

ABSTRACT

From destination marketing to place marketing in North-West England

As destinations and places have increasingly found themselves to be in competition to attract tourists, business visitors, new residents, students and inward investment their response has frequently been to set up organisations tasked with the responsibility of promoting the destination to its target market(s). The development of destination marketing organisations (DMOs) is a global phenomenon, which has accelerated in recent decades.

Pike (2008, p.31) defines a destination marketing organisation as ‘The organisation responsible for the marketing of an identifiable destination’. As a term ‘destination marketing’ generally refers to organisations whose purpose it is to promote a destination to tourists. The term ‘place marketing’ has a similar meaning except that it is usually applied to describe marketing activity designed to attract investment, a skilled workforce and human capital in addition to tourists (Quinn, 2013). Place marketing thus enjoys a wider and less specific brief than destination marketing.

In tandem with international patterns, England, has witnessed significant changes in the governance of its DMOs. This followed the publication of a Government Tourism Policy in 2011 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2011 *Government Tourism Policy*). This document, partly as an austerity measure and partly from a claimed philosophical belief, announced that the government policy was now to reduce the public funding of DMOs in favour of private sector funding. The policy document assumed that the private sector was both willing and able to fill this funding gap.

The purpose of the study which is the subject of this extended abstract is to explore how a DMO can engage with its stakeholders in order to operate effectively in circumstances of reduced public financial support. The methodological stance that underpins the study is broadly interpretive in nature (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Fifteen extensive semi-structured interviews were conducted with chief executives of DMOs throughout England and chief executives/chairman of key stakeholder organisations relative to one specific DMO, called Marketing Cheshire. Marketing Cheshire’s remit is the promotion of a particular sub-region (Cheshire and Warrington) within North-West England. The interviewees were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Reliability, validity and

generalisability will be achieved in the study through thematic analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010).

At the time that this study began Marketing Cheshire was supported financially by the three local authorities which comprise the Cheshire and Warrington sub-region. However between 2011 and 2014 this DMO suffered a 90% cut in its public sector funding (Heeley, 2015) and only two of the three local authorities now make any direct financial contribution to the DMO. When Marketing Cheshire was funded in large part by the three local authorities its brief was to focus almost entirely on promoting tourism development and this legacy remains in large part despite the changed financial climate.

The research has revealed different organisational responses to the changed business environment across different DMOs within England. For instance, Visit Cornwall has established itself as a community interest company which is entirely independent of local authority funding (visitcornwall.com). Visit Lincoln describes itself as a public-private partnership but it was established by Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce and Lincoln BIG (Business Improvement Group) which are both businesses in the private sector (visitlincoln.com). Shropshire Tourism has evolved to become an organisation that is self-funded through earned income. It receives no public funding and it claims to be the only DMO in the country in such a position (stem.com). Marketing Cheshire have merged with Cheshire and Warrington LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) in one of the first such arrangements in England (chesterchronicle.co.uk, 2015).

LEPs are local business led partnerships between the private sector and local authorities that exist to determine local economic priorities and to stimulate growth and job creation. LEPs frequently receive substantial funding from central government to facilitate the work that they do (lepnetwork.net).

The visitor economy is worth around £2.47bn per annum to Cheshire (marketingcheshire.co.uk). The annual Gross Value Added (GVA) of the whole Cheshire and Warrington sub-region is over £20bn per annum (www.871candwep.co.uk) so even though the visitor economy figure excludes Warrington it can be seen that the visitor economy is a relatively small part of the sub-region's total economy. In practice Warrington is the most economically successful of the three local authorities that come under the Cheshire and Warrington LEPs remit (Cox, 2016) but the contribution of its' visitor economy is relatively small.

Marketing Cheshire continues to focus its efforts on promoting tourism within its sub-region and concentrating on that part of the sub-region in which the visitor economy contributes the most. However in so doing it is restricting its scope by devoting most of its efforts towards a relatively small sector in the total economy and by neglecting Warrington at the expense of Cheshire.

The key recommendation to emerge from the research is that the organisation Marketing Cheshire should diversify away from a concentration on tourism and the visitor economy in Cheshire alone largely to the exclusion of Warrington and instead embrace the new opportunities that present as a result of the reduced financial contribution of the local authorities and their consequent reduction in influence over the DMOs strategy. In short Marketing Cheshire should transition from being a destination marketing organisation into a place marketing agency that serves the whole of the Cheshire and Warrington sub-region. Such a transition could play a vital part in assisting Cheshire and Warrington to achieve its stated aim of becoming a £50 billion per annum economy by 2040.

It is believed that this research will contribute to a greater knowledge and understanding of the challenges currently faced by DMOs in England and elsewhere and that the findings will provide a theoretical basis for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the change management processes that are required for Marketing Cheshire and other DMOs to confidently face the future.

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