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Selling Mexico: Marketing and tourism values ☆

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ABSTRACT

The Mexico Tourism Board has recently sought to diversify its tourism industry and increase the number of visitors to archeological sites by positioning Mexico as a cultural/historical destination as well as a sun-and-sea destination. While experts debate the positive and negative effects of tourism on Mexico's people and on archeological conservation, new trends toward so-called "responsible tourism" have emerged in the marketplace, indicating increased public awareness of the industry's impact, as well as a desire for more authentic and fulfilling travel experiences. Effective marketing can serve to promote particular tourist values that increase the positive impacts and decrease the negative ones. In the past, the goals of archaeology and tourism have been believed to be at odds, but if the two groups join forces to define the financial and non-financial objectives of particular sites, opportunities exist for the collaborative creation of marketing materials that promote those objectives and benefit both groups.

1. Introduction

Mexico is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world and ranks tenth in the world in terms of international arrivals, having welcomed 21.3 million tourists in 2010. Tourism is the second largest industry in Mexico (next to agriculture) and in the same year, the sector contributed $11.8 billion to the country's economy (U.S. Department of State, 2011). The majority (70%) of international tourists to Mexico are from the United States (Lince, 2004), and the country spends millions of dollars in marketing its destinations to the U.S. market. Most tourists visit the country's beach resorts, but Mexico's rich history and archaeological sites have made it a unique destination that has been positioned as an attractive mix of the modern and the ancient. Mexico's Tourism Board has recently begun to emphasize its cultural and archaeological history in an attempt to diversify the industry and to position the country as a cultural destination as well as a sun-and-sea destination.

The objectives of this article are to examine the ways in which Mexico is using marketing campaigns to promote the development of tourism to its archaeological and cultural sites and to discuss ways in which strategic marketing might be employed to address the various issues faced by this increased development. The goals of archaeologists, to conduct further research and protect sites, have often been believed to be at odds with the goals of tourism. Many believe that the tourist industry seeks only to increase numbers of visitors, while remaining indifferent to the negative impacts that can result from such increases. Through the examination of recent marketing campaigns as well as current trends in sustainable tourism, this article posits that if archaeology and tourism work together to define both the financial and non-financial objectives of particular sites, opportunities exist for the collaborative creation of marketing materials that promote those objectives and benefit both groups. While there is surprisingly little recent literature on the subject of tourism marketing, especially as it pertains to Mexico, this paper will endeavor to review previous work on the history of Mexico's tourism industry and the issues related to tourism in this developing country. General tourism marketing practices will also be considered.

2. Related literature

2.1. Mexican tourism history

In the late 1920s, following the Mexican Revolution, Mexico began to develop tourism as a "route toward internationalism, cosmopolitanism, economic growth and development as well as improved relations with its intended market and neighbor, the United States" (Berger, 2006:4). The Mexican government made large investments in the development of beach resort centers such as Los Cabos, Cancun, Ixtapa, and the Maya Riviera, among others, and built modern airports, roads, and public services in these areas. Foreign hotel groups entered the market in large numbers, and visitors from the U.S. have flocked to Mexico's beaches. Mexico's spectacular archaeological sites gave the country a unique flavor, and Teotihuacan was the first archaeological site to be specifically promoted for tourism purposes (Walker, 2005). The tourism industry has been acknowledged as a major factor in the modernization of Mexico (Berger, 2006). Tourism is now a major force in Mexico's economy, and

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comprises 10% of total national employment (Berger, 2006). As the industry has developed, Mexico has devoted tremendous resources to the marketing of its many tourist attractions in the United States, and conducts a variety of campaigns to ensure a steady flow of visitors. In 1989, in an effort to position tourism as a force for conservation and constructive development, Mexico joined Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador to create an international joint tourism project called La Ruta Maya (later renamed the Mundo Maya) in order to spotlight Maya archaeological sites and drive tourism to more remote areas of the country. Recently, Mexico has been dealt a serious publicity blow due to negative reports of violence resulting from the activities of warring drug cartels, causing some potential visitors to avoid the country altogether. Still, the national economy relies heavily on the industry, and the Mexican government has set a goal of ranking in the top five global tourism destinations by 2015 (Mexico Tourism Board, January 27, 2012).

2.2. Tourism issues

Tourist spending can be particularly beneficial to rural economies located near archaeological sites, and local communities often see heritage resources as a way to diversify their economies (Hoffman, Kwas, & Silverman, 2002). Although some gains have been made, poverty persists in Mexico, particularly in rural areas, and 44% of Mexico's population lives below the poverty line (U.S. Department of State, 2011). The 2010 census conducted by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography identified 6.6 million of the country's 112 million people as indigenous, according to a definition based on native language speakers (Godoy, 2012), and despite Mexico's tradition of *indigenismo*, or idealization of the country's indigenous cultures, contemporary Mexican indigenous people are overwhelmingly poor peasants. Many do not speak Spanish, and lack access to any significant political and economic power. Most reside "outside the cultural mainstream of Mexico" (van den Berghe, 1995:571), and many scholars have expressed concern about the effects of Mexico's tourism industry on these disenfranchised communities.

While tourism provides revenue, research suggests that a large percentage of tourism spending is leaked back to the hotel industry's foreign investors (Ardren, 2004). Even local gains may go disproportionately to the rich, while the lowest-income households are often left out (Blake, Jorge Saba Arbache, Sinclair, & Teles, 2008). Traditional industries such as farming and fishing may be displaced by uncertain low-wage jobs serving a fickle tourist population. Daltabuit and Pi-Sunyer suggest that such a rapid transformation of an economy can have a domino effect of deleterious consequences such as the

> loss of a sense of identity and place, the displacement of local cultural models by metropolitan or hegemonic ones, and, in many instances, a socio-cultural breakdown that manifests itself in factionalism, heightened levels of domestic conflict, and increases in alcoholism, delinquency, and prostitution. These dislocations—social, cultural, and economic—typically go hand-in-hand with—indeed, are in large measure a reflection of—new correlations of power that tend to transform the local population into a servile class catering to the needs of foreign visitors (1990:10).

Cross-cultural interactions can be significant opportunities for increased mutual appreciation, but are also fraught with danger of misunderstandings, and the wide variance in economic power between tourists and impoverished locals can create dynamics of entitlement among tourists and resentment among locals. Issues of cultural commodification and misrepresentation are also a source of frustration. In the Maya region, particularly in sequestered resort centers such as the Maya Riviera, visitors are often left with the impression that the Maya civilization ceased to exist after the collapse of the grand cities now in ruins. While tour agencies occasionally include a visit to a Maya community on a tour of an archaeological site, most tourists to the area are left with the impression that the Maya are extinct (Walker, 2005). Other providers stress continuity between modern people and ancient civilizations, positioning contemporary Maya as "authentic" descendents of the city-builders, while ignoring the complexities created by five hundred years of colonial rule and modern capitalist systems (Ardren, 2007; van den Berghe, 1995).

Perhaps most distressing has been the lack of local participation in tourism planning. Some suggest that Mexico's dependence on foreign tourism leads the country to pursue aggressive tourism plans dictated by the distant department of the federal government, despite opposition from local groups, and with questionable benefits to local people (Ardren, 2004; Daltabuit & Pi-Sunyer, 1990). In such cases, "the problem is much less tourism per se than a situation that denies local people any role in the tourist trade other than that of unskilled labor" (Daltabuit & Pi-Sunyer, 1990:13). Jennifer Matthews, an archaeologist who has worked for more than twenty years in the state of Quintana Roo, has also observed that modest local attempts to capitalize on tourism generally find it difficult to compete with more well-funded and well-connected outside operators with the means to advertise their attractions to resort-goers and tour organizers, again leaving local small businesses out of the marketplace in their own communities (personal communication August 16, 2012).

Despite these concerns, tourism is understood to be a powerful force in the global economy. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), annual international tourist arrivals are set to hit a record one billion in 2012, despite challenging global economic conditions (UNWTO, 2012). The travel sector is "directly responsible for 5% of the world's GDP and employs one out of every 12 people in both advanced and emerging economies" (UNWTO, 2012). The 2012 G20 World Leaders Summit held in Los Cabos, Mexico included tourism on its agenda for the first time in history, and the Leader's Declaration from the meeting states, "we recognize the role of travel and tourism as a vehicle for job creation, economic growth, and development" (Mexico Tourism Board, June 22, 2012). The UNWTO has suggested that the economic power of tourism can be a key component of achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals to end extreme poverty by 2015 by "promoting the development of responsible, sustainable, and universally accessible tourism [which] allows destinations and companies to minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and on cultural heritage while maximizing its economic and social benefits" (UNWTO, 2010:4). (For more information about the specific benchmarks of the UN Millennium Development Goals, see http://www.un.org/milleniumgoals).

Tourism revenue provides economic alternatives to the looting of artifacts, and can create a marketplace for other tourism activities in the region. The responsible presentation of sites for tourists can boost understanding of ancient cultures to both locals and visitors while simultaneously promoting conservation values (Drost, 1996; Hoffman et al., 2002; McKercher & du Cros, 2002). In an era of limited funding for archaeological research, revenue from site gate receipts or from tax revenue generated from tourism activities (McKercher & du Cros, 2002) can potentially provide the financial means to conserve assets and to contribute to ongoing work.

Tourism has also been named as a positive force for conservation of archaeological sites and for increasing public understanding of the field of archaeology. Myriad television programs and books on the subject of archaeology attest to widespread interest in the field, but archaeological parks provide the only firsthand experience, and can serve as education centers for visitors of all ages and backgrounds (Hoffman et al., 2002). While some express concern over the idea of the packaging of the past into a commodity for tourist consumption, Henry Cleere takes a broadly positive view of tourist visits of any kind.

> For every 'cultural' tour group visiting Ephesus or the Pyramids at Teotihuacan and spending several hours studying them in detail there are 20 groups arriving by bus *en route* between one visit and