Sensory Experiences Regarding Five-dimensional Brand Destination

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Abstract

Starting from the idea that the destination represents a complex product, seen as the sum of multiple products, the destination branding process should concentrate on developing sensory experiences. In the end, this could lead to a five-dimensional destination brand. The main objective of this article is to identify some of the experiences, which are liable to become sensory signatures of the destination. Taking into consideration the perceptual elements that the tourists rely on when evaluating the destination and their information sources concerning that particular place, marketers should capture in the online communication the essence of the destination’s sensory experiences.

Keywords: Sensory dimensions, experiences, destination, sensory profile;

1. Introduction

Due to our current technological evolution, products are becoming harder and harder to differentiate based on their characteristics. This is the reason why marketing is nowadays operating with experience-like products, this way managing to entertain the consumer. In order to supply memorable experiences, marketers must however impress each one of the consumer’s senses, and sensory marketing is the background that offers this possibility. With the help of sensory marketing, a type of brands can be developed which can integrate all of the five sensory dimensions (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile). Instead of the usual two-dimensional flat brands, five-dimensional brands are emerging that represent holistic experiences for the consumer.

In the tourism and hospitality industry, the sensory marketing perspective creates an ideal background for developing experiences, for quality perception by tourists and even for transforming services in something tangible. If in the case of the hospitality industry integrating the sensory dimensions into the product’s brand platform is done with ease, in tourism, in the case of the destination – which represents a complex product, made up, in its turn, of other products –, things get tricky. The destination as a sum of products must essentially offer the uniform experience on each sensory dimension, which must lead to the making of some powerful and unique association by the tourists.

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with the destination brand. Therefore, it is necessary to develop the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile sensory experiences by the organizations, which deal with the destination’s management and marketing.

2. Conceptual Framework

Society has undergone a change in terms of the fact that the consumer’s acquisitions are oriented towards experiences at the expense of goods and services (Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010). From the consumer’s perspective, experiences are nice and captivating, becoming in the end memorable (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Thus, experiencing the product’s benefits leads to loyalty, this being more appealing to the consumer than the presentation of the product’s characteristics (Sharma & Sharma, 2011).

Seeing as in tourism the product can only be consumed when the tourist travels to the destination, presenting the product as an experience acquires an even more important role in influencing the decision to purchase the product. It is precisely the predominance of the emotional factor in the decision to purchase a touristic product (Stâncioiu, 2004) that makes a product which does not sensory stimulate the consumer cease to exist (Hill, 2010). A tourist’s experience regarding a certain destination is closely linked to his senses (Markwell, 2001) because when visiting the destination, the tourist is nonetheless consuming that place’s atmosphere (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Hence, the objective of a tourist destination, which seeks to obtain a link between the identity elements of the destination and the tourist’s feelings, gaining at the same time a place in his mind, is to create experiences at the destination level by stimulating the consumer from a sensory point of view (Diţoiu, Stâncioiu, & Teodorescu, 2012).

Knowing that the destination is a geographical space, such as a place, an area, a region or a country, where the tourist spends a period of time, the offer at the destination level comprises the tourist receiving units, the infrastructure and the tourist potential: natural, anthropic, cultural, including the inhabitants of that particular place, with their traditions and way of living. Thus, the destination can be seen as an umbrella (Buhalis, 2000) that provides an integrated experience of its components.

The tourist forms his own image of the destination in terms of his perception of that particular place, namely through receiving, selecting, organizing and interpreting the information about the destination (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). This image of the destination is in fact a reflection of the sensory and/or conceptual information (Stringer, 1984), that is to say – an interpretation by the tourist of his own reality (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2011). The tourist is subjected to exterior stimuli, which leads to the making of some strong beliefs concerning the place’s attributes at the crossroads between the destination’s projection and individual needs, motives, preferences, as well as other intrinsic characteristics (Um & Crompton, 1990). The destination image is thus endowed with a holistic character by including the multi-sensory as a component element (Son & Pearce, 2005).

The organizations that deal with destination management and marketing aim at building a strong destination brand. From the tourist’s perspective, the destination brand represents a sum of perceptions, feelings and attitudes directed at that particular place (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2009). This destination brand is very complex, since it must preserve the uniform experience at the level of the product, while at the level of the components it encompasses the experiences created by the suppliers which are competing against each other and which, in their turn, depend on the local access conditions, policies, culture, and other inseparable factors (Gartner, 2009). In order to guaranty a favourable brand image, the strong associations with the destination must be identified (Keller, 1993). The brands that contain more sensory dimensions gain in depth (Lindstrom, 2010). The emotional connection between the tourist and the destination is created in time and becomes even stronger with the help of destination branding by developing some unique markers (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005).

During the branding process, marketing strategies are followed which lead to attaining the objectives at the destination level. The destination marketing strategies create a value proposition, which is superior to the
competition, surpassing the functional aspects of the place (Hudson, 2008). The triumph of national brand strategies, for example, depends very much on the management of the most important touch points (Bulearca & Bulearca, 2011). In essence, the tourist’s holistic experience with the destination can be resumed to the interaction with the place in the touch points, which presupposes that creating, communicating and providing proper experiences in these points would satisfy the consumer. In order to develop these experiences, sensory marketing strategies are followed, applied within the sensory marketing plans, for example, to the places and events (Rodrigues, Hultén, & Brito, 2011). The sensory strategies differentiate the brand, approaching the consumer’s mind and senses both from a cognitive point of view, and from an emotional one (Hultén, 2011).

In conclusion, the marketer projects an identity of the destination under the guise of a brand sensory profile, and the tourist forms his own brand image of the destination in terms of his own perception, that is, by experimenting the brand through all the five sensory dimensions. Thus, it is necessary to create the unique atmosphere at the level of the destination, to create/stimulate positive associations with the place, and at the same time to eliminate the negative ones (if they exist), to provide sensory experiences that can seduce the tourist’s senses and to offer some souvenirs which can leave a visible mark of the destination, along with the overall memorable experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

3. Operational Framework

The present study is an exploratory research. It has been conducted between April 2012 and September 2012 on a number of 500 young people originating from Romania, with ages ranging from 20 to 24 years, holding a university degree or who were due to graduate from a university program.

For the respondents the sources of information regarding the choosing of a destination where they had not previously been are represented by: specialized sites (51.5%), relatives and friends (30.7%), tourist guides (12%) and social networks (5.8%). They assess the destination based on the perceptive elements as follows: visual elements (98.2%), auditory elements (45.6%), gustatory elements (34.7%), olfactory elements (27.2%) and tactile elements (20%).

In order to illustrate this, the sensory profile of a historical region from Romania named Banat-Crișana (made up of the counties Caraș-Severin, Timiș, Arad and Bihor) has been created, taking into consideration both perceptions (internal and external). Thus, the respondents perceive the following for the region Banat-Crișana: visual experiences (90.5%), auditory experiences (44.8%), olfactory experiences (35.8%), gustatory experiences (32.8%) and tactile experiences (32.3%).

A sensory profile is created by starting from the forms of tourism practiced in the area (leisure, health spa tourism and cultural tourism) and the tourist attractions associated with the destination, which are interpreted as sensory experiences. At the level of the sensory experience, for every sensory dimension an element may be identified which may become in time the sensory signature of the destination by supporting it. In the present, the subjects were able to identify the following elements which may become sensory signatures: the visual signature – Peștera Ușilor (Bears’ Cave), the auditory signature – Festivalul Plai (The Plai Festival), the olfactory signature – Parcul Rozelor (The Park of Roses), the gustatory signature – Salamul Bănățean (Banatean Salami) and the tactile signature – Băile Felix (The Felix Thermal Baths).

Thus, the sensogram (sensory profile) of the destination Banat-Crișana was created, similar to the Martin Lindstrom model (Lindstrom, 2009). This sensory profile has the following absolute values for each sensory dimension: the visual dimension – 4.06; the auditory dimension – 3.02; the olfactory dimension – 2.90; the gustatory dimension – 2.89 and the tactile dimension – 2.40 (where 0 = unfelt stimulus, and 5 = stimulus felt at a very high intensity). The stimulus may be a visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory or tactile experience.
4. Discussion

In Figure 1, it can be observed that the sensory profile of the destination Banat-Crișana is moderately developed. The positive aspects are given by the fact that the destination is not associated with any negative experience on none of the five sensory dimensions. However, for an increase in the number of positive experiences associated with the destination more than a simple supply of experiences is needed. In essence, these developed experiences should converge towards the sensory signatures determined at the destination level. This way every sensory signature for each dimension will be given support, and the experiences will have a common theme, the destination brand being able thus to become 5D.

When the strategies are geared towards providing experiences as positive as possible, the tourist ends up revisiting the destination or recommending it, and this because the tourist chooses the destination and assesses his satisfaction based on his own pattern, which changes once he receives new information regarding the destination, that is to say, when he feels an input (Chi & Qu, 2008). Taking into consideration the fact that if more than one stimuli affect the consumer simultaneously, then the latter will remember a concept quicker (Kalkstein-Silkes, 2007), the sensory association with the destination reminds the tourist of the visited place and supports the destination brand.

The tourist’s experience forms itself during the process of prepping and planning the trip, during the trip and after it, the former representing a subjective assessment of an emotional, cognitive and behavioural nature of all the moods the tourist goes through during those three stages (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). The sensory experiences reach the rational part of the consumer’s brain, as well as the emotional one (Hultén, Broweus, & van Dijk, 2009), thus becoming memorable. The intensity of these sensory experiences does not refer only to the number of sensory dimensions involved, but to the quality of every sensory channel as well (Hyun, Lee, & Bäck, 2009).

Even if the aim of developing a five-dimensional destination brand remains that of obtaining a sensory signature for each sensory dimension, developing the experiences at the level of the destination, experiences which are to be
consumed by the tourist during his trip, represents the supporting point for the brand. These experiences originate from stimuli such as the following:

- **Visual**: form, colour, dimension, lighting, transparency, design, image, style.
- **Auditory**: sound, tonality, rhythm, melody.
- **Olfactory**: natural smell, artificial smell, aroma.
- **Gustatory**: taste, flavour, gastronomy.
- **Tactile**: texture, hardness, elasticity, temperature, pressure, comfort.

Hence, starting from these stimuli experiences for tourists may be developed which can be memorable. Any tourist product that forms part of the destination can thus be transformed into an experience by engaging the tourist. During the experience, the consumer’s role is double: that of tourist and that of staff (as part of the experience for the other tourists).

The design of the experience directed towards the five sensory dimensions is important. Although the visual aspect is appreciated by the consumers and used at its maximum potential by the marketers, the other channels complete the experience. For example, smells remain a long period in the tourist’s mind because they leave “profound retrieval traces, which have the capacity to evoke situations, people, products, places already known” (Trevisani, 2007, p. 86). Another example is that if the auditory dimension; thus, Disney World, using choreography sounds, “creates new memories, conjures up the past and can transport us in no time in another space” (Lindstrom, 2009, p. 108). Alongside the visual dimension, the other dimensions contribute to creating, communicating and supplying memorable experiences for the tourist.

5. Conclusions

Tourism needs five-dimensional brands that can represent for the tourist real experiences. That is way the multisensory is an important aspect for tourism (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), because it offers the background needed for developing these experiences. Just like Sydney is immediately recognized for the roof of the Opera building, Paris for the Eiffel Tower or the Netherlands as being the Land of the Tulips, in the same way sensory signatures can be created for every destination, thus resulting five-dimensional brands and positioning that place in the tourist’s soul and mind.

The marketer identifies those elements, which will become in time sensory signatures of the destination, and where such signatures do not exist, he creates them. Once the design of the experience is made, the sensory profile of the destination is projected, and then the difference between this projection and perception is measured precisely in order to correct the profile according to the target-audience’s perception.

From a methodological point of view, the present exploratory research has its limits in the fact that it does not imply a neuromarketing analysis, since at a conscious level the tourist expresses with difficulty the sensations he went through. Moreover, every tourist’s perception is partial, and hence the same experience means something else for every tourist. Future research studies are needed in order to build scales for each sensory dimension at the level of the general product, the same way, as they exist today for food products.

The path that the marketer should follow is that of the design, communication and supply of place experience. If the results of the research study showing that the main source of information for tourists is the online environment are taken into consideration, then it becomes clear that the marketer must capture the essence of the developed experience and communicate it online as similar to reality as possible. The tourist experience starts with the online and it can ends with the online.

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References


