KEY QUESTIONS
How can tourism policy support private sector marketing?
How should strategic and creative control be handled?
Where should we increase/reduce investment activities?
The Commodification of Tourism
Tourism has become commodified - as this is the natural outcome of a standardised approach to tourism consumption. Destinations increasingly feature the same type of facilities, architecture and entertainment ‘activities’ and ‘demonstrate remarkable similarity’ (Torres, 2002).
In focusing on attracting new tourist customers, place marketers have failed “to recognise the unique needs and limitations of each destination as well as their particular geographical, environmental and socio-cultural characteristics” (Buhalis, 2000).
Divisions among public and private sectors of the tourism system are a consequence of the fragmentation of tourism. Stakeholders often have divergent interests and divided responsibilities (Buhalís, 2000).
The responsibility for destination management, and strategic product development usually lies with public bodies who favour a ‘single voice for tourism’ which given the nature of places, with diverse and often competing stakeholders is an exceptionally difficult task (Lichrou et al., 2013).
Contemporary tourists do not represent a target market in the sense of identifiable homogeneous groups of customers. Rather, they are more complex, have more diversified patterns of behaviour and heterogeneous motivations.
What is an Authentic Tourist Experience?
Authenticity is not a matter of black or white, but rather involves a much wider spectrum, rich in ambiguous colours (Wang 1999).
Intra-personal authenticity is essentially concerned with ‘self-making’. It provides tourists with opportunities to experience relaxation, risk, pleasure, daring and uncertainty – which their everyday lives do not allow (to the same extent).
Interpersonal authenticity, when one’s feelings of being true to oneself are directly related to others, emerges from shared experience and helps develop communitas (Belhassen et al 2008).
What About Contemporary Marketing Thinking?
The prevailing view is that value for customers is embedded in products that are outputs of a supplier’s manufacturing process, value-in-exchange, but this has been challenged by the value-in-use notion (Gronroos and Ravald, 2011).
Value creation is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary (Vargo and Lusch 2008).
Customers produce value for themselves independently, but suppliers may offer assistance. Value co-creation necessarily requires interactions between the firm and the customer. Co-creation opportunities that suppliers have are strategic options for creating value (Payne et al 2008).
Operant resources are often invisible and intangible; often they are core competences or organisational processes. They are likely to be dynamic and infinite ... Because operant resources produce effects, they enable humans both to multiply the value of natural resources and to create additional operant resources (Vargo and Lusch 2004).
Value is no longer produced and sold, but something that is co-created with the customer and other value-creating partners.
The focus on experiences and the experience economy (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003) means that we must privilege interaction (relationships) beyond staging or orchestration.
One response has been a shift from cultural tourism towards creative tourism and creating development strategies – leading to more flexible and innovative forms of tourism experience which are harder to imitate than mere services (Alvarez, 2010).
Creative skills are widely used as the basis for small-scale tourism businesses, for example, in the provision of painting or photography holidays, gastronomic experiences and spiritual or ‘holistic holidays’ (Smith and Puczko, 2008) – and are the main drivers of creative tourism development.
Creative Tourism appeals to the kind(s) of existential authenticity sought by people in their leisure activities and is determined by value-in-use.
The destination needs to think carefully about the aspects of creativity that are linked to place, and which give creative tourists a specific motivation to visit. It also makes it important that creativity is also embedded or anchored in the destination (Richards, 2011).
Creativity is attractive as a policy option for stimulating a range of economic, cultural and social outcomes. It is also attractive because of the argued advantages produced by networking and knowledge spillover which stimulates further creative activity (Richards, 2011).
If the intention is to co-create authentic tourist experiences, then policy should focus upon understanding and building resources that tourists and private sector businesses can use in their own value-creating processes.
Instead of traditional value chains that run from producer to commodity to consumer, we need to think in terms of collaborative networks co-creating value (Richards, 2011).
Relational resources need to be developed in order to enable meaningful collaboration and co-creation. Such efforts must go beyond ‘calls to network’ in order to become truly embedded in value constellations.
In terms of marketing, destination brands will continue to be important, but will act more as a resource to be used within networks of value constellations, rather than an end in themselves.
Tourism image is more subjective than other images, and thus the ‘destination dimension’ of place brands is likely to rely (even) less on traditional marketing than traditional brands do (Blichfeldt, 2005).
In order to ensure that place brands remain meaningful, culture must be understood as dynamic, socially constructed and negotiated. Thus, we need to understand place narratives and tourist narratives and explore how both interact to (re)create narratives of place.
Every brand is a story that unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each element making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins 2006).
Destinations should be marketed to consumers not as products, but as narratives, particularly because local communities have needs and live in specific socio-cultural contexts, and are the makers of the destination’s culture and history (Lichrou et al., 2008).
Tourist bodies and local authorities need to become facilitators of facilitators of value-creating activities rather than managers of place products, as this is the best way to support private sector marketing.
This requires giving up strategic and creative control so that Brand Ireland becomes a resource to be used and (re)used in creating and (re)creating brand stories.
In order to develop private sector capabilities, investment activities need to be more focused on research that generates meaningful insights and education that supports the new co-creative and collaborative paradigm.
Strategic investments to be made in resources (identified by local communities) that enable opportunities for locals, businesses, tour operators and tourists to provide offerings that facilitate tourists in creating value-in-use.
References:


