
Going Green In Tourism Marketing

A case study on the Green marketing practices in Tourism in Alappuzha in Kerala

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Abstract

Businesses today face very complicated challenges. One among those challenges is to maintain high standards of competitiveness in a sustainable environment. Discourses related to sustainable businesses in a competitive environment are gaining prominence in the context of global warming, climate change and hazardous waste management. In this context, it is also being argued that firms going the 'green' way have a competitive advantage over its 'non-green' counterparts. Today, be it a fad or by principle, green initiatives are inherent part of many business firms. Taking the hospitality sector of Kerala, this paper attempts to analyse how firms with a green advantage are able to ensure sustainable business in a competitive manner.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 TOURISM, COMPETIVENESS AND SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS IN KERALA

Kerala is often projected as the undiscovered place in India with immense potential for tourism growth. Branded as 'God's Own Country', the enchantingly beautiful countryside and suburbs are certainly attractions for a national and international traveler. In this context, it could be argued that tourism is a lead contributor to the state's GDP. Studies have shown that in terms of employment and economic growth, tourism has had a major impact on the state's economy (Edward and Koshy, 2007). The state government has often highlighted that (i) strong brand positioning, (ii) thinking out of the box, (iii) products differentiation, (iv) model public-private partnerships, (v) tremendous political support, and (vi) public support as the magic words for the success of Kerala tourism (GoK, 2007). However, these arguments are countered by other studies, which have pointed out the negative impacts of tourism in socio-economic and environment domains of the state. For instance, Zacharias et al (2008) have

observed that backwater tourism in Kerala has adversely impacted the environment of the state. Similarly, the media release by NGOs such as Kabani has pointed out that malpractices, lack of transparency, and non-participatory tourism projects based on ill-conceived

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policies have caused tremendous damages to the vulnerable and marginalized communities (Kabani, 2006).

On the other hand, in this era of global warming and amidst the raising cries and hues of saving the green earth, the tourism industry has also adopted the "green" as a key concept for measuring competitiveness. Hotels across the globe have taken up this concept to move ahead in competition. And among the Indian states, Kerala was one of the earliest states to recognize the scope of tourism and the green advantage inherent in it. As the scope increased, the state government also came about with extra incentives in this direction and thus tourism on the whole received a lot of encouragement.

The way in which destinations develop their appeal and sustain their competitive positions have changed dramatically by the emergence of niche and specialty tourism. Ecotourism, "green" tourism, heritage tourism, adventure tourism etc are some examples that come under the global niching phenomenon. Hotels have invested in green initiatives with the eye of attracting more customers thereby increasing their customer base and in turn their competitiveness in the tourism market. Studies have revealed that many hotels across the world have adopted several management techniques that adhere to the environment friendly principles and measures. Supporting these green initiatives of hotels, there exist numerous international certification and state policies and regulations. However, existing literature shows that the hotel industry in Kerala faces various challenges such as

- (i) Environmentally sustainable tourism,
- (ii) Reduction of solid waste disposal,
- (iii) Waste management,
- (iv) Shrinking of common property resources due to encroachments by tourist resorts,
- (v) Decline of traditional sectors such as paddy cultivation and associated land-use changes,

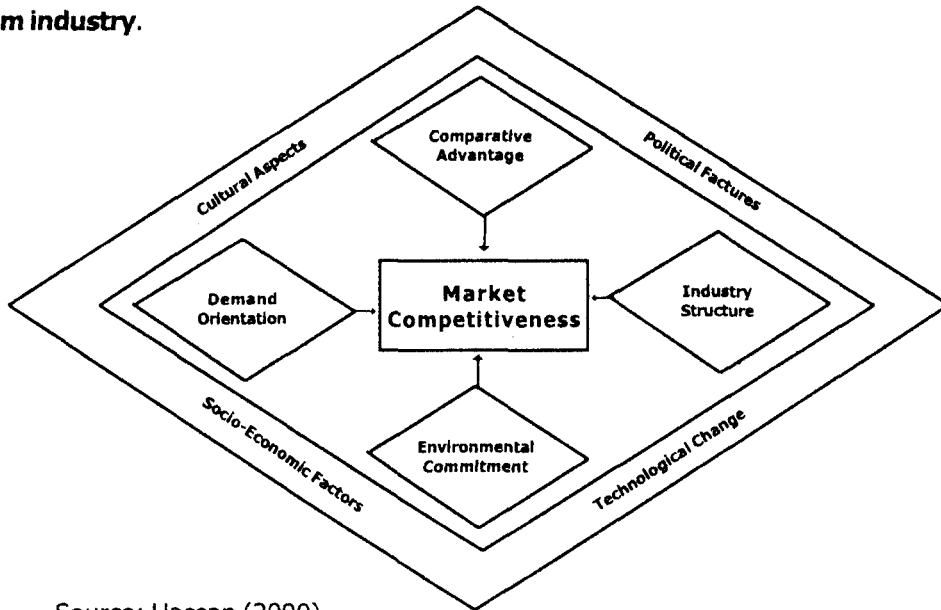
- (vi) Infrastructure development that does not take into account the intricate eco-system chains,
- (vii) Violation of environmental regulations for short-term economic gains,
- (viii) Absence of holistic visitor management plans, and
- (ix) Distorted perception of carrying capacity limits for respective resource systems.

In the above-mentioned context, we explore to analyse how hotels that have taken up green initiative are able to maintain their levels of global competitiveness without sacrificing the balance of the environment. To carry out the analysis, we have adopted a model of competency as proposed by Hassan (2000). This model of competency that we have chosen describes the determinants of market competitiveness in an environmentally sustainable tourism industry. This model focuses on environmental and sustainability factors associated with travel destinations. It also examines the relationship between all the stakeholders involved in creating and integrating certain value additions that help sustain resources at the same time maintaining market position relating to other competitors. According to this model, sustaining the longevity of a competitive market depends on the response to the market demands and the competitive challenges.

According to the model market competitiveness is measured under the following domains mainly (i) demand orientation, (ii) comparative advantage, (iii) industry structure, and (iv) environmental commitment. Figure 1 shows the determinants of market competitiveness in an environmentally sustainable tourism industry. Figure 2 depicts the determinants shown in the model in a detailed manner. Drawing insights from the model, this paper discusses the competitiveness of Marari Beach Resort in the next section.

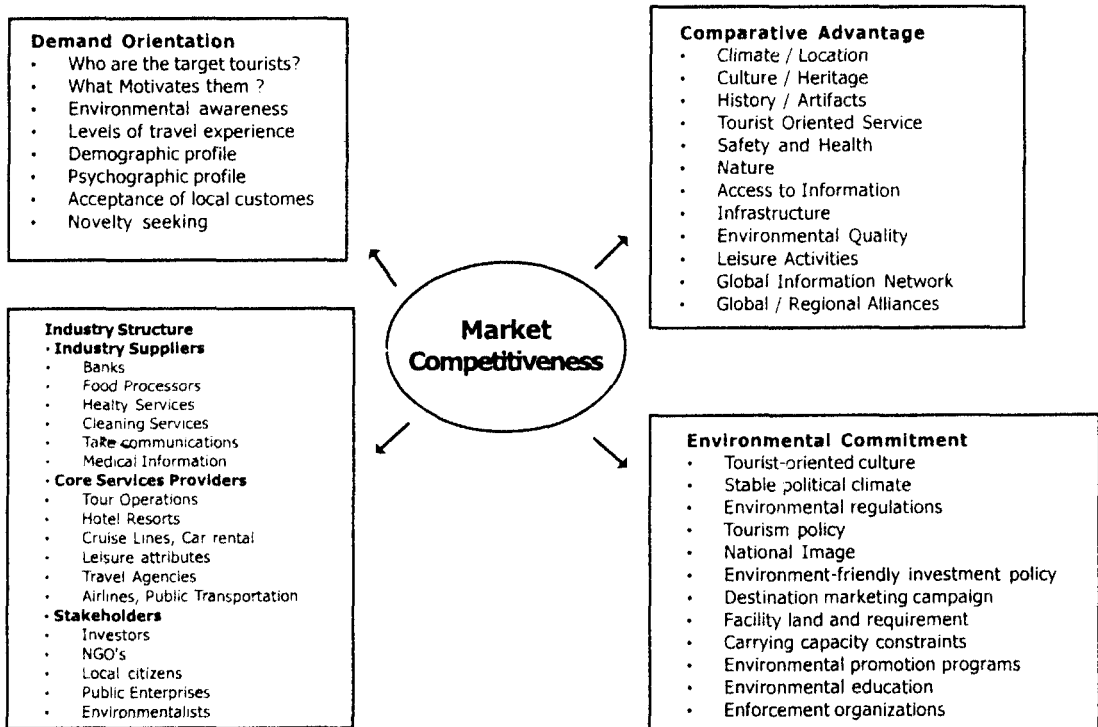
Figure 1. Determinants of market competitiveness in environmentally sustainable

Tourism industry.



Source: Hassan (2000)

Figure 2. Detailed depiction of determinants of market competitiveness



Source: Hassan (2000)

2. GREEN INITIATIVES OF MARARI BEACH RESORT AND MARKET COMPETITIVENESS

The real time observation of the hotel revealed that the resort's green initiatives and tranquil environment is an attracting factor for customers. They provide a no-frills atmosphere, butterfly garden, waste recycling etc. They insist on some core values such as all the materials should be locally sourced, and that they should be community-based and environment friendly. They have an in-house ayurveda centre which teaches yoga and meditation. The company has set pollution control standards, which are much above the norms of the state's pollution control board. The hotel has also set up renewable energy sources such as biogas plants, biomass digester, and other resource utilisation activities such as rain water harvesting, organic garden, recycling of plastic and tin, sewage treatment plant etc. The hotel uses compact fluorescent lamps and there are placards and posters related to water conservation, no plastic zones, waste-fertilizer, no chemical usage within hotel premises, and recycling across the campus.

The staffs are segregated into two groups specifically taking care of environmental protection and conservation. In this regard, adequate and regular training is provided to staff in the maintenance of solar water heaters, in applying natural herbs as room fresheners such as *ramacham* etc. Apart from all these the resort also implements certain well-specified policies such as no replacement of soaps for visitors (unlike the day-to-day replacement of soaps by other hotels) and non-use of detergent. The resort also maintains a butterfly garden, an in house naturalist and a herpetologist. The hotel also distributes saplings to the local communities and other customers. The approach of the resort matches the propositions of the model especially in terms of environmental awareness of customers, frequency of visits, culture, and infrastructure. Moreover, it also suits the model in terms of innovative ideas put forward in safety, health, tourist oriented services and environmental quality, commitment, promotional program, education, destination marketing campaign etc.

The hotel is spread across 24 acres of land and there are around 62 villas in the hotel. The management of the hotel has taken great pains to eliminate any capacity constraints that may arise out of exploitation of the resources available. This is one of

the values that are imbibed by the hotel. The hotel has so far not faced any capacity constraints and is running without the exploitation of the resources. They extract ground water but the soak away pit is made so that the ground water resource is replenished. The hotel is mainly targeting the premium customers. Therefore, the access to core service providers like tour operators, car rentals, travel agencies, airlines and public transportation are taken care by the hotel itself. The guests are given all these facilities by the hotel, the guests can avail cars from the hotel. A fleet of cars with drivers are ready to play at the guests' request. The service of travel agencies are minimized because most of the guests that come to the hotel would have already made their plans. They can opt for tour packages given by the hotel. Tour operators are also eliminated from the picture because the hotel runs its own tour for the guests.

The hotel organises tours to different places in and around Alleppey. Different packages called "Explore Kuttanad" and "Discover Alleppey" is operated by the hotel so that the guests can gain insight into the area. All these facilities are arranged by the hotel so that the guests do not have to venture out in search of these services. The nearest airport is the Cochin international airport and the Trivandrum international airport at distances of 60 and 170km respectively. Airport pick up is arranged for the guests from the airport. Considering all these factors the competitiveness of the hotel can be adjudged to be good in this sense because the hotel itself provided most of the core services. This leads to the fact that the guests has to venture out the least from the hotel and have a nice vacation without worrying for these matters.

The green initiatives taken by the hotel is much appreciated by the customers. This has resulted in a high frequency of repeated visits by the customers, with special reference to international tourists. Most of the customers who visit the resort are premium customers and belong to a high income category. Health and service aspects provided by the resort have added to the competitiveness of the hotel. Environmental commitment and quality in itself has attracted a large number of customers. The findings of the study once again shows compatibility with the model suggested earlier.

3.0 DISCUSSION

This paper has looked at the competitiveness of the hotel industry in Kerala with special reference to the effect of green initiatives on the competitiveness of the industry. Today, Kerala is considered to be one of the star attractions of the Indian tourism industry. Considering the trend of the industry across the world, green initiatives are of gaining popularity among travellers and tourists while selecting a hotel. It is in this regard that we have done this case study to determine the initiatives of a hotel in Kerala and to compare it with a previously developed model to measure the competitiveness.

The findings of the study show that the approach followed by the resort under study will aid the destination to adapt and come up with innovative ideas to meet the upcoming demand in the market. These could affect the competitiveness level as well. It could be observed that the hotel has never hesitated to take adaptive moves in relation the demand. Moreover, as a result of their ability in increasing demand orientation, the frequency and regularity of visitors are very high. For instance, there has been a case of eighteen revisits by the same customer to the resort. Yet another crucial determinant is that of comparative advantage, which is often associated with micro and macro environmental factors. They are very decisive in determining competitiveness.

The major policies of the hotel have been to source all products at a local level. This has contributed to the competitiveness of the hotel because not only does it increase the access to the local resources but also helps the hotel to create a good relation with the local community. On the other hand there are certain factors that diminish competitiveness as well. For example, the resort employs its own staff for the cleaning services. There are no other cleaning service facilities available at the site. The company selects employees and trains them to attain standards to an international level. This is a factor which is against the competitiveness model. However, the firm has taken necessary measures so that its performance is not affected due to the non-availability of necessary cleaning services.

The hotel has access to all major media and information sources. The competitiveness of the firm can be said to be good because even though the hotel is set up so as to give a rural and original feel they

have arranged for all major media and information sources such as newspapers, magazines, television and internet. Considering the theme of the hotel the services which are provided are up to the international standards. The ability for sustained, market competitiveness depends upon the degree of commitment that the destination has towards the environment. The hotel has created a tourist oriented culture among the employees and the local community. This is very evident from the reaction of the guests that has already visited the hotel. The guests usually goes for cycle ride to the country side and the reaction from the local community has been very much promising. The local community is very helpful to the guests who venture out and there have been no incidents of problems for the guests. The employees in the hotel are well educated about how to behave to the guests. Tourist oriented culture seem to be developed both within and outside the hotel. This is very helpful for the hotel to improve its competitiveness.

The political climate under which the firm operates is stable and there are no issues of changing laws that causing any problems for the hotel. A stable political climate is very important for the hotel to be competitive since they are not facing any unwanted constraints from the part of the government. The hotel under study enjoys the fruits of functioning in a politically stable climate and it adds to the competitiveness of the firm since it does not have any problems from the government. The hotels follows all the environmental regulations, in fact upon study it was found that not only does it follow the environmental regulations but the standards set by the hotel is way ahead of the regulations set forth by the government. The tourism policies which are developed by the government are not taken into serious consideration by the hotel. This is because the hotel is way ahead of the policy requirements specified in the policy statements. Specifications in the policies like "Vision 2020" generated by the government have been already achieved by the hotel. This makes it evident that the hotel is at the forefront of innovation in the field of hospitality.

The perception of the hotel is to be environmentally friendly and at the fore front of innovation in the industry. These measures which are taken up by the hotel is enacted and integrated into

the routines of the hotel. However, it has been observed that the factors like psychographic, demographic, climate, nature, leisure activities, industry suppliers, core service providers, facility etc have a mismatch with the model suggested in the beginning of the paper. In this context it could be argued that firms have to focus on value additions and commitment of the firms in the environmental domains. This case study in this regard has shown that to a great extent can help firms to place themselves in a better position in a competitive market and also enjoy the benefits of green commitments that sustain the balance of the environment.

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