

Why people cannot work with each other? Examining the barriers to collaborative destination marketing

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify barriers that might jeopardize the success of collaboration in the tourism industry and to identify the role employees' personal characteristics play in collaborative relationships. Understanding these barriers is not only important, but also the key to the future creation of collaborative relationships, its success, and effectiveness. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative case study approach was adopted. A total of thirty two in-depth interviews were collected during August 2009. This study can provide management with an overview of the barriers and personal characteristics tourism businesses may face when entering interfirm partnerships.

Keywords: collaboration, barriers, partnership, tourism, destination management

Introduction

With increasing technological innovations and globalization, companies are changing the traditional way business is conducted and shifting it to collaborative arrangements (Fyall & Garrod, 2005). This is particularly true in tourism where issues of coordination, collaboration, and partnership are some of the main research topics associated with resource management and destination development (Hall, 2000). Therefore, collaboration has arisen from the need to achieve broad-based support for policies within the tourism industry that is diverse and fragmented (Vernon, Essex, Ponder & Curry, 2005). As described in the literature, tourism partnerships include cooperative marketing initiatives, intergovernmental coalitions, public-private partnerships, and inter-sector planning (Selin & Chavez, 1995).

Interfirm partners in the tourism industry face a number of challenges such as competitive, technological, political, and economic forces that can interfere in the development of partnership (Waddock, 1989). A concern over the accountability of the partnership actions has led to the need of closer monitoring of the performance by partnership arrangements (Selin & Myers, 1995). To date, little research has been conducted on collaboration issues in the tourism industry and to explain the process that takes place when these interactions occur (Fyall, Leask and Garrod, 2001; Waddock, 1989). Regarding the development of tourism destinations, only limited body of knowledge exists on collaboration between local Convention and Visitor Bureau (CVB) and its industry partners (Wang, 2008; Park, Lehto, & Morrison, 2008).

The present research attempts to identify: (1) barriers that might jeopardize the success of collaboration partnerships; (2) the role of employees' personal characteristics of an organization that are engaged in collaborative relationships.

Theoretical Foundation

Debate on collaboration

Collaboration, as defined by Gray (1989), is characterized as “a process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain” (p. 227). Collaboration in the tourism industry is best described in terms of coalitions, forums, alliances, task forces and public-private partnerships (Bramwell & Lane, 2000). It can be said that tourism collaboration is a homogenous form of governance which requires successful cooperation by a number of stakeholders. Usually, communities are dominated by small or medium-sized tourism enterprises with limited knowledge, capabilities, and access to resources that are essential for cross-sector cooperation and networking (Vernon et al., 2005). The local destination marketing organization (DMO) plays an important role in working with tourism companies to promote tourism businesses in the community.

It can be agreed that collaboration is a challenging process (Huxham, 1996) and more than half of collaborative relationships are unsuccessful (Fyall & Garrod, 2005). As Fyall and Garrod (2005) continue, most North American companies are preoccupied with issues surrounding the economic and financial aspect of collaboration, while the human and cultural aspects are often overlooked. Today, companies can have a significant advantage if they are able to create a successful collaboration (Kanter, 1994). Effective interfirm relationships allow companies not only to elevate their standards and strengthen their own competitiveness, but also push them into wider, more global markets (Kanter, 1995). In this sense, understanding what may jeopardize such successful collaboration and what are some of the personal characteristics that can negatively influence partnership is not only important, but also the key to the future creation of collaborative relationships (Ford, Peeper & Gresock, 2009; Selin & Chavez, 1995).

Barriers of collaboration

Research has revealed a number of potential barriers to collaboration. For example, firms subcontracting a service face the possibility of weakening the quality of their service and therefore deteriorating their reputation if the wrong partner is chosen. This could be caused by the inefficient and ineffective exchange of information, goals, and resources (Palmer & Bejou, 1995). Other barriers to collaboration can be the inability of organizations to work together (Fyall & Garrod, 2005) due to time (Fyall & Garrod, 2005; Bramwell & Lane, 2000), capital (Fyall & Garrod, 2005), company culture (Fyall & Garrod, 2005), geographic constraints (Selin & Chavez, 1995), and lack of access to collaborative partnership (Kanter, 1994), among others. Based on Selin and Myer's (1995) study, barriers of collaboration can be determined by *(i)* interpersonal characteristics, *(ii)* organizational characteristics, and *(iii)* individual characteristics.

Interpersonal characteristics are those related to the interaction between individuals and are highly sought after when selecting a collaborative partner. Partnerships between companies are very much similar to those relationships between people. They begin, grow, and develop or fail the same way (Kanter, 1994). Interpersonal characteristics are characterized by good partner fit, trust, and previous experience. Each partner needs each other (Fyall & Garrod, 2005). Partners with equal strength will be more successful than those where one overshadows the other

(Bleek & Erns, 1991). On the other hand, partnerships can be terminated if a company culture is not supportive, partners are dissatisfied with each other, and cultural differences arise. Additionally, inadequate negotiation skills, lack of clear objectives and new ideas, vision, and knowledge can negatively affect collaboration (Fayll & Garrod, 2005; Kanter, 1994). Partners with less power may possibly not be included or may have less influence than others (Bramwell & Lane, 2000). This can cause mistrust and suspicion among partners. On other occasions, collaboration is jeopardized as partners are unwilling to reduce their own power, work with unfamiliar partners, or too many partners are involved and are unwilling to share information (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Selin & Chavez, 1995). Some partners may pressure others to leave in order to press their own case or block the access to information, which can ultimately increase the uncertainty about the future as policies developed by multiple stakeholders become unpredictable.

Organizational characteristics deal with a number of organizational issues such as mutual benefits and return on investment. Research has indicated that two-thirds of partnerships will run into serious financial or managerial trouble within the first two years (Bleeke & Ernst, 1991) and the majority of disagreements in relationship will occur over money (Kanter, 1994). In addition, various companies can exercise different level of power which might make it difficult to include all stakeholders equally in policy-making. Diverse management styles, rapid change in personnel, and the process of decision making will have an influence on the relationship (Kanter, 1994; Fyall & Garrod, 2005). Other authors stated that collaborative arrangements may face the unpredictability of the future as policies developed by multiple stakeholders and organizations can become fragmented (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Selin & Chavez, 1995). Last but not least, if partners are not progressing at the speed they expected and/or lose their flexibility, this would lead to the dissolving of such collaboration (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Fyall & Garrod, 2005).

Individual characteristics relate to personal traits, motivation, and attitudes (Selin & Myers, 1995). Due to the nature of tourism, personal skills and qualities are considered as important as professional qualifications (Illeris, 2003). Personal skills can be defined as cognitive dimensions that build up the understanding and the ability of the learner (Illeris, 2003). Different employers will require different set of skills depending on the workers position and responsibilities (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Personal qualities can be described as characteristics of an individual (Illeris, 2003). Employees with certain skills and qualities can influence a company by increasing its productivity and profits. If a right person is selected but does not have the proper skills and qualities, the collaboration won't be successful.

If collaboration is done properly, it can result in creating alliances with collaborative advantage while increasing the numbers of consumers, offering products at a relative low cost, and being able to react more effectively and efficiently to changes (Fyall & Garrod, 2005). Companies will have the capability to learn from each other new negotiation skills and to increase their commitment and share resources such as time, finance, and training. Local, non-tourist activities may be encouraged, leading to a broadening of the economic, employment and societal base of a given community/region (Bramwell & Lane, 2000).

Method

Research design

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative case study approach was adopted (Wang & Krakover, 2008). Qualitative research is best suited for this study as many scholars suggest that “qualitative researchers can obtain insights into the underlying cognition, affects,

and overt behavior” (p. 278) and can provide data about feelings, thoughts, intentions, and behaviors (Chen, 2010). Qualitative research relies on interpretation of the text, ‘measuring’ the actual word and identifying new theories that emerge based on comparing data with existing relevant literature (Golafshani, 2003; Chen, 2010). It is a process of comparing, contrasting, replicating, and classifying the objects of study where the researcher is trying to understand particular situations (Creswell, 2009).

Sample and Data Collection

This study used personal interviews of representatives from the local tourism industry and specialists that collaborate with Orlando Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau (OCCVB) and/or play an important part in the tourism industry in the area. The informants agreed to record the interviews for better interpretation and transcription. Three main interview questions were developed. A total of thirty two in-depth interviews were collected during August 2009.

Data analysis

After data were collected, participants’ transcripts were analyzed to generate major themes. A grounded theory was used, as it utilizes systematic steps (Creswell, 2009). Grounded theory is designed to “develop a well integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p.5). The data analyses began with assigning answers into categories of information (open coding) and data reduction. Open coding is a process “which deal with the labeling and categorizing of phenomena as described by the transcribed text data” (Chen, 2010, p. 280). In grounded theory, concepts are the basic units of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For information to be a unit, it should allow researchers to better understand the subject or research questions (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007). If more than one concept emerged, this was then compared and the resembling concepts were grouped together into categories. Not all concepts could become categories as categories are more abstract and they are the key to developing the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After appropriate categories were developed and reconfirmed, identified themes were used for interpretation.

To demonstrate the validity of this study, the audit trail was used. This method was selected following Creswell and Miller’s (2000) suggestion of a two-dimensional framework. The audit trial will shift the validity from the researchers to the individuals independent of the project. The goal is to establish trustworthiness of the findings. Additionally, another reviewer that was familiar with the study was selected to analyze the data to ensure that accurate categories were developed.

Research Results

After analyzing the interviews, identified barriers in collaboration were summarized in Table 1. Two main themes of barriers were identified, along with three sub themes consistent with Selin and Myers’ (1995) characteristics. Two main themes can be described as internal and external barriers. Internal are those that can be affected by either the individual or the company and external are those that are out of reach of the individual’s or the company’s control. Internal barriers were further recognized as: interpersonal barriers, organizational barriers, and individual barriers.

Internal barriers

Internal barriers can be described as those that can be influenced either by interpersonal, organizational, or individual characteristics.

Interpersonal barriers

Interpersonal barriers were represented by lack of trust, lack of previous experience, and lack of partner fit. Twelve of the respondents indicated that *trust*, being honest and forthcoming, is the major contributor of successful collaboration and is the single most important and highly desired characteristic essential for survival of any social group. It goes along with Morgan and Hunt's (1994) findings where relationships based on trust are highly valued since any commitment entails vulnerability. This was reflected by the comment of one of the industry representatives: "Trust is huge. ... If we don't think you're going to back us up on what we're doing ... we're going to stop sending business your way."

The ability to learn from previous mistakes should not be overlooked. Winston et al. (2009) points out that the experience that partners endure during collaboration will shape the future involvement and motivation. *Previous experience* had an influence on future likelihood to collaborate. What was learned from previous mistakes should not be overlooked when choosing a collaborative partner. This can be reflected in one of the comments as: "Previous successful experience ... is important because it is already difficult to sell the [product] and if a positive relationship is already established ... we can depend on one another." Another member highlighted the importance to "learn from business lessons that did not go well when trying to promote with another company."

Finally, participants emphasized the need for having a good *partner fit*. Someone who is not competing against you but works with you, is on top of their game, and creates relationships that will grow and develop while providing equal support. This goes along with one respondent: "factors that would jeopardize the collaboration would be a lack of partner fit." As Kanter (1994) highlights, to maximize collaboration advantages, one must understand how relationships work, how they evolve and grow. Creating a partnership where each partner is doing its part is necessary for successful collaboration. Respondents added that partners must have good communication, be honest and committed, and treat each other fairly. This coincides along with Bramwell and Lane's (2000) findings where more than often, individual success gets in the way of collaboration. As one representative stated: "You also need a good partner fit... [who is] willing to work together." Another participant stated: "[d]efinitely providing equal support" and "[e]qual representation" is important for successful partnership. Partners must be equally involved in cooperation. Literature suggests that successful partnerships are created at CEO levels where personal relationships with similar views, vision, and interests can be deal breakers (Fyall & Garrod, 2005). To support this argument, a testimony of one of the respondents can be taken: "Friendships are important with people in the industry. In my business, it's who you know. This gets you started and keeps you going. People have to trust that you are a reputable person and will follow through on your performance."

Organizational barriers

Organizational barriers deal with a number of organizational issues such as what are the mutual benefits, is there a return on investment, does the company have clear vision, and how the performance and integrity of a company is viewed.

Six of the respondents indicated that *mutual benefits* are major indicators of successful collaboration. One of the respondents stated: "You do want to make sure that if you're putting a lot of time into something they're offering the same to you." Another one added: "sharing in the

benefits makes the collaboration useful and successful.”

One factor that was widely agreed upon was *return on investment*. Partners entering collaboration are expecting some sort of return on investment either through increase in revenue and equity or in improving stakeholders wealth. One tourism representative commented: "So if I could spend a dollar and someone else can spend a dollar, you're assuming you're not just getting two dollars but maybe three dollars benefit out of it. Because either the brand added to your brand that compliments or the product that's added to gives the consumer more value." This was confirmed by some of the respondents who stated that if there is no tangible benefit, some sort of return on investment, either due to choosing the wrong market segment or due to other issues, the partnership won't work. In addition, if the partner gets greedy, the relationship will dissolve. One industry representative stated: "If you have an expected return that is unrealized, you're going to lose confidence in the people who presented the return to you." This confirms findings that the majority of disagreements in relationship will occur over money (Kanter, 1994).

As Kanter (1994) continues, *vision* can be one of the barriers to collaboration. Similar views were shared by most of the respondents interviewed. The themes which could be seen were that companies fall apart due to lack of clear vision or plan (either short term or long term) and lack of mutual understanding of the end goal. As described by one of the representatives: "the jeopardy begins with when there is a confusion or conflict between the vision of the leaders versus that of the understaffed. That conflict means that there will be misunderstanding that leads to disorganization and breaking down of commitment."

The fourth major theme for organizational barriers that was observed during the interviews was lack of *performance* and *integrity*. If partners are not progressing at the speed they expected, it could lead to dissolving collaborative partnerships (Bramwell & Lane, 2000). Through the interviews, if partners don't perform as promised or expected and don't keep their product integrity, that will have devastating effects on the collaboration. One of the representatives stated: "if word got out that they or we did not deliver this would jeopardize a relationship and future relationships with other companies. Sometimes your word is all you have and if people don't believe you, you are done. And if you continue to recommend people that are doing a bad job, you are affiliating yourself with these people and you look just as bad."

Individual barriers

Individual characteristics could be divided based on skills and qualities. Employees with certain *skills* can influence a company by increasing its productivity and profits. Skills identified in this study were: influence, discipline, carefulness, sociability, drive and cooperation. Influence can be characterized by a person who has good communication abilities and gives feedback. Discipline and carefulness can be represented by someone with good planning and organizational skills. Sociability would be demonstrated via ability to build relationships and friendships, influenced by strong leadership skills and cooperation spirits. One of the representatives stated: "strong leadership – this is where it all starts and also where it can end."

Personal *qualities* are characteristics of an individual. The most important qualities listed by respondents were: loyalty and persistence, consistency, forgiveness, detail oriented, leadership, and open-mindedness. One of the representatives stated: "Forgiveness. Ultimately, people are people. The tourism industry is a shallow pond so sometimes businesses get stepped on so that another can look better. This is not the right thing to do but you have to forgive..."

In summary, the findings confirm previous studies that recognize interpersonal and organizational barriers as important contributor to successful collaboration. In terms of individual barriers, no previous research has categorized them in terms of interfirm partnership.

As noted, personal skills and qualities have effect on company's future success and collaboration.

External barriers

External barriers can be defined as those that are out of a company's control. The main themes that were observed during the interviews were changes in the economic climate, changes in trends and bad press.

Economic climate, Change in trends & Bad press

Fyall and Garrod (2005) indicated economic factors as one of the possible issues in dissolving partnerships. Change in trends and bad press was not previously discussed in literature. During 2008, the United States economy suffered tremendous shock which led to layoffs, downsizing, and bad press. This caused the travel and tourism industries to undergo rapid and drastic transformation. A majority of companies and businesses had to adjust the way business was conducted and their trends had to be tweaked to these new scenarios. Articles appeared in press about companies splurging on business travel while undergoing layoffs, tourists were encouraged to contact their hotels for better deals and rates which harmed the lodging industry and subsequently their supporting companies. This view was confirmed by one representative: "bad press. ... Things happen sometimes that are out of our control. But other business will not affiliate them after a bad press issue in the news if it happens to us. "

This viewpoint is new to collaboration literature. It may be due to the effect of the economy that while choosing a partner, key decision makers look beyond what is controllable. They envision how the partner would be viewed by press and how would they react to changes in economic climate and trends before formulating assessment.

Conclusions and Implications

This study provides new insights into the barriers that might jeopardize the success of collaborative partnerships and, due to the nature of tourism, the role personal characteristics play in collaborative partnerships. The results of this study confirm the literature where trusts, good partner selection, return on investment, clear vision and previous experiences play an important part in successful collaboration. The findings reveal new patterns of barriers in tourism collaboration, specifically due to changes in the economic climate, changes in trends, and negative press. New personal characteristics identified are discipline, carefulness, sociability, drive, loyalty, consistency, willingness to forgive, detail oriented, and open-mindedness.

In terms of implications for local CVBs and their partners, the study provides management with an overview of the barriers they may face when entering interfirm partnerships in the tourism industry. By knowing the barriers, alliances can be created with partners who meet the criteria of successful tourism collaboration while increasing productivity, lowering costs and reacting effectively to market changes.

Limitations and Future Research

First, due to the fact that this research is qualitative, researchers rely on the utilization of tacit knowledge (intuitive and felt knowledge) (Creswell, 1994). The conclusions are solely based on the author's interpretation. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize the study results to other destinations. Second, given the case specific nature of this study, future studies can be reproduced by using different settings and locations. The research results reveal that the

economic downturn of 2008 may have some influence on the respondents' answers. It would be interesting to see if similar responses will be found in another location during similar depressed economic times. Third, the study provides only qualitative data; quantitative research could possibly provide additional information and/or a combination of both would give more weight to the themes established. A longitudinal study should be conducted as well to determine if the perception change over time.

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