

Wonderful Outdoors Wallonia: WOW!

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Case Study Group One: Product Development

Introduction

Wallonia is the French-speaking federal region of Belgium, situated between Flanders in the north and France in the South-West. Luxembourg and Germany share its eastern border. It has its own government, parliament and laws. The urban north (around the Sambre and Meuse rivers), is where most of the population lives with associated economic activity. The heavily forested Ardennes hills are in the south, is less densely populated and a centre for outdoors activities.

Wallonia's economy was based on mining and heavy industry, but after the World Wars the industry fell into decline and the region has turned to services and tourism to create jobs and bring wealth. Also a recipient of EU funding for their developing economy, this has enabled vast amount of capital investment in tourism product and infrastructure, employs 60,000 people and supports 42 tourism offices with approx. 200 staff in the region alone.

In Belgium, tourism is an exclusive competency of the three regions: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. In 2012, Belgium received a record 6.2 million international visitors in hotels and similar establishments, of whom 48% (3.0 million) visited Flanders, 13% (0.8 million) Wallonia and 39% (2.4 million) Brussels. The number of foreign tourists to Belgium in 2012 increased by 0.2% overall on 2011. The leading foreign markets for Belgium are the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom and Germany. Domestic visitors totalled 3.9 million in 2012, of whom 59% visited Flanders, 25% Wallonia and 16% Brussels.

Source: OECD (2014), "Belgium", in OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2014, OECD Publishing.

For further information

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/tour-2014-en>

What we observed during our visits across Wallonia

The region is made up of complex political, cultural and historical relationships and nuances that impact on a range of critical communication channels including policy, campaigns and even the colour of tourism signs; all this can only hinder decision-making, strategic development, branding, communication and how customer-focused an organisation could be. Being a developing economy, the destination communication is centred on printed marketing collateral, with little evidence of widespread adoption of digital marketing. The content is very linear, with a traditional and functional feel: the messages are all about getting from A to B, with few compelling or inspirational messages about the region itself to attract visitors, or many links to wider networks. Perhaps some of this was lost in translation as almost all of the collateral was in French, Dutch or German, which would indicate limited reach and ambition into neighbouring territories. A surprise too, given the UK is the third largest inbound market.

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The EU has enabled enviable tourism infrastructure, that has resulted in the most incredible array of outdoor provision the group had ever seen. What was not clear was how much of this development was based on demand or was even customer-led. We were impressed with the cycling provision however, and in particular the e-bike development that was enabling supplies to reach new market segments and extend the offer.

We were unable to reach a conclusion however, on whether or not return on investment (ROI) or value of money is being achieved as occupancy rates and visitors numbers were shared, but not always the capacity (apart from Les Auberges de Jeunesse that quoted an average of 40% capacity). This presents a big problem in the long-term as there is the expectation that the funding pot is deep, and the sustainability of an enterprise does not necessarily need to be argued.

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In the online world that enables real-time customer interaction and booking, the tourism brochure is a blunt instrument.

We have identified two areas we believe are where the market needs to pause on its headlong rush to develop even more product, and focus on the following two areas;

A: Market Gaps and Duplication of Information

Wallonia boasts an impressive portfolio of high-investment in outdoor-experiences. Each of these products is promoted by an abundance of brochures that duplicate messages, which may confuse consumers and dilute the offer. There are few examples of links with digital media, even though these are being used in some instances. Initially it appeared too, that the promotion of cycling in Wallonia is integrated, with maps, signage and clearly defined routes. However, as the week progressed it became evident that duplication, (not collaboration) has resulted in a surplus of maps, mapping software and brochures. For example, we learnt about Greenways, RAVeL, Chemis du Rail, IDETA, EuroVelo, Node Networks, Eurocycling routes, Vennbahn, VeloTour, all of which had their own collateral and access points for potential visitors. We were not aware of any evaluation or what the suppliers planned to do next with this array of marketing channels.

The trend in developed markets is to reduce the amount of off-line collateral due to cost, high wastage, lack of book-ability and the inflexibility of this medium. To reach a wider audience (UK for example), developing digital marketing resources, access and product book ability is the way to go; working to complement brochures, greater collaboration and

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online presence that offers engagement, is more cost effective, builds customer content, sharing, word of mouth recommendation and endorsement.

B: Develop Target Markets and New Audiences.

We noticed how 'local' the target markets are; local, regional, near neighbours; Northern France, Western Germany, the Netherlands and limited other markets, including the UK. Is targeting the above-mentioned markets working, when an accommodation property quoted an average occupancy of only 40%? Is the one million annual visitors quoted by the Land of the Lakes at or near capacity?

There is evidence that suggests some services provided are demand-led, e.g. family friendly bike trails and youth hosteling aimed at specific segments with specific needs. There is a need for services for cyclists and this has been taken on board as an essential part of the cycling network and infrastructure, and this approach is to be welcomed. Services such as accommodation (must have storage for example), bike repairs, transport for longer distances etc has all been addressed, or is being addressed. There has also been positive engagement within the Bike Welcome scheme; key to cluster development as well as encouraging cross-sector cooperation.

Ironically, this presents a much more co-operative approach than that possibly seen in the UK. In addition, e-bikes for hire are not those favoured by MAMIL culture (Middle Aged Men in Lycra), that are hi-spec and designed for speed, but a product that it may be argued offers more satisfaction for intergenerational markets. The use of these e-bikes has enabled new target sectors such as the family market to experience the local offer which can only be good for the local visitor economy.



Integrated communication platforms can reach a multitude of markets and audiences however, the market segmentation and customer research are key to defining target segments to ensure the offer resonates and the correct channels are being used.

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This has been done by creating inspirational content to generate PR exposure, develop inspirational (marketing) content, develop a brand personality, differentiate the offer, develop sense of place and links to the landscape. The example we observed was the themed 'year of cycling.'

A little theory

Products, attractions and experiences are key to driving a potential visitor's destination choice. Developing appropriate and innovative tourism product is essential for the long term sustainability of any destination and should be based on:



Visitor Needs and Demands

'Build it and they will come' is not always true because simply building tourism product or infrastructure, and not telling enough people about it, does not mean that visitors will come and spend nights and money. Successful products and experiences meet and exceed visitor expectations, are 'on trend' and fit with the destination's brand and sense of place.

Creating a Competitive Advantage

A new product or experience should be based on whether it will create a competitive advantage and will add value to the existing destination tourism assets.

Creating a Distinctive Experience

Local distinctiveness is what makes a destination stand out. It's the composite of a place's assets; the landmarks and sights, the landscape, wildlife, built heritage, traditions, food, festivals, myths and language.

Tourism Australia, 2007 'Australian Experiences Industry Toolkit; Adding value to your business', Tourism Australia: The development and marketing of tourism experiences rather than individual products or attractions can be effective way to segment visitor markets. Truly authentic experiences can distinguish a destination from its competitors and the perceived opportunity for such experiences can attract visitors to a destination.

We don't believe the Wallonia region needs to develop any more product. There is more than enough to go around. We believe the Wallonia region needs to develop new audiences and more sophisticated communication methods to enhance and increase their reach, visitor satisfaction and ROI.

→ We recommend that Wallonia talks less amongst themselves about the 'product and infrastructure' and looks instead at how it communicates its unique local experiences to new audiences in new locations.

Visitors increasingly want the 'local' experience, to really experience places, meet 'real' people, 'do' as well as 'see' and not just be 'tourists' and have messages and product 'done at them'. They want to understand and appreciate the essential character of a place, learn something and have something to share with others when they return home.

This will bring;

→ Longer stays & increased local spend by encouraging visitors to slow down and do more, bringing increased income into the local area.

→ A more memorable experience by providing something with real character makes visitors more likely to recommend and return.

If a destination already knows why their area is special and has the evidence base of experiences and assets, the destination then needs to know how to use this for greater economic effect.

1. Informational or promotional use

The simplest use of this information is as context in your communications activity: by tying your business/product to the surrounding offer, more impact is given to existing communications and potentially open doors to a wider audience in the following ways:

- Including this information in your offer and core marketing messages.
- Looking for marketing opportunities around the theme for your business
- Using it as contextual copy or inspiration on your website
- Using it as inspiration or subject matter for social media posts
- Using it to form the basis of articles on e-newsletters and updates
- Using it for PR hooks to gain attention or as leverage for articles into new publications
- Featuring information and images in print or in-situ for your visitors once they arrive

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2. As the basis for working with others in the locality

Another way of utilising this information is making connections with others to either:

- Consistently promote the wider offer, thereby shouting with a louder voice by developing a consistent bank of copy or image library to use
- Develop joint services to make it easier for visitors to experience the special qualities e.g. transfer services, staggered opening times etc
- Develop specific joint promotions

3. Becoming a local champion

Armed with local knowledge and expertise many businesses choose to become local ambassadors, volunteering themselves to be the voice for an area and rallying others. The Champion Youth Hostel is already in this space as the staff spoke with enthusiasm and great knowledge about the local area and had information to share with guests on things to do and see locally.

4. Extending what you already do as a business

Another way of using local distinctiveness is to make active changes or extensions to the business model. By doing so the businesses is aligned with the values and assets that make the wider context special.

For example: In addition to their green policy and guest charter, reflecting the importance of green and sustainable activity locally, the product runs a visitor gifting scheme in conjunction with a local wildlife safari operator. By doing so they directly support local causes relevant to the locally distinct qualities of the area.

Or: A B&B can **extend their offer** to include hands-on brewery breaks, ale trails and workshops for example, where visitors can brew their own!

Or: **Making the most of flora & fauna as wildlife** can be a big draw for visitors, particularly with the interest generated by television programmes and the wider awareness of conservation. However, viewing wildlife generally requires specific guidance on where to look and indeed how to recognise what you are looking at.

Ideas to consider

- Providing spotters / identification guides on site for your guests
- Creating or providing dedicated on-site observation areas (could be simple or complex)
- Habitat building on site
- Providing conservation or educational information for visitors

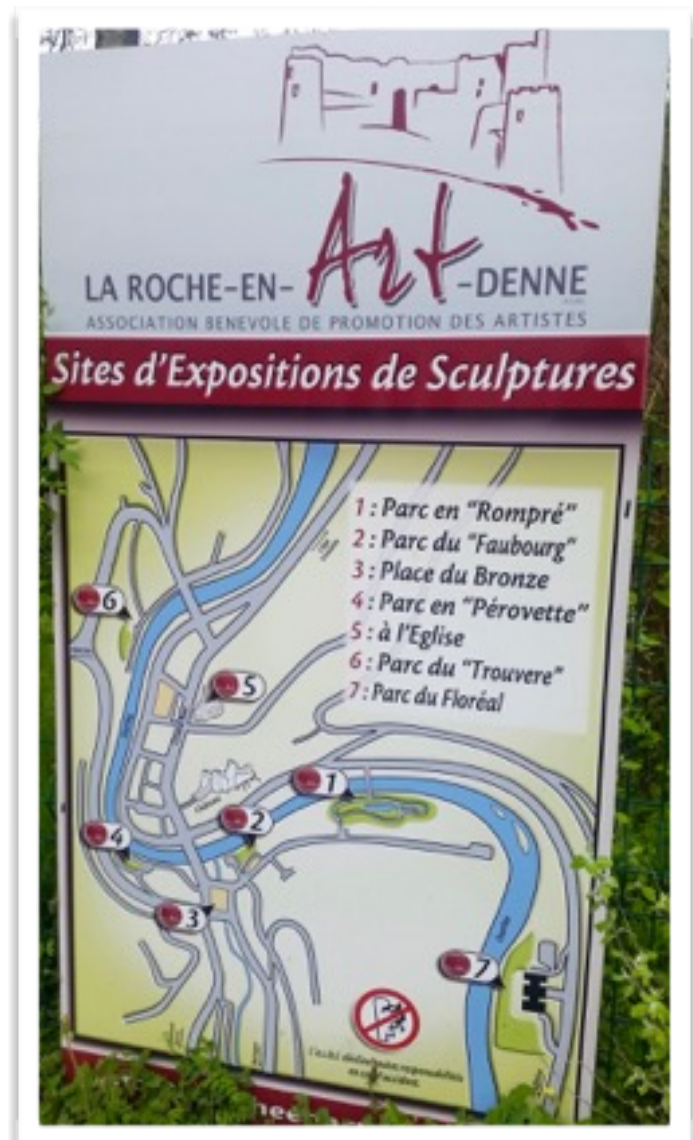
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- Providing wildlife web-cams or spotter updates through your website
- Incorporating these spotter updates into e-newsletters or updates to previous customers

Local products, in particular local food, have seen a massively increased prominence in recent times, so much so that they can be the sole draw for a visit by themselves. Seasonal food, with the attributes of low food miles, bring freshly picked and grown traditionally, will attract visitors and enhance a business's offer. But think wider than just food & drink: there are plenty of great examples of other local products, including arts and crafts, that can also contribute to the character of an area.

Ideas to consider

- Leading by example by sourcing and buying local within your business and promoting the usage of products to your customers
- Offering products from the local area for sale to your visitors
- Providing local directories of producers and outlets
- Listing local markets and offering dedicated trips to visit them
- Offering tasting and try-before-you buy evenings, events or festivals
- Using local materials on site and providing interpretation
- Growing or cultivating your own products
- Showcasing local crafts
- Creating self-guided food trails
- Organising guided tours, walks and experiences for your customers



Understanding, learning and interacting with the past, and seeing how it influences the present is a core part of any local identity. However, although it forms a key part of almost every experience a visitor will have in your area, heritage is a broad church that can encompass many different things, depending on your locality.

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Ideas to consider

- Providing information on or interpretation to heritage features within the local area
- Organising guided, walks, talks and experiences form your business
- Arranging expert talks and visits
- Providing advice and information for genealogical research
- Document and collect local information and stories on particular subjects and present to your customers (or encourage them to contribute)
- Visitor giving scheme to support heritage conservation locally
- Sponsor local heritage causes to showcase your credibility on the subject
- Volunteer opportunities for conservation or preservation activities

A pub that takes heritage seriously, focussing on events that showcase local culture. They run regular craft fairs, acoustic music nights and ensure all their artisans and performers are from less than 25 miles away.

Find out more about the [COOL rural tourism toolkit](#), funded by European cross-border co-operation Programme INTERREG IV A, France (Channel) – England, co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund that aims to encourage rural tourism businesses to make use of the rural areas' environmental assets and local distinctiveness to attract visitors.

Conclusion:

We believe that the products on offer in destination Wallonia need to be evaluated to assess competitive advantage, value-added and ROI of the extensive existing destination tourism assets.

We don't recommend any further product development is undertaken, but rather that whilst a few of the suppliers we met have begun to distill their local distinctiveness into their offer, much more can be done to to make the destination stand out, build a brand, build awareness, and target new market segments to position this beautiful part of Europe as a desirable and sustainable visitor destination.

Case Study Group One: Product Development included

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