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Public Relations in Tourism. A Research on The Perception of The Romanian Public Upon Responsible Tourism

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Abstract

Public relations represent a unique way of promoting the organization, its products or services, by building a higher visibility in the public space. Public relations represent a strategic form of communication, which focuses on gaining the audience's understanding and acceptance, as well as on the process of building a good relation between an organization and the public. In the tourist sector, public relations are more than a necessity. The major challenge consists in identifying the most efficient ways of promoting tourist products, building a positive image, increasing the visibility of tourist destinations, in order to attract a significant number of tourists. Public relations may represent a bridge towards change, a means for adjusting to the new attitudes triggered by change. Starting from these considerations, the purpose of the research is twofold: to analyze the applicative role of public relations in the tourist sector, respectively, to identify the perception of the Romanian public of responsible tourism in Romania. In this regard, we have applied the research method of the questionnaire-based inquiry to a sample of 60 persons, in order to identify the "thought particularities" of the internal public, which may allow us to formulate conclusions useful to such a process. In our opinion, responsible tourism represents the most economically, socially and environmentally efficient approach, a real opportunity for exploiting and promoting local products and services, the tourist potential which Romania may enhance with a view to maximizing the positive impact upon the public in terms of tourist destinations. In this case, professionalism and responsibility should constitute reference points.

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1. Introduction

One of the most effective means of promoting a country is represented by tourism. Many governments perceive tourism as an opportunity, especially for economic development, but, unfortunately, do not invest sufficiently in this

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project, in ensuring quality services or infrastructure and even less in elaborating a tourism strategy which, in such a situation, gains major relevance. The informational offer should respond to questions such as “what is there worth seeing”, “what is it that tourists prefer”, “the most visited places”, “tourist attractions”, “entertainment opportunities”. In order to be efficient, this offer should equally address both the internal and external public, because the satisfaction and contentment of the internal public constitute “tangible” proofs for the external public. Otherwise, what guarantee would there be, unless the signals sent from the inside matched expectations from the outside? Elaborating a tourism strategy should consider, first of all, an inventory of resources, evaluation of the potential market, the services provided, an important part in this respect being played by local or regional communities, as well as by the partnerships between public and private organizations, as decision factors. According to Mathieson and Wall, (2006, p.17) “tourism is both an economic and a social phenomenon that is an agent of change in these areas as well as for the environment. Tourism involves the tourists, the destination and its people, and the routes and means by which they are brought together”. This is the moment in which public relations should make their presence felt, offering efficient communication and promotion strategies related to tourist destinations. Thus, it is expected that tourists will visit the tourist areas with the highest development potential, both in terms of the sights and the opportunities provided.

Promoting a tourism destination should consider a series of factors which function as conclusive points for the public, such as: natural factors, relief, geographical positioning, landscape, vegetation, fauna, climate; the general factors of human existence and activity, traditions, folklore, language, mentality, hospitality, culture; the human element, the behaviour and attitude of the local population, of the representatives of the various public or private institutions towards tourists; the general infrastructure, transportation and (tele)communication, tourism equipments, accommodation and food facilities, sports and entertainment (Minciu, 2000, pp. 147-151). A definition of the tourism destination that reveals the importance of the geographical space and the attractions that are within the space is offered by Medlik (2003, p.163) who argues that “countries, regions, towns and other areas which attract tourists, are main locations of tourism activity, and tend to account for most of tourists’ time and spending. They are the main concentrations of tourist attractions, accommodation and other tourist facilities and services, where the main impacts of tourism - economic, social, physical - occur”. Special attention should be given to the surrounding environment. The impact of tourism upon the environment, the steady development of the tourism sector accompanied by the constant care for nature should constitute new directions of action in the tourism industry. In this context, tourism may represent an opportunity for the preservation of the environment, through the implementation of certain strategies and techniques which may enable the sensible management of tourist destinations, as well as environment protection. In Romania, developing the tourism sector should turn into a priority. Tourism may represent an opportunity for Romania only if serious quantitative and qualitative changes are undertaken in this sector, if offers are connected to the needs and desires of internal and external consumers. These objectives may be achieved through the use of the most appropriate promotion tools which should ensure efficiency and, especially, effectiveness. In this case, public relations become a reference tool.

2. Public relations and responsible tourism

The literature defines public relations like a strategic form of communication, which focuses on obtaining the public’s understanding and acceptance regarding the process of establishing a good relation between an organization and the public, especially in terms of shaping reputation and communicating information (C and Gaither, 2008, p.19). Through the communication and promotion strategies which they develop, public relations facilitate the building of confidence-based connections between the various organizations and the many categories of public, creating interactive relationships between the various levels of society. The British Institute of Public Relations qualifies public relations like a “management reputation”, given that public relations are focused on reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what other say about. Therefore, the practice of public relations is the discipline which centres on reputation, with the purpose of gaining understanding, the support and influence of public opinion and behaviour (Petrovici, 2011, p.18). Public relations represent a unique way of promoting the organization, its products or services, by building a higher visibility in the public space. The public relations activities imply conscious, planned and long-term efforts in building and maintaining relations of mutual trust and understating both with the public opinion as a whole and the different target groups (Kunczik, 2002, p.11). In this

respect, public relations aim at building positive relations between an organization and its public, an organization and the environment, by means of a two-way communication (DiMeo, 2002, p.151).

In the tourism sector, public relations are more than a necessity. To meet the constant challenges, the public relations in the tourism sector should evolve towards turning into a management function, which should lead to responsible approach. The literature argues that the public relations represent the fifth “P” of a marketing strategy: product, price, position and promotion (Wilcox et al., 2009, p.16). According to specialists, cultivating public relations takes longer, but when they are actuated, they can contribute to promoting the company on the market (Kotler, Rackham, 2006, pp.68-78). The major challenge consists in identifying the most efficient ways of promoting tourist products, building a positive image, increasing the visibility of tourist destinations, in order to attract a significant number of tourists. According to specialists, a tourist product may be approached from a global perspective, regarded like a unitary whole, respectively from an individual perspective, due to its intrinsic features, namely: unique elements, which individualize the product even more; location at the “source”, which means that tourism planning should occur only in areas with tourism potential (beach, mountains, mineral springs, thermal waters, historical monuments etc.); developed tourism infrastructure, respectively transportation, accommodation, food and entertainment units with specific equipment; a varied segmentation of consumers, with needs, tastes and different motivations (Gherasim, Gherasim, 1999, p.33).

Public relations may support the tourism public sector, building a positive image and a favourable attitude towards the tourism product, respectively the tourism destination envisaged (Stăncioiu, 2000, p.50). The explanation lies in the fact that in the tourism sector, a favourable image creates motivation in making the decision to buy the tourism product. In this case, the final image appears like the result of a bidirectional process: from the offerer, who projects and transfers an official image, respectively from the potential tourist, who perceives that reality in a certain way, from the perspective of preferences, experiences or the information obtained from other reference sources, other than the official ones (Baud-Bovy, Lawson, 1977, p.43). Public relations in tourism are a key element of the marketing mix, which resorts to “general influence tools” such as the relations with the media materialized in press tours, conferences on tourism, fairs and expositions, promotional activities, special events (Kotler, Rein, Haider, 2001, p.177). Creating a positive image which may mean respect and professionalism should constitute a reference point throughout this entire process, because public relations aim at “building” a favourable climate not only at the level of the tourism market, but also at the level of the entire ensemble, with all its internal and external components (Bucur-Sabo, 2006, p.229). The ongoing transmission of messages meant to inform consumers about tourism products, with the intention of developing a positive attitude towards the product and company, respectively to generate favourable changes in their consumption mentality and habits represent an instantiation of tourism promotion (Bucur-Sabo, 2006, p.222). From the perspective of public relations, this implies the management of the communication between the company and the target public, by means of constant and proper informing of the various categories of audiences (Grunig, Hunt, 1984, p.6). Materials for promoting tourism destinations include: magazines, brochures and tourist guides, which may contain information about certain events, characteristic of a certain area or scheduled activities (audio-visual presentations, expositions), rules of conduct for tourist safety; maps and information on tourist attractions; information centres in public spaces, parks, shops, stations and restaurants; graphic boards placed on tourist tracks and in belvedere points (Henche, 2004, p. 194). In their turn, interpreter guides also play an essential part by the accuracy and coherence of the information provided during tourist circuits. The promotion actions performed by public relations cannot be efficient without properly specialized and trained staff, which may provide quality services and meet the clients’ expectations. In this case, public relations play a strategic part not only in attracting tourists to the various destinations, but also in maintaining their satisfaction after they arrive at the respective destinations. In coordinating these efforts, there may be engaged all the responsible factors, from local or regional tourism agencies to counselling authorities, organizations, local collectives, public authorities etc.

An internationally topical subject is the concept of responsible tourism. Responsible tourism is about taking responsibility, responding, taking action to address the social, economic and environmental issues of sustainability that arise in destinations (Goodwin, 2011, pp.5-6). According to the Cape Town Declaration (2002, pp.3-4), environmental concerns should be managed, “throughout the life cycle of tourist establishments and operations - including the planning and design phase”; the responsible tourism is defined as having a number of characteristics:

minimising negative economic, environmental, and social impacts; generating greater economic benefits for local people and enhancing the well-being of host communities; involving local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances; contributing to the conservations of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world's diversity; providing more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues; providing access for physically challenged people; being culturally sensitive, engenders respect between tourists and hosts, and building local pride and confidence. Responsible tourism recognizes the diversity of the world's cultures and environments and encourages the positive interaction between the tourism industry, local communities and travellers" (Coppola, 2010, p.51). At the same time, responsible tourism offers an opportunity to connect with the people who create the holiday experience, stimulating the holidaymakers to talk about their experiences and to tell stories (Krippendorf, 1999, pp.15-22). As John King (2002, pp.105-108) observes the travel is about "experiences, fulfilment and rejuvenation" rather than about "places and things" and that this lifestyle market is of increasing importance.

In terms of *public relations*, responsible tourism represents a process of responsabilization of the public as well as of the tourism agents regarding the need of practicing tourism responsibly, with all the resulting implications. Responsible tourism aims at the responsible consumption of tourist products, respectively the impact and benefits that this type of tourism should have upon the environment and local communities, economically, socially and environmentally.

3. A Research on the perception of the Romanian public upon responsible tourism. A Case study

In order to identify the "thought particularities" at the level of the public, we have applied the questionnaire-based inquiry as a research method, which allows us to draw useful conclusions. The research was conducted during March-May 2013, in the online environment, on a sample of 60 persons who responded affirmatively to our inquiry.

Statistical processing and interpretation of results has led to the following findings. Firstly, we should mention the fact that tourism is perceived as one of the main sources of attraction in Romania, 92% of the respondents agreeing with this viewpoint, compared to 8% who think otherwise. According to the criteria of efficiency, rural tourism (57%), eco-tourism (27%), respectively hydropathic tourism (16%) are the most appropriate forms of tourism which may be practiced in Romania. As to the respondents themselves, 53% of them prefer rural tourism, 25% eco-tourism, whereas 22% prefer hydropathic tourism. The question of whether they have heard about responsible tourism was answered affirmatively by 42% of the respondents, whereas 58% answered negatively. According to them, responsible tourism means a responsible approach to the tourist sector (42%), a novel way of spending leisure time (35%), respectively a totally different alternative in providing tourist services (23%). This concept implies, first of all, good practices in the tourist sector (38%), the exploitation and promotion of local products and services (37%), as well as protecting natural resources (25%). From all the respondents, 93% believe that responsible tourism could represent, at present, the most efficient strategy for promoting the tourism sector, whereas 7% "did not know" how to answer this question. A relevant number of the respondents believe that responsible tourism is practiced to an extremely reduced extent (42%), whereas others believe it is not practiced at all (58%). According to their opinion, responsible tourism should aim, first of all, at minimizing the negative impact and, implicitly, maximizing the positive impact upon the tourism destinations (40%), generating increased economic benefits for locals and the tourist development of the area (32%), building a good relation between tourists and hosts by providing quality services (28%). The most efficient measures which responsible tourism should undertake are the constant adjustment to the demands of tourists (45%), customized offers (37%), respectively the clients' loyalty (18%). Regarding the means to promote tourism destinations, 44% of the respondents believe that publications (catalogues, posters, maps and tracks, tourist guides and services brochures) are the most efficient approach, 33% trust the Internet (as support for conducting promotional campaigns), whereas 23% believe that "word-of-mouth" communication may play a relevant part from this perspective. The question whether public relations represent an efficient tool in promoting tourism destinations was answered affirmatively by 62% of the respondents, whereas 38% of them "did not know" how to answer this question. The distribution of answers by gender indicates 78% "feminine" answers, respectively 22% "masculine" answers, the segment of women prevailing from this perspective. In terms of age category, the answers indicate a percentage of 33% for the age category 18-23, 27% for the age category 24-34, 25% for the age category 35-50, respectively 15% for the age category above 50.

Concerning the level of education, the recorded answers point to 57% of respondents with high-school studies, 30% with university studies, respectively 13% with post-university studies.

The interpretation of results leads to formulating the following observations. First of all, we should mention the fact that, in relation to the present research, our considerations shall be taken as a rough guide; a sample of 60 persons cannot enable pertinent conclusions, but only guiding findings on the perception of a segment of public upon the tourist sector. As can be seen from the things mentioned above, tourism represents a topical subject for the Romanian public and a constant challenge, the opinions formulated proposing serious “adjustments” in this field of activity. Among the variety of tourism forms, rural tourism occupies a relevant place in the public’s preferences, an alternative to traditional, classic tourism practiced in tourist resorts and centres. In fact, the data we have obtained coincide with those found in the literature, which show that rural tourism is regarded as a means of integral exploitation of the rural environment, of local, natural, cultural and human tourist, resources, having a major contribution to the development of the local economy (Bran, Marin, Simon, 1998, pp. 210-216; Szentesi, 1998, pp. 23-27; Mitrache et. al., 1996, p.14). Most of those interviewed consider that, at present, responsible tourism may represent the most efficient strategy for promoting tourism in Romania, which demands the reconfiguration of the tourist sector by the adoption of responsible practices in this respect. This implies, first and foremost, a better promotion of tourist destinations, the maximization of the positive impact through quality services, which may eventually generate the area’s and the local community’s economic sustainability. The constant adaptation to the tourists’ demands, respectively the customization of tourist services at the level of group or individual, may represent the most efficient measures in this domain (Bucur-Sabo, 2006, p.23). According to the public opinion, the ways of promoting tourist destinations may be present in the offline environment, by the means of printed materials, catalogues, posters, maps and tourist tracks, as well as in the online environment, as a space for the unfolding of promotional campaigns (Kotler, 1997, p. 181). “Word-of-mouth” communication may also play a relevant part from this perspective, since the personal relation is much more direct and often more persuasive than other means of communication (Henche, 2004, p.192). In this case, public relations play a crucial role and may represent an efficient tool for promoting tourism destinations, by offering accurate information, adequate to the wide public (Udrescu, Coderie, 2009, p. 398). The system of public relations, based on the process of communication, has the role of establishing durable connections, built on truth and mutual trust, both inside the system, as well as outside it, with the public (Petrovici, 2011, p. 35).

4. Conclusions

In the Romanian society, the concept of responsible tourism is little known by the local public. This type of tourism aims mainly at stimulating interest in nature, traditions and communities, respect towards the environment by minimizing the negative impact and, implicitly, maximizing the positive impact upon it. For Romania, a strategic approach to the concept of responsible tourism would imply, first and foremost, the exploitation of the areas with tourism potential and turning them into a competitive advantage in this domain. The harmony between nature and the traditional living environment, the unique customs and lifestyle of the communities may constitute real tourist attractions. The preferences of Prince Charles for the villages from Transylvania, “so dear to his soul”, his increasingly frequent visits, his involvement in the tourist development of the area and the local community shows the fact that responsible tourism may represent a viable strategy on the long term, a solid argument and a matching guarantee. The promotion of Romania the series *Wild Carpathia*, entitled “From the Mountains to the Sea”, had an amazing impact on the international level, being “the most watched program on environment broadcast by Travel Channel in the 26 years of this television’s existence”.

In terms of *public relations*, responsible tourism implies coherent strategies for promoting those destinations whose main attraction is represented by the flora, fauna or cultural inheritance. This means enhanced visibility of the destinations with tourism potential, high quality services and a careful segmentation of the targeted public. As Goodwin (2002, p.14) noted, “responsible tourism is an aspiration that can be realized in different ways, in different originating markets and in the diverse destinations of the world”. Progress in responsible tourism means to make better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit, “using tourism, rather than being used by it” (Goodwin, 2012, p.33). In Romania, responsible tourism should become a reference vector, strategically as well as

economically, socially and environmentally. In our opinion, responsible tourism may represent the most efficient approach, a real opportunity for exploiting and promoting local products and services, the tourism potential which Romania may develop with a view to maximizing the positive impact upon tourism destinations. In this case, professionalism and responsibility should constitute reference points.

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