

Experiential Marketing and the Wild Atlantic Way: Developing a Framework for Practitioners

Research area: Marketing

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Purpose of the Paper

Tourism is one of Ireland's most important economic sectors. According to a report published in 2019, latest figures indicate that the industry is worth €9.4 billion to the economy (Dept of Tourism 2019). It has been of particular economic importance in the West of Ireland, where it is a major source of employment both directly in the accommodation and food services sector, and indirectly through retail, transport and other services. When a sharp decline in tourism numbers was noted (ITIC, 2011) the idea was born of developing a branded driving route, to encourage visitor exploration of the area (ITIC, 2015). The Wild Atlantic Way, a 2,500 km driving route was formally opened in February 2014.

Fyall, Templeton et al. (2016) describe the Wild Atlantic Way as "a perfect and timely example" of governmental efforts to use branded driving routes as a tourism strategy, outlining benefits such as the development of peripheral tourism destinations, connecting fragmented communities and injecting economic benefits into local areas. Fáilte Ireland describes the Wild Atlantic Way as 'both an experience and a destination', with the essence of the brand being 'wild', offering emotional benefits to the visitors of 'renewal, memories, liberation, freedom, excitement, oneness' (Fáilte Ireland 2015).

According to Alqatan, Noor et al. (2017) most tourism businesses throughout the world comprise small and medium enterprises, a view agreed with by Peters, Kallmuenzer et al. (2019). The EU definition of SMEs states that small enterprises are those who employ less than 50 people, microenterprises are those who employ less than 10, and medium enterprises are those businesses who employ less than 250 people (EU, 2003). SMEs in the tourism industry (SMTEs) differ somewhat, with Buhalis and Peters (2006) stating that 93% of these enterprises in the EU are micro (employing 0 to 9 staff); 6% are small (10 to 49 employees); less than 1% are medium sized (50 to 249 employees) and only .2% are large organisations (employing at least 250 people). Such companies, in many instances lack the resources available to larger organisations and/or the "know how" to develop effective marketing strategies. To our knowledge, no applicable framework exists to offer a blueprint to SMTEs in the Wild Atlantic Way on how they might develop and implement an experiential marketing strategy, a key element in service excellence. Furthermore, considering the overarching experiential dimensions of the Wild Atlantic Way tourism product, it is v surprising that existing literature has ignored the implementation of experiential marketing in such a context. This study aims

to close this gap by developing and implementing a holistic framework which captures the myriad aspects of the Wild Atlantic Way tourism experience.

Theoretical Background

The concept of an experiential dimension to consumer behaviour was introduced in marketing literature by Holbrook and Hirschman in 1982, in a pioneering piece where they address the aspects of 'fantasies, feelings and fun' in the consumption experience. Their theory focuses on the aesthetic, symbolic and hedonistic aspects of consumption and posits that a new framework for consumption is required, which highlights these elements. They explore experiential consumption through the feelings and emotions of the consumer related to fantasy and fun. This shift away from transactional type theories, where the consumer is viewed as a wholly rational being was embraced by others, including Pine and Gilmore (1998) who view experiences as an independent product identity, and focus on how the service provider can manipulate his product offering to maximise the customer experience. Schmitt (1999) also examines experiential marketing from the provider perspective, describing five different types of experiences that the organisation can offer. Marketing literature also offers the concept of value co-creation, the notion that value is embedded in the interaction between the consumer and the organisation (Poulsson and Kale 2004, Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004, Binkhorst and Den Dekker 2009, Chandler and Lusch 2015, De Keyser, Lemon et al. 2015).

The term Customer Experience Management or CEM, may be seen as an umbrella term that encompasses the multidimensional aspects of experience marketing. Palmer (2010) claims it as a paradigm that replaces relationship marketing, while others cite it as a source of significant competitive differentiation (Homburg, Jozić et al. 2017, Holmlund, Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2020). Schmitt (2011) and Shaw, Dibeehi et al. (2010) offer frameworks to manage what Kandampully, Zhang et al. (2018) describe as a broad concept.

SMTEs share a number of characteristics impacting on their marketing activities. These include ownership structure, with most being family run businesses (Pikkemaat and Zehrer 2016), and crucially constraints of time, finance and skillsets to successfully plan for marketing (Gilmore, Carson et al. 2001). This study argues that in order to fully support experiential marketing efforts by SMTEs, a context specific framework should be developed, one which will enhance marketing planning in constrained circumstances.

Methodology

The study takes a mixed method approach (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018) using an internet mediated survey for stage one, followed by semi-structured interviews with selected respondents for stage two. The survey uses a geographically bounded sample frame of hospitality providers on the Wild Atlantic Way. It has been developed using previously validated measurement scales for key

themes which emerged from the literature. Subsequently a multiple, embedded case study strategy will be employed (Yin 2018). Semi structured interviews will be carried out with selected respondents from Stage 1, using pre- determined themes which have emerged from Stage 1 data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). An inductive approach to theory development will be used, allowing concepts to emerge from which a conceptual framework for experiential marketing may be developed (Ketokivi and Mantere 2010, Goswami 2011).

Potential Contribution

While this study will contribute to extant theory in experiential marketing, it also will provide a practical and contextual guide for SMTEs, demystifying theoretical marketing concepts and allowing practitioners to access pragmatic and effective strategies when planning for marketing.

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