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Conference Communication

St. Gallen Consensus on Destination Management

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the major outcomes of the first Biannual Forum on Advances in Destination Management, held in St. Gallen (Switzerland) over 6–8 June 2012. The summaries cover four discussion domains: (1) the definition and delimitation of destination management; (2) destination marketing and competitiveness; (3) sustainable destination development and governance; and (4) the implications that these concepts have for destination management in practice, as well as for potential research.

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1. Introduction

Destination management has been in the centre of interest, not only in academia but also in practice. A number of scholars have built knowledge in this field, tackling challenges in destination management from different disciplinary perspectives, mainly managerial and marketing. With the introduction of the new Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, there is now a tangible outlet to amalgam different perspectives on this complex and interesting phenomenon.

Around the same time when the above journal was established, a group of scholars at the University of St. Gallen identified a lack of structured exchange with regard to destination management and marketing. This issue would come up occasionally in different tourism conferences but was never really dealt with in an appropriate way. This is why from 6 to 8 June 2012, about 40 scholars from four continents, along with numerous practitioners from central Europe, met in St. Gallen, Switzerland, for the first Biannual Forum 'Advances in Destination Management'. Myriad associations and propositions emerged from their submissions to the conference, as well as through extensive discussions. These discourses were collected and summarized, then tabled for discussion with the delegates. The outcome of this process is the first St. Gallen Consensus on Destination Management.

But why seek a consensus? Consensus decision making is a group process that seeks the consent – but not necessarily always the agreement – of participants on key propositions, and the

resolution of objections. Consensus is defined by the online Merriam–Webster dictionary first as “a general agreement”, and second, as “group solidarity in sentiment and belief”.

Through this St. Gallen Consensus on Destination Management, we hope to give something back to the scientific and practice community and offer some contributions to practical and scholarly guidelines in this field.

2. Methodology

Consensual decision making has multiple foundations, and its development consists of numerous steps. In order to arrive at the first St. Gallen Consensus on Destination Management, we initially collected key statements from the papers to be submitted to this conference, and also directly contacted their authors. We structured these along three argument lines: key outcomes from papers, key research implications and key implications for practice. Three-quarters of the authors responded to this invitation. Thus, we produced various propositions, which were then presented and discussed with the conference delegates in a special two-hour plenary session at the conclusion of the conference.

A first paper was drafted and then sent out for consultation to the same delegates. During this process additional input was collected. Last, the final paper was presented for a vote, where anyone not agreeing with the statements contained in the consensus could retreat as an acknowledged supporter. No one made use of that opt-out choice. Hence, all the delegates of that conference in essence consented to the content of this consensus, or at least expressed their overall “solidarity in sentiment and belief” with the statements.

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3. Overview of the content of this consensus

From the papers submitted and the plenary discussion, we identified four domains: (1) the definition and delimitation of destination management; (2) its competitiveness; (3) sustainable destination development and governance; and (4) implications for destination management in practice. Because this paper is already a condensed reproduction of the three-day discussion, we do not further summarize the results (hence there is no conclusion section).

4. Definition and delimitation of destination management

The debate about what constitutes destination management revealed the relevance of contextual and cultural influences, but also highlighted differences in institutional and regulatory settings between the conference delegates. Nevertheless, consensual agreement was achieved on the following definition:

Destinations can be understood as being geographic entities; a cluster or (latent) network of suppliers; or additionally, as a network of suppliers activated by visitors' demands. In essence, they are productive social systems with specific business aims and non-business related goals.

Tourism destination management essentially equates to management processes that aim to attract visitors (tourists and same-day travellers; "wallets" and thus revenues), and allocate time and money in a specific geographic space (as defined by the visitors). Tourism destination management comprises the following domains of activity: planning (within tourism-related domains); lobbying (on behalf of all tourism stakeholders); marketing (in a comprehensive way – that is, product and pricing, at least to some extent – promotion and distribution); and service coordination (aimed at creating a seamless customer experience). Depending on the specific context of destination management, a rich variety of institutional and regulatory settings can exist, in which the execution of the above domains of activity occurs.

Depending on its scope, the construct of a destination can be differentiated as follows:

- With regard to the planning (and development) and lobbying rationale, the destination is understood to be supply driven, and is therefore a local spatial construct, which is inbound oriented.
- With regard to the marketing and service coordination rationale, the destination is understood as being demand driven, and is therefore a global interest/business field construct, which is outbound oriented.

In common practice, DMO is more related to a destination marketing (not a management) organisation. However, depending on the institutional and regulatory context, this organisation might also undertake other activities (apart from those described above). Depending on the scope of its role, the DMO can also, at times, be a destination management organisation.

4.1. Destination competitiveness

4.1.1. Propositions

The discussion around destination competitiveness revolved around many as-yet-unresolved issues. Several research challenges were brought forward, and these research challenges also implicitly illustrated the state of the discussion in this field.

No matter what the scope is, successful destinations are unique in one way or another. Hence, destination competitiveness can only be judged based on the capacity of the players to

implement differentiation in a strategic context within a competitive environment.

A purely resource-driven approach risks relying too heavily on the exploitation of existing natural, cultural and man-made resources (comparative advantages). Differentiation (competitive advantage) is more difficult to achieve, and is only possible for a few destinations (generally, those in possession of unique natural and/or cultural attractions in the first place).

A market-driven approach enables the development of competitive advantages, whether through new processes or products, comfort, quality or convenience standards and so on. Thereby, the foundations of differentiation are expanded, not least because they are mostly based on complex collaborative innovations under conditions of competition.

4.1.2. Research implications and challenges

Future research with regard to destination competitiveness needs to take into account, among other things, the following.

We still lack a complete understanding of the significance and interrelationships between the attributes of destination competitiveness, so there is a need to generate data and build appropriate causal models to describe and explain the phenomenon of destination competitiveness.

Tourism services are produced in network structures and processes, so there is a need to develop means and ways to explore the awareness of stakeholders (including residents) that they are part of a system which in turn may be in a competitive relationship with other systems.

Tourism often lacks innovation, so there is a need to explore means and ways by which destinations can enable inter-organizational innovations under conditions of co-opetition. There is therefore a need to identify convergent industries (in relation to tourism) on whose foundations tourism development could be further enhanced.

Authenticity can be a strong differentiator, so research could develop a comprehensive theory of and practical guidelines for authenticity management.

Destination management involves network management, so there is a need to develop means and ways to deal with different stakeholder logics/rationalities in thinking and acting.

4.2. Sustainable destination development and governance

The submissions, and later on, the discussions during the conference, revealed a need to combine the issues of sustainable destination development and governance. After abundant argument, we separated the propositions with regard to these domains from the key research implications.

4.2.1. Propositions

Sustainable destination development is in danger of becoming a mere catchphrase without deeper meaning.

- Sustainable products and services offer the potential for true differentiation, yet the willingness to pay for the attributes that produce sustainable tourism is low. People behave in a sustainable way if the (subjective, perceived) benefits from their behaviours are individually internalised (that is, when they receive benefits from their behaviours), rather than when benefits are externalised (when their behaviours appear only to benefit others).
- Communication is a supporting act that influences a customer's perception, and is a reflection of their own behaviour.

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