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Overcoming the Image of Colombia: A Study of Canadian Travel Agents

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Overcoming the Image of Colombia: A Study of Canadian Travel Agents

Introduction: The decision making process for individuals who are considering traveling to a particular destination can be influenced by several different factors. Among those factors is the influence that travel professionals such as tour operators and travel agents play in recommending, or not, a destination. This study was conducted to gain further insight into the role that travel intermediaries have in shaping and influencing their customer's decision to visit a country. More specifically, the study investigates how Canadian travel agents perceive Colombia as a travel destination. Colombia as a country has developed a negative reputation, and has become associated with dangerous terms such as drugs, kidnapping, and cartels. ProColombia, the National Tourism Organization (NTO), has continuously worked towards changing the perception of potential tourists, and encouraging people to come visit their country. This study was conducted on behalf of the ProColombia office in Toronto. More specifically, this project investigated travel agencies across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), to determine their perceptions of Colombia as a travel destination.

Literature Review: Destination image has been one of the most researched concepts (Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Pike, 2002). Image is important to attract travelers. Image management is also important in addressing negative publicity or in helping a destination recover from a crisis. NTOs use promotional and advertising materials to influence buyers and to positively improve tourists' perceptions of a destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004). However, little research has been conducted on the role travel intermediaries play in destination image management (e.g., Dimanche, 1998). DMOs must capitalize on intermediaries, such as travel agents and tour operators, which have the ability to sway the opinion of individuals, and create an image that is "skewed towards a set of favorable experiences" (Govers et al., 2007, p.15). Intermediaries must ensure they are receiving adequate information from NTOs in order to create culturally appropriate, favorable material that is constructed to appeal to those who are considering visiting (Yuksel et al., 2014). Visitors typically have a pre-set image of a destination before discussing with an intermediary, thereby making the role of the tour operators and travel agents more important. Emotional feelings can be gathered after discussing a destination with an intermediary, and any negative connotations attached to a country can quickly deter some individuals from wanting to visit

Methodology: This study analyzed how travel agents perceive and sell Colombia as a destination. The sample comprised 139 travel agencies that were identified by ProColombia. Students from a major urban university were trained to play the role of potential pleasure tourists to Colombia. Investigators visited in groups of two each of the agencies as mystery shoppers and followed a script to ask questions from the travel agents. After each visit, the investigators completed a short questionnaire to summarize the responses of the travel agents to the questions.

Results: One hundred and thirty nine travel agencies were effectively studied for a 75% response rate. Non-respondents consisted of agencies that were closed or that met only with professional clients. The findings of the study suggest that a significant number of travel agents lack knowledge about the destination, have negative perceptions of Colombia, and as a result are

underselling Colombia or recommending other South American destinations. Key findings include:

- Only 55% of travel agencies recommended visiting Colombia
- 38% of travel agencies consider Colombia as an unsafe destination
- 46% of travel agencies were unaware of tour operators selling Colombia
- 58% of travel agencies were unaware of the direct flight from Toronto to Bogota

Discussion: As an NTO, ProColombia is creating valuable content that can be marketed to target markets. However, in order to change the negative and lasting perceptions of tourists, ProColombia needs the support of travel intermediaries to encourage visitation. This study demonstrates the importance of adequately educating travel intermediaries. Although they may be travel professionals, they, like travelers, may hold misconceptions about and negative images of destinations. Destinations that face crises (political unrest, terrorist attack, natural disaster) need to establish image recovery management strategies that are specifically dedicated to travel intermediaries. For example, familiarization tours for travel agents can be designed or destination information conferences for travel agents and tour operators can be planned in target markets. Destination image is a key factor in the traveler's decision-making process and DMOs, particularly those that represent destinations recovering from crises, should develop image management plans.

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