

Are Residents the New Tourism Ambassadors?

Local people may be the best ambassadors for tourism in their home towns and cities, according to SHTM Ph.D. graduates Dr Philipp Wassler and Dr Liang Wang, and the School's Dr Kam Hung. Building a brand for a destination is an effective way of attracting tourists, but destination marketers rarely consider the needs of residents – the biggest and potentially most influential group of stakeholders in any destination. The researchers note that local communities can make or break a destination brand, and their marketing may be far more cost-effective, authentic and persuasive than traditional advertising. Surveying residents from Hong Kong, famously branded as “Asia’s World City”, this pioneering study offers important empirical insights into how residents’ voices can help tourism destinations to differentiate themselves in an increasingly globalised and competitive market.

Brand Identity

Destination branding is a way to promote a tourist site by building a brand that conveys its unique identity. A good destination brand, note the researchers, is the sum of the experiences and stories a place has to offer, making the destination instantly recognisable to tourists. As attracting tourism is a critical strategy for local economic development, communities, cities and even countries can benefit from creating a memorable brand image.

However, this may not be an easy task. Indeed, as the researchers note, “few destination brands can be regarded as truly successful”. Although we know much about branding products and services, destinations are far more complex.

“Destination brands represent not only intangible goods and services”, explain the researchers, “but also places, people, and ideologies, which cannot be simply packaged and sold”. Therefore, destination marketing organisations (DMOs) must consider a wide range of stakeholders – not just tourists.

Chief among these stakeholders are local residents. Tourism has huge economic, socio-cultural and environmental effects on host communities. “Some of these effects are positive”, write the researchers, “but many are negative”. For example, although tourism growth may help residents to escape poverty, it may also damage the local landscape, bring traffic congestion and even erode the area’s culture and traditions.

This places residents at the core of a destination’s brand identity. As the researchers explain, “the sustainable development of a tourism destination is closely contingent on participation and support from residents”. Understanding residents’ needs can help DMOs to tailor their branding strategies accordingly. Local people also represent a rich but untapped resource for destination marketers. Nobody knows a place better than those who live there, which makes marketing by residents more cost-effective, less biased and more authentic than traditional advertising.

A Novel Theory

Surprisingly, however, little is known about what motivates local people to support a destination brand. Studies have ignored the vital difference between corporate branding and destination

branding: unlike the employees of corporations, residents are not paid to market their home towns or cities. To make matters worse, write the researchers, “many past studies have focused on the negative consequences of negative brand attitude among residents, instead of their positive behaviours”.

Seeking to fill these gaps in the literature and ultimately help DMOs better market local tourist sites, the researchers developed a novel theory to explain residents’ role in destination branding. When local people feel that they and their community are represented accurately by a destination brand, they are likely to feel a greater affinity with the brand, known as “self-congruity”. In turn, note the researchers, “residents’ identification with a destination brand is a strong catalyst for different types of brand advocacy”. It may reduce their resistance to tourism campaigns and increase their support for brand development and promotion, “finally transforming them into brand ambassadors”.

Conversely, if residents feel that they have been misrepresented by a DMO, they may refuse to help maintain or further develop the brand. Some may even organise public resistance or launch counter-branding campaigns. Indeed, note the researchers, “residents’ possible sensitivity about their representation within a destination brand is a persistent issue”. In today’s increasingly globalised world, conveying the complex identity of a community and its inhabitants is becoming ever more important. For example, Hong Kong may be “Asia’s World City”, but its history, culture and people are unique.

Hong Kong Residents Surveyed

The researchers needed to select the right setting in which to explore local people's attitudes towards destination branding. As "residents form part of the brand identity and are therefore part of the branded product", the residents surveyed had to be well aware of their "own" brand. To act as brand ambassadors, they also had to participate in the branding process. Hong Kong offered the perfect match, given that for the last two decades the local community has been thoroughly involved in the process of branding Asia's World City.

One hundred permanent residents of Hong Kong were recruited to take part in the study. They were aged between 18 and 54, with roughly equal numbers of men and women, and came from Hong Kong's three main regions. Therefore, the researchers were confident that the participants' views on the World City brand would represent those of Hong Kong residents in general.

The residents were each invited to complete a questionnaire rigorously constructed and tested by the researchers. One section focused on their attitudes towards Hong Kong's World City brand. Another measured the extent to which they identified with the brand, such as whether it matched their self-image. The third section explored how likely they were to act as ambassadors for the brand. Brand ambassadorial behaviour can take many forms, from attending festivals and exhibitions to simply sharing information online.

Residents as Ambassadors

The researchers then conducted a thorough statistical analysis of the participants' responses. Their findings provide important empirical

insights for DMOs, showing above all that residents are "important receptors of the brand and simultaneously the most important marketers of the destination". They are both "an ethical responsibility and a possible resource of support for destination branding efforts".

DMOs' first task should thus be to identify residents' needs and enlist their support for brand development and implementation. Positive brand attitudes are important, but self-congruity is even more so. The researchers warn that "great care should be given to presenting community values in a way that coincides with residents' self-concept and sense of pride, as well as their local identity and self-esteem".

In turn, the researchers explain, this is "likely to transform residents into valuable marketing assets – brand ambassadors". Local authorities who carefully consider residents' input can more effectively rebrand and rejuvenate a destination for potential tourists. Indeed, travellers are increasingly looking to local people for authentic, unbiased experiences of destinations. These days, write the researchers, tourists "want to establish emotional contact with local residents and their culture, rather than merely consuming a destination through sightseeing".

The value of these findings lies not only in their practical implications for DMOs' branding strategies, but also in their guidance for harmonising the interests of tourism developers and local communities. Most previous research has focused on local people's resistance to tourism development, presenting branding authorities as inconsiderate or even hostile towards local communities. Instead, this study innovatively shows how to "access the possible economic benefits of residents' brand ambassadorial behaviour by understanding, respecting, and promoting local identity".

Future Destination Branding

Hong Kong's branding authorities have already encouraged residents to market the World City brand, and offered a wide range of items for brand promotional use. In light of this study's findings, however, the next step may be to more closely connect Hong Kong's brand with the lives of its residents. In Hong Kong and beyond, branding that takes account of residents' needs and desires will help tourism destinations to distinguish themselves from their competitors and avoid homogeneity in an increasingly globalised world. Most importantly of all, it will enhance the sustainability of tourism by preserving communities' unique cultural heritage and natural landscapes into the future.

POINTS TO NOTE

- Creating a brand for a destination is a promising new way of attracting tourists.
- Local residents offer an important yet largely untapped source of cost-effective and authentic marketing for destinations.
- A Hong Kong survey shows that destination branding should focus on accurately representing residents' and communities' unique cultural identity.
- Giving residents ownership of tourism destination brands will bring economic benefits and help to preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Philipp Wassler, Liang Wang and Kam Hung (2019). "Identity and Destination Branding Among Residents: How Does Brand Self-Congruity Influence Brand Attitude and Ambassadorial Behavior?" *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, pp. 437-446.