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International Collaboration in Destination Marketing: a Case Study of the Vanilla Islands

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INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION IN DESTINATION MARKETING: A CASE STUDY OF THE VANILLA ISLANDS

Tourism is a growing industry and more and more countries want to take advantage of this economic boom, creating fierce competition between destinations. Indeed, although the number of international tourist arrivals will continue to rise for several years, reaching 1,4 billion international tourist arrivals in 2020, the number of destinations also increases (UNWTO, 2015). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), there are more than 149 countries and territories enjoying this industry, each consisting of many destinations (UNWTO, 2015). While the tourist is delighted with the steady increase in the number of accessible destinations, the reality is quite different for destination management organizations' (DMOs) leaders. They are not just competing with nearby locations, but also fight against destinations around the world to attract tourists' attention.

This is the new challenge of DMOs; successfully stand out among this abundance of destinations. They must excel in terms of innovation, not only in regard to products and services, but also in the destination management such as dealing with new stakeholders. One solution is international collaboration in destination marketing. Although competition is usually the *modus operandi* of DMOs, the many benefits of collaboration, such as sharing knowledge and costs, as well as improved products and services (Wang et al., 2013), are strong arguments to persuade leaders to try this innovative mode of management. Since many factors can influence the performance of collaboration, either positively or negatively, this research aims to discover the perception of the elite on the success and failure factors of an international collaboration in destination marketing at the beginning of its life cycle.

The literature review conducted revealed that some success factors remain critical for the duration of the collaboration, while others are under enormous variation of importance. This can be explained by the fact that collaboration goes through several distinct phases during its *life cycle* (*pre-partnership, take-off, growth, prime, deceleration and after-life*) (Caffyn, 2000). Each life cycle phase having distinctive characteristics, each phase has success and failure factors of its own. Therefore, when an organization strives for excellence, it must take into account the relevant success and failure factors for each of the life cycle phases (Quinn and Cameron, 1983; Gray, 1985; Pinto and Slevin, 1988a, 1988b; Bissonnette, 1996 and Préfontaine et al., 2001). The first phases being more critical for the success of collaboration (Quinn and Cameron, 1983), this research mainly focuses on this time period. Because of its distinctive situation and the potential richness of information to get from it, the Vanilla Islands has been selected as a case study.

Semi-structured interviews with top leaders of the Vanilla Islands (e.g., Minister of Tourism and Culture, Executive Director of Tourism office, President of Tourism office) have allowed to identify and to deepen the success and failure factors for each of the first three phases of the life cycle of an international collaboration in destination marketing. In addition to confirm the relevance of analyzing the success and failure factors distinctively, and this for each of the different phases of the life cycle, this study also unveiled four new success factors (*prioritizing economic interests, historical consistency, promoting exchanges between destinations and consolidation of existing projects*). Once the main factors identified, we carried further analysis in order to understand the underlying correlations that link them together. The variation, evolution and interaction of success and failure factors during different phases of collaboration have also

been studied. These theoretical contributions not only extend the current scientific literature, but they also constitute promising research avenues.

Moreover, many managerial contributions stem from this study. Here are some of those implications. First of all, it is important to quickly establish a good organizational structure within your collaboration. While your projects will be more and more important and complex over time, you will need strong administrative support to manage them. Also, it is critical to properly manage the political support through the different phases of the life cycle. While it is true that political support is very useful for starting collaboration, partners must gradually move away from this influence in order to not suffer from the uncertainties of politics. Thirdly, collaboration should aim appropriation, not just support, of the project by the economic environment. Tourism enterprises must develop a sense of belonging to the collaboration branding. The brand should not be only in promotional campaigns, but also be visible in different tourist attractions. Also, businesses that believe in the brand can take initiatives to strengthen the links among the different destinations of the collaboration. Finally, make sure to consolidate existing projects before moving on to others. Otherwise, these projects could suffer from a lack of attention and collapse.

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