

▪ Cruise Baltic Web Site Story  
A network of destinations branding online - what makes it challenging?

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the issue of brand identity building of the Cruise Baltic network member destinations. It chronicles how the paradigm of competition which traditionally caused intense rivalry amongst individual destinations, in the Cruise Baltic network context, recently, shifted an agreement to adopt the cooperation paradigm. Furthermore, it follows a two-pronged analysis, first, to identify network members' perceived challenges caused by online branding implementation, both on the individual - and collective level; secondly, to deconstruct narratives-in-use, following Boje's guidelines as research method. Study findings yield accounts of network members that shed light on options available to decision makers to deal with the challenges arising as a consequence of a joint brand identity in Cruise Baltic's online presence; also enable them to 're-position' the Cruise Baltic web site story as a multi-authored narrative.*

## **1. Introduction**

The use of Internet is increasing and people continue turning to it for more information regarding tourism destinations. Research, conducted by travel industry association of America, supports the growth in Internet usage among travelers. (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003.) Accordingly, the increased use of the Internet raises a sense of urgency amongst destination management organizations to develop and implement a destination web brand that appeal to web site visitors and seduce them to repeat visitation, to such an extent to raise position of a particular vacation destination above any other. (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003.)

In that sense, Opoku, Abratt and Pitt (2006) extend the importance of the conceptualization of brand personality to the online environment, including websites as an important element of corporate identity management. Kim and Fesenmeier (2008) have found that inspiration-related elements have the greatest impact on first-impression formation toward destination web pages.

We focus on the issue of building the brand identity of a network of destinations situated in different nations in the Baltic region, called Cruise Baltic <http://www.cruisebaltic.com>. These destinations attempt to build a collective identity and moreover and, subsequently, project the brand image online. This leads to the coexistent dimensionality of, on one hand the joint online presence versus the distributed physical and geographical locations of the actors in the network. On the other hand there is the juxtaposition of the individual self interest of the Cruise Baltic network members versus the group, or collective interest to build a joint brand identity. This discussion gives rise to our first research question:

RQ1: What makes the online branding problematic in the case of a network of destinations?

Given the geographically distributed nature of networks, it tends to be more complicated for its members to agree on their joint brand identity, as opposed to the identity for a single organization. Palmer and Bejou (1995) has studied tourism destination marketing alliances and emphasize that alliance should not be made without understanding the needs of the stakeholders. Despite the tendency to form airline alliances, the cooperation for example between Delta Airlines and Virgin Atlantic ended, when one of the partners considered it would be more beneficial to break the agreement (Palmer, 2000). In other words, each of

the stakeholders in the co-marketing alliance has to realize and understand that two or more of them can collectively achieve more than individually. This is also the situation in the cruise sector. The same holds true in relation to the decision making process that Cruise Baltic network members face as they embark on a joint corporate identity for their network of destinations. The latter evokes our second research question:

RQ2: What makes building brand identity problematic in the case of a network of destinations?

According to Rowley (2004) the discussion of branding in **the** digital age can be explored from two different perspectives: organizational strategy and brand experience. Her observation leads us to a two-pronged discourse on one hand the organization strategy vs. the multicultural network strategy in the case of the network of destinations and on the other hand the brand experience vs. the brand performance level. Despite the common identity as the goal, the alliance, the multicultural network, maintains the separate identities of the members and brings them face to face with cultural differences between the partner organizations (Rich, 2003).

## ***2. Challenges a network of destinations faces in online-branding environment***

The network of destinations branding online can be defined as “*a cooperative adoption of complex system, which specifically refers to a collective inter-organizational process whereby adoption is led by a focal firm or firms*” (Hausman, Johnston & Oydelén, 2005). Wang and Xiang (2007) emphasize as a main challenge in this inter-organizational process the *fragmented nature of tourism destinations*. They state that “the structure of the tourism industry and the complexity of destination marketing call for an integrative approach to understand the nature and dynamism of collaborative destination marketing”.

One of the challenges might be, according to Ind and Riondno (2001) that the presentation of the brand should *reflect the overall brand idea and make the most of the mediums potential*. Failure to lever the potential of the new media can be blamed largely, on the rather limited organizational perspective of the Internet as a communications channel. In the authors' view, a poly-inclusive perspective would be more in keeping with the multi-faceted nature and true value of the Web. It is embedded in the capacity of the web to be

represented and applied as both a distribution and a communications channel to facilitate access, interaction, community building, openness and comparability. The “best” Web brands optimize all these facets and integrate the Web into the other activities.

Palmer (2002) states, that although the Internet offers tremendous opportunities for developing strong destination marketing organizations on the one hand, having a web site in itself is not enough to enjoy continuing success of a tourist destination on the other. In an age when all destinations can develop a web site, the application of a coherent strategy is essential to develop position and promote an electronic presence. Still, even the best electronic strategy *will ultimately fail if not matched by a consistent delivery of promises*.

Tan Tsu Wee and Chua Han Ming (2002) emphasize that in the hyper-competitive markets of today, *brand equity based on symbolic values and meanings is becoming more important*. Brand communications evolve into the communication of an entire concept about living based on symbolic values and meanings. Gnoth (2002) differentiates three levels of customer experiences: the functional, experiential and symbolic level. While the functional level relates to the core characteristics of a product or service, the higher levels of customer experiences are represented in the core essence of a brand. Likewise the customer experiences, also the service and *destination brand performance occur at the functional, experiential and symbolic level to meet the customer needs at these levels* (Gnoth, 2002).

Hence, the need to match the experiences that customers' desire to their identification with a particular online brand represents an important trigger for the various members of a network of destinations to adopt a support system to enable smarter, simpler and more social dialogue between the Cruise Baltic brand website and its users. Representing the organizational transformation as a “journey”, the complexity of the project's inherent challenge emerges, i.e., the *move towards the symbolic level, find a 'common ground'*, one beyond the level of identifying with common functionalities, which are relatively easy to copy by competitors. Destinations represent *unusual entities in that their characteristics and complexities* may defy productive efforts at branding. Therefore, the successful of branding destinations is far from easy to attain or measure (Henderson, 2007). Nevertheless, Dickinson and Ramaseshan (2008) explored a relationship between "cooperative marketing" and performance outputs. The study was conducted among others in tourism industry. Cooperative marketing arrangements were classified as a form of strategic alliance based on equity (cross ownership) and non equity (verbal or contracted) arrangements.

Buchanan and Dawson (2007) see the organizational change, within the framework of a network of destinations branding online as a *multi-story process*; opine that the voices of its members have to be recognized in order to offer valuable insights to furthering the knowledge and understanding that guide of organizational change processes. Brohm (2005) has found *Polanyi's theory of knowing or epistemology as a way to explore the multiplicity theme in organizational changes*, and touching on many complex subtleties. Brohm (2005) likens Polanyi's concept of polycentric order to the much more recent concept of organizational networks (Powell, 1990). However, according to Brohm economic theories, including those involving organizational networks, depart from academic notions that differ fundamentally from Polanyi's. In particular, organizational networks involve a group of members, whose properties, assets and property rights differ; each in pursuit of maximizing their own interest. In the polycentric order the starting point is the shared experience, in which the participants (the network members) through mutual interactions and adjustments produce meaning, identity, interest and value. The coordination principle for polycentric order is not a market mechanism or central governance but is based on the idea of participation; sharing identity through mutual adjustments and dialogue.

Go and Fenema (2003) position the *concept of polyinclusion*, i.e., the capability of the simultaneous inclusion in multiple worlds or spaces. Examples that illustrate the application of the theoretical construct of polyinclusion in practice are: people travel while phoning to their office and watching a movie, whilst working out in a gym. In the case of Cruise Baltic the inclusion of spaces could be the emergence (compare polycentric order) of the individual destinations into the network that projects its identity in its web site. Go and Fenema (2003) conclude: "Technologies enable people to move their minds (TV, Internet), thereby expanding access to multiple channels or, putting same in different words, inclusion within 'other' worlds, cultures, ideas and spaces." In the case of Cruise Baltic the inclusion of minds could be seen, on the business-to-business level, as the shared experience, i.e., how the members perceive the common identity they wish to project in the online presence of their joint brand. On the business-to-consumer level, the *joint web site projection offers the visitors an experience of a fused mix of cultures, ideas and spaces*.

### **3. Deconstruction analysis of Cruise Baltic Web Site Story**

The Cruise Baltic network consists of ten countries and 26 destinations around the Baltic Sea, which have joined together to create a set of consistent standards to support cruise passenger operations between ports and cities. Interestingly the members have a dual identity, each can be seen both as a partner involved in the collaboration process and competitor engaged in competitive activities. Online brand promise projection is, by necessity embedded in the brand essence. Therefore, in order to project online the former, the members must agree on the essence of their common brand identity; a precondition for the ability for coherent joint-building of brand image.

How can this be accomplished? Go and Williams (1993) were able to forecast that networks, characterized by simultaneous competition and cooperation, build the central competitive advantage in the contemporary tourism industry. Also Bengtsson and Kock (2000) argue that most complex, but also most advantageous relationships between competitors, is "coop-etition" where two competitors both compete and cooperate with each other. It is essential to be able to separate the different parts of the relationship in order to profit from such a relationship.

The Figure 1 illustrates the coexistent dimensionality of, on one hand the joint online presence versus the distributed physical and geographical locations of the actors in the Cruise Baltic network. On the other hand the Figure 1 presents the juxtaposition of the individual self interest of the network members versus their group or collective interest required to build a coherent joint brand identity.

Figure 1 Juxtaposition in individual vs. group interests and online presence vs. geographical location of the network actors

Boje (2001) posits eight analytical steps, which he describes as 'story deconstruction' analysis. In this paper we apply the steps of story deconstruction analysis in the context of Cruise Baltic network of destinations. Our aim, following the steps systematically, is to be in the position upon completion of the analysis to resituate (or re-position) the narrative, to project the multi author story based on the accounts of the members perceptions about the challenges they face in the process of building the brand identity.

In order to chronicle the accounts of the Cruise Baltic actors, one of the authors interviewed at least one member of the network in each of the participating countries during the time period Autumn 2005 to Spring 2008. In all 21 persons has been interviewed. Each interview took on average between half an hour to two hours. As the accounts of members are narrative and conversational in nature, interviews were audio taped and, subsequently, transcribed. In particular, the informants were encouraged to convey their feelings regarding the paradox of belonging to a collective (transnational identity) and a national identity, each representing different interests.

Boje's story deconstruction guidelines as a method of narrative analysis includes eight steps, these are

1. Duality search
2. Reinterpret the hierarchy
3. Rebel voices
4. Other side of the story
5. Deny the plot
6. Find the exception
7. Trace what is behind the lines
8. Resituate.

In the case of Cruise Baltic brand story the *duality search* is presented in the Figure 1 above, which illustrates the juxtaposition in individual vs. group interests and online presence vs. geographical location of the network actors. As Boje (2001) states, the point of reading (and interpreting) a story for its dualizing terms is to see the play of differences. *Reinterpreting the hierarchy* in the case of Cruise Baltic branding online could mean the fact

that despite the dominating roles versus niche roles the members in the network have had in the initiating stage of their cooperation, this situation is not to be interpreted in their online brand projection context; As none of the individual destinations has claimed a dominant role or a niche player role in Cruise Baltic web site presence. *Rebel voices means* giving voice to the marginal perspectives. In the case of Cruise Baltic's web site this means that there has been a reversal in the dominant hierarchy and also that the *other side of the story is heard*. *Denying the plot* in the case of Cruise Baltic could mean that none of the destinations get a special position as "a hero", or they are all presented in a democratic fashion. *Finding the exception* can be seen as the feeling that the whole region of Baltic Sea has somehow fused together and is emerging in a semblance of unity. *Tracing what is behind the lines* could mean the understanding that the individual destinations still exist and have their special characteristics that differ from one another. *Resituating* is the ability to see both the emerging polycentrality in the form of the whole region and the individual destinations at the same time. Or to paraphrase Boje: "The idea of deconstruction is to see both images, to do a double visioning".

It should be noted that the various dimensionalities or dualities (online presence vs. physical, geographical location; Individual self interest vs. joint group interest) referred to in Figure 1 are not exhaustive. For example, other dichotomies may be viewed as relevant, such as 'single vocal narrative' vs. 'multi-vocal narrative'; 'cohesive identity' vs. 'fragmentated identity'. But due to space constraints we have limited our discourse to the aforementioned.

#### ***4. The emergence of a joint brand identity in Cruise Baltic's online presence***

From a theoretical perspective, Nandan (2005) distinguishes and contrasts two concepts, 'brand identity' vis-à-vis 'brand image', that are crucial for developing methods that contribute to fostering strong brand loyalty. In particular, the concepts of 'identity' and 'image' represent separate constructs; their congruence cannot be taken for granted. It implies, that brand identity, i.e., who we are as a firm (Kapferer, 1998) is not synonymous with the notion of 'consumer perception'(Govers, 2005).

Or more specifically, brand identity is concerned with the issue how brand strategists want the brand to be perceived. "It is a set of unique brand associations that represent what the brand stands for. These associations imply a promise to customers from organization members. Brand image is related to how the brand is currently perceived by consumers". (Aaker 1996, 68-71.) Ideally, there should be no gap between brand identity and perceived brand image. In reality, however, such gap exists (Govers, 2005), consequently raising the question, whether or not and to which extent stakeholders identify with an online (common) brand.

One of the leading informants of Cruise Baltic chronicles the making process of a common film for the web site as follows:

*"It (the cooperation project) has turned out to be a network. I mean it could have been just a project, people working together but now it is actually a network, and people are helping each others. Now it is not that important by how many pictures my destination is shown in the cruise Baltic website promotion film compared with the other destinations. The important thing is that we show this region with these facilities, the six themes that we have chosen together to represent the region as a whole."*  
(informant a.)

Gustavson and Reger (1999) present a representation of the relationship between collective organizational identity and a number of distinct sub-identities. Figure 2 illustrates the identification in the network of destinations (regional identity) in relation to the distinct national or local identities of the destinations. Following Huemer (2004) the concept contained in Figure 2 is applied in this study at the network level to determine the various issues that include the idea of a destination's network horizon. Below the Figure 2 shows how each of the destinations in the network, under scrutiny, possess their own national - and local identities, which may or may not overlap, to a significant extent, or not, with one or more other destinations.

Figure 2 The relationship between the identification in the network of destinations (regional identity) and distinct national or local identities of the destinations

The shaded area in the middle of the Figure 2 depicts the subsets of attributes that are shared by all of the destinations in the region and thus can be considered as constituting the network-wide identity. Following the argumentation in the Gustafson and Reger (1999) paper the overlapping national and local identities are loosely coupled with the **common**

**brand identity** of the network of destinations and each other and may be supportive, compatible, or conflicting.

One of the leading informants is, **as of yet, unable to detect a solution other than regarding the entire Cruise Baltic region as one symbolic entity:**

*“But especially for the cruise industry, the fact that it is not a mono destination product but we are depending of each others. One cruise is always at least five destinations, so we need to work together. I don’t see any other solution.” (informant a.)*

In the web of relationships between the Cruise Baltic members there are to be seen analogous to an ecosystem in a similar vein as Hausman & al. (2005) has stated. The strategy of the leading partners, Copenhagen and Stockholm, can be characterized as the dominator's or keystone player's in developing the whole region of the Baltic Sea. Most of their partners, again, could accord to this analogy, be characterized as niche players in the holistic model of organizations (Götlich 2003) developing from loosely coupled systems to collaborative business ecosystems.

According to the model there are three generic business strategies that are likely to yield stability and sustainable success in the cooperation of actors. These strategies are called ‘dominator’, ‘keystone’ and ‘niche players’ strategies. Dominator strategies encompass largely the character traits postulated by industrial organization models. A dominator defends its own “ecosystem” by innovating it constantly in order to defeat the competitors that represent concurring “ecosystems”. At the same time the dominator needs to invest into product and process innovations on its own or in cooperation with the partners it has integrated into its concern. Keystone strategies do not necessarily focus on proliferation. keystones observe markets and create platforms for products and services on which niche players can find fertile soil to develop their activities in order to together create network effects. To the outside keystones act as guards defending the “ecosystem” against intruding dominators. Niche players’ role in a keystone-controlled “ecosystem” is to develop skills to adjust to the defaults originating from the keystone and to specialize on products and services that belong to their core competence. (Götlich 2003.)

As the Cruise Baltic members see the idea of cooperation versus the viewpoints of the differently positioned, **mono-situated destinations** in the network, **as follows:**

*“The successful cruise business demands cooperation between the destination and the port. The reason why Stockholm and Copenhagen were interested in investing so much energy in order to develop the other destinations was that they wished to develop the cruise product from mono destination into the multi destination product. And in this work they needed the input of the other destinations in the region, as well.” (informant b.)*

*“The benefits from the cooperation may vary – Copenhagen already has the standards, but it gains of getting more visibility whereas Gdynia, for example, gets more of facility and the know how of Copenhagen and Stockholm and some others of the more experienced ports.” (informant c.)*

Fyall, Callod and Edwards (2003, 644) state that the peculiarities of the destination product complicate the building of relationships with the tourist and diminish the value of such efforts while promoting the value of greater inter-organizational collaboration. Also Carey, Gountas and Gilbert (1997, 425) state that sustainable tourism is dependent on the effective cooperation of all the stakeholders in the industry, for example, suppliers, intermediaries, public sector and consumers. Selin and Chavez (1995) emphasize the dynamic and complex nature of tourism partnerships and require for further research examining tourism partnerships at both the network and organizational levels of analysis.

*“During this project we have developed a good product, Cruise Baltic, and if we actually work together it can be sold as a whole union. That does not only have to do with the individual destinations, but you have to make the ships to come into the region.” (informant d.)*

Silversides has examined (2001, 175) some key issues, which label successful networks in the sector of advertising agencies and found that networks need an identity and they take time and trust. Networks also need a pride in the group's identity and reputation.

One of the actors describes the moment when Cruise Baltic received an award of “Cruise Destination of the Year 2007”:

*“When the award was announced I look around and saw the participants' faces and they all looked proud. It was wonderful, they had a part in this project,*

*and they also thought that this was my project, I have won the prize. I think that's part of the hard work". (informant e.)*

Moreover, networks provide learning and constant development for individuals and firms who are reflective.

*"We think we are so alike, living so close to each others. But then, a close look reveals that there are differences between Norwegian and Finnish and Swedish people, not to mention the Baltic States. It demands quite a lot of diplomacy, and sometimes just the ability to make decisions. Ten countries with different languages and cultures, this is quite a lot. Our joint language is English, but of course there are variations in how well everybody knows the English language. But all in all, it is strength and we also learn from each other. And as it regards the product development, so many countries to choose from, it makes the product very rich and multifaceted. (informant b1 and b2.)*

The creation of trust between local and global systems (Ganzaroli 2002) and in the management of business relationships has become crucial for most all firms (Batt & Purchase 2004, 173; Ford et al., 2003). Huemer (204, 251) identifies a number of trade-offs associated with trust and identity when developing business relationships in networks. Li (2005, 93) researched different effects of trust and shared vision on knowledge-transfer and found that in managing knowledge transfer, trust is more influential factor in inter-organizational relationships, while shared vision, in contrast, is more influential in intra-organizational relationships. According to Tell (2004, 121) organization's identity is seen as a stabilizing resource, whereas network identity is an activity that may lead to increased variety. Trust, as well, is built up over time and it is a result of an activity, which is needed in order to cope with dependency of connected actors and furthermore, it offers a sense of continuity. (Tell 2004, 121.)

As one of the participants sees the continuity and belonging together because of the cooperation:

*"It has been a very nice experience for me to have to do with these different nationalities and cultures, and also the common sense to be a Baltic man or woman. This has most obviously connected us, too." (informant f.)*

Inkpen and Tsang (2005, 146-165) identify structural (network ties, network configurations and network stability), cognitive (shared goals and shared culture) and relational (trust) dimensions affecting the transfer of knowledge between network members.

One of the newcomers among the participants sees the Cruise Baltic cooperation like this:

*“The Cruise Baltic has really managed to make competitors cooperators, or competitors to cooperate, because they have this, they need each other. They have been clear in this brand building and they knew what their goals were. (informant g.)*

Hardy, Lawrence and Grant (2005, 58-77) argue that effective inter-organizational collaboration emerges out of a two-stage process. In this process conversations produce discursive resources creating a collective identity and translate it into effective collaboration. Also Quinn and Dutton (2005, 36-57) emphasize the conversational dimension in coordination proposing that the energy that people generate and deplete as they coordinate affects both how conversations unfold and the effort that people devote to coordinated activities.

Here follows how one of the partner members describes the working methods deployed:

*“In the working groups everybody is setting their input in the brainwashing. Everybody from different countries, different kind of people, and then we begin to construct the ideas into the one common statement, approving some and neglecting some.” (informant h.)*

The process of building the brand identity the Cruise Baltic is projecting on its website has continued several years. Based on the interviews we were able to deconstruct the multi-voiced process. Based on the study findings, subsequently contribute to the felt aim to resituate the expressed multi-voiced narrations, anchored in national interests through a poly-inclusive approach. The conceptual result of the application of polycentric ordering enabled the cohering the various separate members' web narratives, to a multi-author narrative referred to as the Cruise Baltic Web Site Story.

## **5. Conclusions**

When the use of Internet as a way of searching information about the destinations is increasing, the importance of creating a destination web brand that differentiates itself in a positive way from the competitors' has become significant. In this paper our focus has been on the issue of building the brand identity of cruise destinations belonging to the Cruise Baltic network. The individual destinations in the network have traditionally been competitors, but during the recent four years they have agreed on a cooperation project, which has been partly funded by EU. This organizational change process is characterized by a duality or dimensionality of the individual self interests of the network participants versus their joint group interest to build a joint brand identity, which they can project online.

In this paper we have analyzed, **firstly**, the challenges the network of destinations is facing in its online branding because of the fragmented nature of tourism destinations and the complexity of destination marketing. Despite of the medium the best brand strategy fails if it does not meet the promises of the brand. Also the ability to express the brand performance at a level that meets the customers' or tourists' symbolic needs is one of the greatest challenges the network of the destinations has to manage in order to succeed in its online branding. The network of the destinations branding online can be seen as a multi-story process. The concept of polycentric order is presented as a way to understand that the starting point in a cooperation project, like Cruise Baltic, is the shared experience, the joint values and interests, which form the core for the successful building of common brand identity. Technology, the online presence offers inclusion of spaces and minds. In other words, the joint web site projection offers the visitors an experience of a fused mix of cultures, ideas, and spaces.

Secondly we have in this paper followed Boje's deconstruction guidelines as a method of narrative analysis. We have aimed to find these steps of analysis and applied them in the narrative of Cruise Baltic online presence.

Finally, the study findings revealed insights enabling the conceptual resituating of the Cruise Baltic web site story as a multi-author narrative, which is partly based on the challenges the network of destinations is facing in its online branding, and partly based on the accounts of the participants of the network. These accounts are shedding light on the possible ways of dealing with the challenges on the emergence of a joint brand identity in Cruise Baltic's online presence.

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