

New Business Opportunities in the Growing E–Tourism Industry

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Chapter 4

Promoting Place Appeal: New Tools and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Widespread internet usage and continuing advances in information systems have greatly changed the dynamics of tourism. Industry providers now have many comparatively low-cost methods available to follow-up exploratory queries in assorted languages, and to maintain post-visit contact with customers. But the push-pull of information has radically changed (and is still evolving). Service providers might welcome the opportunity to better target many more prospective visitors at minimal cost, but soon recognize both negative & positive aspects to widely-referenced user reviews (which are sometimes snidely contributed by competitors). Regional policymakers struggle to develop common platforms to assist with new competitive realities. Destination marketing has expanded to include needs to cultivate investment, generate tourism, and attract mobile experts, while developing & retaining creative local talent. The more competitive local economies have found measures to enjoy prosperity, while other locales suffer collapsing property values & simply watch residents migrate away. This chapter highlights examples of creative uses of e-tourism for improving place appeal.

INTRODUCTION: COMPETITIVE OPPORTUNITY VS. COMMUNITY STARVATION

Worldwide competition for human resources, tourism, investment, and jobs is serious & unrelenting. Innovative information services have shaken many industries and led to new efficiencies, but with major ongoing costs such as widespread social restructuring, corporate downsizing, and many personal tragedies due to unemployment and involuntary relocation.

A vast number of rural areas are trying to cope with depopulation. Some are successfully developing tourism, often by proactively using online information systems. Fortunately the tourism market is broadening, with cross-border tourism greatly increasing. The Chinese now lead the world in international travel spending at US\$129 billion in 2013 (UNWTO 2014a), with over 100 million outbound tourists in 2014; Russian outbound tourism has also greatly increased. But the competitive din is also getting

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louder, with a growing multitude of attractive places seeking attention. Potential tourism destinations need to be increasingly clever & sophisticated to garnish initial & continuing revenues, and to create sustainable local jobs. Let us first discuss some of the mechanics of the new electronic information flows, and major corporate efforts in the hospitality industry. As online information usage has blossomed, important changes are evolving with standards, oversight and trust. This is highly important, as these tools are increasingly vital.

ONLINE INFORMATION REVOLUTION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The world has become more accessible with new information systems. To check the weather in distant places, for example, is now easy and virtually cost-free. Places often feature online webcams allowing faraway people to see live ongoing circumstances in real time. Many younger people take such information-on-demand for granted, oblivious to the huge changes achieved in the past couple of decades.

New communication infrastructures allow a wide range of services to be handled remotely and more efficiently, with parallel consolidation in regional, national & global networks. This disruption has shaken many industries and radically changed staffing & office location requirements.

The rapid development of online information systems over the past twenty years has had huge effects on tourism. Local marketing materials previously printed and distributed to travel agents can now be quickly accessed online by anyone, from anywhere, at any time. Information can be quickly & inexpensively updated, and better tailored to individual needs. Increasingly detailed levels of information aimed at those with special interests, or changing news or special offers, can be relatively easily provided in multiple languages. Further, the query process can begin a direct dialogue for continuing contact, with email, online chat or voip phone links offering further personalized services, all at nearly zero marginal cost per query.

Computers and online systems have become ubiquitous, and in most parts of the world there seem to be “smartphones” in every hand or pocket, and among people of every age and type. This has accelerated a process of do-it-yourself investigation. Very few people can now shy away from the mechanics of the internet either at work or in their personal lives. This contrasts with business processes some thirty years ago, when secretaries took charge of typing and office machines. Executives now typically have substantial technical skills, and handle at least some electronic communications themselves. New skill sets are thus required at work. This wider participation has also greatly altered some businesses: much of the travel industry now caters to self-booked services and highly competitive open pricing -- a marked change from the former reliance on insider deals and professional travel agents. Major new IT-dependent services that have developed in parallel to traditional travel providers include Airbnb (lodging) and Uber (transport), both offering good prices (due to low overhead costs) and personalized service. Both also feature feedback ratings to strengthen confidence among the user community.

TRANSFORMING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Information has become easier, cheaper, and immediate. It is also participatory: visitors often now post images and reviews of their shopping, dining, lodging and transport experiences, and many people

greatly value social networking as a means to identify appropriate destinations. Some people, perhaps complete strangers, will ask past visitors to clarify their online postings, and seek further suggestions.

The huge change in information supply is also introducing new realities with comparability. As a consumer, it has become easy to compare and contrast assorted offerings. Selection can now take place while better informed about a wider range of choices. But as a provider, it is more difficult to maintain unique offerings, processes or procedures, as the well-informed competition can easily, cheaply, and silently monitor your product and quickly attempt to emulate or supersede you. Exceptional touches such as a unique gift or special discount are recorded on social media. Photos or comments are first shared among a few hundred friends, but then can be more widely exchanged by friends-of-friends, etc., who expect the same or better.

As businesses and others with products and services (such as tourist destinations) increasingly focus and refine their online marketing, their strategy is simultaneously front-and-center available online for analysis by others. It is very difficult to maintain differentiation and any Unique Selling Proposition - others can immediately attempt to copy what makes you special.

ONLINE REVIEWS

Connectivity has introduced new levels of authenticity. Bloggers and Facebook users “check in” and communicate with the wider world while in the process of receiving commercial services. Dissatisfaction with any step of the service process is recorded, and such faults or errors often remain online - perhaps influencing the decisions of hundreds or even millions of others over many years. People tend to trust the impromptu & unrehearsed comments of non-professionals about personal service experiences. This can become sinister, however: TripAdvisor.com has recorded multiple cases of deliberate reputational sabotage by competitors posing as indifferent normal customers.

This in turn has led some businesses to seek assistance from online reputational management specialists such as Kwikchex or Reknown. Other such services are happy, for a fee, to seed the internet with glowing reviews and positive comments.

DELIBERATELY MISLEADING INFORMATION

People use and rely upon online reviews, but read them carefully and sceptically. A recent survey of 1169 adult American internet users (Gammon 2014; also eMarketer editors 2014) showed 90% believed reviews were important to the purchase process, but unethical practices in their opinion occur sometimes or often:

“Some people review products and services without trying them” -- 64%

“Businesses write negative reviews of competitors” -- 68%

“Businesses write their own positive reviews” -- 80%

Indeed, in an earlier YouGov study (Diaz, 2014) among Americans who submitted reviews, 21% reviewed a product or service they’d never bought, used or tried. Reasons?

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- 32% -- “Just felt like it”
- 23% -- “The review was on behalf of someone else”
- 22% -- “Because I didn’t like the idea of the product”
- 19% -- “I didn’t like the manufacturer / service provider”
- 10% -- “For humor”
- 14% -- “Don’t know”
- 11% -- Other

Websites built around online reviews generally seek to ferret-out deception. They have clear terms of use, typically requiring that reviewers have actually purchased and used the product or service they review. Starmer-Smith (2010) noted many sites are unable to properly verify postings (this is admitted, for example, by [bedbugregistry.com](#)). He also complained about marketplaces for fake reviews ([Freelancer.com](#), [Fiverr.com](#)), and cited a US plastic surgery firm fined \$300,000 in damages due to false reviews by its staff members. Such developing legal penalties for fraud and deception are steps on a path toward better online standards. Businesses risk prosecution, for example, under the EU Unfair Commercial Practices Directive, but even a warning by any major commercial standards authority can seriously harm an organization’s reputation. The major private firms also wield substantial penalties: TripAdvisor is “the largest travel community in the world, reaching 315 million unique monthly visitors” (TripAdvisor, 2015). When discovering fraud they not only reject a review, but they can also label transgressing businesses with a “red badge” warning message of suspicious content. Some users surely then avoid such providers who sought to deceive them.

REACTION BY HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

Many corporations, including major hotel chains, are quickly developing their social customer service systems. Some prompt clients by email to post reviews, most monitor social media for problems and complaints. They hope to stifle trouble before it erupts into something bigger, but many also recognize the value of customer feedback in identifying service shortcomings. A tweet about problems with room service or a faulty air conditioner can very quickly be rectified, moving the complainant toward a positive experience and perhaps an endorsement. A *Conversocial* (2014) survey timing assorted hotel brands responses to mention on Twitter found Hyatt & Hilton often replied within an hour; both have dedicated social media teams active around the clock. Such focus is difficult or impossible for a small operation, but many now use social media tracking services (such as *CyberAlert*, *trackur* or *hootsuite.com*) to keep them updated or to handle first quick responses. Key metrics are highlighted and managed by increasingly sophisticated systems, but it’s also the case that many policymakers and otherwise savvy managers are still largely oblivious to the business impact of social networks, “the Internet of Things” and new connected-lifestyle tools. It’s difficult or impossible to stay well-informed about constantly changing technology, but increasingly essential to try (using tools such as *Wired* magazine or *Lifehacker.com*); at minimum, we need to recognize that ongoing information technology changes are formidable & consequential, and stay briefed on major trends.

PROACTIVE MARKETING BY THE PUBLIC SECTOR

It's not enough for local places seeking to advance their community interests to rely wholly upon global corporate interests such as major hotel chains, however well-meaning and sophisticated. Such major players may not have a substantial local presence. Even when they do, they support tourism everywhere; at corporate level they're indifferent if a tourist visits your community or another 500km away. Local places need to develop dynamic marketing strategies themselves: settings attractive to assorted visitors - including those visiting online. That portal can then link to multiple private sites developed by others throughout the region.

One idea useful for marketers is to highlight potential major groups of customers and to develop a 'persona' for each group (UNWTO 2014c, p.14), a fictional named profile with the characteristic traits and needs of that demographic (perhaps subdividing gender, nationality, age group, etc.). Marketing can then be tailored and aimed at each such persona, rather than homogenizing the destination appeal into a 'one size fits all' average that appeals to nobody.

PLACE APPEAL

Mobility offers opportunities around the world for those with talent or resources. We see this most clearly in Europe, where EU mobility allows major flows away from depressed or less competitive regions to those places that are dynamic, more profitable or exciting. It has become much more difficult to retain good people and key investments. Place appeal is thus much broader (and more important) than tourism: there's hope to influence longer term decisions such as where to live. Specialists can provide guidance on where among many assorted communities or neighborhoods a home buyer (or employer) might best invest.

There are three core processes at the heart of place appeal; each is essential. First and foremost is formulating what is special about the locality. This could include historical events, famous residents or visitors, special foods, remarkable natural resources, community spirit, etc. Everyone has a certain love for the place they live or where they were raised, but experiences differ widely. Rather, here we seek shared dimensions, and those that can be shared with others. These special points become marketing hooks, illustrating & illuminating the locality, and attracting the wider world. Exploring for these hooks feeds process two: local education. Residents need to understand why & how attracting tourists and external investment is important to them. (Most can see benefits to their own self-interest if maintaining social services, property values and local reputation). Finally, place appeal must effectively reach out and attract resources.

Places around the world today face a stark reality: there is global competition to generate investment, attract mobile experts, develop & retain creative talent, and cultivate tourism. The competition is cruel, with losers stripped of their life savings on collapse of local real estate markets, with prospects of an impoverished retirement. People can be suddenly left with no equity and huge housing debt (negative equity or "underwater mortgage") if a very major local employer transfers functions elsewhere, for example; and it can all happen in a few weeks. Those buying at sudden discounts typically fail to understand they're investing in a ghost town: a collapsed tax base leads to cuts in social services, further outward migration, and a continuing downward spiral.

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There are similar traps for those renting their home in a rising market. A fixed-income retiree, for example, may suddenly be faced with unaffordably rising rent. The neighborhood enjoys ‘gentrification’ but they must move away.

Place appeal combines studies in marketing, regional development, public & private sector economic policy, and strategy. It is both art & science, as we work to gain insight on employment trends, economic geography, and individual choices of where to live and invest.

Technical practitioners of place appeal need to 1) understand the economic impact of place appeal and destination marketing as they relate to the mobility of talent & capital, 2) recognize the interrelationships of public & private sector employment, local tax base, public services, and local competitiveness & desirability - while some places prosper, others decay, 3) analyze the ‘footprint’ of major regional institutions such as universities or multinational corporations, and communicate among the various stakeholders, 4) wield marketing (and other) tools to make a given place more attractive, and 5) develop practical know-how from among the range of more-or-less dynamic geographic sub-regions, new industries, and creative opportunities as they relate to place appeal.

WHICH PLACES NEED PROMOTION? EVERYWHERE!

Locations around the world are competing for revenues & resources to survive. But some places face the gravest of difficulties. Japan’s Fukushima Prefecture, for example, has been fundamentally tainted by its seacoast nuclear accident. The March 2011 explosions and meltdowns in three of six Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors resulted in long term displacement or forced evacuation of more than 154,000 residents, a 20-km exclusion zone, and assorted continuing dangers from nuclear fallout (Japan Reconstruction Agency, 2013). Land, groundwater, air and sea are acknowledged to be contaminated, but in most cases officials declare contamination levels not a threat to health. Industries such as agriculture and tourism have been greatly damaged, and property values are depressed across the region, in large part due to simple uncertainty. So what can be done?

Fortunately the University of Aizu in Fukushima has very strong programs for ICT (information & communications technology), with a new Revitalization Center that aims to become a major catalyst connecting the surrounding community & businesses with overseas resources. Via online networks they might easily take people around the prefecture, showing daily lives among the nearly two million current residents. They can help publicize government grants and local opportunities. Alternately, they can enter the Restricted Area (“dead zone”) using webcam technology on remote-controlled rovers or drones. They can build web pages that simultaneously display radiation readings from multiple monitoring stations, and make it easy for those researching the area to find information. They can offer something unique & desirable that is unavailable elsewhere (for example, free childcare, open continuously for all, in highly-secure locations allowing remote monitoring by families). Ultimately, they can aspire both to minimize uncertainty and to stimulate interest and growth in particular areas or throughout the region.

While problems are magnified in Fukushima Prefecture by the perceived nuclear pollution worries, Japan’s wider Tohoku region already faced major challenges of depopulation, stagnation, local economic cutbacks, and a vicious downward spiral of economic contraction. So while Fukushima urgently requires better place marketing, they’re not alone in such need.

LEARNING FROM ELSEWHERE: BEST PRACTICES

When a place is in decline, residents may defect and go elsewhere; people often have little choice due to need for employment. For those who remain, personal successes become smothered in an ailing community. Property values plummet, local services and safety deteriorate, even exposure to pathogens increases with decline in public health. These are fundamental capitalist dynamics. Many industrial areas in Europe and the USA have languished and suffered over the past twenty years, but some have found new vitality. Localities must learn successful strategies from others, and creatively adapt. Sweden's Ice Hotel is a fine example of huge success in tough, inhospitable surroundings (Lambert & Jung, 2013). Leaders must translate success stories elsewhere into their own local regenerative policies. Change is everywhere, with almost all places exposed to one threat or another; of course there also are many great opportunities.

Where to search for help? One of the best and most practical centers for benchmarking & placemaking best practices is the Project for Public Spaces (<http://pps.org>), a global non-profit organization aimed at creating stronger neighborhoods. A newer initiative is Localversity, a developing global network of local-focused education centers aimed at grass-roots community brand promotion. CoolTownStudios.com is a further good source for progressive ideas and proven techniques for creating more livable urban environments. The writings of Richard Florida are excellent guides to better understand the new competitive realities of economic geography.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarizing suggestions on IT tools (many posed earlier): It's become essential to create an appealing web presence, and to monitor the online operations of key competitors. There are many potential benefits to monitoring social media for mention of your operations, as the potent consequences to negative reviews can be minimized or even turned around with a quick, substantive, caring response. Recognizing that the strategic impact of online information tools is already huge, and still growing, top level executives hoping to allocate organizational resources effectively should schedule regularly briefings on major trends and tools.

Similarly, drastic changes in technology & mobility have greatly altered our world at the neighborhood level. There's a new competitiveness requiring some understanding of economic geography, and why some places are winning and others losing. Those places facing depopulation, hollowing-out, or economic decline can reference many turnaround strategies from elsewhere. Building place appeal is a dynamic art and science, where the cost to hire a specialist professional (bruce@reorient.com) is insignificant when compared to shrinking property values and a declining region's eroding tax base. Existing local talent, major employers, and other resources should be nurtured and publicly encouraged, or they're likely to migrate somewhere more enterprising, energizing, or profitable. The process of attracting visitors (and residents or investment) often starts with an appealing online presence, accessible from pocket or desktop everywhere. Creating excellent & provocative online portals can pay huge dividends.

CONCLUSION: IT'S ESSENTIAL TO CATER TO VIRTUAL VISITORS

E-tourism is greatly evolving and not yet popularly well-defined. But the processes described in this chapter, and throughout this book, have become increasingly fundamental, and are now a necessary component to the tourism industry. Electronic tools now enable venturesome destinations to refocus & upgrade, and to reach out and offer genuine local experiences to people far away, making friends and developing a setting where visitors repeatedly return. From that, some ultimately may take up residence. Each of us must live somewhere, why not in a promising, innovative, vibrant community?

Of course, “armchair travellers” have always existed, and such people presently are better served than ever before. It’s now easily and cheaply possible to interact with people in distant lands from the comfort of one’s home, to control cameras and remote equipment in real time, or to seemingly move around streets and public places with tools such as Google Earth. No need to be troubled by packing or jetlag, traveler’s illnesses, racism, or grouchy border guards. Virtual travel is great, and getting better! And though each so-called virtual tourist does not expend as much revenue for local services as those who physically stay for days or weeks spending money, there’s minimal environmental cost per visitor, and millions can be served. Such people can provide ideas and participate in discussions, they can watch local products being made, and order online; their assorted enthusiasms can quickly translate to tangible revenues, long-term friendships and substantial goodwill. In fact, it is best to consider such virtual tourism one step on a path, as perhaps most conventional tourists researching future travel plans are now necessarily online visitors first. We must provide properly for virtual visitors, and cater creatively, or they’ll take their energies and interests elsewhere.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Fukushima Daiichi: Nuclear power plant situated on the coastline 230 km NE of Tokyo. The facility suffered severe damage from a major earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011, with subsequent overheating, explosions, and nuclear meltdown (a Level 7 nuclear event). The accident involved continued release of unknown levels of radioactive contamination into the surrounding environment, triggering widespread evacuations, both forced & voluntary. The plant is presently offline and scheduled to be properly contained and ultimately dismantled.

Online Portal: A website providing visitors an easy platform for finding related further information. The portal may deliver key information in any of numerous selected languages. As portals funnel valuable visitors to other assorted sites, portal managers often have some leverage to encourage editing or upgrading selected external resources.

Place Appeal: The competitive strategic process of marketing places in order to better attract & retain inputs and resources such as investment, human capital & tourism engagement.

Placemaking: The art of creative environmental development, where the full range of stakeholders (such as residents, business owners, government, etc.) build and shape their community.

Social Media: Information tools that promote user-generated content such as reviews, and which link users in an informal exchange community.

Virtual Visitors: Those who consult and investigate a destination's online resources. This is now a typical step for those considering a physical visit, though many virtual visitors are satisfied with online access and have no prior intent of subsequent physical travel.