Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management 31 (2017) 126–133

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management

journal homepage: http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-hospitality-and-tourism-management

Destination positioning and temporality: Tracking relative strengths and weaknesses over time

Steven Pike

School of Advertising, Marketing & Public Relations, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland, 4152, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 26 July 2016
Received in revised form
10 November 2016
Accepted 29 November 2016

Keywords:
Destination positioning
Destination image
Destination marketing
Short breaks
Temporal

ABSTRACT

A key goal of the marketing activities for any destination marketing organisation (DMO) is to achieve a competitive market position for the destination. The proposition underpinning this project is that a destination's market position will change positively only slowly over time. A core construct in market positioning is destination image, requiring an understanding of perceived strengths and weaknesses relative to the competitive set of rivals for any given travel context. Despite the importance of this, there has been a lack of research published about the temporality of a destination's competitive position. Studies of a destination's image or competitive position have tended to be a snapshot at only one point in time. In this project the cognitive perceptions held of a competitive set of five destinations in New Zealand were examined at two points in time over a period of 14 years. Results indicated no changes in the market position of the destination of interest, between the two samples. Conceptually, the study demonstrates the value in tracking destination positioning over time. From a practical perspective the findings suggest destination marketers should adopt a long term approach to destination positioning, given the difficulty in changing consumer perceptions. The focus of marketing communications should be on reinforcing positively held perceptions that are representative of competitive strengths.

1. Introduction

Destinations and *destination marketing* have emerged as core themes in tourism research (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012). This is not surprising given the majority of *tourism* activity takes place at destinations (Leiper, 1979), destinations are the biggest brands in the travel industry (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002), and most communities now fund a destination marketing organisation (DMO) to coordinate promotional activities (Pike, 2016). A key role in the promotional activities for any DMO is to establish a competitive position in the market. A competitive position is attained by maximising strengths that effectively differentiate the entity from competitors (Porter, 1980). Since travellers are spoiled by choice of destinations, of interest in this project is how destinations are positioned in consumers' minds for a given travel context. Underpinning the project is the proposition that a destination's perceived market position will improve positively only slowly over time. Given the advertising clutter of competing destinations offering similar features and benefits, along with the noise from the more superior marketing budgets of substitutable consumer goods brands, and the knowledge that perceptions developed organically through life experiences are likely to be more influential in consumer decision making, it is posited that marketers attempts at developing induced images for such a large entity as a destination will only occur incrementally over time.

There is a lack of evidence to support this proposition, because the issue of destination position temporality has largely been ignored by academic researchers. However, there exists some support within the destination image literature. A study by Gartner and Hunt (1987) found evidence of positive destination image change, but concluded that change only occurs slowly. Gartner (1993) suggested the larger the entity the slower the image change, a proposition that has largely been overlooked by tourism researchers. During the first 40 years of the destination marketing literature, the topic of destination image has been the most popular (Pike & Page, 2014). However, even though hundreds of destination image studies have been reported, the issue of temporality has rarely been addressed.

The lack of research interest in changes in destination image and market position over time is interesting given the long held view, that due to the intangible nature of tourism and travel, a

E-mail address: sd.pike@qut.edu.au.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2016.11.005
1447-6770/

destination's image is as important as the actual features provided (see for example Hunt, 1975; Mayo, 1973). Consumer and travel trade perceptions can impact on the competitiveness of the destination. This understanding underpins the major investments made by destination marketing organisations (DMO) around the world, in terms of undertaking marketing communications that seek to achieve congruence between the desired destination brand identity and the actual destination image held by consumers.

A tourism destination is a complex entity to promote, and DMOs have emerged in earnest in recent decades as communities have sought to become organised in the pursuit of destination competitiveness. Key challenges faced by DMO staff are the multi attributed nature of tourism-related resources within the geopolitical boundary they represent, the diversity of stakeholders and their differing market interests, and the difficulty in differentiating the destination in markets crowded with rival places offering similar visitor experiences. In addition, the DMO does not have direct control over the delivery of local tourism services, new product developments, pricing and distribution. Therefore the DMO's role is essentially one of coordination of the promotion of the destination to achieve a differentiated and competitive market position, to reduce the risk of substitutability in consumer decision making.

This paper reports a replication study, rather than a longitudinal study, to monitor any differences in a destination's position over two points in time. The destination of interest is Rotorua, one of New Zealand's best known holiday areas. Unfortunately, Rotorua's relative fame has not always been for positive reasons, with a general downward spiral in competitiveness occurring from the 1950s to the 1980s through the withdrawal of major government resources (see for example Stafford, 1986, 1988). In the year 2000 research was undertaken to analyse Rotorua's position in the important domestic short break holiday drive market, following a decade of repositioning efforts by the district's first regional tourism organisation (RTO), combined with a NZ$30 million investment in infrastructure by the local government to improve place visage, business confidence and community pride (see Pike & Ryan, 2004). The study provided baseline benchmarks of Rotorua's market position as a short break holiday destination in the important domestic market, which can be used as a basis for tracking destination image change over time, relative to four key competing regions. Resources became available in 2014 to conduct a repeat study, the aim of which was *to investigate the extent to which the Rotorua's market position might have changed over the 14 year period, in the destination's most important domestic market*.

2. Literature review

2.1. Positioning as a source of competitive advantage

Positioning can enable a brand to effectively compete against a specified set of competitors in a particular market (Keller, 2003, p. 150). Market positioning was introduced to the advertising community as a strategy in 1969 (Trout & Ries, 1979), and is defined as "establishing and maintaining a distinctive place in the market for an organisation and/or its individual product offerings" (Lovelock, 1991, p. 110). Effective positioning represents a potential source of competitive advantage in any industry sector (Porter, 1980). For almost any given travel context the competitive set of destinations are close substitutes, offering similar attributes and benefits. The successful positioning of a destination into a consumer's evoked decision set, at the time of decision making, represents a source of competitive advantage over the majority of competing places that are not salient (Pike & Ryan, 2004). The evoked decision set is the small number of destinations that are top of mind during decision making, limited to around four (see Howard, 1963; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Thompson & Cooper, 1979). The first destination positioning study published in the tourism literature was in 1978 (see Goodrich, 1978). In the time since there has been a lack of research published in relation to monitoring a destination's market position over time.

2.2. Destination image

The core construct in market positioning is image. Given the long-standing recognition that perceptions held of a destination by consumers are as important as the actual tangible features on offer (Hunt, 1975; Mayo, 1973), along with destination image having consistently been one of the most popular topics in the tourism literature in the past four decades since the field commenced in the early 1970s (Pike & Page, 2014), it is surprising there have been relatively few studies testing Kotler's (1982) suggestion that a state's tourism image will only positively change slowly over a long period of time. Underpinned by this proposition, with a further postulate that a destination image might not fluctuate greatly over time but that individual attributes might fluctuate greatly, Gartner (1986) investigated the image of Colorado, Montana, Utah and Wyoming in November 1982 and then again with another sample in February 1983. Unpaired t-tests for 13 attributes for each of the four states identified the means for only two of the 52 items differed significantly ($p < 0.05$) over the three month period. Gartner and Hunt's (1987) 1983 research analysing the image of Utah partly replicated a study by Hunt in 1971 (see Hunt, 1971). Their findings indicated a general improvement in the state's destination image over the 12 year period. Research by the English Tourist Board (1983, cited in Jeffries, 2002), which analysed the effectiveness of an advertising campaign attempting to improve Londoners' perceptions of Northern England over a three-year period, found only minor changes in destination image. Similarly, an investigation of the images of five destinations in Queensland, Australia found almost no changes over a 12 year period (see Pike, 2010; Pike, Gentle, Kelly, & Beatson, 2017).

The findings of these studies support Kotler's (1982) proposition, and present implications for all destinations, most critically for emerging destinations attempting to establish a competitive position in new markets; and also for DMOs at destinations impacted by disasters and/or negative publicity. In this regard there have been many studies about destinations in the stagnation or decline stage of the destination lifecycle around the world, (see for example Ahmed & Krohn, 1990; Halkier, 2014; Jackson, 2012; Leslie, 1999; McDonnell & Darcy, 1998); but relatively few repositioning success stories published about destinations that have successfully reversed a negative image. As mentioned, tourism services are intangible and so the destination images held by consumers play an important role in their decision making. In other words, *perception is reality*, given what consumers believe to be true will be real in their decision making (see Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p.572, in Patton, 2002). Again, this presents challenges for emerging destinations that have little or no image in the market, or for destinations suffering negative perceptions. While negative perceptions might not be based on fact and actually be wrong, they nevertheless guide an individual's travel planning. Thus, whether a consumer's perceptions of a destination are correct is not as important as what that individual actually believes to be true (Mayo, 1973).

2.3. Image formation

Gunn (1988) proposed destination images are formed formed at two levels, organic and induced. Organic image developed occurs through an individual's assimilation of information from life experiences. Induced images, on the other hand, are formed through