

Incongruity between expression and experience: The role of imagery in supporting the positioning of a tourism destination brand

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Abstract

Branding has a role to play in integrating efforts to promote tourism. The positioning strategy for the Tourism Brand Ireland initiative is based on the core values of friendly people and unspoiled beautiful scenery. Images on the main national tourism promotion websites are examined in the context of the expectations created for visitors to Ireland. As the nature of Ireland changes with increasing economic success, the sustainability of the current positioning for the Irish tourism brand may be questioned. Ongoing in-depth research into the perceptions and expectations of visitors, as well as the attitudes of the host population, is critical to guide strategic marketing planning for destinations.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is now the largest indigenous industry in terms of revenue for the Irish Exchequer, producing a record number of 6.1 million visitors in 2001. This paper is written in the context of the ongoing Tourism Brand Ireland initiative which, since its launch in 1997, has provided a framework for branding and promoting Ireland. The positioning strategy adopted by Tourism Brand Ireland is based on 'people and place', essen-

tially what the Irish Tourism Board, Bord Failte, describe as 'the attraction of Ireland's intriguing and engaging people, within a rich, colourful, unspoiled, natural and cultural environment'.¹ The message used to articulate this positioning is 'Ireland, an emotional experience'. Essentially, the image of a friendly host population ('people') and unspoiled and beautiful scenery ('place') are the 'core values' for Irish tourism.²

This paper will seek to examine

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the sustainability of this positioning strategy; are the images of 'people and place' used in Irish tourism promotion realistic? This paper examines the role of branding in tourism destination marketing, with particular attention given to the development of the Tourism Brand Ireland initiative by Bord Failte. The observations of O'Connor³ on Irish tourist imagery and its relationship to national self-image will be revisited in the context of perceived changes in the nature of the Irish welcome and the environment which together support the 'people and place' positioning. Contemporary tourist images of Ireland as presented on Bord Failte's international websites are examined to see if there have been any subtle shifts in imagery, relating to images of Irish people and landscapes. The implications for the tourism positioning strategy of changes in the 'core values' will be discussed with reference to the assertion that promotion tends to be the only element of the marketing mix applied to tourism,⁴ and that, in order to manage tourist expectations and experience satisfactorily, the product must also be considered.

There has been little research in the Irish context on the use and implications of tourist imagery and particularly in relation to overall national marketing strategy. This paper is exploratory in nature and aims to engage in the discussion about the nature of the 'core values' which underpin the positioning of the Irish tourism strategy.

THE ROLE OF BRANDING IN TOURISM

The nature of branding, particularly the relationship between brand promise and performance, is explored by

Schreuer⁵ who describes the 'simple premise' that marketing communications create brand expectations, while operations deliver on that promise. The 'operations' in the context of destination branding effectively include all aspects of the holiday experience. As branding becomes more important, Schreuer sees consumers becoming 'increasingly sophisticated about the relationship between brand promise and performance'.

The issue of whether it is possible to brand a destination is one which has engaged many observers. Cross⁶ asks 'Can you brand a destination like a pair of trainers?' It can be said that destination brands are less developed⁷ and generally more complex due to the diversity of service provision.

Branding for tourism products and actual tourist destinations is quite different; destinations are not perceived as brands by the general public. Clarke⁸ has identified six benefits of tourism branding:

- As tourism is typically high-involvement, branding helps to reduce the choice.
- Branding helps in reducing the impact of intangibility.
- Branding conveys consistency across multiple outlets and through time.
- Branding can reduce the risk factor attached to decision making about holidays.
- Branding facilitates precise segmentation.
- Branding helps to provide a focus for the integration of producer effort, helping people to work towards the same outcome.

The integration of tourism promotion effort and the desire to deliver a clear

positioning statement for Irish tourism were critical factors in the decision to launch Tourism Brand Ireland.

DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM BRAND IRELAND

Growth in the Irish tourism industry over the period from 1988 to 1995 far exceeded any other European country, with the number of overseas visitors increasing from 2.4 million in 1988 to 4.2 million. The concept of developing a tourism brand for Ireland emerged from a realisation that it would be difficult to sustain this growth in an increasingly competitive international environment.⁹ The other factors which acted as a spur in the branding initiative included reductions in contributions from the European Union Structural Fund, the potentially damaging consequences for the environment of greatly increased visitor numbers, the need to extend the tourism 'season' beyond the traditional peak of June to August and the challenge of reducing the impact of the imbalance of visitor numbers towards the South-West, West and Dublin.¹⁰

A strategic redirection of the marketing of Ireland abroad was deemed necessary; this involved developing a single brand for Ireland. The key desired outcome of the Tourism Brand Ireland initiative was to develop perceptions among international consumers of Ireland as a destination which is active, authentic, cultural, friendly, personal and memorable.¹¹ The research underpinning the branding exercise had uncovered perceptions among overseas consumers that Ireland has a macho culture where the pub is pre-eminent. Also, with reference to the critical

ingredients of entertainment, things to do and see, and expectation of fun, the focus group's results indicated that Ireland was not seen to deliver in these areas. The Tourism Brand Ireland initiative was essentially intended to change these negative perceptions and present a more realistic image of Ireland.¹²

PEOPLE AND PLACE IN THE POSITIONING OF TOURISM BRAND IRELAND

The ease of interaction with Ireland's friendly people and the delight of a colourful and cultural landscape have been the twin pillars of the Irish tourism product offering, forming the 'core values' of Irish tourism as perceived by overseas visitors to Ireland.

Images of Irish people

The appropriateness of tourism imagery and its relationship to reality is a controversial issue. Important work in the Irish context has been carried out by O'Connor, who maintains that Irish people are presented in advertising as 'simple people living their lives in traditional ways far away from the hustle and bustle of city (life)'; effectively Ireland has been traditionally presented as a pre-modern society.¹³ According to O'Connor, tourist imagery is significant in providing a self-image for the Irish nation. This is because, first, the length of Irish exposure to tourist representation — essentially since the 19th century and with ongoing initiatives such as the Tidy Towns competition — has assisted in making Irish people very aware of their 'presentation of self' to others. Secondly, a traditionally

high level of contact between natives and visitors has helped to facilitate an awareness of how the natives are perceived by outsiders. O'Connor maintains that an abundant availability of visual tourist publicity on Ireland and the Irish has been influential in providing a 'mirror' image: 'the way in which we see ourselves is substantially determined by the way in which we are seen by others'.¹⁴ It can be argued, however, that the increased wealth and arguably augmented self-confidence of Ireland in recent years may well mean that Irish people may no longer comply with this mirror analogy.

Quinn,¹⁵ in her analysis of Bord Failte brochures, found that Irish people were typically depicted in service settings reassuring tourists that they are like personal friends of the family. She also found that a higher than average amount of space was devoted to the landscape theme: 39 per cent of Bord Failte space as opposed to 32 per cent in comparative studies of 21 national tourist board brochures.

One of the most striking aspects of Irish tourist imagery according to O'Connor¹⁶ is the way in which Irish people are presented; Irish people are regarded as an 'essential ingredient in the publicity package', with much more emphasis in Irish tourism promotion literature on the qualities of Irish people than in other European countries which have not been colonised or become economically dependent and/or peripheral.

According to O'Connor, 'Hospitable, friendly, welcoming are three recurring and related epithets of tourist publicity.' She ascribes this friendliness to a desire to please the tourist but points out that the emphasis on people has lessened somewhat for a

number of reasons, for example, more emphasis on quality. In this context, O'Connor is referring to, for example, the increasing importance of quality in food. As the friendly, convivial reception is presented as being an intrinsic part of the Irish tourism product, however, any perceived diminution of this will lead to a perception that the quality of the tourist experience has suffered.

Images of place

According to O'Connor,¹⁷ the depiction of empty space in much Bord Failte literature is also striking — this is ascribed to 'colonial constructions' and refers to a 'certain ironic truth' because of the impact of emigration in certain parts of the island (such as the West). Her thesis is that Ireland has been, and continues to be, constructed as 'other' to cater for the needs of other Europeans and North Americans. O'Connor maintains that this construction has negative implications for the local population in terms of identity and self-worth and interaction with tourists.

Observations on tourism and indigenous peoples by, for example, Butler and Hinch¹⁸ may have resonance also in Ireland, which, until the arrival of the 'Celtic tiger' economy, was comparatively underdeveloped. They claim that the exposure of many tourists to indigenous cultures is 'limited to a master/servant in economically underdeveloped countries, or to fleeting, often staged and inauthentic representations of traditional life-styles'.

Part of the rationale of Western-based economic thinking is that indigenous peoples are seen to have

a competitive advantage because of unique cultural and physical resources. The emphasis in Irish tourism promotion on the emotional relationship between the visitor and the friendly host is reflective of this thinking.

Other significant work in this area has been carried out by Pritchard and Morgan¹⁹ who have examined the branding strategy adopted by the Wales Tourist Board, specifically the representations of Wales used in promotional advertising. They argue that the representations used in destination marketing are not simple value-free expressions of a place's identity, but are, in fact, 'the culmination of historical, social, economic and political processes'. For example, they point to the resurgence of interest in the Welsh language and other factors such as political devolution. These changing socio-cultural processes will result in greater representation of the Welsh cultural and linguistic heritage in domestic and overseas destination marketing.

Images from Bord Failte's main tourist website

An examination of the Bord Failte international website (<http://www.ireland.travel.ie>) would support O'Connor's point that presentation of the Irish people is not as dominating an image as before. The main information icon on 'Want to see more on Ireland?' presents the wording 'friendly, beautiful, relaxing'. The more-detailed sections which follow are dominated by landscapes and culture. The site for the US market, however, features some 'stories' describing aspects of the Irish visitor experience. 'Consider yourself at

home' and 'Emerald green and Texas friendly' are two of these accounts by visitors, which emphasise the traditional friendliness of the Irish.

The images of wide-open spaces with few or no people are still strongly evident from the international Bord Failte website. There are a number of 360-degree shots on the site which allow the viewer to have a panoramic view of some Irish scenes. The images are of 'Wicklow', 'Glencveagh', 'boats', '12 Bens', 'cliffs', 'Kil-liney' and 'O'Connell Street'. What is striking about these images is the dearth of people; apart from 'O'Connell Street' (Dublin), and a boats scene at a pier with a small number of people, three of the remaining images do not contain any people, and two images have just one person in splendid isolation.

SUPPORTING THE POSITIONING OF TOURISM BRAND IRELAND

The initial rationale for the brand recognised that since Ireland was attempting to differentiate its product offering internationally, it was in fact engaged in a branding exercise.²⁰ This acknowledgment of the competitive situation internationally not only justified, in the opinion of Bord Failte, the branding initiative, but also raised the issue of the positioning strategy to be adopted. According to Ries and Trout,²¹ who popularised positioning, 'positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect. That is, you position products in the mind of the prospect.' As already outlined, market research carried out by Bord Failte uncovered quite negative impressions of Ireland. Tourism Brand Ireland aimed to promote the positive aspects

of a holiday in Ireland which can be summed up as 'Ireland: an emotional experience'.

The dilemma in choosing images for destination marketing identified by Nickerson and Moisey²² is that while 'places evoke all sorts of emotional experiences', it can be difficult for the marketer to provide an inspirational image that would be interpreted in the same way by all potential visitors. They recommend going back to the simplification of branding and positioning based on the visitor's experience as seen by features in a destination. In the Irish context, this would mean positioning on the basis of specific features such as the Cliffs of Moher, Lakes of Killarney, and so on. An interesting question to ask is 'What are the destination images that are critical in positioning the destination?' It is critical to have continuous market research to match the tourist destination with the type of tourist;²³ it is also vital to pre-test destination images in the target markets so that the images can be used most effectively in overseas promotion.

Importance of the tourism product

It must be acknowledged that the Tourism Brand Ireland initiative has been impressive, with revenues growing rapidly. The most tangible feature of the Tourism Brand Ireland initiative is the promotional support, which has incorporated a strong visual impact including a new logo with tailored advertisements for individual markets. Companies and governments have, however, applied only part of the marketing mix to tourism (ie promotion), with little attention paid to the other element. The marketing function may be interpreted narrowly as being

concerned with advertising, promotion and, to an extent, price.²⁴ This ignores the fact that the tourism destination product itself is made up of an amalgam of tourism products, offering an integrated experience to consumers²⁵ of not only the service providers — hotels and guesthouses, restaurants and travel companies — but also the informal contacts with Irish people in a hotel bar, when asking for directions, and so on.

There are two significant aspects relating to the tourism product and its capacity to support the positioning of emotional experience with Irish people and place:

- The impact of tourism on the tourism product itself. Internationally, destination marketing organisations tend to place emphasis on increasing visitor numbers without assessing the negative environmental consequences.
- The changing nature of the tourism product. The substantial economic growth in Ireland may have had a negative impact on the 'sense of place' of Irish people, with a perceived dilution of the traditional Irish values of friendliness, and the distinctive sense of national identity.²⁶ This raises important issues about the changing nature of the Irish tourism product and the validity of images of Ireland projected in campaigns promoting tourism.

Whither the traditional Irish welcome?

There have been signals that the strength of the Irish welcome and the integrity of the landscape are both

coming under attack. A string of editorial and feature pieces in the national media paint a consistently alarming picture. According to the environmental campaigner, Professor David Bellamy, Ireland's rural landscape is suffering from too much development in the wrong places;²⁷ there is also overcrowding in a number of popular destinations.²⁸ According to Professor Frank Convery from the Environmental Institute at University College Dublin, Ireland risks getting a negative perception in Europe because of its environmental problems relating to issues such as poor quality drinking water.²⁹

According to Mike Welsford, brand expert, the Irish tourism brand is coming under increased pressure from prosperity and apathy; 'it's about building an understanding of Brand Ireland's core values and living these out as a personal commitment'.³⁰

Bord Failte's own research has indicated that while the advantages of Ireland over other destinations are the Irish people and scenery, there is evidence of a decline in the number of visitors mentioning the Irish people as the main advantage.³¹ This erosion of the core values of friendliness and the natural environment had also been acknowledged by the Irish Tourist Industry Confederation (ITIC) which has launched initiatives to deal with the problem, including pilot projects to create more awareness of the environment in the tourism industry, and also a training programme for young people in the industry focusing on issues such as friendliness and care for the environment.

The growth of Irish tourism depends on protection of the environment and the distinctive Irish

welcome.³² So, is it the case that Ireland has a national tourism strategy which is promotion-based but not sufficiently cognisant of the importance of retaining the integrity of the tourism product itself?

CONCLUSION

To a considerable extent, tourist promotion of Ireland has moved away from images of donkeys, turf baskets and smiling red-headed natives, which were perhaps representing the 'pre-modern' society described by O'Connor.³³ It nevertheless is the case that the positioning of Irish tourism is anchored in an emotional attachment between the visitor and the native, with the ability to interact with the people and landscape which has been identified by Bord Failte as a unique differentiating factor.³⁴ This is reflected, for example, in the images of wild Irish landscapes on the Bord Failte main tourist information website where the vast empty space invites the visitor to commune with nature, and in the site for the US market, where the friendliness of the natives is highlighted in stories by overseas visitors to Ireland.

The enormous economic growth of recent years has catapulted Ireland firmly out of any perceived 'pre-modern' context into the ranks of the highly developed countries. It must be asked whether a wealthy country can sustain unique differentiating points based on friendliness and immersion in wild uncluttered landscapes. Media reports highlighting severe environmental problems, along with a perception among UK visitors that the Irish welcome is not as strong as before, are significant.

While the Tourism Brand Ireland initiative has been used expertly by Bord Failte and its partners to build a coherent and attractive image for Irish tourism, there are questions about the sustainability of the underlying positioning strategy.

It is conceivable that in forthcoming years the quality of interaction between visitors and Irish people will cease to be a plank of this positioning strategy. Using the continuum model devised by Dann³⁵ it is possible that the relationship will move from a 'positive image' to a 'neutral image' where there is 'no interaction, no participation'. This should not necessarily be considered to be a negative development; what is critical is that the positioning is supported by the reality on the ground. Certainly, the emphasis placed on heritage in the promotion of Irish tourism is welcome; the highlighting of the (friendly) 'people' factor in itself raises very high expectations; it may be better to strive for friendliness in practice but not to isolate it as a major element of the promotion of the brand.

The apparent insidious deterioration of the Irish environment is potentially a much more serious matter. It should be acknowledged that tourism can itself contribute to this.³⁶ Ireland has become used to exponential growth in the number of visitors, with numbers now standing at 6.5 million. Has there been a discussion about maximum carrying capacities of tourists? There must be a realisation that growth in visitor numbers is inconsistent with the objectives of maintaining the environment and high levels of visitor satisfaction.³⁷

Apart from ongoing and in-depth research on visitor perceptions and

experiences, it is also important, as Ryan³⁸ suggests, to continually monitor host reaction to tourists, which is an important part of the visitor experience. Again, there is a lot to build on; the Tourism Brand Ireland initiative was a product of in-depth analysis of the attitudes of overseas markets to Ireland. The Tourism Brand Ireland Review in 2000 has built in market research on the best prospect markets: Britain, USA, Germany, France, Italy, The Netherlands and Australia. There already exists a strong research base with the visitor attitude surveys and other reports commissioned by Bord Failte and the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation (ITIC); more may be needed.

It is also important not to lose sight of the impressive strides made in product development in golf courses, heritage centres, equestrian facilities and gardens — spearheaded to a large extent by Bord Failte — and in the emphasis on quality in accommodation and dining, improvements which have enhanced greatly the experience of visitors to Ireland.

With the advent of Tourism Ireland, the new overseas marketing body for Northern Ireland and the Republic (Bord Failte is now responsible for domestic marketing only), exciting opportunities are presented to market the whole island. This would also be the right time to evaluate the positioning for the Irish tourism product in the context of an increasingly competitive international situation and also, importantly, to reflect changing realities in the Irish socio-economic and political spheres. This process should involve all stakeholders

in Irish tourism: visitors, policy-makers and the host populations.

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