Chapter 4
Promoting Place Appeal: New Tools and Strategies

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ABSTRACT
Widespread internet usage and continuing advances in information systems have greatly changed the dynamics of tourism. Industry providers now have many comparatively low-cost methods available to follow-up exploratory queries in assorted languages, and to maintain post-visit contact with customers. But the push-pull of information has radically changed (and is still evolving). Service providers might welcome the opportunity to better target many more prospective visitors at minimal cost, but soon recognize both negative & positive aspects to widely-referenced user reviews (which are sometimes snidely contributed by competitors). Regional policymakers struggle to develop common platforms to assist with new competitive realities. Destination marketing has expanded to include needs to cultivate investment, generate tourism, and attract mobile experts, while developing & retaining creative local talent. The more competitive local economies have found measures to enjoy prosperity, while other locales suffer collapsing property values & simply watch residents migrate away. This chapter highlights examples of creative uses of e-tourism for improving place appeal.

INTRODUCTION: COMPETITIVE OPPORTUNITY VS. COMMUNITY STARVATION

Worldwide competition for human resources, tourism, investment, and jobs is serious & unrelenting. Innovative information services have shaken many industries and led to new efficiencies, but with major ongoing costs such as widespread social restructuring, corporate downsizing, and many personal tragedies due to unemployment and involuntary relocation.

A vast number of rural areas are trying to cope with depopulation. Some are successfully developing tourism, often by proactively using online information systems. Fortunately the tourism market is broadening, with cross-border tourism greatly increasing. The Chinese now lead the world in international travel spending at US$129 billion in 2013 (UNWTO 2014a), with over 100 million outbound tourists in 2014; Russian outbound tourism has also greatly increased. But the competitive din is also getting

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louder, with a growing multitude of attractive places seeking attention. Potential tourism destinations need to be increasingly clever & sophisticated to garnish initial & continuing revenues, and to create sustainable local jobs. Let us first discuss some of the mechanics of the new electronic information flows, and major corporate efforts in the hospitality industry. As online information usage has blossomed, important changes are evolving with standards, oversight and trust. This is highly important, as these tools are increasingly vital.

ONLINE INFORMATION REVOLUTION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The world has become more accessible with new information systems. To check the weather in distant places, for example, is now easy and virtually cost-free. Places often feature online webcams allowing faraway people to see live ongoing circumstances in real time. Many younger people take such information-on-demand for granted, oblivious to the huge changes achieved in the past couple of decades.

New communication infrastructures allow a wide range of services to be handled remotely and more efficiently, with parallel consolidation in regional, national & global networks. This disruption has shaken many industries and radically changed staffing & office location requirements.

The rapid development of online information systems over the past twenty years has had huge effects on tourism. Local marketing materials previously printed and distributed to travel agents can now be quickly accessed online by anyone, from anywhere, at any time. Information can be quickly & inexpensively updated, and better tailored to individual needs. Increasingly detailed levels of information aimed at those with special interests, or changing news or special offers, can be relatively easily provided in multiple languages. Further, the query process can begin a direct dialogue for continuing contact, with email, online chat or voip phone links offering further personalized services, all at nearly zero marginal cost per query.

Computers and online systems have become ubiquitous, and in most parts of the world there seem to be “smartphones” in every hand or pocket, and among people of every age and type. This has accelerated a process of do-it-yourself investigation. Very few people can now shy away from the mechanics of the internet either at work or in their personal lives. This contrasts with business processes some thirty years ago, when secretaries took charge of typing and office machines. Executives now typically have substantial technical skills, and handle at least some electronic communications themselves. New skill sets are thus required at work. This wider participation has also greatly altered some businesses: much of the travel industry now caters to self-booked services and highly competitive open pricing -- a marked change from the former reliance on insider deals and professional travel agents. Major new IT-dependent services that have developed in parallel to traditional travel providers include Airbnb (lodging) and Uber (transport), both offering good prices (due to low overhead costs) and personalized service. Both also feature feedback ratings to strengthen confidence among the user community.

TRANSFORMING COMPETITIVE Advantage

Information has become easier, cheaper, and immediate. It is also participatory: visitors often now post images and reviews of their shopping, dining, lodging and transport experiences, and many people
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