

Defending a **co-country-branding strategy** for the **European Mediterranean**: Reasons and arguments

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Objectives | The slowdown of growth with regard to the rate of incoming international tourism in the large traditional tourist territories in relation to the rapid increase of the same in other emerging destinations is an indicator that requires a dynamic and an active sector's response by affected countries, such as Spain, France, Italy and Greece. Finding these four among the top tourist countries, according to the ranking prepared by the World Tourism Organization (WTO 2013) - both in terms of arrivals and international tourism revenue -, the analysis is focused on these territories, which will be called, as a whole, 'The European Mediterranean'.

In addition to the aforementioned slowdown in tourism growth rates, it can also be noted a number of characteristics common to all of them, such as increasing competition, mainly from countries such as China, Southeast Asia or Eastern European countries; changes in tourism demand, mostly a shift to more demanding tourists in terms of quality; concentration of tourism demand in other Member States of the European Union and in domestic tourism, compared to a reduced number of non-EU tourists; the preponderance of sun and beach tourism and the subsequent seasonality of tourism; and the existence of important centers of concentration of tourism, among others.

Thus, given these observations, the European Mediterranean countries should develop a strategy and implement actions to ensure they retain their competitiveness in tourism, by adapting what they offer to the requirements of the demand.

In this sense, as a performance measure, it is proposed the establishment of a joint country-branding strategy (creating the term Co-Country Branding or CCB). This innovative strategy will be focused on promoting an attractive tourist product, of high quality, able to adapt to the needs of tourists, allowing, in turn, the attraction of new segments, an expansion into distant markets and a level of satisfaction that will encourage loyalty and increased spending at the destination.

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Methodology | The proposed 'Co-Country-Branding' strategy has been defined by the observation of the changes in the tourism market and the projected trends, as well as the current situation in which the European Mediterranean and each of its countries find themselves. That is why it is twofold, making it an 'approximation/differentiation' strategy. In other words, through sun and sand tourism, an image of the European and Mediterranean countries as a common area is being transmitted, strengthening the image of quality that these destinations already possess, while simultaneously emphasizing the characteristics of each country that makes it unique, exotic and, in other words, different from the rest. Thus, the CCB not only allows for the obtention of benefits from synergies of collaboration (networking between destinations, exchanges of experience and know-how, ...) and the creation of a stronger brand through a joint effort by the countries, but it also contributes reaching the individual objectives of national marketing strategies. In this sense, the design of the CCB strategy allows for the unification of the efforts that each of the European Mediterranean countries currently carries out to achieve common goals to all of them, such as better positioning, access to distant markets, selling their country as 'singular' and 'authentic', and the promotion of their different identities, among others. Therefore, this new country-branding methodology is oriented toward meeting the needs of tourists, serving different market segments and niches, through a multi-motivational offer and boosting its image toward distant markets that are a lot more accessible through the cooperation of these countries in the integration of the region and brand - 'the European Mediterranean'.

Main results and contributions | The creation of a strong country brand, which acts as an umbrella for the individual brands of the different territories of which it is comprised, will help to achieve the revitalization of the individual brands and support the same, which, in turn, entails:

- i) The attraction of increased tourism demand (reflected in the number of visits), responding to the slow growth in international tourist arrivals in the Mediterranean area;
- ii) Better positioning on global trade;
- iii) Advantages of synergies resulting from the aggregation of individual countries under a common brand;
- iv) The possibility to benefit from cross-selling;
- v) A boost to the traditional sun and sand tourism, not so competitive in recent years;
- vi) Working in a more successful way toward meeting the needs of a new tourist typology, which profiles itself as a more dynamic tourist with a multi-motivational demand.

Limitations | This research is exploratory in nature, thus the observations are not conclusive, but merely indicative of possible future research. It will be required to go into much more depth in this field of study, which is not only extensive in terms of subjects, but also physically with regard to the analysed geographic extent.

Conclusions | The competition of a number of common elements shared by France, Spain, Italy and Greece characterizes them as traditionally touristic, but also as mature countries in this sector, requiring active and dynamic action strategies to meet the new challenges of the tourism market, such as globalization, increased competition due to the rise of emerging countries, changes in fashion, tastes and demands of consumers, etc.

Bearing in mind this state of affairs, the researchers propose the implementation of a 'Co-Country-Branding' strategy. That is, individually these countries, leaders in tourism in Europe, apply marketing strategies, called country-branding strategies, focused on the multi-motivational characteristics of the consumer. Throughout this work it is proposed a strategy of collaboration between these countries that form a homogeneous, clearly identified area, which has been called 'the Mediterranean Europe'. Through the implementation of this strategy, numerous advantages and benefits would be obtained that would alleviate, improve or prevent some of the tourist drawbacks and limitations to which Spain, France, Italy and Greece are currently facing. Some of the key benefits mentioned include:

- i) The differentiation from other Mediterranean countries, through increased tourism development and an offer characterized by safety for the visitor.
- ii) The differentiation from other destinations, due to a high quality multi-motivational supply.
- iii) The revitalization of national brands, already mature within the tourism sector.
- iv) The attainment of national marketing objectives: better positioning, attracting distant markets, etc.
- v) The use of the brand as a strategic asset (VRIO resource), increasing the values associated with the destination.

- vi) The brand as an element of differentiation and response to the trend of tourist homogenization boosted by globalization.
- vii) Penetration of more distant markets due to the wider reach of the macro-brand and the transmitted image.
- viii) The revitalization of the traditional Mediterranean sun and beach tourism, already mature, associating it with new experiences and the possibility of complementing it with other typologies of tourism.
- ix) The use of the trademark 'Mediterranean Europe', which integrates the wide range of the Mediterranean tourist offer.
- x) Alleviation of seasonal tourism offering attractive tourist typologies in non-summer seasons, promoting off-season holiday tourism and addressing strategic market segments.
- xi) Adapting to the needs of the demand, offering an experiential consumption of the tourist product by using a marketing strategy based on motivations, feelings and unique experiences.
- xii) The contribution to the achievement of the objective of European regional convergence, through the promotion of tourism in regions and localities with lower levels of GDP.

Taking all the above into account, it is clear there are many benefits and positive effects to be attained with the implementation of the innovative 'Co-Country-Branding' strategy for tourism in the European Mediterranean countries. Therefore, it is urged that all stakeholders involved in tourism and, above all, the decision-makers should act before it is too late. Given the fact that it was already observed the first signs of exhaustion of the tourist model and marketing strategy in these traditional European Mediterranean countries, we cannot stand by waiting for the rapid increase of competition to gradually take away market share, and finally the position of major tourist countries that they hold today.

References |

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