Evaluating Bloemfontein's image as a tourist destination: a tour operator's perspective

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Abstract

Tour operators have been identified as vital information sources influencing the images and decision-making processes of tourists. Bloemfontein is situated in central South Africa. Tourism marketers believe that the city is an ideal stopover destination for national tour operators *en route* to other destinations. Research was conducted among national tour operators in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town to determine their perceptions of Bloemfontein and whether they regard the city as a tourist or stopover destination. The research indicates that the city is not regarded as a tourist destination, but is seen as an ideal stopover destination which could be included in future tour itineraries. It is currently excluded because operators are unfamiliar with the tourism offering(s) of Bloemfontein due to insufficient marketing by the tourism officials of the city.

JEL M31

1 Introduction

In their study of a model of destination image formation, Baloglu and McCleary (1999: 868) determine that the image of a tourism destination is strongly influenced by the buying decisions of its clients. Destination images, which are powerful motivators in travel and tourism, are not necessarily grounded in experience or facts (Middleton, 1994: 87; Kim, 1998: 340-342). In another study of the perceptions of US-based tour operators of tourism destinations in Turkey, Egypt, Greece and Italy, Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001: 1) also find that it is actually the perceived image of a destination that has to compete with those of competitor destinations in the marketplace.

The image which a person has of any product or service is highly subjective and therefore not easy quantifiable. Images exist in the minds of beholders. The most important and complex limitation of a perception or image of a product or service is the fact that it can be strongly believed in by an individual consumer, yet can be mistaken. According to Goodrich (in Konecnik, 2004: 309), two levels of image can be identified, namely the primary destination image, formed by a visit, and a secondary image, based on information received from external sources such as the media, word-of-mouth, and so on.

Through the media and through hearsay, most people have already decided whether they are attracted or repelled by the image of a destination (Kim, 1998: 340). All destinations have images, often based more on historic than on current events, and it is an essential objective of destination marketing to sustain, alter or develop these images in order to influence prospective customers' expectations.

The images held by the travel intermediaries of a destination are just as important as those held by tourists (Konecnik, 2004: 309). Tour operators and travel agents are regarded as significant sources of information influencing the images and decision-making processes of tourists through their roles as promoters and consultants. According to Konecnik (2004: 309), first-time visitors particularly rely on professional sources such as tour operators and travel agents to determine potential destinations.

Bloemfontein is situated in the centre of South Africa alongside the N1 highway. Tourism developers and marketers in the city believe that Bloemfontein is an ideal stopover or weekend destination for tour operators from the major metropolitan areas of South Africa, Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, *en route* to other destinations. However, as the Chief Executive Officer of Mangaung Tourism (of which Bloemfontein forms the major part) has pointed out, the city is not used for this purpose to any significant extent (M Scholtz, 2003, pers. comm. 23rd January). One of the questions that arises, therefore, is whether or not the image/ perception of Bloemfontein as a tourist destination is a significant factor in the decision of many major tour operators in South Africa not to include the Free State's capital city in their itineraries.

This is the background for this study, whose primary objective is to determine the current perception of the tourism image of Bloemfontein among tour operators in the major metropolitan areas of South Africa. The secondary objectives are to determine:

- Which factors are involved in forming destination images or perceptions, so as to create an awareness of these factors among marketers of tourism destinations in South Africa;
- The extent to which Bloemfontein is regarded as a tourist destination and/or stopover destination by national tour operators; and
- Which steps should be taken to improve the current situation where and if necessary.

This study is useful, since it can be used to create and/or maintain the correct tourism image for Bloemfontein. Furthermore, tourism officials in other towns and cities in South Africa could adapt this study's methodology to determine tour operators' images of the tourism destinations in their areas, and so maximize tourism income, with a corresponding positive effect on local and regional economies.

2 Theoretical background: the image of the destination

Images of tourist destinations are based on motivation and perceived ideas about that destination (Manuel, McElroy & Smith, 1996: 32-33; Bennett, 1998: 24). A destination image may be defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a specific destination (Crompton in Gartner, 1996: 456). An image is a personal composite view of a destination's tourism potential, and is not necessarily the same for each visitor (Chon & Sparrowe, 2000: 49). An image is formed on the basis of past holiday experiences, hearsay, information from other people, the media, tour operators or travel agents. The dominant attributes people use to sort these mental images are often related to product variety, cost, climate, scenery, personal safety and sanitation. These factors may be important in determining people's choice of destination (Bennett, 1998: 92-94; Kim, 1998: 340-341).

No two individuals will have an identical image of a destination because the information they receive is subject to mental processing. Our experience of the world is conditioned by the information signals we receive through our senses, namely sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, and this forms the process known as perception. As our senses only comprehend a small portion of the total information we are exposed to, the human brain sorts the information and relates it to our individual knowledge, values and attitudes through the process of cognition. The final outcome of the perception and cognition processes is the formation of a mental image of a destination. These images are unique to each individual, each person's own view of reality, but they are important in an individual's experience of a destination, decision to visit again, and feelings in relation to the tourist experience of the place (Gartner, 1996: 460; Ryan, 1997: 123–125). In marketing, image is everything (Davidoff & Davidoff, 1998: 100). The image or perception that the customers have of a product, whether this image is true or not, determines the success of the product. It is critical that a positive image of the product be maintained, as it is very difficult to change or overcome a negative image (Gomez-Jacinto, Martin-Garcia & Bertiche-Haud'Huyze, 1999: 1024-1025).

Beerli and Martin (2004: 658) list the following factors according to which images/ perceptions of destinations are formed:

- Natural resources, e.g. weather, rainfall, lakes, mountains, etc;
- Tourist leisure and recreation opportunities, such as the availability of theme parks, sports activities and adventure;
- Culture, history and art, such as access to museums, folklore and religion;
- Political and economic factors, e.g. safety, crime rate, prices, etc;
- Natural environment, including factors such as overcrowding, pollution, traffic congestion, etc;
- Social environment, such as the friendliness of local residents, quality of life and language barriers;
- Tourist infrastructure, such as availability and quality of accommodation, restaurants, tourist centres, etc;
- General infrastructure, such as the quality of the road network, health services, transport facilities, etc; and
- Atmosphere of the place, referring to aspects such as its reputation as an, attractive or boring destination, etc.

Konecnik (2004: 309) agrees that these factors are important, and adds further components:

- Service levels at the destination, as well as the attitudes of staff who come into direct contact with tourists;
- Quality and variety of attractions and accommodation; and
- Effective marketing by the destination marketers in order to create a favourable image which may ultimately lead to a competitive edge.

Davidoff and Davidoff (1998: 100-102) cover certain aspects that may create image problems. These are safety, cost and product differentiation.

2.1 Safety

Safety is one of Maslow's most basic human physiological needs (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 1996: 77). According to Keyser (2002: 232), the common perception in the marketplace that many countries of the developing world are not safe as tourism destinations is the most important threat facing the tourism industries of these countries. This perception is usually related to the high incidence of crime in the society generally, and against tourists specifically. Crime against tourists is the most prominent aspect related to tourist safety, and an issue of considerable concern to the managers of various destinations. Crime creates negative perceptions of the destination, and may result in inhibited demand, or even a reduction in demand, if only in the short term. The White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa identifies safety and security as one of the most important issues facing tourism in this country (Keyser, 2002: 381-382).

2.2 Cost

An incorrect perception of cost may also create an image problem for a specific destination. Some destinations are seen as expensive. This image may be created through expensive airfares, but expensive airfares do not necessarily imply that other products at the destination are expensive (Davidoff & Davidoff, 1998: 101). Pearce, Morrison and Rutledge (1998: 79-80) conclude that the airfare is the most important of the price factors in the international consumer's choice of destination, and that exchange rates that fluctuate are seen to have more impact on hotel tariffs, although the effect is small and not significant. The challenge for tourist destinations is to isolate themselves from factors such as price increases related to exchange rates.

The price of the product is a critical element of the marketing mix, because it has different meanings to consumers and organisations respectively. To the consumer, price represents the amount of money he/she has to pay for the product and thus for his/her need to be satisfied. The consumer will view the price as acceptable if he/she perceives the value that he/she receives equal to or more than the value that he/she has paid for the product. To the organisation, price is important because it relates directly to the income and profitability of the organisation (Bennett, 1998: 213).

2.3 Product differentiation

There are not always major differences between products, and selling relates directly to image. For instance, airlines basically sell identical products, but a particular airline will create a certain image, of being safer or more dependable than the other airlines, for example, to gain the competitive edge. In creating an image, the names used may be associated with a specific image, and logos and signs also play a significant role (Manuel, McElroy & Smith, 1996: 40–41). George (2001: 174) states that names, logos and slogans are a significant aspect of branding, and that research has shown that the style and design of logos and the strength of a name may greatly affect a consumer's perception of an offering or product.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Demarcation of the research area

The study is limited to the greater Bloemfontein area excluding Botshabelo.

3.2 Empirical research

Questionnaires regarding the tourism image of Bloemfontein were distributed amongst national tour operators in the major metropolitan areas of South Africa, namely Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions and focused on the following issues:

- The knowledge of the tour operators regarding Bloemfontein as a tourist destination;
- The tour operator's perception of Bloemfontein as a tourist destination;
- The tour operator's perception of Bloemfontein as a stopover destination *en route* to a final destination;
- The extent of marketing materials on Bloemfontein received by the tour operators on a regular basis; and
- The extent to which Bloemfontein is included or excluded in itineraries of the tour operators as well as the reasons for this.

The questionnaire's contents and credibility were tested in a pilot study with local tour operators in Bloemfontein.

The tour operators were identified using listings of tour operators in reputable travel magazines, namely *Getaway* and *The GSA Travel Agents Sales Guide*. All the national tour operators identified in these magazines were included in the study. All tour operators registered with the South African Tourism Services Association (SATSA) were also included. These tour operators are all active in organising tours in and around South Africa. Tour operators in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban were included in the study as these cities represent the major metropolitan areas of South Africa from a tourism point of view. The empirical research was conducted in these cities between September 2002 and March 2003.

A total number of 109 questionnaires out of a possible 133 delivered to tour operators were completed. This indicates a response rate of 82 per cent. The majority (90 per cent) of questionnaires were completed by means of personal interviews, but telephonic interviews and email (10 per cent) were also used in cases where tour operators were not available during the field visits.

3.3 Limitations of the methodology used

It is possible that some of the national tour operators in the mentioned areas of study could have been excluded, since they did not advertise in the *Getaway* or *GSA* magazines during the course of the study and are not members of SATSA either. However, it is assumed that the majority of operators do use of the chosen magazines for advertising or are at least a member of SATSA, and so the anticipated influence on the final results should be marginal.

4
Empirical research results

The empirical results will be discussed under the following headings:

- The profile of the tour operators;
- The perception of Bloemfontein as a stopover destination and as a tourist destination;
- The tour operators' knowledge of tourist attractions in Bloemfontein; and
- The marketing effectiveness of Bloemfontein.

4.1 Profile of the tour operators

The demographic profile of the respondents may be subdivided as follows:

- **Job description**: A wide spectrum of respondents within tour operations is included in the study. The majority (30 per cent) are employed as sales consultants, followed by operational managers (19 per cent), presidents/owners (17 per cent) and sales managers (16 per cent).
- **Age**: Almost 75 per cent of the respondents are between 30 and 40 years old (42 per cent) and 20 and 30 years old (32 per cent). Only 6 per cent of the respondents are over 50 years of age. A reason for this tendency may be the fact that the tourism industry in South Africa is a relatively young industry. Similar results are found in research done by Snyman (2002: 67).
- **Years experience**: 36 per cent of the respondents have between 3 and 5 years experience as tour operators, 28 per cent between 6 and 10 years experience and 19 per cent between 11 and 15 years. It is thus clear that the majority of respondents do not lack experience, even though they are predominantly of younger age groups. Only 6 per cent have between 0 and 2 years of experience.
- **Visits to Bloemfontein**: 70 per cent of the respondents have been to Bloemfontein before. It may thus be assumed that their answers are largely based on their personal experience and perceptions of the destination. Konecnik (2004: 309), writing about the tourist industry in Slovenia, says that empirical results indicate "that a tour operators' own familiarity with a destination, gained, for example, through having visited Slovenia, had a bigger influence on image differences than whether Slovenia was promoted as one of the tour operator's possible destinations".
- **Time span over which visits to Bloemfontein took place**: 79 per cent of the respondents who have visited Bloemfontein before did so in the past 5 years. Two-thirds of the respondents who visited Bloemfontein previously would like to visit the city again. The remaining third, in response to open-ended questions, give the following as their main reasons for not wanting to visit Bloemfontein again:
  - Nothing to do or see;
  - No tourist attractions;
  - Bloemfontein is old fashioned and for old people; and
  - Simply not interested.

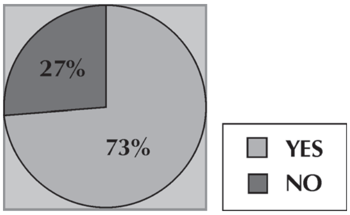
The respondents who indicate that they would like to re-visit Bloemfontein mention the following reasons:

- Friendly people;
- Interesting historic places and old buildings; and
- Ideal as a stopover.

4.2 The perception of Bloemfontein

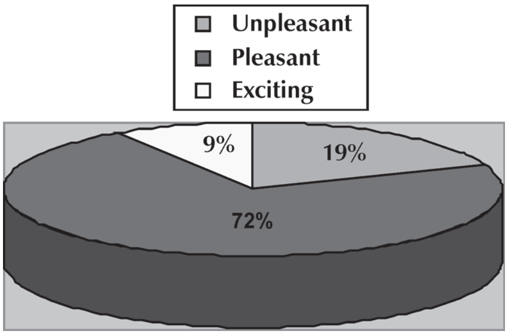
The research questionnaire aimed to obtain information about the respondents' perceptions of Bloemfontein as a destination from the viewpoint of a tour operator.

Figure 1
Potential for overnight packages



As Figure 1 shows, 73 per cent of the respondents think that Bloemfontein has potential for overnight accommodation stays. This information correlates with the results shown in Figure 2. The majority of tour operators in Durban (88 per cent), Johannesburg (77 per cent) and Cape Town (70 per cent) agree that Bloemfontein has potential for overnight packages.

Figure 2
Perceptions of Bloemfontein as a stopover destination



In Figure 2, respondents' opinions about Bloemfontein as a stopover destination are scored in three categories: unpleasant, pleasant and exciting. Overall, 72 per cent indicate that Bloemfontein is a pleasant stopover. Also, all the tour operators in each of the three regions agree that Bloemfontein is a pleasant stopover destination: Durban (88 per cent), Cape Town (80 per cent) and Johannesburg (62 per cent).

Figure 3
Perceptions of Bloemfontein as a tourist destination

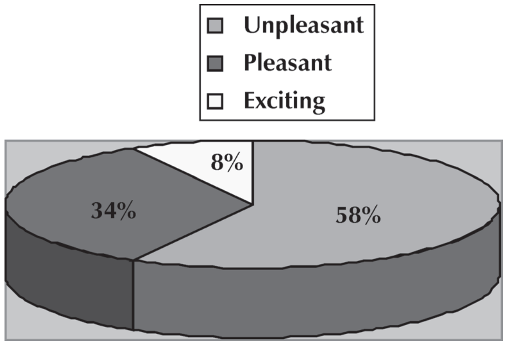


Figure 3, however, shows that only 8 per cent of all the respondents rate Bloemfontein as an exciting tourist destination. 58 per cent of the respondents perceive Bloemfontein as an unpleasant destination, while only 34 per cent regard it as a pleasant destination. If Figures 2 and 3 are compared, it is clear that the respondents in all three cities favour Bloemfontein as a stopover rather than a tourist destination. 73 per cent of all the respondents agree that Bloemfontein has potential for overnight packages.

The positive aspects of Bloemfontein that are mentioned by respondents are good value for money (52.3 per cent), affordable accommodation (47.7 per cent), interesting and friendly people (46.8 per cent), suitable accommodation (44.0 per cent) and personal safety (41.3 per cent). The negative aspects indicated are a lack of beautiful scenery (45.8 per cent) and a poor climate (41.3 per cent).

Overall, the respondents know little about interesting cultural attractions, good restaurants and the quality of the infrastructure. Before any final conclusions can be made, therefore, the general knowledge of the respondents must be tested to find out exactly how much they know about Bloemfontein, as this knowledge forms the basis of their answers and perceptions.

4.3 Tour operators' general knowledge about Bloemfontein

This section of the research questionnaire tested the knowledge of tour operators in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban about Bloemfontein, focusing on both well known and less famous attractions.

Figure 4
Knowledge of attractions of Bloemfontein

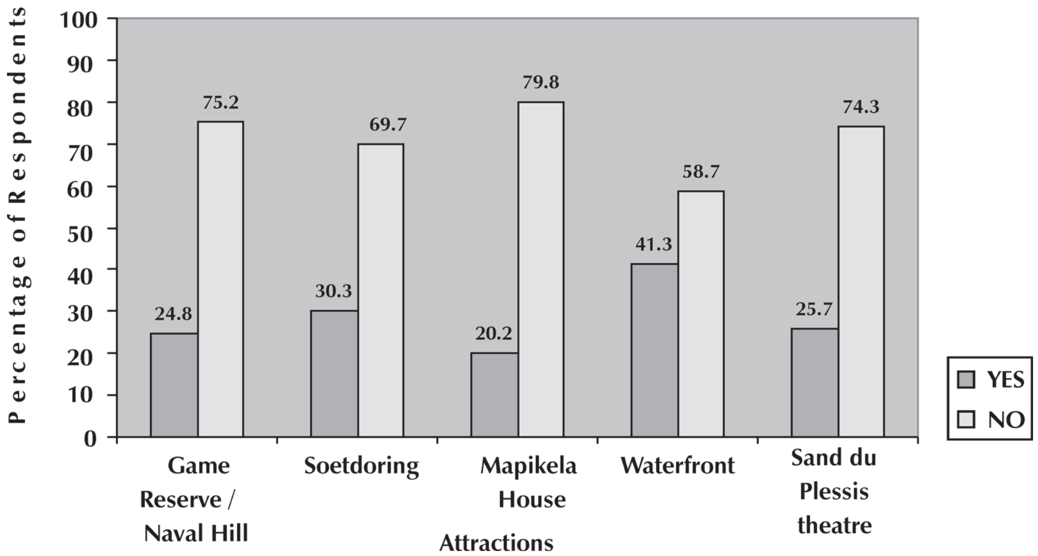
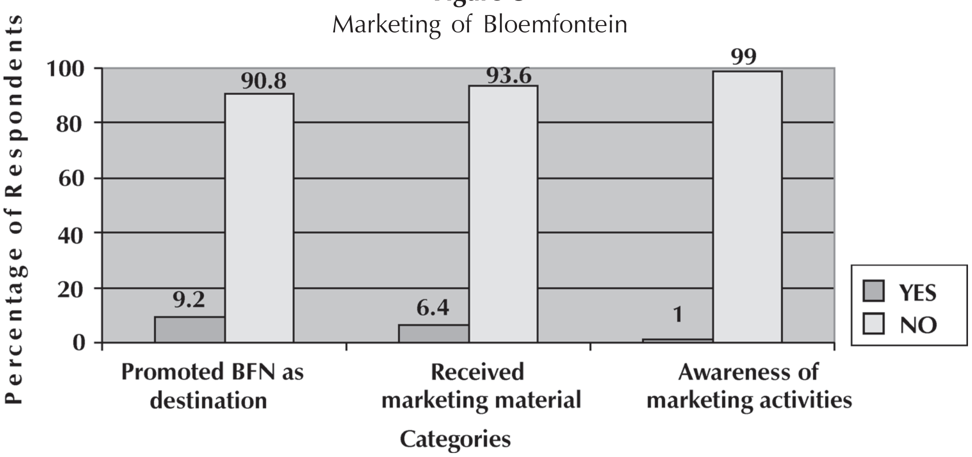


Figure 5
Marketing of Bloemfontein



As shown in Figure 4, of the most well-known of the attractions mentioned in the questionnaire, the Waterfront, is known to only 41.3 per cent of the respondents. Mapikela House, a cultural attraction important in the history of the ANC, is least known, being recognised by only 20.2 per cent of the respondents. Naval Hill and the Sand du Plessis Theatre are recognised by 24.8 per cent and 25.7 per cent respectively, whilst Soetdoring Nature Reserve is recognised by 30.3 per cent of the respondents. These figures clearly indicate that the respondents are not nearly fully aware of what Bloemfontein has to offer. The marketing of Bloemfontein therefore should be investigated, to find possible reasons for this ignorance.

4.4 The marketing of Bloemfontein

This section of the questionnaire was used to determine whether or not Bloemfontein is being marketed to the tour operators and whether or not these marketing efforts do indeed reach the tour operators.

Figure 5 shows that 91 per cent of the respondents indicate that no one has ever promoted Bloemfontein as a destination to them. 94 per cent of the respondents indicate that they have never received any marketing material on Bloemfontein, and an astonishing 99 per cent of the respondents indicate that they are not aware of any marketing activities to promote Bloemfontein. Mangaung Tourism should focus on marketing the city of Bloemfontein, with all its assets, to tour operators, as they are the providers of tourism products.

5 Conclusions

It is clear from this research that:

- The majority of tour operators in Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town do not regard Bloemfontein as a tourism destination in its own right;
- The majority of the tour operators regard Bloemfontein as a potential stopover destination;
- The tour operators do not currently include Bloemfontein in their itineraries due to insufficient knowledge which creates the perception of a city with a lack of interesting tourism products, beautiful scenery, etc; and
- More than 90 percent of the tour operators have never received any marketing materials about Bloemfontein as a tourist destination.

6 Recommendations

Bloemfontein should be marketed among national tour operators as a central and exciting stopover destination *en route* to other destinations. The Mangaung Municipality, which includes Bloemfontein, Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu, recently compiled a tourism data base listing the area's tourist attractions, accommodation facilities, entertainment opportunities and major events as part of their Integrated Development Planning Framework. This database should form the cornerstone of future marketing communications to tour operators and other interested parties, and should be included on Mangaung's interactive website in future. In addition, tourism marketers of Bloemfontein should regularly include national tour operators in their other marketing campaigns to create an awareness of Bloemfontein's total tourist offering. This could involve personally inviting tour operators to visit the city on guided tours to familiarise them with local tourist-related activities. This initiative should be complemented by the regular distribution of brochures and other marketing materials to the tour operators where specific tourism products and events are highlighted.

Besides increasing awareness, tourism marketers should also emphasise the following aspects of Bloemfontein in their marketing to national tour operators:

- Bloemfontein offers value for money to tourists in transit;
- The city offers sufficient, affordable and suitable accommodation to the majority of niche markets in South Africa;
- The inhabitants of Bloemfontein are widely regarded as friendly and interesting people; and
- Bloemfontein is perceived as one of the relatively safe tourism stopover destinations in South Africa.

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