

**DEVELOPING THE POSITIONING OF THE IRISH RURAL
TOURISM PRODUCT – THE ROLE OF
IMAGE AND MARKET FOCUS**

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Authors:

John Power
David Haberlin
Anthony Foley

Waterford Crystal Centre for Marketing Studies
School of Business
Waterford Institute of Technology
Cork Road
Waterford
Ireland

Tel: +353 (0) 51 302411
Fax: +353 (0) 51 302456
E-mail: japower@wit.ie
dhaberlin@wit.ie
afoley@wit.ie

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ABSTRACT

While the Irish tourism industry has experienced rapid growth in recent years, the demand for rural tourism has effectively declined. Therefore, it is an opportune time to examine how the positioning of the Irish rural tourism experience can be improved. To achieve this improvement means examining the role of image in supporting the positioning strategy. We do know that image is valuable in understanding the destination selection process of tourists (Baloglu and McCleary 1999). This is of itself complex, 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. Tourists who perceive little difference between a destination's image and their actual or ideal self-image are more satisfied with the destination (Chon, 1992). Ideally, there should be congruence between the image of the destination, the image of the service provider and the self-image of the visitor. The key question then arises – how do we determine what this image is?

This paper proposes that market orientation, with its emphasis on the generation and dissemination of market intelligence (Kohli and Jaworski 1990) facilitates an understanding of visitor self-image, and contributes to achieving congruence between this self-image, and the image projected by the DMOs and the service provider. A conceptual model and a number of propositions are presented which link image and market orientation to the positioning of the rural destination. The focus in this paper on understanding the complexity of image at visitor, service provider and destination level will also address the lack of research examining the role of different stakeholders in the development of destination brands (Hankinson, 2004).

KEY WORDS: Market Orientation, Self-concept, Image Congruence, Positioning, Destination Branding.

INTRODUCTION

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). It is important that there is 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 is of itself complex 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. There is also the issue of how can we identify what is the specific character of this image? This is where a market orientation is useful, effectively what Kohli and Jaworski (1990) describe as the generation of market intelligence, the dissemination of this intelligence throughout the organisation, and the development of an appropriate market response to this information. It is likely that for the DMO, a market orientation will support the development of awareness of visitor self-image and effective market responses to this information, and will perform a similar function for service providers. Therefore, it is argued in this paper that a market orientation is required to mediate the relationship between visitor self-image, and the image of the destination, and the service provider.

This paper aims to examine the importance of market orientation, the nature 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 and market orientation as a means of supporting 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.

MARKET ORIENTATION

Market orientation is concerned with the creation of market intelligence in all sectors of the company, and then relaying this intelligence throughout the organisation in order to make proactive movements within the given marketplace. Jaworski and Kohli (1990) have defined the concept as follows:

“Market orientation is the organisation wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, dissemination of the intelligence across departments, and organisation wide responsiveness to it.”

Market orientation begins with the generation of market intelligence. The generation of intelligence involves taking all components of the marketplace into account including, customers, competitors and suppliers, and also the forces that impinge upon the conditions of the market such as the law and all regulatory requirements. Renko et al (2005) have stated that in practice the process of intelligence covers formal and informal mechanisms such as customer surveys, meetings and discussions with customers and trade partners, analysis of sales reports, formal market research and so on. This information must be gathered in order for the company to understand the market (Avlonitis and Gounaris, 1999).

Once data has been gathered on the various entities at play within the given market, it must be diffused throughout the organisation to familiarise the entire establishment with the workings of the marketplace. It is important to note at this point that however important the acts of intelligence generation and dissemination are, the effort put into either of them will never come to fruition without the correct responses being made to the data. The data generated must be used systematically to guide strategy recognition, understanding, creation, selection, implementation, and modification (Hunt and Morgan, 1995).

Two particular dimensions of the market orientation construct namely, intelligence generation and dissemination, are of particular interest in the context of this paper and conceptual model. Firstly, the area of intelligence generation for the tourism provider (e.g. an individual provider such as a bed & breakfast) or DMO needs to be assessed. It is imperative that the companies involved in rural tourism in Ireland generate sufficient intelligence on the self-image, and expectations of visitors. Understanding of both of these dimensions provides the ability to offer a modified service; tailored to suit the specific needs of individual customers (Chang and Chen 1998). The next element that the company must undertake revolves around dissemination of data on the visitor's self-image. In the case of the individual service provider dissemination should not prove to be as difficult a task as it will be for the DMOs. This is due to the fact that responding effectively to a market need requires the participation of virtually all departments in an organisation (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). Gaul and Jung (2002) agree with this stance stating that dissemination is not a major factor for small ventures because the number of employees is rather low and the entrepreneur has an important role in ensuring satisfactory use of information. Larger organisations have to deal with issues such as centralisation, formalisation and departmentalisation, which are not present to the same degree in smaller organisations.

The third element of a market orientation is responsiveness to the very intelligence that has been generated and disseminated (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). What this means for those companies involved in Irish rural tourism is, once they have gathered information on visitor self-image and disseminated this information throughout the company, a corporate image should be presented to establish an effective position within the minds of target visitors.

BRANDING, POSITIONING & IMAGE IN TOURISM

Branding of products and services appeared many decades ago as a method to differentiate products from alternatives in the market and to create a unique selling proposition for the target audience. 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). 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. 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 then known as brand image. 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).

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.

Buhalis (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). The aim of this paper is to address this complexity by identifying the image of the tourist who take a rural holiday in Ireland, to examine if congruence is evident between the tourists own self-image and their perceived image of the destination and the service provider. In addition, the paper seeks to identify which of these two parties holds a more significant congruent image with the tourist, so as to understand who plays a more influencing role in the development of the Irish rural tourism products image and overall position in the tourism market.

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 Ireland's image (people, place and pace) in the projection of the destination image to potential tourists. There may be a need for modification of Ireland's image to ensure that the portrayed image 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 APPLIED

Malhotra (1981) was the first real 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 products and the image of the self. Goh & Litvin (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.

Consumer (Tourist) Self-image

As outlined above, branding is the identity projected by 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 the brand is really what constitutes image (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). Image congruence is a well-documented area of the marketing literature acknowledged by consumer behaviourists but is an area, which has received little attention by academics in a 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 also 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 brand to express their self-concept (Todd, 2001). That said, surely the same can be said for consumers relationships with destinations. 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 national tourism bodies or DMOs but they 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 determining 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 tourists's own self-image, the destination image and the service provider's image is a complex set of events. Our aim is to identify that management of these relationships is important in order to attract the correct target audience to the rural holiday experience in Ireland, but 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 congruence 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 & Sustainable) is the first regional cohesive marketing initiative in Ireland which aims to address the increasing drift towards urban tourism through a more planned, focused approach to marketing of the rural tourism proposition. TWIGS will provide the foundation for the empirical work based on this paper. Specific research is being conducted 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 DMOs. 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

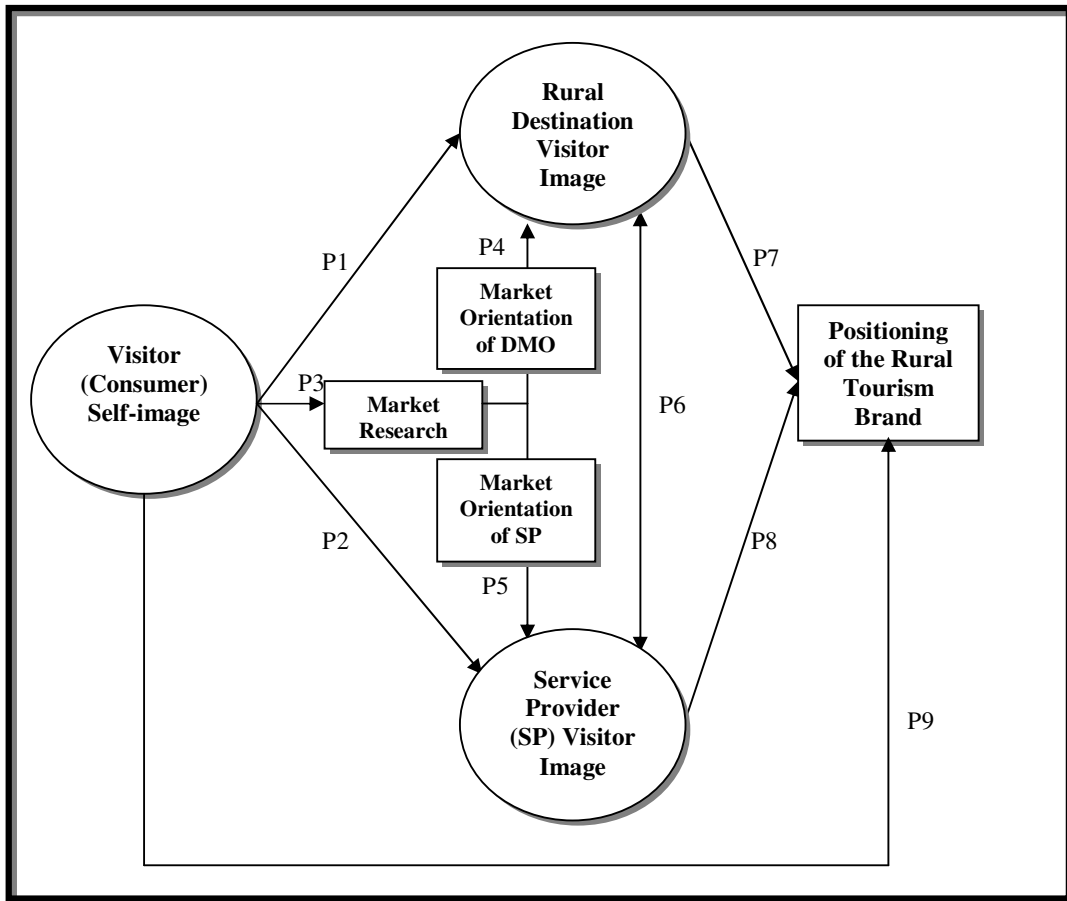


Figure 1. The Role of Image and Market Orientation in Supporting the Positioning of the Irish Rural Tourism Product

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 market orientation has on this interrelationship and 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. Market orientation is seen as a mediator and an important link between the creation of a congruent image of a destination and is a critical element essential to the successful positioning of a rural tourism brand.

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. Market orientation through market research is the mediating role between consumer and the DMO and service provider.

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, we postulate 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.

Nevertheless, in order for the DMO or tourism service providers to understand their market they must, according to Avlonitis & Gounaris (1999) generate intelligence on their particular market. In this case intelligence generation is concerned with creating an understanding of visitor self-image through market research. Once the organisation has generated sufficient intelligence, it is then disseminated throughout the entire organisation (Jaworski and Kohli, 1990), providing a comprehensive understanding of visitor self-image in all areas of the company, thus allowing the DMO or tourism service provider to create an image congruent with that of the visitor's self-image. This intelligence will be generated through market research activity. In turn market research will facilitate the development of a market orientation which will not only aid an improved understanding of the visitors self-image, but will also lead to the development of a congruent rural destination image and service provider image by disseminating consistent information to those parties at both a strategic level and an operational level respectively. Therefore, based on the above discussion and arguments, we postulate the following propositions:

P3: Market research is a facilitating element in the development of market orientation for the DMO and service provider.

P4: The greater the market orientation of the DMO the greater the congruency between visitor self image and rural destination visitor image.

P5: The greater the market orientation of the service provider the greater the congruency between visitor self image and service provider visitor image.

Based on these propositions the authors argue, 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, we postulate the following proposition:

P6: 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 upon or not. 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 Buhllalis (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. We therefore state the following propositions:

P7: The positioning of the rural tourism brand is influenced by the rural destination visitor image.

P8: The positioning of the rural tourism brand is influenced by the service provider visitor image.

As we have seen earlier, there is a well-established body of literature to support the notion 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 that the positioning of a tourism brand should be influenced strongly by the visitor self-image. Hence, we postulate the following proposition:

P9: There is a positive congruence between the consumers' self-image and the positioning of the rural tourism brand.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Specific propositions have been developed linking image with market orientation, and it is argued that achieving congruence of image among the different stakeholders will strengthen the positioning of the rural tourism product. The researchers plan 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 market orientation and image congruence, thus highlighting the need for market focus 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. Harmonising the fragmented images being projected by the DMOs and tourism service providers 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 paper should also provide a direct benefit to the tourism industry, DMOs and practitioners in Ireland through highlighting the importance of a market focus in achieving a cohesive image for the rural tourism product.

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