

Tourism Destination and Reputation Management: Towards a Model of Stakeholder Communication

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper and literature addressed –

In order for a tourism destination to coherently present itself to the market, a large variety of stakeholders need to work towards common goals. Proactive communication with and between stakeholders, as employed by corporations under the labels corporate communications management or reputation management, is proposed as a method of aligning the objectives and actions of the various groups. The paper examines tourism destinations, which are widely thought to be the competitive unit in tourism, from a network perspective and analyses the interaction, specifically communication and cooperation, which occurs between the various stakeholders. The organisational structure and lifecycle stage of the destination are examined as variables that could affect the ability of the destination to effectively communicate with internal and external stakeholders.

Research method –

Three comparative case studies are used to determine the effect of structure and lifecycle on communication amongst stakeholders. The cases, Wanaka in New Zealand, Åre in Sweden and St Moritz in Switzerland, were carefully chosen to represent cases on various levels of those two variables. In-depth interviews, observations as well as supporting documents were used to collect the data for the cases.

Research findings –

At time of submission data has been collected from two out of the three cases and the analysis is in progress. The paper is submitted as a working paper, because only the theoretical background and some first impressions of the data can be included at this stage. By the time of the conference the research will be completed and a model will be presented.

Main contribution –

The main theoretical contribution of the paper is a model of stakeholder communication and reputation management in tourism destinations. The model will be based on the results of three cases and will show the relationship between the organization of the organization, the communication between stakeholders and the ability of the destinations to present itself as a cohesive competitive unit. Recommendations for practitioners will follow.

Keywords: reputation management, corporate communications management, network theory, destination management, stakeholder theory.

Introduction

In 2004 the international tourism industry broke all previous records, with a total of 763 million international tourist arrivals, an increase of nearly 11% on the previous year. International tourism receipts grew accordingly, to new record earnings of US\$623 billion, an increase of 15.7% on the previous year (World Tourism Organization 2005). The industry is forecast to keep growing, but the World Tourism Organization warns that, from now on, the industry cannot expect a 'normal' year and needs to be prepared for uncertainty, with random events such as terrorism and SARS overshadowing previous years (World Tourism Organization 2006). Under these turbulent conditions, the challenge for tourism destinations, who are the competitive units in the global tourism industry, is to move with the market and to be flexible enough in their planning to adapt to the constantly changing environment. In order to stay competitive they need to present themselves to the market in a coherent and strategic manner (Bieger and Laesser 2004), which requires them to manage their reputation amongst a wide variety of stakeholders, inside and outside the destination. This implies that it is no longer sufficient to study only the network of businesses responsible for tourism services, but open up the network to other groups, which also have an interest or a stake in the development and operation of the destination. The purpose of the study is to determine the underlying communication dynamics that facilitate or hinder the presentation of a tourism destination as a comprehensive experience-generating virtual service firm. Based on three case studies of major alpine resorts, Wanaka in New Zealand, Åre in Sweden, and St Moritz in Switzerland, a model of the underlying dynamics and processes is intended.

Relevant Literature

The Tourism Product

The tourism product is interesting from a marketing perspective, because it comprises a series of interrelated services; transport, accommodation, entertainment, hospitality and attractions, which combine to make up the 'tourism experience'. These services are usually provided in a set geographical area by individual Small to Medium sized Tourism Enterprises (SMTEs), who are unable to provide the entire tourism product alone, because they do not have the resources or capabilities to do so (Pavlovich 2003). So although they are autonomous in their operation they are unable to control the delivery of the product in its entirety. In other words, individual SMTEs are dependent on one another when it comes to providing the tourist with a well-rounded experience. The tourism destination product could then be seen as a bundle of interrelated services provided by autonomous, yet interdependent SMTEs. In addition to these core tourism enterprises, who are dependent on tourists for most of their income and who deal directly with tourists, there are other actors operating within a destination that support the main tourism firms. This usually includes the local government, trade associations as well as a range of other stakeholder groups that either influence or are influenced by tourism activity within the destination. The services provided at the destination level are both commercial and non-commercial in nature, since the provision of infrastructure and other public goods at the destination is often not provided by commercial entities for a profit. These non-commercial services however are just as important to the success of a destination as other services and, in order to provide the tourist with a well-rounded experience, both types of services need to be provided (Pechlaner and Tschurtschenthaler 2003). Operating in this complex and often turbulent environment, presents SMTEs with unique challenges, because coordination or collaboration is an integral part of the tourism industry (Tinsley and Lynch 2001).

Network Theory

Tourism destinations have been described as clusters (Jackson and Murphy 2002), industrial districts (Hjalager 2000) as well as networks (Pavlovich 2003) and virtual service firms (Gnoth 2004). Networks within a destination are thought to be sets of relationships between actors that are delimited at the point where actors are no longer helping participants to capture value (Jarillo 1995). A widely used method for gaining a holistic view of such a complex product is through network analysis. This is a form of systems analysis, which proposes that businesses are embedded in their environmental context (Anderson et al. 1994; Bieger and Laesser 2004; Granovetter 1985; Granovetter 1992; Hakansson and Snehota 1989) and that competition no longer occurs between individual firms, but in between networked structures, or supply nets (Flagestad and Hope 2001; Hertz and Mattsson 2004;

Pavlovich 2003; Pechlaner and Tschurtschenthaler 2003; Von Friedrichs Grangsjö 2003). That implies that actors do not only influence one another, but the exchange between actors also has an impact on other relationships in a network. Markets are seen as dynamic and evolving, where no business is independent of others (Håkansson and Snehota 1989), but instead businesses are interdependent with all others within the market. This interdependence between actors in networks has the effect that any strategic action performed by an actor does not only affect the actor and the actors connected to it, but can also restructure the market in which they operate. Every action taken changes the playing-field for all actors involved in the network or market (Hertz and Mattsson 2004). Time is an important construct in regards to networks research, since the network at any given time is a result of past action and can both open up opportunities for or constrain future action within the network (Hertz and Mattsson 2004). The difference between networks as networks of firms who happen to supply the same markets and networks of firms as a coordinated operational system is an important distinction (New and Mitropoulos 1995). When applying this differentiation to tourism destinations it seems that destinations as networks fit more closely into the first category, where the firms in the network happen to target the same market - tourists. However, in order to get the most out of a destination's capability the second category of a coordinated operational system is more promising. But how can this coordination be achieved?

Corporate Communications and Reputation Management

The process of stakeholder management through corporate communications management (Cornelissen 2004) or reputation management (Alessandri 2001; Fombrun 1996; Fombrun and Van Riel 2004; Gotsi and Wilson 2001; Greyser 1999) is promising, because its main argument is that only through open multilateral communications can actors in tourism destinations get close to their various stakeholder groups, both internal and external, and involve them in the strategic decision making process. The need for this exists, because tourism destinations are socio-economic organizations and their profit objectives need to be well balanced with the social and environmental concerns of stakeholders in order for tourism to be a legitimate method of economic development in regions that are dependent on it (Flagestad and Hope 2001). Corporate communications or reputation management offers a framework in which stakeholder expectations are managed through thorough internal and external communications programs. It is thought that this framework could also apply to destinations, because the destination, much like the corporation is a competitive unit, made up of smaller interdependent units, which needs to legitimize its operation amongst its stakeholders. The major differences are the ownership structures that underlie a corporation and the network organisational model of a destination. Both the corporate, or centralised, and community, or decentralised model of destination organisation (Flagestad and Hope 2001) fall in to the category of cooperative or network models of destination organisation, since they are not entirely owned by one corporation (Bieger and Laesser 2004). Hence, the thesis aims to discover the organizational dynamics at the destination level that facilitate the development of effective communication programs that legitimize strategic tourism development in the eyes of all stakeholders. A comparison between destinations operating under different organizational structures and in different development stages, adding a time dimension, is thought to give deeper insight into the processes underlying reputation management in destination networks.

Research Problem

Tourism destinations are seen as the competitive units in the global tourism industry and in order to stay competitive they need to present themselves to the market in a coherent and strategic manner (Bieger and Laesser 2004). Most destinations, unlike corporations, which are built on a hierarchical organisational structure, are characterised by a network or cooperative organisational structure (Bieger and Laesser 2004). They have to manage the desires of all stakeholders in and surrounding the destination in order to present themselves as one. Since there are many different actors which have stakes in the destination and who might have different expectations in regards to the development of tourism, effective communication between actors is necessary to facilitate the strategic decision making of the destination as a whole. This paper is the first research stage of a project that aims to understand the following problem:

How well do actors communicate in various destination structures and lifecycle stages and what effect does this have on their ability to manage the reputation of the destination strategically for competitive advantage? And why?

The following questions form the basis for data collection for this project. There are different models of cooperative destination structure in the literature that are thought to influence the the dynamics at the destination (Bieger and Laesser 2004; Flagestad and Hope 2001) In order to understand their effect on communication or vice versa, the organisation of the destination first needs to be understood. Weick (cited in Von Friedrichs Grangsjö and Gummesson 2006) suggests that in order to understand organising, one first needs to find out who the actors are, what they do and how they do it. Therefore, the first research questions for this project are.

Q1: Who are the actors, including stakeholder groups, in each destination?

Q2: What do they do?

Q3: How do they do it? And why?

Since the structure of a destination is thought to change through a lifecycle (Butler 1980) and time is an important factor in network dynamics (Hertz and Mattsson 2004), the next questions are concerned with development trends within the destinations and how the destination has evolved over time.

Q4: How has the destination developed over time? Why has it developed this way?

Since effective communication is thought to provide the framework for effective cooperation and effective strategic reputation management (Cornelissen 2004), it is important to determine what communication takes place within the destinations, how actors communicate and whether they believe communication is important to the strategic success of the destination. The same questions will be asked about cooperation.

Q5: How much communication/cooperation takes place between actors in the destination?

Q6: What form does this communication/cooperation take?

Q7: How important is communication/cooperation to the actors in the destination?

Varying objectives amongst actors in a destination can hinder cooperation in regards to strategic issues and it is important to understand the reasons for differences in these views, since the balance between cooperation and competition is an important balancing act in strategic networks (Von Friedrichs Grangsjö 2003; Von Friedrichs Grangsjö and Gummesson 2006). Therefore it is important to know the different actors views in regards to strategic issues and possible conflicts.

Q8: What strategic issues are facing the destination? And why?

Q9: What conflicts are there at the destination level in regards to these issues? And why

Methodology

This research methodology is based on the assumptions of the realist paradigm, in that there is thought to be one 'reality' out there, but that, as opposed to positivism, is only probabilistically measurable (Easton 2005; Perry 1998; Perry et al. 1998). Qualitative case study research into networks is thus appropriate, as it allows inquiry into a phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not always clearly evident (Carson, Gilmore, Perry and Gronhaug 2001; Yin 1994). This is particularly true in the case of networked structures, which are in themselves hard to delimit (Jarillo 1995). Comparative case study provides the possibility to look at multiple cases within their context, at different stages of development or in different configurations, and compare them using a full set of data collection methods. The comparative method does have its complications, in the sense that different units, or cases, must be compared that have a different context and different actors within them. Contextual variables need to be monitored and their effect on the case acknowledged .

In this first round of research, the initial output will be individual in depth descriptions of each destination. These will be shown to the respondents from the interviews, in order to get feedback on

the researcher's interpretation of the data. From there the individual descriptions will be revised, if necessary, and then a general theoretical model will be constructed to show the relationship between communication at the destination and the influence of structure on the ability of destinations to manage their reputation strategically. In the figure above, the cases in the first round are shown at the same level of induction, because although the researcher will be learning more at every step, the interview protocol will remain the same and only the theoretical model will bring together the results of the three cases.

Case Selection

Multiple cases are recommended for theory generation (Eisenhardt 1991; Eisenhardt 1989), with the purpose of replicating or comparing cases, rather than using each case as a respondent and summing the data (Perry 1998; Yin 2003). Hence, 'representativeness' is not an issue in case selection, as it is in statistical sampling (Perry 1998) and random sampling is not necessary (Eisenhardt 1989). However, it is important to delimit the population from which cases will be chosen, because this specifies the domain to which the results of the study may later be generalised. Cases can be chosen based on literal or theoretical replication, where the former assumes that the cases are likely to yield similar results for predictable reasons, and the latter assumes that for predictable reasons results will contradict each other (Perry 1998). The selection of cases ought to have a purpose and cases should be chosen to fill theoretical categories on literal or theoretical replication dimensions (Eisenhardt 1989; Pettigrew 1990). For this research, cases were chosen on both literal and theoretical replication dimensions in order to ensure that cases are literally comparable, based on certain dimensions, and theoretically different in order to gain insight into underlying processes in the cases. The difficulty of comparing cases is reduced, because the cases are similar in some dimensions, which makes them more likely to be comparable, where at the same time the theoretically important dimensions can be compared at different levels. Table 1, below, shows both the literal and theoretical replication dimensions considered when making case choices for this study.

Literal Replication	Theoretical Replication
Type of Destination – Alpine	Organisational Structure – centralised vs. decentralised Life cycle stage – developmental stage of the destination
Size	
Dependent on tourism – not much other industry	
Peripheral destinations	
Similar product offering	
Accessibility - opportunism	
Language – researcher's ability to communicate	

Table 1: Dimensions of literal and theoretical replication used in case selection.

Since the cases are supposed to be compared, it was necessary to assure some similarity between the destinations, so that they would be more readily comparable. The literal replication dimensions included the type of destination, which meant that only alpine tourism destinations would be considered, and the size of the destinations should be similar. The destinations should also be dependent on tourism, be peripheral, would have a similar product offering to the others and, most importantly, be accessible to the researcher. In addition to literal replication issues, the dimension of language was included after it became clear that the theoretical replication needed for the present study was not possible within New Zealand. These dimensions essentially provided the population from which specific cases were chosen. It was predicted that both the organisational structure of a destination, whether it is a centralised or decentralised, destination (Bieger and Laesser 2004; Flagestad and Hope 2001; Pavlovich 2003), as well as the life-cycle stage of a destination (Butler 1980; Goncalves and Aguas 1997; Johnston 2001) would impact on the destinations strategic ability or success. So both of these factors were deemed important as dimensions that would be theoretically replicated in the study, to be able to draw conclusions as to how they influence strategic ability.

For this study, three cases were chosen, because they were believed to cover the theoretical ground to a satisfactory extent and would allow triangulation of findings between them. Although they are in three different countries, they are thought to be comparable on all of the literal replication dimensions

and the context will be closely examined during the research in order to determine their effect on the results. Table 2, below, shows the three cases chosen.

Theoretical Dimension	Wanaka, New Zealand	Åre, Sweden	St Moritz, Switzerland
Organisational Structure	Decentralised, no major players	More centralised, two major players	Centralised/Decentralised, consolidation under a very strong RTO
Lifecycle - History	Introduction/Growth	Growth	Maturity/Decline

Table 2: Cases selected for the current studies with their perceived levels or stages on the theoretical dimensions.

As can be seen in the table, the first case, Wanaka, is decentralised, which means that it functions under what could be called a community model, and is a very young destination experiencing significant growth over recent years. Åre, is a much older destination and is growing very quickly, driven by two major players, around which most of the capital in Åre seems to be centralised. St Moritz is a mature destination, which is to some extent consolidated under a very strong RTO. As mentioned above, these categorisations are based on basic research and will need to be validated during the project. The cases selected are all very complex and only through multiple respondents would it be possible to gain a balanced picture of the case.

Respondent Selection

Since the research aims to discover the overall dynamic at the destination and get a deep insight into the communication that occurs to facilitate strategic action, it is necessary to speak with a number of local stakeholder or interest groups. It is likely that some of these will hold vastly contrary views and opinions in regards to how the destination ought to develop and behave towards the stakeholders. In amongst all of this, a deep, rich picture of reality should emerge. In order to gain insight into as many of the groups that are represented in a destination as possible, preliminary interviews with first contacts and a snowballing technique were used to identify possible groups and representatives of these groups to include in the study. The aim was to speak to people as high up in every group or organisation as possible, as well as multiple people in large organisations, because it was assumed that these people would have a better perception of the macro level dynamics that occur within their own group and in its conduct with others.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection methods are employed by the researcher to come close to the imperfectly 'knowable' reality of what is being studied. In qualitative research, the use of multiple tools is thought to be favourable, as it allows triangulation between the results, to get even closer to the subject matter (Simpson 2004). The rich data provided by multiple tools allows the generation of theory that is closer to the management reality in the case and allows conclusions to be more readily implemented by practitioners (Gummesson 2000). The three tools used for this project are unstructured observation, in-depth field interviews and collection of secondary documents.

Data analysis

The data will be coded and analysed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which will allow a deeper analysis of the very complex and very large dataset. Each destinations data will be coded individually first, but then cross case analysis will be used to compare the data. The analysis for the first stage is guided by the research questions and in qualitative research tradition aims to generate a deep, vivid picture of the destination, along with reasons for why things are the way they are.

Research Findings

The structured analysis of the data for the first two cases is in progress and the data for the third cases will be collected soon. It is too early to present the findings of the first two cases here, but instead an overview of the researcher's first impressions of the destinations and data is presented.

The first general impression is that choice of destinations was appropriate and will provide some very interesting results. Wanaka and Åre, fit the theoretical replication dimensions well, since they are both networked dependent, do have vastly different organisational structures and are experiencing different types of developmental issues, related to lifecycle stages. Secondly, it was very interesting to observe that this seems to influence the communication in regards to strategic issues and specifically the ability of the destinations to implement strategic change. And thirdly, all respondents so far have been very interested in the research project and have contributed enthusiastically. This is encouraging, since it means that this is not only an interesting area for academic study, but that communication issues are also on the minds of practitioners. A brief description of the destinations is presented below, followed by a discussion as to the importance of the initial findings in regards to the research questions.

Wanaka, New Zealand

Wanaka has a large number of different actors and groups of actors. The local council sets the policy framework in which business and life in the destination happens, but there is a lot of conflict in regards to where the destination should be heading, how it should develop and who is responsible for destination development. The main players in Wanaka are the council, the local tourism marketing organisation, the Department of Conservation, as well as other organised stakeholder groups play a major role. A lot of strategic plans exist for different parts or levels of destination management, but the implementation of these seems to be very difficult and hindered by debate and conflict amongst stakeholder groups. There is a good level of communication between stakeholder groups, but certainly not between all of them and the communication is not very proactive. This is similar to the cooperation dynamics, which seem very sporadic and there seems to be no concerted effort to get all actors to join forces. Some networks in the destination, like the local tourism marketing organisation, which is charged with destination marketing to both national and international markets, do make an effort to bring actors together, but they are finding it hard to get 'buy in' into their strategies from the wider community. Although most businesses in the region do live off tourism, there is only limited coordination amongst players to present the entire destination as a product. It is interesting to note that some residents and groups even have a negative perception of tourism and the development that it has brought, although it is clear that Wanaka's economy is reliant on tourism. Wanaka's extreme growth over the last years has infuriated local green groups and has led to a large number of court cases against developers in the region. An effort was made by the council, with help of external consultants, to set a common strategic vision for the destination through a series of planning workshops, referred to as Wanaka 2020. Community members and stakeholder groups were enthusiastic about being able to express their views and have an input into this process, but are still waiting for implementation of the plan. Many respondents expressed frustration over the tight legal framework and the council's inconsistent attitude towards development.

Åre, Sweden

In Åre, the main players are Skistar, a publicly listed company that operates the ski-facilities; Holiday Club, an international hotel group that also operates spa and conference facilities; and Åre företagarna, the local business association, which represents nearly all business in Åre, including a large number of small businesses. The local council provides the legal framework and seems to work very closely together with the major players to enhance business. The most striking finding is that the three major players as well as the council all cooperate with each other very closely and work to develop the destination together. A group, called the Vision 2011, which is made up of representatives from the council, the three major players as well as the local tourism office provides the driving force for strategic development in the village. The strategic plan developed by the group provides the objectives for development and all players are cooperating toward achieving those goals. Interesting is that at the moment no local tourism organization exists and instead the destination marketing is performed by the major players in the destination, where it seems that Skistar is responsible for the winter and Holiday Club has taken over the summer marketing. The players seem clear about what their role is in the destination and they act accordingly. The actors do cooperate with actors outside the village of Åre, but this cooperation is not as intense and organised as within the village itself. Future plans include opening the planning up to more input from smaller businesses and managers of small businesses are being 'trained' to participate in these planning exercises. In fact, training of staff is seen as important by all actors in the destination and an online training facility has been set up for prospective staff to complete before they can be employed in Åre. This is aimed at improving the

service quality by ensuring that all service staff has a minimum knowledge of the destination. The major players also cooperate on securing prestigious events for the destination, like the Alpine Ski World Championships in 2007. In fact, events are supposed to bring more tourists to the region in summer, which has previously been the low season.

Discussion

The brief overview presented some of the most interesting issues found in the data so far. In regards to the organisational questions, there is a large difference between who the actors are in the two destinations, with Wanaka being more decentralised and Åre more centralised around the activities of some major players. This seems to affect what the individual actors do and how they go about it, which in turn seems to influence the ability of the destinations to implement strategic plans. Communication in both destinations is at a reasonable level, however in Åre the communication is more results orientated, which also leads to greater cooperation in regards to strategic issues. It seems that the more centralised destination, with a more coherent 'leadership' group seems to be more effective at presenting the destination as a unit, through goal orientated cooperation. Communication in both destinations is largely informal, with some formal communication within groups and organisations. Both villages are small enough for the individual actors to know each other, which makes the social networks in the destinations very important to business. These issues are being explored in more detail in the structural analysis and will be presented at the conference.

Main contribution

Since this is a working paper and the research has not been completed, this section only outlines the expected contributions.

The main contribution to theory will be a model of how communication occurs amongst the various stakeholder groups within the destinations and how they cooperate with one another in regards to strategic decisions. The application of corporate communications and corporate reputation management principles to destinations will allow some findings to be applied to other types of networked structures. This will contribute to the network literature in general, since it is not only tourism destinations that need to coordinate or manage their various stakeholder groups in order to develop and advance their objectives.

This study will give managers in tourism destinations, or anyone who is involved in tourism or regional planning, an understanding of how important communication and cooperation between stakeholder groups is in facilitating regional developments, when there might be conflicting interests or agendas. Cooperation amongst the various stakeholders will lead to greater consistency in the image presented to the market and to the ability of the destinations to fulfill tourist expectations. The research aims to make recommendations as to how managers in destinations ought to communicate in order to develop their business within the framework of the destination.

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