

TOURISM OBSERVATORY (TO) FROM MEDELLIN TO ANTIOQUIA

Written by:

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1 Introduction

The growing economic interest in tourism and its contribution towards employment generation evokes the essential necessity for different governmental entities to commit to its development. However, these entities must face various obstacles in order to reach this goal, one of them is to have guaranteed information to help decision making. Further obstacles include the tourism sectors division of services where a multitude of different independent subsectors exist offering different activities. Finally, due to the previously mentioned divide of services there is an absence of central leadership entity. Many institutions have been created but nothing has been done to create a sense of union this is due to a misconception of competitiveness and lack of focus. For this reason, a great opportunity presents itself to universities to engage themselves on offering solutions to these obstacles because universities have the capacity to bridge different experts together. Universities are not tied to political parties through their avoidance of political pressure they are able to create an institute that can offer information and strategies to develop the tourist industry. This project would come from the work of several universities.

This research focuses on the procedure to create a center that would manage tourism information, including the administration to collect, process and analyze information. This center would be called “observatory”. The research is divided into two parts. First; carry out in-depth interviews with experts in working in different professional areas to gain insights on how to create an effective center, taking into account the political, economic, technical and cultural conditions.

Furthermore the research involved the analysis of Observatories in Latin America and Colombian experiences to detect where high-performance and beneficial practice was being achieved and developed. SITUR was visited and studied because it is considered that this center and their experience should be the beginning of any proposal.

The second part of the research involved activities and personnel within tourism were identified. Additionally the research looked at what advantageous products and services could be offered in an observatory and what management structure would be needed. What economic and technical feasibility, conclusions and sustainability factors were examined.

2 Theoretical Framework

Observatory is a term “commonly used” in the academic and research world to describe a center functioning to study a unique phenomenon in nature or society. From this point of view, a Tourism observatory’s function is to promote the structure and development of tourism (Alvarado Muñoz, Guaña Cabrera, & Rivera Martinez, 2004).

“The touristic observatories (TO) are integrated information systems created to study, research and monitoring of a tourist destination”, by means of data (Conde Perez, Schmidt Cornejo, & Covarrubias Ramírez, 2011), it is an indispensable tool for sustainable planning.

The creation of this instrument comes from knowledge management and its aim is to connect the public and private sector. It is a tool used to maximize the competitiveness of tourist enterprises and better position the destination, tourist enterprises and products offered for “target groups” (Conde Perez, Schmidt Cornejo, & Covarrubias Ramírez, 2011). These centers are spaces where sectorial information is processed by means of the following tasks: secondary sources of information analysis, secondary and primary data survey, data processing and customization of the result oriented to each client.

The TO is not looking for collide with other organization that present touristic statistical information, its function is to complement their findings to reach a main common objective: the development of the destination (Conde Perez, Schmidt Cornejo, & Covarrubias Ramírez, 2011).

The product of this research is the conceptual and operational design of a TO including its managerial structure and running.

The TO must to take into account, not only the behavior of those working in tourism but those who actively participating in it, all of which combined work like a system.

3 Methodology

The research was done through the following paths:

1) A Benchmark about other TO’s was done, in each one, qualitative and quantitative information was investigated with the aim to identify topics with more relevancy to users and managers. The researchers looked to capitalize on beneficial experiences. The following information centers (IC) and TO were visited online: Observatorio turístico de Melilla, España (Ciudad Autonoma de Melilla, 2004), Observatur, Argentina (Universidad Nacional de Lanus, 2004), Observatorio turístico de Perú (Universidad de San Martín de Porres, 2008) and Situr: sistema de indicadores turísticos para Medellín y Antioquia, Colombia (Medellín Convention Bureau, 2006). Additionally the information obtained was useful to develop the in-depth interview to experts and the final conclusions.

2) In-depth interviews to several experts were done these were not only those working in tourism but also: computer managers , virtual libraries managers and marketing researchers.

4 Development of the project:

The development of the TO was done through the following activities:

4.1 Possibilities, opportunities and expectations were identified (STAGE 1)

In-depth interviews with several experts, previously named, gave the most important points to take into account in reference to the relationship between state and enterprise, ways to catch data, warnings about marketing research, advice about finance, marketing and the management of the users and knowledge about the behavior of regional and local tourist businessman and their professional associations. The following chapter (3) shows the obtained results.

4.2 Basic Analysis about SITUR (STAGE 2)

The touristic index system named SITUR, is a management information system used to collect, process and publish different indicators related to foreign visits, occupation index and others. The SITUR currently has done an empowering job, making way for the improvement of information data collecting and distribution of data/information about any essential topics. The experience of SITUR is an asset and must be taken into account when any organization wishes to develop a TO. Today SITUR is able to give answers to the needs of the sector however the sector needs dramatic improvement in destination planning and management, this implies that a modernization of the system and wider covering (in geographic and conceptual terms) is needed.

4.3 Design and development of organizational structure taking into account physical and human resources. (STAGE 3)

Following to interviewed experts' advice; a structure was designed that would answer to the different functions needed for TO to successfully run. The structure planning includes administrative and technical tasks.

4.4 Startup proposal. (STAGE 4)

Taking into account the analysis, advice and Colombian way of thinking it could be concluded that it would be better to start this TO Project with a prototype/pilot scheme, in order to measure and understand how a TO behaves. The proposal is to develop a TO through parts and then eventually join them all together. Several low cost pilot projects would allow an observation of TO benefits. Once properties of the pilot TO are verified, the final TO can be implemented by the integration of all parts of the industry.

5 Results

5.1 Experts' interviews (STAGE 1)

Through the interviews the main difficulties and opportunities to start a TO in Antioquia were identified. These observations were divided into four subjects: data management, how to administrate, implied actors and TO products and services.

5.1.1 Data management:

- Entrepreneurs and business managers should but do not respect the importance of data and information to make decisions.
- They are empiricist and have little rigor in management and distrust sharing information due to taxes.
- Regional hotels are obsolescent of management information systems
- There is no synergy or team ethics between stakeholders from the sector.

5.1.2 How to administrate:

Recommendations about how a TO should operate were that the TO must:

- Maintain a financial reserve and economic independence
- Generate news in order to keep update with daily changes and also therefore be considered a reliable source of information for the sector
- Supply a software that solves the basic needs of tourism SMEs about accounting. This could be a good strategy for the TO to collect useful information.

- Assert guaranteed political independence
- Have alliances with other research centers in the country like those associated to Fenalco, ANDI, FEDESARROLLO
- Integrate current information sources
- Possess auditory information in all their stages
- Make comparisons between local information centers and other tourism destinations
- Keep interest alive by providing information that involves any economic factors that would impact tourism.

The Sample of population must be significant in number in order for the results to be valid. Additionally the analysis must be understandable, e.g. any comments from experts regarding information or statistical results should be clearly explained.

5.1.3 Stakeholders

In the development of research, stakeholders were defined as crucial factors because of their importance to receive and provide information

SUBSECTOR	COMPANY
Lodge	Hospitality
	Extra-hospitality
Brokerage	Emissive agencies
	Incoming agencies
Food	Restaurants
	Catering
Transportation	Land transportation
	Air transportation
	Airports
	Transportation terminals
	Car renting
	Insurance
Planning and public management	Tourism bureaus
	Tourism corporations
	Profesional associations
	<i>Convention Bureau</i>
Tourist products and activities	Cultural centers
	Leisure centers
	Independent operator
	Health centers
	Guiding
Training, education, research and consultancy	Research centers
	Universities

5.1.4 TO Products and services

TO products and services were identified for the benefit of the academic community and real sector, they were defined through the suggestions of academic literature, experts and Latin American experience. It was deduced that the following should be done:

- Annual tourism report,
- Subsector and tourism products reports,
- Barometers that concludes the point of view of stakeholders,
- Prospective studies about markets (country and products would be included).
- Accessibility of new markets studies.
- Benchmarking about other destinations.
- Studies about destination branding.
- Studies about promotion and sales of destination.
- Specific studies about pricing, context and others.
- Analysis and evolution of tourism demand.
- Tourist traceability.
- Geographic information systems to determine demand concentration.
- Tourist segmentation.
- Tourist satisfaction and
- Tourist loyalty

5.2 SITUR (STAGE 2)

Valuation of SITUR was done by means of several meetings, where the following was evaluated; current status, their capability of collecting information, its reports and its technological platform. Conclusions drawn was that SITUR can only produce results in accordance to its budget, it has a good platform and knowledge regarding information collection.

5.3 Organizational design and development of the TO (STAGE 3)

In the undertakings of a TO and its startup, it is important to take into account that it will begin with very few resources but through time it should grow and develop to reach a greater potential.

What is really important is that the structure should be clearly defined and each subdirection must have some explicit functions that enable the fulfillment of the objectives. The main objective of these bodies in the administrative structure proposed, is to direct and control processes as well as investigate, allocate and manage information resources. Managers were assigned tasks necessary to the information survey and process. The TO could begin with six (6) people that cover many functions, through time the TO could demonstrate the structure presented in chart 1.

With this administration structure a steering committee is proposed (see chart 2).

This group has the task of auditing and monitoring the management.

It is also suggested that an advisory team be put in place (see chart 3), this group is linked with universities allowing various specific fields and areas to contribute to the creation and strengthening of the TO.

5.4 Start – up (STAGE 4)

The size of the project, the responsibility to deliver results in the short term, the need for sustained growth that provides a solid foundation, and a consistent use of resources should be taken into account to define this: The TO would be developed in phases. Each phases would have pilot projects. Pilot projects would be the core of the TO allowing microanalysis useful to correct and scale easily. SITUR would be a better proof center to test each phase that would keep to gain experience. Pilot projects in Medellin and in the regions outside would be done.

6 Conclusions

Tourism information systems should work within a single computer platform.

Current results, although satisfactory, require further investigation.

Tourism companies are not developed in their use of ICT and the web, this would be one of the main tasks

Good strategic planning of a sector depends on a robust management information system, that is useful in short, medium and long term planning; better information equates to the better making of decisions.

- In order to strengthen, in the future the tourism sector must utilize information system management.
- In addition to the collection, processing and analysis of information, a key success factor will be the integration between users and the TO.
- More than structure the TO needs leaders with the skills to manage its importance and independence (economic and politics) and support it over time.

7 Recommendations

- Ensure financial independence of the TO.
- Conditions outside of Medellín may be very different and it will probably be necessary to provide front desk platforms to enterprises to align them with the TO
- Pilot projects would allow the identification of weaknesses and strengths only detected by a practical application.
- Identify the information needed by stakeholders and provide a way for them to understand it.
- International standards would be covered by an index so that future comparisons can be made easier.

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