Marketing strategies in Ecotourism: The case study of Thailand and Botswana

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine marketing strategies and their relationship to push and pull factors in ecotourism. The position the study adopts is that of a comparative analysis between two developing nations; namely Thailand and Botswana. The study areas have been chosen because they constitute vast resources of biodiversity and have a wealth of ecotourism attractions. Both countries have developing and emerging economies and have, in the last decade, come to consider ecotourism as a viable economic sector and a major contributor to economic development. Content analysis of the reviewed literature from secondary data sources on marketing strategies and their relationship to the push and pull factors in ecotourism has been employed in this empirical study. A mixed method approach was employed using a semi-structured questionnaire and interview research tools which were specifically designed to address the needs of this study.

Keywords: Botswana, Ecotourism, Marketing strategies, push and pull factors, Thailand.

1. INTRODUCTION

Travel and tourism is the 21st century industry that has become a major contributor to the gross national product globally with the marketing of tourist destinations and its products becoming a widely recognized practice for both public and private sector organizations.
Thailand and Botswana are not exceptional as tourism in both countries has proven to be a major source of employment, foreign exchange earner and a viable alternative to other industries like manufacturing. However, it has to some extent, contributed negatively to environmental conservation causing some degradation. As developing countries, the two have well-defined tourism policy documents and frameworks to support the industry, though these do not fit seamlessly into focused competitive strategy that provides for their unique positioning into the global market (WTTC, 2010). Hence, the need for effective and efficient marketing strategies.

According to the International Ecotourism Society (IES, 1993), ecotourism is a form of tourism intended as a low impact and often small-scale alternative to standard commercial tourism and one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry. It is defined as ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people’. Its purpose is to benefit the local community and host countries through ecologically and culturally sensitive travel as it involves travel to destinations where flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Furthermore, it fosters respect for different cultures, appreciation for natural habitats, economic and political empowerment of local communities.

Thailand and Botswana, as developing economies in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa respectively, have a wealth of traditional and cultural attractions, heritage sites and varied artefacts that have been contributing to the appeal of their destinations but it is only recently that they have been discovered as major marketing tools to attract travelers seeking a personally rewarding and rich tourist experience of learning the past and present heritage of the host country. An application of well integrated and effective ecotourism marketing
strategies becomes crucial in enhancing awareness of the unique abundant natural resources available in these tourism destinations. In Thailand, the ecotourism sector has, for the past decade, increasingly gained popularity and the country has become a favoured destination with its abundance of natural resources. These attractive sites like landscapes, ancient buildings and traditions as well as the various activities including bird watching, rock climbing, scuba diving, sea canoeing and trekking enjoy a higher potential for tourism in the country. However, the future of ecotourism in Thailand is dependent upon being able to implement sustainable development practices so as to attract a good share of the international market.

Tourism in Botswana is the second revenue earner after diamond mining and the country has transformed to be a middle income country with a per Capita GDP of $13,100 in 2010. In terms of nature-based tourism, there is a rich abundance of wildlife and wildlife assets, world-class wilderness of the Kalahari desert, less-crowded national parks, unique cultures and traditions and rich varieties of flora and fauna. African governments, increasingly advocate for ecotourism development and expansion as a way to boost their economies and promote national and local development. The ecotourism policy in most African countries is, therefore, an integral part of the government and national policy. Botswana prides itself with unspoilt landscapes and scenic beauty such as national parks, game reserves and has one of the largest inland wetlands in the world; the Okavango Delta as the country’s ecotourism attraction (Mbaiwa, 2003).

2. Literature Review

Sharpley (2003) highlight that tourism in the developing world serves as the main source of income and that gross receipts from tourism have grown in value than all other visible
exports put together. He further highlights that 30% of international tourists tend to make developing countries their destination of choice.

Marketing literature suggests that a balance between push factors (internal motives) and pull factors (destination attributes) may cause a traveler to select one destination over the other (You et al., 2000). The competitive environment of modern day business appears to necessitate the successful implementation of marketing, if a firm is to advance in its chosen segments (Kwaku et al. 2001). Jamrozy (2007) illustrates how tourism marketing can be integrated into more sustainable marketing strategies by suggesting a shift away from economic profit towards sustainability. The study has adapted a living system theory to tourism marketing that focuses on quality of life for all stakeholders. The results advocate for a triple line, triangular model that upholds the three dimensions of sustainability, economic viability and social equity and environmental protection. Hsu et al. (2005) highlight the significance of taking current tourism images into perspective when formulating marketing plans and strategies as it is these images that will contribute to tourists’ decision and selection on where to travel, rather than factual information. Gronroos (1999) maintain that the marketing mix model, in almost all the western world, is widely considered the general marketing model. The 8Ps are the parameters that the marketing manager can control given the internal and external constraints of the marketing environment. Ecotourism businesses should be in a position to manage the basic elements of the marketing mix to attract new customers. However, Kotler et al., 1999 concur with others and maintain that branding is an important component of effective destination marketing and serves to provide a solid framework for managing the image of a place.
3. METHODOLOGY

Study sites

The study aims to address ecotourism attractions in Southern Thailand and Northern Botswana which boast of an array of ecotourism attractions.

Data collection and analysis

The examination of marketing strategies as antecedents of ecotourism performance in the selected geographical areas was carried out using a mixed method approach including a semi-structured questionnaire and interview research tools that were specifically designed by the author to address the needs of this study. Content analysis has been employed in the analysis of a wide selection of reviewed literature on the impact of marketing strategies on ecotourism performance and success.

The conceptual research framework applied in the study aims to explore the relationship between pull and push factors in the ecotourism sector. It is important that ecotourism marketers identify and explore tourists’ motivations for travel that lead to a decision to visit and their perceptions of tourist attractions and attributes in order to be in a position to employ effective and efficient marketing strategies and sustainable marketing plans. The conceptual framework further supports the contention that various push and pull factors have an influence on destination choice and play an important role in shaping a tourist’s motivations, assisting them to make a destination choice (Keating and Kiz, 2008). The perceptions tourists hold of ecotourism attractions and destination image attributes influence their destination choice and these have implications for marketing and destination repositioning (McCartney et al. 2008). Oppermann (1996) noted that few tourism destinations are actively
trying to understand their current visitors in order to find ways of effectively marketing to them. However, he further highlights that in marketing research, it is less expensive to re-attract previous customers than to acquire new ones. Tourism destinations must be careful about their image and ensure the perception they have is aligned to that of their potential customers. Pan and Chris (2007) report on visitor motivations and satisfaction. However, they suggest that ‘pull’ factors are better predictors of overall satisfaction than motivational ‘push’ factors. Since ecotourists tend to choose destinations which are believed to fulfil their internal needs, measuring satisfaction will help destination marketers to adjust and provide the desired quality of products and services.

*Instruments for Data Collection*

The researcher conducted both in-depth interviews and a questionnaire. An intensive review of secondary data was employed comprising of current government policy documents, official reports, relevant books and various articles from international refereed journals. Telephone interviews were conducted on both the private ecotourism companies and government officials in relevant tourism ministries.

*Quantitative and qualitative data*

Qualitative and quantitative methodology used in this study contribute towards the development of study objectives and form the basis for discussion in this document. In this study, semi-structured Questionnaires with a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions were administered to ecotourism company owners, managers and marketers as well as tourism personnel in relevant government departments.

Semi-structured interviews with ecotourism company officials, destination marketing personnel, private ecotourism business owners, and the relevant government officials and key
stakeholders, were conducted to collect in-depth information about marketing strategy techniques used to attract international eco-tourists and to explore key issues arising from the questionnaires. Questionnaires were administered on international tourists to solicit their views, perspectives and suggestions on factors that determined their choice of ecotourism destination. Interviews have been chosen as a result of their reliability and potential to generate high response rate and provide in-depth information pertaining to participants’ experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic.

**Sample Group**

Key informants and sample population are divided into three sample groups as follows:

1. Public and private ecotourism company owners, managers and marketing personnel
2. Tourism Government officials at Tourism Authority Thailand, Thailand Ministry of Tourism and the Botswana Tourism Board
3. International tourists who will be visiting Phuket and Songkhla Provinces during the time of study.

The sample group was used in order to get an understanding of the marketing strategies employed in the ecotourism sector to attract international tourists and the related challenges and opportunities.

**Data Analysis**

For quantitative data, simple descriptive statistics were employed, which involves simple percentage and frequencies to analyze the responses of the questionnaires. For quantitative data, the researcher will extract useful information by interpreting and summarizing the viewpoints of the interviewees according to the interview transcript.
Content analysis will be employed to analyze in-depth interviews in the qualitative dataset as well as written information including relevant tourism brochures in the secondary data in order to obtain more information about marketing strategies employed in the ecotourism sector. Primary data involving quantitative dataset was analyzed using a SPSS version 16.0 as an analysis tool to calculate mean and standard deviation for variables. Further analysis was done using t-test and One Way Analysis of Variance; ANOVA to examine the influence of demographic variables on destination choice. Regression analysis will test the relationship between tourists’ perceptions towards tourist attractions, attributes and their motivations across different dimensions as well as implications on marketing strategies (Kim and Lee, 2002; Lee et al., 2003).

4. Results and Discussion

Four hundred questionnaires were distributed and only 354 were fully completed and considered suitable for the research analysis. 46 questionnaires could not be used as a result of missing values and incomplete responses. The response rate was 84.6% (85%).

Reliability Test

Reliability refers to how well something can be used to obtain the same result repeatedly. Cronbach’s Alpha was used to check for Reliability and internal consistency on the questionnaire. The results of the computed alpha coefficient indicate that there is a perfect internal consistency with results ranging between 0.72 and 0.89 as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability test results
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions on destination attributes</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors influencing choice of destination</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Mix</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>22</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Marketing Mix Clusters**

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<th></th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
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</thead>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Socio-Demographic profile of the international tourists**

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents show that 212 (59.9%) are male and 142 (40.1%) are female. In terms of age, a high percentage of the international tourists 35.9% are in the age range of 20-29 years followed by those between 30 and 39 years of age at 23.2%. Those over 60 years of age are a small percentage of 5.1% indicating that the senior travelers’ propensity to travel to tourism destination in Southern Thailand is low as compared to that of middle-aged travelers.

The majority of the respondents who visit Southern Thailand are single at 190 constituting 53.7%. Married couples are 146 at 41.2%. Southern Thailand remains the tourist destination
for the Asia Pacific region as a result of proximity. For Europe, the pleasant weather and climate position Thailand as a preferred destination of choice at 26.8% followed by the Oceania at 17.5%. The Americas and Africa constitute a small percentage at 8.5% and 6.5% respectively. In terms of educational achievement, visitors to Southern Thailand have a moderately high level of education with Bachelor Degree at 28.5% and Diploma qualification at 23.2%. Both constitute 51.7%. A high percentage of respondents are employees at 33.6% followed by business owners at 19.5%. Government officers and students constitute a small percentage of travelers to Southern Thailand at 11.9% and 11.3% respectively. The retired travelers and housewives constitute relatively low numbers at 16 (4.5%) and 15 (4.2%) respectively. In terms of monthly income, 31.1% of the respondents have a monthly income between USD 1,001 and US$ 3,000 followed by those earning less than US$ 1,000 at 18.4%. 17.8% earn a monthly income between US$ 3,001 and US$ 5,000 followed by those earning over US$ 9,000 at 13.8%.

Socio-demographic characteristics by purpose of visit

The results of the study show the socio-demographic characteristics by purpose of visit. They indicate that the majority of the tourists traveled for holiday and leisure at 294 (83.1%) followed by 23 (6.5%) who travelled in order to visit friends and relatives. 19 (5.4%) traveled for business and a small number of 7 (1.98%) travelled for ecotourism and culture. International tourists who travelled for official purposes constitute a small percentage of 0.56%. The results show that respondents travelled for Holiday/leisure made up the majority and are in the age groups ranging between 20 - 29 years of age to 30 - 39 years of age at 110 (31.1%) and 69 (19.5%) respectively. They are followed by those who visit friends and relatives at 23 (6.5%). The widowed and divorced travelled mostly for holiday and leisure. However, they constituted a small percentage at 4 (1.1%) and 9 (2.5%) respectively.
Very few international tourists travelled for ecotourism/nature and for official purposes at 7 (1.98%) and 2 (0.56%) respectively. Of those travelling for Holiday/leisure, the majority come from the Asia Pacific region 111 (31.4%) followed by Europe 84 (23.7%) and Oceania 55 (1.95%). Most of these travelers have a high school qualification 83 (23.4%), a Bachelor degree 82 (23.2%) and a Diploma 69 (19.5%). The majority are employees 107 (30.2%) followed by business owners 51 (14.4%) and students 34 (9.6%). The majority of respondents are earning between US$ 1,001 and US$ 3,000 at 110, though there is a good balance in terms of representation on monthly income especially on those travelling for Holiday and leisure purposes. Travel for ecotourism/culture and for official purposes constitute small numbers at 7 (1.98%) and 2 (0.6%) respectively. A significant number of international tourists coming from the Asia Pacific Region travel for Holiday and leisure 111 (31.4%) followed by 12 (3.4%) travelling on business purposes. International tourists from the Americas and Africa constitute small numbers at 23 and 21 respectively. None of these two groups have undertaken travel for purposes of visiting friends and relatives or for official purpose. Respondents have a propensity to travel for Holiday and leisure 294 (83.1%) across all socio-demographic variables followed by travel to visit friends and relatives 23 (6.5%).

**Significance of the study**

The study has practical implications and will contribute to the body of Marketing literature as it has significance in strategic decision making and planning in managerial marketing. It is hoped that the results of the study will provide suggestions to ecotourism organizations and marketing personnel for improving their current marketing strategies in line with the demands and needs of customers. Results of the study will provide insights into significance of the relationship between push and pull factors in ecotourism marketing.
By addressing these research questions and comparing the results to the reviewed previous literature, tourism marketers will have a better understanding of the various options of marketing strategies and their impact and effectiveness in the ecotourism sector. This will enable ecotourism managers and marketers to better understand best practice marketing methodologies to employ for enhanced profitability. Furthermore, they will have a better insight of their customers and be in a position to meet and exceed their needs, wants and expectations.

REFERENCES


