

Awareness of the Tourism Brand Name of Plateau State Among Tourists

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Abstract

Brand naming is a potent marketing strategy/mechanism. Its awareness precedes consideration and trial which are all quite central to the success of any marketing outfit. They follow each other sequentially: awareness leads to consideration and consideration is later followed by trial or purchase/patronage. The goal of the study was to assess the awareness of tourists about the tourism brand name of Plateau State. The tourism slogan of Plateau State is 'Home of Peace and Tourism.' The study was undertaken in nine purposively selected tourist sites in the state in which 1,023 tourists were sampled and interviewed using both convenience and availability procedures. The study confirmed that Plateau State is very rich in tourist attractions, which if adequately planned, developed, managed and promoted will make her one of the leading tourist destinations in Nigeria. The state in her marketing strategy has coined an enchanting brand name as her tourism brand name. The result shows that the brand name is popular among tourists who saw meaning and sense in it from their experiences. They applauded the brand name, but a good number pointed to the fact that peace is too fragile and elusive in Plateau State. This should be addressed holistically to ensure that the brand name and its input are sustainable. It was surprisingly pointed out that the phenomenon of logo or symbol design and development which altogether goes with brand naming is completely ignored and there is need to do just that to make the branding of Plateau State as tourism destination holistic and complete.

Keywords: Destination branding; brand name, awareness and Plateau State

Introduction

A destination's brand image awareness is as important as the destination's brand identity is to its success in the marketplace, because it exerts so much influence in the behaviours and attitudes of that destination's 'target market': investors, tourists, consumers, students, entrepreneurs, trading partners, the media, governments, donors, multilateral agencies, or any other constituencies. Today, every destination must compete with every

other for its share of the world's market, political, social and cultural transactions in what is virtually a single market. As in any busy marketplace, brand image becomes critical: almost nobody has the time, the patience or the expertise to understand the real differences between the offerings of one destination and another, and so people fall back on their fundamental beliefs, prejudices and brand identities of those destinations to help them make their decisions. Just as in the commercial marketplace, 'brand identity provides a shortcut to an informed buying/patronage decision.

Destination brand awareness is relatively a new marketing concept for the tourism industry, as well as a topic of academic research. Much of the research that has been done so far focuses on destination branding to the branding and the consumer product while debating whether the two practices are different enough to merit separate strategies. The consensus is that tourism destination branding is sufficiently different from singular product branding. The overall image of the destination (i.e., brand image) is a mediator between its brand associations (i.e., cognitive, affective, and unique image components) and tourists' future behaviors (i.e., intentions to revisit and recommend). The overall image is influenced by the three types of brand associations (cognitive, affective, and unique image components) and is a critical mediator between brand associations and tourists' future behaviors. Place Branding does not merely stick on new labels, but consolidates the essential characteristics of the individual identity into a brand core and creating brand awareness campaigns. At the same time, it sets social processes in motion; which can nuance, strengthen or correct different perceptions. The routine development of mechanisms leading to a reliable and consistent brand is highly essential for Place Branding. Such development does not merely promote a core message, a logo or a claim, to the public but additionally communicates the Place Brand on a long-term basis using a consistent brand awareness communication.

Destination brand awareness is defined as "the capacity of potential customers in recognizing or remembering that the brand is present for a certain type of offering" (Aaker, 1991). According to Kozak (2002), brand awareness refers to a brand's ability to be remembered and recognized coming from the mental process used by the consumers in identifying it. Two levels of brand awareness are identified based upon the consumer's brand knowledge. The first is brand recognition, describing the consumer's ability to recognize the destination brand under a series of specific external stimuli. The second is a brand recall, illustrating the ability to remember the destination brand due to it being present in the consumer's mind, independent of specific external stimuli (Cai, 2000).

Another critical advantage of branding is building destination brand awareness. At times brand awareness is crucial as it represents the strength of the brand's presence in the mind of the target audience (Baloglu, 2001). The criticality of awareness is renowned and has been commented on by several scholars. For instance, Milman and Pizan (1995) posit that when a destination seeks success, first it must achieve awareness, then a positive image. For Goodall and Ashworth (1993), only the destinations of which tourists were aware could be included in the opportunity set, while Fesenmaier Vogt and Stewart (1993) espouse that although awareness does not always lead to purchase, it does result in product curiosity. All of this can be subsumed under the conclusion that destination brand awareness is a significant component that determines the effectiveness of a brand in the hospitality and tourism industry (Kim & Kim, 2005; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003; Oh, 2000).

In the tourism industry as with many other industries, there is a clear relationship among brand awareness, consideration and trial/purchase and therefore, market share. However, some brands are more successful at converting awareness into consideration and some at converting consideration into trial. Conversely, some brands are better than others at driving consumer behaviour from awareness all the way through to purchase. It is therefore imperative to employ a diagnostic approach to understand how a destination brand performs relative to other destinations and identify areas that require the devotion of time and resources to aid branding initiative, which in turn will improve the destination selection process.

But choice theories all focus on 'bounded' rationality as even the most informed society may not have all the information it needs to guide a perfect decision making. There is always room for some unknown, unforeseen and uncertainties. A tourist destination could exhibit her strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. However, tourists found at any destination could have based their choice on information available to them through her brand promises to the audience. The adequacy and reliability of such information is a critical issue in decision making. For instance, a destination with vibrant and unique attractions could have series of weaknesses and threats, but because of its outstanding attractions and branding strategy, tourists would be willing to risk visiting such a destination.

According to Chaudhary (2000), the destination selection process is a step by step procedure, which proceeds from "awareness to interest to consideration to trial to evaluation and to repeat." A potential tourist (visitor) becomes aware of a destination and thereby becomes interested. Then the

tourist/traveller considers traveling to the destination. The potential tourist becomes an actual tourist through a practical experience (that is, trip). He or she then evaluates the attraction and decides whether or not to revisit or tell family and friends to visit. Figure 1 below illustrates how awareness snowballs into eventual purchase/visit. Awareness is the solid foundation of the entire marketing process. It kick-starts a marketing mechanism that culminates in buying/purchase/visitation.

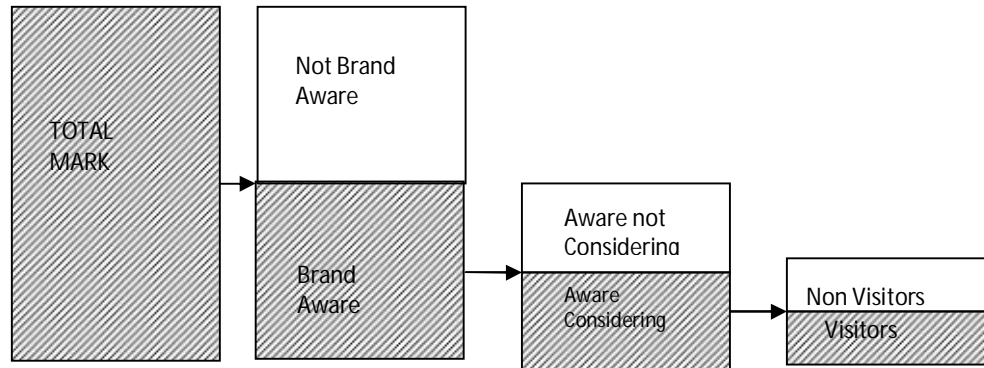


Figure1: Brand Awareness Chart (Chaudhary, 2000)

The study of brand awareness is closely related to brand familiarity. Since brand awareness is the level of customers' brand recognition by direct or indirect experiences such as advertising, word-of-mouth communication, or interaction with a salesperson, it is created by the extent to which customers are familiar with the brand. When a destination wants to be successful, it must first achieve tourists' awareness and second a positive image (Milman & Pizam 1995).

A recognized brand is a promise to consumers who generally know what to expect from that brand and trust that their expectations will be met. Viewed within a hospitality context, visitors will likely expect high-quality facilities and customer service at an upscale internationally recognized chain (brand) of hotels. At the same time, visitors can also expect to pay a premium for this assurance (promise) of quality and reduction of perceived risk. Berry (2000) states that "a brand reduces customers' perceived monetary, social, or safety risk in buying services, which are difficult to evaluate. However, strong coordination between the Destination Management Organization (DMO) and destination stakeholders in shaping a common vision and developing consistent visitor experiences can help ensure that visitors expect, and receive, a high-quality destination experience. Brand awareness

campaign has proven to be advantageous because it provides the competitive advantage of identification and differentiation of one destination from another (Keller, 2003; Kotler, 1994; Lim & O'Cass, 2001), and it can delineate and attract specific market segments and can also increase awareness of/about a destination (Jago et al., 2003). Despite the vacillation by some researchers about the prudence in branding destinations, successful destination branding and rebranding have been achieved in various places world over. Florida is branded as 'The Sunshine State' and Dominica in the Caribbean as 'The Nature Isle' these brands have maintained tourist flows in the former and increased same exponentially in the latter. The managers of these destinations have found a way to exploit specific characteristics of the destination using branding concept positively. This distinctive merging of various attributes of a brand aids in the formulation of a unique destination identity (Jenkins, 1999). Konecnik (2004) posit that the name of a destination has collateral like the name of any company selling consumer products. As a result, marketers must be savvy; they should recognize that vigilance is essential to maintain and improve certain differentiating factors of a destination (Kotler et al., 2010). They must be smart in their marketing of the brand.

It is suggested that consumers use a more extensive purchase process for premium goods relative to lower-priced products (Smith 1992). Numerous empirical studies report relationships between information search costs and product price (Bucklin 1966; Keil & Layton 1981; Newman & Statelin, 1972; Weitzman 1979). Since vacation travel often entails significant consumer expenditures, it is likely that prospective visitors spend considerable time and energy determining the destination that will be visited. A high and positive destination brand awareness reduces the need for detailed information search and contributes toward making it an area of choice for the visitor (Seddighi and Theocharous 2002). According to Laws (2002), branding is a means of increasing the efficiency of marketing. It is appropriate for destinations that seek to create destination awareness and destination image within the consumer market. Destination branding is not new, but its importance has grown significantly since tourism became one of the world's largest industries.

The branding of tourism destinations requires honesty, objectivity and, above all, an empathetic understanding of consumers' mind. While branding embraces a host of activities, including infrastructural development, product enhancement and protection against environmental degradation, it shapes perceptions of the destination. Therefore, destination branding should be used as an image-modification process where consumer's perceptions ultimately facilitate tourists purchasing decision.

When a destination has a powerful brand, it translates into a better image of the country. The improved image could, in turn, lead to increased exports and inward foreign investment. According to Anholt (2005), country brands stand for some qualities, including “power, wealth and superiority and they could be used as tools for economic development”. Countries have branded themselves with qualities such as music, philosophy, trust, beauty, and peace. These brands act as a form of identity differentiation from competitors. The branding of a destination enables the customer to identify it and distinguish it from its competitor readily.

The challenge of this study was to investigate whether the tourists that visit Plateau State knew its SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats,) as a tourist destination before deciding to visit. It is imperative to ascertain how and why tourists chose Plateau State as their preferred destination among other competitors. These are critical research issues which this very survey undertook. From their experiences in the state, did the state deliver its brand name promises? How did the tourists feel about the brand identity including the brand name of “home of peace and tourism”? All these were contentious issues in the study.

Methodology

The study used a survey approach. The researchers, with the advice of the staff of the Plateau State Tourism Corporation, purposely identified and selected the most physically developed and patronized resorts for questionnaire administration. Nine (9) tourist resorts were selected for the exercise including Assop Falls, Jos National Museum, Hill Station Hotel, Museum of Traditional Nigeria Architecture (MOTNA), Pandam Game Reserve, Rayfield Resort Jos, Zoological Garden, and Jos Wildlife Park.

Convenience sampling was used to generate data for the study, and it involves choosing respondents at the convenience of the researchers. In this particular study, the convenience sample was adopted in the selection of tourists for the administration of the study questionnaire. Convenience sampling is helpful especially when it is difficult to draw a probabilistic sample due to lack of reliable database as is the case here with the number and distribution of tourists in Plateau State over the years. The method also saves time and cost substantially. All in all, a total of 1,023 copies of the study questionnaire were validly filled and returned. We asked respondents to describe how Plateau State stands within their conceptual understanding of destination branding, given her brand identity as a tourism destination. Comments were solicited on the definition of destination branding from the tourists to gauge its effects on visitor perceptions of Plateau State, with respondents being asked to provide an image statement that they felt

describes Plateau State as a destination brand and how they contained the brand name arising from their personal experiences.

Results

Plateau State is seen as a land of beautiful sceneries, rich cultural and historical features and excellent clement weather/climate. The analysis of destination brand awareness shows that out of the 1023 tourists interviewed, 954 (85.5%) of them were aware of Plateau State as a destination brand before they travelled to the state.

The people of the state are known to be very friendly, hospitable and accommodating. The hospitality of the inhabitants of Plateau State informed the addition of the slogan, "peace", to her rich tourism resources thereby leading to the coining of her destination brand name as 'home of peace and tourism.

Furthermore, the high altitude of the Jos-Plateau region of Plateau State has a moderated its temperature, which has been described as temperate-like. The approximate maximum temperature is about 26°C while the mean minimum temperature is about 18°C and the average temperature is about 22°C (DungGwom et al., 2009). The weather/climate on the Jos-Plateau region of the state is therefore generally cold especially between December and February as a result of the Harmattan winds (North East Trans Sahara Trade Winds) and in July and August at the peak of rainy season. Thus generally, the Jos-Plateau region of the state has been acclaimed as one of the coldest areas in Nigeria, and Jos town, the State headquarters is the coldest State capital in Nigeria. This cold attribute is a unique tourism asset/attraction of the State.

The other outstanding tourism resources, which are noted in this survey as unique in Plateau State are: MOTNA (the only kind in Africa, South of the Sahara), Wase Rock (one of the five rock pillars in the world), the Ampidong Crater Lake (the only kind in West Africa) and, Jos National Museum (the biggest in Nigeria). Others are Jos Wildlife Park (the first and the most prominent man-made conservation reservoir in Nigeria) and, the Gahwang Basaltic Pavement (the only kind in Africa). The researchers also established that Plateau State is the second with most diverse ethnicity in Nigeria, after Adamawa State, with over 50 indigenous ethnic groups (Dung-Gwom et al., 2009). All the over 50 indigenous ethnic groups together with other ethnic nationalities that have come to settle in Plateau State (the non-indigenes) exhibit varied, colourful and rich cultural events which can capture the interest of a wide segment of tourists. If richness of attractions were the only factor in image projection/perception, then Plateau State would have sustainably been projected/portrayed as having an excellent tourism destination brand image in Nigeria. But this would only happen if

the tourism assets of the State were effectively harnessed (planned, developed managed and well promoted). Efficient utilization of the rich tourism potentials of the state would have impacted very positively on her perceived tourism image. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture has even as a mark of giving impetus to the sector, drawn up a comprehensive strategic tourism development plan in 2008 for implementation

Only about two-thirds (64%) of the sampled tourists were aware of the destination brand name, and they indicated that Plateau State was relatively peaceful and rich in tourism potentials including her clement weather/climate on the Jos Plateau region at the time of their visits to the state in 2015. Incidentally, however, recent communal crises, conflicts, terrorism, and insurgency appear to have damaged that image after more than a decade of deadly communal conflicts/crises. Only about one-fifth of the sampled tourists felt that Plateau State was a crises-torn state and cannot claim to be a 'home of peace and tourism,' but 'home of pieces and crises.'

Discussion of Findings

Brand awareness campaign has proven to be advantageous because it provides the competitive advantage of identification and differentiation of one destination from another (Keller, 2003; Kotler, 1994; Lim & O'Cass, 2001), and it can delineate and attract specific market segments and can also increase awareness of/about a destination (Jago et al., 2003). Despite the vacillation by some researchers about the prudence in branding destinations, successes have been achieved in various places the world over both in destination branding and rebranding. Florida is, for instance, branded as 'The Sunshine State' and Dominica in the Caribbean as 'The Nature Isle.' These brands have maintained tourist flows in the former and increased same exponentially in the latter. The managers of these destinations have found a way to exploit the unique features of the destinations using the branding concept, to formulate destination identity (Jenkins, 1999). Konecnik (2004) posit that the name of a destination has collateral like the name of any company selling consumer products. As a result, marketers must be savvy; they should recognize that vigilance is essential to maintain and improve certain differentiating factors of a destination (Kotler et al., 2010). They must be smart in their marketing of the brand. Branding Plateau State as a tourism destination has advantages because destination branding has long been identified and has proven economically beneficial in the domain of marketing.

The promise of a brand is just as significant for destinations as it is for other service organizations. Although promise may not necessarily provide a guarantee, it portends the degree to which visitors anticipate comfort in their

immediate or future vacation experience. Thus, if the promise is not delivered, the visitor feel unhappy and dissatisfied. However, given the variable nature of tourism products and the fact that all its elements are not under control, or even the direct influence, of the DMO, the term *promise* may be somewhat too strong as it implies a guarantee. Such a complex experience is difficult to guarantee every time. This lack of DMO control over the entire visitor experience often contributes to the underdevelopment of destination identities and lead to the perception that destinations are not brands (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott 2002).

The brand name/slogan of Plateau State was assigned by the Federal Government of Nigeria to designate Plateau State as a peaceful and popular tourist destination in the country. This slogan is reflected and alluded to most writings and publications about the state. The slogan (sobriquet) is strategically coined to project the image of the state as a tourist destination where not unique and spectacular attractions are found, but also where peace reigns supreme so that the tourists and investors alike could be lured or attracted. But to talk about the peace profile of Plateau State without recourse to the sectarian clashes (ethnoreligious conflicts) that erupted in the recent years and embroiled the state right from September 2001, is a disservice to intending visitors. The grave magnitude and gruesome nature of the ethnoreligious conflicts culminated in the outright imposition of a state of emergency in the state in May 2004. Indeed, the crises were quite worrisome as they marred every aspect of livelihood as well as the good image of the state as a tourist destination.

As captured in our literature review the primary role of a brand is to *identify* the destination or goods or services and to *differentiate* those destinations or goods or services from those of competitors. The brand name of Plateau State identifies the state as the home of peace and tourism. The findings show that indeed Plateau State has very rich tourism potentials (both natural and cultural) and the second most diverse cosmopolitan state in Nigeria living together until the recent outbreak of imposed terrorism/insurgency which is acclaimed as alien and very strange to Plateau inhabitants. The current internal squabbles/conflicts/insurgency are believed to be the handiwork of outsiders and enemies who wish to disrupt the rich resources and sustained peace associated with plateau people.

Conclusion

This study is timely given the fact that the destination branding has become an increasingly important topic of discourse among destination management organizations, DMOs. Researchers and practitioners emphasize the importance of image creation and destination differentiation as integral

elements in building a reliable destination. A holistic destination branding definition included themes of *identification, differentiation, experience, expectations, image, solidification and reinforcement*. To this, has been added such essential themes as *recognition, consistency, brand messages, emotional response, differentiation, brand awareness, and identification*. This study concludes that tourists found in Plateau State were aware of the state's brand identity which implies that Plateau State is a brand with a tourism brand identity in Nigeria. There is always a room for reconstruction, rebuilding and rebranding (3r) especially in a destination like Plateau State which has just suffered much image damage due to conflicts, terrorism, and insurgency in the recent times.

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