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Conceptualising a contemporary marketing mix for sustainable tourism marketing

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Abstract

Marketers look to the concept of the *marketing mix* to help them create and present product offerings to target markets. Various conceptualisations of the marketing mix can be found in extant literature, from the traditional *Four Ps*, to seven Ps for the marketing of services, and broader frameworks for tourism marketing. In this paper we make two contributions to tourism marketing: (1) we synthesise three extant marketing mix frameworks to propose an optimal mix for tourism marketing managers, consisting of ten controllable elements; and (2) we further develop this marketing mix by cross-referencing each of its ten elements with the three elements of the triple bottom line reporting concept, *People*, *Planet*, and *Profit* to assist tourism marketing managers deal with critical challenges surrounding sustainability. The result, we argue, provides tourism marketers with an effective marketing mix for sustainable tourism marketing. The marketing mix is not just one functional aspect of the tourism organisation, but captures and reflects all the organisation's values and decisions concerning sustainability, and signals these to key stakeholders. It is therefore a critical gauge of a tourism organisation's sustainability stance, vital for differentiating tourism brands on a key performance attribute.

Introduction

When tourism marketers consider how they will mix the marketing activities they wish to direct toward a particular target market, they turn to a framework such as the *marketing mix*. But what should this marketing mix include if it is to guide decision making effectively and comprehensively, particularly if sustainability issues are to be addressed? We consider three popular marketing mix approaches to develop a typology of activities that, we argue, should be in the mix for the tourism marketer. We also consider how this marketing mix might ensure sustainable tourism outcomes. This paper therefore makes two significant conceptual contributions to knowledge and managerial practice in the area of contemporary tourism marketing.

The *Four Ps*, *Product*, *Price*, *Promotion*, and *Place*, the mainstay of general marketing texts since it was framed by McCarthy (1960) almost half a century ago, has proven resilient over the ensuing decades, but its suitability as a key contemporary framework for marketing thinking has been questioned (e.g., Day and Montgomery 1999). The United Nations-backed *Principles for Responsible Management Education* (UN, 2008) is an effort to help guide future business leaders in the practice of more ethical, socially, and environmentally inclusive business practices, issues not comprehensively covered within the *Four Ps* framework. Also, the American Marketing Association (AMA, 2007) has recently revised its definition of marketing to highlight the need for both the organisation's and society's needs to be addressed through the organisation's market offers.

While the Four Ps has continued to enjoy some popularity since its inception, almost three decades ago, Booms and Bitner (1981) developed a broader framework for services marketing to recognise the unique characteristics of service products, adding People, Process, and Physical evidence. Despite this advance, some marketing authors (e.g., Kotler, Bowen, and Makens, 2006) find it difficult to embrace a marketing mix for tourism services that reflects tourism's unique service and experience characteristics. Morrison (2010) is one tourism marketing author who, we believe, addresses this shortcoming through the inclusion of additional marketing mix elements, based on the assumption that "there are another 4 Ps in our industry: people, packaging, programming, and partnership" (p. 56).

Given the variety in these three marketing mix conceptualisations, an optimal marketing mix for tourism marketing managers, one that provides clear direction for the development of tourism market offerings, is currently unavailable. We analyse a number of tourism marketing textbooks and conceptualisations to develop a more optimal tourism marketing mix. We also investigate extant tourism marketing mix conceptualisations to evaluate their accommodation of the sustainability issues that surround tourism marketing decisions. Given the increasing demands for business to be more socially and environmentally responsible, and sustainable (e.g., Dawkins, 2004; Environics, 1999), it is important that sustainability be at the forefront of marketers' thinking. Given the importance of sustaining physical and social environments for the long-term success of tourism businesses, tourism marketers' engagement with sustainability issues is critical.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to highlight the controllable elements an optimal tourism marketing mix might practically consider: and, (2) to propose a framework conceptualising sustainable tourism marketing. By reviewing the tourism marketing mix, and by developing a framework that provides a practical yet comprehensive instrument to assist the tourism marketing manager practice sustainable tourism marketing, we make two significant contributions to knowledge and managerial practice.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section reviews extant marketing mix frameworks, before synthesising these and proposing an extended, ten-element marketing mix for tourism. The second section discusses the increasing pressure for business to be more sustainability-oriented, how contemporary marketing mix conceptualisations do not address this end, and considers incentives to do so. The third section proposes an expanded marketing mix framework that can assist tourism marketers develop a sustainability orientation, simply but effectively, by cross-referencing the expanded marketing mix elements with the three elements of the triple bottom line (TBL) reporting concept, People, Planet, and Profit (Elkington, 1997). We illustrate with several brief examples of how the sustainability elements might interact with marketing mix elements. The final section discusses potential application of the proposed framework, and future research opportunities.

1. Conceptualising an Optimal Marketing Mix for Tourism

The notion of the marketing mix is attributable to Neil Borden, who in his address to the American Marketing Association (AMA) in 1953, drew on James Culliton's earlier idea of the business executive's role in combining different ingredients (Van Waterschoot and van den Bulte, 1992). Borden proposed six *ingredients*, but it was the four ingredients of product, price, promotion, and place (the *FourPs*), advanced by McCarthy (1960), that have proven resilient with marketers over the decades. This simple framework was considered suitable for the product, and later sales, market orientations that characterised post-war United States economic development, but recent changes in definitional direction (e.g., AMA, 2007; UN, 2008), suggest that *time and place* are very different to now.

To address the unique characteristics of services, when compared to more tangible, standardised, storable manufactured goods, the mnemonic approach of the Four Ps was continued in an expanded services marketing mix, consisting of seven Ps (Booms and Bitner, 1981). Various marketing mixes have been proposed for tourism, but before looking at these it is necessary to look closer at the services mix, as tourism typically consists of a product/service mix of tangible (e.g., meals, accommodation, transportation carriers, and physical sites) and intangible components (e.g., service personnel, events, and experiences).

Recognising the uniqueness of services, Booms and Bitner (1981) developed three additional Ps to add to the traditional four; *Participants*, *Physical evidence*, and *Process*. *Participants* includes "all human actors who play a part in service delivery and thus influence the buyer's perceptions: namely the firm's personnel, the customer, and other customers in the service environment" (Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler, 2006, p. 26), highlighting the role of human resource management and the notion of the *customer mix* as key ingredients in the service offering. While the term *People* is now more commonly used than *Participants* in Services Marketing literatures, we prefer to use Booms and Bitner's (1981) original term here to avoid confusion with the use of *People* in the TBL framework. The concept of the customer mix is further addressed by Langeard, Bateson, Lovelock, and Eiglier's (1981) *Servuction Model*.

Physical evidence consists of "the environment in which the service is delivered and where the firm and customer interact, and any tangible components that facilitate performance or communication of the service" (Zeithaml, et al., 2006, p. 27), highlighting the concept of the *servicescape*.

Process describes how the service is assembled, the "actual procedures, mechanisms, and flow of activities by which the service is delivered – the service delivery and operating systems" (Zeithaml, et al., 2006, p. 27). Each of these three elements is within the control of the services marketing manager, allowing service differentiation, and thereby providing customers attributes on which to compare and judge different service brands. As service products often contain tangible product elements, and, like goods products, must be priced, promoted, and

distributed, these seven Ps provide a succinct, generic summary of marketing activities for services.

In an effort to divine a more appropriate mix for tourism marketing than the generic seven Ps, a variety of frameworks has been proposed. Here we look at just three of these alternative frameworks, taken from recent and popular tourism texts by Morrison (2010), Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (2006), and Shoemaker, Lewis and Yesawich (2007). We briefly discuss their approaches before synthesising these into a more inclusive tourism marketing mix.

Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (2006) take a rather traditional approach to constituting their tourism marketing mix, casting it in terms of the traditional four Ps, but including the physical environment, customer interaction with the service delivery system and other customers, and customer coproduction under the label of the augmented product. Shoemaker, Lewis, and Yesawich (2007, p. 62) suggest that, since many tourism businesses are engaged in activities that go beyond the Four Ps and the three additional service marketing Ps, a framework consisting of 13 Cs is more appropriate for “creating a product or service *with* the customer”, rather than *for* the customer. These 13 Cs, we would argue, depart from the spirit of the marketing mix concept, and are limited in their applicability. The final C in their classification, for example, is Competition, “because firms do not operate in a vacuum” (p. 63), but this is not an element of the tourism marketer’s controllable activities.

Morrison (2010) proposes an eight-element tourism marketing mix, adding People, Packaging, Programming, and Partnership to a base of the traditional Four Ps. Morrison’s (2010) conceptualisation of *People* is consistent with that of Booms and Bitner (1981), but his earlier conceptualisation (1989) omitted customers, who are so often co-producers of the tourism experience, and referred only to industry personnel. The remaining three elements of Morrison’s mix appeal as they include key activities typically engaged in by tourism marketers in order to create innovative and exciting consumer experiences, whether the consumer is a guest, passenger, or visitor.

Packaging describes the “combination of related and complementary hospitality and travel services into a single-price offering” (Morrison, 2010, p.392). *Programming* “involves developing special activities, events, or programs to increase customer spending or give added appeal to a package or other hospitality/travel service” (Morrison, 2010, p. 392). *Partnership* refers to “cooperative promotions and other cooperative marketing efforts by hospitality and travel organizations” (Morrison, 2010, p. 352).

Tourism marketing is a cooperative activity, as consumers rarely use just one brand in consuming the overall tourism experience. Optimal results are achieved when the different products and brands are combined synergistically to deliver clear and superior benefits. Alliances, or partnerships, are needed in optimally bundling different brands’ *ingredients*, and these are often combined in ways and at times to

efficiently manage demand and capacity usage. Programming bundled packages at times of low demand, often underpinned by symbiotic inter-sector partnerships, helps deal with the characteristic of tourism service products that is so important to financial management: perishability. The opportunity to sell tourism service inventory occurs in real time, and if not sold at the moment of production is, of course, lost forever.

From the extant frameworks analysed, we propose an optimal tourism marketing mix that consists of the traditional four Ps, the three additional services marketing Ps, and the three additional Ps suggested by Morrison. These *ingredients* succinctly reflect what the tourism marketer can control in order to differentiate the market offering, achieve the desired brand positioning, and permit the consumer's evaluation of that offering. A summary of our expanded tourism marketing mix is provided in the first column of Table 1.

In the next section, we review the increasing demand for a greater sustainability orientation of business, including tourism, before proposing the further expansion of our marketing mix for sustainable tourism marketing.

2. Increasing Pressure for Greater Sustainability-orientation in Tourism

Confronted by evidence of environmental damage and the consequence of the current global economic downturn, pressure is on business to change. Calls for greater sustainability action are rising from many quarters. Consumers, a primary stakeholder group with the ability to "influence the profits of competing firms, and indirectly also the direction of the economy" (Hansen and Schrader, 1997, p. 447), expect firms to be more socially and environmentally responsible. Consumers want firms to inform them of their pro-social initiatives, and report that this information will influence their purchase behaviour (e.g., Dawkins, 2004). A considerable body of evidence in the ethics and corporate social responsibility literature (e.g., Brown and Dacin, 1997; Creyer and Ross, 1997; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) suggests consumers develop favourable attitudes to more responsible businesses and brands.

Business too is aware of the need for change. A recent McKinsey Quarterly global survey on business and society (2007), for example, found environmental issues, including climate change, have soared to the top of the socio-political agenda for executives around the world, with the environment "expected to attract more public and political attention and affect shareholder value far more than any other societal issue" (McKinsey, 2007).

The need for change has also become apparent in the business schools that are likely to groom future commercial leaders. Around 180 business schools across the globe recently signed up to the United Nations-backed Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) in an effort to help guide future business leaders in the practice of more ethical, and socially and environmentally inclusive business practices. A key acknowledgement of the PRME program is that "curriculum development and adaptation in the spirit of corporate responsibility call for a more

holistic approach to theory and practice”, while a key aim of the program is “broadening the understanding of social and environmental challenges and their relevance to business” (GFRME, 2008). Academics are also presenting arguments for sustainability to be integrated into marketing curricula (Bridges and Wilhelm, 2008).

The nature of the tourism phenomenon, dependent as it is on the careful management of natural and man-made resources to provide the basis of market, makes the issues of sustainability critical for tourism marketing managers. Finding a balance between the “major collision” of industrial technology and nature’s ecological systems is a “major challenge for business managers” (Post, 1991, p. 34); as there is perhaps no industry more global than tourism, this challenge could not be more critical than for this business activity.

The concept of the tourism marketing mix is the ideal starting point for examining how tourism organisations might more appropriately meet increasing sustainability demands; within the mix are captured the core values of the organisation, reflecting the nature of its relationships with key stakeholders, such as suppliers, consumers, employees, host communities, and the environment. The next section proposes three very different Ps be added to our expanded tourism marketing mix in order to deliver a simple yet robust framework for delivering sustainable tourism marketing.

3. A Proposed Optimal Marketing Mix for Sustainable Tourism

Sustainability is a recurring theme in contemporary tourism research (e.g., Butler, 1999; Chhabra, 2009; Jamroz, 2007; Landorf, 2009; Lansing and de Vries, 2007; Liu, 2003; Middleton and Hawkins, 1998; Schianetz and Kavanagh, 2008), yet a simple, effective framework for assisting tourism managers to deliver sustainable tourism product alternatives is absent from this research. We address this gap by further developing our sustainable tourism marketing mix concept in this section of the paper.

Sustainability is often defined in terms of sustainable development (Basiago, 1999), which the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development Report, *Our Common Future*, or *Brundtland Report*, defines as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN, 1987). *Our Common Future* outlined four sustainability principles: (1) holistic planning and strategic decision-making; (2) preservation of essential ecological processes; (3) protection of human heritage and biodiversity; and (4) growth that can be sustained over the long term. These principles are reflected in the World Tourism Organization’s (2004) prescription that “Sustainable tourism should:

- (1) Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.

(2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.

(3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.”

A general definition of sustainable tourism marketing must adhere to these ecological, social and economic conditions, which are reflected in the TBL framework. While we prefer to use the term ‘sustainable tourism’ to describe the marketing mix proposed in this paper, we are mindful of the subtle distinction between sustainable marketing and sustainability marketing, an important distinction for tourism, which is summarised by Belz and Peattie (2009, p. 31):

“The adjective ‘sustainable’ can be used to mean durable or long-lasting. Therefore ‘sustainable marketing’, can be interpreted as a kind of marketing, which builds long-lasting customer relationships effectively - without any particular reference to sustainable development or consideration of sustainability issues. Sustainability marketing more explicitly relates to the sustainable development agenda.”

Belz and Peattie (2009, p. 30) also note that such a marketing perspective “emphasizes the triple bottom line of ecological, social and economic issues”, might be distinguished from green marketing, and presumably ecotourism, “which tends to focus on environmental problems and the reduction of the environmental burden”.

The ten Ps of our proposed tourism marketing mix capture and reflect the organisation’s values and decisions about sustainability, and signal these to key stakeholders, particularly consumers, yet they do not yet provide a framework for sustainable tourism marketing. To achieve this, we apply the TBL to the expanded marketing mix, not in an additive manner but by cross-referencing each of the ten mix elements with each of the three TBL elements, as shown in Table 1.

	Planet	People	Profit
Product			
Price			
Promotion			
Place			
Participants			
Process			
Physical evidence			
Partnership			
Packaging			

Programming			
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Table 1: A Contemporary Marketing Mix for Sustainable Tourism Marketing

We contend that the sustainability imperatives of *People, Planet* and *Profit*, as described Elkington (1997), are often omitted from marketers' thinking. If included at all in contemporary texts, these concepts are often segregated from the discussion of how the product offer might be constituted, or relegated to afterthought status in a concluding chapter. A recent analysis of marketing texts supports this assertion; Demoss and Nicholson (2005, p. 338) analysed more than 20 current introductory marketing textbooks for guidance regarding environmentally sustainable practices across all elements of the marketing mix, and found only "limited, sporadic coverage of specific issues, with modest exposure to general environmental awareness".

Of the tourism textbooks we used to compare marketing mix approaches, only Shoemaker et al. (2007, p. 143, 145) make clear reference to the issue of environmental sustainability, but in a separate chapter from the marketing mix. These authors note: "Environmental concerns such as waste disposal, recycling, and pollution are attracting attention not only from customers but from regulators as well. Cruise ships are no longer allowed to dump their wastes into the sea, and some even have biodegradable golf balls so that their customers can practice from an on-board driving range without polluting the sea. Golf courses are looking for new strains of grass to minimize the use of pesticides, and hotels are moving toward recycling of solid wastes, not to mention asking you to reuse your towel and sheets." These authors also acknowledge: "Increasingly, the public expects the hospitality industry to incorporate ecological concerns into its decision making. Some companies have already started and have even found it profitable."

The tourism marketing mix we propose allows managers to address key sustainability impacts from each of the 10 marketing mix elements in a comprehensive and systematic manner. In each of the 30 cells of the proposed matrix will be raised questions in regard to the interactions of the organisation's operations and *People, Planet*, and *Profit*. These questions might cascade from the WTO's (2004) requirements of sustainable tourism and the related sustainability principles of *Our Common Future*, as presented above, and might be framed as:

People

How does our (marketing mix element) demonstrate respect for the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance?

Planet

How does our (marketing mix element) make optimal use of environmental resources, maintain essential ecological processes, and help to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity?

Profit

How does our (marketing mix element) ensure our viable, long-term economic operations, provide long-term socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation?

We do not prescribe answers to these questions here, as different tourism contexts will promote different marketing mix element-TBL domain interactions, and therefore require different remedies for different challenges. We suggest that potential answers to many of these questions are extant in a variety of literatures that deal with the issue of sustainability; Lansing and de Vries (2007), for example, deal with the ethicality of sustainable tourism promotion claims, while Landorf (2009) deals with planning issues surrounding the mitigation of tourism impacts on World Heritage Sites, and Schianetz and Kavanagh (2008) investigate the selection and evaluation of sustainability indicators for destinations.

Further, examples of best practice in many of these interactions might be identified in case studies within these same literatures, or available, for example, on the Web. Spain's Alhambra, for instance, a former Moorish palace overlooking Granada, and now a World Heritage site (World Heritage Site, 2009), was ravaged by both time and those who made it their temporary home, or *squat*, several decades ago, when management controls were absent and its value as a cornerstone of Spain's cultural landscape overlooked. Its management today, however, provides an excellent case study in sustainability practice.

Other researchers have addressed the issue of addressing marketing's role in facilitating sustainable tourism, with one text dedicated to the topic (Middleton and Hawkins, 1998), and calls for concepts such as the marketing mix to be redefined according to sustainability principles so that tourism organisations might reflect a sustainable marketing orientation (e.g., Jamrozy, 2007). The framework we propose raises awareness of the need for such marketing-mix element-TBL domain considerations, and provides the manager an inclusive yet simple checklist to ensure the potential social, environmental, and long-term economic ramifications of organisational decision-making might be addressed rather than overlooked.

Conclusion

If a business concept, such as the marketing mix, is to be of use for scholars and practitioners it must be *fit-for-purpose*. A marketing definition should strengthen marketing's organisational role (Grönroos 2006), and it should reflect changes in the environment (Cooke, Rayburn, and Abercrombie 1992). We have argued here that

neither the traditional Four Ps nor the expanded Seven Ps for services is fit for the purpose of providing tourism marketers an optimal checklist of the operational activities they might manage. We argue the expanded marketing mix we propose, based on an analysis of extant frameworks, is a more holistic approach and better suited to this task. Further, we assist tourism marketing managers develop a sustainability marketing orientation that allows a simple yet comprehensive checklist for delivering sustainable product offerings to the market, and signalling to key stakeholders organisational values that reflect this orientation and differentiate the brand. Both of these contributions, we feel, are a valuable addition to the sustainable tourism marketing literature.

In a recent article, Elkington (2009, p. 77) identifies three “pressure waves, that, since 1960, have driven political and market change linked to sustainable development”. The first of these waves, 1960-87, saw “new environmental rules spread across the developed world, with business largely on the defensive, forced into compliance” (p. 77). The second, which peaked around the end of the 1980s, saw environmental performance become an issue for the first time, “with companies competing by developing greener products” (p. 77). The third followed the 9/11 attacks, and has been characterised by “the way corporate responsibility and wider sustainability issues have increasingly become central to the agendas of organisations like the World Economic Forum, the Clinton Global initiative, and now the Copenhagen summit on climate change looming at the end of 2009, which will ensure that our carbon footprints will be under scrutiny as never before” (p. 78). The future, Elkington suggests, “focuses on new market opportunities thrown up by the world’s great social and environmental challenges, on evolving entrepreneurial solutions, and on bringing such solutions to scale, often through the use of market mechanisms and economic instruments” (p. 78).

Elkington suggests several *dos and don’ts* for marketing professionals. Among the *Don’ts* are (p. 78):

- Underestimate the challenge of going green convincingly and profitably.
- Greenwash – it’s still so easy to do, through stretching marketing points, over-enthusiasm or misreading the direction of the debate.
- Imagine that ‘green’ performance improvements are a guarantee of market success – the product or offering has to work on its own terms.
- Forget that all forms of evolution - including product evolution – involve intense continuing adaptation to environmental (or market) conditions. Innovate and communicate – and then keep innovating.

Among the *Dos* are (p. 78):

- Be consistent: even well-founded green claims in one part of the business can be undermined by mishaps or misalignments in other parts of the business.
- Work out what your company’s line is on key policy issues – looking not just for ways to defend your existing business model and reputation but new ways to build value.

The second focus of this paper was to extend our tourism marketing mix to specifically deliver sustainable tourism marketing outcomes. We achieve this by the inclusion of the three TBL domains, *People*, *Planet*, and *Profit*. While our framework is a departure from the conventional additive notion of the marketing mix, instead requiring ten marketing activity elements be cross-checked against the three TBL domains, we believe the framework is sufficiently straight-forward and practical to be of use for tourism marketers. Extant tourism marketing mix conceptualisations do not equip today's and future marketing managers with an adequate framework to deal with the sustainability challenges facing business, and society. What is needed is a framework that addresses Elkington's (2009) *Dos* and *Don'ts*. Our framework, we contend, goes some way toward meeting this need.

Business, including tourism, must ensure it is building future business, with product offerings for future markets. Marketing concepts that tackle the issues of sustainability are important for this future. Elkington (2009, p. 78) observes: "There are moments in history when a new set of challenges surface, when a new order urgently needs to be built." It is difficult to conceive a world without tourism, and therefore tourism markets, but to ensure this future, sustainable tourism marketing is needed. It is appreciated that while the marketing student may struggle to recall such an expansive concept, the mix proposed should provide managers with a simple yet effective tool to assist sustainability-oriented decision-making. Future research might test the applicability of this framework through a compilation of case examples of sustainable business practices from a cross-section of tourism organisations. From such a study, hopefully an industry guide for best practice may emerge.

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