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BRANDING POTENTIAL OF SPAS IN THE NORTHERN PLAIN AND THE MID-TRANSDANUBIAN REGIONS

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Abstract: Based on both primary and secondary research in our article we examined the brand elements of the main baths of the Northern-Plain Region (Szolnok Liget Thermal and Experience Bath, Nyiregyháza Aquarius Experience Bath, a Hajdúszoboszló Hungarospa Plc. and the Debrecen Aquaticum Mediterranean Experience bath) and the Mid-Transdanubian Region (Komárom Medical bath, Agárd Thermal and Medical Bath, Pápa Castle Garden Bath) and worked out their brand systems. We also examined and analysed the possibilities and process of branding. According to their brand elements we established three categories for the baths: Established brands, Developing brands and Brandable baths.

Keywords: branding, brand element, tourism brand, bath

Introduction

One of the most important tourism products of Hungary is its health tourism. The Northern Plain and Mid-Transdanubian Regions are rich in thermal baths and spas, and can boast some really well-known and popular ones both in domestic and international markets. Spas are often favoured destinations of summer holidays and free time programs as they offer opportunities for regular keep-fit activities, body care, relaxation as well as medical treatment provided by professional staff. They have become regular places for the up-keeping of general wellbeing, physical and mental health, they are no longer just venues of few-week summer holidays. Regular spa customers far from their homes today expect to have access to quality free time activities, something that spas of different destinations have increasingly to take into account during the process of tourism product development.

In tourism today there is an increasing demand for high quality services. In the future the product and brand development of European destinations will have to be based on high quality services and innovation. The health tourism strategy developed by ESKI (National Health Strategy Research Institute) underlines the fact that Hungarian thermal water is not a strong enough call phrase on international markets, thermal water as a sole attraction does not guarantee a competitive position any more. Infrastructure spas need to be upgraded to level of wellness and experience baths, the 'blue-pool' aspect has to be strengthened and there have to be more targeted medical services provided by professional staff. Health tourism products have to be transformed from

the price advantage category to the quality/gap-filling niche product category. (ESKI, 2010)

In order for tourism products to be competitive today they need to possess a distinct character they have to appear as a brand. Today it is not only the Mediterranean sandy beaches and exotic destinations that are attractive to tourists, but also there is a growing demand for destinations that are unique and have something special to offer.

Background of the research

Baths offer a wide choice of free time activities to their guests who are in search of colourful experiences. In the US most people visit baths out of 4 different motivations: stress-relief, self-indulgence, improvement of health and 'cutting loose'. Women aged under 40 go for the pampering programs, women over 50 prefer medical treatment, men look for sauna, massage, gym and other sports services. (Patricia A. Monteson-Judith Singer 2004).

The destination of the future is characterized by a unique image. (Bodnár, 2008). Spa research carried out about the baths of Karcag and Cserekeszőlő (Müller et al. 2005) proved that baths' uniqueness and image could be strengthened by product diversification and subsequently they can be made well-known for target markets by proper positioning. The importance of a distinct character is emphasized by Gyarmati (2005) in the case of baths in Eger, Egerszalók, Miskolctapolca. In order to win target markets they have to even be able to characterize a distinct lifestyle.

A tourism destination brand can be a town, a region or even a whole country. Simon Anholt, who first used the expression Nation Brand in the late 90s, in his keynote speech at the conference of EuroPCom in the European Parliament stressed that a strong destination brand is only possible if people developing it and living in it are well aware of who they are and how they are different from the rest of the world, what is the value added they can share with others. Also, they stressed that brand developers and brands need to be able to give valid responses to global challenges at local level. (Anholt, 2011)

It will not take more than a few hours' research on the internet to discover that the biggest challenge of our era is sustainable development both from an environmental, economic and social point of view. It applies to all industries. Stefan Gössling, in his lecture held at Queensland University, highlights that the forecasted growth rate of the tourism industry is possible only at BEU (Business As Usual), something that will be impossible to keep for many reasons. (Gössling, 2011)

On the UNWTO website the MDG (Millennium Development Goals) section starts by three keywords: Sustainable, Competitive, Responsible. On the website of WTTC the 'Our mission' section also underlines the importance of sustainability. (wttc, 2012). In its draft of Tourism Development Strategy circulated for discussion the NGM (National Ministry of Economy) expresses this in the following way: "Competition is getting more and more fierce between destinations both for tourism products and the applied marketing techniques. In a market crammed with messages there is a need for authentic, ethical and sustainable destination brands." (NGM, 2011)

Because of competition between destinations and the ever-changing nature of tourists' expectations and behaviour tourism destinations need to be managed as other commercial brands. The brand image plays a crucial role in the success of destinations and has a significant influence on customer behaviour. Tourists visiting a destination for the first time are more likely to choose one which has a powerful, positive, unique, easily recognizable image. (Asunción Beerli, Josefa D. Martín 2004) Thus, brand and a unique image significantly influence destination choice.

A brand is a "Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." (Kotler, 1999) Today it is very important that Hungary should be able to create, based on our special characteristics, a strong brand which makes us distinct from all our competitors on the increasingly competitive global tourism market.

An alternative definition: products or services which offer a useful and unique set of features in a standardized form and the same quality. (KAMINSKY, 1999: 152, in: Horkay, 2003). This definition puts the customer, the fulfillment of the customer's needs and the quality parameters of the products and services.

Brand policy communicates recognizable achievements which are unique to the company and can be recognized from time to time again. (Bruhn, 1944). A good example for

brand policy is the successful hotel chains (Danubius, Hilton, stb.) which emphasize easily recognizable company specific features in their marketing.

In many cases the customers do not simply buy a product, they buy a brand. Customers and guests attach an expected quality to the brand, consequently brands delivering the biggest customer satisfaction will be the most successful on the market. Purchasing decisions are not always made in favour of the provider offering the highest quality services, the price-service ratio can be a more significant factor. (Scherlag, 2000)

As any other brand, destination brands aim to form a distinctive image that is recognizable and can be differentiated from rival destinations. (Horkay 2003)

In the domestic and international competition of destinations only those regions and places are successful which focus on the experiences of the most successful international destinations (benchmarking) and combine their innovative, quality-centred tourism product development with consistent positioning and differentiating strategy. Professional brand policy in tourism (brand creation and management) is the competitive means to creating a unique product portfolio. It is a break-out point and a strategic task for the management of every destination: lasting success is guaranteed only by possessing a brand which cannot be confused or replaced by other brands, a brand that has an appeal, invokes emotions and has a strong enough reputation. (Horkay, 2003)

Aim of the research

The aim of the research was to determine the branding potential, brand position and future brand building tasks of baths in Hungary.

Hypothesis:

By examining brand elements of baths their branding potential can be determined for the specific region and the main directions of brand development can also be specified.

Material and methods

A survey conducted in the baths of the Northern Plain Region (Szolnok Liget Thermal and Experience Bath, Nyíregyháza Aquarius Experience Bath, a Hajdúszoboszló Hungarospa Plc. and the Debrecen Aquaticum Mediterranean Experience bath) in 2008 (n=457) served as the secondary database for the research. Primary data collection was carried out in the baths of the Mid-Transdanubian Region (Kerényi-Müller-Szabó-Mosonyi 2010) with the participation of guests of three baths. (Komárom Medical bath, Agárd Thermal and Medical Bath, Pápa Castle Garden Bath, n=375)

In the questionnaires used in the baths there were both open and closed questions.

Part of the questions were put into the question group concerning quality assessment of the baths. Guest satisfaction was measured through the provided services, the work of the staff, etc. There were questions about how satisfied they

were with the opening hours, the work of staff, the price/value ratio of services, the choice of services, the quality of services including cleanliness of pools and their design elements. Answers to these questions were scaled between 1–5. 1=not satisfied at all, 2=not very satisfied, 3=fairly satisfied, 4=satisfied, 5=very satisfied.

An average was calculated from the results showing the overall assessment of baths by the guests.

The main question groups as referred to above:

- questions about guests' familiarity with information such as prices, services, marketing activity, water composition etc
- questions about factors affecting bath choice such as number of pools, design of bath, etc.
- questions about the symbols and associations concerning the bath such as thoughts and feelings induced by the bath and the time spent there, experiences with the water, experiences with the slides etc.

Questions were rated by guests on a 1–5 scale and the average values of the different brand elements were displayed on graphs. Data was processed with SPSS 18.0 statistical software.

Results

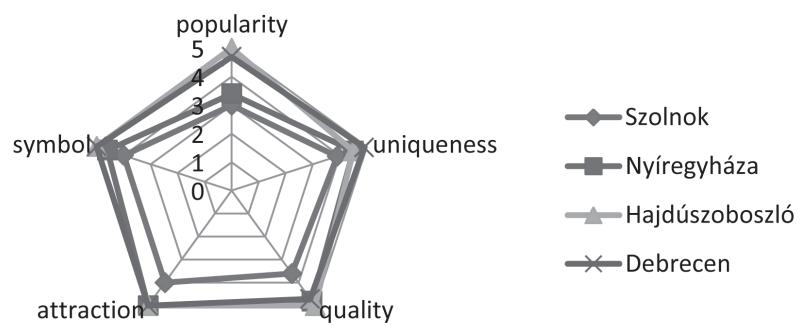
In the questionnaires there were questions about the reputation of the bath and the connection between reputation and the travel decision. Questions about customer satisfaction were focused on: choice of products, prices, cleanliness of the bath and its environment, design elements of pools, hospitality of local people, opening hours, quality of service provided by staff, prices of tickets and the price-value ratio, programs offered by the bath and children friendly services. An average was calculated from the data to show quality. Other questions were aimed at symbols of the bath and its attraction elements. Several unique features of the baths were specified by the participants. The results are graphically presented in *Graphs 1. and 2.*

Examination of brand elements clearly shows that the baths of Debrecen and Hajdúszoboszló have a well-established brand.

The baths of Agárd and Nyíregyháza have a developing brand.

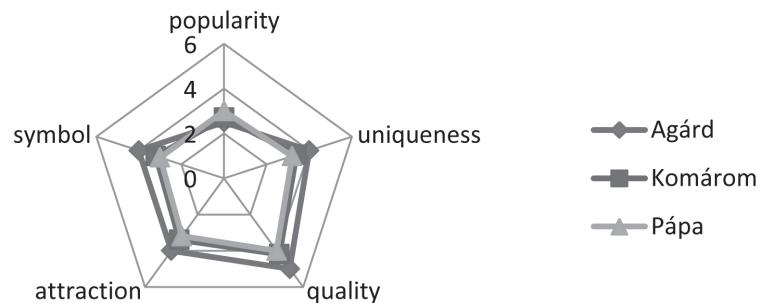
Although the baths of Szolnok, Komárom and Pápa possess some distinct and recognizable brand elements their brands are considerably weaker taking all elements into

Branding potential of baths in the Northern plain region based on the main brand elements

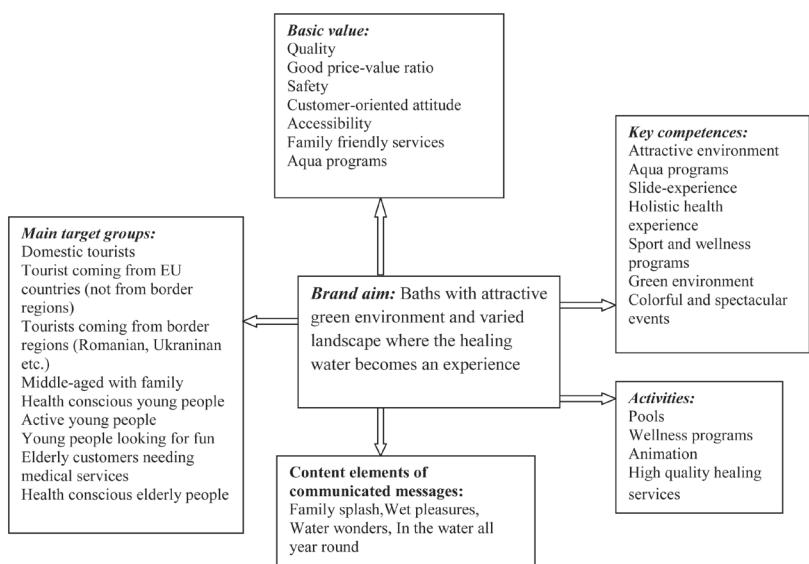


Graph 1.: Brand system of the baths in the Northern Plain Region

Branding potential of baths in the Mid-Transdanubian region based on the main brand elements



Graph 2.: Brand system of baths in the Mid-Transdanubian Region



Graph 3: Umbrella brand of the experience baths of Hungary

account. Their popularity could be improved by strengthening their uniqueness.

Although it is important that baths should represent unique (sub) brands, the baths of the country have to be gathered under

one big umbrella brand. As one of the leading health tourism destinations in Europe, Hungary's baths have to appear as a well-recognizable umbrella brand as a result of branding. Health tourism destinations can be transformed into brands through product development and an emphasis on USPs and also by using proper re-positioning. The evolving brands can improve customer loyalty.

The umbrella brand contains the brand aims, basic values, activities, key competencies, communicated messages and main target groups to which all domestic baths have to conform when developing their individual brands.

Conclusion

Out of the baths of the Northern Plain region the Hajdúszoboszlói Hungarospa Plc and the Debrecen Aquaticum Mediterranean Experience bath has a stronger brand than the Szolnok Liget Thermal and Experience Bath and the Nyíregyháza Aquarius Experience Bath in all brand element categories. These results are partly explained by the fact that the bath in Hajdúszoboszló is in the maturity phase of its product lifecycle as it has been positioning itself on the domestic market since the 1960s. Although the bath in Debrecen started its operation later on the health tourism market, the attractions of the town and its tourism potential has greatly contributed to its success. Both of the baths have gone through significant attraction development which had a considerable impact on the strengthening of their quality, uniqueness, symbol system. These baths are well-known and respected service providers not only on the domestic but the international markets as well. They could be labelled as market leading rivals in the Northern Plain region.

The baths in Szolnok and Nyíregyháza draw customers mainly from the domestic market as they are lesser-known and lack a really wide choice of attractions. In terms of product life cycle they are in the growth phase. Strengthening of their brands can be through enriching their USPs, widening their choice of services and making their marketing communication strategy more effective. They are upcoming competitors of the baths of Debrecen and Hajdúszoboszló in the region.

The baths of the Mid-Transdanubian Region (Komárom Medical bath, Agárd Thermal and Medical Bath, Pápa Castle Garden Bath) have a significantly weaker brand potential than the baths of the Northern Plain region. They have not been on the market for long serving mainly local and micro regional demands. Attraction development, innovation into unique services can be an effective way to improve their brand potential and make themselves better-known on the market.

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