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Conference Report of ATMC (Advances in Tourism Marketing Conference 2011)

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Introduction

In early September 2011 (6th – 8th) the 4th Advances in Tourism Marketing Conference (ATMC 2011) was taking place in Maribor, Slovenia (EU). Following the success of the previous three conferences in Mugla (Turkey, 2005), Valencia (Spain, 2007) and Bournemouth (UK, 2009), this conference never attempted to become one of the huge conferences boasting with hundreds of papers to be presented – it was much more a boutique conference of stunningly high quality, which has resulted in nominating six conference papers with outstanding quality.

This 4th ATMC conference, entitled: “**Transforming Experiences – Tourism Marketing from both Sides of the Counter**” was aiming to explore, analyse, and evaluate the co-creation of experiences, that is, the involvement of tourism operators and how tourists involve themselves in their own production of experiences. The multidisciplinary tourism marketing conference has brought together leading academic researchers, policy makers and practitioners. It provided a forum for ‘cross-fertilising’ discussion and dissemination of the latest themes and topics related to the tourism experience economy. The audience was very engaged, and the scientists were happy to have had enough time for discussions after each presentation. All sessions were intensively visited, no people sitting on the sunny terrace outside the stunning conference venue except during the coffee breaks – this too can be seen as proof of the superb quality of the papers presented and the discussions that followed.

Conference Aim

Tourism experiences are no longer just provider-generated but co-produced, often social events that occur in communities and subcultures. After the long-awaited ‘death’ of SERVQUAL (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008) the challenge for tourism marketers is the renewed analysis, definition and discussion of tourism services and experiences.

For the conceptualisation of tourism experiences, this year’s theme took its lead and inspiration from **Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)**; Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and the **Service Dominant Logic (SDL)**; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). CCT highlights that consumption is a socially and (sub)culturally determined practice, while SDL takes its lead from the co-productive processes involved in services. Here particularly, skills and knowledge feature in the creation of value. **Both theories form a new lens for innovative approaches and new insights into resources and activities on both sides of the counter.**

The **transformation of tourists from ‘passive audiences’ to ‘active players’** (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Prahalad, 2004) is facilitated by the digital environment. It also resonates with **new thinking on consumer-driven value co-creation**. Attaching tourists emotionally to the value propositions offered at destinations (Bagozzi et al., 1999) requires the consideration of the consumption situation including the feeling and thinking tourist (Chou, 2009). Both, the

Service Dominant Logic and the Nordic School of Services around Groenroos (2006) and Gummesson (1997) urge tourism marketers to re-evaluate their resources, their approach and understanding of tourists as co-creative customers. CCT adds the socio-cultural perspective.

Marketing management thereby shifts its dominant logic of marketing from a goods-centric logic to a service centric logic. A service-centered view identifies operant resources, especially higher-order, core competences, as the key to obtaining competitive advantage (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Tourism marketers are thus challenged to review the processes on both sides of the counter:

- Firstly, they need to revise their understanding of their role and resources in the co-creative process they engage in with the tourist when co-producing experiential benefits.
- Secondly, and according to the dimensions of CCT, tourism marketers need a firm grasp on how tourists, (1) create meaning and identity (2), create their own tourism cultures, (3) are influenced by institutional structures that pattern consumption, and (4) generate and employ interpretive strategies to deal with mass-mediated normative messages.

With this in mind, and **focusing on the tourist experience**, questions guiding the inspiration of conference visitors were; what are the implications for the definition and creation of customer value? How is the transformational process of ‘recreation’ to be conceptualised and measured, including the implications for loyalty, word-of-mouth and satisfaction formation? What is the role of the new social media, of family, peers and other tourists in this co-production? What is it actually that is creative when tourist and provider meet?

Conversely, there is the **business on the other side of the counter**. What are the implications for the tourism system, including transport, accommodation, hospitality and the attractions in which tourists feature as producers? If resources and offerings are nothing but value-propositions how does that affect communications with tourists? What are the implications for missions, strategies and staff-training if tourists are acknowledged as bringing their own expectations and experiential background to the ‘moment of truth’, when staff has to decide on the scope of what, how and when to generate service?

Conference theme and subthemes

Regarding the two perspectives on experiential and transformational marketing exposed above, we invited papers that illuminate three specific aspects of tourism & hospitality marketing:

- a) the creation and perception of value and quality
- b) the company’s ways of conceiving, producing, delivering and measuring its output
- c) the value of new and existing methodologies for a new approach to experiential marketing under a shifting paradigm.

Accordingly we were inviting papers on the following sub-themes:

- Customer experience in tourism: determinants and management strategies
- Modern ICT and social media
- Virtual communities and construction of new social bonds
- Cross-cultural issues in customer experience management
- Postmodern consumption
- Who is the new tourist?
- Changing demographics
- CSR and cause-related marketing
- Quality management, brand equity and labelling

- New trends in tourism consumption (couchsurfing, glamping, participative tourism etc.)
- Innovation; processes of value co-creation and co-production
- Service production and consumption
- Research methods for experiential and co-creative production and consumption
- Strategy
- Tourism destination shaping of cultural and spiritual experiences: current theory and prospects
- Practitioners and tourism researchers: opportunities and challenges

For the conference, and for this issue, special regard has been paid to the originality of the papers and authors were asked to avoid self-plagiarism (“recycling” of already published research results unless you present new insights).

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1. The creation and perception of value and quality
2. The company’s ways of conceiving, producing, delivering and measuring its output
3. The value of new and existing methodologies for a new approach to experiential marketing under the shifting paradigm.

The conference started with a Doctoral Colloquium a day prior to the conference. Eight young researchers presented their research work – yet 35 senior conference participants were present to analyse and to discuss – and thus help the doctoral candidates with their future work.

ATMC 2011 had first-class keynote speakers: after the welcoming words of the director of the Slovene NTO and the Maribor-LTO, Professor Steve Vargo, Distinguished Professor of the Hawai’i University in Manoa, the “Father of service-dominant logic (SDL)” presented his proposal how to use SDL in the field of tourism. The second keynote speaker was Ms Sandra Carvão, the Communications Manager of the UNWTO. She presented the major tasks the UNWTO is providing for its members, as well as the latest news on tourism trends. The third keynote speaker, Professor Frédéric Dimanche of the Skema Business School in Provence (France), addressed the audience with his discussion on value creation based on interactions between organisations and consumers, with special regard to service design in tourism. The fourth speaker, Professor Terry Stevens from Stevens & Associates (Swansea, UK), faced the audience with the practitioner’s view of experiential tourism. Our last keynote speaker was Professor Pablo de Diesbach from École Hôtelière de Lausanne; his contribution was the conceptualization and reflections on tourism destination ambassadors. He exemplified how to switch from a cognitive to an experiential approach of persuasion.

The conference was divided into six tracks with two parallel sections each. The participants were given 30 minutes time to present their work, and asked to provoke a discussion on the research-work they presented. ATMC 2011 has discussed the following themes:

- Co-creation and Service Experiences in Tourisms
- Evaluation of Rural Tourism Destinations
- Responsibility and Nature Area Issues
- Innovation and Value in Tourism
- Modern ICT and Social Media
- Tourism Destination Competitiveness
- Tourist Experiences in Destinations

- Tourist Perception and Destination Branding
- Rural- and Nature-based Tourism,
- Value co-creation in Tourism
- Customer Experience in Tourism and
- Tourism Managers' and customers' perceptions.

The conference had 56 reviewers from all continents that have done a great job. The wish of the organisers was to set the quality of the presentations as the highest priority and the result was that out of more than 100 abstracts and papers received, 40 papers made it to their presentation.

The ATMC was hosted by the Multidisciplinary Research Institute Maribor, the second biggest city in Slovenia, being the European Capital of Culture in 2012. It took place in the wellness seminar hotel Arena at the foot of the Pohorje Mountain – a quiet place with great culinary that has allowed very intense work on the one side and a lot of enjoyments after the sessions have been completed.

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