

POSITIONING ROMANIA AS A TOURISM DESTINATION BASED ON THE INFORMATION FROM ONLINE TRAVEL GUIDES

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Abstract:

Concerned with asserting itself as a unique tourism destination, Romania has spent time and money and has put a lot of hope in choosing its brand elements and secondary associations, forgetting that brands are not built only through advertising. The points of contact through which customers get to know a brand are various: observation and personal use, oral advocacy, interactions with Romania's citizens, online and mobile experiences, etc. This paper aims to highlight the importance of Romania's positioning statement, as a tourism destination, based on the information from major online international travel guides, and to argue the harmonization of this approach in differentiating the brand through its main elements (logo, slogan, etc.). Together with the differentiation and brand elements, the positioning ensures Romania's honesty, originality and authenticity as a tourism destination.

Key words: *tourism destination, positioning, points-of-difference, points-of-parity, brand*

1. Introduction

When striving to impose Romania as a tourism destination, positioning becomes a creativity exercise, which refers not to what is done with this tourism product, but to the tourists' mind (Ries, Trout, 1981). Positioning should trigger, in the customer's mind, the impulse of considering a purchase decision. For the human spirit to approve the mind's decision, the brand needs to be differentiated through authenticity because, as Stephen R. Covey (2004) says, human beings are four dimensional, having a body, a mind capable of thinking and independent analysis, a

heart capable of feeling emotion and a spirit – one's soul or its “philosophic kernel”. Creating a correct frame of reference for positioning the brand “Romania, tourism destination” implies identifying the target market and the relevant competition, as well as establishing the ideal set of brand associations (the points-of-parity and the points-of-difference).

This paper used as information source only the analysis of Romania's presence as a tourism destination in the online international travel guides. No doubt, this information should be rounded with consumers' assessments and information available on blogs or social networks.

The framework for positioning Romania as a tourism destination also requires a constant concern over the brand's equity. For that purpose, Romania has to analyse its brand equity regularly, using either the “BrandAsset Valuator” model (developed by the advertising agency Young and Rubicam), the “Aaker model” (created by David Aaker, a marketing professor at the University of California-Berkeley), the “BrandZ model” (developed by the marketing research consultants Millward Brown and WPP) or the “Brand Resonance Model” (which views brand building as an ascending series of four steps).

2. Analysis of Romania's image as a tourism destination in the online travel guides

According to the Flash Eurobarometers No. 258, 291 and 328 (Flash Eurobarometer No. 328, 2011), the Internet is the second source of information for the European tourists, after friends and colleagues' recommendations. In this context, analyzing Romania's presence as a tourism destination in online international travel guides is becoming a mandatory approach for positioning Romania as a tourism destination.

On the website [lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/romania) (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/romania>) Romania is described in a slightly humorous note. According to this website, Romania is a country characterized by carefree living in the countryside - wooded mountains, horse-drawn carts and herds of sheep that walk unhindered, on the roads, alongside vehicles. References are made to Dracula (the former ruler of Walachia) and the beautiful medieval monuments in Sighișoara and Sibiu. Bucharest is regarded as a city with grotesque monuments from the communist era, besides cathedrals worth seeing. The Carpathian Mountains are valued because tourists can ski, cycle or take enjoyable trips. Monasteries of Southern Bucovina and Maramureş have to be visited especially for the beautiful paintings and architecture which make them special.

Frommers.com website (<http://www.frommers.com/destinations/romania>) does an interestingly description of Romania. According to this site, the Romanians are proud because they represent “a Latin island in a Slavic sea”, referring to the fact that Romania is surrounded by countries that are not Latin (Ukraine, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria are Slavic countries). Although Romania was under Ottoman rule for a long time, the Western culture is predominant. Furthermore, the website states that the Romanians

are proud to talk about national celebrities, inventors, scientists, poets, writers, musicians, leaders, and do not avoid to tell tourists about the problems Romania is facing (corruption, politics, health, education, living standards, infrastructure). Romanians are seen as faithful people, tourists being informed that they will see Romanians of all ages making a cross sign whenever they pass a church. The Roma community is not perceived favourably by the Romanians, which are not proud of their countrymen due to several negative aspects (crime, begging, aggression, etc.). However, their musical talent and their skills in certain crafts are presented as a positive part of this community. Surprisingly, the site informs that Romanians have problems with speaking English, advising tourists to avoid asking for information from older people (which is in fact a reality especially in rural areas).

The website [virtualtourist.com \(http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Europe/Romania/TravelGuide-Romania.html\)](http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Europe/Romania/TravelGuide-Romania.html) has a favourable view of holidays in Romania, describing it as a legendary place where Dracula lived. In addition to impressive castles and green mountains, tourists can discover caves and salt mines, while benefiting from the curative effects of the Black Sea mud. The website also recommends visiting the Palace of Parliament and the Arc de Triumph. With a rich history, Romania is regarded as a unique holiday destination.

[Roughguides.com \(http://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/romania/\)](http://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/romania/) rates visiting Romania as worthwhile and challenging at the same time. The Carpathian Mountains' beauty and the Romanian culture and lifestyle contribute to the beauty of this country. Bucharest is described as a city not to be missed, as well as Cluj, Timișoara, Brașov, Sibiu and the legendary Sighișoara.

The website [worldtravelguide.net \(http://www.worldtravelguide.net/romania\)](http://www.worldtravelguide.net/romania) considers that Romania, which is mainly known as the land of Dracula, is much more than suggested by its notoriety based on excessive fiction. Those who have the opportunity of visiting Romania can enjoy the great beaches of the Black Sea, medieval churches and monasteries. This destination is described as being suitable for those interested in mountain trips and sports, as well as for those who enjoy nature in general. One of the recommended cities is Bucharest. Besides the capital, recommendations include the cities that have preserved cathedrals, churches and other historical monuments. The site also brings forward some negative aspects, arguing that many of the recommended buildings are eclipsed by post-Stalinist buildings and North Korean style apartment houses. Furthermore, the public transport leaves much to be desired (with old and insufficient vehicles, taxis which charge incorrect rates, and the existence of pickpockets).

The Michelin guide (<http://travel.michelin.com/web/destination/Romania>) regards Romania as, unarguably, one of the most promising tourism destinations. It is noted that Prince Charles spends some holidays at his residences in Transylvania, being delighted by the beauty of the natural environment and local traditions and culture. Romania is pictured as a country with a rich culture, which produced first-class artists, writers and composers, like George Enescu, actresses, like Elvira Popescu, historical figures, like Mircea Eliade, philosophers, like Emil Cioran, or athletes, like

Nadia Comănci. The country side offers attractions such as castles and monasteries. An important region, recommended by this guide, is Transylvania, with its medieval towns and the Carpathian Mountains, with magnificent landscapes, high peaks and wild forests.

Another very popular online travel guide, letsgo.com (<http://www.letsgo.com/europe/romania/>), describes Romania as a country in transition, devastated by Ceausescu's regime, known for its poverty and crimes, which discourage visitors to choose it as a tourism destination. However, the authors note that those who are so easily discouraged have much to lose. Although seen as a country where you need a large travel budget, Romania is rich in history, rustic destinations and hospitable people. Bucovina, Sinaia, the Black Sea and Transylvania are among the recommended destinations.

To conclude, Romania is characterized rather positive, the description being one that probably attracts tourists who have travelled through many countries, being open-minded towards other destinations and who are looking for memorable travel experiences, given by the peculiar landscapes and the character of the place, its cultural attractions, and the traditional and authentic life style of Romanians. Obviously, being an emerging destination, negative aspects of Romania are also presented, but these should not discourage tourists.

3. Positioning the tourism destination Romania

The types of attractions which advantage Romania and which can be used to promote and position it as a tourism destination are the natural attractions and landscapes, the cultural and historical resources, entertainment and nightlife, the traditional villages, the gastronomy, and a few cosmopolite cities (Bucharest, Cluj, Sibiu, Brașov, Timișoara).

The tourism products offered by Romania, which could be further developed, include cruises, ecotourism, cultural tours, mountain holidays, rural tourism, health and wellness tourism, city breaks, hiking and cycling, adventure tourism, and pilgrimage, as well as conferences, symposia, and meetings.

Unfortunately, Romania as a tourist destination has only few known micro-destination brands such as Transylvania, the Danube Delta, Sibiu and Bucharest. Consequently, Romania should catalogue the micro-destinations which could be further developed and decide which of them will be prevalently promoted. In order to become an internationally successful tourism destination, Romania has to build a strong image, containing a couple of well known micro-destinations.

Based on the information obtained from the main online travel guides and directly from the foreign tourists, the main attraction of Romania as a tourism destination is the well preserved nature, embodied by the Carpathian Mountains, the Danube Delta and the rural landscapes.

The four main attributes which identify Romania as a tourism destination are: authentic, rural, hospitality, and green.

Based on the information from the online travel guides, the positioning statement of Romania, as a tourism destination, includes the following competitive frame of reference (Kotler, Keller, 2012):

a) *target market*: young adults, groups of friends, couples without children, "empty nesters" – aged over 50, who no longer have children in their care, from the middle class, seeking unique/new destinations with wildlife, as well as authentic traditions and culture;

b) *Romania offers, these segments*, itineraries to explore and places where you can gain rewarding travel experiences.

After establishing the frame of reference, the appropriate associations that will function as points-of-parity and points-of-difference have to be chosen (Keller, Sternthal, Tybout, 2002). *Points-of-difference* are, as defined by Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller, "attributes or benefits that consumers strongly associate with a brand, positively evaluate, and believe they could not find to the same extent with a competitive brand". In turn, *points-of-parity* are "attribute or benefit associations that are not necessarily unique to the brand but may in fact be shared with other brands". These types of associations can be *category points-of-parity*, perceived by consumers as essential to a legitimate and credible offer within a certain product or service category, or *competitive points-of-parity*, intense, favourable and unique associations designed to overcome perceived weaknesses of the brand (competitive points-of-parity allow a brand to achieve the "breakeven" in a field where competition is trying to find an advantage).

Regarding Romania as a tourism destination, the following can be outlined:

a) *points-of-difference*: authenticity, tradition;

b) *category points-of-parity*: safety, well preserved nature, hospitality, infrastructure;

c) *competitive points-of-parity*: protected natural areas, authentic lifestyle.

These three associations stem from the elements which should identify Romania as a tourism destination: **positioning attributes** (authenticity, well preserved nature, cultural traditions, and authentic lifestyle); **key values promoted by the brand** (exploration, spirituality, simple life lived in nature); **brand personality** (hospitality, closeness to nature, kindness).

Given the target audience, to whom the communication efforts of the brand will be directed, the three elements of Romania's positioning statement, as a tourism destination, are tangible/intangible, rational/emotional (fig. 1).

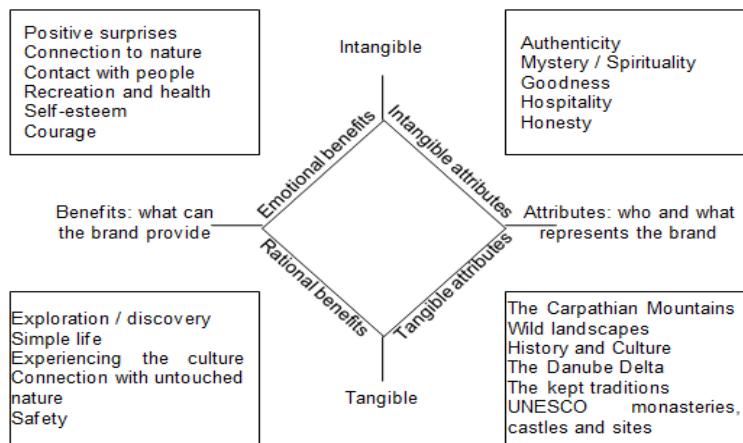


Figure1. Romania's attributes and benefits, as a tourism destination

Brand attributes are likely to differentiate Romania from other tourism destinations, the authenticity/originality and spirituality associated with this destination being the most important ones. In terms of benefits, the emotional ones are very important in positioning a brand, Romania promising potential tourists that although they will make an extra effort to explore, it will be rewarded by the feeling of courage and spirit of adventure experienced.

Undoubtedly the proposed positioning statement of Romania as a tourism destination will have to be stated and promoted.

4. Conclusions

For “the tourism destination Romania” to be able to connect with its potential tourists, positioning is useful but not enough. Positioning is relevant to the rational needs and desires of consumers, but this effort must have a more complex purpose, as positioning is a mere claim that alerts consumers to be cautious of an inauthentic brand. In other words, positioning is not complete without the differentiation and the brand, redefined as a triangle which Philip Kotler calls "the 3i" (Kotler, Kartajaya, Setiawan, 2010).

The “3i” model (fig. 2) consists of brand **identity**, brand **integrity** and brand **image**. According to this model, differentiation that is synergistic to the positioning will automatically create a good brand image. The “3i” model allows consumers, when looking at the “Romania, tourism destination” brand, to evaluate if the brand is trying to mystify the reality (in other words, if it is “false”, “lacking in character”) or if it is genuine (if it is “authentic”, “has character”). To sum up, Romania, as a tourism destination, has to be authentic and to provide experiences that live up to the promises made (Gilmore, II Pine, 2007).

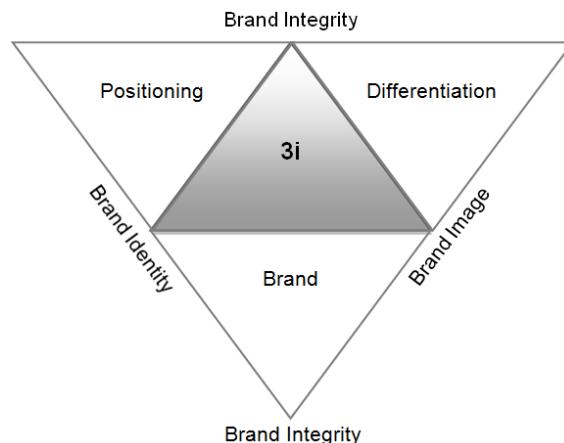


Figure 2. The “3i” model

"Romania, tourism destination" brand identity relates to the positioning of this brand in the customer's mind (the use of information from the online travel guides being necessary, but not enough). Positioning should be unique and relevant to the rational needs and desires of consumers. At the same time, brand integrity assumes the accomplishment of what is stated by brand positioning and differentiation. This means to be credible and to strengthen consumer confidence in your brand while respecting your promises.

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