that is intended to be projected and the trust it needs to gain among potential or actual tourists. Thus the design of some such programs in support of the national tourism brand should be able to outline a clear and distinct image in the minds of tourists and create a sense of trust and security. The capacity of development programs for the national tourism brand to influence the perceptions of tourists or potential tourists is very high, but it must be supported by communication and promotion actions addressed to the appropriate target group.

The national tourism brand programs developed so far have managed to some extent to create a distinct positioning of Romania, but the efforts are not enough, especially in terms of the financial investment made and in terms of fully exploiting all existing opportunities.

The main advantages provided by the current promotion program of the national tourism brand derives from the operation and highlighting of natural and anthropogenic tourism resources possessed by our country and the promotion of specific forms of niche tourism, which is addressed to a well identified audience. However, important destinations or forms of tourism that could have highlight the tourism potential of Romania were not included in

the current promotion program, which could provide opportunities for the future tourism development of Romania. But the exploitation of any opportunities should be made based on complex studies and analyses and based on a carefully constructed strategy in this regard.

In terms of selecting the most appropriate means of communication and promotion of Romania's national tourism brand so that the message easily reaches the desired target audience, the options are of the most diversified. Either opting for the traditional means of communication (TV, radio etc.), or for the online ones, the essential fact remains that they must aim at well-defined objectives and must be adapted to the specific target audience and should generate measurable results.

The main limit of this research derives from the small number of specialists interviewed, so that the opinions expressed in this research are not sufficient in order to provide a significant contribution to the sustainable development of Romania's tourism brand. Future researches should be carried out periodically on a greater number of specialists in order to observe the long-term evolution of the implementation process and to determine the level of objectives fulfillment.

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