Chapter 11
Smart Sustainable Marketing of the World Heritage Sites: Teaching New Tricks to Revive Old Brands

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ABSTRACT

This chapter revisits the author’s earlier findings that scrutinized online marketing strategies employed by the world heritage sites (WHS) based on a predetermined set of sustainability indicators. Recent data shows that, for the most part, the WHS continue to lack behind in sustainable initiatives to promote their sites in a responsible manner. Only slight improvement is noted in terms of efforts to seek host community views on how the local heritage should be showcased and the manner on which culturally appropriate representations can be promoted. In the light of unexpected decreased visitation levels at most of the WHS, as reported by literature, a retro brand marketing strategy is suggested which strives to marry the rich historical past of the sites with the present need. A smart sustainable marketing agenda is proposed to improve brand equity and facilitate coordination between different stakeholders of the heritage sites and to attract increased visitations.

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, nations are making an enormous effort to place their historic sites on the world heritage list because they believe that the international recognition can serve as a powerful engine to attract different kinds of visitors, diminish seasonality, and offer international recognition thereby enabling them to promote extended stays in their regions (Patuelli, Mussoni, & Candela, 2013; Weidmann, Hennings, Schmidt, & Wuestefeld, 2011). The UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) strives to facilitate the identification for the WHS list and conservation of cultural and natural heritage considered unique to humanity. The UNESCO’s World Heritage mission aims to:

Smart Sustainable Marketing of the World Heritage Sites

- Encourage countries to sign the World Heritage Convention and to ensure the protection of their natural and cultural heritage;
- Encourage States Parties to the Convention to nominate sites within their national territory for inclusion on the World Heritage List;
- Encourage States Parties to establish management plans and set up reporting systems on the state of conservation of their WHS;
- Help States Parties safeguard World Heritage properties by providing technical assistance and professional training; provide emergency assistance for WHS in immediate danger;
- Support States Parties’ public awareness-building activities for World Heritage conservation;
- Encourage participation of the local population in the preservation of their cultural and natural heritage; and
- Encourage international cooperation in the conservation of our world’s cultural and natural heritage (UNESCO 2010).

Despite the emerging significance of world heritage and increasing number of site entries on the WHS list, tension continues to exist with regard to negative impacts associated with the international valorization of heritage for tourism purpose. From a tourism perspective, heritage is a commodity purposefully designed to satisfy the needs of contemporary audience. In line with this view, Taylor (2001) maintains that heritage tourism is motivated by monetary benefits. World heritage recognition, therefore, continues to share a dialectic and complex relationship with tourism (Boyd & Butler, 1997; Cesari, 2010). A divide exists between scholars of cultural heritage and their counterparts of tourism and marketing. According to Lyon, the “practitioners involved in the design of heritage as a visitor attraction face professionals whose interest is focused on the resource and its protection rather than on the question of public access” (2007, p. 62). Several studies have argued that the coveted UNESCO honor is extensively tapped by the world heritage site managers as a key marketing tool to attract tourists (Lyon, 2007; Rakic & Leask, 2006; Rakic & Chambers, 2007). This has brought to light concerns that the concept of ‘World Heritage’ has deviated from its original path in that the designation is being exploited to “either to serve the purposes of the tourism industry or for the purposes of nation building” (Rakic & Chambers, 2007, p. 146).

In other words, although the original intention was to bestow unique and universal value to selected heritage and garner support for its conservation, these motivations have extended to nation building, global identity and economic benefits. It is feared that the conservation of heritage sites is being shadowed by the need to seek financial numerations (Bregalia, 2005; Chhabra, 2010, 2013; Drost, 1992; Hede, 2007; Winter, 2007). Much blame has rested on the tourism industry. Several authors postulate that the world heritage has become commodified and exploited for contemporary hedonistic pursuits (Lyon, 2007). A dialectic relationship, therefore, between tourism and heritage needs to be nurtured through the use of strategic tools such as sustainable certifications and sustainable marketing (Chhabra, 2010; Lyon, 2007). Galla (2012) argues that a sustainable perspective is crucial for safeguarding the unique universal value accorded to the WHS which can be compromised by commodification.

For viable use of heritage sites, it is therefore important that sustainable marketing strategies are devised. The sustainable perspective calls for a holistic, unbiased, and responsible view of marketing (Haywood, 1990; Walle, 1998) which takes current and potential impacts of tourism into consideration. According to Kilbourne, responsible marketing needs to extend beyond microenvironments and promote “sustainable consumption and quality of life and expand the domain of inquiry to include technological, political and economic benefits and costs of consumption, thus challenging the paradigm itself” (1998, 208).
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