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**IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS RURAL PRODUCTS FOR
BRANDING OF AGRO-TOURISM DESTINATION**

**ZNAČAJ AUTOHTONIH RURALNIH PROIZVODA ZA
BRENDIRANJE AGROTURISTIČKE DESTINACIJE**

ABSTRACT

Attractive tourist destination is one that, through the creation of unique and competitive identity, positions well in the domestic and international market as a preferred destination for tourism, trade and investment. That branding, as a marketing and management process gives a particular product, service or organization a unique identity and thus it provides a way to be clearly and positively identified, and as such different and more recognizable from the competition. Also, some indigenous rural products can significantly contribute to building of recognition and thus improve the competitive position of the individual tourist destinations from which they originate.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the extent to which agrotourism economies are using local products to attract modern tourism consumers and for branding of a destination. In order to obtain relevant data, an empirical study will be carried out in Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem which will determine the importance and specificity of indigenous rural products of the region, as means of attracting tourist consumers in certain rural areas, as well as a significant tool for the creation of competitive advantage in the increasingly saturated tourism market. Furthermore, it shall be determined to what extent agrotourism economies present these products during their marketing activities.

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For the purposes of this paper a research type case study will be made (exploratory case study) which will include agrotourism economies from the rural area of Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem. Data will be collected by using the method of survey, semi-structured interviews, work on documents and the qualitative analysis of the data collected by use of description and comparative methods, methods of analysis, synthesis, specialization and generalization will be used as well.

Obtained findings will enable the definition of the main guidelines for the improvement of marketing activities of Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem as an agrotourism destination with an emphasis on its branding, particularly by the use of its indigenous rural tourism products. Results of the research will also contribute to a more efficient way of branding agrotourism economies and whole region as a unique agrotourism destination.

Keywords: branding, agrotourism destination, indigenous rural tourism products, Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem

SAŽETAK

Atraktivna turistička destinacija je ona koja se, kroz stvaranje jedinstvenog i konkurentnog identiteta, kvalitetno pozicionira na domaćem i inozemnom tržištu kao poželjna destinacija za turizam, trgovinu i investicije. Upravo branding, kao marketinški i menadžerski proces daje pojedinom proizvodu, usluzi, organizaciji jedinstveni identitet i na taj mu način omogućuje da bude jasno i pozitivno identificiran i kao takav različit i prepoznatljiviji od konkurencije. Također, pojedini autohtoni ruralni proizvodi mogu značajno pridonijeti u izgradnji prepoznatljivosti, a samim time i unaprjeđenju konkurentne pozicije pojedine turističke destinacije iz koje potječu.

Stoga je svrha ovoga rada analizirati u kojoj mjeri agroturistička gospodarstva koriste autohtone proizvode za privlačenje suvremenih turističkih potrošača i za potrebe brendiranja destinacije. S ciljem dobivanja relevantnih podataka, provesti će se empirijsko istraživanje na području Slavonije, Baranje i Srijema kojim će se utvrditi važnost i specifičnost autohtonih ruralnih proizvoda navedenog područja, kao sredstva privlačenja turističkih potrošača u određeno ruralno područje, ali i značajnog oruđa za stvaranje konkurentskih prednosti na sve zasićenijem turističkom tržištu. Nadalje, utvrditi će se u kojoj mjeri agroturistička gospodarstva ističu upravo te proizvode prilikom svojih marketinških aktivnosti.

Za potrebe ovoga rada biti će izrađena studija slučaja istraživačkog tipa (exploratory case study) koja će obuhvatiti agroturistička gospodarstva s ruralnog područja Slavonije, Baranje i Srijema. Podaci će se prikupiti korištenjem metode anketiranja, polustrukturiranog intervjua i rada na dokumentaciji, a tijekom kvalitativne analize prikupljenih podataka, uz korištenje metode deskripcije i komparativne metode, koristiti će se metode analize, sinteze, specijalizacije i generalizacije.

Dobivene spoznaje omogućiti će definiranje glavnih smjernica za unapređivanje marketinških aktivnosti Slavonije, Baranje i Srijema kao agroturističke destinacije s naglaskom na njezino brendiranje, posebice korištenjem njezinih autohtonih ruralnih turističkih proizvoda. Rezultati istraživanja ujedno će doprinijeti učinkovitijem načinu brendiranja agroturističkih gospodarstva, ali i cijele regije kao jedinstvene agroturističke destinacije.

Ključne riječi: brendiranje, agroturistička destinacija, autohtoni ruralni turističkih proizvodi, Slavonija, Baranja i Srijem.

1. Introduction

Globalisation is a megatrend of modern tourist market. Global economy trends have unified local, regional and nacional markets into the global one, erasing countries borders and uniqueness. The same trends, combined with the undeniable marketing fluctuations and competitive pressures, have imposed new rules of game, conduct of behaviour and doing business, erasing the cultural and social differences. It could be said that tourism is an originator, stimulus and initiator of globalisation, primary because of the tourists travelling and lodging outside their domicile and the bonding and integration of tourists, tourists workers and local population.

Changes caused by the globalisation processes modify the way of behaviour of tourist consumers, but also directly effect the tourist activities providers. This means that the most popular tourist destinations today are the ones that provide tourists with different activities which emphasize local traditions and adapt to the interests and needs of constantly increasing tourists demands. Indigenous, originality and difference of a certain tourist region enables its tourists destinations to maintain their marketing competitiveness, founded on the principles of sustainable development (Pavlič, 2004, 226). Those not willing to adapt to the new changes will have significantly higher investments in promotion of their quality and other advantages, because the modern tourist accomodations offer must have, beside the economical attraction, also the abundance of offered activities, providing a guest with opportunities to learn about local culture and to improve his health and well-being, thus benefiting his individuality, psychic and physical development and social adaptation (Jadrešić, 2001).

Vrtiprah (2006) states that the changes in behaviour of tourist consumers, brought by influence of globalisation processes, can be seen in new additional desires and modified previous perceptions of the tourist product quality. Tourists more and more tend to seek specific forms of tourist offer, becoming more demanding, travelling more frequently but for a shorter period, being well-informed, unpredictable, seeking an individual approach to customer, quality of service and richer experiences. Considering that the tourist demand became global, its increasing mobility caused higher concordance of tourist consumers preferences, creating a certain global life-style, with similarities in preferences to types of tourist products, which leads to a trend of increased standardization and homogeneity of a tourist market (Vanhove 2005, prema Čavlek 2011). This directly effects the tourist market, which shows the emergence of stardardized products and tendency toward branding of products, thus aiming to satisfy tourists demands and comply to the trend of relatively high loyalty to product brand which tourists show, placing their preferences toward pleasant surroundings, vacation experiences and high-quality service rather than the location of tourist destination itself. Branding in particular,through its marketing and managment processes, shapes the unique identity of a certain product, service or organisation, thus giving it a clear and positive identification, rendering it distinctive and distinguishable among its competitors. Branding is a process of creation of a destination identity by promoting its characteristics, particulary its authenticity.

Considering that the indigenous food products are fundamental part of culture and tradition of a certain area, they can significantly contribute in building that area recognition, thus improving the competitive position of the tourist destination from which they originate. The region of Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem, having a vast quantity of indigenous products, certainly has a lot of potential for creating a tourist brand which will secure the international

recognition, attract the foreign investments and skilled work force and contribute to the tourist and economical development.

2. Theoretical considerations

The rural area offer is considerably heterogeneous, with individual rural tourist economies having broadly different levels of development, equipment and ability to provide tourist services, in most cases unsufficiently attractive to specific tourist market segment. Therefore, a singular rural homestead or rural-tourism enterprise project does not have sufficient marketing strenght, which demands the neccesity of development of the rural agrotourism destination.

Theory of tourism states that the definition of „a tourist destination“ primary means „a geographical space which differs from the tourist permanent residence, which provides tourist activities and consumption of tourist products, therefore it can be defined as 'a location of tourist consumption'“ (Čavlek, 2011, 391). A tourist destination is considered to be wide, integrated space, which builds its tourist identity on the concept of experience-giving cumulative attractions combined with the additional tourist infrastructure inside singular tourist area. A tourist destination is shaped according to tourists' wishes, preferances, interests and needs.“ (Vukonić, Čavlek, 2001, 389). Therefore, its purpose is to form and organize larger space as a tourist area, thus providing better utilization of space, rising the quality of tourist resources, providing more complex offer by combining several different tourist attractions, and giving opportunities to create recognizable identity on the tourist market. According to Demonja and Ružić (2010), the basic factors of tourist destination are:

- attractiveness (nature beauty and climate, cultural and social distinctions, attitude toward tourists, infrastructure, price levels, shopping opportunities, capacities for sport, recreation, education and similar). Such area must have offer which will satisfy the needs of visitors of different market segments, according to their age, sex, social or professional status
- quality of nature, and
- accessibility

Considering this, agrotourism destination can be viewed as an complex of mutually connected elements which combine attractions, activities, vacation specifics, supporting services, availability and distribution of tour packages (Hajdaš Dončić and Štefanec, 2006). Demonja and Ružić (2010) state that defining agrotourism destination should follow this criteria:

- it is a unit of space functional for tourism, having all tourist and other neccesary characteristics,
- it is a complex, unified tourist product placed on market to attract customers, and
- it is a place of intensive tourist gathering, caused by different benefits which it provides to them, which form a foundation of its tourist attractiveness.

When evaluating a destination, particular importance is placed on its attractiveness, which stems from achieving a certain level of quality, manifesting in attractiveness of its individual tourist resources. Hajdaš Dončić and Štefanec (2006) list the basic variables which form the destination attractiveness, being the main elements of tourist product and effecting the agrotourism destination development. Such elements are (Hajdaš Dončić and Štefanec, 2006, 30-31):

- elements of accommodations offer: comfort of accommodations, qualities of services and food, provided facility infrastructure, surrounding landscape quality;
- elements of destination's tourist product;
- ecological elements: climate, beauty of nature and vistas, architectural accord and cleanliness (balconies, windows, gardens);
- social and cultural elements: hospitability and knowledge of foreign languages of locals;
- elements of offer: quality of tourist objects outside of accommodation facility, convenience of different offers (excursions and such);
- infrastructural objects: accessibility by road, quality of communication networks, quality of local public transport;
- promotional elements: quality of signs giving directions to attractions, availability of informations, quality of information desks;
- informations system: connection to all destination network nodes.

Agrotourism destination with the strong, recognisable, authentic and mutually connected attractions, products and services will have more market success than the one which presents unconnected and dispersed products and services. Increasing competitiveness among destinations conditions the development policy toward the tourist destination approach, which establishes an attractive, diverse and integral product, recognised in the international market and strong enough to attract potential tourist demand. Modern conditions demand that the sustainable market advantage of tourist destination must be based on uniqueness and authenticity of its resources and attractions, ecological preservice and positive attitude towards the quality of environment, quality and specifics of tourist infrastructure and superstructure, quality of human resources, creative and innovative solutions in marketing and destination promotion system, the different interactions of all of this elements (Kunst in Čorak, 2010), and creating the destination brand which will distinguish a certain destination among its competitors.

According to Kotler and Keller (2008, 443), a brand is mark, name, term, sign, symbol, design, shape, or a combination of all of the above, which purpose is to identify goods or services of one company (manufacturer, distributor, seller) or group, and to differentiate it from its competitors, while branding is defined as continuous process of creating a strong brand, meaning that it is a marketing and management process which gives unique identity to a certain product, service or organisation, thus providing it with the clear and positive identity, more distinctive and distinguishable than its competitors (Bolfek, 2012, 365).

Considering the fact that the indigenous food products make a vital part of regional culture and tradition, they can greatly contribute to recognition building and be one of the key factor in the regional destination brand. In the era of increasing globalisation, competitive struggle for market share more and more reveals values of two types of products: ecological (organic) and indigenous.

(Bukvić and associates, 2007, 17). Therefore this paper will accentuate the role of indigenous products in the process of destination brand creation, on the example of Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem region.

3. Research methodology

Having the gathering of relevant data as a main goal, and considering the relevant characteristics of a case study⁶ as a qualitative research method, an exploratory case study was selected as the most appropriate for this paper theme. Case study had a goal of researching how much agrotourism economies use indigenous products for purpose of attracting modern tourists consumers and destination branding.

According to the defined goal, the basic research questions were:

1. Which are the basic indigenous rural products of Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem region?
2. How much the destination management (County tourist bureaus) in Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem region use indigenous rural products for tourist destination branding?
3. How much are the indigenous rural products present in the gastronomic offer of the agrotourism economies.

The research was conducted during the period from February 20th till March 26th 2014. The research pattern scope included 15% of the agrotourism economies⁷ and six of County tourist bureaus in Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem region. The data was collected by methods of polling, deep-probing interviews and documentation research, while the qualitative analysis of the collected data included methods of description and comparison, as well as methods of analysis, syntesis, specialization and generalization.

4. Research results and conclusions

Modern tourist demands place more and more emphasis on the original or indigenous products in gastronomy and oenology. Conducted research shows that all of the surveyed agrotourism economies (15%) in Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem region promote significance and value of indigneous croatian traditional products. Among the most famous croatian traditional products with controlled origin, owners of homestead economies particulary held in esteem Slavonian kulen sausage and Slavonian home-made slivovich brandy. They also mentioned various meals prepared by original recipes, such as: chobanac (shephard's soup), carp baked on a stick and fish paprikash stew. Besides that, it should be mentioned that their tourist offers include their own home-made agrocultural products. Listing their products, they have mainly mentioned original red paprika powder (both hot and sweet variants), honey, fruit

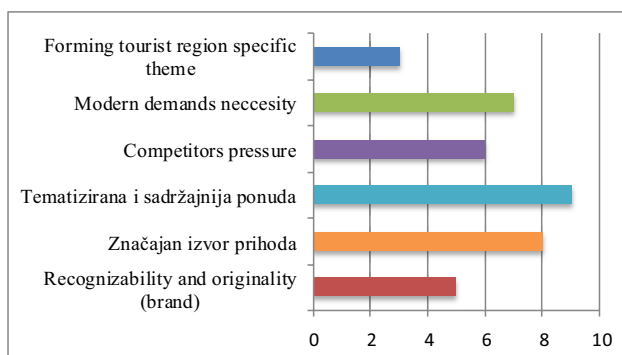
⁶ Qualitative „working research“ case study usually consists of researching the questions about one or more cases inside a given system (Creswell, 2007), while the study subject can be an individual, group, organisation, local community, whole culture or any system considered to be separate entity (Halmi, 2005), possessing the information and characteristics relevant to the study theme (Tkalac Verčić and associates, 2010). Case study directs significant attention to the individual participants, having the goal to understand their point of view regarding the case (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2007), and using the qualitative methodology methods during the data analysis. Therefore, case study enables a researcher to obtain precise and wholesome information about one or more cases, thus being an empirical research which observes a phenomena inside its context (Creswell, 2007), requiring an approach in which researcher has a goal of detail understanding of one or comparison of several researched cases, using the different sources and information-gathering methods. Yin (2007) distinguishes three basic types of case studies: explanatory, exploratory and descriptive.

⁷ Establishment of number of registered tourism rural family economies (homesteads) was done by consulting the database of registered agrotourism economies in the Republic of Croatia. Since that processed data regarding the real number of registered rural tourism economies for 2013. does not exist, balanced indicator have been data considering 2007., processed and published in 2008. According to that data, Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem region had 58 registered rural tourism economies, while Istria county region had 64.

liqueurs and brandies, and preserved meat products such as kulinova seka sausage, pork rinds and others.

Further research results, shown in *picture 1.*, show that the main reason of implementing the indigenous tourist products in the rural tourist economy homestead offer is to expand the offer and to give it a „local theme“. 88,8% of participants stated that the indigenous products greatly contributed to their income from tourism. Slightly less percentage of 77,7% stated that implementation of indigenous gastronomy and oenology products suits the modern tourist demands and attracts tourist to a particular region. Realizing that the traditional indigenous products have a diversification effect on the tourist map of the European Union, 66,7% of participants stated this as a main reason for including the traditional gastronomical products of Slavonian region into their tourist offer. Finally, according to the research results, it is conclusive that the economies owners think that implementation of the traditional gastronomy ensures originality and recognisability of both their own and regional tourist offer.

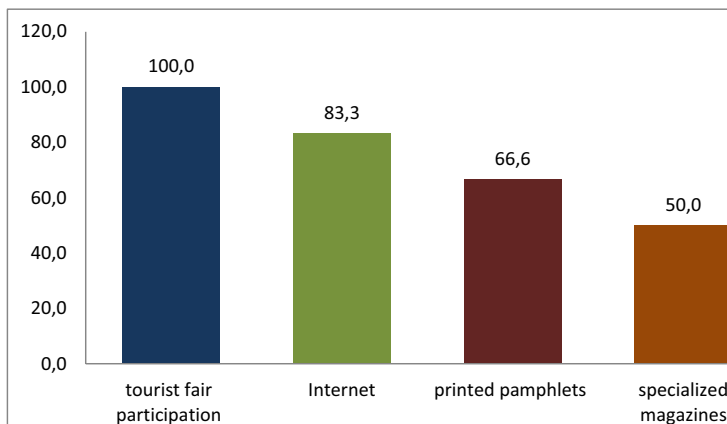
Picture 1 Main reasons for implementing indigenous products in agrotourism offer in the agrotourism economies owners perceptions



Source: Author according to the research data

Further analysis of research data, gathered by polling the employees of County tourism bureaus in Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem region, represented the scope of the marketing activities which tourism bureaus use in the promotion of indigneous products present in agrotourism offer. Concluding results show that all of participants have in some way actively promoted the indigneous products of their region. All of them (100%) stated that one of the best promotional methods for the indigenous rural products is participation in a tourist promotion fair, which yields its high results by having an advantage of direct contact with the potential customers at the fair stall. Also, 83,3% of participants use Internet for most promotional activities, for reason of its mass promotional effect. Beside Internet, 66,6% of participants also use printed promotional pamphlets. 50% of participants also use a paid advertisement in the specialized tourist magazines (*picture 2.*) Stanojević (2011.) states that the recent researches by companies Arbitron and Edison's research, conducted under the joint research project called „Infinite Dial“, shown that the Internet has become highly important to the general public, and that the people are more willing to give up television than Internet. Therefore it is important that the destination management organizations fully utilize all the opportunities that Internet provides when promoting the indigneous products, aiming for the best agrotourism destination branding by using its well-known individual traditional indigneous products.

Picture 2 Media presence in promotion of the indigneous rural products



Source: Author according to the research data

5. Summary

In the increasingly more demanding tourist market, agrotourism economies should place their hopes in the traditional indigneous products, which improve their offers and raise their profits. Even more important is that agrotourism economies work together with the relevant local and government destination management organisations, trying to diversify their offer and create an unique image, or brand, which will set them apart among „the sea“ of similar destinations.

Research conducted for this paper demonstrates that the agrotourism economies in Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem region recognize the importance of indigenous gastronomy and oenology. That has a particular merit today, when the modern demand conditions make all other destinations, regardless of their relative distance, potential competitors. This has a serious repercussions on business conduct and eventual profits. Although the agrotourism economies owners haven't yet fully recognized the importance of branding and possibility to improve their brand using the indigneous products, they still understand that using the indigneous croatian products can help them in „beating“ the competitors and improving their offer.

Research conducted in the County tourism bureaus shows awareness and using the opportunities given by the indigneous products promotion. It is used to strenghten the unique identity, giving it as clear and precise distinction as possible, thus presenting the destination differently and more recognizable than its competitors. But, regardless to the fact that the tourism bureaus managers recognized the Internet and other medias as the most effective promotional tools, it is also important to work on co-operation with all co-creators of the regional agrotourism offer, and to use tourist visitors themselves as creators and promoters of agrotourism destination brand.

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