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TITLE

Collaborative Destination Marketing and ICT 2.0: the innovative ASR model and its application to a case study of Mantova, Italy

PUBLICATION SUMMARY

Destination marketing is becoming extremely complex worldwide, due to issues related both to the demand side and the offer one. The high level of competition among destinations, a new generation of tourists difficult to satisfy, the fragmented nature of the offer that complicates its management are the main elements of this scenario. Destination managers have to find the right strategy. Based upon the results of previous research and the analysis of the case study of Mantova (Italy), this paper proposes a new approach for destination management, through a model that synthesizes the innovative approach of the collaborative networks and the fundamental support provided by ICT and the web. The implications of the model are provided from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Destination marketing; Collaboration; Tourists Relationship Management; Information and Communication Technologies; Web 2.0;

1. Introduction

Tourist destinations are very complex environments to manage.

On the offer side, different local stakeholders, primary tourist service suppliers, and local residents all contribute to the offer formation; their activities and interests are often conflictual and call for meta-management. Tourist suppliers are likely to focus their marketing strategy on their own services only, while demand has got a holistic perception of the destination. This gap between the demand's perspective and the supply's one calls for innovative marketing solutions. Furthermore, competition in the market is increasing, due to the globalization and the improvement of transport costs that lead to the emergence of new all-inclusive destinations all over the world. New challenges open for traditional community destinations that are to reach the economies of scale in supply and in communication typical of the emerging corporate destinations (Flagestad and Hope 2001). Coordination is thus required for fulfilling this goal.

On the demand side, the panorama is not less challenging: tourists are becoming more sophisticated visitors, with complex motivations and needs to be satisfied. The traditional marketing approach, focused on increasing arrivals and considering tourism like any other commodity shows significant limitations. Contemporary tourists are more technologically skilled than in the past and use internet

for selecting their favorite destinations. This is a further element increasing competition and calling for meta-marketing actions at community destination level. Furthermore, what makes tourism marketing particularly challenging consists of the need of the demand to move towards the product (the destination) that is physically far from where demand originates. This implies that small and medium enterprises face difficulties in reaching their markets due to the high costs of communicating and promoting their offer. Once again, meta-marketing strategy at destination level can address this limitation.

ICT can support in overcoming the issues, briefly explained in this section, that threaten the success of traditional community destinations. The ICT and the internet revolutionized the tourism industry, offering a fundamental support to solve the co-ordination failure and to compete with bigger and better-known destinations. ICT also provide an answer to the need of gathering and analyzing intelligence from the demand and supply side, a must for any destination marketing strategy. Furthermore, new collaborative models are proving their effectiveness in solving the fragmentation problem of the tourism industry and can be fostered by ICTs.

This paper, based on research and consultancy on destination marketing, shows how ICT can successfully support destination management and marketing strategies in community destinations. The objective of the paper is to briefly review the theoretical background related to ICT and to the collaborative destination marketing, in terms of the contribution provided to the success of destination management. Starting from the results of previous research, the paper sets a methodology and includes all the guidelines within an innovative destination management model, based on an ICT destination management system that supports collaborative marketing. Innovation does not lie on the technological modules at the base of the infrastructure, but on the way these modules are integrated and on the support they give to the destination management strategy proposed. The paper uses a case study approach to evaluate the model application, trying to correlate the level of network building and the ICT support with the performance and results of the destination.

In section 2 the A.S.R. model, defined by three main constructs - an ICT infrastructure, an operative marketing superstructure and a destination marketing strategy - is introduced. Section 3 describes the case study of Mantova, Italy, where this model has been applied over the last three years and where practices and results can be analyzed in order to challenge the model outlined. Section 4 concludes the paper by suggesting management recommendations.

2. The ASR Model – Attraction, Stay, Return

2.1 The two leverages behind the model: ICTs and collaboration

The model described in this paper starts from the challenging market described in the introduction, where threats are well known, but also opportunities are widely available, mainly leveraging two strategies:

- taking advantage of the ICTs and the Internet;
- focusing on collaboration and interaction between private and public stakeholders.

ICTs are likely to bring advantages to tourists and to suppliers, if there is a correct employment of them. On the one hand, customers can use new technologies to satisfy their unique and specific needs, through technological platforms that make tourists create their dynamic product. On the other hand, ICTs can be the right answer for the suppliers and the stakeholders to an ever changing and dynamic offer system as the tourist one is, thanks to the opportunity to exchange real time information with the market – both consumer and business - to support the decision making process and to implement multimedia and multichannel marketing strategies, and to reach economies of scale. Regarding this, a significant degree of coordination and collaboration among different stakeholders is necessary for the tourism supply system, due to its fragmented nature (Hall 2000). Public bodies and agencies appointed to implement destination management and marketing should be able to address co-ordination failure problems by stimulating public-private partnerships and making tourist service suppliers of a destination collaborate rather than fiercely compete. Indeed, with the ongoing globalisation process, the competition moved from a single-firm level towards a territorial level (Porter 2001).

The importance of collaborating lies on reaching economies of scale when communicating and marketing the destination. The market visibility reachable by sharing resources is a key asset for tourist destinations, which want to emerge in the global arena. Implementing cooperative destination marketing strategies is crucial for community destinations, as SMEs do not have financial resources and/or the knowledge to reach the market.

To summarize, collaboration is a winning strategy to manage community destinations, supported by the new generation of ICT, or ICT 2.0, whose sharing and networking functionalities enable cooperation and add value to the whole system.

2.2 The ASR Model – Attraction, Stay, Return

The conceptual model developed to guide this study is presented in fig. 1. The model is defined by three main constructs:

1. *Destination strategy*, which comes from the theoretical background described before and wants to simplify the long term strategic guidelines for a destination in the three components of the acronym: attract the right targets of tourists, make their stay longer and increase their satisfaction and loyalty to support their return or their positive word-of-mouth about the destination.
2. *Operative marketing superstructure*, which turns the strategic guidelines into plans and actions; it includes the main processes for an efficient and effective destination management and the organization structure in charge.
3. *ICT infrastructure*, which represents the backbone of the model and integrates repositories, channels and devices to create, share, and analyze information about the destination, the stakeholders and the tourists.

In the next sections each construct will be described in detail, starting from the last one up to the first in order to follow a bottom-up approach to better highlight the innovative integrative approach of the proposed model.

2.3 ICT infrastructure:

Destination Management Systems need to be developed in order to enable the networking of all local tourism providers as well as a comprehensive and innovative interface between the destinations and their prospective and current clients (Buhalis, 1994).

Data and information represent the backbone of every DMS and the capability to create, store, exchange and analyze them is crucial for the management of the system. The infrastructure at the base of the model is composed of four main modules:

- database
- extranet
- multichannel delivery platform
- business intelligence.

Each module can easily be found on the market, due to the large offer of these platforms, their complete standardization, the full integration of their interfaces and their powerful tools of their applications. Innovation of the model does not lie on the technological modules at the base of the infrastructure, but on the way these modules are integrated in a unique environment and on the support they give to the destination management strategy proposed.

The *database* represents the root of all the information systems at the base of the model. It includes all the tourist attractions, from amenities and services (accommodation, transportations, catering, entertainment), to public and private goods (museums, churches, lakes, parks), that represent the

destination heritage. Modern electronic database platforms provide powerful tools to structure data in flexible schemes, sort, index, tag and correlate data, together with services and applications to easily manage and share the knowledge.

Each element is described by multimedia content, including text, pictures, audio and video, that is having an important influence on tourism development. Multimedia content provides a tangible image experience to travel planners and can enhance the variety of information and interaction opportunities (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Furthermore, the current strategies of database design follow the direction of the data uniqueness, that means to insert the single datum once, avoiding duplications, and allowing all the information, applications and services related to that specific datum, to get it automatically in its most updated version; while database models, like the network model, allow to any records to participate in any number of named relationships.

The *extranet* provides access to the database and connects all the players involved in the creation of the destination offer and in its promotion: DMO, tourism offices, information points, stakeholders, suppliers and so forth. Each one is provided with a specific access profile with different levels of authorization to read, modify, create, share and delete the content. The concept behind the extranet is to share the knowledge in every point of the territory where it can be useful and to spread the content update to the best points able to manage it. With this approach, every point of this network becomes responsible for the creation and the update of the content related to its territory, with important and positive effects on the quality of data in terms of completeness and updating.

Each point of the network can access to all the content, using it to promote the entire destination, with the consciousness of using the most updated and complete information available.

The *multichannel delivery platform* allows the knowledge stored in the database and managed by the extranet to be delivered in several formats, through a set of integrated channels, to different and well known targets, both on the consumer and on the business market. The same data and information are provided in different combinations and formats, according to the particular channel they are delivered through and the specific target they are designed for.

Main channels of the platform are:

- multimedia tourist offices distributed on the territory, to support the operators in giving information to tourists;
- internet kiosks located in the main meeting points, including train stations and airports but also hotels, museums and other public points;
- contact centers, very far in their innovation process and able to manage phone calls, emails, faxes and text messages by the same interface and electronically;

- web portals, both for consumers and for businesses, with their interactivity able, in the past, to revolutionize the tourism industry;
- mobile devices, to take advantage of the new generation of smart phones pda's, iPhones, gps navigators, multimedia players and so forth; there's a convergence process of several features within these devices - regarding web browsing, gps localization and, in particular, multimedia content (photo, video) creation, sharing and interaction - that is making them very interesting channels to promote the destination and to interact with tourists.

These diverse but complementary channels are designed and integrated following some common guidelines related to the interaction between content and users. The first one is related to the information going from the system to the users. Both for tourists and for operators, these channels offer the access to the content through features typical of a recommender system, providing assistance in the social process of indicating or receiving indications about what options are better suited in a specific case for specific individuals (Gretzel, Mitsche, Hwang, & Fesenmaier, 2004; Resnick & Varian, 1997).

From the tourist service providers' perspective, these channels are useful to identify better customer requirements and to match them with other consumers ones and to their preferences (Fesenmaier, Werthner, & Wober, 2003). Within these computer-mediated environments, tourists can simulate real visits and virtual experience, leading to the creation and communication of the destination image (Cho, Wang, & Fesenmaier, 2002).

The second guideline is related to the information coming from the users to the system, taking advantage of the bilateral communication supported by these channels. Unlike offline information, which is unilaterally exposed to travellers, the ICT channels allow people from around the world to virtually interact with a destination (Cho & Fesenmaier, 2001). The web, for example, enables consumers to develop their online profile and to include personal data that indicate their preferences, other than provide their own content – from comments, to pictures up to complete travel diaries – with the typical attitude of the modern web 2.0 world.

Other channels, such as contact centers and multimedia tourist offices, can gather important data too, due to their direct interaction with tourists which offer the opportunity to store the information exchanged within the system.

The final module of this platform is the Business Intelligence, a specific technology to support the process of gathering, analyzing and reporting strategic information, by turning data into information and information into knowledge and intelligence. Business intelligence tools support the decision making process by gathering data from different databases, analyzing in an overall perspective and reporting through advanced and interactive dashboards and balanced scorecards.

The whole platform, as described before, allows not only to provide information to tourists, but also to gather information from them through all the channels tourists interact with. A business intelligence module completes the platform structure, offering to destination managers a strong support to develop tools for the decision making process. The main tool is a tourism observatory, an industry outlook which can integrate data coming from the platform, regarding tourists' needs, with tourism traditional information (hotels data about arrivals and presences, economic reports from chambers of commerce, tickets sales in museums and park, and so forth). This can support tourism organizations to provide better services. Understanding how different market segments appreciate different tourism products and services also enhances the possibilities to put suitable products forward (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

2.4 Operative marketing superstructure

The operative marketing superstructure consists of two main elements: the processes and the organizational structure. The superstructure gets as input the strategic guidelines for the destination; through its processes it uses the information coming from the infrastructure to create plan of activities, to manage them and to analyze the results.

Main processes of the operative marketing superstructure are data analysis and segmentation marketing mix definition. Both components are well known and they have been studied and analyzed with deep details. In the following section, there is a brief overview of each of them.

Data analysis takes advantage of the information gathered by the infrastructure and reported through the business intelligence tools. The main goals of the analysis are three:

- creating a map of the destination offer (AS IS) with all its strengths and weaknesses
- defining the ideal destination offer (TO BE) based on all the tourists feedback gathered and behaviors observed
- planning the roadmap for the destination to reach the TO BE starting from the AS IS and to coordinate all the change management activities related.

Segmentation is the process following data analysis to identify, among all the customer profiles, specific targets with homogeneous needs and to set the right offer for each of the identified targets.

Families travelling with children, for example, have their own specific needs and a destination who wants to attract this cluster has to provide the basic products and services required, from special kids menu at the restaurants to discounts and promotions to access museums, from entertainment to educational formats and so forth. The main output of the segmentation process is a complete list of needs available for each target, to guide the offer creation.

A clear action plan coming from the two previous processes is the base for the destination marketing mix, to be done for each of the segments by the definition of its four components: products, place, price and promotion.

Organization in charge to manage the processes is a mix of public and private entities. Major marketing tasks are coordinated by dedicated entities (CVB or DMO) (Ritchie & Crouch 2003). A DMO has a huge impact on all the level of marketing mix, by promoting the new product development, coordinating the distribution channels trough partnerships with the private sectors, promoting the destination officially and regulating the price to protect suppliers from unfair competition and consumer from overcharging (Buhalis 2000).

An important support to the DMO can be provided by private companies, mainly consultants firm, with deep expertise in destination management and in ICT. The combination of the two players can be a winning strategy, since allows the DMO to set the strategic guidelines and to manage the operative activities with the right support, without the need to acquire specific knowledge and to keep it updated, and focusing on its specific strengths.

Around these two players a network of public and private players can be built, including Chamber of Commerce, industry associations, suppliers and so forth. Tourism marketing, in fact, should provide suitable gains to all stakeholders involved in the tourism system. Hence, marketing should be used as a strategic mechanism in co-ordination with planning and management rather than a sales tool.

The ICT infrastructure is a strong support to the network efficiency and effectiveness, since the collaboration of all these entities is crucial to the success of every destination management strategy, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. Collaboration and ICT, as answers to the fragmentation issue, can solve co-ordination failures and help in overcoming scale problems. Besides, these two leverages can help in differentiating the offer for the several targets of tourists, gathering detailed information about needs and motivation and turning it into customized proposals. Finally, a destination where the stakeholders work together to provide personalized products and services to each tourist has an important competitive advantage to differentiate its offer from the one of other destinations.

2.5 Destination marketing strategy

Strategic management and marketing objectives for a destination are heterogeneous, but even if each destination is different from the others, there are some common guidelines that can be applied to every territory.

The overall goal is to enhance the long-term prosperity of the local people and maximize the profitability of local enterprises. A second objective, related to this first, is also the preservation of

the territory resources by increasing the awareness of both locals and visitors and by providing funds for the conservation and regeneration of resources. Optimization of tourism impacts can be followed by ensuring a sustainable balance between economic benefits and socio-cultural and environmental costs (Buhalis 2000).

Marketing strategy can be simplified through the three components of the acronym A.S.R.: attract the right targets of tourists, make their stay longer and increase their satisfaction and loyalty to support their return or their positive word-of-mouth about the destination.

Attracting the right target market and providing the most appropriate combination of local tourism products and services is the secret for successful destinations (Baker, Hozier & Rogers, 1994; Ritchie, 1996). Approaching the *appropriate target market segments should also assist the reduction of seasonality; for example special theme offerings, as well as festivals and events should enable destinations to increase their demand during the low season.*

Staying is mostly about the maximization of tourists satisfaction. It is believed that increasing the portfolio of product offers will not only provide consumers more opportunities from which to choose, and in turn, will make it possible for visitors to stay longer (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007).

Covering as much as possible the customer needs in a personalized way make them stay longer within the destination, other than to extend fairly the benefits of tourism to all the players of the destination.

Return of tourists back to the destination is related to their satisfaction about their visit. Return means not only the repeated visit to the destination, but mostly the word of mouth generated by satisfied tourists to their family and friends. Loyalty can turn tourists into the most credible tour operator of the destination, make them influence the decision making process of other tourists who belong to their target.

The more target needs are well known and satisfied, the more satisfaction and loyalty can link the tourists and the destination. Efficiency of this process can be improved by studying and profiling the demand and working on customers loyalty (Buhalis 2000).

3. Case study – Province of Mantova

The model described before has been applied in the Province of Mantova, Italy. The project started in 2005, when the public administration of Mantova focused the tourist development plan on the communication and the relationship management with tourists. From the application of the model, guidelines and suggestions can come for managers of any industry.

3.1 The Destination Management System

Personalized communication is important in every industry and it is particularly true for a destination like Mantova, who does not want and cannot attract masses of tourists, but has to focus on specific targets, spread during the whole year and across all the Province territory.

This goal can be reached through the new information and communication technology tools, to be used together with the traditional one-to-many communication approach (mainly brochures and trade fairs), to develop a one-to-one strategy with each tourist and to support the many-to-many communication among the tourists of a community.

Province of Mantova invested in the development of the ASR model, with the support of Strateghia, a private consulting firm specialized in Destination Management, who designed and managed the implementation of both the technological and organizational aspects. Following there's a brief description of the main steps of this path.

2005

Database: all information related to tourist resources, from amenities and services (accommodation, transportations, catering, entertainment), to public and private goods (museums, churches, lakes, parks), that represent the destination heritage was gathered and stored within an electronic database.

Contact Center: located in the tourist information office in the City of Mantova, offers a quick and personalized access to information, that can be delivered to the tourist through a set of integrated channels, including phone, fax, email and text messages.

Multimedia tourist office: integrated in the same environment of the contact center, offers the same features to access the content of the database, with specific tools to print personal travel plan to the tourists who visit the information office.

The operators get an important support from these tools in doing their job efficiently and effectively. For example, if they have to provide information about a specific event, they can access to the event record on the database with all the related information (description, title, locations, images, contacts). Additional information is accessible through dedicated areas in the event page, that automatically gives to the operator information related to the event: how to reach the location, where to sleep and eat, touristic itineraries related to the city where the event take place, etc.

2006

Extranet: three major tourist destinations – Castiglione delle Stiviere, Sabbioneta and San Benedetto Po – were connected to the database, becoming other points of the network. In each city a multimedia tourist office was developed, following the model of Mantova, to offer tourists the same information and the same services, to spread the information across the territory and to share the content management and update among all the network partners.

Hotels dialer: to connect the hotels directly to the database using the contact center to make automatic phone calls to each hotel, with a recorded message asking to the hotel owner to digit the number of available rooms using the phone keypad

Trade fair: to support the trade fair participation through a web based access to the DMS.

2007

Tourism Observatory: a fundamental tool to support the decision making process for the public administration responsible. Data collected by the DMS - coming from all the tourists who visit the four information offices spread in the territory, call the contact center, send an email or a fax – are merged it with other information available in the Province databases: from the hotels (arrivals and overnight staying), the museums (number of ticket sold), the websites that promote Mantova, the customer satisfaction surveys distributed to the tourists in several locations. Other information sources are studies, researches and conferences, providing knowledge about national and international trends and practices, to compare Mantova with a wider scenario and to get guidelines to increase the competitiveness.

All information is structured within a document that every semester is presented to the DMO board, in order to support the destination marketing plan and execution through specific guidelines. DMO board includes the Province, the Town Hall and the Chamber of Commerce, together with the tourism responsible of the three destinations involved in the extranet. Observatory presentation is an important moment for all the stakeholders to share the knowledge about the destination, to be aware of the strength and the weaknesses and to plan together the marketing actions.

2008

Web portal: following the Observatory guidelines, a new web portal for tourism, completely integrated with the DMS, has been developed. The website, online from January 2009, will take advantage of the real time information updated, providing them to a wider community of users with a 1-to-1 approach. Thanks to the complete integration of the website with the DMS, every content update, coming from each point of the network, will be immediately published online. For example, when a hotel digits the room availability through the phone keypad for the “hotel dialler”, this information will automatically be available on the website, on the four tourist information offices and on the contact center, since it is the same information shared among several integrated channels. Website will also guarantee web surfing without barriers for people with disabilities (Michopoulou, Buhalis, Michailidis, & Ambrose, 2007), following the requirements and the

guidelines illustrated by the World Wide Web Consortium for using websites and Web-based applications (W3C, 2005).

The website will also provide important information about tourists, through the analysis of the navigation path, the distribution of online survey, the interaction between tourist and websites and among tourists in the community area, etc. This information will be included in the Observatory, for a better analysis and a more effective definition of the strategic guidelines.

2009

Voice portal: automatic audio-guides, recorded as a voice message, accessible through a phone call to the dedicated phone number of each touristic attraction

Interactive museums network: an interactive internet kiosk, connected with the DMS, to show to the tourists, who are visiting one of the 32 museums of the System, a multimedia collection of content related to that specific museum (video, images, audio, text) and to the city where it is located (hotel, restaurants, events, amenities).

3.2 The collaborative destination marketing – evidence of the achievements in Mantova

The DMS has supported the creation of a collaborative destination marketing model among the stakeholders. It is interesting to use the Wang and Fesenmaier framework synthesis (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007) to analyze Mantova case.

Precondition, which delineates the economic, social and environmental conditions for alliance and network formation. Among the preconditions identified in the framework, two main elements determined the network collaboration in Mantova. First is the information technology, that played a fundamental role as a driving force to collaboration and a facilitating tool during the process. Availability of the Mantova DMS has involved stakeholders to create the necessary knowledge and to take advantage of the benefits.

A second important condition was the organization support provided by the Province of Mantova. The strong leadership of this local authority has been fundamental for the success of the collaboration strategy. To lead the organization effectively and with a long term horizon, the Province of Mantova invested on a partnership with Strateghia, the consulting firm who has supported the Province since the beginning in every step of the innovation path, providing the competences necessary for planning, designing and executing in both ICT and Destination Management. Strateghia designed the DMS infrastructure, planned the whole step-by-step evolution, provided training services; furthermore, it is responsible for the Tourism Observatory, for the coordination of the stakeholders network and for the provision of the new web portal content. The Province of Mantova and Strateghia were the first two modules of a mixed DMO with both

public and private companies, that during the last three years have involved other stakeholders, i.e. the Town Hall, the Chamber of Commerce, the Hotel Associations, the Travel Agencies Incoming Pool to the Network of Museums.

The motivation, which explains why organizations choose to enter into strategic alliances and networks to achieve specific goals. The Mantova case belongs to the strategy oriented cluster. Expand market, develop product portfolio, maintain competitiveness for the whole destination, improve the services, enhance the community and increase the economic gains are all motivations behind the decision of the partners to join. Working together and providing holistic experience to consumers is the only way to make the destination more competitive and sustainable in the long term (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007) and this seems to be a common orientation for all the stakeholders who joined the network.

The stage construct, which captures the dynamics of collaborative marketing processes, is the implementation stage for Mantova, since a lot of projects have been shared and executed. The following evaluation stage is partially running, through the tourism observatory who assesses the goals, evaluates the results and checks against the expectation.

Finally the outcomes phase describes the consequences of the collaborative marketing activities. Several outcomes listed in the framework have been reached, mainly on the “strategy-oriented” group. Destination image is improving every year, thanks to the multichannel DMS. The DMS has processed in the first semester of 2008 more than 20.000 inbounds (including phone calls, visits to the four tourist information offices, faxes and email) with an increase of 50% compared to the same period of the last year. Another outcome is related to marketing costs, share and thus reduced, and the effective use of all the pooled resources by the stakeholders. Learning outcomes are important as well. Resources working on the project got a lot of skill, not only following the training courses organized every year by the Province, but also learning by doing.

As overall results, tourism in Mantova is showing a positive trend in terms of arrivals. It is possible to use some of the data from Tourism Observatory to have a quantitative perception of the destination management model impact, following its three strategic guidelines – attraction, stay and return – and estimating their performance. Associating any increase in the tourism indicators entirely to the new model would be an error, proper econometric techniques should be employed for robust conclusions of this association. However, it is useful to compare some indicators where the model could have had an important impact, since its launch in late 2005.

To evaluate the Attraction, in figure 2 there is the trend of arrivals during the last 5 years. Starting from 2005, Mantova has registered an average increase of 19%, turning the negative trend of the previous years in a positive one. Same considerations can be done regarding the Staying, that can be evaluated using the overnight staying of the last 5 years represented in figure 3. The average

increase between 2005 and 2007 is 23%, with important results both from the Italians' side and the foreigners' side. Finally, an evaluation of the Return can be done through the analysis of the customer satisfaction, reported in figure 4. Even in this case, high level of customer satisfaction registered is an important indicator of the effectiveness of the work done by the DMO.

Future developments have been already planned and are ready to be implemented. The main one is the extension of the DMS to include other three Provinces – Cremona, Lodi and Pavia – that together with Mantova represent the “Po di Lombardia”, a local tourist system which covers a wide area all along the Po river and interested in adopting the “Mantova” model to better manage the destination.

4. Discussion, implications and suggestions for managers

To conclude there are some interesting key points coming from the paper analysis, to be followed by Destination Managers, but useful in any other industry.

a) In the era of information overload, a good strategy is to invest on platform for content management, rather than on the content itself, and use it to connect all the content providers.

Content is very easy to find, not only in the tourism industry: the internet provides a wide offer of maps, weather forecast, financial reports, news, music, pictures and other content available at a very low cost or even for free. Investing in a platform to manage the content, instead of the content production, could be a strategy to differentiate the offer, to focus on the best content selection and to innovative the interaction model for the end user.

b) In a context of sources fragmentation and high workload for content updating, a bottom up approach can be a winning strategy.

The Italian national website for tourism - Italia.it – is sadly known as a “worst practice”, due to several strategic error. One of them is related to the “top down” approach for the content production and update, with the Government giving to each Region the responsibility of the content for its own whole territory. A bottom up approach, with every knot of a wide network responsible for a small part of the work, can bring benefit to the whole network. The knot wants to take advantage of the high visibility offered through the network, and this is an incentive to work on the quality of the content in order to support “long tail” effects; the network, on the other side, will benefit of high quality information, as wide, updated and reliable as it would never be possible with a top down approach.

c) ICTs based network can support the development of collaborative behaviors

An “environment” – technological and governmental - able to connect players and to provide powerful knowledge management tools, can have a positive impact on the relationships among players and on their processes and organizations. Even in a fragmented context, where every player doesn't invest on the value of the relationship with the other players, the strategy of sharing the knowledge can get important results. Data analysis and information periodical reporting, for example, create opportunities for the stakeholders to seat around the same table, understand better the whole picture of the market, discuss with the others and define the main guidelines to follow all together.

d) In an era of increasing globalization, where SMEs are exposed to big competitors from all over the world, ICTs can help to reach the scale on production and/or on communication.

Small and medium enterprises from all the economic sectors face barriers in implementing successful marketing strategies mainly due to shortage of capital. ICTs can help them overcome these barriers thanks to the economies of scale they can reach if they communicate and market themselves as an economic district instead of single players.

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8. Appendix – Pictures

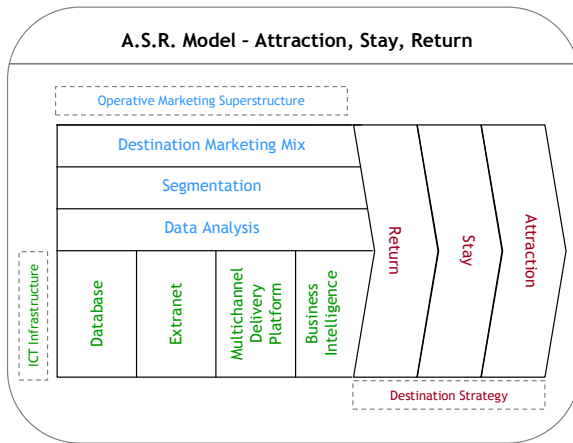


Figure 1.

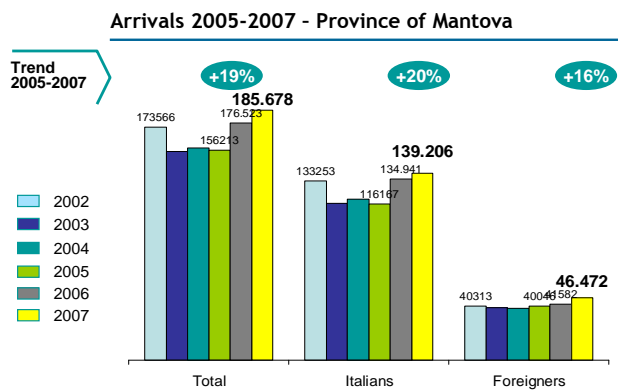


Figure 2.

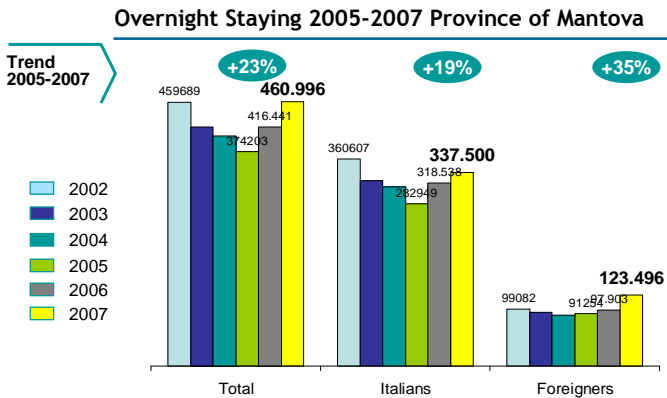


Figure 3.

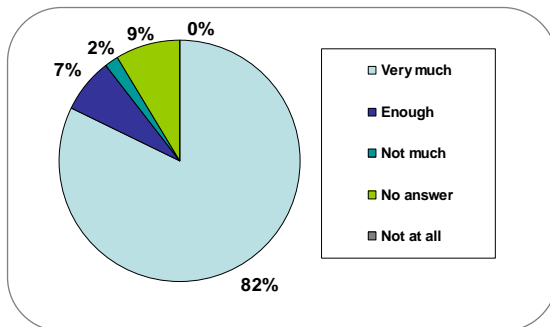


Figure 4