

Religious Tourism Promotion. Good practices from Greek Tourism Office in Milan

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Biographies

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Abstract

The forming and practicing pillar of Greece's tourism policy is the Greek National Tourism Organization. The primary mission of the GNTTO is the international promotion of Greece as a tourist destination. To achieve this goal, both within the country and in the international field, it has established and operates Regional Tourism Authorities in the 13 administrative regions in Greece and the Foreign Offices in major cities abroad. The Regional Tourism Authorities are intended to coordinate the tourism activities at a regional level while the Foreign Offices to promote Greece abroad. Such an important office abroad is the GNTTO office in Milan. The office in order to achieve the promotion of Greece as a tourist destination in the Italian market develops actions both in Italy and in the Greek territory. In this effort, an important role has the promotion of religious tourism since this sector is part of the alternative forms of Greek tourism.

The research was conducted at the GNTTO office in Milan from 15/11/2015 – 29/07/2016. The survey's data was obtained from interviews with the Director of the Office and the employees working there, by studying files of relevant actions and information collected by the researcher while participating in many of these actions.

The research revealed that the public tourism institution of Greece does not simply confine itself only on maintaining a good relation with the press or on ensuring the display of a positive image on the Media, but also establishes communication campaigns and undertakes promotional actions of religious tourism which are beyond the linear flow of information of tourists in order to accurately show the benefits of investing in the two-way communication, with satisfactory results.

Introduction

The public sector always plays an important role in the development of tourism and to the promotion of every country as a tourist destination. This role is traditionally more active in the developing countries and weaker in the developed ones. But the role of the public sector apart from the tourist facilitation and the granting of investment motive, it remains also important in the shaping and practicing of tourism policy (WTOBC, 2009: 9).

The structure of public tourism sector and the framework of its cooperation with the private tourism sector are determined by the historical, economic, socio-political and cultural conditions of each country and so it is not undivided in every state on the time track, but neither has it appeared in such way at the EU member states. Each government entity carries, through various administrative forms, the communication policy in order to be promoted as a tourist destination. In the European Union member states the tourism policy is formed and the communication policy is practiced by administrative schemes that are either purely of a public nature or have a mixed character that combines the public and the private component.

Thus, tourism constitutes a state responsibility which is applied typically at a national level with the administrative form of the Ministry. In most countries, as an executive arm of the competent ministry for tourism, it operates as a public entity, the national tourism organization. In many countries the additional national tourism organization is responsible for the conduct of tourism policy and development.

Another important conclusion is the fact that in most countries of western and northern Europe, as well as in Austria and Germany, the national tourist organizations undertake promotion activities of purely executive nature rather than the formation of the national tourism policy. Furthermore, under the supervision either of the Ministry or the National Tourism Organization, many countries operate tourism offices abroad for a better promotion of the country as a tourist destination.

The formation of tourism policy in Greece belongs to Greek National Tourism Organization, which operates as a public legal entity under the supervision of the Ministry of Tourism. It is a fact that over time, although in its present form the GNTO operates since its foundation, which dates back to 1950, has been placed under the supervision of various ministries, but always of an economic nature. (UNWTO, 2005; Μυλωνόπουλος, 2016: 37-42).

The main task of GNTO is the international promotion of Greece as a tourist destination. To achieve this goal, both within the country and in the international field, it has established and operates the Regional Tourism Authorities in the 13 administrative regions in Greece and the Foreign Offices in major cities abroad. The Regional Tourism Authorities have as

their object to coordinate tourism activities at a regional level while the foreign GNTTO offices to promote Greece abroad.

The foreign offices of the GNTTO are researching the wider tourism market falling within their competence and develop, depending on local characteristics, the appropriate publicity methods. (Mylonopoulos, Moira & Aivaliotou, 2012).

As for the tactics, it is attempted the constant improvement and updating of the information services that generally cover the promotion of national tourism and maintaining of relationships directly with the traveling public through the Internet as well as the continuous upgrading of the electronic presence and image of tourist destinations. It is also very important the creation of meaningful contacts and the maintenance of relationships with major tour-operators and travel agencies, without neglecting the newer and more dynamic of them. The reinforcement of the promotional efforts is reflected in the practices that create strong and long-term relationship with the people of the media first of all within a permanent framework of reliable and regular communication, through the provision of trustworthy and valid information about the developments taking place at the destination and its tourist product. Moreover, very important is for every occasion the tactic of invitations to selected travel and non-travel journalists as well as to representatives of advertising companies, in cooperation always with some local tourist organizations and agencies, to carry out informative and familiarization excursions of the destination.

Notable is the exceptional importance of generating a great number of publications on a regular basis and of relevant news report for tourism of each communicatively active country, as it appears to be achieved by forming contacts with representatives of specialized media per target market.

Moreover, it is worthy emphasizing the importance of promoting audiovisual material for displaying the particular tourist attractions of the country, the effectiveness of hosting opinion articles about the quality of tourism in the newspapers that have significant influence on domestic target markets, the publication of tourist tributes concerning the destination country that provide latest information on magazines of various content and amusement etc.

In addition to these, it is emphasized the importance of organizing or participating in public relations events, such as for example cultural and sports events of large-scale, information sessions etc.

The previous experience on large events is considered essential especially if it comes to a decision to undertake the organization of such events. On the same terms, also the participation to international tourism exhibitions, seminars, workshops, conferences for the media etc is highlighted.

As for the printed and audiovisual communication, important is the presence of the destination on tourist albums and regional tourist guides, in tourist documentaries and the promotion of the destination's landscapes through the film shooting e.g. the movie Mamma Mia that emerged publicly the islands of Skiathos and Skopelos. (Mylonopoulos, Moira & Kondoudaki, 2009).

The complexity and polysynthesisism of the tourism image in any case, clearly requires the use of a variety of methods to build it, as does the use of promotional and marketing tools targeting both the general public and the professionals of the travel industry. (Μυλωνόπουλος & Κοντουδάκη, 2011:25).

It is necessary to establish a positive image, at countrywide, destination, caterer, accommodation, services etc. that can be achieved through the successful planning and organization of public relations in all levels. However, the peculiarity of tourism in the forms developed nowadays makes the field of public relations in tourism complicated.

GNTO's office in Milan

An important office abroad is the one that operates since 1975 in Milan, Italy. The office in Milan in order to achieve the promotion of Greece as a tourist destination in the Italian market develops actions both in the Italian and Greek territory. In this effort, an important role has the promotion of religious tourism since this sector is one of the alternative forms of Greek tourism. The office in Milan has developed several practices in order to attract the tourist interest of Italian opinion leaders both in a public and a private level, i.e. with state actors, professional operators, scientific organizations and the mass media. In fact through these practices very often

brings in excellent cooperation the private and public institutions of Italy, but also is a key of cooperation for the respective institutions in Greece. This means that it is the main lever for mobilization and collaboration of the public institutions in Greece e.g. municipalities, regions, Regional Tourism Authorities and GNTO and private professional organizations either collectively or at an individual level e.g. Federation of Professional Tourist Guides, airline company Aegean Airlines etc.

Methodology

The research was carried out at the GNTO office in Milan, as one of the authors of the present, held her six months internship from 15/11/2015 to 29/07/2016. The data was derived from interviews with the Director of the Office and its employees, also by studying dossiers of relevant actions and from data collected by the researcher while participating in many of these. The goal was to gather, record, classify and evaluate tools and actions undertaken by the Office for the promotion of Greek religious tourism in Italy as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of these. Out of these practices developed by the office in Milan, it occurs that the office is active on promoting religious tourism either independently or in combination with other activities such as gastronomy, culture, entertainment, maritime activities etc.

The actions for the promotion of religious tourism are classified into two levels, a) actions in the Italian territory and b) actions in the Greek territory. Furthermore, those actions are held in collaboration with the public body (GNTO office), with local organizations that are both public (Local Administration Organizations) and private (e.g. Mount Athos Area Organization etc.).

More specifically, the following are case studies from the tourist promotion of the office in Milan that can be described as good practices.

Case studies

Actions in the Italian territory: 1) The provision of information and the distribution of leaflets about religious sites throughout Greece, along with other forms of tourism, 2) Participation in exhibitions, conferences and touristic events in various Italian cities, 3) Organizing events at the Greek embassy in Rome for the promotion of religious tourism in Greece, 4) Organizing events

at the office's facilities in cooperation with various promotional organizations of Greece, 5) Organizing workshops at the office's facilities in Milan in cooperation with various promotional organizations, 6) Organizing events in various cities in Italy, for example, Milan, Naples, etc., 7) Organizing webinars at the office's facilities in Milan, 8) Advertising Greece in printed and electronic media in Italy.

3B. Actions in the Greek territory: 1) Press trips in Greece in order to familiarize the Italian journalists to the religious destinations such as Mystras, Thessaloniki, etc., 2) Trips of travel bloggers in Greek destinations, including Meteora, Mount Athos, etc., 3) Documentary missions e.g. Skiathos.

Conclusion and Discussion

It appears that the public tourism body of Greece through the actions being developed by the GNTTO Office in Milan, is not just satisfied by maintaining good relations with the press or by ensuring the presentation of a positive image in the media, but establishes communication campaigns and undertakes promotional actions of religious tourism which are removed from the linear flow of information of the traveling public to accurately show the benefits of investing in a two-way communication, with satisfactory results (WTODC, 2000:15-26). Religious tourism is projected directly and indirectly, either independently or in addition to other alternative forms of tourism. The GNTTO Office in Milan, by researching the local tourist market and taking advantage of the modern tools of advertising and communication, with the most suitable and rational manner, undertakes actions that coordinate the various stakeholders involved in tourism, both at public and private level, in order to attract tourists from Italy to Greece.

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