Chapter 12
The Role of Tour Operators in Destination Tourism Marketing in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Destination marketing is one of the tools used by tour operators to gain a tourism competitive advantage. Tourism is one of the biggest businesses in the global village. It is a business in a very competitive market environment that marketing tourism destinations cannot be done by destination management organizations (DMOs) alone but also intermediaries like tour operators. Marketing tourism destination nowadays is highly driven by technology which enhances tourists' destination knowledge prior to their visits. However, the downside of technology cannot be underestimated on the business environment. While there is a growing importance of technology usage which creates challenges for destination competitiveness, tour operators use their marketing strategies to help building positive destination images. These images are created to influence tourists' travel decision making and visits. This chapter, therefore, has examined the present tourism marketing strategies, activities, and approaches used by tour operators in creating positive images for tourism destination using 20 cases of Malawian tour operators.

INTRODUCTION

Destination marketing plays a major role in influencing tourism development in a community (Wang & Pizam, 2011). Sustainable tourism defines destination marketing as a process of communicating with potential visitors to influence tourists' destination preference, tourists' intention to travel, and ultimately, tourists' final decisions and product choices (Pike, 2015). Moreover, in many developing countries, ministries or departments of tourism are responsible for destination marketing; and in most cases, they work jointly with tour operators. Tourists, too, play a role through their behavior—which is frequently monitored by authorities to determine tourism impacts (Camilleri, 2018; Murray, Lynch & Foley, 2016) as well as to determine the ramifications of destination marketing and image creation beyond the realms of marketing effectiveness (Orel & Kara, 2014). It is therefore important to determine not only the numbers of tourists, but also the type and quality (including behavior) of tourists, that a destination receives—which, in turn, influences the impact of tourism in a destination community. In order to achieve the activity, it also requires that the services of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) – or tourism ministries and departments – be supported by tour operators. As Van Rensburg (2014) notes, one of the reasons why a tour operator needs to work closely with departments of tourism is due to its closeness and interaction with tourists even before decisions are made by tourists to visit destinations. Tour operators, according to Djurica (2010), are always in the forefront of discussing destinations with potential tourists, responding to potential tourists' questions, and convincing tourists to consume tourism products; additionally, they are also involved in clarifying destination products and creating the destination image. In tourism and destination image creation, tour operators consider a number of marketing strategies—the most important one being marketing communication through their tourist brochures, advertisements, and destination websites.

On the other hand, a destination image is the perception in which tourists and non-tourists view a destination—that is often ascribed to its image (Kokkranikal, Cronje & Butler, 2011). A destination image is highly and most frequently researched in relation to how tourists perceive the destination and how the image influences the decision-making process (Qu & Qui, 2015). According to Pike (2015), that image has the power to undeniably influence behavior on tourist behavior, too. Many developed countries use DMOs to portray a destination image and vision; and yet, in many developing countries, opportunities are lost by side-lining DMOs. While little is being done, tour operators in developing countries like Malawi take an active role by designing their own brochures and destination websites to appeal to tourists'

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