DEVELOPING A COHESIVE POSITION FOR RURAL TOURISM – THE ROLE OF IMAGE CONGRUENCE

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ABSTRACT

Image congruity theory has received great interest by marketing academics over the decades. However, to date most of the research concerning image congruity is centred around consumer goods and based on the assumption that the greater the image similarity between consumer and brand, the more favourable the relationship between the two. This paper aims to investigate this issue and apply the long-standing theoretical concept of image congruence to tourism, and more specifically the Irish rural tourism product, through the development and testing of a conceptual model.

The author uses the metaphor of 'brand as person' to present a conceptual framework that illustrates the interrelationship between consumer (visitor), rural destination, and tourism service provider. This paper aims to illustrate how important the management of this interrelationship is in order to effectively market a destination to a target audience. The paper concludes with a discussion of research directions and implications for theory and managerial practice. A joint Irish / Welsh rural tourism marketing initiative based in the South East of Ireland will provide a context for the empirical work.

KEY WORDS: **Tourism Marketing, Self-concept, Congruence, Positioning, Destination Branding**

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in the global tourism industry would suggest an ever-increasing set of competitive markets, where price differentiations are at an all time low and fluctuating currency exchange rates hinder the development of a consistent basis upon which to develop and sell your product (WTO, 2002). These challenges along with many others have inclined academics and practitioners alike to look for alternative methods to help differentiate their product offering. This paper aims to postulate a method in which a definitive position of the rural tourism product can be characterised by applying the long-standing theoretical concept of image congruence to the tourism industry and the Irish rural tourism product specifically.

The Irish tourism industry has experienced rapid growth in recent years with over 6 million visitors in 2003. However, the demand for rural tourism has actually declined by almost 20% since 1999, while urban tourism has increased by 12% (Failte Ireland, 2002). Thus, there is an urgent need to address the positioning of the Irish rural tourism product, and the image, which underpins it. We do know that image is valuable in understanding the destination selection process of tourists (Baloglu and McCleary 1999). Therefore, it is important that there is a clear understanding of the role of image in supporting the positioning strategy. The key question then arises – how do we determine what this image is? This in itself is a complex task as image is composed of not simply the image of the destination, as projected by the Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO), but also the image of the service provider – and not least, the self-image of the visitor.

The objective of this paper is to examine how image congruence can be used to strengthen the positioning of the Irish rural tourism product. This relates to the theory that the image of the visitor and the image of the destination should fit each other, that is, be congruent. It is argued here in addition that the image of the service provider is also a critical element, as suppliers are part of the destination experience (Buhalis, 2000). Not only should the image of the service provider and the image projected by the DMO match, but also the image of the service provider and the visitor should be congruent. Achieving a fit in image is likely to more effectively support the positioning of the rural tourism brand.

This paper aims to examine the importance of branding, positioning and the creation and meaning of image in tourism. Following on from this, the theory of image congruence will be introduced in relation to the tourism industry. The remainder of this paper discusses the conceptual model, which unites the elements of image (visitor, destination and service provider) as a means to support the positioning of the rural tourism brand. Possible research directions going forward will also be outlined. The focus on understanding the complexity of image of a visitor, service provider and destination level may address the lack of research examining the role of different stakeholders in the development of destination brands (Hankinson, 2004). A joint Irish / Welsh rural tourism marketing initiative based in the South East of Ireland will provide a context for the empirical work.

BRANDING, POSITIONING AND IMAGE IN TOURISM

Branding of products and services appeared many decades ago as a method to differentiated your product from the alternatives in your market and to create a unique selling proposition that your target audience would buy in to. According to the American Marketing Association (2005), a brand is;

> "A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good
> or service as distinct from those of other sellers."

Branding is now often considered a key tool in product and service differentiation. It must be emphasised that brand identity is created by the brand owner (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997). Prior to projecting an image to a target audience the brand owner decides what the consumers needs and wants are and develops those needs and wants along with all associations of the brand into brand values (Konecnik, 2004). These brand values are then projected to the consumer, who interprets these values and identity, derives a meaning from them, which is known as brand image. That said, brand image may be defined as the complete picture and association of a brand in the mind of the consumer (Berkman, Lindquist and Sirgy, 1997). Brand image is the perception of a brand that a consumer holds in their mind. A brand image is a mirror reflection of the brand personality, which a consumer conjures up about a brand.

Aaker (1997) developed a scale to measure brand image using personality as a metaphor for image. Aaker (1997) defined brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand". Aaker's scale was made up of a number of traits. These traits came from a number of sources including; personality scales from psychology, personality scales used by marketers, and original qualitative research. The personality dimensions, which Aaker developed included sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness, better known as the 'Big Five'. The scale can be used for individuals to rate their own self-image and also the image of a brand.

Increasing product parity, competition and emergence of new tourism markets has underscored the need for destinations to create a unique identity in order to compete for market share. Branding is therefore, thought to be one of the most effective tools available to marketers to do so (O'Leary and Deegan, 2003).

However, to date little research has been conducted in the area of destination branding, but much work has been conducted on the analysis of destinations images. The aim of this paper is to identify the image of the tourist who actually take a rural holiday in Ireland, to examine if a congruence is evident between the tourists own self-image and their perceived image of the destination and the service provider, and to identify which of these two parties holds a more significant congruent image with the tourist, and therefore, is more important in the development of the Irish rural tourism products image.

Destinations are effectively an amalgam of tourism products and services, which are consumed under the brand name of the destination, according to Buhalis (2000), who also points out that a destination can be a perceptual concept. The DMO is responsible for the planning and marketing of the destination. In the Irish context, the DMOs are Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourism Board, and Failte Ireland.

Buhlalis (2000) draws attention to the important fact that the destination, which is 'consumed' by the visitor, is comprised of multiple encounters with different service providers;

> "Tourists' overall experience is composed of numerous small encounters with a variety of tourism principals, such as taxi drivers, hoteliers, waiters, as well as with elements of the local attractions such as museums, theatres, beaches, theme parks, etc. Their overall impression develops their image of a destination after their visitation. As a consequence there is much overlapping between strategic marketing of the destination as a whole and of each individual supplier at the region. Hence, the competitiveness of each player is often interrelated and almost indistinguishable from one another."

There is a need to examine the role of these multiple stakeholders in destination marketing. Every country claims unique heritage and culture, and no destination has differential advantage in services and facilities (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2003). As a result it is critical for destinations to portray a unique identity. Branding has emerged as a way of differentiating destinations. Destinations are difficult to manage and market because of the complexity of the relationships of local stakeholders (Sautter and Leisen, 1999).

At present the current image of the Irish tourism product is based upon the three elements; people, place and pace (Board Failte, 2000). The people of Ireland are portrayed as friendly and welcoming, the beautiful scenery, tranquil locations and the general pace of life in Ireland are the basis of most of the international appeal, which Ireland holds. Morgan and Pritchard (2002) suggest that Ireland has been running the same basic proposition in all campaigns to all markets of interest for decades without making any direct distinctions in order to segment the market.

Foley and Fahy (2004) make particular reference to the images of Irish people and place, and how the aptness of tourism imagery and its relationship to reality is a controversial issue. That said, is the projected image of Ireland an accurate depiction?

Many authors have made reference to the importance of the primary elements of Irelands image (people, place and pace) in the projection of Ireland's image to potential tourists but possibly there is a need for modification of Ireland's image to ensure that the portrayed image of Ireland is dependable with what the destination has to offer in reality (O'Leary and Deegan, 2003). Therefore, we propose that the Irish rural tourism product should identify itself with the image its target audience expect, so as to create a greater 'fit' for maximum effect.

IMAGE CONGRUENCE: A TOURISM APPLICATION

Consumer research has shown that a consumers attitude towards a brand is significantly influenced by the matching of the brand user image with the consumer's own self-concpet (Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy and Chenting, 2000). Self-concept may be defined as a person's perception of him or herself (Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993). This definition can be further developed by Onkivist & Shaw (1987) who describe self-concept as an individuals total ideas, thoughts and feeling about themselves in relation to other objects in a socially determined frame of reference (Graeff, 1997). Image congruence therefore, is the matching of a consumer own self-concept (image) to the perceived image of the brand.

Malhotra (1981) was the first major contributor to the theory of congruence. Malhotra's theory measures; self-concept, person concepts and product concepts. The scale that Malhotra developed includes fifteen pairs of adjectives, used in conjunction with a semantic differential scale, that measures the adjectives across a seven-point scale. Congruence is therefore, assessed by measuring the gaps between the image of the products and the image of the self. Goh & Litvm (2000) suggest that the same scale may be used to test a consumer's view of a product or a destination.

However, it was Chon (1992) who first postulated and successfully applied the self-concept congruity theory to tourism through a study of post-visit satisfaction (Litvin & Goh, 2003). His findings indicated that tourists who perceived a low difference between a destination's user-image and their actual or ideal self-image were most satisfied with the destination, whereas those with high difference were least satisfied.

Satisfaction with a brand (destination or service provider) may be defined as the subjective evaluation of a chosen alternative brand, which meets or exceeds expectations (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995; Oliver, 1997). Davies et al. (2003) found that a strong positive co-relation exists between customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. He argues that loyalty is conceived of as the tendency to stand by one brand more than others and hence, it is clear therefore that satisfaction is linked to loyalty. Hallowell (1996), goes even further to state that there is a relationship between customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and profitability. Therefore, the author argues that when a brand promise is made and expectations are fulfilled the consumer or visitor is satisfied and more likely to hold a favourable impression of your brand, especially if there is significant image congruence between consumer and brand.

Consumer (Tourist) Self-image

As outline above, branding is the identity projected by the marketers of brands. This identity is interpreted by consumers' perception and the result is an external perception or image of a brand. Therefore, the external perception that a consumer has about your brand is really what constitutes image (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). Image congruence is a well-documented area of the marketing literature acknowledged by consumer behaviourist but is an area which has received little attention by academics in the tourism context.

According to Graeff (1996), the Image Congruence Hypothesis assumes that consumers should have a favourable attitude and purchase intention towards brands that are perceived to be congruent or fitting with their self-image, and a relatively less favourable attitude towards brands perceived to be incongruent with their self-image. Therefore, self-concept is the perception an individual has of him / herself, based not just on one's physical self but inclusive of the products and services consumed, and the people with whom the individual associates. Onkivist and Shaw (1987) suggest that people begrudge being considered as mere faceless numbers and therefore, in an effort to stress their own personality, will use products and brands to express their self-concept (Todd, 2001).

Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) believed that self-concept was formed and maintained through an interaction process between an individual and others i.e. reference group, in a bid to enhance their self-concept through this socialisation process. Heath and Scott (1998) suggested that an individual's sense of identity or self-concept is an integral part of an individual's psychological make-up, which is developed and maintained through the purchase of symbolic goods or brands. That said, the author argues that consumers or visitors purchase destination brands in a bid to enhance their own self-image, and to move ever closer to their ideal self-image.

Similarly, Todd (2001) agrees that one's own self-concept and the role of being a tourist are inextricably linked thus, the author therefore believes that the theoretical concept of image congruence can be applied successfully to the tourism industry and the Irish rural tourism product.

However, the application of the theoretical concept of image congruence and self-concept to tourism is not as straightforward as in traditional buyer-seller relationships. The consumer is influenced by and purchases the rural brand of Ireland (destination image) but the functional service they actually purchase is offered by the tourism service provider. The destination image is more often than not the brand promoted by the DMO or national tourism bodies, whom do not own the product. Therefore, the consumer is purchasing a functional service but thinks of it as fitting with the overall destination brand. Therefore, if incongruency exists between destination image and service provider image will the consumer be dissatisfied?

Destination Image

Destination image may be defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have of a place or destination (Konecnik, 2004). A destinations image may be analysed from a number of perspectives. For instance, Goodrich (1978) identified two levels of image, namely, the primary destination image formed by a visit, and the secondary image formed through external sources i.e. brochures, adverts, referrals. Likewise, Milman and Pizam (1995) identified the multidimensional perspective of destination image. They argued that destination image is the aggregate of the product, the behaviour of tourism employees and the environment.

Numerous other authors have made references to the complex make-up of a destinations image, but regardless, one item remains constant, that the image of a destination is the result of an individual consumers perception of the destination and all associations.

We question what is the role of the destination image in the overall context of the rural holiday experience? Does it play a significant role in shaping the type of person who holidays in rural Ireland or is the destination image merely a motivator to decide?

Service Provider Image

Konecnik (2004) argues that the images held by intermediaries of a destination are equally as important as those held by tourists. As these service providers or intermediaries are often sources of information and distribution channels, it is paramount that they hold a similar image as they can influence the images and decisions of tourists when they are in a destination. Hence, we argue that if the destination image projects an image that more effectively targets the correct audience then so should the service provider. The result should be less wasted resources trying to attract a mass market and more congruent and satisfied tourist base (Chon, 1992).

As already evident, the interrelationship between the consumer (tourists) own self-image, the destination image and the service provider image is a complex set of events. Our aim is to identify that the management of these relationships is important in order to attract the correct target audience to the rural holiday experience in Ireland, and also to identify which party plays a more significant role in attracting tourists to rural Ireland; the destination image or the service provider image. Similarly, should there be a 'fit' or congruency between the destination and service provider image?

CONTEXT FOR IRISH RURAL TOURISM

Tourism can be seen as a development tool for rural destinations (Buhalis, 2000). In global terms the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) estimates that rural tourism holidays account for approximately 3% of international travel. Tourism planning is critical at the destination level, as for tourism to be sustainable; it must be carefully planned and managed (WTO, 2002). Many visitors from overseas who visit Ireland are by definition participants in a rural tourism holiday, or on a partial rural tourism holiday. This is a difficulty for the planning of rural tourism in Ireland – where does 'urban' end and 'rural' begin? The problem of reducing performance in rural tourism may be examined through the distribution angle. While there are many 'honey pot' locations in Ireland visitors may not stray to the outlying rural areas. Added to this is the diffusion of the rural tourism offering with a diverse set of service providers. These factors make a compelling case for a more planned approach to the marketing and positioning of rural tourism in Ireland.

TWIGS (Tourism Wales Ireland Green and Sustainable is an initiative funded by the ERDF under Interreg IIIA Community Initiative Programme 2000-2006) is the first regional cohesive marketing initiative in Ireland which aims to address the increasing drift towards urban tourism though a more planned approach to marketing of the rural tourism product. TWIGS will provide the foundation for the empirical work for this paper. Specific research is currently being inducted on both the self-image and the expectations of the visitor. The findings will be used to drive the positioning of the rural tourism product in the South East of Ireland via the tourism service providers and the DMO's. Furthermore, additional research is underway to determine the unique selling proposition, both for the individual TWIGS participants (i.e. tourism provider) and also for the regional destination, which the target market will buy into.
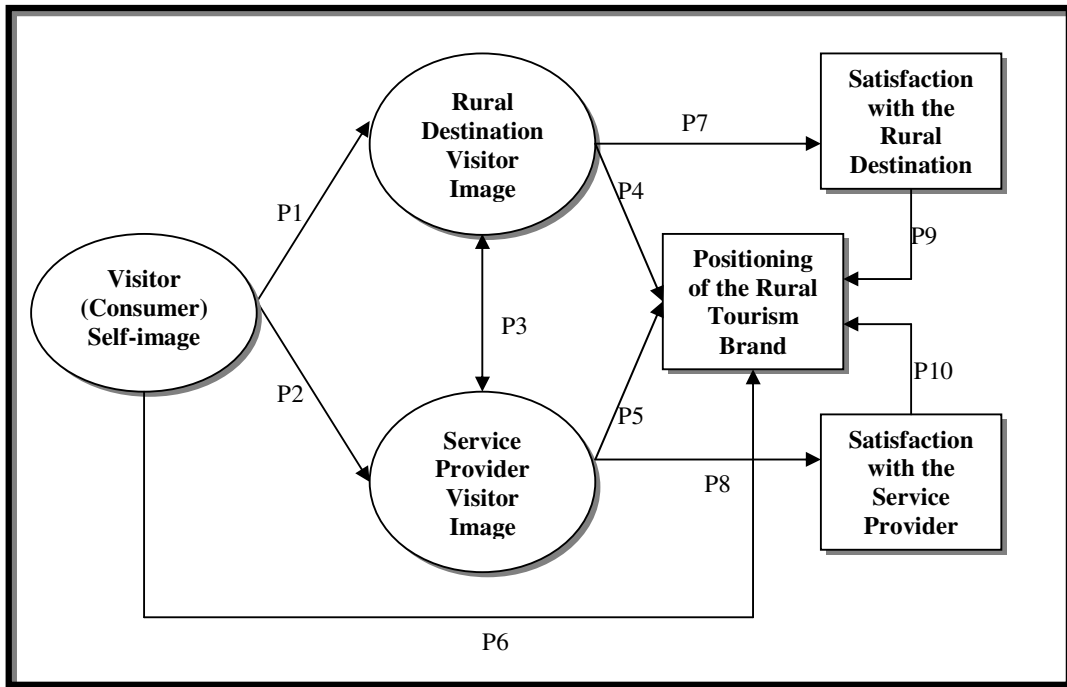
DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Figure 1. The Role of Image in Supporting the Positioning of the Irish Rural Tourism Product

The purpose of the conceptual model presented (figure 1.) is to illustrate the complex interrelationship, which exists between customer self-image, rural destination image, service provider image and the influence, which this interrelationship has on the positioning of the rural tourism product. The objective of the model is to highlight the importance of having congruent images between the destination and service provider in order to create a uniform image, which is perceived by the visitor.

To date, there has been much reference in the literature to the favourable outcomes of satisfaction and purchase intent, when the consumer holds a similar self-image to the brands image (Malhotra, 1981; Sirgy and Chenting, 2000; Graeff, 1997; Chon, 1992; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). The first step to arriving at a position where the Irish rural tourism products image is consistent with that of the visitors' self-image is by gaining an understanding of what the actual visitors self-image is in the first place.

Notably, for the purpose of this conceptual model, a destination brand image is the aggregate of all associations surrounding the brand (Milman and Pizam, 1995; Goodrich, 1978), and likewise the service provider image is the perceived image of what the service provider offers in the eyes of the customer. That said, we argue that the theory of image congruence can be applied to the Irish rural tourism context and specifically to the interrelationship between visitor, destination and service provider.

Hence, the author postulates the following propositions:

P1:   There is a positive congruence between the visitor's self-image and the rural destination visitor image.

P2:   There is a positive congruence between the visitor's self-image and the service providers' visitor image.

Based on these propositions the authors argues, that if the visitor is to ideally have a congruent image with the destination brand image and the service provider image then likewise all parties i.e. destination and service provider, should have congruent images in order for this interrelationship's image congruence to be more significant (Todd, 2001; Sirgy and Chenting, 2000). Detection of the similarity between all parties will allow for the identification of the significance of each party and the importance that each party holds in the perception building of the visitor.

In relation to the Irish rural tourism market, the DMOs can attempt to develop an image for rural tourism at a strategic level and then convey this image throughout the entire industry. However in order for such a strategy to be successful there must be strong compliance and buy-in from the service providers at an operational level. Hence, the author postulates the following proposition:

P3:   There is a positive congruence between the rural destination visitor image and service provider visitor image.

As the identity of the Irish rural tourism brand is primarily held by the position, which the brand holds in consumers' minds. The Irish rural tourism brand predominantly constitutes the destination brand and the service provider brand. The brand values from both these parties are projected to the consumer, who interprets, derives meaning from and makes a decision to act or not act upon. Unlike, consumer goods the tourism brand of a country is fragmented and hard to manage. The authors argue however, that the management of the destination brand image and the service provider's image hold the key to the development of an effective position for the Irish rural tourism brand (Morgan and Pritchard, 2002). According to Buhlalis (2000), there is considerable overlap between the strategic marketing of the destination, and each individual supplier. Therefore, the positioning of the destination is supported not only by the image of the destination, but the image of the supplier or service provider. The author therefore state the following propositions:

P4:   The positioning of the rural tourism brand is influenced by the rural destination visitor image.

P5:   The positioning of the rural tourism brand is influenced by the service provider visitor image.

As already outlined, there is a well-established body of literature to support the concept that consumers favour products that are perceived to fit with their own self-image (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy and Chenting; 2000, Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). Within the tourism context, Todd (2001) agrees that one's own self-concept and the role of being a visitor are inextricably linked.

It would be rational to assume therefore, that the positioning of a tourism brand should be influenced strongly by the visitor self-image. Hence, we postulate the following proposition:

P6:   There is a positive congruence between the consumers' self-image and the positioning of the rural tourism brand.

Subsequently, Chon (1992) argues that tourists who perceive little difference between a destination's image and their actual or ideal self-image are more satisfied with the destination and will hold a more favourable perception about the destination brand. Likewise Graeff (1997), Aaker (1997) and Sirgy & Chenting (2000) all argue that greater satisfaction with a brand is the result of have similar congruent images and that the greater the similarity, the greater the satisfaction with the brand. Therefore, the author puts forward the following propositions:

P7:   The greater the match between visitor self-image and rural destination image the greater the satisfaction the visitor has with the rural destination.

P8:   The greater the match between visitor self-image and service provider visitor image the greater the satisfaction the visitor has with the service provider.

Similarly, the more satisfied the consumer becomes with a brand the more favourable the impression or perception that consumer will have of the brand (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995; Oliver, 1997; Davies, 2003; Hallowell, 1996). Therefore, the consumer will position that particular brand in a more favourable place. Onkvisit & Shaw (1987), Goh and Litvm (2000) and Todd (2001) suggest that the more satisfied a consumer or visitor is with a brand, or element of, then the outcome is a more favourable overall perception of the entire brand. Hence, the author postulates the following propositions:

P9:   The greater the satisfaction the visitor has with the rural destination the more favourable the perception of the rural tourism brand.

P10:   The greater the satisfaction the visitor has with the service provider the more favourable the perception of the rural tourism brand.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Specific propositions have been developed linking visitor image, rural destination brand image and service provider image, and it is argued that achieving congruence of image among the different stakeholders will strengthen the positioning of the rural tourism product. The author plans to carry out an empirical examination of the issues in the context of a joint Irish / Welsh rural tourism marketing initiative based in the South East of Ireland. 66 rural tourism service providers are participating in this project, and both a qualitative and quantitative approach to the research design will address the propositions presented above.

The purpose of this research is to address the gaps in the literature to date and to contribute to the positioning of the Irish rural tourism brand. It would be hoped that a definitive position for the Irish rural tourism product could be ascertained through our conceptualisation of image congruence in this context, thus highlighting the need for image congruence in our tourism industry.

CONCLUSION

As competition escalates in what is now the largest single industry in the world countries like Ireland are being forced to sell a destination brand as supposed to a product. From a managerial point of view, it is paramount to have a competitive strategy and likewise a competitive image in order to remain successful and to get closer to your target audience. Having a thorough knowledge of your brand's personality and image allows you that access and gives you the chance to build a relationship and trust between customer and brand. Nevertheless, managers today must realise that, while customers may purchase your brand, they are in fact purchasing the image of everything that surrounds your brand. Therefore, it is essential to manage all externally perceived images of your company so as to have a harmonised and consistent message.

Harmonising the fragmented images in the tourism industry is going to be a difficult job, but image is going to be the critical element in a tourist's choice of a destination. No longer can the Irish rural experience be based upon the basic elements of people, place and pace but will have to be more unique, more true and more reflective of the tourists who actually come and holiday in rural Ireland.

This paper has made an important contribution in applying and developing the theory of image congruence in a tourism context, and has addressed gaps in the literature relating to the role of different stakeholders in the development of destination brands (Hankinson, 2005). This project should also provide a direct benefit to the tourism industry, DMOs and practitioners in Ireland through highlighting the importance of image congruence in achieving a cohesive image for the rural tourism product.

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