

THE PROFILE OF THE TOURISM INFORMATION CENTER OFFICER IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Local destinations incorporate various stakeholders, often including a host community, and can form a network with other destinations to shape larger destinations. To attract tourists, destinations must consider the travel basic costs, convenience, and timelines. Like other consumers, tourists weigh costs against the benefits of specific destinations and investment of time, effort, and resources against a reasonable return in education, experience, fun, relaxation, and memories. Convenience takes various meanings in travel decisions: time involved in travel from airport to lodging, language barriers, cleanliness and sanitary concerns, access to interests (beaches, attractions, amenities) and special needs (Kotler, 2002).

Tourist Information Officers are our front line in all tourism matters, along with Travel Consultants and with the front-desk personnel of other tourism stakeholders. Working in tourist information centers around Romania, they are able to promote tourism destinations, tourist attractions and provide information and reservation services for sightseeing, travel, accommodation and tours. They also assess tourist opportunities for local communities. The purpose of this paper is to deliver a brief status quo of the TICs Officers in Romania and some suggestions for the improvement of the service of tourism information centers.

Keywords: tourism information officer, destination management, destination marketing, tourism center certification, profile of TIC Staff, tourism

JEL Classification: L83, L84, R11

Introduction

The role of a Tourism Information Center in a Destination

The ability to concentrate *attractions, facilities, and services* in a convenient, accessible location is essential in order to create a strong destination pull [Kotler, 2002]. Several tourist destinations require different types of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and the therein integrated offers of Tourist Information Centers. Basically, there are different types or dimensions of TICs, they vary in content, size and offers, according to their specific target groups, regional specialties, nature and cultural background. The basic role of TICs consists mainly in the following tasks:

- To generate, to handle and to distribute information to visiting tourists in the local tourist office at the destination. In this context the TIC - as location where requested information is supplied to visitors - is part of the tourism infrastructure and part of tourism supply of a destination.

- To provide all tourist information services regarding the destination. This role requires: permanent updating of information at local and regional level (e.g. event calendar, new services, special offers, etc). This is done on the available electronic platform which is linked to the local, regional and national tourism portals and forms the basis of periodically published promotion material; periodically reporting visitors' requests and the TIC activities to the responsible local, regional and national tourism institutions. This leads on each level to a valuable data basis which enables the evaluation of consumer trends and the further development of the tourism services according to the needs of visitors. The less potential visitors know about Romania as a tourist destination, the less visitors are familiar with the culture, language and alphabet of a destination the more valuable are the information and services supplied by a TIC via internet as well as on-site in the travel destination.

1. The Tourism Information Centers in Romania – a short status quo, based on GTZ Research

In 2004 the National Authority of Tourism in Romania had the initiative to bring all the Tourism Information Centers (TICs) together in order to assure a common platform of communication and to develop a training program for the TICs officers. As result, the Ministry and the German Program IBD-GTZ developed the first part of a Practical Handbook for the Tourism Information Centers. As the first part was a good support for the TICs, the second part will be published at the beginning of 2009, under coordination of the authors of this article.

In order to improve the quality of human resources working in the TICs through training, in late 2007 and 2008 IBD GTZ conducted a study on the structure and

success factors of the CITs in Romania, study based on interviews and field observation. The result is important and offers a good image about the current situation, concerning the current endowment, the profile of the employees, the services delivered to the tourists, the organizational structure a.o. We interviewed TICs officers of a total of some 18 centers in various destinations in Romania.

According to the study, the most of TICs are financed by a local authority that settled up the center and coordinate its activity (13 TICs). Only few are supported by NGOs, either Chambers of Commerce or Tourism Associations (4 TICs).

The most TICs in West European countries are supported by tourism associations. In Romania, there are already quite a lot of tourism associations (TIC), but only few of them fulfill the standards for modern DMOs from abroad. Despite the progress, mostly of them do not represent the ideal form of organization for establishing a TIC, because:

- They are highly specialized and have therefore just a few members;
- They represent just a part of the local industry or branch;
- There are several equal organizations representing the same target group in the same region;
- They have not established strong connections to the other local and branch associations;
- They have not established strong connections to the adequate regional or national umbrella organizations;
- They are a strange mixture of private and public interests, representing private enterprises but are often led by a high ranked public servant;
- They have no formal ways of exchanging information with one another and between them and the regional and national institutions;
- They have just a diffuse idea of what associations have to do in democratic countries and what kind of services they should offer to their members. The obvious lack of professionally organized self-helping groups in the private sector has become one of the biggest constraints for the development of tourism in Romania.

Therefore, the creation and cultivation of associations or association-like structures in the tourist industry, is the first and most important step for the establishment and operation of sustainable TICs.

2. Tourism Information Center Officers – their contribution to a successful promotion of a destination

2.1. Tourism Information Center. Basic roles and prerequisites

Often enough, either in a conversation in a hotel, restaurant, or on a tourist trade fair, the dissatisfaction is in the air, due the bad manners or the lack of knowledge of the staff employed. "Oh, if my people would be more commitment and empathic, would be even happier the customers." These are phrases present each day in the work environment. It shows how crucial "good people" are. And this is particularly true, for those who are every day in direct contact with potential customers. There are a lot of people who have day-to-day personal contact with the guests that are coming: the sales persons in a travel agency, the counter personnel of airlines, the flight attendants, the train controllers, the bus driver, the travel guide, the guide / travel manager, employees of TICs, the receptionist, the waiter / waitress, the sport trainer. As we mentioned, the TIC Officers are also here. They even have a key position for the entire journey, a central strategic role.

The personal presentation of the local tourist offer, the personal handout of printed material, the personally given advices, and the verbal information supply is the biggest advantage of a TIC compared to all other sources of information. It can be summarized that all personal services like information supply, advice and recommendations are of overwhelming importance for the tourists. The advice given by trained and multilingual service personnel can not be substituted by electronic media. An officially recognized TIC represents the destination as a whole and the local tourist industry in particular. It must act independently from the interests of single enterprises. The visitors expect sound, professional advice free of personal interests. But a TIC can only fulfill its duties, if it is "served" by trained and motivate personnel.

From all visited and interviewed structures, we find out that one TIC has a room between 0-15 qm, 3 TICs between 15-50 qm, 6 TICs between 50-100 qm and 3 TIC have more as 100 qm. In the most cases the space and the endowments assure mainly the role of distribution of informative material about the destination, and only modest back-office activities, like management destination activities or marketing and research tasks.

The minimum space requirement for the TIC must not be less than 16 m². A large separate storage space with no direct visitor access is also needed. The room is for back-office functions and serves as a rest place for employees. As technical requirements are needed: 1 reception desk (for standing guests) with one chair (behind the table), 1 – 2 telephone(s), fax, photocopier, 1 – 2 desks with 2 (4) chairs, computers (at least 1, connected to the Internet, 2 connected as an intranet), printer, TV set with video for presenting attractions of the region/location, large

detailed map (on the wall) of the region indicating tourist attractions and activities, wall-poster with list of provided services, touch screen with non-stop information service (the computer will be inside but the touch screen will be accessible from outside), cash register, coffee machine, shelf (shelves) (at least 1) and boards.

2.2. Profile of TIC Officers

A Tourist Information Officer (also known as visitor information services officer) helps holiday makers make the right accommodation and tour choices. The international statistics shows that the employment is mostly full-time, and most persons in this occupation are females mainly in the age group of 25 to 34. Due to the research mentioned to point 2 for the TICs in Romania, in the 17 questioned centers are working 32 persons: 27 employees full time, and 5 part time.

There are no specific training requirements to become a tourist information officer as most training is provided on the job. However employment opportunities are increased if you have undertaken formal studies. Currently, from the full time employees there are 16 (94%) who have either an Advanced Diploma or a Diploma. While only 6 % have no post school qualifications. Based on experiences from different EU member states MS, a "TIC Further Training System" has to be developed for Romania. One seminar is particularly useful for the purpose of a TIC initiator. This procedure shall help to be successful and to avoid common mistakes.

Industry representatives advise prospective tourist information officers to gain as much work experience in the retail trade as possible and to complete relevant tourism courses. A lot of people start as casuals in the industry which can lead to contract employment.

From all 27 full-employees, 9 have attended a training program in tourism organized by ANT (National Authority for Tourism), ANAT (National Association of Travel Agencies); 7 attended a TIC training program organized by THR (private consulting and training company). With time, tourist information officers can progress into managerial positions or may progress in the related field of tourism marketing.

Another important issue for incoming destinations is the foreign language. The employees of the TICs declared that they have good communication skills in English (21 persons), French (13 persons), German (7 persons), Italian (4 persons), Hungarian (3 persons), Spanish (1 person). As general recommendation, the employees must be fluent in English and have a good knowledge of a second language, or the desire to acquire necessary English language skills (within a maximum 1,5–1 year period). They should be able to communicate in another foreign language spoken by the majority of their customers. Other important skills are: management skills, communication skills, emotional intelligence, e.g. common sense.

Tourist information officers are found in a variety of positions or titles, depending of the organization where they are employed or depending on the region. Job opportunities are also dependent on the type of funding which is available to operate the centers. Some, for example, are run on a voluntary basis or are self funded. Jobs in these centers are rarely advertised and are filled usually by word of mouth.

For the tasks required in a tourism information center, we can identify the TIC officer (permanent employee), the clerk (part-time or seasonal), salesperson/clerk, TIC officer/clerk/travel agent. We tried also to draw some job description for this position, bringing together the required skills and educational background (Table 1, 2, 3).

Job description – tourism information center coordinator/officer

Table 1

TIC coordinator/officer (permanent employee)

<p>Skills/education</p>	<p>The tourist officer must have a degree in the tourism sector and at minimum one year of professional experience in the tourism sector.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Or</p> <p>must have a degree in related fields:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social sciences, • Economics, • Geography, • Knowledge of cultural aspects of society • Administration science, <p>and three years of professional experience in the tourism sector</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a minimum five years of professional experience in the tourism sector. <p>He must be fluent in English or the desire to acquire necessary language skills (within a maximum 1,5-year period). Should be able to communicate in another foreign language spoken by the majority of his customers. Should have successfully taken part in a TIC-officers accreditation seminar and must be willing to be permanently trained.</p> <p>Another option for the qualification are the degrees awarded for tourism sectors by CNFPA (National Board for Vocational Adult Learning), as tourism manager, tourism guide a.o.</p>
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	<p>Other important skills are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management skills, • Communication skills.
Job description	<p>The tourist officer is responsible for the overall functioning of the TIC.</p> <p>Internal operation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning, Coordination, Controlling of TIC Activity • Material procurement • Directing staff • Reporting, budgeting <p>Reporting to NTO (National Tourism Organization), local or regional DMO (Destination Management Organization) management.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External relations: • Customer counseling • Public relations • Stakeholder relations. <p>Knowledge of CRS. Representing the TIC in public (TIC-related PR in coordination with the tourism administration and/or the DMO management).</p>

As we saw in the table 1, there are a lot of requirements for a TIC officer. From outside a job in tourism is desirable and is perceived as a non-intensive job. Despite this perception, being involved in tourism isn't simply a matter of chatting about the interesting sites and is not only about recommending nice tourism sights. It is more than that, and, for this reason the job requirements are various.

Job description – tourism information clerk / sales clerk

Table 2

Clerk (part-time or seasonal)	
Skills/education	<p>Middle school education and profession in the field of hospitality or retailing in tourism.</p> <p>Solid knowledge of the English language. Working knowledge in another widely-spread language, such as English or another language spoken by the visitors</p>
Job description	<p>The clerk can take on all responsibilities except public affairs. Additional requirements, according to the sales activities (sale of postcards, books, literature and other printed materials, videos, DVDs, audio cassettes, souvenirs).</p>

Salesperson/Clerk

Skills/education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic knowledge of retailing, • Basic knowledge of advertising and promotion • Sales skills • Handling cash register/invoicing • Knowledge of the assortment.
Job description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control of deliveries • Ordering • Daily filling of shelves and boards • Selling of goods to customers • Checking stock of items.

There is a strong marketing focus on the job and the information tourist officers need to not only promote or 'pitch' a region but to actually “sell” tour packages. Most visitor centers receive a commission for tour, accommodation and travel sales and so staff is set sales targets (Table 2).

Excellent communication skills come to the fore here, when trying to get someone to book a tour at the same time as they book accommodation. Monthly salary, gratifications (fixed costs) are available. The better the TIC officer and its staff work, the greater the success of the TIC: e.g. more members (fees), more participants, more customers, more revenues.

Job description – tourism information center officer / clerk / travel agent

Table 3

TIC officer / clerk(s) / travel agent

Skills/education	<p>Middle school education and profession in the field of hospitality or retailing in tourism. Communication skills targeted at producers/suppliers (hotels, restaurants,...): personal selling, print, web site, PR/advertising, sales promotion</p> <p>Communication skills targeted at customers: display promotion, web sites, information and ticketing.</p>
Job description	<p>With regard to the supplier/producer: bookings, reservations, sales, e-commerce.</p> <p>With regard to the customer: bookings, reservations for the customer, e-commerce ticketing and purchases.</p>

As any good salesperson knows, it's vital to know the product. The tourist information officers have to be familiar with all the tour operators and the various attractions and services in their region, including everything from Nordic walking to monastery visits. As part of on going training, they should do industry familiarizations, going to hotels or to other accommodation structures, getting familiar with transport possibilities within the areas.

For all the jobs listed above (Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3) tact, diplomacy and great interpersonal skills are a must in this job. Dealing with the general public can be challenging at times, especially when they don't speak Romanian, or when the TIC officers don't speak English or their language very well or their holiday hasn't gone according to plan. The ability to speak a second language is also highly desirable. Staff will also be working with computerized travel reservation systems, and proficiency in these is essential. And, there is the need for a proficiency in Microsoft word and excel, as well as using other booking systems.

Conclusions

The research and the permanent dialog with TIC officers, since 2004, showed big differences in the existing TIC standards. For this reason, there is a strong need to establish an effective networking on national level between all existing and emerging TICs because of: protection of rights and rightful interests of members and employees; support of activities that promote Romania as a tourist destination; co-ordination of members' activities in the field of mutual information exchange; inspection regarding quality of provided basic information services and supporting its growth; co-operation with state administration (including NTO), self-government, physical and legal entities within Romania and abroad in the field of information and in tourism.

Accreditation of a TIC *is not to be understood as a juridical licensed legitimating*. This is the responsibility of a defined institution, for example a Committee of Standardisation, which is usually not involved in tourism. To describe it correctly, accreditation in this sense means, *that the accredited TIC is on the list of NTO, containing the official addresses for tourism industry representatives and for customers to get information and contacts*.

This list will be published in NTO materials as well as on the NTO web site. Only an accredited TIC should be a member of the national TIC-network. The NTO, responsible for the promotional mix on the national level, controls the quality of promotion literature, advertising and other promotional material provided for TICs. The accredited TICs, should display the "i" sign (as symbol for their accreditation at the entrance of the TIC and on their web site) and to print also "Accreditation Certificate" on their information materials.

The certification and accreditation is only a solution for the near future. The TICs in the national network shall establish their own national association which should be responsible for certification and accreditation of TICs as a self-regulating body.

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