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McCamley, Claire, Gilmore, Audrey and McCartan-Quinn, Danielle

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### Original Citation

McCamley, Claire, Gilmore, Audrey and McCartan-Quinn, Danielle (2011) An investigation of Stakeholder Relationships in the Marketing of Tourism within Northern Ireland. In: Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Conference 2011: Marketing Fields Forever. Academy of Marketing. ISBN 978-0-9561122-34

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# **An investigation of Stakeholder Relationships in the Marketing of Tourism within Northern Ireland**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is a high growth industry and there is increasing recognition that it must be managed and governed in a sustainable manner (Jamal and Getz 1995; Sautter and Leisen 1999; Gilmore and Simmons 2007; Gilmore et al. 2008). Tourism planners and managers operate at national, regional and local levels, and interaction is required at inter and intra sectoral level (Sautter and Leisen 1999; Wilson, Nielsen and Buultjens 2009). Tourism has some unique and individual characteristics which result in the need for a unique form of management, such as

- Fragmentation of industry and infrastructure
- Involvement of both public and private sector companies
- Many companies are small – medium sized enterprises
- Includes a variety of services and products (Gilmore 2003).

The specific Northern Ireland context adds a further dimension in that the region is emerging from a sustained period of political instability. Political instability can have a negative impact on tourism (Altinay et al 2002; Gilmore et al 2008), and as such tourism is a relatively new focus on the Northern Ireland agenda. Within the tourism industry there is much focus on interactions and relationships as a result of conflicting directions among stakeholders (Sautter and Leisen 1999; Sheehan, Ritchie and Hudson 2007; Wilson, Nielsen and Buultjens 2009). Quite often there may be disagreement as to which stakeholder view should be prominent, and as to what objectives should be met. This results in a fragmented and disjointed approach to tourism management. Tourism planners and managers acknowledge that this fragmentation can negatively impact upon levels of coordination and cohesion within the tourism industry which consequently weakens the overall value of the tourism offering (Jamal and Getz 1995; Sheehan, Ritchie and Hudson 2007; Wilson, Nielsen and Buultjens 2009).

## **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MARKETING**

According to the World Tourism Organisation's conceptual definition (2004), "sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability". In terms of marketing management, an approach which takes account of each of these aspects in a holistic and integrative manner is required in order to achieve sustainable tourism. There are difficulties associated with this approach not least in managing it within the context of the complex characteristics of the tourism industry.

Stakeholder engagement is recognised as a key process in achieving sustainable tourism. *"Organisations of all kinds are realising that making significant steps towards achieving the objectives of sustainable development requires the adoption of an integrated, 'stakeholder' approach to policy-making,"* (Fyall and Garrod 2005 p.16). Stakeholders must be identified and their needs understood.

## **STAKEHOLDER THEORY**

Freeman (1984, p.49) defines a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives." This theory suggests that the success of an organisation (or industry) may be dependent on the level to which the

organisation addresses the needs of stakeholder interests. Therefore effective stakeholder management, in the sense that the industry actively attempts to address and satisfy stakeholder objectives can potentially contribute to a competitive advantage for that area. Furthermore, efficient and effective management of stakeholder relations can potentially help to strengthen the tourism offering.

Freeman's definition implies that the success or otherwise of an organisation (or in this case industry) can have implications for associated stakeholders (Sautter and Leisen 1999; Hardy and Beeton 2001; Byrd and Gustke 2006). In this respect, some stakeholders may be positively affected if industry achieves its objectives, and consequently some stakeholders may be negatively impacted upon by the achievement of objectives, depending on respective interests. This point can be illustrated by considering, for example, the interests of environmentally focused stakeholders against stakeholders who welcome business development and an increase in tourist numbers. As there are multiple stakeholders in tourism, stemming from all areas of society, there are a great many interests, all varied and perhaps conflicting.

The classical idea of stakeholder management is that the central agency considers the interest of the stakeholders and develops policies and practices based on the stakeholders' power and influence (Reed 1997; Byrd and Gustke 2007). Those with more power would be given more consideration than those with less. In this instance some stakeholder interests would be met while others would be negatively impacted upon, thereby creating conflict within the industry.

In order for a shared vision to emerge, multiple stakeholder engagement is required in the tourism planning process, including "residents, public authorities and business interests" (Yuskel et al 1998, p.351). However, there may be an element of bias in terms of what groups emerge as representative of stakeholders and indeed, the process of engaging stakeholders in order to identify interests (Byrd and Gustke 2007). In this respect, the difficulties in managing exchanges between stakeholders and ultimately achieving a holistic and balanced marketing approach, become evident. There is a three tiered process which can be adapted in order to ensure effective stakeholder management, including identification of stakeholders, management of stakeholders and managing interactions between stakeholders. This process leads to the following questions:

- a. Who are the stakeholders?
- b. What are their perceived interests?
- c. What processes are in place to actively manage stakeholder interests?
- d. How are stakeholder interests balanced to ensure wide participation and consensus building?
- e. What is the level of engagement of stakeholders in tourism development?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology in this study is based on the need to gain in-depth, qualitative insights into the process of tourism management from the perspectives of various stakeholders involved in the tourism industry. In order to achieve these qualitative insights, the research will include content analysis and in-depth interviews. Within this industry 3 key plans (2 masterplans and 1 strategic plan) have been commissioned over the past 10 years. Stage 1 of research will review these plans to provide a background understanding of the nature and scope of stakeholder involvement in tourism development, and will analyse the documents in relation to the questions above. The second stage of research will use in depth interviews, chosen as they "*allow for a richer and more nuanced account of stakeholder opinions, attitudes and*

*experiences,*” (Wilson, Nielsen & Buultjens 2009 p.274). The research will meet the following objectives:

1. To investigate relationships between stakeholders (both public and private sector) operating within the tourism industry in Northern Ireland by
  - a. carrying out content analysis of key plans relating to two heritage sites in Northern Ireland (2 masterplans and 1 strategic plan)
  - b. carrying out in depth interviews with key stakeholders
2. To evaluate stakeholder relations according to conceptual frameworks developed from the literature review.

The overall aim of the research will be to develop a model of collaboration on which stakeholder interactions can be based which will serve to improve stakeholder management and consequently contribute to improving the overall tourism offering.

## **INITIAL FINDINGS**

To date research has been carried out in the form of content analysis of 3 key documents relating to the Northern Ireland tourism industry, one an overall draft strategy and two others relating to two heritage sites. Key issues identified so far are:

- There is a lack of clear frameworks with which to identify stakeholders and consequently to manage stakeholder views in a balanced manner
  - There is evidence of a “central agency” approach whereby policies and practices are developed based on stakeholder power and influence.
- The regions in which the heritage sites are located have a high level of SME involvement. Many of these SMEs lack expertise, have limited resources, and lack involvement in wider industry networks and planning. The consultation methods used by the public sector for the regional tourism plans would appear to be unsuitable for SMEs.
- Stakeholders are divided into three groups with Government and Local Authorities forming two groups and ‘everyone else’ coming under the third group
  - Within this third group stakeholders will have varying expectations, orientations and indeed different capacity with which to express views. Furthermore, within this group, individual types will have varying levels of power, thereby influencing the level of equality coming through. This raises the questions are all stakeholder voices equal and how is this managed? Putting such a wide variety of organisations and individuals in one group would imply bias towards public sector.
- There would appear to be an over emphasis on environmental protection, at the expense of economic development and uncoordinated objectives (possibly due to stakeholder engagement process) within the tourism plans.
- Overall, while the concept of stakeholders is acknowledged in strategy, there is limited attention paid to the process of stakeholder identification, management process or level of engagement.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research is still at an early stage. A full content analysis of the industry documents relating to tourism development in Northern Ireland is in process. Key stakeholders have been identified and in-depth interviews are being organised. Currently a number of key figures within the industry have already agreed to be interviewed and they will provide important contacts during the research process.

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