

The Issues of Strategic Dissemination of Information in Croatian Tourism

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Summary

The paper deals with the problems of strategic dissemination of information in Croatian tourism. The introductory part treats the planning or, precisely, the strategic planning as a generic activity of management. Furthermore, it shows the results of a questionnaire carried out among Croatian tourism management experts about determining the messages disseminated in the tourism market, as much as in-depth interviews about determining the information disseminated in the tourism market. In addition, the paper deals with the issues of formulating, implementing and evaluating the strategies of information dissemination in Croatian tourism. In the concluding part it is asserted that tourist destinations must pay necessary attention to the collecting, processing, storing and disseminating of information, which should result with adequate messages, later conveyed to the tourism market.

Keywords: information, message, dissemination, strategy, Croatian tourism.

Introduction

The future is the source of numerous opportunities and dangers. Therefore, the task for all those who bear responsibility of decision making, i.e. management, is, among else, to anticipate the future and to plan the changes which will be taking effect in the years to come.¹ Planning is one of the basic functions of management. It includes the defining of organization objectives and the ways of reaching them, and it concerns the decision-making in all stages. Planning is a generic activity, whose aim is growth and development. The aim is a desired condition achieved by planning, so its purpose is to define priorities. Planning includes a future period necessary for a series of actions aimed at realizing the strategy comprised in today's decisions.² Accordingly, management of tourist destinations aimed at quantity and quality improvement, and growth and development of tourism, seeks to define a strategy, to plan future actions efficiently and to envisage trends, phenomena and events in organizational environment. Strategy can be defined as a means of accomplishing the goal. Strategy can be described as a direction chosen by the organization in order to accomplish the goal. According to Mintzberg³ there are five ways of using the word strategy: plan – deliberately chosen the course of actions; endeavour – a certain manoeuvre for the purpose of outwitting the rival; pattern – in a series of actions; position – the means of positioning the organization into environment; perspective – an integrative way of perceiving the world. Mintzberg observes the links between the five ways of using the word strategy and concludes that it is necessary to explore various perspectives of a certain organization and its activities described by each of the words. Strategy is based on determining the basic and long-term objectives of a specific project and on the analysis of organizational environment, which should be formalized in the form of a strategic plan. Management should try to avoid crisis situations by pondering upon long-term consequences of each activity. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure guidelines as a basis of not only future activities but also of avoiding unpleasant surprises in case of unforeseen developments. Eventually, it should be pointed out that a quality strategy results in a better acceptance of the organization identity by its actual and potential consumers, and can strengthen the competitive position compared to other organizations.

Research methodology

In its empirical part the research was carried out by means of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The respondents in the questionnaire were supposed to use

¹ Srića, V., *Inventivni menedžer*, Croman & MEP Consult, Zagreb, 1994, p.20

² Griffin, R.W., *Management* 3rd ed., Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1990., pp.158-189.

³ Mintzberg, H., *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1994.

the following scale: 1- absolutely not, 2 – mostly not, 3 – neither yes nor no, 4 – mostly yes, 5 – definitely yes. In this research there was not a sampling method, but the whole population was interviewed since the respondents were the representatives of tourist boards on a specific level. Although the regulations related to founding, structuring, working methods, objectives, tasks, financing, managing and other issues essential for a proper functioning of the tourist board system, stipulate the obligation for the local government to found tourist boards and to make them operational – this is not the case. According to the data obtained from the Direction of the Development of Tourist Boards and Selective Types of Tourism, controlled by the Ministry of the Sea, Tourism, Transport and Development of the Republic of Croatia, two counties, seventeen cities, and forty-eight municipalities did not establish or activate their tourist boards in the time of the research. The system comprises 328 tourist boards, among which 257 or 78% are operational. Consequently, the non-operational tourist boards from the system do not belong to the population and for that matter they are not relevant for this research. In carrying out the research and interviews, tourist board directors took active part. The questionnaire was filled in by 142 representatives of tourist boards on all levels. This meant 55% of the tourist boards on all levels concerning the whole population.

The in-depth interview was carried out with 7 respondents – the representative of the Ministry of the Sea, Tourism, Transport and Development, the representative of the Croatian Tourist Board and other five representatives of various tourist boards: of the Zadar County and of the cities of Poreč, Opatija, Split, and Dubrovnik. The survey was carried out in cooperation of the Ministry of the Sea, Tourism, Transport and Development and the Croatian Tourist Board's main office. The questionnaires were delivered by the Ministry to the tourist board offices and when filled in later collected by the Croatian Tourist Board's main office and forwarded to the Ministry. The Ministry sent on the filled in questionnaires for the data processing. The research was carried out within the intervals of 45 days, namely from 15 July to 31 August 2004. The data from the questionnaires were brought into a specially constructed electronic matrix and then processed by the computer programme *Statistica 6.0* (Statsoft). The in-depth interview was carried out directly or by phone. The collected data were processed within the intervals of 15 days, namely from 1 to 15 September 2006.

Research results

The questionnaire contained two statements: (1) it is necessary to determine only one message for the specific market and (2) it is necessary to determine more different messages for the specific market. The results of the research for the above mentioned statements (by ordinal numbers) are presented in the following table:

Table 1: The standpoints of Croatian tourist management about determining the messages disseminated on tourism market

statement	number of respondents	medium value	minimum	maximum	standard deviation
1.	142	3.106	1	5	1.230
2.	142	3.472	1	5	1.213

It results from the questionnaire that Croatian tourist management, namely the directors of tourist board offices, in relation to both statements – *it is necessary to determine only one message for the specific market* and *it is necessary to determine more different messages for the specific market* – take ambivalent standpoints. This implies the need for reassessing the efficiency of the present practice of determining key messages disseminated by our tourist management on the market. It also leads to the conclusion that it is possible to improve the present practice of their determining in Croatian tourism. The in-depth interview contained the questions about determining the information disseminated on the tourism market. The results of the in-depth interview show that the determining of information disseminated on the tourism market is carried out on the basis of discussions led within the bodies of tourist boards. In certain cases it is carried out in cooperation with other exponents of tourism policy, experts in the field of communication and specialized public relations firms. Very often, they are determined by public calls.

Formulating the strategy of information dissemination

Efficient communication should be based on the objective evaluation of the position of tourist destination on the market. Regardless the research efficiency, i.e. collecting and processing of information, very important is the attentive observation of changes in the environment. Due to over saturation by information, which affects not only individuals but organizations as well, communication becomes an important factor, on which the efficiency of tourist destination usually depends. The objective insight into the position on the tourism market can help develop strategies of information dissemination, which will make it possible for a specific tourist destination to form its characteristic identity. Before determining the strategy, it is important to know how the tourism market or a group of tourist and potential tourist perceive a tourist destination, i.e. what attributes they use to describe it. The ways of discovering the related information include the carrying out of quality and quantity research of tourists' attitudes, the analysis of former media coverage of a specific destination and its competition, together with internal brainstorming of organization members concerning the tourist destination. After considering the state of affairs regarding internal and external environment, we can continue with setting the goals for the strategy of information dissemination. This is the stage in which we should evaluate the results of the communication process – the reaction of the market on the level of

efficiency of the process of transferring the information to tourists' decisions concerning the choice of tourist destination. Consequently, the goals should be flexible and should be adjustable to changes in internal and external environment. Dissemination of information has certain costs. Too much information about unimportant matters is equally questionable as too little information about important matters. Therefore, the efficiency of communication processes depends on those whose duty is to ensure information, as much as on those who are engaged in delivering messages. A clear picture about targeted groups of recipients is needed in advance. It is easy to make a long list of recipients, but since time and money are limited, it is necessary to rank them in order of importance and influence concerning the goals set in the communication process.⁴ Eventually, forming the strategy of information dissemination includes the determining of key messages. By developing the key messages, we should avoid indefinite statements, excessively complex statements and, in general, too much information. It is important to investigate the efficiency of messages on a specific sample of respondents. With respect to the heterogeneous character of the media, it is important to investigate the impact of messages in different forms of transfer. They can be clear and without excessive simplifying.⁵ The tourism market is crowded with information and the recipients will simply not be able to memorize too complex messages.

Implementing the strategy of information dissemination

The strategy of information dissemination includes information, i.e. transfer of information, and communication, i.e. presenting the information in the form of key messages adjusted to targeted market segments. The media, and especially TV and radio stations, i.e. electronic media which have become the main means of conveying information, play the most important role in this process. A quick and easy access to the media is indispensable. The members of the team responsible for the implementation of the strategy, or the team PRs, should be available to the media at any time. Websites should become more accessible and more attractive for users and should be updated regularly with new contents. They are more efficient and cheaper than traditional means (catalogues, leaflets, posters, publications, etc). There is also a need to form a team of experts, with necessary professional support, who will be able to respond quickly to problem situations. The services of questions and answers should be dedicated a special attention. The availability of such services should be advertised.⁶ The strategy of information dissemination should include the list of all relevant communica-

⁴ Communication strategy, Step by Step Guide, Economic & Social Research Council, <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk>, June, 2006.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Adjusted from: Communication Strategy Enlargement, European Commission, 2000.

tion activities in a form of a feasibility plan. Regarding the quality improvement of Croatian tourism, the communication activities can include branding, development of destination identity, media relations, publications, e-communication, events, etc. Generally speaking, by planning communication activities we should focus on the most important and most influential market segments, determine priority activities, and establish the possibilities for the rationalization of the strategy implementation costs. After making the list of priority market segments, it is important to determine the most appropriate channels they can be reached through. In this context, it is equally important to think about various time framework, imperatives, language and objectives of the targeted market segments.⁷ If a specific segment is important to Croatian tourism, it does not have to mean that even Croatia as a tourist destination is important to potential tourist of the given market. Many of them feel over saturated with information, and, accordingly, the information should be disseminated by conveying only the relevant ones for them. For success on the offer-saturated tourism market, it is crucial for the content of information to be clear enough. In tourism not even secondary communication channels should be neglected. Maybe not every particular tourist should be reached directly. However, some types of the public, such as the media, are at the same time a channel towards other types of public, i.e. potential tourists, and they are also the public themselves. Therefore, it is wrong to underestimate the strength and importance of the media. Two-way communication is equally important for the development of relations with various segments of the tourism market. Accordingly, channels should be determined, which will be used in order to get feed-back information. The following communication tools can be used in implementing the components of the strategy of information dissemination: brochures, leaflets, posters, fliers, etc; interviews with TV and radio stations, newspapers and the media in general; interactive CDs; articles for selected magazines; interactive websites and information services; letters; personalized and mass electronic distribution of short and simple messages; e-bulletins, short video presentations, newsletters. Having designed the communication plan, we can start with the estimation of the time and budget needed for carrying out the strategy of information dissemination. We must also plan the money for unforeseen developments that can occur during the development of strategy. There are also ways of saving time and money spent on communication. Using e-mail and web communication instead of paper – after initial expenses, can be a cheaper way of communication. It also includes using specialized firms for particular tasks such as organization of conferences, designing and printing of publications and developing of websites. Although this may seem more expensive in short-terms, it can also save precious time of the team members responsible for strategy implementation and

⁷ Adjusted from: Communication Strategy Enlargement, European Commission, 2000.

can ensure professional and directed communication by avoiding hidden expenses and inefficiency. Using somebody else's expertise can help with advice and support. Not less important is using only the channels relevant for a specific market segment, focusing on activities of high impact and low costs, and a good estimation of the influence of each activity.⁸ A successful implementation of the strategy requires active participation of the public sector, primarily Parliament and the Government of the Republic of Croatia. The Ministry of Tourism should secure a framework for coordinating communication and information activities of all parties concerned who are included in the implementation of the strategy. Within this framework, it is necessary to establish a team for managing communication and information. Communication processes between the members of the team can be programmed or not.⁹ Programmed communication is carried out in case of frequent situations. Communication is supported by the programme that defines all the methods and procedures developed to be applied at certain moments. If the members of the team work autonomously on routine tasks, communication should be minimal and automatic. However, in certain cases the members of the team can 'produce' too many reports so that the leader of the team can know what they are doing, and which limits the 'communicational capacity' of the team. Over saturation with information is a common cause why the members of the team avoid being engaged in the communication important for the team. Regarding the technology that makes it possible for us to exchange and to store a large amount of information, we, in fact, do that because we can, without even asking ourselves whether it brings some new value or not. The members of the team must provide each other with sufficient information about the areas where their work is interdependent for the purpose of coordination. The team must agree about methods and procedures for this kind of communication to be maintained and coordinated. Communication is not programmed when there are no adopted procedures which will resolve conflict situations, so communication requires a special treatment. When the members of the team observe some changes, it is of critical importance to inform the whole team about it. Communication should be continuous, comprehensive and in due time. Namely, the changes that occur in one place can be a landmark for something that will affect sooner or later some other parts of the system. The team that do not exchange that kind of information is not efficient. Regardless the fact that the members of a certain team can work together in developing answers to changed conditions, there is always a danger for their communication to become chaotic. Certain skills are needed so that they can communicate with each others in different time and from different places. Especially here, the team

⁸ Communication strategy, Step by Step Guide, Economic & Social Research Council, <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk>, June, 2006.

⁹ Kimbal, L., Developing the Team's Communication Strategy, Caucus, <http://consortium.caucus.com/published.html>, June 2006.

should use the main part of communication means that they have at their disposal, i.e. technology, time and energy.

Information dissemination evaluation strategy

The efficiency assessment of information dissemination strategy is inevitable. Implementing the evaluation discipline in the strategy from the very beginnings enables survey and promotion of the strategy as a flexible document. Therefore, the function of evaluation relies on the assessment and feedback, i.e., on the comparison of the goal and the level of accomplishment. It is especially important to point out that the efficiency of evaluation is in a strong correlation with the planning, because only the evaluation affecting and changing people's behaviour is efficient. In such a way the concentration of tourist management can be directed only towards the issues interesting for Croatian tourism and requiring a certain reaction. With regard to the initial goals and activities, it is important to incorporate some very simple implemental indicators and evaluation methods, such as: research of tourists' standpoints related to the quality of Croatian offer as a tourist destination 'before and after'; systematic observation of media coverage (so that the information supply and the transfer of messages can be necessarily adjusted); supervision of website usage. The strategy of information dissemination should include time schedule of the main communication activities. It should include deadlines, sections, and evaluation points. The process of information management requires time, and the best strategy will fail if there is no thinking about the ways of using it. The accurate estimate of time needed for dissemination is important for the feasibility of the strategy. Evaluation is based on information and measurable results of the strategy implementation. Accordingly, so that the strategy can reach the goal, we need the support of information system which will provide Croatian tourist management with necessary information that will help make decisions about improving the strategy of information dissemination, which is the basic element of the information management model functioning in the quality improvement of Croatian tourism.

Conclusion

Tourism (especially its economy effects) is extremely important for Croatia. However, it is doubtful whether it can be recognized as a destination on the tourism market. By considering and determining tourist destination policy, Croatian tourist management must endeavour in trying to act directly on factors that mould the perception of tourist and potential tourists, for the purpose of affecting the results of market competition in the future. Given the fact that tourist are becoming ever more sophisticated, their expectations from tourist destination continue to grow. The processes in tourism are significantly influenced by continuous perfecting information and communication technologies. Tourist are exposed to a large quantity of information, so tourist destinations must seriously

pay attention to collecting, processing, storing and dissemination of information, which should result in adequate messages conveyed to the tourism market.

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