

Marketing Research on the Competitive Travel Products Design

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Abstract

Starting from the idea that in the field of services, their quality is obtained only by placing the customer in the center of the performance act, our aim was to find out to what extent, in the field of tourism, the population participates in the obtaining of quality travel products and how their consumption influences the individual development and society as a whole. Based on these considerations, the present paper aims to determine how travel products should be designed to comply with the sustainability principles. In this respect, we conducted a research on the opinion of foreign tourists visiting Constanta, Romania, to further find out from them what the researchers who carried out the research in the tourists' country of residence could not find out. Thus, a combined tourism product that would include a circuit in three European countries could be designed.

Key words: travel product, research, foreign tourist, marketing

J.E.L. classification: Z3, M30

1. Introduction

Tourism management implies the analysis of any activity related to tourism and accommodation services from the perspective of allotment and spatial rapports with other facts. Tackling it only considering the spatial relationship, although this approach is an important characteristic of geography in general, does not correspond to researchers' requirements in tourism management.

The diversification and modernization of travel services are an integral part of the permanent fundamental concerns of travel companies, as one of the basic directions to stimulate tourist demand and achieve a higher quality level of satisfying consumers' needs for travel goods and services. Tourism is an industry that has extremely optimistic forecasts for the future, its importance becoming gradually higher, both globally and regionally, nationally and locally. Over the years, tourism has undergone a continuous and thorough diversification thus becoming the branch of the economy that has gained the fastest economic growth around the world. Modern tourism is closely related to a continuous development and encompasses a growing number of destinations. These dynamics have transformed tourism into a key factor for the global socio-economic progress. As an activity overview focused on fulfilling tourists' needs during their stay, the travel services have the role to exploit the tourism potential of the chosen destination, thus becoming a catalyst for the development of tourism. Considering the amplitude and dynamics of tourism as phenomenon, a continuous process of travel services development and diversification in view of satisfying consumer's needs and desires can be fully observed.

Therefore, commercialized travel products must be carefully designed as to not affect the environment and smooth development of travel activities. At the same time, the development of certain competitive tourism products leads to the improvement of the quality of life and the stimulation of the disadvantaged areas.

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize how travel products are created in order to best meet foreign tourists' needs. This work can be used by both Romanian tour operators and other individuals skilled in the production of tourism products.

The competitive development of travel products leads to generating new jobs, both directly - in the field of travel services production and distribution - and indirectly, through the multiplier effect on the related branches. Travel products launching will lead to special effects on the connections that will be created between hosts and tourists, the relationships between appreciating values and the standard of living between the participants in the act of tourism, communication, exchanges of ideas, etc. The novelty of a competently designed travel product, the existing conditions, the culture of people and places, doubled by hospitality, interest, motivation and aspiration for a better life will consecrate the development of a truly sustainable tourism.

The localities where the travel product thus created will be implemented will become spaces where all elements of the local sustainable development will be assembled. The interest to improve the infrastructure, establish a spiritual life of the envisaged localities will emerge. This will create the support for improving public services.

According to a reputed specialist, the travel product exerts a complex influence on the overall level of economic development of the localities considered (Stanciulescu, 2014, p.56). This will achieve the strategic objectives that take into account the insurance and protection of the human factor, the technical endowments and heritage conservation, grouped in three directions of action as follows:

- Stopping the migration of population from certain disadvantaged environments (e.g. rural areas) and stimulating the return, at least partially, of the population to these zones.
- Ensuring the living and civilization conditions in those environments by stimulating the stability of the active population in these environments.
- Preserving and protecting the natural environment - factor of attraction for the indigenous and foreign population.

By launching the travel product on the international market the rural, mountain, ecological and cultural tourism will become a cultural-educational ambassador, a constant and not costly tool - for example the continuation of the economic activity in a poorly productive environment, the prevention of the unemployment rate growth, the major contribution to increasing the general degree of civilization of a large category of population, especially by improving sanitary conditions, social behavior and cultivating aesthetic taste.

2. Literature review

In sustainable development, tourism plays an essential role in highly contributing to Romania's economic relaunching and revamping. The development and diversification of travel services are debated and supported by many specialists studying modern tourism, being considered key elements for the capitalization of tourism potential. A high-quality service is a way to ensure profitability as it endorses greater price stability under conditions of increasing competition, while a quality service is also a satisfaction as it constitutes the basis to build a culture in that firm (Minciu, 2014, p.412). Another aspect to stress is that tourism, as phenomenon, but also as activity, is unique, precisely through that dependency that it manifests towards natural, social or cultural environment, but also towards transport. Due to this dependency, tourism has an undeniable interest in ensuring their sustainability.

For a long time, the idea that the rail transport means the most exhaustive and best organized transportation system has been approved, yet through the explosive growth of the auto and air transport, things have been reconsidered without doubting the significance of the railways within the overall transport system. This significance imposes the present and future necessity to modernize the rail transport in order to handle the pressure of competition before the other transport means (Daneci-Patrau, 2013, p. 64). From studying tourism's positive economic effect on the economic development at national, regional or local level, we can infer that it leads to the idea that there are at least three important multiplier effects: the multiplier effect of tourism, the multiplier effect of travel investments and the multiplier effect of foreign trade (Cristureanu, 2018, p. 178). Being a particular area of economic activities, travel services present a number of traits which, although characterize the tertiary sector in general, have specific peculiarities, mainly determined by the content of the tourism offer and demand, the forms in which materializes the meeting between the demand and offer. Thus, the consumption of travel services is characterized

by a large gamut of peculiarities (specific traits) which separates it from the consumption of goods and at the same time defines its contents (Rezeanu, 2017, p. 153).

On the official website of the National Tourism Authority of Romania (www.mturism.ro) were presented the studies carried out by a series of specialized institutes from 11 countries where Romania has Travel Promotion Offices: Austria, Germany, Italy, Finland, Hungary, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Spain, France and Denmark. The studies were commissioned by the Romanian Offices and had as main objectives, for almost all countries: how Romania is perceived as a potential tourist destination by the tourists from each of the 11 countries; what the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are for the Romanian travel products and what is the image of Romania as a tourist destination on the market of each country; which Romanian travel products would be most interesting for the travelers from the 11 countries; how Romania is perceived as a tourist destination in comparison with other Eastern European countries in terms of natural potential, services offered, value for money, etc.

The idea concluded of all studies assessed is that Romania has considerable natural resources, with great potential for tourism development. Most of the examples mentioned by the French people heed: mineral or thermal water treatments from the seaside resorts and tourism from the seaside resorts. Romania also benefits from the diversity of natural landscapes (a strongly contrasting natural environment) and the warm greeting offered by natives to foreigners and which is acknowledged by everyone.

From the study carried out by InterPress on the Spanish market, it turns out that the Romanian tourism market potential is large enough to be promoted in Spain: diverse and complementary tourism resources (culture, nature, sports and ethnography); the "Latin" character, with a language with common origins and certain cultural features that bring the two countries closer together; relatively close to Spain from a geographical point of view (less than four hours by plane); recent establishment of air connections that can promote travels between the two countries; the increasing presence of Romanians in Spain, which made Spanish people to want to get to know more about a country they hardly knew before; a well-preserved nature, in some cases original and extremely attractive (especially the Carpathians and the Danube Delta); the enormous cultural, architectural and artistic treasures ("the largest jewels – the monasteries, the castles, the churches and the traditional villages from Maramures and Bukovina should be capitalized", according to the interviewees).

The Danes emphasize that Romania has the potential to provide many opportunities for a family vacation with children. In addition to adventure and family values, many former Danish tourists say that it is cheap to visit Romania.

Without the intention to present the values of Romania, as they were perceived by the tourists or tour operators from all 11 countries, the opinion expressed by the English caught our attention. According to the study "Romania in the UK Travel Market - Image and Product Perception Analysis", carried out by Trip Vision in February 2006, Romania's strengths are: intact nature; life in the countryside; heritage; multiculturalism; diversity; smaller or larger, beautiful and undiscovered cities (except Bucharest); lifestyle (outside the capital); child safety; deep family orientation; organic food in rural areas (good for vegetarians) etc.

But there are other English travelers, strongly motivated by the desire to see new things and discover new places. Trip Vision dubbed these types of individuals "Explorers" and considered them the segment of consumers with the greatest potential for the Romanian tourism market. Explorers travel more than the average tourist, but more importantly, they are more open and independent and appreciate experience authenticity before comfort.

According to the study conducted on the UK market, the main opportunities of Romania would be: differentiation from other Eastern European countries (through language, culture, food) and promotion of specific vacation offers and images that are known to be international. Romania was spontaneously described by English respondents as "romantic", starting with the life in the countryside, moving to the architecture and history of the destination. Romanticism is something that the other Eastern European countries lack and this should be the basic message promoted by Romania, around which several specific product offers can be added. For instance: skiing, sledding, pleasant evenings with good food and drinks more affordable than in other ski resorts. There is a sufficiently large number of themed holidays that can be linked to the same primary

communication in order to render Romania a differentiating, distinctive and positive aspect compared to other destinations, especially those from Eastern Europe that may be considered competitors.

In Norway, the articles found on Romania and, in particular, the image of holiday makers focus on the following issues:

- A new holiday destination, which can be further developed.
- A convenient destination in terms of travel products rates.
- An interesting destination for strengthening the Eastern European myth.
- Some exotic tourist attractions.

Romania is a destination that surprises most visitors, especially due to the modest initial expectations. Tour operators often meet tourists' positive astonishment regarding Romania, often due to the complete lack of or modest expectations. The feeling of security is one of the aspects that surprised many tourists that visit Romania. The conclusion of this study states that what is essential for Romania is not necessarily new inventions in the field of tourism. Instead, there is a need for marketing and attention in the direction of the many opportunities this country offers for those interested in trying something different. There is an abundance of other tips that Romania has received through these studies related to the image of the country, as a tourist destination. Space does not allow us to present them all. However, we invite all those interested to study these materials and act accordingly. We also hope that those who commissioned these studies will draw the rigorous theories and take all the necessary steps to improve the image of Romania as a tourist destination.

3. Research methodology and hypotheses

Next, we present a marketing research conducted among foreign tourists arriving in Constanta with various travel reasons, in order to identify their preferences regarding the tourist objectives in Romania, the preferences regarding the accommodation services (type of accommodation structure, category of accommodation unit, etc.), type of B&B (full board, half board, etc.), preferred form of tourism. Based on the results yielded by this research, we will produce a lump sum travel product, in the areas indicated by foreign tourists as they know them (or that they would like to discover), with the tourist attractions that can be visited in the respective areas (we consider the following tourism activity: hiking), with the most frequent type of accommodation indicated by them, etc.

The research was based on the following three hypotheses:

- I.1 Foreign tourists use 50% combined means of transportation.
- I.2 More than half of foreign tourists travel for business purposes to Romania.
- I.3 More than half of the foreign tourists consider it appropriate to include Romania in a tourist circuit.

For financial reasons and because the purpose of this research is didactic, we could not respect the size of the sample, hence we condensed it to 100 people. We distributed 110 questionnaires that could be validated based on questions. The first stratification variable was represented by the foreign tourists staying in the type of unit (hotels, B&Bs, villas, motels), and the second variable represented the size of the accommodation unit in which the foreign tourists are accommodated, in relation to the number of employees.

In order to ensure the representativeness of the sample, in the random selection of the accommodation units where foreign tourists are accommodated, their proportion within the total of researched population was respected, namely:

- Foreign tourists staying in hotels 52%.
- Foreign tourists staying in urban tourist B&Bs 31.5%.
- Foreign tourists staying in farm B&Bs 11.21%.
- Foreign tourists staying in villas, cottages, camping, etc. 5.29%.

In order to obtain the most correct and accurate data, we used the direct interview method, which involved moving to each accommodation unit and conducting an interview with the foreign tourists accommodated. The information was collected directly from the foreign tourists who wished to participate in the interview and who were informed about the researched topic and were

assured of the importance of the answers given. The accommodation units where the foreign tourists were staying (hotels, tourist B&Bs, agrotourism B&Bs, villas, tourist cottages, etc.) were randomly chosen.

The working tool of this research was a questionnaire, consisting of 27 questions grouped as follows. The first part of the questionnaire included identification questions:

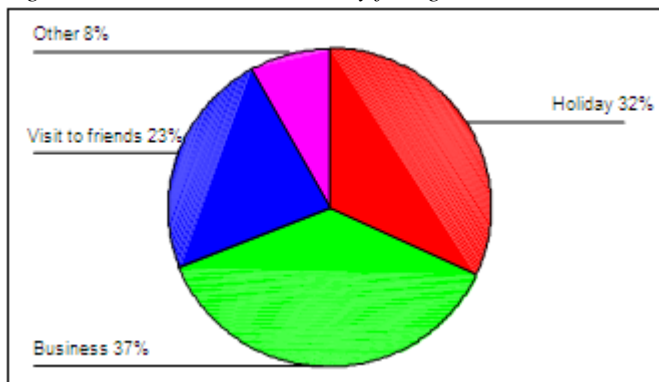
- About the reasons why tourists interviewed visited Romania.
- About the quality of the different types of services requested by tourists during their stay in Romania.
- About the positive and negative aspects held by tourists.
- About the areas most often visited by foreign tourists.

In the second part of the questionnaire there were questions used to identify the interview subjects related to age, sex, level of preparation, country of residence.

4. Interpretation of results

Following the survey, it was found that out of the 100 interviewees, 32% indicated holiday, as the main reason for visiting Romania, 37% - business, 23% indicated visits to friends and relatives, and 8% indicated another reason. But we notice that adding up the tourists who visit Romania for the holiday with those who come to visit their friends and relatives it equals 57% of the total respondents, which means that they could be willing to go on a mountain hike to visit the tourist spots of great attraction. Figure 1 shows the main reason why foreign tourists visit Romania.

Figure no.1. The main reason why foreign tourists visit Romania



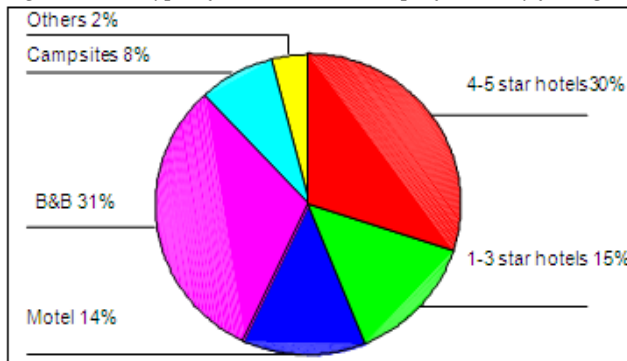
Source: own processing

Regarding the means of transport used to travel to Romania, 46% of the 100 interviewees replied that they used the plane as a means of transport and only 5% indicated the vessel. On the second place in the preferences tourists indicated the car (27%), hence it can be concluded that for the transport of tourists in Romania a combination of the two means of transport, namely the plane and shuffle bus can be used.

As a result of the survey, from the 100 interviewed tourists 34% indicated Bucharest as a tourist destination visited in Romania and only 2% indicated Bukovina. We can observe that, in ascending order, the preferences of the interviewed tourists are directed towards Transylvania (21%) and the Carpathian Mountains (12%). So, a combination of tourist areas can be made in order to create a travel product. As a main attraction, the interviewed tourists indicated businesses in proportion of 36% and closely followed by the legend of Dracula in a proportion of 25%, followed by mountain hiking in a percentage of 14%. Only 3% of those interviewed indicated equally the traditional culture and the history of Romania, meaning that the last two positions should be much more promoted, both at tourism fairs and in accommodations. Regarding the opportunity of introducing Romania in a tourist circuit together with other neighboring countries, 68% of the interviewees answered "yes" and only 32% gave a negative answer, which shows that Romania would be much more demanded as tourist destination in such a circuit.

Tourists' preferences regarding the type of accommodation selected shows that 31% of the interviewees opted for B&Bs, followed by the 4-5 star hotels, in proportion of 30%. A very small percentage is composed of the campsites that were preferred by 8% of the interviewed tourists and this is due to the fact that there are very few functional and of a higher quality units like this.

Figure no. 2 Type of accommodation preferred by foreign tourists



Source: own processing

Regarding the tourists' opinion about the quality of travel services, following the research, the average values presented in table 1 were recorded (on a scale from 1 - excellent to 5-very negative, 6-do not know).

Table no. 1. The quality of travel services

Travel services	Average values
Hotel/Motel	2.23
B&B and full board	2.14
Travel agency services	2.37
Restaurants/Bars	2.25
Road and local transport	2.80
Airport services	2.37
Tour guide services	2.48
Leisure activities	2.57
Attractions/Museums	2.13
Shopping	2.49
Souvenirs	2.39
Information services	2.96

Source: Author's contribution

We can notice that the best average of the Romanian travel services according to the tourists' preferences expressed in the research carried out is of 2.13 for attractions/museums and for B&B accommodations, the calculated average is 2.14. All other services are considered by tourists between good and satisfactory.

As a result of this research, a profile of the foreign tourist in Romania can be created, or an image of his/her preferences, according to which a travel product that corresponds to the expressed wishes of the interviewed tourists can be made.

Here's how we synthesized the preferences:

- The main reason for visiting Romania: holidays and visits - 55%.
- Means of transport used for coming to Romania: plane - 46%, car - 27%.
- Favorite regions to be visited: Bucharest - 34%, Transylvania - 21%, Carpathian Mountains - 12%.
- Specific attractions sought in Romania: business - 36%, Dracula legend - 25%, mountain hiking - 14%.

- The opportunity to create a tourist circuit in which Romania enters along with other countries: Yes 68%.
- Reasons for choosing Romania as a tourist destination: curiosity – 26%, recommendation – 22%, price – 20%.
- Most appreciated tourist services in Romania: attractions and museums, full board B&B.

From the analysis of these data we have designed a lump sum travel product in the form of a tourist circuit in which several forms of tourism will be combined and where Romania will participate alongside other neighboring countries such as: Hungary, Bulgaria. We will use as means of transport the plane and shuttle bus to transport the tourists to their tourist destinations. In Romania, the travel product will include visiting the capital, Prahova Valley, Transylvania and we will use mountain hiking as a means of recreation. The tourist services will be at affordable prices and as accommodations we will choose 4-5-star tourist B&Bs, as far as possible, with full board or half board. This travel product will include other regions too beside the areas known by foreign tourists, this being a very good way of promoting them.

5. Designing the combined travel product

Based on the marketing research for the design of the lump sum travel product, it was concluded that over 60% of the foreign tourists interviewed, consider that Romania (as a tourist destination) would be much more attractive if it got included in a tourist circuit with the surrounding countries: Bulgaria and Hungary.

We will further present a lump sum travel product consisting of a tourist circuit in which we will combine Bulgarian coastal tourism and Romanian mountain tourism from and cultural tourism from Hungary. Of course, within the mountain tourism that we will present in Romania, along with the mountain hiking we will also envisage objectives of cultural interest in the areas we travel, so here as well we will combine the mountain tourism with the cultural one.

The lump-sum travel product entitled "Let's Discover Romania" has as theme sports tourism intertwined with discovering the cultural and tourist objectives from Transylvania area and Apuseni Mountains area. 'Țara Moșilor' is an extremely beautiful area, with a natural potential that is insufficiently exploited, but which offers optimal conditions for mountain hiking and adventure sports, such as: paragliding, river rafting, rock climbing, mountain biking etc.

Beside the possibilities for sports leisure, tourists can visit tourist attractions with a cultural value that is recognized abroad: Prahova Valley, with the famous mountain resort Sinaia (Sinaia Monastery, Peles Complex which includes Peles Castle, Pelisor, Foisor, Guard's Chambers and Economat), the city of Brasov (the Black Church, the Church of St. Nicholas of Scheii Brasov, Brasov Citadel), the city of Sibiu, the Cultural Capital of Europe in 2007 (the Brukental National Museum, the Council Tower, the Carpenters Tower, etc.). Meshing the forms of sports leisure (adventure sports) and the discovery of the cultural treasures of the region aims to fully meet tourists' expectations and needs, the more so as the travel product is addressed to foreign tourists.

The lump sum travel product "Let's Discover Romania" is an 18-day vacation, distributed as follows:

- *Bulgaria* - 5 nights (6 days) in the Albena resort on the Black Sea coast, at the 4-star Laguna Garden hotel, in an all-inclusive system.
- *Romania* -10 nights (11 days) as follows:
 - Sinaia - 2 nights (3 days) - accommodation at Villa Boema *** in all-inclusive system
 - Sibiu -1 night (2 days) - accommodation at Arpasel B&B 4 daisies – dinner
 - Alba Iulia - 2 nights (3 days) - accommodation at San Bened Mansion in full board system
 - Garda de Sus - 2 nights (3 days) - accommodation at "Mama Uta" Guesthouse - dinner
 - Padis - 3 nights (4 days) - accommodation at Ic Ponor Guesthouse in full board system
- *Hungary* - 2-night accommodation at Budapest Star Hotel ***.

Transporting tourists to the destination will be done by plane from the tourists' destination country - Varna (Bulgaria), then after the 5-day stay on the Bulgarian coast, transport by plane on the route Varna (Bulgaria) - Bucharest (Romania) and then by shuttlebus from Bucharest on the whole route through Romania, including Hungary, from where the tourists will return to their

destination country by plane from Budapest (Hungary). Apart from the basic services, accommodation, meals and transport, several recreational services are offered, consisting, on the one hand, of mountain hiking, and on the other hand, of visiting historical-cultural objectives in the area. Mountain hiking is practiced as a group, with a specialized guide speaking a language of international circulation, following certain rules and instructions.

6. Conclusions and proposals

A well-designed travel product, based on research, can influence the development of a disadvantaged area by:

- *Bulgaria* - 5 nights (6 days) in the Albena resort on the Black Sea coast, at the 4-star Laguna Garden hotel, in an all-inclusive system.
- Attracting a flow of foreign tourists to the area.
- Modernization and extension of infrastructures: accommodation, food, transport so as not to affect the existing natural environment.
- Creating new jobs and developing the local human resources through the improvement of the employees.
- Maintaining the continuity of the traditions, customs and spiritual values in the area.

The travel product designed was created based on the preferences of foreign tourists, expressed in the analyzed research, which should ensure the tourist flow in the areas promoted by the respective product and a high degree of tourist satisfaction.

The quality and competitiveness of travel products contribute to the development and maintenance of a sustainable tourism.

We will mention the following proposals:

- Informing and raising awareness to the travel agencies and tour operators on the importance of designing competitive travel products that will determine the achievement of sustainable tourism in the area.
- State's involvement by granting facilities to the tourism agencies that promote such Romanian tourism products in the economically disadvantaged areas.
- Hiring specialized personnel with higher education in the field by tour operators and travel agencies.

The tendency to customize travel services and the development of new forms of tourism will lead to an increase in tourism employment, and, simultaneously, to the diversification of tourism professions. Some of the main activities performed by tourism employees are in the field of tour operators, travel agencies, tourism promotion and advertising.

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