

Fields of tension in tourism strategies: between public policy and business strategy, between rationality and emergence, between market-driven and resource-based views.

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Abstract

Tourism strategy and planning are old disciplines in tourism research and practise. This paper challenges the predominantly rational design approach to tourism strategy and planning and proposes instead acceptance of tourism strategies as mixtures of public policy and business strategy, of rational as well as emergent strategy design and of market-driven and resource-based views in analysis and strategy formulation. In this way the paper identifies and discusses fields of tension in the making and implementation of tourism strategy and draws on management theory in an attempt to understand destination tourism planning and policy. Based on the analysis of the process of developing a tourism strategy for Bornholm in 2006, the paper suggests that strategic management theories that are more based on organic views of the organisation may be more applicable to strategic management of tourism destinations than theories with a more mechanical view of the organisation. Thus the key to success of tourism strategies may not be careful rational analysis; planning and strategy formulation even when highly participatory, but rather a matter of setting a course, choosing the crew then weighing the anchor and letting the ship go.

Key words: Tourism strategy, public and private, umbrella strategy, emergent strategies, resource-based view.

Introduction

Planning for tourism development is a central issue in tourism research and practise. There has been a gradual shift both in the literature and among practitioners from predominantly physical/spatial planning approaches towards more strategically oriented tourism plans. Global trends affecting tourism, the recognition of tourism's impact on the environment and social fabric of communities, the increased competition as well as sophistication of tourism has led to a focus on sustainability of tourism and destination competitiveness and with it, a focus on how to develop tourism strategies for new tourism (Poon, 1993). There is a lot of tourism literature about planning and strategy but little that examines the applicability of various strategic management theories to strategies for tourism destinations.

This paper tries to do that, drawing on the experience of developing a tourism strategy for the island of Bornholm in the South Eastern Baltic Sea and on the schools of thought on strategic management. The paper proposes that there is no single theory that is applicable to destination strategies. Instead a combination of theories must be applied to understand such strategies. The needs of destinations for strategy call for strategic approaches that can provide both a public tourism policy and a business-oriented strategy and take account of both the resources on which to base tourism development and the influences of the external environment. It must also be a source of inspiration for leadership and cooperation in the tourism system, accepting that a significant part of realised strategy will be emergent strategy.

The proposal of the paper is that particularly strategic management theories that view the organisation or firm as an organic entity and are rooted more in evolutionary economic theory than neoclassical economics can be a source of inspiration for destination strategists and managers. They are faced with a changing external environment that can be taken advantage of but is mostly out of their control. They also face an internal environment of stakeholders and businesses that are dependent on each other in producing the overall visitor experience but also limited in control to that of their own product; in economic terms, they are producing both positive and negative externalities in relation to each other (Flagestad and Hope, 2001).

Thus the purpose of the paper is to contribute to the literature on strategic management for tourism destinations by analysing the process of tourism strategy development on the island of Bornholm using the theoretical framework of the general strategic management literature.

Theory Review

Tourism strategy and tourism plans are not the same thing

Tourism textbooks on tourism planning and strategy at destination level present these as two separate things (Cooper, Gilbert, Fletcher and Wanhill, 1998, Pearce, 1995, Gunn, 1994). Tourism planning is most often discussed as a question of spatial and investment planning while tourism strategy is most often discussed as a question of marketing strategy for destinations. The first is done in the public sphere with stakeholder involvement and the strategic elements take the form of public policy. That in turn makes the strategic orientation of the plan more akin to statements of principles than strategic objectives. The second, marketing strategy is developed in the private sphere dealing with the marketplace of tourism. Being limited to marketing it will not address value creation across interests at destination level, e.g. how to achieve sustainability.

A combination of the two could perhaps meet the need for tourism strategy. However, it is rare that the two aspects are presented as pillars of a common public and private tourism strategy for the destination. Pearce (1995) does so in his conceptualisation of regional tourism planning for Northland, New Zealand. Here the Regional Tourism Strategy is a kind of umbrella strategy, enacted by respectively the Northland United Council via a Regional Planning Scheme and the Northland Tourism Industry Board via a Regional Tourism Marketing Plan. The Regional Tourism Strategy outlines aspects such as market preferences, land use needs, community

needs, product developments, tourist industry as well as local authority services and land use policies. Thus it tries to meet the simultaneous needs for tourism policy, strategy and planning.

Later, Simpson (2001) argued on the basis of a review of the literature on respectively stakeholder participation and strategic orientation in tourism planning, that a combination of the two, denoted stakeholder driven strategic planning by the author, could be a major contributor to “the ultimate sustainability of tourism development” (Simpson, 2001). As the author states there has been formalised planning for tourism ever since the growth of mass charter tourism along four different approaches identified by Getz (1987) as representing the stages of development of tourism planning philosophy: (i) Boosterism approach: tourism is an entirely beneficial activity and the extent of its operations should be maximised wherever possible, (ii) Economic approach: tourism is a valuable force for economic development and is best used to generate income and employment, (iii) Physical/Spatial approach: tourism should be developed in such a way that negative environmental impacts are minimised and “placeness” (Gunn, 1994) is advanced and lastly, (iv) Community approach: tourism is a social and political force which can best be developed through the medium of local control. While examples of all four can be found separately or in combinations around the world, the physical/spatial approach enjoys considerable support through the efforts of writers like Inskip (1991) and Gunn (1994) and, as a result, appears according to Simpson (2001) to be the dominant tourism planning philosophy. Hall’s (2000) planning approach of sustainable tourism planning can be added as a fifth to the list and reflects recognition of the need to maximise the benefits of tourism while minimising or eliminating environmental, cultural and social instability.

Shift towards strategy in the strategic management sense

Simpson (2001) brought strategic orientation into tourism planning with the argument that the concept of strategic planning is a suitable mechanism by which a tourism plan may come to fulfil the criteria of sustainability. With the growth of literature on the competitiveness of tourism businesses and destinations this shift has been reinforced. Ivar (2004) introduced the strategic approach which refers to the search for competitiveness of tourism businesses and destinations and can be added as a sixth item to the list of approaches in tourism planning philosophies (Al-Masroori, 2006). Nonetheless, articles applying different approaches to strategic management and corporate strategy in relation to tourism destination planning make up a limited proportion of the literature on strategic management in tourism. Most of the literature applies the theories of strategic management to tourism firms and not to tourism destinations. In *Resource Guide in Strategic Management in Tourism* (Dale, 2005) only 10 out of 125 articles and book chapters in the bibliography relate theories and methods of strategic management to tourism destinations and not tourism firms. Similarly, Olsen’s (2003) literature review of strategic management in the hospitality industry does not include any articles about applying the theories of strategic management to destination level, e.g. destination corporations. It seems that when it comes to tourism strategy development as a joint public-private exercise at destination level there are few attempts to apply the theories of strategic management. However, Flagestad and Hope (2001) do so in the case of winter sports destinations, combining the Resource-Based View (RVB) of Rumelt (1986) and the Industrial Organisation (IO) perspective of Porter (1980) and introduce the useful concepts of the “community model” and the “corporate model” of destination management as well as “sustained value creation” and “the value fan” as an interpretation of Porter’s Value Chain in the context of the destination. These may in turn be helpful in explaining the strategic success of destinations.

Were it not for the scant literature on the subject, the lack of discussion of the applicability of strategic management thinking to tourism destinations could be ascribed to the failure of such theories in that particular context. A number of authors do in fact argue this point (Middleton & Hawkins, 1998; Hall, 2000 and Pigram, 1993) and does so on a variety of grounds: The contrast in attitudes at local level between the public and private sector, the fragmented nature of the tourism industry causing government to take over planning in the public interest with a reactive planning approach as a result and lastly, simply that planning for destinations is

considerably more difficult than planning in the corporate boardroom. The latter is undoubtedly true, but apparently practitioners have not listened as there are examples of attempts to apply strategic management thinking in tourism outside of the tourism firm (Ministry of Tourism NZ, 2007; Wonderful Copenhagen, 2007; Tourism Queensland and the Department of Tourism, Fair Trading and Wine Industry Development, 2006; South West Tourism and the South West of England Regional Development Agency, 2005; Brighton & Hove Economic Partnership and Brighton and Hove City Council, 2004 and Ålands landskapsstyrelse, 2003). Though only half of these few examples are strategies for tourism destinations and the rest for larger regions, they still represent examples of strategic approaches to tourism planning at another level than the tourism firm. Thus there are tourism regions and destinations that are inspired by models of strategic management in their planning and make an attempt to overcome the above mentioned difficulties. Thus while the field of strategic management is well developed with a number of different schools of thought and a large body of literature, tourism research still lacks attempts to test the applicability of these theories on tourism destinations even though there are cases from practice which may be explored.

Prevalence of rational design approaches to strategy

In addition, tourism strategy and planning processes are most often presented as rational processes in which the individual steps follow each other in logical succession (Cooper, Gilbert, Fletcher and Wanhill, 1998, p. 209). Only when dealing with the development of sustainable tourism plans and extensive community participation in tourism planning, do we come across examples of processes less rational and more organic or reiterative in nature (Gunn, 1994, p. 237, pp. 255-258). Still community involvement tends to be presented as a series of steps or an element in an overall rational process, where community involvement in a somewhat mechanistic way serves the purpose of ensuring equitable allocation and use of resources as well as local commitment, support and social sustainability of tourism (Gunn, 1994; Hall, 2000 and Simpson, 2001). Overall tourism strategy and planning is conceptualised as a number of steps or elements in a process where the output of a previous step becomes the input to the next step and so forth. Typically the process is divided into five steps: 1. Setting objectives, 2. Research, 3. Synthesis and conclusions, 4. Development concepts and 5. Recommendations (Burns and Holden, 1995). Cooper, Gilbert, Fletcher and Wanhill (1998) add an initial stage of study recognition and preparation as well as subsequent implementation and monitoring and plan reformulation that feeds back into the policy and planning stage.

This dominance of prescriptive models in strategy formulation and planning in tourism indicates that the strategic approaches in tourism are predominantly inspired by the schools of thought on strategic management and planning that view the firm as a mechanically controlled entity (Chandler, 1962; Ansoff and McDonnell, 1985; Porter, 1980) rather than as an organic entity. These schools of thought are prescriptive in outlining strategic planning as a step by step process of analyses and choices/decision-making with the strategy as the end product. Subsequently follows strategy implementation. Strategy in these schools is seen either as a plan, a set of behavioral and decision-making rules or as positioning. Thus the focus is primarily on the external environment of the firm and in the second step on how to organize the activities of the firm to achieve success. However, there are also schools of thought on strategy that recognise a more evolutionary development of strategy as well as the imperfection of knowledge about external forces and the future, seeing the firm or organisation as an organic entity (Mintzberg, 1985, 1987, 1990 and 1994; R. Rumelt, 1986 and Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). In these schools of thought strategy is understood either as a pattern of behaviour, as resource-mobilization/-use or as values. Thus the focus is primarily on the organisation itself and what it can do in relation to its own learning and its surroundings to achieve success. Particularly Mintzberg (1985) recognises what may be called the limits to planned strategy and offers a typology of five different types of strategies observable in and relevant for organisations in different settings: The Planned Strategy, The Entrepreneurial Strategy, The Ideological Strategy, The Umbrella Strategy and lastly, The Process Strategy.

Considering the complex nature of a tourism destination with its mix of public and private stakeholders, leader and followers, large and small businesses, primary and supporting activities set against the global forces of competition (Flagestad and Hope, 2001), it is somewhat surprising that there has not been more attempts to use a greater variety of the models and thinking on strategic management to explain the success or failure of tourism strategy and develop models for tourism strategies at destination level.

Approach

The paper is exploratory in nature. Its purpose is to develop an understanding of the application of methods and models of strategic management in the area of tourism destination strategy. The method of analysis is to put into perspective of strategic management theory, observations on the process of developing a tourism strategy for the island of Bornholm during the year of 2006. The discussion is divided into sections corresponding to the phases as well as the methods of the planned and actual process of developing the strategy. The focus of the analysis will be on signs of the fields of tension that in the introduction were hypothesised to be identifiable in strategy processes for tourism destinations: (i) Mixing of public tourism policy and business strategy in an umbrella strategy, (ii) Juxtaposing Inside-Out and Outside-In approaches in the analysis and strategy formulation (iii) Emergent strategy mixing with deliberate strategy and (iv) Taking on leadership/Promoting leadership in others.

Analysis

Past planning and strategy for tourism on Bornholm

The tourism destination of Bornholm in the South Eastern Baltic Sea has a long history of tourism and is today a mature destination with recent years of stagnation in visitor numbers as well as visitor spending, combined with decreasing average length of stay. Thus there has been limited economic growth hindering quality development of tourism despite the growth in tourism at world and regional level (Andersen et al, 2006). Faced with these challenges and the opportunity offered by the establishment of a Forum for Growth gathering diverse stakeholders in business development as part of the recent regional reform in Denmark, the municipal board decided towards the end of 2005 to make the first ever common strategy for tourism on Bornholm. The Forum for Growth was asked to take on the strategy project.

Despite its long history as a coastal holiday destination for visitors from primarily Denmark, Germany and Sweden, Bornholm has never had a tourism strategy. Destination Bornholm ApS was established as a private limited company in 1992 with public as well as private shareholders. Destination Bornholm has as its overall objective to generate economic growth and increased employment on Bornholm through marketing of Bornholm as a tourist destination as well as product development among the tourism businesses on Bornholm, while respecting the principles of sustainability and promoting quality. Thus Destination Bornholm is the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) and has had strategies and business plans as well as marketing plans through the years. However, these have been strategies and business plans for Destination Bornholm as a company and not for Bornholm as a destination.

In the public sphere, tourism policy and planning was until the recent municipal reform the responsibility of the county. This tourism policy and planning was part of the Regional Plan, a spatial development plan with two main parts – a text outlining the objectives and intentions of development on Bornholm and maps with the designation of areas for various uses. The tourism policy and planning of the Regional Plan focused on balancing the needs and impacts of tourism with primarily local development and nature protection interests as well as promoting recreational infrastructure (Bornholms Amt, 2001).

The municipalities also had planning obligations, being responsible for local plans related to tourism development and activities in urban areas and some of the municipal plans included tourism. Only one of the five previous municipal plans on Bornholm did reflect any kind of

strategic thinking about tourism (Rønne Kommune, 2000) under the headline *Rønne som turistmål* (Rønne as a tourist attraction).

Thus tourism strategy on Bornholm was until the new strategy was formulated in 2006 a mix of the business and marketing plan of Destination Bornholm, the Regional Plan of the County and the various municipal plans. Not surprisingly the objectives of the various plans were not in accord with each other. The business and marketing plan of Destination Bornholm focused on attracting more visitors; increase their spending and satisfaction as well as the economic growth of tourism (Destination Bornholm, 2003). The Regional Plan focused on limiting the number of bed spaces so as not to exceed a set carrying capacity, but also on promoting nature and outdoor experiences of the visitors. The municipal plans focused only on tourism activities in their own areas. Thus they were more likely to promote competition than cooperation. In addition, the strategies of the tourism businesses on Bornholm would be entrepreneurial with the strategy formation taking place in the mind of the owner-manager. It would seem quite a challenge to accommodate and integrate all these different approaches to and needs for strategy and policy in one common strategy for the destination.

Nonetheless it did become recognised by stakeholders on Bornholm that there was a need for a common strategy and policy for tourism development. With the decisions of respectively the municipal board and the Forum for Growth to make such a strategy, a major step was taken towards more common thinking and doing in tourism on Bornholm. This in itself became a major focus of the strategy, incorporated in the vision as well as the title (Forum for Growth, 2006).

The process of tourism strategy formulation on Bornholm

The process of developing the new tourism strategy for Bornholm followed the stages outlined in table 1.

“Insert Table 1 here”

This outline indicates that the strategy project assumed that a rational approach could be used. However, according to Mintzberg (1985, 1990) planned strategy is only possible under the following conditions:

1. Precise intentions in the organisation.
2. These intentions are accepted in the whole of the organisation.
3. A predictable external environment or an environment that can be controlled by the organisation.

If we equate “organisation” with “destination” in this set of conditions, it becomes apparent that while there may have been precise intentions at the leadership level (Forum for Growth, Destination Bornholm), these intentions may not be shared by all stakeholders of the destination. Similarly, it is questionable whether the external environment of the destination can be considered predictable and the destination is definitely limited in its control of those conditions.

The problem of shared intentions can partly be accommodated by opening up the strategy process to a greater part of the organisation in the initial phases. In the case of Bornholm this was partly done by widening participation to a set of tourism industry leaders and a wide section of the public sector. The original plan did also include giving all of the tourism community a possibility to exert influence on the strategy. However, this part of the plan was not realised and during the communication of the strategy upon its adoption, a frequent reaction from industry representatives that base their own business on “green” principles was to question the economic growth focus of the strategy.

The second issue was partly accommodated in the design of the strategy process by using the method of megatrends analysis and development of alternative scenarios for tourism based on the uncertainties of trends. This method had the advantage of highlighting the limits to control of the external environment and its predictability. The reaction to that exercise was a focus on how external conditions drive demand for tourism and how internal workings of the destination must be improved in order to take advantage of demand and improve value for the customer.

Reflections on choice of methods in the strategy process

In planning the strategy project a number of issues related to the method and organisation were considered:

1. Should the strategic analysis be made in one go? Or should a screening of issues be made first and resources saved for in-depth analysis of specific issues during the process?

Decision taken: Make the strategic analysis in one go, because the strategy must be based on coded knowledge of the situation.

Finding: It would have been more useful to have a brief initial synthesis of tourism on Bornholm with identification of the main external influences or trends of importance. In the end the entire external and internal analysis was in fact boiled down to such a synthesis. This would have allowed for better “tapping” and “coding” of the knowledge of the participants in the process. On occasion, it would have been useful to be able to go into depth with concrete issues raised by the participants. It would have allowed the team to share and build up knowledge and a common understanding of tourism on Bornholm as part of the process rather than having to assimilate the analysis carried out by the analysts. It would also acknowledge and take advantage of the predominant entrepreneurial strategic approach of the businesses themselves. This finding supports the contention that less rational and more evolutionary approaches to strategy could be useful, particularly with respect to the analytical part of the strategy process.

2. Should a SWOT-analysis be made or other methods of strategic analysis tried out?

Decision taken: To not do a SWOT-analysis and instead work with megatrends and scenarios.

Finding: The SWOT-analysis was not missed. Both because such exercises have been done many times on Bornholm and the participants nearly would have been able to recite previous analyses by heart. Moreover, many of the external conditions for tourism are out of reach of the control of the destination. Thus while the SWOT-analysis will identify such, it will not give any answers as to how they more detailed affect the destination. The alternative exercise of outlining consequences of megatrends and discussing scenarios proved more useful in highlighting the challenges in tourism. Nonetheless the megatrends and scenario-workshops did not quite deliver as expected, so the team still had to give opportunities a good think after the workshops. This experience demonstrates as above that thorough initial analysis with advantage may be replaced by methods that develop common knowledge and understanding of the external (as well as internal) conditions, such as the scenario-workshops. Once again, it is also a way to recognise and use the entrepreneurial approach of the tourism businesses and the predominantly silent knowledge on which it is based (Petersen, 2001).

3. What sort of balance between an Inside-Out/Resource-Based View of strategy and an Outside-In/Market-Driven View of strategy should be struck?

Decision taken: More or less equal. Tourism is heavily influenced by forces and drivers outside of the destination while many of these are out of the control or influence of the destination. It can however take advantage of them whenever they are expressed as changing consumer patterns, new market or technological opportunities. Thus the external environment cannot be overlooked nor considered totally uncontrollable. At the same time, tourism relies on inherent properties and natural, cultural and social resources of the destination which clever (business) people have to know how to convert into satisfying experiences (value) for the tourist.

Finding: A good balance was appropriate and the attempt to identify Core Competences (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994) in the internal analysis proved a particularly useful and significant move beyond just listing weaknesses and strengths in a SWOT-analysis. This finding corresponds

well with the conclusions of Flagestad and Hope (2001), arguing for a model of building competitive advantage at destination level that combines the Resource-Based View with Industrial Organisation and Organisational Economics theory.

4. Should there be a focus on leaders in tourism on Bornholm in making the strategy or rather wide participation and influence of stakeholders, including communities?

Decision taken: Focus on leaders in making the strategy. Those leaders have size and influence to take on leadership in implementation and are already acknowledged as leaders.

Finding: Being a leader in terms of being successful as a business or holding an official position of power is not identical with being a leader among colleagues in the tourism industry. Thus choosing such an approach to promoting the strategy in the businesses community requires consideration of the particular role of the individual leader. The visionaries and entrepreneurs that are most respected but also exemplify integrative thinking, linking their own product with that of others (in economic terms promoting positive externalities) should have a strong presence in such teams. That was not the situation in the strategy project. The team was identical to the Marketing Committee of Destination Bornholm and thus a previously appointed, not elected, body of business representatives. It later turned out that some of these were more known for promoting own interests than for working for the common interests of tourism on Bornholm. Moreover, the ownership that had been expected to develop from forming a smaller team of leaders in the business community around the strategy formulation proved surprisingly short-lived. Some of the members of the working group got the opportunity to implement the strategy as a tourism cluster working group formed after the adoption of the strategy by the Forum for Growth. Rather than proposing actions to implement the strategy, the group developed its own strategy, admittedly with some references and overlap to the overall strategy but also new directions. Moreover, underway in this new process, entirely new activities that would be hard to associate with the planned strategy were proposed by yet other stakeholders and adopted. The result of this is a realised strategy that is a mix of the planned tourism strategy, the cluster group strategy and other stakeholders' own strategies, the latter being emergent strategies.

“Insert Figure 1 here”

5. What needs of the tourism community on Bornholm should the strategy be able to meet?

Decision taken: Based on consultation with tourism as well as public administration stakeholders during project preparation it became clear that the strategy had to fulfill three main needs: (i) Provide a tourism policy framework for politicians and administrators, (ii) Be a business development strategy for tourism and (iii) Be a source of inspiration for individual tourism businesses.

Finding: This identification of needs set the scope for the tourism strategy and supports the conclusion that a tourism strategy for a destination that is a community destination and not a corporate destination (Flagestad and Hope, 2001) - as is the case for Bornholm – only can be an umbrella strategy. It cannot be the one and only strategy embracing all stakeholders, getting them to march blindfolded in the same direction. That would in turn point to leadership in the process of making the strategy as well as in the implementation as crucial to its wider integration in the community. In the lack of such leadership it would not be surprising if implementation failed.

Conclusions

A number of elements of theories on strategic management prove useful in understanding and planning strategy projects in tourism destinations:

1. An umbrella strategy may be the most suitable type of strategy for destinations to aim for. This has consequences for how to structure the strategy, how to organise the strategy process as well as its implementation. Careful identification of needs during project preparation is crucial for identifying what type of strategy is wanted and realistic.

2. A tourism strategy process can with advantage be inspired by the Resource-Based View and the thinking on Core Competences.

What the destination at its core is particularly good at must be the basis for differentiating itself and creating value internally as well as externally, giving its limited influence on the external environment.

3. However, Core Competences must be put into perspective of the external environment. Tourism must shift to be more market-(customer)-driven (Poon, 1993). Thus the external environment cannot be ignored.

4. A tourism strategy must be developed and promoted by leaders in the tourism community. The more focused on Core Competences and the more like an umbrella strategy a destination strategy is, the more important it also is, that key leaders take leadership in implementation.

5. Destination strategies will be a mixture of the deliberate strategy (adopted and implemented by the DMO and other official bodies) and the emergent strategies of the many stakeholders.

The reach of the destination strategy is limited in a community destination because the power of the DMO is limited. Thus it must be accepted that the realised strategy is a mixture of the deliberate strategy and emergent strategies. Thus the important challenge is how to transfer the objectives, values and ideas of the planned strategy to the emergent strategies.

In summary, the key to success of tourism destination strategies may not be careful rational analysis, planning and strategy formulation even when highly participatory, but rather a matter of how the strategy sets a course, chooses the right crew, then weighs the anchor and lets the ship go, but provides plenty of harbours to visit for new supplies. One possible approach is a strategy process that builds common knowledge and understanding of the situation as well as the knots and bolts of the organisation of tourism in the destination, focuses on the strategy as a source of inspiration for stakeholders and takes the leadership question very seriously.

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