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Journal of Destination Marketing & Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jdmm

Conference Communication

2014 St. Gallen Consensus on destination management



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 February 2015

Accepted 24 March 2015

Available online 20 April 2015

Keywords:

Destination management

Consensus

Research

Practice

Agenda

ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the main insights of the second Biennial Forum on Advances in Destination Management (ADM), held in St. Gallen (Switzerland). Issues in five domains preoccupied the discourse of scholars and practitioners alike: (1) the definition of 'destination', (2) the purpose and legitimacy of destination management organizations (DMO), (3) governance and leadership in destination networks, (4) destination branding, and (5) sustainability. For each domain, this consensus offers a purposeful research agenda grounded in the ADM's community of destination management and marketing researchers. This paper builds on conference participants' collective sense-making efforts expressed over the course of the conference and in a dedicated consensus session.

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1. Introduction

Around the time the *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* was established, the first *Advances in Destination Management* (ADM) forum sought to integrate disparate research efforts on destination management. A group of about 40 scholars and practitioners interested in the complexities and challenges of managing and marketing tourist destinations engaged in thought-provoking discussions, the outcome of which was published in the first *St. Gallen Consensus on Destination Management* (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013).

Following the success of the first forum of this kind, a second ADM forum followed in June 11–13, 2014, again in St. Gallen. Like its predecessor, the 2014 edition of the *St. Gallen Consensus on Destination Management* recaps the results and insights of this conference. Based on a refined methodology, we identified five key domains that preoccupied destination management and marketing scholars as well as attendees' discussions and collective sense making: (1) the definition of 'destination' (2) the purpose and legitimacy of destination management organizations (DMOs), (3) governance and leadership in destination networks, (4) destination branding, and (5) sustainability.

In the spirit of the first consensus, the subsequent sections are intended to contribute to the community of practitioners and researchers that shares a concern for the prospect of tourist destinations. The implication sections for each domain therefore point to avenues for further research, the results of which should be of practical relevance in the close or more distant future.

2. Methodology

The reported consensus draws on a five-step methodological procedure. The procedure sought to actively engage conference participants, to continuously record their insight derived from discussions and input sessions, and to build on the main contributions from the work presented as well as on the consent of the community of researchers, whose collective sense making this paper represents.

Step 1: throughout the conference, we invited delegates to record their critical thoughts, propositions, and intermediate conclusion by pinning notes to seven pin boards. These boards represented the conference streams and were accessible to conference attendees during all sessions and breaks. Pin board titles included: (1) consumer behavior, (2) conceptualizations, (3) economics and development, (4) management, (5) branding, (6) analytics, and (7) sustainability. Note that all titles related to the root domain *destination*. This procedure supported attendees' recall in the consensus session at the end of the conference (cf. Step 3). In addition, it helped us to avoid overemphasizing those issues most present from the final sessions and from discussions closest toward the conference's end. A majority of conference participants actively contributed to a total of 127 notes.

Step 2: by means of a quick interpretive content analysis (Saldana, 2009), the 127 notes were sorted and a series of topical clusters was proposed that transcended the seven sessions. These proposed clusters served a dual purpose: first, they helped to stimulate vivid and critical discussion of the state of the art in destination management research, and second, to discern the domains that preoccupied the community of destination management researchers across presentations and discussions.

Step 3: in a dedicated three-hour consensus session at the end of the conference, attendees were confronted with the proposed

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clusters. Their discussion and sense making were taped and transcribed in shorthand. The shorthand minutes were projected in real time, visible to the plenary of conference participants. Thus, attendees could amend minutes and express their approval or dissent of the consensus' written formulation as well as create topical links across matters discussed.

Step 4: a first draft of the consensus crafted arranged around five domains (cf. subsequent sections) was sent out to all conference participants for *ex-post* consultation and collected their afterthoughts. This resulted in adding four publication references and eight amendments qualifying or elaborating on statements in the initial draft.

Step 5: finally, the final version of the consensus was presented to conference participants and put it up for a vote. Whoever was not willing to support the consensus's final form was offered the option to be deleted from the list of acknowledged supporters (cf. acknowledgments). No one chose to opt out. All attendees support the consensus 'or at least expressed their overall "solidarity in sentiment and belief" with the statements' (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013, p. 46).

3. Structure

The subsequent sections represent the five domains around which the ADM forum's discussions and contributions evolved: (1) the definition of destination, (2) purpose and legitimacy of destination management organizations, (3) governing and leading destination networks, (4) destination branding, and (5) sustainability.

To make these domains more accessible, we operationalized them as a series of questions: the first domain centers on the definition of the destination: what is a destination? What are the specific implications of production and productivity in defining the destination? The second domain is preoccupied with the purpose and legitimacy of destination management organization – whatever their specific name (e.g. DMO, visitor board, etc.): Do we need destination marketing and management organizations? If yes, what are they good for? The third domain picks up on the topics of governance and leadership in a destination context and asks: what is governing and leading destination (networks) all about? Finally, the fourth and fifth domains cover all contributions and discussions preoccupied with branding and sustainability in a destination context. Particularly, attendees and contributions were asking: what is the future of destination branding and sustainability?

Every section is organized in a discussion and implications part. Note that the length of the sections is a rough testament to the richness and length yet not the vividness of discussions with regard to the subject of each domain. As with the previous consensus, there will be no dedicated conclusion section at the end of the paper, as it already portrays discussions over the course of the ADM forum in a very condensed way. Instead, we offer takeaways and a brief comparison between this edition of the *St. Gallen Consensus* and its predecessor.

4. Domain 1: the definition of destination

4.1. Discussion

Recent publications on the destination as a concept (e.g. Beritelli, Bieger & Laesser, 2014; Hristov & Zehrer, 2015; Pearce, 2014; Pearce & Schänzel, 2013; Pechlaner, Kozak & Volgger, 2014) as well as destination management and marketing (e.g. McKercher & Prideaux, 2014; Pike & Page, 2014), on the one hand, and a number of critical contributions of conference participants, on the other, triggered an

extensive discussion of what a destination actually is. Both shed doubt on the usefulness of present definitions.

One perspective that brought challenges of present definitions especially to the fore was productivity and a production-systems view of destinations, which included the tourist as a co-producer (cf. Gunn, 1972). To date, there is little research into the productivity of (inclusive) destinations and destination systems. The UNWTO's definition of the 'tourism destination' was seen as symptomatic artifact of the shortcomings in dealing with the challenges related to destination formation, operation, and its impact measurement:

'A local tourism destination is a physical space in which a visitor spends at least one overnight. It includes tourism products such as support services and attractions, and tourism resources within one day's return travel time. It has physical and administrative boundaries defining its management, images and perceptions defining its market competitiveness. Local tourism destinations incorporate various stakeholders often including a host community, and can nest and network to form larger destinations' (UNWTO, 2002).

Conference attendees concluded that the UNWTO definition falls short in providing a meaningful conceptualization of the tourist destination for future research on destination planning and development. At the core, criticism of the UNWTO definition is based on two main arguments: first, it takes an excessively institutional and supply-oriented perspective (i.e. what is offered where and by whom), and second, it neglects the demand side in its impact on processes and outcomes of tourism service production (Beritelli, Reinhold, Laesser & Bieger, 2015).

Conference participants agreed on the subsequent alternative definition of the destination concept, which is based on discussions at the 2012 ADM forum and a more detailed understanding of the demand-driven mechanisms that shape a more variable and multi-faceted view of the destination (Beritelli et al., 2014): A tourism destination is a market-oriented productive system. By means of their behavior in space and time and household production, tourists, aggregated as flows, activate this productive system. Actors on the supply side support tourists in producing their holiday experience by providing marketable first-nature resources (e.g. nature and culture) and second-nature resources (e.g. infrastructure and services). Together, tourists and supply side actors co-produce an experience – from origin to destination(s) and back.

A number of original contributions and discussion inputs by the conference participants illustrate the support for the above definition and shift in perspective:

- *Tourism develops along flows* – no matter whether these flows were naturally created or artificially initiated. For example, new artificial points of attraction such as Disneyland Paris (i.e. creating a new visitor flow from Paris to Marne-la-Vallée or from Europe to Marne-la-Vallée via the airport hub of Roissy Charles de Gaulle) or new mobility offer creating accessibility (e.g. high-speed trains generating new opportunities by connecting Madrid and Seville or – in the near future – Hong Kong and Guilin). The observable spatial behavior of tourists and actors' decisions varies as a result of those flows. But destination constructs based on a supply-side or political and administrative logic fall short of accommodating these diverse behavioral patterns.
- *Points of attraction extending gravitation of different kinds are inherent drivers of any destination formation.* The analysis of visitor movements might help, if necessary, to delimit the geographical boundaries of destinations. However, 'worth seeing/experiencing' is not necessarily equivalent to 'actually going to see/experience'. Many destinations resort to second- to fourth-tier points of attraction and are surprised that they fail to attract significant visitor numbers.

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