Tourist Quests as Branding Tool

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the world economy. Due to the closure of borders, tourism sector is the most affected. Many countries have focused their efforts on domestic tourism. Place branding tools allow creating an appropriate image for consumer (in this case, tourists), which let monetize cultural, historical or natural objects. It is important that modern tourist service consumers have become quite demanding and often want to go beyond usual excursion routes. An innovative tool to attract tourists to the place is to carry out tourist quests. Despite its popularity, tourist quests have not been widely developed yet and often remain a part of short-term sightseeing tours. This paper examines the economic potential of tourist quests for branding places and developing domestic tourism. The "Let's meet Russia" tourist quest technology is revealed. Public-private partnership that can ensure the economic effect of place branding is also identified. The article formulates requirements for places that are seen as locations and can trigger tourist behavior. Main objective of the "Let's meet Russia" project is to make popular those places that are out of popular tourist flows. As a result it supports small and medium-sized businesses in the hospitality industry.

1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of forming a place brand today is perhaps one of the most discussed both in the scientific community and among practitioners in the field of regional development. Geo-branding allows us to solve a whole range of regional development problems, including attracting investors and tourists, and increasing population loyalty to state authorities.

Despite the fact that place branding and place marketing concepts have appeared relatively recently, they have already become widespread and have fairly extensively applied a methodological terminology (Anholt, 2005).

Nowadays, place branding is used to attract tourists, to increase the region investment potential, to preserve labor resources and attract new human resources, to strengthen local product position in the foreign market. This paper has considered one of such directions – tourist branding (Ward, 1998). However, in our opinion, it is the driving force for place positioning, since when visiting a particular place, people get acquainted with it for subsequent decision-making about moving, training, investing or purchasing any product.

2 MATERIALS AND METHOD

This research makes use of general scientific methods including analysis, synthesis, generalization, systematization of data and information. Also, the given study is based on the works by foreign and domestic scientists on place marketing and place branding, as well as on digital tools in this process.

3 TOURIST DESTINATION BRANDING

Globalization process has largely manifested itself in new thinking way in human minds. Travel has become an integral part of human life. Growing demand for tourist service has led, in turn, to an increase in competition and, as a result, to the need to attract to a particular place. In this regard, the authorities, entrepreneurs and the population face the task of ensuring that the place is competitive and attractive for tourists. Meanwhile, for a long time, the main destination branding has attracted tourists from

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abroad, while domestic tourism has been considered as an auxiliary one.

For the first time, Philip Kotler in his work "Marketing places" raised the question of marketing tools for place branding in the market (Kotler, 2005) in the early 1990s. At this stage, in the scientific community and in practice, a number of customary terms are sometimes perceived as synonyms: "regional marketing" (Gutman, 2002), "territorial marketing" (Pankrukhin, 2002). Despite the fact that some scientists agree that these terms are interchangeable, most scientists and practitioners believe that these concepts should be separated. First, marketing is a more general process that involves positioning a place in the relevant market. Thus, this is an exclusively economic process that has clear and measurable performance indicators (Vizgalov, 2008). In turn, place branding involves a certain image created in the minds of direct consumers, which encourages certain actions to commit. Accordingly, branding has less measurable economic indicators, which are often delayed.

3.1 COVID-19 Pandemic Influences Tourist Service Market

Most economists agree that countries have yet to assess the national economy losses after the coronavirus pandemic in 2020-2021. However, it is already possible to identify industries that have suffered enormous losses. And in this sense, the tourism sector is the most vulnerable. The closure of the borders has made it impossible to develop external tourism. In turn, this process has had a positive impact on domestic tourism. Now the regions are faced with the task of maintaining domestic tourism rate and not losing it after the borders opening and the tourist market returning to its usual course. In this regard, it is the tools of place branding that will ensure tourist destination in the post-crisis period.

Small and medium-sized enterprises that are somehow connected with the hospitality industry have become the most vulnerable during the pandemic. Many businesses were forced to close, while others found internal reserves and retained business; however, its turnover has largely decreased.

In this regard, place branding should be considered not only as a tool for a region or city positioning, but also as a supporting and developing strategy for small and medium-sized businesses in the hospitality industry.

It is important that stakeholders, including public authorities and key enterprises, consider the destination branding process as a set of measures used to stimulate small and medium-sized enterprises (Moilanen, 2009).

Given the circumstances prevailing the coronavirus pandemic, traditional methods of marketing territories cannot fully provide a way out to the economic problems (Brand City, 2007). The current situation requires complex non-standard solutions. In this paper, we propose to consider tourist quests to solve these problems.

3.2 Tourist Quest as Complex Place Branding Tool

Throughout the world tourist quests are increasingly used as an innovative way to attract visitors and explore the site. The general development of tourism service marketing and increasing consumer demands makes search for suchlike new methods.

The word "quest" is originally English and refers to search, a subject of the search, search for adventure, knight's vow fulfillment. As a computer game genre, quests have become widespread and therefore naturally transported to the reality. Its integral element is overcoming difficulties that in the game format involve solving puzzles, which makes the quest even more attractive for tourism industry. It is worth noting that there is problem solution without which it is impossible to achieve results. American teachers Bernie Dodge and Tom March identify such solution as the basis for maintaining interest in the object of study. From this we can conclude that dynamic and changing quest nature will ensure a stable interest in the branding object, in this case – the place.

At the present moment, short quest excursions are mostly popular as they help to inform and entertain visitors.

3.3 Economic Effects of Tourist Quest as Place Branding Tool

Like any other game format, tourist quests are based on interest and competition, so this format often involves several teams to participate. The main task is to consistently pass through several "stations", and each one gives a riddle for the next game stage. The technology for conducting tourist quests is quite fully revealed in various scientific and applied works.

Despite the fact the vast majority of them consider a tourist quest as a short-term entertainment and education, the questing methodology does not change if game time is up to several days.

Quests make it possible to direct people's actions in accordance with certain scenarios and it is an

advantage of organizing tourist processes in the quest format (Svistunov, 2015). This is especially important for those territories that are not tourist centers and therefore are hardly known to the public. So, if a person travels according to his own plan, he usually includes well-known accessible objects found on tourist routes. However, one of the place branding main goals is to develop the territories that have not yet become popular tourist sites. This is due to the fact that popular places do not need additional highlighting and are often themselves triggers of tourist behavior.

Thus, quest technology can allow expanding tourist flows towards the places that need additional positioning and ensuring their popularization (Borisova, 2010). In turn, if such territories are attractive for visiting it stimulates investment inflow necessary for appropriate infrastructure construction.

Quest target audience is mainly young people aged 18 to 35. This category is the most active and ready for innovative leisure activities. In addition, one of the category priorities is to learn new places and open their horizons, because young people are more willing to "invest money in impressions". As innovators, young people are not interested in visiting well-known places. On the contrary, they want to discover something new and unique.

In this regard, attention should be paid to small and medium-sized businesse potential, which involve small hotels, cafes and restaurants (including ethnic and themed), souvenir shops and craft workshops, and etc. For such enterprises, attracting tourists is a significant problem, since they are often located outside of well-known tourist flows.

In turn, small business development focused on servicing and accompanying tourists encourages the place development as a whole. In addition, place branding for such territories allows solving a number of socially significant tasks, such as preventing the outflow of the young, improving the life standard, reducing social tension and, as a result, increasing life satisfaction.

3.4 "Let's Meet Russia" - Tourist Quest Technology

In the coming years the Russian Federation socio-economic development sets one of the priority tasks to develop tourism potential for the country regions in the coming years. In accordance with this task, the authors have proposed the tourist quest project "Let's meet Russia". It is focused on domestic tourism development by attracting attention to little-known or unknown sites.

The main project objective is to attract small places with appropriate potential (cultural, natural, ethnic and historical values) to the tourist flow.

"Let's meet with Russia" quest participants will be directed to promising locations and destinations within the region tourist development.

In this regard, it is essential to build a public and private partnership. Common interest coordination will allow using the quest potential for the development of certain territories. Thus, building the game storyline should include building relations between the state authorities responsible for the economic and tourist development, commercial organizations, cultural institutions and scientific community.

When designing a storyline, the main stakeholders should stick to the following principles:

- state and local government authorities: should select sites that need additional support in attracting tourists (popular sites should possibly be considered as a starting location, but not make it the basis of the storyline);
- historians, cultural scientists, local historians: one should choose such places as locations that can be obtained from sources available to participants (the Internet, museum expositions, mass media, etc.);
- organizers: all locations should be related to each other by similar topics, locations should expect accessible transport service;
- small and medium-size businesses serving the hospitality industry should provide access to the location and make it available for participants to receive points for moving to the next location.

In order to achieve economic efficiency from place branding by including it in the tourist quest program, the location must meet a number of requirements:

- the place is should be accessible to transport (the tourist quest "Let's meet Russia" isn't supposed to include hiking routes);
- the location must hold an object of cultural, historical or natural significance, its positioning corresponds to the general concept of the tourist potential development within the given territory (for example, if the region is positioned in terms of its historical potential, it is not advisable to attract quest participants to natural sites);
- the location infrastructure should be equipped by small and medium-sized businesses, whose development will be facilitated by holding tourist events (during the course, participants

must interact with this organization and purchase certain products and post in social networks).

Locations should be selected comprehensively, and the storyline construction ought to ensure the following task solution:

- getting to know the territory (in completing the quest course, participants are required to independently find key information about the place, both from open sources and through contacting the relevant cultural institutions – museums, ethnic centers, etc.);
- place popularization (the prerequisite for passing the "Let's meet Russia" tourist quest is to leave digital evidence – score is awarded after posting on social networks. Thus, there the target audience is expanded in proportion to the number of subscribers for each participant);
- stimulating demand for small and medium-sized businesses in the hospitality industry (according to the "Let's meet Russia" tourist quest terms, to get points for buying tips and to move to the next stage, a tourist has to make a corresponding purchase using a QR code and leave digital evidence in social networks).

Thus, the "Let's meet Russia" quest storyline should ensure both place economic efficiency and popularization. Only if the stakeholders coordinate their interests it is possible to form a tourist place brand capable of monetizing.

4 CONCLUSION

Creating a brand place is a complex process that involves the many stakeholders interaction, each of them is obliged to understand the economic efficiency degree made from their actions (Buyanova, 2021). However, for a long time, place branding was perceived as a kind of auxiliary tool. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought society into a state of turbulence, and therefore, participants in economic relations have become more careful in choosing the appropriate tools.

One of the most vulnerable industries during the pandemic was the tourism sector, and it made domestic tourism popular in most countries. New challenges require the innovative tools use, including place positioning. A tourist quest can be used as such a tool. Despite the fact that this format has become quite trendy in recent years, it has grown to be widespread only as a type of short-term sightseeing tours. In our opinion, this format has a significant potential as a tool for place branding. This article

describes the basic principles of organizing the "Let's meet Russia" tourist quest. This quest main goal is to ensure the positioning and branding of territories that are not in the path of popular tourist flows, which in turn will stimulate the economic development of these territories by increasing the efficiency of small and medium-sized businesses representing the hospitality industry. Tourist place branding will allow solving a number of socially significant tasks. The primary one can be considered an increase in the living standard of small territories population, a decrease in the level of outflow of population and, as a result, an increase in the level of life satisfaction.

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