

THE ROLE OF INFORMATION CENTRES IN PROMOTING TOURIST DESTINATIONS CASE STUDY: TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE BRAŞOV

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Abstract: *The main purpose of this paper is represented by the developing of proposals for improving the activity of Tourist Information Centre (TIC) in Braşov, starting from the fact that it has a very important role in promoting Braşov county. In the first part of the paper we focused on the theoretical concepts related to our topic, whereas in the second part we applied the benchmarking method for comparisons between three Tourist Information Centres in the world: Riga (Latvia), Girona (Spain) and Manhattan (USA), for adopting the best practices learned in our proposals to improve the activity of TIC in Braşov. In order to analyze the activity of TIC Braşov, we used the mystery consumer technique. The last part contains the conclusions and our proposals for improving the activity of TIC Braşov.*

Key words: *tourist information, mystery consumer technique, benchmarking.*

1. Introduction

Tourists need to be informed when they choose to go to a new tourist destination. The types of information required shall bear: what they can visit in that location, places where they may find accommodation or where to dine, how they can spend their time out there, where they can buy souvenirs etc. Most of this information can be purchased in time by visiting websites or consulting guidebooks. However, visitors of a place, of a region or country often seek Tourist Information Centres (TIC).

The TIC is often the first contact partner

of tourists from a certain tourist destination. Here tourists are offered new ideas of leisure, recommendations for accommodation or meal, and other important information. Also, when they arrive in an unfamiliar city, TIC is, for many tourists, the first place that they call in order to obtain information about the tourist offer. Therefore, the receipt and services provided by TIC shall meet the requirements of tourists from different countries.

Starting from these considerations, we wrote this paper in order to assess the activity undertaken in TIC Braşov, and to formulate proposals for improvement,

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through the comparison made to other TICs.

2. Literature review

The main target of the hospitality industry, in general, and for a tourist destination in particular, is to generate the satisfaction of the tourists. Essential for tourism is informing tourists in the right place and at the right moment. Informing tourists means awareness of both the local population and the actual and potential tourists [4].

In terms of tourist informing, TIC represents a valuable resource for providing information on the spot and for influencing the visitor's choice. They can have an influence on extending the length of stay and it can encourage visitors to return. The existence of TIC is based on consistent, impartial and current information.

Tourism awareness means understanding the basic principles of hospitality and tourism, the benefits and consequences of tourism and its development for the country, understanding the satisfaction of the visitors and concern for the customer and of the conditions for successful and sustainable tourism [5].

Tourist destination management is achieved through dedicated structures that need to manage the synergy of local players to achieve double effect: the satisfaction of the tourist and the locals and getting profit community.

Destination Management Organization (DMO) has the responsibility to evaluate the image of the destination and to supervise possible changes of image, which can be used to assess various means of promoting. The World Tourism Organization defines DMO as "organizations responsible for the management and/or marketing of destinations" [6]. The main task of DMO

is the coordination of tourism and the trade with tourist products. Furthermore, it must provide service elements such as their awareness and promotion which are not provided by private sector, and must serve a range of needs of the tourists, community of the residents, service providers in the hospitality industry [7].

In Romania, at regional or local level, DMO are represented either by the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism or Sustainable development agency or an NGO from the field of tourism. In the case of Braşov, DMO is the Association for Promotion and Development of Tourism (APDT).

For a tourist destination to create a competitive advantage, it needs to turn to benchmarking, meaning a search process of excellence, superior performance in relation to competing destinations to know themselves better and to evaluate the effectiveness of management [2]. According to the European Benchmarking Code of Practice, the benchmarking refers to comparisons between organizations and to learning the lessons that can be drawn from to these comparisons [1].

In order to analyse the activity of TIC Braşov we used one of the most popular types of marketing research, namely the technique of "the mystery consumer". This is an effective method of improving the quality of customer contacts, stimulation of the employees and attracting of new customers, as it is the process in which are used the mystery consumers who are guided by predetermined scenarios, assessing, based on questionnaires, integrity and the employees loyalty for companies, operations which they undertake, the employee behaviour in front of the customers, the product quality and/or services, as well as the merchandising [3].

3. Analysis of the activity performed by Braşov Tourist Information Centre

In order to formulate our suggestions for improving the activity of TIC Braşov, we started from the analysis of other TICs, recognized as examples of best practices.

Therefore, we have presented through comparison, in the table 1, three examples of these best practices, in terms of organizing and offered services: Riga (European Cultural Capital in 2014), Girona (Catalan city located in north-eastern Spain) and Manhattan (USA).

3.1. An overview of Braşov Tourist Information Centre

TIC is an important instrument in promoting some tourist destinations. It is the place of confluence of all pieces of information in the area. The services offered are decisive, as well as the first impression, because many tourists associate it with the rest of their stay in the area.

Tourist information services are poorly organized, both at city level as well as in the entire county of Braşov. Although there is a tourist information network at county level, being set up by the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism Braşov (APDT), comprising 11 centres (Braşov, Poiana Braşov, Predeal, Râşnov, Făgăraş, Prejmer, Bran, Zărneşti, Săcele, Sâmbăta de Sus, Şinca Nouă), these do not answer in a adequately way to the diverse needs of tourists.

TIC Braşov is a structure that works in collaboration with the Municipality of Braşov and Braşov County Council, and is part of the network of Tourist Information

Centres in Braşov County. TIC Braşov, located in the Historical Museum Square no. 30, is open every day from 9:00 - 17:00. The staff offer information services, booking, guide services for tourists who contact the office directly, by phone or by e-mail.

The Tourist Information Centre's activities aim to promote the city of Braşov and its surroundings, as well as to provide all the necessary information for tourists visiting the area, the facilities offered, the opportunities for leisure, on trips that can be made to and from the area, and any information with tourist character, and not only desired by them [8].

Services offered by TIC Braşov:

- The possibility to choose the hotel, villa or guesthouse which corresponds to the requirements and budget of the tourist to spend a weekend or a longer holiday in the tourist destination Braşov;
- Information about accommodation possibilities, degree of comfort and prices;
- Information required for hiking in the mountains around the city;
- Status information of the ski slopes;
- Information about the sights and Predeal, Sinaia, Bran, Râşnov, Zărneşti, Făgăraş;
- Promotional and informational material: maps, leaflets, brochures.

Furthermore, TIC Braşov provides information about Braşov and Poiana Braşov related to:

- The tourist potential which individualizes Braşov ;
- Accommodation: hotels, motels, villas, cottages, guesthouses, agrotourism, camping;

Comparative analysis of three Tourist Information Centres

Table 1

NAME OF THE CENTRE	LOCATION	SERVICES OFFERED
TIC RIGA (LATVIA)	The TIC is located in the premises of the Schwab House, designed by Karl Johann Felsko at the end-19th century and erected right next to the 14th-century House of Blackheads. Both buildings were completely destroyed during the German air raid on Riga in June 1941. Fully reconstructed in 1999, the Schwab House now adorns Town Hall Square, along with the splendid House of Blackheads. The square also features the symbol of Hansa trading cities - the statue of Roland with the Riga coat of arms on the shield.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LIVE RIGA souvenirs gaining BalticMiles points (find the offer here); • online accommodation booking; • postcards, stamps and envelopes (there is a mailbox at the TIC); • Riga Card, offering free museum entrance, as well as discounts up to 50% for bus tours and guided tours in Old Riga, as well as at hotels, restaurants, entertainment, car rental and other places; • Riga public transport electronic ticket (E-TICKET); • tickets to various events (BilesuServiss.lv); • LuxExpress and SIMPLE international express coach tickets; • Various excursion tickets (guided tours, bus tours, etc.); • guides, books, maps and public transport scheme; • O!Karte mobile phone start package, top-up codes, mobile internet cards and “Traveller’s start package”; • Rīgas Doms concert tickets; • BalticTaxi coupons. • Consultations in English, Russian and Latvian on leisure and tourist opportunities, guided tours, tourist routes, bus routes and public transportation in Riga and to other Latvian destinations. • Information on the best hotels and reservation on-line.
TIC GIRONA (SPAIN)	Tourist information is at the south end of the Rambla, beside the Onyar river.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided tours in Girona old town; • A wide range of souvenirs; • Free brochures with and about the city of Girona and Costa Brava region; • Maps, guides and books; • Sale of tickets for different entries in museums, churches, cathedrals or tickets to local events; • Bicycle rental etc.
TIC MANHATTAN (USA)	TIC is located in Midtown Manhattan, the theatre area, two minutes away from Times Square.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free WiFi in the Centre and a special place for people who want to charge their cell phone; • Travel essential and gifts- self-service store; • Travel packages which include entry into museums, helicopter ride, cruises, trips to different locations etc.; • Maps, guides, brochures and books; • Bicycle and car rental; • Online reservation on their website (www.gonytours.com) where you can get up 50% OFF; • tickets to various events etc.;

- Leisure possibilities: hiking, hunting, fishing, cycling, skiing, snowboarding, mountain climbing, rural tourism, ecotourism, medical tourism, ethnography, routes, destinations (adequate equipment required, guide list);
- Transportation: train timetables, other public transport timetables, transportation companies working times, taxis, car renting;
- Infrastructure and ancillary services (police, environment, mountain rescue teams, lifeguards, hospitals, pharmacies etc.);
- Entertainment (clubs, cinemas, gaming – opening hours);
- Shopping centres, high streets, souvenir shops, local events (dates and times);
- Exchange offices, cash points, average exchange rates, local and international meetings and events within the local area.

3.2. The research results of the analysis of TIC Braşov activity

In order to analyse the activity of TIC Braşov, we have performed a marketing research, using interactive analysis techniques. The purpose of this research is to identify the level of service and information offered by the TIC Braşov staff, and also the way in which the TIC is organised.

On this line, we have used the “mystery customer” technique. The research was held between 24 March and 13 April 2014, on a sample of twenty people between 18 and 26 years of age. These were divided into two categories, half interpreting the role of foreign tourists, and the other half representing national tourists. The criteria to follow were: the location and the ease of identification of TIC Braşov, the way of organising the interior of the TIC and its external appearance, the courtesy of the staff,

their level of knowledge, the type of information and services offered, the functioning program, the informative materials offered and also other objects commercialised within TIC.

Firstly, concerning the TIC Braşov location, all participants in the research have considered it very good, being situated in the centre of the city, but also very hard to find, only two of the twenty participants knowing where TIC Braşov is situated, without us mentioning to them. This is due to the lack of informative panels and signalling indicators, both from the city and its actual location.

Inside of TIC Braşov, the situation was not very different either. The complaints management is totally missing and there is no way to evaluate the satisfaction of tourists who come to the centre or regarding the tourist experience in our country. Another shortcoming noticed in 80% of the cases is the lack of a brand strategy and the publicity at point of sale, any means of this kind (brochures, books, flyers, T-shirts, maps, badges, custom hats with TIC or the logo of Braşov) totally lacking.

Other complaints of the “mystery customers” are related to the Centre schedule, which is apparently not respected as it is prescribed in the operating and display regulation. In three of the twenty cases, it happened that the tourists arrived there during the open hours, yet there was nobody left to offer them information.

Another reason of dissatisfaction was the insufficiency of printed material: maps, catalogues, guides, etc., felt among 10% of the cases, as well as the impossibility to purchase traditional items or souvenirs, noticed in 100% of the cases. Lack of Internet connection or of any other means of communication was also one of the drawbacks noticed by the participants.

It was also noticed a lack of staff interest in providing extra information (40% of the cases): the only info provided being the ones requested by tourists. This could be caused

by their wages that have quite low level, which does not train interest and active involvement of staff in providing quality services. Also, insufficient staff is another deficiency noticed in the research, only one employee working for TIC Braşov.

However, in terms of provided information, the staff was very prepared, both in terms of knowledge (referring to both tourism and linguistic accuracy) and management of communication. Regarding the staff friendliness, there has been noticed, in the majority of cases, a greater empathy towards foreign "tourists" compared to those from Romania.

In conclusion, TIC Braşov faces a number of issues that do not necessarily relate to poor quality of services, but rather the material endowment of the TIC and its reduced promotional activity.

4. Conclusions and proposals for improving the activity of TIC Braşov

Conclusions and improvement proposals of TIC Braşov's activity were structured in several major directions: improving promoting techniques of TIC Braşov and increasing its visibility, improving TIC Braşov's organising and functioning, diversifying activities, increasing the quality of the services offered by TIC Braşov, creating a database of tourists who use TIC Braşov services, and developing satisfaction assessment tools.

4.1. Improving the promotion techniques used by TIC Braşov and increasing its visibility through

- Creating a website and an interactive Facebook page to promote tourism in Braşov and adjacent areas of the city, which will contain useful information for tourists;

- Implementing a brand strategy by

creating an official logo and intensive promotion of it, both online and offline, by making customised products with TIC Braşov (T-shirts, mugs, maps and other information materials, caps, umbrellas with the logo and inscriptions of the city or region, scarves, worn by the TIC staff, or badges with the official logo etc.)

- Advertising on radio stations in Braşov county and also at national level;

- Outdoor advertising through outdoor billboards, signs and posters displayed in various locations in Braşov;

- Public Relations: press releases and interviews with the occasion of organising events, inviting the press and television when organising competitions, local or national events;

- Making and distribution of promotional and informative materials on various supports (print, CD, DVD, etc.);

- Printing of monographs, specialized materials, books, tourism information magazines, newspapers, etc.

- Organisation and management of events for promotional purpose, for Braşov area (festivals, tourist nights, etc.);

- Sales promotion: advertising at point of sale, making of brochures and leaflets distributed to other information centres and even travel agencies, bids, etc.;

- Use of direct marketing techniques by sending emails to various institutions, agencies, partners or loyal tourists, with travel offers updated seasonally. When organising events it can be transmitted via the Internet or post, tourism providers offers and schedule of events;

- Providing various facilities for tourists, such as tourists cards "Be.LIVE IT", offering free entry to museums, monasteries, events, discounts up to 50% for bus tours and also for those who want a guide in the city centre or regional level; discounts at restaurants, hotels, clubs, rental cars and bikes etc. There can also be implemented a system for those who want

to travel by taxi in the city, so they can find coupons at TIC Braşov which they can use for that purpose.

4.2. Improving the organising and functioning way of TIC Braşov:

- In order to provide optimal services for customers, the location of the TIC should be appropriate. Any means of information must include indications on the address and its positioning. One idea could be the placement of billboards, signs, city plans in strategic points in the city (train stations, public transport stations, at the entrances of the city, public institutions etc.) as well as the distribution of flyers and promotional materials in locations frequented by tourists (travel agencies, restaurants, near sights, etc.), and also using guerrilla marketing techniques (drawing/printing directions on asphalt) helping tourists to get a quick orientation;

- Moreover, a TIC should be well signposted, so that tourists will find it in the shortest time possible. In this way, a good use of billboards and banners placed on top of the Information Centre can help tourists get directions quickly and without problems;

- The functioning hours of the TIC should be as coating as possible, so it will be open all year round and most of the day, and outside the working hours it is advisable to use an Electronic Information Point, which will replace the TIC when it is closed. Visitors can get information about accommodation units in the county, as well as other services. The Electronic Information Point should be equipped with a telephone, where tourists can call for reservations at hotels, hostels or B&Bs;

4.3. Diversification of TIC Braşov activities through:

- The TIC may also carry out income

generating activities (local excursions, rental guides, organizing manifestations and events, the sale of publications, making of travel offers designed for the entire year, etc.);

- Trade of products is another activity that any TIC should include. These products can be: information media, books, souvenirs, sale of tickets to events of any kind, city tours, trips and conferences and even a connection to the regional, national and even international reservation system, this being a good opportunity to improve offer of services;

- There can also be placed a mailbox in the centre, so that tourists do not have to go to the post office when they want to send a postcard;

- Selling travel tickets for public transport, tickets to cultural events (theatre, opera) and sport events, tickets for tours (guided tours, bus tours to Bran, Sinaia, Buşteni etc.);

- Developing tourist routes and city tours, with a guide or attendant (hiking, cycling tours, mountain biking, rock climbing, mountain climbing, caves, riding, visits to handicraft workshops, etc.), as well as providing guides for museums and other cultural sites;

- Offering travel guides, city maps, books, public transport timetables;

- Offering facilities such as free WiFi for tourists who visit TIC Braşov;

- Editing of tourist promotional materials of Braşov in Romanian, English and other languages (maps, county brochures, Presentation Booklet sites of Braşov area, brochures on topics such as sites, museums, churches, leaflets, maps).

4.4. Increasing the quality of the services offered by TIC Braşov:

a. Preparing the staff who works in the TIC Braşov by:

- Training in the quality of tourism

services, on issues of communication and behaviour towards visitors, complaints management;

- Perfecting or forming programs through seminars, workshops and exchange of experience in the country and abroad;

- Courses to perfect the staff knowledge concerning international languages they know.

b. Creating a database of tourists who use the services of TIC Braşov by:

- Establishing databases which contain contact information of tourists and regular transmission of this information by electronic means (which is easy and inexpensive) to maintain relations with them. Also, this database can help to achieve local and national statistics, and transmission of tourist information to travel agencies operating in this area, useful in developing customised packages, knowing this way how to better focus on satisfaction of tourists' needs;

- Submit monthly statistical reports and statements to network information centres in the county and to APDT.

c. Developing of satisfaction assessment tools through:

- Studies concerning the tourist's satisfaction in order to identify their needs, the client's expectations and the best means of satisfaction;

- It would be advisable to introduce the concept of "complaint management" by creating a registry book of proposals and complaints;

- Conceiving forms/questionnaires that should be handed over to tourists, these representing a simple way of receiving complaints and proposals from tourists. These forms can be completed at the office or at tourist units and also attaching these forms to the site would represent a way of efficient communication.

These proposals, however, can not be implemented without allocating a marketing budget which can allow achieving all these goals and without employees motivated enough to do this.

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