Effective Destination Promotion in Rural Communities: Management and Marketing Approaches

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The highly competitive and growing tourism industry necessitates both effective destination management and marketing approaches (Ozdemir & Faruk Simsek, 2014) to reach consumers and draw visitors. This is a competitive and complex issue (Wang, 2011) and often requires a collective effort by interdependent agencies in rural communities, which, can be challenging for a myriad of reasons. In this study, the management and marketing approaches of interdependent agencies entering a formal marketing alliance (Wang & Ziang, 2007) and subsequent use of intentional and collective destination branding (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011) are analyzed while considering tourists' consumption values (e.g., utilitarianism and hedonism [Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994]) and their travel and visit intentions (Park & Yoon, 2009) as approaches to effective destination marketing of a rural community.

Design/methodology/approach

The researchers conducted a qualitative study through a semi-structured interview of eight questions. Those eight questions were first examined for relevance by asking the experts of the local economy in small towns (e.g., economics and tourism faculty) and included economic development, investment in destination promotion, small-town images, visitor economy, stakeholder's responsibility in economic development, and so forth. To recruit participants, researchers first emailed selected rural community boards to ask their agreement for participation. Then, researchers identified thirty-seven key stakeholders of local communities and small towns located in in the Midwest US. Interviews lasted between one and three hours. Stakeholder groups included government personnel, elected officials, business owners, employees and representatives from relevant rural community boards. To capture the primary themes in the interviews, researchers used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Intercoder reliability checks were conducted in line with Tinsley & Weiss (1975).

Findings

The results of the study highlighted some conflict between the interdependent agencies in rural communities that stems from their different conceptions of destination branding (e.g., weight on localized or globalized concept-based branding), the consumption value of visitors (e.g., value related to business facilities, entertainment, or other) marketing approaches (e.g., promoting leisure travel, business travel, as a sports destination, or other), and destination management (e.g. investing in entertainment facilities, sports facilities, expanding convention centers, or other). However, results also indicated that key stakeholders recognize the increasing value of the visitor economy (e.g. an increase in visitor's means an increase in real traveler spending in the local community), acknowledge it warrants investment in the collective promotion of the destination (e.g. developing a brand strategy at the community level), and would be more effective through the consistent use of a singular brand identity (e.g. developing and consistently using a community brand in promotional materials, on websites, etc.). Thus, ultimately attracting more visitors and fueling development (e.g. new restaurants and retail stores, and new or improved local facilities and amenities) across the entire economic spectrum of the rural community. To potentially move past the conflicts between the interdependent agencies operating independently and toward a new approach, the researchers propose a formalized alliance. This new approach may include a new legal structure with a governing board comprised of two members from each interdependent agency, formalized sharing of staff (e.g. human resources, accountancy, marketing, etc.), and cost sharing (e.g. personnel, advertising and promotion, etc.), collective tiered membership (e.g. as a source of revenue), among others. The proposed approach may serve as a framework to help communities manage costs, maximize resources, and attract more visitors through unified marketing approaches and destination management. Creating a marketing alliance to collectivize the different interests may also help sharpen focus on how to balance the value between the utilitarian and hedonic motivations driving consumer behavior toward and within the rural community. While generally associated with consumer buying behavior, hedonic and utilitarian motivations can be linked to travel experience and visit intention (e.g. pressure-oriented travel as a form of local-specific events vs. cost-effective travel). As this should be at the forefront of decision-making when managing and marketing the destination, a formalized structure may help foster needed critical thinking and conversations around the topic, and strategic use of funds.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners:

Previously, the literature did not shed light on linkages between interdependent agencies entering a formal marketing alliance (Wang & Ziang, 2007) and connections to effective destination branding (Qu, et al, 2011) while also considering the consumption value of tourists (e.g., utilitarianism and hedonism [Babin, et al, 1994]) and their travel experience and visit intention (Park & Yoon, 2009). The researcher's findings may therefore garner the attention of tourism marketing researchers and educators. For tourism marketing researchers, this study showed that the management and marketing practices in rural communities may have significant implications for destination promotion and establish a framework for further study. While practitioners may find relevance of the proposed approach as a marketing alliance in rural communities that was presented as a way to effectively manage and market a destination.

Originality/Value:

When considering travel and visit intention, consumers balance utilitarian factors with the desire to satisfy hedonic needs, such as affect, entertainment and/or social interaction (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). The perception of how a consumer views a destination in terms of hedonic need satisfaction may influence how they view the destination as a brand, where a consumer travels, how they travel, and what experiences they book or plan. How consumers view a destination and the brand associations of a destination influence their evaluations toward the brand, brand choice (e.g. intentions to travel, visit, book or purchase), and conjure attitudes and assimilations of benefits and attributes of the brand (Keller, 1993). Together, an image of place is formed, which is an important asset, starting point of tourist expectations, and eventual

determinant of tourist behaviors (Ryan & Gu, 2008; Qu, et. al, 2011). Ultimately, how the consumer views the destination is influenced by the marketing and management approaches of the interdependent agencies and how collectively effective they are at addressing the consumption values of tourists and promoting the destination accordingly.

Track: Hospitality and Tourism

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