

Tourism Marketing Mix and Plan: Practices from the Amhara National Regional State World Heritage Sites

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Abstract

The Amhara National Regional State undoubtedly has significant tourism potential. However, the industry remains in its infancy; unable to realize its potential due to a range of constraints including understanding difference on the concept of marketing. A solid strategic plan, based on the marketing mix strategies, might contribute most to the overall industry growth and customer satisfaction within the region. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the Tourism Marketing Mix Strategies and marketing plan practices of the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Offices. To achieve these objectives, the study applied qualitative study design that helps to collect both descriptive and historical data. The data was collected from tourism experts who are working at Bahirdar, Lalibela, Gondar and Debarq cities, and analyzed through interpretative and descriptive account of the data. A key finding of this study revealed that not all marketing mixes are equally utilized in the regional offices; their operation mainly focuses on the classical marketing mix strategies (product, promotion, place and price). On the other hand, promotion and public relation staff are primarily responsible for developing the region's marketing plan; the region's tourism industry do not operated with written marketing. Finally, based on the results of the study, the Tourism Bureau should understand the all marketing mix elements as important and make sure the development of written marketing plans for the region's marketing activity.

Key Words: Marketing, Marketing Mix, Marketing plan, Strategies, Practices, Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau, Ethiopia.

Introduction

Tourism is now one of the largest and most important industries in the world in terms of employment creation and generation of foreign revenue (UNDP, 2011). Worldwide inbound tourism increased by 4% in the first nine months of 2016. Similarly, the number of worldwide outbound trips grew by 3.9%. The outlook for 2017 is very positive, with world outbound travel predicted to grow by between 4% and 5% (IPK International and ITB Berlin, 2016)

It is recognized that most of the developing countries now generate economic benefits through its tourism industry. In the past, the governments have been reluctant to invest for tourism development, but in this modern age the situation has changed (World Bank, 2006). According to United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2015), Ethiopia has been enjoying unprecedented tourism growth in the recent years. International tourist arrivals have been on a growth trajectory since the 90s rising from 64,000 in 1990 to 681,249 in 2013. This has been matched by growth in the contribution of the travel and tourism sector's direct contribution to the country's GDP which in 2013 was 4.2%, translating to ETB 35,766.6m. Further, the industry is now an important source of employment accounting for 3.8% of total employment in 2013 representing 985,500 jobs directly. Such performance has seen the tourism industry increasingly becoming an important economic sector in the country

A strategy is an amount of decisions which have as purpose the optimum unfolding of the activities, in a certain period of time. By an appropriate strategy adopted by destinations' administration, all the established objectives can be accomplished. A tourist marketing strategy plan has to comprise a vision, a mission and several objectives, which should be the result of a rational option and of the free will of the destination. In the existing conditions of a more and more globalized and competitive tourist market, a company cannot be maintained to a competitive level without conceiving a general and sectorial plan (Malcomete, 1991).

Marketing efforts and know-how are instrumental in commercializing ideas and inventions successfully. Therefore, it could be fatal for destinations to ignore the importance of marketing (Yli-Kovero, 2006; Salminen, 2006). Kotler (1999) emphasizes the position of marketing to even argue that, in the future, marketing has the main responsibility for achieving profitable revenue growth for the destination. Today cost-efficiency does not provide long-term competitive advantage for destinations whereas marketing, when well conducted, does. Especially in the field of strategic marketing, benefits are still largely waiting for realization.

Marketing has traditionally been viewed and treated more as an operational rather than strategic function in destinations. It has focused on decisions related to analyzing and selecting target markets, product and brand development, promotion, and channels of distribution (Hunt and Morgan, 2001). This perhaps somewhat biased standpoint presents marketing as a task of creating, promoting and delivering goods and services to consumers and businesses (Kotler, 2003). It is generally accepted that acquiring a new customer may turn out to be considerably more expensive than building customer loyalty among firm's current customers (Kotler, 2003). This strongly speaks for the need for higher levels of customer orientation among destinations. Similarly to reward systems that base on short-term performance, short-term marketing focus may start working against longer-term market orientation and strategic intentions of a destination.

Statement of the Problem

Tourism is a very competitive industry in nature and the travelers have a wide range of options and gives attention for those which are good value for money. Inadequate quality infrastructure, uncompetitive rates, indifferent or product with poor quality, complexity in getting access to information on travel and tourist destinations, unskilled service providers have really negative effect on the competitiveness of the tourism destinations (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2010).

Currently, marketing efforts are extremely more important than production and sales, the function of marketing is vital in the tourism and hospitality industry. Accordingly if a country has an adequate amount of facilities and possess potential of tourism but does not think about the marketing techniques and the introduction of this desirability in its programs, doubtlessly that country will not be doing well in growing and developing its tourism industry. Similarly, due to the lack of marketing strategy, the position of this industry in the developing countries is paler than before (Lamso, et al; 2013). However marketing's contribution to travel and tourism has been undervalued by both policy makers and practitioners, leading to a misunderstanding of the nature and value of the marketing discipline for the travel and tourism industry in general (Riege & Perry, 2004).

In addition to, having eleven world heritage sites in Ethiopia, there are many positive opportunities that exist for tourism development. The tourism sector in recent times is taken as a tool for poverty alleviation in country. The Ethiopian government also gave due attention by incorporating the sector in the country's development strategy. As recognized in national biodiversity strategy action plan (2004), although the country has many positive opportunities lack of marketing strategy is among the factors which hold back the country from using its abundance of tourism resources to compete as a tourism destination with other east African countries.

Above all, previous studies regarding the effectiveness of tourism marketing strategy and marketing mix in Ethiopia and the Amhara National Regional State are very few. Even the studies that have been made are sketchy and isolated; they shed very little light on the subject matter. In order to promote the development of an appropriate kind of tourism marketing strategy that prevents or minimizes socio-cultural and environmental degradation, and maximizes the economic benefits, more in-depth studies are needed for an understanding and smooth running of the tourism industry with other sectors. Therefore, the researchers strongly believe that there is a huge gap of data that can be used as a measure or indicator for marketing mix components and strategies from the perspective of the stakeholders.

This study is a modest attempt to highlight *Tourism Marketing Mix and marketing plan Practices from the Amhara National Regional State World Heritage Sites*, because tourism potential is not an end by itself to the sustainable development of Ethiopian tourism industry and the Amhara National Regional State particularly, and no one lives on potential alone. In order to show tourism marketing and having more tourism resources as a tool for promoting sustainability in the Ethiopian tourism industry, primarily, the practices from the Amhara National Regional State World Heritage Sites, the following basic research questions are formulated:

1. Are marketing mix components and strategies evident in the operations of the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism offices?
2. Do Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism offices operate with written marketing plans?
3. Who is responsible for developing the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Offices' marketing plans?

Objective of the Study

General Objective

The main objective of the study is to analyze the Tourism Marketing Mix Strategies and marketing plan: Needs and Practices from the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Offices.

Specific Objectives

In order to handle the research questions and realize the general objective stated above the study is tried to deal with the following six specific objectives:

1. To review the marketing mix components and strategies of the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism offices.
2. To assess the written marketing plans of the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism offices.
3. To identify the responsible body of marketing plan in the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism offices.

Materials and Methods

1. Research Design

The methodological approach for this study was described as a case study of the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Offices within the qualitative domain. This research is viewed as being a qualitative research report because qualitative research is typically rich with detail and insights into participants' experiences of the world. Stake (1978) said that qualitative studies may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience and thus more meaningful. Qualitative data can more fully describe a phenomenon. In this study, data in the form of participants' own words, direct quotations from documents, were used to convey what the researchers had learned. Patton (2002) said, the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researchers than with sample size.

In an attempt to understand the marketing operations of the regional offices, descriptive and narrative marketing data was collected from the regional offices' personnel in order to answer the predetermined questions. Narrative and phenomenological strategies of inquiry through open-ended data collection were used in an attempt to identify any developing themes as described by (Creswell, 2003).

2. Population, Sampling Technique and Size

The population of the study was the Amhara national regional state culture & tourism offices' experts in Bahir Dar, Lalibela, Gondar and Debarq which are considered as the most tourist hubs of the region. The experts were purposively selected based on their work experience, position and educational background on the issue, in order to get in depth information about the subject. To assure generalizability, data was collected from seven FGD and fifteen interviews based on the principle of data saturation.

3. Data Collection Instruments

To properly address each objective a qualitative data collection instrument such as focus group discussion (FGD), interview and document consultation were developed.

Individual discussions with key senior experts, and policy and decision makers from the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism offices at each destinations, particularly, at Bahir Dar, Lalibela, Gondar & Debarq. Accordingly, three, four, six, and two experts were interviewed in the study

at Lalibela, Gondar, Bahir Dar, and Debarke respectively. Based on data saturation principles, a total of fifteen (15) interviewees were conducted.

A total of seven (7) joint discussions with six members of senior experts were conducted in order to identify the area of focus and marketing strategies. Therefore, at each top four destination of the region (Bahir Dar (3), Gondar (2), Lalibela (1) and Debarke (1)) the following numbers of FGD were organized.

Official documents, studies and papers comprehensively describing the linkage between tourism marketing mix strategies, and marketing plan were reviewed.

4. Data Analysis Procedure

After the data have been collected, it is accompanied by proper way of analysis in order to interpret and draw conclusion from the mass of collected data. The interpretation of the qualitative data was a thematic analysis approach. In this case the interview and focus group discussion results were repeatedly and thoroughly read so as to gain the major themes of each respondent. Utilization of summary data and unattributed quotes.

Data Presentation, Results and Discussion

Analysis and discussion of data as a part of scientific methodology of research process are fundamental to reach to some conclusion. Therefore, this chapter deals with the interpretation and discussion of data collected from senior experts through interview and focus group discussion. All the data gathered from interview and focus group discussion questions qualitatively described in words to give answers for the basic research questions set in this study. For this purpose, the first part of the study discusses about the characteristics of the respondents while the second part deals with the analysis, results and discussion of the data of the study corresponding to the basic research questions.

1. Characteristics of Respondents

Furthermore, structured interview was held with fifteen senior experts who are working more than five years in the tourism industry and those who have a direct or indirect attachment on the marketing/promotion departments of the offices. Similarly, seven focus group discussions with six senior experts averagely in each FGD that counts to forty two respondents have participated. All participants have a minimum of first degree and five years of relevant experience in the office. This is important to obtain data with regard to issues that required more clarification. In doing so, the characteristics of respondents, academic qualification and years of experience is based on the responses to the background data in the first part of the interview and FGD obtained from fifty seven (57) experts (fifteen from interviewees and forty two from FGD participants).

2. Marketing Mix Strategies of the Region

The first question of this study was designed to explore which marketing mix components and strategies are evident in the operations of the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Offices. The four accepted marketing mix components established by Borden in 1964 are product, price, place, and promotion. Whereas in the tourism industry, experts incorporate other marketing questions and strategies including partnering, processes, possibilities, and people. Research question one was designed to find which, if any, of these eight components and strategies could be observed within the operations of the regional tourism practices.

Study participants were asked if they were in agreement with the eight components identified above. Most of the respondents were in agreement with the eight plans, one respondent from the bureau said, "yes, they sound great". A study participant from Gondar city Culture and tourism office said, "I would be interested to learn more about this strategy." A number of other participants also displayed an eagerness to learn more about the plan.

Marketing for the destinations throughout the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Offices may be defined quite differently depending on a number of factors. In order to establish a base definition for marketing within this study, the interview guideline referred to the American Marketing Association definition. The American Marketing Association (2004) definition state, marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders. Of the respondents commenting on this definition, most of the respondents were in agreement with the AMA statement, whereas some of the respondents made no direct comments. The

majority of responses to this question were simple yes or no answers. Some participants did provide their own marketing definitions.

When asked to define and explain how marketing was applied at the destination, a respondent shared, *“our bureau views marketing in a holistic way. Everything we do, customer service, keeping facilities clean, quick turn-around in responding to phone messages or emails of prospective families, direct mail, television advertising, etc. is considered as marketing. We have worked hard to create an image of excellence and understand that it only takes one bad experience to tear down what we have worked on.”* Another respondent shared his view as, *“marketing is everything we do as a destination. We market to existing tourists as well as to our prospective tourists. We market externally through local and international media sources.”* In order to present the data related to question one of this study, participant feedback is presented by utilizing the eight identified marketing plan focus areas: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, Partnering, Processes, Possibilities, and People. This divided format should provide a means to determine which marketing mix components and strategies are evident in the operations of the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Office.

1. Product:

In marketing terms, product is defined as a commodity or service offered. Study participants were asked to describe what differentiated their destination from others (regions and countries). One respondent from the regional culture and tourism bureau said that the region is home to impressive landscapes, four national parks and eight protected areas including Simien Mountains National Park, source of Blue Nile and home of Lake Tana, the largest lake in Ethiopia and UNESCO biosphere reserve, home of the highest mountain peak in Ethiopia, endemic wildlife species, including Walia Ibex, Gelada baboon and others, various endemic flora species, high population of migratory birds and fish species, rich historical resources, ancient palaces, churches, monasteries and other architectures including Lalibela, Gondar, the monasteries of Lake Tana, masterpiece of the Gondarian artifacts and paintings, rich history of two dynasties and capitals, unique cultural traditions, festivals (Timket, Meskel, Ashenda-Shadey, Ethiopian Christmas, Easter), peaceful coexistence of Ethiopian Christians and Muslims, Cultural traditions (Ge'ez used in church traditions, unique traditional music style) and the people of Amharawho is known for hospitality and pride of history.

Generally, various biophysical and cultural resources had been visited by tourists from different parts of the world. Currently, the region is remarkably known by the living rock churches, monasteries, being source of Blue Nile, community tradition, mystical landscapes, endemic species and home of emperors. Of the other responses, the most common answers given when asked how their destination's products differentiated from others included a strong importance on historical, cultural, biblical integration, great host community and safe environment. However, the tourism resources of the region are not well exploited and assessed.

2. Price:

Experts were asked to tell their mind about the average entrance fee of the regional destinations. One respondent from the regional culture and tourism bureau said that prices varied widely from destination to destination and the fees are determined by the government and church authorities in respect to their resources, differently. When asked how their destination's entrance fee is established, participants provided a wide variety of answers. The most common answers given were that fees reflected the local economies, and priced competitively with other destinations. However, the package price of a tour is determined by the travel agents and/or tour operators solely. This makes unfair competition of stakeholders on their common resources. Many stated that they were not really sure how these travel agents and/or tour operators set their price. Some stated that this was an area handled by someone else. One participant simply stated that a professional formula was established for the fee earlier and since then increases have been instituted. Another said, *“I wish I knew – sounded good to somebody. It gradually increased in small increments. I will be happy if we are calculating the actual fee per tourist cost like other service provider organizations.”* This question turned out to be one of the hardest for respondents to answer. One respondent from the regional bureau said that *“our overall destinations can be considered as expensive when we compare with the service that we have provided to the tourists but it may be cheap if we are comparing only the monetary value with the neighboring destinations.”*

Generally, the respondents said that there is a relatively high local transport cost; especially for visiting lesser known attractions and there is some price inconsistency among authorities managing the various

attractions. Most private service providers in the regional destinations increase their service price during peak season and the visitors considered the destinations as expensive destination by judging on their first impression and this hurts the long term business that the stakeholders will make.

3. Place:

The regional culture and tourism offices often market their facilities as being the right place for visit or as being special. Interviewees were asked if visitors were impressed with the physical facilities at their destinations, whether the destination was visually appealing, clean, and in good repair. Some of the destinations were rated as being very nice or outstanding (City tour - Bahir Dar) where as participants rated their destination as being partially or somewhat compliant to the above statement and some destinations were rated as needing some serious attention and repair (Simien Mountains National Park, road).

One respondent from Gondar city culture and tourism office said, *“if you scroll the travel agents’/tour operators’ website, you will get a beautiful assortment of photographs of the destinations. Off course, this pictures help to solidify the destinations prestigious image and it shows for the visitors how much we are blessed with wonderful resources and a beautiful destination that really sells itself. However, the travel agents and/or tour operators sell these beautiful destinations for a day or half a day which is not enough time to visit the whole resources that we have and the community is not collecting the real benefits from the tourism industry.”* Due to the elevated level of concern for safety and security in different countries, a question was posed to the participants on whether they felt their destination provided a safe visiting environment or not. They rated the country and the region as one of the safest and secured destination than any other neighboring destinations.

They also added that it was part of their office mission statement to provide a secure visiting environment. One respondent from the bureau said, *“Regular checks are done on facilities and destinations and safety issues are dealt with as soon as possible. However, the check in at the destinations is somewhat loose but we have a well-developed discipline and harassment prevention policies as a bureau in order to develop a sense of community and help tourists to feel secure in asking questions and taking risks. Most experts understand that security threats can come from inside and out as well. Professional safety inspectors highly recommend that every destination should have a regularly reviewed safety plan and at the national parks it is a must to have a scout.”*

Generally, the destination have good network of tourist information offices and air connectivity to Bahir Dar, Gondar and Lalibela as well as the local and foreign tour operators know the main sites and include the region’s attractions in their itinerary more than other areas. On the other hand, the region have a poor travel trade awareness and knowledge, especially of the many less traditional Amhara attractions and experiences, and the local tour operators are not proactive in packaging new and innovative experiences and the tourist information offices in need of support and refurbishment.

4. Promotion:

The promotional area of marketing encompasses the combination of advertising, personal selling, publicity, and all other venues used to communicate with customers and prospects. Promotion is designed to create interest and awareness in a product, service, or event. Truth in all activities should be a given when it comes to the region’s destination, but one expert pointed out, *“we have seen competitors blanket the newspapers, destination entrance fees, tourist magazines, and etc. with all sorts of elaborate misrepresentations of what they deliver.”*

Sometimes the promotional area of destination marketing can be controversial and it can be quite costly. A question on the destination marketing asked to study the contributors if their offices advertised or not. The participants answered that their offices did very little advertising, and some offices, said that they did not use advertising efforts at all. For the purposes of this study, advertising is viewed as a promotional effort that requires payment to a media entity. The data that supports research questions expound on which types of advertising worked best for the destinations and identify advertising efforts that have faltered. A respondent suggested, *“It is critical to clearly establish who you are trying to attract before spending one cent on advertising. All of your efforts should be measured for success. Otherwise you may be blindly casting your cash into the void.”* Chosen markets must be of sufficient size and be viable enough to sustain and support the offices’ operation. The question was designed to address this issue by asking the participants to identify what groups of people were viewed as their destination’s current visitors, stakeholders, and prospects and, the respondents replied based on the type of resources they have.

Above all, there are some printed marketing collateral efforts in the region through bill board, magazines, brochures, bulletin and some guide books but virtually no destination promotional initiatives and no joint marketing efforts with Ethiopian Tourism Organization (ETO), lack of digital promotion and limited technological infrastructure and skills disjointed imagery and promotional materials, tourism fair attendance lacks a clear strategy.

5. Partnering:

Partnering is one of the four new marketing characteristics introduced in the tourism and hospitality industry. This area focuses on the ability of offices to reach out and establish mutually beneficial and rewarding arrangements with like-minded people, businesses, or organizations. For the destinations, these partnerships may lead to better destination services, promotional opportunities, additional revenues, or lower expenses. The offices partner should also reap rewards through the experience. By striving to create win-win situations with partners, successful programs can be nurtured and renewed indefinitely. One of the bureau marketing expert were asked if their destination had established any cooperative partnerships with local businesses, churches, or community groups through sponsorships, contests, cooperative advertising, signage, revenue opportunities, or other support. He replied that Gondar city has tried partnerships with different cities and organizations whereas other destinations have not established any exemplary partnerships.

When they were asked about partnership, most respondents replied only the external partnership and they ignored the internal partnership. Internal partnership opportunities are often the easiest to form, yet they are overlooked by many destinations. *“The actual stakeholders in a destination’s operations have the most to gain by its success,”* stated the public relation officers of the bureau. A question was posed to see if participants felt their office staff was treated as integral partners in maintaining the destinations’ successful operations and image. Participants were also asked if staff input and feedback was sought for marketing efforts. Of the results, offices were not doing a job in utilizing a professional partnership with their staff.

All in all, destinations were not very much serious about partnerships in the previous time but now they are doing a very good job by creating an internal and external partnerships with different professionals, private and governmental stakeholders by signing a memorandum of understanding/ bilateral agreement. The exemplary job that can be mentioned here is the establishment of the Amhara National Regional State Tourism Transformation Council which makes the regional higher institutions (Gondar, Bahir Dar, Woldiaya, DebreMarkos, Dessie and DebreTabor Universities) as a member of the council.

6. Process:

The marketing plan views this area as a destination’s internal tasks. They shape and brand the culture of a destination community and are often referred to as destination policies. Outcome derived destination processes and policies such as discipline or conduct codes, dress codes, tour itinerary, tour procedures, and a number of other such written or understood operational travel procedures all fit within this category. This focus area affects experts, guides, visitors, scouts and cooks most directly as these items deal with day-to-day internal operations. Visitors rely on feedback from their visit and communication provided from the guides to remain informed about events taking place in this area.

When asked to rate if the materials associated with their destinations were visually appealing and professional in manner on items such as notices, report cards or statements, one interviewee mentioned, *“We have definitely improved in this area within the last year; at least guides and hotel workers have their uniforms.”* However, most participants felt that their offices are not utilizing technologies such as the internet to provide services, communications, information and even most offices don’t have web sites. It has been said that anybody can talk the talk of a good service process, but a good destination service has tourists that walk the walk of a good service as well. Study members were asked if the tourists at their destination had been notified that their behavior is reflective on the destination and they need to serve as ambassadors at all times. Most of the respondents agreed that they were doing a very good job in this area.

In general, the respondents agreed on the existence of well-established regional bureau structure and the absence of official written marketing strategy at both the national and regional levels. They also added that there is a limited interaction and links between neighboring regions (Amhara and Afar), limited international marketing skills and experience, inadequate human and financial marketing

resources, limited public-private marketing partnerships, inadequate market measurement and research efforts.

7. Possibilities:

This area involves analyzing a destination's current positioning posture and encourages forward, strategic thinking and planning. A marketing plan views this component as critical in achieving positive changes and growth. Through honest evaluation, a clear picture can be drawn of how a destination is currently conducting its operations. From a position based on a strong sense of self-awareness, marketing experts can more easily identify marketing possibilities and challenges. In conclusion, even if Ethiopia's most important historical, cultural and natural attractions and three of the unique World Heritage Sites (Lalibela, Gondar and Simien Mountains) are located in this region, there is limited global awareness and unclear brand image of Ethiopia and the region as tourism destination.

8. People:

This last and final marketing component was saved for last, but it should be first and foremost in all the operations of a destination according to one respondent from the regional bureau. He added, *"People must remain at the center of everything. Quite often, tourism experts should begin veering toward the destination with their programs and philosophies by educating stakeholders. It is vital that people is the heart and forefront in the tourism development."* This administrator also shared, *"The staff and administration should strive to keep human power at the center of all that takes place. With human power in the center, everything around will excel."* The advantage of the region is the existence of a sociable, friendliness and open citizens, retaining and building on the authentic hospitality of the Amhara people. However, some of the local community is not aware of the tourism development and limited marketing capacity and skills potential of the experts as well as the community and the reflection of negative social and cultural impacts of unmanaged tourism. To wind up this marketing mix let us share what one expert in Gondar city culture and tourism said, *"The tourism and hospitality industry at country and regional level is not lead by professionals. The growth of the tourism and hospitality industry leads the people who are working at the industry because even experts are not competent enough in knowledge, skill and attitudes about tourism and hospitality."*

3. Written Marketing Plans of the Region

A marketing plan is a marketing weapon that costs nary a cent, guides all your efforts down the most propitious path, and yet is absent from the arsenals of most businesses, according to Levinson (1990). He addressed, a good marketing plan intimidates no one, except perhaps the competition. It serves as a written map of the route-showing the goal and how to attain it. According to McMurtry (2003), the purpose of writing a marketing plan is to define strategies, priorities, commitments, and activities in a way that serves as a guide for all marketing efforts. A marketing plan commits you and your organization to a specific direction and guides your allocation of resources. An old saying comes to mind which state, failing to plan is planning to fail.

The research question for this study was designed to find if the regional culture and tourism offices are operating within the framework of a written marketing plan. Interviews and FGD responses led to the conclusion that only the regional bureau and Gondar city have a written annual marketing plan in place that was reviewed by the staff and referred to for policy decisions. While other destinations had partially complied with some sort of marketing effort, there were found to have no written strategic marketing plan in the regional culture and tourism offices.

4. Responsible Person for Developing Marketing Plans of the Region

A public relation officer from the regional culture and tourism bureau stated, "Marketing strategies are developed primarily on a corporate level, with input from our bureau." He also mentioned, "While there are no formal procedures in place to solicit the entire staff's involvement in marketing efforts, all are aware of the need to be positive advocates, both in their communications and daily support roles with tourists and other stakeholders. The bureau has an open-door policy. All ideas or suggestions for improvement and growth are welcome. Periodically, some staff members are involved in writing or editing marketing copy." The question is to uncover who is responsible for developing the regional annual marketing plans. The respondents from the offices said that the public relation and promotion department at the regional bureau is the most responsible part of the annual marketing plan of the destinations. However, they do not have a marketing department at bureau and office levels of the regional destinations.

Conclusion

This research assesses the marketing mix strategies and marketing plan to promote tourism in the Amhara National Regional State tourism destinations which is found in North Western part of Ethiopia. To this end, the findings obtained from the analysis of purposely selected experts at Bahir Dar, Gondar, Lalibela and Debarke through interview, focus group discussion and document review were exploited in order to assess the predetermined objectives. Most of the questions were open-ended to allow for the greatest possible freedom of answers and thought. Many interviews and focus group discussions were extended well over one to three hours in length. Due to the size of the topic, marketing & new tourism product development, a wide variety of topics were covered.

The study covered tourism and hospitality marketing mix strategies and marketing plan at the regional culture and tourism offices. Not all marketing mixes are equally utilized in the regional offices. The offices have clear cut classical marketing mix strategies (product, promotion, place and price). Other than classical marketing mixes no clear-cut strategies were planned for other tourism marketing elements (People, Process, Partnership and Possibilities) which have significant impact on marketing for tourism destinations.

Regarding written Marketing Plans of the Region; only the regional bureau and Gondar city have a written annual marketing plan in place that was reviewed by the staff and referred to for policy decisions. While other destinations were found to have no written strategic marketing plan in the regional culture and tourism offices.

Recommendations

Tourism is one of the key industries driving change in the Amhara National Regional State and it provides multiple opportunities for economic growth and improved livelihoods of the community. To explore these opportunities, it is essential that the region should adopt clear marketing strategies. Therefore, the study recommends the following points:

- Effective organizational structure of tourism offices is an essential institutional element to achieve proper development and continuous management of the tourism sector. Although, there is an excellent organizational structure for culture and tourism offices of the Amhara national regional state currently, they missed the big umbrella of marketing department and they have started their activities by opening public relation and promotion department which is a single element of marketing. Therefore, the offices' structure should be equipped and facilitated in order to achieve close co-ordination among government agencies and between the public and private sectors on tourism.
- According to an old adage, "failing to plan, one is actually planning to fail." Just as darkness is merely the lack of light and cold the absence of warmth, getting lost is also a completely negative circumstance. Something get lost not because of anything you do but because of what you fail to do. Therefore, you stay found by keeping track of where you are. The tourism marketing activities of the region is led by the experts' instinct because there is no a written strategic tourism marketing plan yet. For this reason, the bureau should have a written strategic tourism marketing plan.
- Since the areas of process, partnership, people and possibilities were areas of confusion for marketing the destinations. The bureau should implement effective tourism marketing strategy frame works in order to design, deliver and manage sustainable tourism potentials of the destinations.
- The bureau should be better organized and run the tourism industry by well qualified experts that can strengthen its capacity to regulate the smooth functioning of the whole system and provide reliable and up to date information to visitors through short and long term trainings. Trainings and other updated courses should be conducted at regular intervals to update the personnel with efficiency and satisfy the visitors as they have high educational background.

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