

Differentiation Needed for South Pacific Destinations

Australian tourists tend to consider South-Pacific destinations as largely similar, notes SHTM Assistant Professor Stephen Pratt in a recently published research article. Destinations, he shows, are broadly substitutable for each other. Yet there is sufficient scope to enhance the attractiveness of less well-known islands to this, the region's largest tourist group. Dr Pratt assesses Australian tourist perceptions of similarities and differences among four South-Pacific destinations, and argues that marketing organisations need to strike a balance between promoting the region as a homogeneous whole and highlighting the distinct attractions of particular destinations.

'Tropicalisation' of the South Pacific

The images, representations and perceptions of the South Pacific have been created and reinforced over several centuries, Dr Pratt notes, which mirrors the case in "other previously colonised areas of the world where the colonizers are responsible for the collective representation of 'Other'". This process, known as 'tropicalisation' by researchers, tends to ignore "cultural, environmental, and geographical diversity" and produce "a singular concept of what a tropical South Pacific island should look like". That concept, which largely originated with the first Europeans to visit the region in the 1700s as explorers, adventurers, traders and missionaries, has been reinforced over the years in art, films, literature, music and advertising.

Early tourism advertising featured "untouched scenery and voluptuous native women", Dr Pratt notes, combined with other familiar images such as swaying palm trees, golden beaches, crystal clear waters and perpetual sunshine. In short, this was paradise. Even today these images are appealing, and not entirely inaccurate – the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) understandably uses them to attract tourists to the region as a whole and distinguish it from competitor regions. Yet they do favour more familiar destinations. The problem lies in finding away to differentiate individual destinations in the region.

Fiji is the most established South Pacific destination, with a 59% share of the Australian market, and thus benefits most from the SPTO's regional campaigns. Fiji

Tourism's successful tagline "FijiMe" implies, in Dr Pratt's words, that visitors will be "Fiji'ed". Knowing that it is preaching to the converted, Fiji Tourism then focuses on such niches as "CruiseMe", "RomanceMe" and "DiveMe". The destination marketing organisations (DMOs) of the region's less-familiar destinations tend to emphasise discovery, as in the Solomon Islands' "Discover Somewhere Different", with the unstated implication that the islands are different from Fiji, thus allowing them to be "defined by their competition", as Dr Pratt notes.

Australia is far and away the South Pacific's largest source market. Of the region's roughly 1.4 million international tourists in 2010, 529,000 were Australians. The majority (311,000) went to Fiji, followed by Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. The remaining destinations have less than a 4% market share each. Hence, Dr Pratt emphasises, there is an urgent need "to know to what extent each South Pacific destination has its own unique identity or destination image", at least in the minds of Australians.

Destination Brand Attributes Investigated

Dr Pratt administered an online questionnaire survey to residents of Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's two largest metropolitan areas, targeting those who had been on an international holiday within the past 12 months or were planning one in the next 12. The questionnaire focused on past visit behaviour, visit/revisit intention, destination awareness and desired destination if time and money were no obstacle.

The questionnaire also highlighted four South Pacific destinations – the Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu – and asked the importance of 13 brand attributes. These included "ideal place to relax", "People known for friendliness and hospitality", "A chance to get involved in local culture", "Ideal for couples", "Romantic", "Easy to get to by air", "Great for adventure", "Good for families", "Value for money", "Range of accommodation for all budgets", "Well priced travel packages", "Good for shopping" and "Destination advertised regularly".

The respondents were evenly split between the sexes and

the two cities. The average age was 39, more than half had an undergraduate degree or higher, and the average household income was higher than the metropolitan average. Just over half of the respondents had previously visited a South-Pacific destination, and just under half planned to in the future.

Different but Largely Similar

The respondents' perceptions of the destination attributes were ranked by salience and turned into perceptual maps to allow visual comparison. The aim, Dr Pratt writes, was to allow DMOs to understand their current market positions, "see which attributes they are most closely associated with in the mind of the potential tourist" and identify the 'competitive sets' of their brands, or the "uncontested attributes that represent an opportunity for repositioning away from the competition".

Unsurprisingly, Fiji ranked highest on many of the attributes, including being easy to get to by air, having people known for their friendliness and hospitality, and representing good value for money, among others. There were, however, a few divergences from this pattern. Samoa was perceived as an undiscovered adventure destination and the Cook Islands as romantic. Many of the attributes were also shared by all four destinations. Indeed, in the minds of Australian tourists, Dr Pratt suggests, all four destinations are "synonymous with friendly people, good climate, beautiful scenery, and a range of water activities". In other words, they are very attractive but indistinguishable.

Standing out from the Island Crowd

Given their high degree of substitutability, how can each destination distinguish itself in the marketplace? Dr Pratt believes that the less-frequented destinations in the region must differentiate themselves from Fiji. This will involve, he explains, "positioning themselves as a tropical paradise with all the attractions that such a holiday offers but is not Fiji".

Dr Pratt suggests that a country could emphasise its friendly laid-back populace in contrast to the aggressive taxi-drivers at Fiji's Nadi Airport, its white sandy beaches unspoilt by the roar of jet-skis or its more authentic cultural souvenirs lacking a "made in China" label. He also notes that the Cook Islands are seen as a romantic destination for couples and Samoa is associated with rugby. There is thus enough scope for the less well-known

countries to capitalise on South Pacific brand attributes while developing destination-specific niche markets.

Balancing Regional and Destination-specific Attributes

The issues Dr Pratt identifies will be familiar to DMOs in other areas with strong regional identities such as the Caribbean and Europe. Although Europe may feature more obviously distinct destinations than the South Pacific or Caribbean, there is still a fine balance to be achieved between motivating tourists to visit a region and encouraging them to go to a particular country within it. Ultimately, Dr Pratt writes, destinations in tourist regions must move beyond "ubiquitous imagery" to achieve "the right mix of being the same (as other regional destinations) but different".

Points to Note

- The South Pacific is often imagined as a homogeneous "tropical paradise".
- Australia is by far the largest source market for the South Pacific islands.
- Fiji is the most popular South Pacific destination.
- South Pacific countries should differentiate themselves by finding niche markets.

Pratt, Stephen. (2013) "Same, Same but Different: Perceptions of South Pacific Destinations Among Australian Travelers". *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 30, No. 6, pp. 595-609.