

“The Impact of Tourism Conferences on Tourism Brand Extension” “Case Study: 2nd Int’l Tourism Branding Seminar of Iran”

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ABSTRACT

Development of tourism industry necessitates a deep understanding and awareness of influential social, cultural and economic factors affecting a region. Those regions with high potentials for tourism development that are not facing a favorable trend in terms of tourism growth need to focus their efforts on developing a brand. Tourism destination branding is considered as one of the most important dimensions of destination marketing, which leads to improvements in tourism destination image and generates competitive advantage. In this study, a survey was conducted among 108 tourism experts and professionals attending the second Tourism Branding Seminar and Festival in Tehran. The questionnaire was designed to assess the significance of tourism conferences/seminars and the importance of branding in the context of tourism development. The results of the study suggest that tourism-related conferences, the quality of the gatherings and the participation of tourism experts have a noticeable influence on tourism development and policies. Also each of historical, cultural, ecotourism, recreational, therapeutic and religious factors, respectively has priority in the Tourism branding process.

KEYWORDS: Tourism Development, Conference, Tourism Brand, Destination Marketing, Experts

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, brand is one of the most worthwhile belongings of any company. Gardner and Levy (1995) stated that the long-term success of a brand depends upon the right brand selection and actualization of the brand concept before entering market. In fact, the serious competition among various providers has led to the provision of standard and similar products and services. As a consequence, customers are now confused by having a lot of choices. In such a tumultuous market, dominant brands can act as a key (Fung So and King, 2010). Transformation of a product to a branded one leads to consumer loyalty and consumers will remain loyal to their favorite brands even in the case of the worst recessions.

Presently, tourism development has been being paid serious attentions by government programmers and private sector companies' at all national, regional, and international levels. Most countries are aware of the fact that further innovation is needed to improve their economy. In countries like Iran, oil revenues are considered as a kind of economic rent which lacks direct inductive effects on economy from the viewpoint of production level promotion, while tourism is mutually dependent on some economic activities and its development has a great impact upon country economy by enhancing revenues. As a result, development of tourism rescues country economy from falling in a one-crop economy state and brings about an economic stability which, in turn, is a result of the stability of the incomes from tourist attraction.

The main reason for tourism industry development in most countries is its economic revenues although some other reasons are also given (Ranjbarian and Zahedi, 2000). Nowadays, tourism is so important in economy and job creation that it can be considered as the running force of any country's economy (Brown, 2003). Tourism industry may have significant impact upon the raise of employment, accommodation incomes and governmental incomes. Thus, tourism can directly or indirectly affect the economic growth (Oh, 2005).

On the other hands, the importance of brand in advertising countries, destinations, tourist attractions etc. has further been revealed in tourism industry. A brand will be powerful if it can affect consumer attitude and normally routinize their preferences, attitude, and shopping behavior towards itself. Nowadays, brand is a crucial and inseparable part of marketing strategy and brand marketing is the heart of trade. Most of the prominent companies are structured around their brand (Baker, Hunt, Scribner, 2002).

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Both customer and organization take advantage of brand. When a consumer has already used a brand afterwards, he/she would feel more comfortable with it and his tendency to further use of it would rise. Trademarks provide information about product quality, performance and its other aspects and cause customer to face fewer risks. Trademark earns its proprietors meaning and is a part of his/her possession.

On this basis, several countrywide or worldwide conferences, seminars, and tourism exhibitions are annually held to gather the experts together in order to exchange the experiences, innovations, and related research results. Such organizations act as an effective factor in growth and development of tourism industry.

2. Importance and Necessity of the Study

During recent decades, problems in various fields of tourism have caused experts and researchers to hold numerous conferences and seminars to exchange their ideas in order to investigate and solve the existing problems. In 1991, world tourism organization in cooperation with Canadian government organized an international conference on touristic travels and statistics in Ottawa. The outcomes of this conference led to the current definitions in the field of tourism. Several conferences on tourism are still held annually throughout the world such as International Conference on Destination Management which discuss the topics like provision of a framework for tourism competitive advantages and improvement of policies and international tourism cooperating. Another example is Annual European Tourism Forum which investigates the tourism processes in Europe (unwto.org).

Such conferences aim to help along economy and tourism development by destination advertisement. Some other aims can be listed as follows:

- Tourism marketing
- Coordination of destination advertisement activities
- Guarantee of destination trade activities success
- Bringing of other specific occurrences to destination

Enjoyment of diverse tourism attractions is one of the approaches to develop tourism industry because such attractions should satisfy tourists' expectations and obviate their needs and demands during the visit. In other words, tourism attractions should be valuable to tourist and affect his/her attitude and satisfaction. Tourism attractions would be valuable to tourist if they were paid special attentions by touristic destinations, their destruction was continuously avoided, and some facilities were added to them considering tourists interests.

The role of advertisements in tourism industry which are put by experts and authorities in both private and public sectors motivates tourists to visit touristic destinations and take advantage of attractions and facilities. Advertising activities in tourism should accord with the type of tourists and their cultures. Therefore, such activities require a definite policy, appropriate management, and professional workforce. This type of tools and professional workforces which, in fact, are tourism industry experts, gather in several conferences and exhibitions during the year and exchange their information on various subjects and by this way, help along the growth of tourism industry.

Thus, Conferences and experts gatherings are another basis of tourism development and topics such as tourism brand, destination, and products are among the most important factors which are discussed during these conferences. Such conferences are able to affect the government policies and development plans in tourism sector and persuade potential investors to invest in this sector upon government tendency towards the progress of tourism. Furthermore, participated experts may share their ideas with private and public sector investors and open up a possibility for tourism industry to develop.

3. The State of Branding in Tourism

American Marketing Association defines brand as "a name, term, pattern, or a combination of them which is used to specify and make a seller's product or service distinct from other's" (Ranjbarian and Zahedi, 2010). A reliable brand is one of the customer's favorites when choosing a product or service. In most markets, brand creates a specific identity for a product and links it to an especial group of society. From the viewpoint of psychology, this type of products or service brings customers self-confidence and prestige along with their apparent use. Therefore, customer is willing to pay a different cost for it.

In addition, a dominant trademark subconsciously means a better quality of product to customer. When customer buys a branded product, he/she believes that he/she has received a valuable thing in return for the paid money. Indeed, trademark, like capital, technology and raw materials, has a considerable role in providing value added for an organization. The most indelible concept of a brand is its value and personality which determines the essence of a brand's name and arm. Trademarks differ from one another in market power and value. Brand mentality is a set of the conceptions of a brand which have meaningfully been organized in consumer's mind (Dean, 2004). Perceiving a brand means any favorable aspect of a brand which helps to form a mentality about that brand (James,

2005). Berry (2000), suggests that companies first pay more attention to brand than to product itself. Brand plays the main role in most of the service markets and also in the businesses which need production technology (Certu, 2005).

During past decades, Branding for touristic destinations has attracted a lot of attentions. In highly competitive global markets, destinations' need for the creation of a unique identity -making themselves distinct from rivals- has been much more crucial. In modern marketing concept, a brand offers consumer a related added value; a distinctive and dominant option which is completely distinct from other rivals and have a meaning beyond functional aspects.

Nowadays, most entertainment sites claim they possess luxury furniture, wonderful attractions, friendly-behaving and intimate employees, and a unique cultural heritage. Nonetheless, these factors do no longer make a distinction and successful branding for touristic destinations is done based on their potential capabilities so that it will not be possible to replace it with another destination (Hudson, 2008, p 265).

In tourism world, brand or trademark is a set of the tourism product characteristics and its added value. This added value is a logical perception and mentality or a feeling that the trademark creates in customer's mind. The customer's mental image of a brand and its state in comparison with other rivals is even more important than the product characteristics.

A strong brand assures customer of its quality and tourist is willing to pay further for it. For instance, tourists want to pay much more for a tourism company which is among the dominant brands (Farzad Moghaddam, 2011).

4. METHODOLOGY

Present study is a descriptive and applied research. Secondary resources such as books, journal papers, theses, and informational websites were used to gather the required information on the study background, while questionnaire was the primary resource.

The statistical population of the study includes the participants in second international tourism brand seminar which was held on November 23th-24th 2011 at the conference center of ministry of the interior in Tehran. 130 questionnaires were distributed and 108 of them which were usable were gathered. The simple random sampling method was used to select statistical samples.

To investigate the normality of answers distribution Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was carried out. The reliability of test was greater than 5 percent for all variables, thus the test result confirmed the normality of answers. One-sample t-test was also used to evaluate the study assumption. Reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's Alpha test. Using SPSS software Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated 0.836 which is a favorable amount to confirm the reliability of a questionnaire. The validity of questionnaire was also measured considering the comments received from tourism industry experts.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Demographic Characteristics

According to the results obtained from demographic characteristics section of the questionnaire, following brief information on statistical sample characteristics was gathered:

Table 1. The respondents' descriptive statistics

| Variable | Quantity | Frequency(Percentage) |
|-----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Gender | woman | 46(43/4) |
| | Man | 60(56/6) |
| Age | Under 30 | 81(77/1) |
| | 30-40 | 14(13/3) |
| | Over 40 | 11(9/6) |
| Education | High School Diploma | 3(3) |
| | Associate Degree | 9(8/9) |
| | Bachelor's Degree | 34(33/7) |
| | Master's Degree and PhD | 55(54/5) |

The data obtained from demographic characteristics section of the questionnaire show the participated experts are young and most of them hold a higher education degree. This fact demonstrates the big scientific reliability of the studied sample and confirms the validity of the study.

5.2 Investigation of the Study Assumptions

Part 1: The role of holding conference on tourism in the development of this industry

First assumption: holding conferences on tourism has a significant positive effect on the development of tourism.

$$\begin{cases} H_0 : Mean \leq 3 \\ H_1 : Mean > 3 \end{cases}$$

Table 2. The results obtained from One-sample t-Test (test repetition = 3)

| Predicate | Mean Value | Standard Deviation | t | sig | Assumption Result |
|---|------------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------------------|
| 1. Need for holding conferences on tourism | 4.47 | 0.09 | 16.42 | 0.000 | Confirmed |
| 2. The effect of such conferences on the development of this industry | 3.75 | 0.113 | 6.63 | 0.000 | Confirmed |

The assumption is confirmed since, for both predicates, t is located in the zero assumption rejection regions. In other words, it is greater than +1.96 and the significance level (Sig) is smaller than

5 percent. As a result, it is needed to hold such conferences since they have a significant and positive role in the development of tourism industry.

Second assumption: conference quality has a significant positive effect on the development of tourism industry.

$$\begin{cases} H_0 : Mean \leq 3 \\ H_1 : Mean > 3 \end{cases}$$

Table 3. The results obtained from One-sample t-Test (test repetition = 3)

| Predicate | Mean Value | Standard Deviation | t | sig | Assumption Result |
|--|------------|--------------------|------|-------|-------------------|
| 1. Need for holding conferences on tourism | 3.471 | 0.048 | 9.81 | 0.000 | Confirmed |

Here again, t is located in the zero assumption rejection region. In other words, it is greater than +1.96 and the significance level (Sig) is smaller than

5 percent. Therefore, the assumption is confirmed, that is, conference quality has a significant positive effect on the development of tourism industry.

Third assumption: the participation of tourism industry experts in conferences has a significant positive effect on the development of tourism industry.

$$\begin{cases} H_0 : Mean \leq 3 \\ H_1 : Mean > 3 \end{cases}$$

Table 4. The results obtained from One-sample t-Test (test repetition = 3)

| Predicate | Mean Value | Standard Deviation | t | sig | Assumption Result |
|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|------|-------|-------------------|
| 1. Experts Participation | 3.495 | 0.059 | 8.36 | 0.000 | Confirmed |

Since t is located in the zero assumption rejection region, In other words, it is greater than +1.96 and the significance level (Sig) is smaller than 5 percent, this assumption is also confirmed. Thus, the participation of tourism industry experts in conferences has a significant positive effect on the development of tourism industry.

Fourth assumption: these conferences have a significant positive effect on macro policy-making.

$$\begin{cases} H_0 : Mean \leq 3 \\ H_1 : Mean > 3 \end{cases}$$

Table 5. The results obtained from One-sample t-Test (test repetition = 3)

| Predicate | Mean Value | Standard Deviation | t | sig | Assumption Result |
|---|------------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------------------|
| 1. Rate of country's tourism industry growth | 2.67 | 0.115 | -2.67 | 0.496 | Rejected |
| 2. The effect of such conferences on tourism industry | 3.25 | 0.132 | 2.04 | 0.044 | Confirmed |

Here again, t is located in the zero assumption rejection region. In other words, it is greater than +1.96 and the significance level (Sig) is smaller than 5 percent. Therefore, the effect of these conferences on country's macro policy-making is significant and positive. On the other hand, the rate of country's tourism industry growth is not significant from the viewpoint of respondents and they consider it to have a negative value and believe that the future of international tourism in Iran is not satisfying.

Part 2: The role and importance of brand in tourism development

First assumption: All the factors historical attractions, religious places, entertainment attractions, cultural elements, nature visiting, health tourism potentials, and trade potentials have a significant positive effect on branding process in Iranian tourism industry.

Table 6. The results obtained from One-sample t-Test (test repetition = 3)

| Factors | Mean Value | Standard Deviation | t | Sig | Assumption Result |
|---------------------------|------------|--------------------|--------|-------|-------------------|
| Historical Attractions | 4.96 | 0.069 | 24.473 | 0.000 | Confirmed |
| Religious Places | 3.46 | 0.109 | 4.246 | 0.000 | Confirmed |
| Entertainment Attractions | 3.90 | 0.116 | 7.793 | 0.000 | Confirmed |
| Cultural Elements | 4.45 | 0.090 | 16.055 | 0.000 | Confirmed |
| Nature Visiting | 4.36 | 0.086 | 15.723 | 0.000 | Confirmed |
| Health Tourism Potentials | 3.77 | 0.103 | 7.427 | 0.000 | Confirmed |
| Trade Potentials | 3.24 | 0.125 | 1.88 | 0.062 | Rejected |

Since the significance level is smaller than 5 percent for all factors except trade potentials factor, all of them affect the branding process in Iranian tourism industry. In other words the contribution of the factors such as historical attractions, religious places, entertainment attractions, cultural elements, nature visiting, and health tourism potentials to the branding process in Iranian tourism industry is significant but this is not the case for trade potentials factor.

In addition, according to the resulted mean value, it can be said that the greatest contribution to the branding process in Iranian tourism industry belongs to historical attractions factor. Other factors can be arranged in order of priority as follows: cultural elements, nature visiting, entertainment attractions, health tourism potentials and finally religious places. The smallest contribution belongs to trade potentials

Second assumption: branding has a significant positive effect on the promotion and sale of tourism products.

$$\begin{cases} H_0 : \text{Mean} \leq 3 \\ H_1 : \text{Mean} > 3 \end{cases}$$

Table 7. The results obtained from One-sample t-Test (test repetition = 3)

| Factor | Mean Value | Standard Deviation | t | sig | Assumption Result |
|--------|------------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------------------|
| Brand | 4.32 | 0.089 | 14.83 | 0.000 | Confirmed |

Since t is located in the zero assumption rejection regions, In other words, it is greater than +1.96 and the significance level (Sig) is smaller than 5 percent, this assumption is confirmed. Thus, branding has a significant positive effect on the promotion and sale of tourism products.

Third assumption: the participation level of the companies representing dominant brands has a significant positive effect on the development of tourism industry.

$$\begin{cases} H_0 : \text{Mean} \leq 3 \\ H_1 : \text{Mean} > 3 \end{cases}$$

Table 8. The results obtained from One-sample t-Test (test repetition = 3)

| Factor | Mean Value | Standard Deviation | t | sig | Assumption Result |
|-------------------------|------------|--------------------|--------|-------|-------------------|
| Companies Participation | 3.675 | 0.056 | 11.869 | 0.000 | Confirmed |

Here again, t is located in the zero assumption rejection region, In other words, it is greater than +1.96 and the significance level (Sig) is smaller than 5 percent. Thus, this assumption is also confirmed, that is, the participation level of the companies in exhibitions has a significant positive effect on the development of tourism industry.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

According to the survey results and experts emphasis on the negative growth rate of country's tourism, it is highly required to gather tourism experts around by hold such specialized conferences. These conferences open up a possibility for tourism industry authorities inside and outside the country to exchange their ideas and experiences with each other. This, in turn, results in the development of tourism industry. It is worth mentioning that some factors such as the quality of organization, presented materials and the scientific reliability of conference can considerably impact upon the motivation of experts for participating in future conferences.

Moreover, enjoyment of tourism specialists in conference organization and scientific secretariats may further enrich such conferences. On this basis, the invitation of renowned university professors and alumni who specialize in tourism to executive and scientific associations of future conferences is recommended.

The support drawn from foreign and domestic investors for holding tourism conferences makes it financially possible to convene such conferences and also familiarize the investors with the internal tourism industry atmosphere. As a result, investors are persuaded to invest in tourism development plans.

On the other side, by specification of the factors stated in present study and confirmation of the assumptions about the necessity of tourism branding, it is resulted that tourism destination branding is related and affected with numerous factors. Destination would not take any advantage of this program, just by designing a logo and an advertisement term for it. Therefore, it is suggested that destination branding authorities should pay comprehensive attention to all of the effective factors.

As results show, all of the effective factors in branding success do not have the same level of importance. On the other hands, tourism destination branding is often a costly and comprehensive program. It is recommended that the factors with higher priorities should be realized before immense investments, considering the importance of available factors and resources in country. To achieve this, emphasis should first be put on the factors with greater contribution to destination branding success and then other factors should be realized at next stages.

There is another point here; attention to "destination branding and programming group" should be considered as the most important factor. The structure of this group should be designed in a manner that includes all required expertise and is supported by all beneficiaries (public and private sectors, university etc.). Furthermore, the performance of this group should be scientific, programmed, and oriented to the actualization of destination tourism development.

At the end, enjoyment of experts' ideas about tourism brand and branding is recommended as an important factor in tourism brand development and some actions like organization of educational workshops and seminars, support for research theses and proposals, and review of successful and unsuccessful samples are suggested to be taken in order to improve the mentioned factor

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