

Marketing for rural tourism – strategy and realisation in Bulgaria

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Abstract

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With the hope of rapid development of rural tourism in Bulgaria, how to innovate and optimize the marketing mode and successfully achieve marketing purposes is an urgent problem for the marketing of rural tourism destinations. Based on the analysis of destinations in Bulgaria like Botevgrad, Chiprovtsi, Radomir, etc., this paper has proposed suggestions on designing tourist products in the provinces of Bulgaria. The ambition is to encourage rural areas to make full use of local superior resources, including traditional folk culture, old churches and pastoral views to build traditional leisure agricultural projects, protect the precious historic and cultural heritage and promote the prosperity of local rural economy. The research is based on field research of the specific places with the cooperation of local authorities and different organizations. The paper begins with a literature review concerning the role of tourism in sustainable destination development, considering the specificities of rural tourism, and the contribution of this tourism to sustainable development of rural areas. The literature review is followed by a case study for 3 regions in Bulgaria. Via qualitative and quantitative approach, the case study identifies the views of diverse stake holders (visitors, public, private agents of supply, residents and consultants). The methodology and observations under the analysis are presented and open for discussion. The paper ends with some prescriptions and offers for marketing strategy creation. In conclusion there are some suggestions on how to make the rural area sustainable through marketing strategies on rural tourism.

Keywords: rural tourism; marketing strategies; sustainable development

Introduction

Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union includes rural tourism as a way for sustainable rural development.

Findings of previous studies stated that marketing in rural tourism should be used as an instrument for developing strategic programs of rural tourism destinations, such as sustainability in the long run, customers' satisfaction, profit maximization, tourism season extension, and neutralization of the negative social and environmental impact of tourism. (Mihailović & Moric, 2012). Availability of an enormous range of communication tools and visibility of promotion activities increases the importance of social networking, the

media, internet and marketing influencers, attracting people to visit rural areas and making everything very dynamic. What we have observed in our study area is mass promotion, a rapid and stereotypical development, and lack of involvement of other marketing elements in the strategies, such as availability and development of products and services, all of which threatens prosperity. This makes social networking, media, internet and marketing influencers more important in attracting people to visit rural areas.

It is important because the newest concept of marketing has been increasingly seen as managing a profitable relationship with customers who are visitors in rural tourism marketing and who are the basic setting for success (Mihailovic & Moric, 2012). In this context the purpose of this paper

is to investigate the function of marketing concept in rural tourism development with particular attention to visitors' perception and develop recommendations in order to sustain rural tourism activities in the region and reply the research questions which were whether it is a true success story or not and what should be done to make it sustainable in the future. While the empirical part of the study focused on visitors' perception, in other saying demand side, results provided recommendations to supply side of rural tourism marketing through a marketing mix developed based on consultants' opinions.

A heuristic approach for exploring the research context according to Saxena (2016) defines rural tourism marketing as "a variegated phenomenon linked intricately with how rurality is experienced and shaped by actors' enterprises and a broad array of socio-cultural, political, economic and material processes and practices." Considering this complexity and the benefits which all the actors can derive from rural tourism, the issue of the marketing of rural tourism needs to be studied (Aithal & Anil, 2008). It is complex because rural tourism is a specific type of tourism which takes its features from the rural and agricultural sector. This is why it is so associated with agricultural activities and rural areas, making the seasonal character of the demand in tourism (Mihailovic & Moric, 2012) and creating a dilemma between marketing and rural tourism. Rural tourism marketing is more challenging than marketing of tourism in general (Puat Mat Som et al., 2010). Marketing is expected to generate, diversify and extend the life of activities, while one of the main roles of marketing philosophy in rural tourism is to protect the specific features of rural areas and activities which are the *raison d'être* of rural tourism. The aim of marketing is to make the sector successful, but the rural tourism sector cannot enjoy the benefits of being too successful because success will change and/or destroy the nature of the product and the distinctive character of the environment (Mihailovic & Moric, 2012; Gilbert, 1989).

The processes related to the sustainable development of tourist destinations correspond to the identification of good environmental practices and the sustainability of their territories and products. An example of this is the eco-movement that has begun to create new marketing approaches to gain a larger eco market share. (Kabakchieva & Vasileva, 2018) National and international quality certification systems are an opportunity for positive change in the tourism industry through globally recognized functional standards (Bozhinova, 2015).

Based on this argument, Mihailovic & Moric (2012) stated the role of marketing philosophy in rural marketing as defining the guidelines for image creation and protection,

through a convenient strategic marketing plan, in order to protect the long-term interests of an area.

The basic elements of marketing do not differ in rural tourism, but rural tourism promotional strategies require a niche appeal rather than a mass appeal (Puat Mat Som et al., 2010). However, there is a hidden risk, what appeared to be niche markets may in reality be vulnerable parts of a mass market (Roberts & Hall, 2004). At this stage, there is a need to differentiate between niche and segment in order to provide good marketing.

With smart marketing in rural tourism, it is possible to obtain considerable potential economic value including economic diversification, long-term economic stability, a trend to higher spending and a longer stay in rural areas, a demand for local goods and services, infrastructure development, and an increase in farmers' income (Pavel, 2013).

However, this is neither simple nor easy. Rural tourism marketing should not be seen simply as advertising and promotion or printing leaflets, but as a means to achieve the development of the strategic goals of rural tourist destinations for economic, social and environmental purposes, from visitors' satisfaction to the extension of the tourist season and long-term prosperity (Mihailovic & Moric, 2012). However, results of previous studies showed that the majority of suppliers in rural tourism dedicated very little of their time to developing marketing activities (Pato & Kastenzholz, 2017). This applies not only to business practices but also to academic studies. As Pato & Kastenzholz (2017) stated, despite its importance, rural tourism marketing has not received sufficient or continuous attention except in some remarkable studies. This is defined as "paucity" by Gilbert (1989) and "spares" by Cai et al. (2008) in rural tourism marketing.

Marketing philosophy, marketing mix, marketing structures, marketing strategies, positioning strategies, marketing implementation, niches, destination image, segmentation, activity patterns, motivation and satisfaction are prominent subjects in rural tourism marketing. There are also few studies on very specific topics such as using colors in rural tourism marketing strategies, where the emotional effects of a combination of violet, and other colors are described as follows: violet with green and orange is enjoyable; violet with yellow is doubtful; violet with red, purple and blue is unpleasant (Doncean, 2013). More recent studies address the effects of social media on visitors and green marketing tools in rural tourism. Although, there are overlaps among them in the literature regarding rural tourism, marketing has been classified into three groups in order to develop an appropriate approach for data collection and analysis and to make use of results of previous studies. For the purposes of this study, marketing mix, vis-

itor's motivation and satisfaction and social media in rural marketing strategies are reviewed below.

Classic marketing mix, known as 4Ps, is a theory proposed by McCarthy (1960) which has been adapted to tourism marketing in order to maximize economic benefits through attracting people who become visitors and conduct tourism consumption, for instance, promotion of a destination in newspapers and networks, attracting consumers with competitive prices, and making products ready in more places through multiple channels (Jia & Xiaobing, 2017). In addition to the classic 4Ps (product, price, place and promotion), there are studies that discuss additional Ps in marketing mix. For example, people-centric new Ps inspired by consumer images are discussed in the marketing of niche products, as follows: profit, pause, pleasure and principle (Dagevos, 2009). When it comes to service marketing where rural tourism is concerned, it is suggested that the 4Ps strategy should be extended to 7Ps or 8Ps. Based on a study by Botten & McManus (1999), Esmaili et al. (2017) express service marketing variables as seven strategic factors (7Ps) with an additional 3 Ps, as follows: physical evidence, people and process, or 8 Ps including political and social situation (Esmaili et al., 2017). Marketing mix model with these elements is studied in order to evaluate and prioritize the effective indices in rural tourism marketing as affecting factors of loyalty to a tourism destination (Ghadiri et al., 2013; Esmaili et al., 2017). According to a study conducted in the town of Khalkhal in Iran, the elements of promotion, people and price are ranked respectively and the distribution (place) element seems to have no effect on the lack of activities related to the distribution of tourist attraction in the loyalty to the region (Esmaili et al., 2017).

Rural-Tourism in Bulgaria – Situation

Rural tourism is characterized by a stay in a rural environment, such as a family hotel, a farmhouse or a nearby campsite or other accommodation facility, contact with the hosts, access to the farm or a stay on a farm. In particular Bulgaria has the prerequisites for development this type of tourism (Grigorova et al., 2016) but it faces a number of challenges, hindering the development of rural areas. Part of these challenges are the lack of a clear vision and goals for its development at the national level; insufficient or ineffective advertising of Bulgaria as a destination for rural tourism; insufficiently developed products and services; lack of sufficiently trained and qualified personnel in rural areas to deal with the development of this type of tourism; poorly built infrastructure – roads, water supply, open spaces and others. (Makedonska-Tsvetkova, 2016)

Considering rural tourism as an integrating sector of the economy, uniting agriculture, forestry, infrastructure, environment, culture, transport, etc., allows to identify it as the main priority of the national policy for the development of rural areas. It is becoming an increasingly growing and important sector for Bulgaria. However, it is still not well developed and still emerges as a vacant market niche in the tourism market, with opportunities for future development. (Makedonska-Tsvetkova, 2016)

This type of tourism can appear as passing through, i.e. the stay is to take place within the framework of a round trip as a weekend or weekly stay. In any case, tourists expect to get involved in the daily life of the household: harvesting fruits and vegetables, herbs, preparing traditional dishes, getting involved in the customs and festivals of the area, observing or learning about local crafts, folklore or agricultural traditions. These activities are usually complemented by various types of active or cultural tourism, as well as hiking, mountain biking, horse riding, visiting monasteries, museums, archaeological and other sights, craft school, adventure and culinary experiences, and most often it is a combination of all these.

Within the national economy, due to the relatively weak tradition in the development of rural tourism, Bulgaria does not register a compromised ecological environment in the areas of its potential development. The lack of adequately developed a strategic attitude on the part of private and public authorities, naturally poses challenges related to improving the conditions for recreation in a large part of the guest houses in the villages, optimizing the infrastructure, etc. The low educational qualifications of the employees in the sector, combined with the aging population in rural areas, could also be considered a serious problem for the sustainable development of the sector (Petrov, 2021).

Contributions of Farm Holidays to Tourism and Farming in Bulgaria

Analysis of supply

A characteristic feature of the tourist product in rural tourism is personal contact with visitors, creating an opportunity to feel the environment and spirit and participate in the activities, traditions and lifestyle of local people. There is also a very strong cultural and educational element in this form of tourism. However, the tourist offer still lacks a sufficiently rich set of additional tourist services, and often local entrepreneurs mistakenly perceive this type of tourism as offering a stay and a passive vacation in a village.

The Bulgarian village, to a large extent, has preserved its way of life and culture, which allows tourists to feel the spirit

of the past. They can enjoy the traditional Bulgarian cuisine and touch the traditions and customs of the local population through the holidays, music and crafts, which give a unique feeling of authenticity.

Adventure tourism can be considered as an element of rural tourism offer. It includes various active forms of tourism and enriches the experiences of tourists in a rural environment. It is also the most dynamically developing segment in world tourism encompassing a combination of diverse activities in nature. When practicing these forms of tourism, what becomes leading is the communication with nature and active participation with a certain physical commitment for tourists.

The ecologically clean products, the hospitality of the people, and the affordable prices are also trademarks of the Bulgarian village. But, at this stage, there is a lack of a comprehensive concept for the development of rural areas at a national level, related to protected areas and rural communities, which would stimulate the development of tourism. A sustainable rural tourism strategy is needed to give a competitive edge in expanding both on domestic and international market.

Analysis of demand

The rural tourists look for authenticity and wildlife in their trips. Tourists do not want mass tourist landmarks, attractions, hotels and restaurants. They are looking for something more real, more natural, part of life. That is why they are looking for contact with the local culture and the inhabitants of a place and direct contact with the environment and natural resources. They want to immerse themselves in the life and work of the community. They travel with friends or organize their trip independently. They often travel and for a short time.

The profile of consumers interested in the tourist product for rural tourism can be extremely diverse in terms of demographic, socio-psychological and other indicators, but at the same time, they all have several common characteristics: they prefer interactivity and direct participation in various activities to the static transfer of knowledge and skills; they show a keen interest in the unique aspects of local nature and culture, so they willingly participate in a variety of creative workshops, culinary challenges and other attractive activities; they want to feel like locals, participating in the unique experiences that are provided to them by the respective destination; before making their choice of travel, they are highly interested in the experience of other tourists, and after visiting the destination, they like to share their impressions through various social networks and online platforms and tell about their experiences, thus motivating more trav-

elers to take advantage of the tourist product; they like to combine several types of tourism during their visit to a destination, focused on the experience itself; they can spend a significant part of their budget on the unique activities they have planned in the destination and through which they want to immerse themselves in the local way of life and culture (Aleksova, 2021).

Organizations

According to the third chapter of the Tourism Act, the municipality and the tourist DMO structure (Destination Marketing Organization), also called Organization for Management of Tourist Regions, are responsible for the destination's marketing. The Organizations for Management of Tourist regions in the rural destination should partner with the management of municipalities, directorates of national and nature parks and cultural institutions supporting their activities; with local authorities as well as other stakeholders, including: tour operators for incoming tourism, offering various tourist packages; specialized European tour operators, offering outbound tourism in little-known destinations; tour operators organizing student trips and routes; tour operators, organizing cultural-cognitive and pilgrimage trips for tourists of the third age; travel agents offer different travel services: hotel reservations, conference and sports events, tour guide services, team building, tourist animation, etc.; mayors of neighboring municipalities with interest in offering a regional tourism product; scientific and cultural institutions (historical, ethnographic and archaeological museums; community centers, cultural centers, conservation and visitor centers); institutions for the management of the cultural and historical heritage (museums, municipalities, cultural institutes); educational institutions (schools, colleges and universities) with a profile focused on cultural heritage and tourism; small and medium enterprises in hotels and restaurants, offering additional services (sports and adventure: horseback riding, rafting, kayaking, cycling, etc. tour guide services, tourist animation, etc.); tourist information centers in the region; consulting companies and non-governmental organizations; local establishments and associations (folklore, craft, sports, tourist associations, interest clubs, etc.); artists, craftsmen, prominent scientists, teachers, entrepreneurs.

Examples of Good Marketing Practices in Rural Tourism from the Municipalities of Botevgrad, Chiprovtsi and Radomir, etc.

Best practices from Botevgrad municipality

The municipality of Botevgrad is located in the relatively less developed, northern part of Bulgaria and is relatively

poor in tourist resources¹. This feature determines the lower mobility of the population in the region for the purpose of recreation and tourism, as well as a more limited number of tourist visits compared to those in southern Bulgaria. It is these features that predetermine the development direction of the municipality as a destination for rural tourism and adventure experiences.

The opportunities for the development of rural tourism in combination with adventure and extreme tourism on the territory of Botevgrad municipality are significant and do not require large investments. The desire of local entrepreneurs to provide different types of tourist products and the integration between them is to a large extent decisive in the realization of the destination with the slogan „Botevgrad – adventure at the crossroads“.

„Adventure Decathlon Botevgrad“ is an innovative event designed for fans of adventure, adrenaline and time spent in nature, which has become an emblem of adventure tourism in Botevgrad. The aim of the initiative is to demonstrate in an attractive way an innovative format combining entertainment and active outdoor sports, presenting to potential tourists and guests the opportunities for recreation and tourism in the region of the municipality, as well as attracting children and adolescents from schools to similar activities.

The launch of the “Nomadic Unity” project, representing a network of places, people and projects, has given an impetus to the development of rural tourism in Botevgrad municipality. It is an attempt to revitalize derelict country houses in small settlements through restoration and transforming them into social environments for the exchange of experience, knowledge and resources. The project is a private initiative and aims to turn the houses into the new coworking & coliving spaces in Bulgaria for people who profess the idea and culture of a shared working and living environment, creating an atmosphere and a sense of community, openness and sustainability. Their motto is «to move the shared city office out of the city – to the countryside», and the idea is to create a community of experts in various fields of business, culture, tourism and to gather local residents in one place with people arriving from all over the world.

The holding of annual seminars to demonstrate ancient crafts in the village of Bozhenitsa in an open-air art center – making antique weapons, ceramics, wood carving, car-

pet weaving, glass casting, has been held annually for the past three years, is also gaining popularity. The aim of the seminars on various ancient crafts to be targeted not only at prominent artists from around the country, but also at the general audience who will watch demonstrations and learn basic techniques.

Best practices from Chiprovtsi municipality

The municipality of Chiprovtsi and the region are characterized by low economic and investment activity and lack of active investor interest. The crisis and recession have additionally had a negative impact on entrepreneurial activity in the municipality and the district. The economy of the municipality is mainly developed by micro-enterprises, which represent 93.6% of those operating in the municipality. This trend is a sign of instability and lack of sustainability of the local economy.

The product range related to the formation of an ethno-cultural tourist product in Chiprovtsi was developed under The Carpet Tale project².

It provides an opportunity to attract paying tourists and covers several spheres: **tourist products related to carpet traditions**, which are a source of topics and specialized knowledge on the topics „The Tale of the Carpet“, „The Way of the Carpet“; „History through the eyes of carpet weaving“ etc.; **tourist products related to the symbolism of carpets**, which gives a broad perspective for the formation of specialized products with an educational orientation: thematic summer schools and traveling universities with an interdisciplinary orientation, international exchanges, practical seminars, etc. and may be developed into a separate product „Secrets of the Ancient Symbols Encoded in the Carpet“ and other derivative titles; **tourist products related to dyeing**, offering training in dyeing in the Chiprovtsi History Museum

¹ During the period 2017–2019, the mayor of the municipality of Botevgrad assigns to Ph.D. Dessislava Alexova to prepare with her teams studies of the tourist environment in the municipality of Botevgrad, municipal programs and strategies for sustainable development of tourism, the results of which are described in a number of scientific works (Aleksova, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021)

² Further developed in a scientific monograph (Alexova, 2021), where part of the results of the expert work on the project, developed by a wide team of authors with the participation of teachers and experts of the international business school – bulgaria, external experts, are included, revised and supplemented by the author. Representatives of the historical museum – chiprovtsi, museum of ponishawieto – pirot, municipality of chiprovtsi, municipality of pirot, local associations and representatives of artistic circles from the cross-border area.. The project: cb007.2.12.121 “the carpet tale: establishment and initial marketing of a new cross-border tourist product connecting the regions of pirot and chiprovtsi through their shared carpet-making traditions” which project manager is dessislava alexova has been done by the interreg-ipa cbc bulgaria – serbia program 2014tc16i5cb007 – 2015 – 2 with lead partner: international business school and partners chiprovtsi history museum and pirot museum of ponishavlje. Accessed: <https://ibsedu.bg/en/page/203-announcements>

– and the local school, which have excellent conditions and an equipped office.

The product range aimed at the cultural heritage and natural resources of the municipality was developed based on the results of surveys among local residents and visitors and work with focus groups in 4 areas: 1) local government, 2) artisans, cultural and educational workers, 3) local business and 4) local youth.

Best practice Radomir municipality

The municipality of Radomir is located in South-West Bulgaria in the Radomir valley of the same name, and its territory also includes part of the adjacent slopes of the Vitosha, Golo Bardo, Verila and Konyavska mountains. The favorable geographical location and transport accessibility largely determine the possibilities for the development of the municipality.

The diverse resources of Radomir municipality make it a suitable destination for the Slow Food Travel network of Slow Food International. This is an approach that places, at the center of tourist interest, food and its natural, cultural and social aspects, which connect in a network the interested parties in a given territory. „Slow“ tourism can integrate within itself the concepts of culinary tourism, to a significant extent rural and agrarian tourism, festival and cultural tourism, when their focus is local culinary traditions, as well as creative, volunteer and ecotourism, when local foods and traditions are an essential part of the experience³.

The organization of local events with different profile and scale – festivals, farmers' markets, tastings, workshops contribute to the realization of the local foods and services that can be found in a Slow Food Travel destination. These events attract the attention of journalists, guests from the country and abroad, consumers looking not only to buy local and quality foods, but also to meet their producers and learn their stories. They can also include the participation of professional chefs to present traditional foods and products in an innovative way with the use of modern technologies.

Good practices – quality certifications

The development and introduction of voluntary quality certification is a tool that will be an integral part of the tourist brand of the destination part of rural tourism. Its im-

³ It is this opportunity that encourages the municipal leadership of Radomir in 2022 to implement a project for the study of the tourist environment and the development of a tourist brand, implemented by the company Creativo.com Ltd, headed by Ph.D. Desislava Alexova.

plementation is based on the need to create and enforce a more effective marketing tool, through which products from the destination and the region can be better recognized and therefore more competitive on the market⁴.

According to the current concept, quality certificates will be able to be obtained by: **tourist sites**: places of accommodation, dining and entertainment establishments, tourist attractions (equestrian bases, craft studios, event-type attractions, etc.); **cultural institutes** – museums, galleries, community centers; **local products** – craft workshops, food and meals, drinks, handicrafts, etc. (Figure 1).

The main seven principles of responsible marketing, on which the quality criteria of the voluntary certification focus, include: focusing on the interaction of visitors with the natural environment and cultural heritage of the region; emphasis on good interpretation, through a better understanding, appreciation and satisfaction of the contact with the culture and nature of the region and the corresponding experience; efforts to prove effective tourism sustainability practices and minimal negative environmental impact; providing benefits to the local community; respect for local culture, by integrating it into the offered tourist products, services and goods; proven care for the client through responsible attitude and satisfaction of the user's expectations; correctness and adequacy of the presented information, advertising and offering, forming realistic expectations among the guests.

The municipality of Radomir is also the first municipality in Bulgaria to take the first steps to branding products and services in the protected areas of the European ecological network Natura 2000. The goal is to award a „Green“ label, which increases sales and profits; enables working with unique varieties, breeds and innovative products; stimulates the sustainable use of resources, improves cooperation between farmers, local businesses and natural resource managers, contributes to a well-managed nature that attracts many visitors, stimulates the local economy for the benefit of the territory and communities, contributes to popularizing the benefits of Natura 2000 for the society.

Green Lodge is an initiative of the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (BAAT) and represents another form of voluntary quality certification in the field of rural

⁴ The standards for assessment and certification with the Radomir Trademark were developed by Dr. Desislava Alexova based on the model of the certification system of the Pan Arks Foundation, that of the Stara Planina Regional Tourist Association, Strandzha Nature Park and Botevgrad Trademark.. The main goal of the Standards is to support the imposition of a sustainable model of tourism and local economic development in the municipality of Radomir, as well as to choose a sign by which the tourist destination will be sufficiently attractive and unique (Aleksova, 2019)



Fig. 1. Quality certificates “Trademark Radomir”, developed by Vihra Ognyanova, PRIM DESIGN OOD, 2022

tourism. It covers only accommodation: guesthouses, family hotels and farms and aims to represent an image brand for a quality product in rural tourism.

Green Lodge facilities are certified based on established European minimum and specific quality criteria, adapted by BAAT. The minimum criteria for product quality are adopted by Eurogites – a European association for ecological and rural tourism, which is the sector representative of the European Commission. Over 200 000 accommodations have been certified under these criteria. They cover a variety of areas: security, cleanliness, space, comfort, heating, focus on tradition in the style of architecture and interior, rural environment, wealth of cultural and/or natural resources, contribution to local economic development, social and environmental responsibility.

The specialized criteria for a sustainable product were developed by the European Center for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism (ECEAT) and are a label for quality and innovation. They have been adapted for Bulgaria and grouped into four main directions, which have different importance levels: sustainable resource use (25%), ecologically clean food (13%), contribution to the local community (37%), nature conservation (25%). Sustainable resource use has an educational effect and includes energy and water savings, RES, waste management. Sustainable agriculture and the provision of ecologically clean food requiring natural fertilization, cultivation of local varieties, offering food of own production, including participation of guests



Fig. 2. Green Lodge Quality Nomination Certificate, BAAT, 2009



Fig. 3. Green Lodge Quality Certificate, BAAT, 2009

in its preparation. Social responsibility and contribution to the local economy includes local supply of goods and services, information about local culture, training in crafts, preserved architecture and interiors, natural materials, and nature conservation, respectively: promotion among guests of responsible behavior in nature, maintenance of the landscape in the yard and surroundings, cooperation with environmental organizations.

Upon fulfillment of 100% of the minimum quality criteria, the site receives a Green Lodge nomination, and after fulfilling a minimum of 60% of the specialized quality criteria, a Green Lodge certificate (Figure 2 & Figure 3).

The methodology used in updating the quality criteria of EUROGITES and ECEAT and their adaptation for Bulgaria by BAAT consists of a study of the quality criteria throughout Europe and preparation of a State-of-art document, conducting an internet survey among users, updating and adaptation of a methodology for the exchange of good practices, which includes: an internet system for self-assessment according to quality criteria, instructions for conducting expert assessments, an illustrated aid for presenting good examples in rural tourism.

Marketing for Rural Tourism – Strategy

All these kinds of organizations try to support and promote direct contacts between potential guests and farmers as individuality – personal contacts are major strength of the product. These is also expressed in the web pages and catalogues at provincial/regional level. There is no nationwide catalogue. Farm holidays are presented at trade fairs in Bulgaria and abroad, in advertising campaigns, as well as in PR activities. The farms are usually also presented in resorts. A further main feature of all marketing strategies to promote farm holidays are close links with tourist organizations at all levels.

Overall marketing strategies must include:

- More activities at all levels of marketing
- Make use of all possible synergy effects
- Better cooperation with existing tourism organizations – without losing individuality
- Creation of independent product philosophy – providing an active market policy
- Quality classification of the product
- Emphasizing regional particularities
- Rising price levels in general and extending price margins (higher quality products at higher prices)
- A family-oriented pricing policy
- More market differentiation of offers to target groups
- Promotion of direct contacts between guests and landlords
- Preparation of cooperation with travel agencies and service centers (on a limited scale)
- Development of networks between regions/provinces
- Emphasizing of PR activities
- Creation of corporate identity/corporate image
- Systematic market research

How could the marketing strategy be implemented?

Tasks lay in the following areas:

Strengthening the self-esteem of the farmers

The aim is to develop more professional products and higher prices with consequently increased profitability= Activities include:

- Supplements of farm holidays in different social media
- PR in rural – tourism and public media
- Participation in seminars, workshops, discussions and represent farm holidays interests there
- Creating a basis for joint marketing

It is assumed that demand for farm holidays will increase considerably in the future. The product has to be prepared to make sure that this will bring mainly positive effect to the farmers. Activities include:

Establishing a common logotype for farm holidays in Bulgaria to be used at all levels. This logo should stay for good quality.

Implementing a uniform system of quality standards (similar to the “stars” used by hotels). For the visitor that will ease the perception and expectations from the place. If farmers use different criteria that makes difficult to the consumer to identify which product suits him best. Besides furniture and equipment, the criteria must include aspects like “farm quality”, “experience quality”, information for guests, as well as ecological issues. The farmers must be also obliged to offer their guests at least 3 home made products.

Support for farmers with the specialization of the products.

- Image work

The aim is to create an image of an attractive, interesting tourist product with good quality and adequately (not cheaply) priced.

Activities include:

Image explanation

Adequate PR

Adverts in social media

Presentation at fairs, workshops, etc.

- Improving information and motivation

Seminars for staff and farmers

Regular talks and discussions with farmers

Web page with training

The work of DMO in the field of PR communications and the attraction of the primary and secondary target groups should be aimed mainly at generating more significant publicity in the regional and national media and active use of its own communication channels: creating partnerships with the media; creating partnerships with leading bloggers, vloggers and influencers in the online space; positioning the new tourist product of the cross-border area in the local media.

Active use of the own online platforms of the stakeholders: official sites and Facebook pages, other Facebook pages promoting, etc., by placing banners, quick links and sharing news and events; creating pages and profiles in social networks and media for the tourism supply in the destination.

Conclusion

Tourism has a long history in Bulgaria. Since the beginnings farm houses and private houses have been popular part of Bulgarian tourist product. Recently tourist needs and demand are rapidly changing. A lot of visitors to Bulgaria do not come just only for recreation. Today they look for more “intelligent” products. They clearly want to see their personal benefit, such as why they should go to that specific destination, hotel or farm. There is considerable increase in bed nights in

farms during recent years. For farmers that is an interesting source of income. For the farmers the future will require a clear decision as to whether they want to continue being a by-product within the tourism policy of their country, their resort or region, or if they are prepared to play an active, creative role in the development of tourism at every level.

Some general conclusions may be drawn about farm holidays in Bulgaria:

- There is a good level of market potential for farm holidays in Bulgaria;
- It is in the interest of everybody involved in tourism to promote farm holidays;
- Farm holidays are ecological – it is environmentally and socially compatible form of tourism, it supports small size enterprises and integrates the local people;
- The small-scale enterprises (with a capacity of about 10 beds) are in particular need of support from professional organization;
- New product ideas can only be successfully developed in strong harmony with the farmers as they often tend to regard new developments with skepticism;
- As a basis for successful marketing, it is vital to improve the self-confidence of farmers who rent out rooms – to convince them that they offer an interesting product which is of high value to their guests, especially to families;
- Tourism and farming will be a theme of the future

Some final points should also be highlighted about the necessity for cooperative marketing to make rural tourism sustainable.

The holiday farms in Bulgaria are a high number of small – scale enterprises. That results in lack of management skills and marketing know how coupled with limited financial resources and marketing potential in order to address more sensitive groups of holidaymakers/consumers.

Therefore, the argument for farm holidays has for long been that they were the cheapest form of accommodation on the market. This image could gradually be changed towards the valuable elements of holidays in the environment of a farm to experience farming life, animals, work on farm, closeness to nature in seasonal cycle, healthy food, etc., which are attractive especially for kids from urban areas. In the future pedagogical effect of time spend in a living farm will become more important. Besides the chance of experiencing an interesting vacation the visitors may become more sensitive to the chances for future of farming.

Although the small scale of business may be a weakness at the market it is one of the major strengths for farm holidays. Thus the objective is to balance out the market limitations and to give the farmers support where ever possible and sensitive.

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