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Identity, image and tourism

a case study in strategic branding of the region Veluwezoom

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development and application of a research method to investigate differences between the actual and preferred qualities of a region in the perspective of local stakeholders in the leisure chain and expectations and valuation by the visitors. Regional suppliers and related stakeholders in the Dutch region Veluwezoom are not sufficiently aware of their image among consumers and their expectations in relation to regional attractiveness. The results underline the importance of bridging the gap between the perception and expectations by the guests and the offer of the touristic suppliers in the Veluwezoom. The focus is on product development and branding.

Key words: region branding, leisure scan, stakeholders and visitor expectations

Introduction of the research project

One of the main challenges of current regional policy is to market the attractiveness of a particular area, thereby increasing tourist visits and subsequently revenue. Today the branding of places and regions is turning into a business where experiences are combined with local qualities to commodificate this to touristic products. The growing competition between places and regions results in a general acceptance that promotion is a valid activity for public sector management agencies and tourism boards (Burgess, 1982). The popular copying of successes elsewhere and the apparent disappearance of the typical 'couleur locale' seems to result in a more uniform offer.

The purpose of this research is to focus specifically upon the application of branding to a region by using the identity and image as a source for innovation in order to cope with the expectations of the visiting guests, proper planning and management.

As encounters between regions and their visitors take place through perceptions and images, the application of regional marketing is dependant on cooperation, communication and management. Marketing therefore is the conscious and planned practice of representation and signification, which in turn is the starting process for applying region branding (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993). In place and region marketing the customer orientation would have to be how the visitor encounters the place, how they live in, how they make sense of it, which symbolic, physical or other elements they evaluate in order to make their assessment of the place. Interactions with these locations occur through direct experience of the environment or indirectly by the media representations (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001). As a result the image of an area results in a mental map that people create to allow them to navigate through the complex surrounding reality. Branding deals with these mental images and focuses on people's perceptions and images and puts them at the core of planned activities, designed to shape the region and its future. In creating and managing a brand in relation with local tourist products, it becomes an attempt to influence and treat those mental images in a way that seems attractive to actual circumstances and future needs of the region. A brand embodies a whole set of physical attributes, socio-psychological aspects and beliefs which are related to the unique selling propositions of a product or region.

Building a brand of the region Veluwezoom (see the map in figure 1) as an application of a regional identity research method is the purpose of this case study.

A renewed interest in authentic experiences, heritage and nature based leisure makes it relevant for local entrepreneurs in tourism to use the regional characteristics as part of the USP's for branding and coproduction in tourist concepts. In doing so the added value that branding attributes to a region delivers functional benefits and attracts consumers to visit and buy (Jones, 1986).

The region Veluwezoom is characterised by the dominance of a variety of nature landscapes with a high conservation status and consists of a large scale forest originated by ice pushed ridges and the natural gradient to the riverplane the IJssel. In the vicinity of the city of Arnhem the little villages along the eastern border of this region are typical.



Figure 1. Map of the region Veluwezoom (part of the Netherlands, EU).

Regional suppliers and related stakeholders in the Veluwezoom are not sufficiently aware of their image amongst consumers and the expectations and demands of these guests in relation to regional attractiveness. The local entrepreneurs are relatively small organisations which still have to develop in response to the changing needs of the customer. However innovation in their business is slow and the environmental quality is under pressure. The National Park Veluwezoom is a key factor in tourism but also a vulnerable one which requires visitormangement (see figure 2) in order to achieve sustainable tourism development. Ideally it should be possible for local government and landowners to provide a broader range of quality visitor experience opportunities that in turn maintain an appropriate level of resource protection (Jubenville and Twight, 1993).

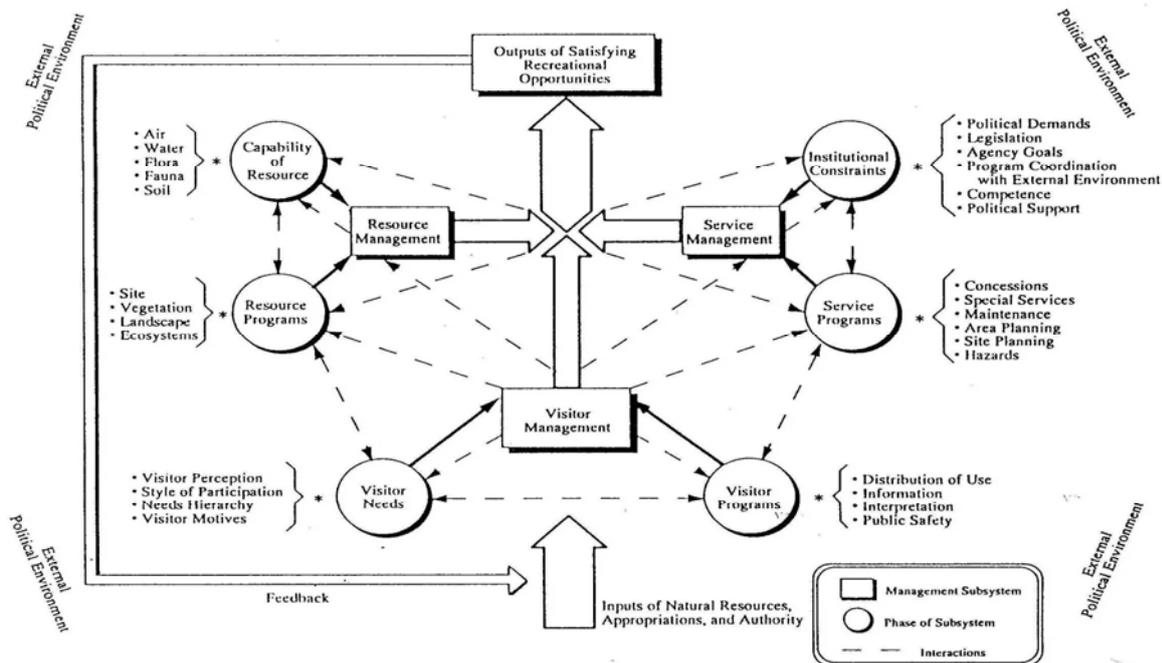


Figure 2. Visitormangement in the outdoor Recreation System Model. (Jubenville and Twight, 1993).

Objective

In view of the above the purpose of this research was to systematically identify three aspects: the image of regional core qualities among regional stakeholders, the perception amongst leisure consumers and the crucial match between expectations and actual experience. With these aspects successful tourism concepts can be designed. The importance of the regional image of the consumer in combination with the evaluated USP's of the Veluwezoom-characteristics enables more insight in the tourist journey. The assumed core qualities which makes the area attractive from the viewpoint of the regional suppliers compared with the expectations and experiences of consumers delivers the possibility to match and makes visible incidental gaps between them. This information enables the possibility of distinctiveness in supply and furthermore also specialize the design of touristic concepts with this Veluwezoom DNA. The limited awareness of the customer's image by the local stakeholders in the leisure chain can thus be strengthened.

Research approach

In order to reach the objective a research method has been designed and applied in the case study area. The research approach follows the steps below:

- a survey of the regional identity characteristics.
- in a desk research the identity of the area is established by the description of eight elements: location, history, exterior, scale, intangible elements, symbols, conduct and communication (Noordman, 2004).

The results are listed by their typical identity in a selected list in which each is shortly described together with a colour slide with its characteristic images. This research enables a regional driven analyses since a complete description of this information is missing.

- perception of the regional image and the target rating of the core qualities by stakeholders. The selected participants consists of representative stakeholders in the leisure chain (in total 23 persons connected with: a book shop, hotel, campsite, government, tourism board, land owner, nature organisation, NGO, entrepreneur in outdoor-leisure, etc.). The selection of this group of stakeholders is determined by their regional importance, active membership in the association of entrepreneurs in tourism, representation of the governance and cooperation. In an individual tests-session the stimulus consisted of 43 charts with a short description and followed by a test in which a set of colour slides (without the corresponding sentence) depicted the same identities. Included were a couple of false identity representations to check the reliability of the answers. By rating of importance both sets delivered a short list of the ten most typical identities from the viewpoint of each participant. All short lists resulted in a definite list of 18 selected top identities which are called 'core qualities'. One week later the stakeholders marked these core qualities by a questionnaire considering two perspectives: the actual state and the preferred state. In analysing the answers a leisure scan was made (Flooren, 2007) which showed the results of these sessions in a figure (see figure 3).
- the region's image among consumers and their expectations with regard to the region. At random visitors (N= 265) are asked about their motives, image aspects and expectations of the Veluwezoom and their actual experiences during the period of July- October 2007

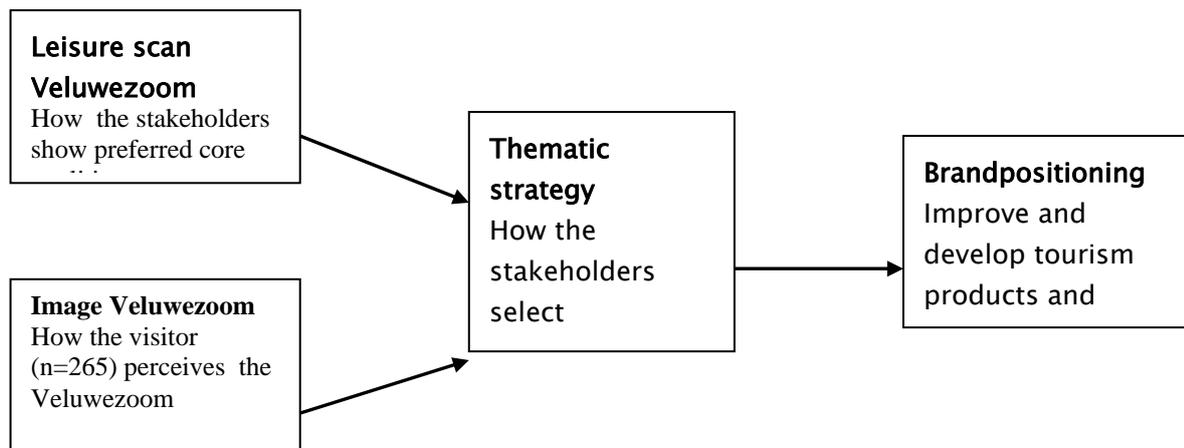
(see table 1 and 2) according to the customer journey approach (Voss and Zomerdijk, 2007) .

- match and mismatch analyses dealing with supply and demand.
- confrontation workshop to furnish the brand with a thematical product approach.

The results of this research project offer:

- a leisure scan with a valuation and rating of core qualities(presented in figure 3).
- a set of conclusions on contemporary tourism practices in this region.
- recommendations and regional driven contents for the brandpositioning.

In the following scheme the order of the research delivers input to build the brand.



Scheme 1. Research steps in order to enhance brand positioning

The research among stakeholders resulted in the valuation of the core qualities of the Veluwezoom . The confrontation between this outcome and the perceived image of visitors results in 3 types of research information. At first a confirmation of the match made between the leisure scan and similar perceived image results, which enables a thematical approach with a focus on the development and reinforcement of products and services. The mismatch between the results of the leisure scan and the image of the Veluwezoom amongst visitors delivers extra information which give input for the second type: the possibility of innovation in a high potential theme which meets the visitors' expectations. The third type of information denies the preferred core qualities and perceived image of the visitor and will inspire changes in the supply. Workshops with a various range of stakeholders (n>60) in mixed groups make use of these three types of information to promote the building of interesting new themes which will focus on improvement, development and creation of innovative products and services for visitors. The outcome of suggested themes from the workshops results in a set of attractive pearls presented in a poster presentation. Each individual stakeholder makes his/her preference manifest by choosing a favourite theme. By counting all the individual choices a selection of themes unfolds which indicate the needed direction of improvement or design in tourism products and services.

Results and perspectives

The leisure scan (figure 3) of the identified core qualities confirm the actual importance of typical natural resources and related activities from the viewpoint of local stakeholders except the qualities of the beaches and watersport facilities. The role of story telling with sagas, myths and legends is not highly preferred. Also the actual importance of local products is denied. The ambitions (shown in the target situation) indicate more attention in improvement and innovation on the core qualities: hospitality, local products, comfortable accommodations and culinary products. The local entrepreneurs are responsible for realising these ambitions. The government will be addressed to realize the ambitions which need nature- and landscape management with the related core qualities: variety of landscapes, beaches, heritage, accessibility & infra structure and active sport & outdoor.

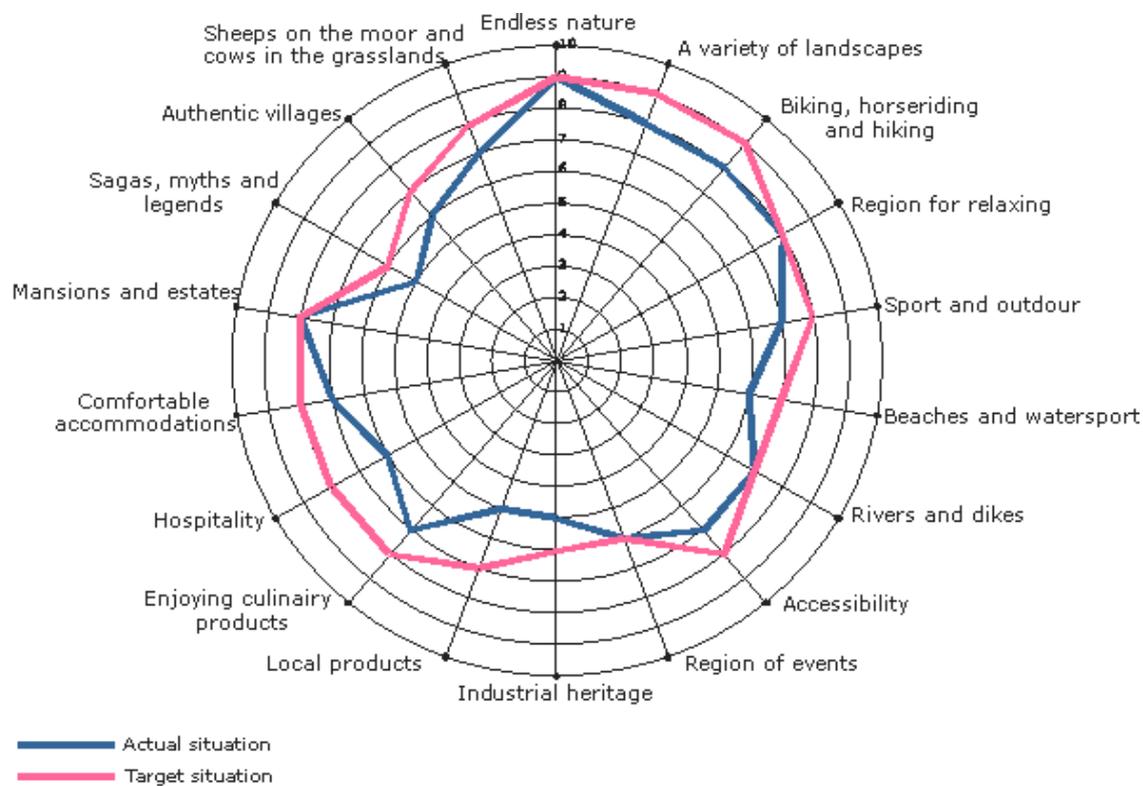


Figure 3. Leisure scan of the identified core qualities of the Veluwezoom by stakeholders (Bouwmeester, 2007).

The leisure scan offers information about the actual and target situation and provide a compass which focus the direction of future activities from the perspective of local stakeholders (Flooren, 2007). The stated identity of a region as formulated by a set of core qualities, all derived from the viewpoint of the tourism industry, provides a valuable resource. The addition of memorable experiences will provide more value in the supply chain and its concepts for tourists, recreational use and a pleasant environment for residential use. If we combine these concepts by blending the authentic concepts as above, we can lengthen the stay and increase consumption. Together this will reinforce the development and the propositioning of the brand Veluwezoom.

Table 1. Motives of the three types of visitors in the Veluwezoom (Schulenburg,2007)

Aspect	% Visitor	% Day-tripper	% Tourist	% Total	N
Sociability	22.2	16.4	30.6	25.3	265
Relaxation	57.4	32.8	68.1	57	265
Water recreation	7.4	6	4.9	5.7	265
Special day-attraction	24.1	35.8	3.5	15.8	265
Special overnight stay	0	1.5	13.2	7.5	265
Bikeing- and walking opportunities	48.1	25.2	56.3	53.6	265
Other active recreation	9.3	6	6.3	6.8	265
Visiting family&friends	9.3	0	4.9	4.5	265
Places of interest	13	6	11.8	10.6	265
Quiet & solitude	38.9	34.3	47.9	42.6	265
Wild animals	16.7	13.4	11.8	13.2	265
Appropriate for children	22.2	32.8	27.8	27.9	265
Distance from own residence	35.2	32.8	13.9	23	265
Nature/landscape	37	37.3	53.5	46	265

Table 2. Image-aspects of the Veluwezoom by three types of visitors (Schulenburg, 2007).
(meaning of the marks: 1 = high preferred aspect and 3 is low preferred aspect).

Aspects	Visitor	Day-tripper	Tourist	Totaal	N
Good price-quality relation	2.42	2.46	2.31	2.36	233
Pleasant excitement	2.42	2.72	2.61	2.6	228
Suitable for short breaks	1.82	1.94	1.77	1.82	244
Suitable for long holidays	2.31	2.49	2.43	2.42	237
Events	2.67	3.03	2.91	2.9	212
Quiet/solitude	1.59	1,76	1,83	1,77	244
Adventure	2,29	2.19	2.38	2.31	218
Watersport area	2.72	3.1	2.95	2.95	196
Attractions	2.59	2.64	2.65	2.63	207
(Culture) Heritage	2.66	2.64	2.63	2.64	211
Appropriate for children	1.91	1.9	1.91	1.9	231
Many biking and walking opportunities	1.44	1.58	1.53	1.53	251
Good accommodations	2.45	2.39	1.93	2.14	233
Hospitality	2.21	2.15	1.93	2.03	241
Beautiful nature	1.3	1.54	1.49	1.46	248
Pleasant for everybody	2.16	2.33	2.2	2.23	231
Area with a typical atmosphere	2.07	2.37	2.13	2.18	239

Nice villages and cities	2.36	2.43	2.32	2.36	244
Appropriate for a day-trip	1.96	2	2.04	2.01	239
Shopping facilities	2.89	2.69	2.58	2.67	225

The image of the Veluwezoom is described by three types of visitors. With a short duration within 2 hours the real ‘visitor’ is distinguished from the so called ‘day-tripper’ whose stay is longer than 2 hours without an overnight stay. The ‘tourist’ visits the Veluwezoom in combination with an overnight stay in the neighbourhood.

All visitors prefer to visit a natural environment (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989) and this is confirmed in the list of motives in table 1. A region with a variety of interesting places and experiences with typical qualities in which the variety of nature is dominant, as is the case in the Veluwezoom, may attract and retain the visitor longer. It is remarkable that the opportunity to visit the extended possibilities for watersport, as seen in table 2, is not recognized as a typical preferred image-aspect. The high quality of watersport possibilities is more or less unknown to the public. Surveys held amongst sailing guests recreating on the river IJssel (see figure 1) and Rhederlaag (large watersport area) seems to confirm that those visitors ignore the touristic opportunities on land and choose other locations ignoring all highly preferred aspects in table 2. To connect the leisure possibilities between land- and waterrelated activities provide an interesting opportunity. The combination of these activities is yet to be explored.

The thematic strategy with local stakeholders was realized in a workshop which combined the results of the leiscan and the research of the visitors ‘image Veluwezoom’. Distinctive themes were selected to meet the expectations of the visitors. Combinations of outdoor leisure in the various landscapes, a year round agenda of events which make use of the highly appreciated core qualities and combinations of cultural heritage in a short break concept were popular themes. In a network approach the stakeholders became convinced that more cooperation between entrepreneurs, local government, tourism boards and a knowledge centre is needed. The feasibility of brand positioning is dependant on the improvement and development of products and services, which make use of the selected themes.

Additional sites, visitor centers, heritage trails and events in addition to catering- and shopping options may delay the tourist departure. Extending the visitor stay can be accomplished by diversifying the tourism product and by offering appropriate accommodation. Sustainable use of the regional qualities may make authentic experiences not only remarkable, but will lead to an increase in tourism visits and consequently a more valuable brand. For a successful branding and combined innovations in tourism, the perceived image of the region in the mind of entrepreneurs and their related actions needs to be combined with the regional products and services. With the outcome of this research, the identity and image of a region can be investigated and offer a source for innovation in order to build distinctive tourism concepts. To become a hospitality region which meets the demand of the customer, this information can be more effective when embedded in the local context in order to produce the right quality. The use of regional core qualities in tourism packages can provide a sound basis for a competitive strategy which will support local entrepreneurs in synergy with government in their combined action.

Conclusions and discussion

The developed research method provides insight in the differences between actual and preferred qualities of the region Veluwezoom. The leisure scan presents the ambition of the stakeholders and shows a kind of compass in possible future developments to reinforce the identity in product development and brand positioning. Although the most preferred image-aspects by the visitors correspond with the outcome of the stakeholders analyses, the leisure motives offer a source for more regional oriented product-market combinations. For a better understanding of the expectations and valuation by the visitor there is a need to expand the research of the tourist journey and the personal experiences with a qualitative approach during a complete year. The focus of this case study on the relative small subregion Veluwezoom can become of more importance to combine this with the region Veluwe since visitors cross the borders to enjoy their leisure.

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