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Sustainable tourism marketing: what should be in the mix?

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Sustainable tourism marketing: What should be in the mix?

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Keywords

Marketing mix, responsibility, sustainability, tourism

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Introduction

When tourism marketers consider how they will manage 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 a contemporary tourism marketing mix include? 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 paper proceeds by first discussing extant marketing mix frameworks, before synthesising these and proposing an extended, ten-element marketing mix for tourism. We then discuss the increasing pressure, and incentives, for business to be more socially and environmentally responsible, examine extant views on how the marketing mix concept does not address these ends, and propose an expanded marketing mix framework that can assist tourism marketers meet these responsibilities, simply but effectively. To do this, we cross-reference the three Ps of the triple bottom line reporting concept. A brief illustration of how these three sustainability elements might interact with the other ten elements is also presented.

From a Traditional to a Tourism Marketing Mix

The conceptual roots of the marketing mix are attributable to Neil Borden, who, in his address to the American Marketing Association 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 (1964, p. 4) used the term to describe "the marketing procedures and policies with which marketing managements deal when devising marketing programs". McCarthy (1960) distilled the large number of potential *ingredients* that could influence the development of a marketing strategy to a simple schema consisting of four elements: Product, Price, Promotion, and Place – the *Four Ps*. It is this simple mnemonic device that has come down to us as the marketing mix, the activities the marketing manager needed to consider to achieve the desired market offering.

The Four Ps, the mainstay of general marketing texts since the 1960s, was, however, designed with manufactured products in mind. 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), the Four Ps forms the basis of our proposed tourism marketing mix as it adequately deals with the tangible tourism product component.

We next include the three additional elements offered by Booms and Bitner (1981) to recognise the unique service characteristics of tourism products: People, Process, and Physical Evidence. *People* 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 and Bitner, 1996, p. 26), highlighting the role of human resource management and the notion of the *customer mix* as key ingredients in the service offering. The concept of the customer mix is addressed in 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 and Bitner, 1996, p. 26), highlighting the concept of the *servicescape*.

Process describes the "actual procedures, mechanisms, and flow of activities by which the service is delivered – the service delivery and operating systems" (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996, 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 yet generic summary of marketing activities for services. But even this services marketing mix does not adequately capture the unique service and experience nature of tourism products.

Various authors have advanced different iterations of the mix for tourism marketing. In summary, Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (2006) add to the traditional four Ps 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".

The mix that we believe provides the most useful insight into the unique characteristics of marketing tourism products, however, is Morrison's (1989) eight-element mix. To the base of the traditional Four Ps, Morrison adds: People, Partnership, Packaging, and Programming. Morrison's (1989) mix appeals as it includes key activities that tourism marketers typically do in order to create innovative and exciting customer experiences, whether the customer is a *guest*, *passenger*, or *visitor*. Morrison's conceptualisation of People is more limited than that of Booms and Bitner (1981), and included only industry personnel. Customers, who are so often co-producers of the tourism experience, were omitted. *Packaging* describes the "combination of related and complementary hospitality and travel services into a single-price offering" and programming" (Morrison, 1989, p.503). *Programming* describes the "development of special activities, events, or programs to increase customer spending or give added appeal to a package or other hospitality/travel service" (Morrison, 1989, p. 505). Packages are often constructed around an event, theme, or program. *Partnership* refers to

"cooperative promotions and other cooperative marketing efforts by hospitality and travel organizations" (Morrison, 1989, p. 503).

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 helps deal with the characteristic of tourism service products that is so important to financial management: perishability.

Based on this review of extant frameworks, and by synthesising all the different typologies we propose a ten-element tourism marketing mix that captures the range of activities the tourism marketer might use in order to optimally manage market offerings. This ten-element tourism marketing mix consists of the traditional four Ps, the three additional services marketing Ps, and three additional tourism Ps suggested by Morrison. The services marketing conceptualisation of *People* is preferred over Morrison's as it captures the role of not only employees but also customers. These *ingredients* succinctly reflect what the tourism marketer can, and often does, control in order to differentiate the market offering, achieve the desired brand positioning, and permit the consumer's evaluation of that offering.

The Call for Greater Sustainability Considerations

Confronted by evidence of environmental damage and the consequences of the current global economic downturn, pressure is on business to change. Calls for greater social and environmental responsibility 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), are just one stakeholder group that expects firms to be more socially and environmentally responsible. Consumers want firms to inform them of their corporate 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 this groundswell and 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. According to this survey, the environment is "expected to attract more public and political attention and affect shareholder value far more than any other societal issue" (McKinsey, 2007).

The nature of the tourism phenomenon, dependent as it is on the careful management of natural and man-made *place* resources which are often the basis of the tourism *product*, makes the issues of social responsibility and environmental 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 the tourism industry.

As the tourism market offering is the result of "the marketing procedures and policies with which marketing managements deal when devising marketing programs". (Borden, 1964, p. 4), the concept of the marketing mix is the ideal starting point for examining how tourism marketers might more appropriately meet increasing social and environmental demands. Further, the elements of the marketing mix articulate the organisation's vision, mission, strategy, and values, and provide a window into its identity. The respect with which employees and customers are treated by an organisation, for example, says much about the values of the organisation. The next section introduces the three Ps of the triple bottom line, in order to deliver a simple yet robust framework for delivering sustainable tourism marketing.

A Tourism Marketing Mix for Sustainability

If tourism is to be sustained, the different physical, social, cultural, and man-made resources upon which the phenomenon depends must be sustained. We define sustainable development, we refer to the most generally accepted definition of the concept (Basiago 1999), that is, the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development Report, *Our Common Future*, or *Brundtland Report*, which is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987).

The *Our Common Future* Report continues on to outline 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. In our view, a general definition of sustainable tourism marketing must appreciate and accommodate these four principles. Importantly, as noted by Butler (1999), such tourism marketing approaches must consider the human and physical environment. Accordingly, we conceptualise sustainable tourism marketing as marketing for the purpose of tourism that (1) is holistic and strategic; (2) preserves ecological processes; (3) protects human heritage and biodiversity; and (4) sustains long-term growth, to permit present and future generations to meet their tourism needs.

To propose a tourism marketing mix that addresses these four sustainability challenges we cross-reference our 10 mix elements with the three Ps of the triple-bottom-line reporting concept. It must be noted that we do not do so in an additive manner. Rather, we argue that the ten elements we have identified should be cross-referenced with the three sustainability domains, as shown in Figure 1, in order to ensure sustainability issues are considered as part of each marketing mix decision. To avoid confusion, we use the term *Populations* here to refer to fair business practices toward employees and the communities within which the organisation conducts its business. We use the term *Populations* in order to avoid confusion with the *People* element, already drawn from Booms and Bitner's (1981) marketing mix for services, though the term *People* is conventionally used in the triple bottom line framework. *Planet* refers to the ecological systems within which tourism firms operates. *Profit* should consider the organisation's impacts on the populations and planet, and reflect full-cost accounting to minimise negative externalities beyond the usual annual accounting cycle (Elkington, 1999).

We contend that the sustainability imperatives of *Populations, Planet,* and the more sustainable view of *Profit* are often omitted from marketers' thinking. Demoss and Nicholson (2005, p. 338) provide support for our contention. These researchers 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".

	Product	Price	Promotion	Place	People	Process	Physical Evidence	Packaging	Programming	Partnership
Populations										
Planet										
Profit											

Figure 1: A Contemporary Marketing Mix for Sustainable Tourism Marketing

Of the tourism textbooks we used to compare marketing mix approaches, only Shoemaker et al. (2007, p. 143, 145) makes clear reference to the issue of environmental sustainability, but does so in a separate chapter disengaged 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 the questions of sustainability in regard to the effects of each of the ten marketing mix elements in our mix. Though different tourism contexts will promote different element-domain interactions and therefore require different remedies for different challenges, we may consider one of these interactions here, that of *People* and *Populations*. The organisation's marketer manager should ensure that tourism service employees, customers, and members of the communities affected by the organisation's operations, such as host populations and contracted workers, such as local guides, should be treated with respect, and their risks associated with negative externalities minimised. We suggest the framework we propose raises awareness of the need for such element-domain considerations, and provides the manager a comprehensive checklist to ensure the sustainability ramifications of decision are addressed.

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*. 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 activities they might manage in order to deliver tourism *product offers* to the market. While sustainability is a recurring theme in contemporary tourism research, a simple yet effective framework for assisting tourism managers to deliver sustainable tourism product alternatives is absent from this research. We address this gap in this paper.

Business, including tourism, must ensure it is building future business 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." We suggest that our proposed mix will help to build this order for tourism marketing sustainability.

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