

## **Branding in Serbian Rural Tourism**

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**Abstract:** To become competitive in the global world market, as a relatively new destination for rural tourism, we need to know how to use existing resources and to prove capable of coping with new challenges. The road to this great accomplishment goes through branding, because only with the help of branding it is possible to achieve recognition of Serbian rural product. That, first, implies a reformatory process of searching for our renewed that is redesigned identity, networking of various industries, as well as their integration. In such a context, rural tourism of Serbia should not be isolated within a particular segment of the whole, rather it should master those universal principles upon which the world is organized today, which is a unique and dynamic tourist product, and should be gradually turned into a brand thanks to its added value.

**Keywords:** *Rural tourism branding, image of rural areas, tourist product, semiotic analysis, branding attraction*

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### **1. Introduction**

Today, when most products have the same quality, and the market becomes saturated, branding is becoming a very powerful force. Thanks to branding, it is possible to achieve recognition for each product, and therefore the tourism product (offer) as well, and to make differentiation from competition. Some countries opt for an integrated product branding of the country as a tourist destination, while others see their opportunity in branding partial tourism products. Starting from the rich cultural and historical heritage, natural and built attractions, it is possible to create a destination product, and make it recognizable as a tourist destination. For a tourist destination, brand is very important because it represents more than products and services, as it includes trust and emotions. Destination becomes a brand only if it is permeated with high values. In the international market, there is still not enough awareness of Serbia as a tourist destination, mainly because there is no recognizable tourist product to convey the image of desired positioning of tourism. Villages of Serbia, with its expanses of intact forests, mountains, vineyards and hunting-fishing zones, could become a trademark of Serbia as tourist destination in total, as they already have a strong identity.

**The Image of Rural Areas as a Basis for their Branding:** Branding a tourist destination can be very complex. In the case of rural tourism, rural destination could be branded, or it could be products, services and employees, given they create key benefits in interaction with customers, so that rural product of Serbia represent a mix of brands. Branding is the process by which tourist organizations try to create desired perception of a tourist destination as a specific product, as well to encourage consumers to associate the country with a tourist destination. A country stands out and individualizes its offer compared to the offer of competing countries by a process. The brand consists of a name, phrase, symbol, logo, design, and a combination of all these elements, which helps to recognize the product, and as means of differentiation from the competition (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2005). Branding is actually giving power of the brand to specific products and services. Branding is based on making a difference. To brand a product, it is necessary to instruct and educate consumers. "What" is the product, "what" is achieved by using different elements of the brand, and "why" consumers should pay attention? Branding involves creating mental structures and it helps consumers to organize their knowledge about products and services in a way that will clarify the decision. Branding a tourist destination means communicating the values, vision and mission to the staff in various tourist organizations, to the country's population and its tourists. A brand is more than a product or service and must not be a promise that cannot be achieved. People who promote the development of certain forms of tourism have to be responsible for promoting and ensuring a favourable brand image. It is achieved by developing awareness of the destination, then knowledge, as someone who is aware of the existence of rural tourism in Serbia need not to know anything about its tourist offer. Introducing a consumer with the tourist

product aims at creating good feelings and preferences, as one country could be liked by tourists but not the preferred one compared to competing countries. In order to build consumer preference, consumers must be introduced to advantages of the country that will lead to decision to visit it. Marketing advantages that each destination can achieve from branding include the following (Kotler et al., 2005):

- Tourism product is easy to identify and differentiate thanks to brand;
- Global brand increases the range of tourism product acceptance, by agencies and tourists;
- The reaction of consumers to the price increase is more inelastic;
- The reaction of consumers to the price reduction is more elastic;
- Simplifies the selection of products, reducing the risk when buying and provides emotional benefits;
- More effective marketing communications;
- Less sensitivity to competitive marketing actions;
- Increased loyalty.

For a destination to become a brand, it is necessary for all tourist organization to participate in the process of branding, national, regional and local, as well as to establish cooperation with all stakeholders. Attention must be paid to the following activities: infrastructure development, tourism product development, protection of natural environment, changes in organizational culture and promotion. In order to identify the needs and wishes of consumers, it is necessary to continuously work on market research. Other phases are: development of brand identity, brand launching (introduction), brand implementation and monitoring, evaluation and revision of the brand (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2006). Brand as a reflection of quality needs a developed quality system. It is necessary to invest in accommodation facilities, security, traffic control, sanitary services, and public services. The villagers and homeowners must be educated when it comes to tourism. For a Serbian village to create a positive image, it is necessary to establish contacts with visitors, with employees and population of tourist destination, because an image must be created from within. Employees must be ambassadors of positive impressions and they must believe that the performance of their tourist product is authentic. Only then can visitors enjoy a unique and unforgettable experience, which cannot be experienced elsewhere. It is necessary at the same time to create a product and build an image.

Branding should provide a new dimension to brand identity, connecting with people on a personal, holistic level, where in addition to closeness, pillars of branding are sensory experience, imagination and vision also. While creating a brand image of the village, one should know that the brand represents a set of strategic ideas arising from personal fascination and personal fantasies, such as social interaction, aesthetic experiences and events. To build the image of rural destinations, it is necessary for them to possess the appeal that will keep travellers at least several days. Passengers should be allowed to continually explore things, which would consist of linking rural tourism with other forms of tourism such as wine, mountain and spa tourism. Numerous studies show that the country's image significantly affects the re-visit of a certain destination. Many have rated this factor as one of the most important when making decisions on re-visit destination. Other factors include: natural beauty, climate factors, traffic connectivity, security, etc. The rich cultural heritage, hospitality of people, healthy food, wine tours, fresh air and much more, are just some of the attractions that have not been used in sufficient scale in designing the image of rural products. Image of Serbia as a tourist destination has not been built adequately, which may have a negative effect on creating the image of Serbian rural tourism.

## **2. Product Portfolio in Rural Tourism**

The term "tourism product" can be used just conditionally, since it includes a series of partial "products" (different products) used by tourists to meet the needs, in their discretion. The main part of the "tourism product" includes services. Most of the total tourist expenditure is attributed to various services and only a small part to the material and tangible products. Other spending includes pure services such as transportation, guides, excursions, treatments, cultural events and so on. Tourist destination product is a set of tangible and intangible elements, which, as a combination of attractive, receptive and communicative factors, could meet the customer, has needs and desires of tourists, choosing the right combination of these elements in their own discretion. Rural tourism is usually the second or third holiday, and lasts longer than 10 days. The product is very seasonal, with demand peaks in spring (March - May) and autumn (September -

October). It is highly price elastic. Many authors believe that every rural tourism destinations should have their product portfolio consisting of attractions that could be "seen", attractions that could be "bought", and attractions in which you can "participate".

- Attractions that could be "seen" are primarily passive; they mainly include tours of local sights, monasteries, traditional houses, historic places.
- Attractions that could be "bought" are part of rural products, which are tangible, and visitors could take home: souvenirs, food and drink. These last two categories are particularly important in realizing the economic benefits, in expression of local identity, and in creating the vital network-market of farmers, shops selling local products, village fairs and tours of food and beverage suppliers.
- Attractions in which you can "participate" can be hiking, horseback riding, and bird watching. Market niche here may be represented by creative workshops and schools of painting, sculpture, yoga (Hall, Kirkpatrick & Mitchell, 2005).

Product portfolio in rural tourism could be composed of specialized products being specialized, which is the most common case, or of "tailor made" products, where visitors can create their own offer (product mix). For the organizers of these trips, specialized product is much more relied on existing market segments, allowing focusing on the image of the destination itself. Increasing the line width and depth of rural products can include many segments of consumers. Since the rural tourism relies mainly on domestic tourists, following steps are necessary to ensure long lasting development of this product:

- Development of a central reservation system in rural tourism at the destination (country, region) level, and subsequently connecting to the rural tourism booking systems of Europe;
- Creating a system of standard offers of rural facilities (quality housing, food, staff, putting bids on the Internet);
- Create a calendar and schedule of local events, festivals and events, aimed at promoting domestic sales;
- Initiation of inter-regional (and / or cross-border) cooperation;

### 3. Semiotic Analysis

In marketing, communicating with consumers relies on so-called. Semiotic analysis. The application of semiotics in branding is of great benefit because all signs and symbols in the environment are consciously or unconsciously interpreted by consumers, where the meaning of things is created depending on their socio-cultural experiences and traditions. Brands are positioned and brand image is built using characters, image, and consumers develop positive or negative attitudes that affect the purchase (Hall et al., 2005). With all attempts to convey intangible qualities of material culture, analysis of the meaning of advertising is not an exact science. Opportunities for rational and convincing interpretation of messages are numerous, which makes no version everlasting. In a case of rural tourism, the subject of semiotic analysis are controlled messages and symbols, designed to project the image of rural areas to potential consumers and stimulate connection and desire for visit. The interest, in addition to signs that promote a specific place, should be based on identifying and interpreting values and myths of rural, but also the wider political, economic and cultural context, in which these meanings are created and consumed. Semiotic analysis is used primarily to identify the type of product or service to be offered in market. Then the entrepreneur or tourist organizations choose to select the logo that marks a specific product or destination (as a visual element of the Serbian village, some of the motives of the handworks that would become universal for the total of Serbia could be chosen). In addition, it is important to associate the sign of the product and the way it is perceived by consumers.

In Serbia, certain chaos in the promotion of villages could be observed. Non-existing printed material in many cases is just the beginning of the problems we are dealing with, when it comes to promotion. What is the bigger problem is that we have shortcomings with the placement of our services when the online promotion, as a far cheaper form of promotion. Each rural tourism promotional material should include written text, images, but also slogans (short phrases pronounced by attractive font size, position or design) and maps. Most promotional materials of rural areas of Serbia applies only to rural households (mainly accommodation and breakfast, specialized shops selling souvenirs and local products) rather than pointing to the possibility

of using offers from a wider environment. Slogans and logos are the two most common techniques used to establish the image and identity of a product (in this case the destination) in the minds of consumers. Like any system of signs, these systems often have a second or even more meanings, besides the literal meaning of which particular care should be taken when positioning in foreign markets. Slogans should be short, simple and easy to remember, but first they should captivate consumer's attention and arouse strong positive impressions with branded destination. Analyzing the propaganda of rural areas in the United States, one could conclude that there are at least four dominant themes i.e. code in the promotional slogans (Butler, Hall & Jenkins, 1998):

- "Environment" - nearly half of slogans (45%) have been using this theme that can be divided into three specialized code: the experience of place, nature and landscape. Rural areas offer an experience of "fun", "discovery", "satisfaction", and "magic" and "much more to explore". Natural connotation is conveyed by labels that include "land, water, air and fire," "sand, sun, snow", while the landscapes are full of "wild", "resources", "Wonderland".
- "Ideal Community" - 26% of the slogans have been ideal community as a promotional theme. Tourists are invited to "come to the village", "to relax and enjoy" in "friendly community" where "you come as a guest and leave as a friend."
- "Location advantages" - going to the village has its advantages, according to 15% of the slogans. Some of them let you know that you are "in the economic centre", "the cradle of country music" or "where the fun begins".
- "Legacy" - the historical identity have been stressed in only 14% of rural communities, using phrases like "turn the clock back in time", "return to childhood", "discover the best of your past".

They have also been using 4 groups of symbols in branding their rural areas: symbols that represent 64% of the natural environment - there are wild animals, trees, water, flowers and vegetation, insects. Symbols, which represent the legacy 20%, of historical buildings, ancient objects, tools, ancient clothes. Symbols related to agriculture 16% - grains, livestock, farm tools, rural buildings and recreation 12% - sports equipment, cars, and campfire.

#### **4. The Role of Attractions in Branding of Rural Tourism**

Attractions as a set of elements inside destination environments, which serve alone or in combination as the main motive for visiting tourists, represent just one of several components of tourist system. Other components include: an informational component that includes a greater emphasis on promotional mix and other information affecting the demand to be directed to offer; features of the tourists, their cultural level, seasonality of tourist traffic; traffic infrastructure and housing, food, fun, entertainment and so on. Rural manifestations events are not just a product, but also experience and enjoyment that affect the tourists to feel like part of the story. The main characteristics of the events are following: limited in duration, occur rarely or only once, offering social experience, they are unusual, raising awareness of the region, creating a positive image and attract tourists and thus affect the development of tourism in general (Bodwin, et al., 2007). Rural manifestations and their organization have a very important role in the economy, culture and the promotion of rural areas. Organizers of such events can use many tactics to cover their costs, such as sponsorships, rental of advertising space as well as space for displaying, selling food, drinks, souvenirs, etc.. However, if you compare all these events, small number of them have a primary role to return money to the organizers but most of them helps to attract tourists who otherwise would not have opted for this form of tourism. Various activities throughout the year help in overcoming the problem of seasonality. The events which can be organized regardless the season are: schools in the countryside, exploring old tools, sports competitions, animal feeding, farm sightseeing and walk through nearby forest. Most people engaged in organizing events instinctively knows or quickly learns that all local events should be based on existing cultural and natural resources because they are a strong foundation for creating a strategy of one place branding.

Since ancient times there were wine roads going through our country as well. In recent years, small wineries are popular, that addition to production of wine possesses cellars for tasting and drinking wine, a few small apartments, homemade food accompanied by the flavour and aroma of wine. This is an interesting model for which the state is interested as well, as higher education institutions, for placing on the domestic and foreign markets. In mid-September in Vrsac, Days of vintage" are organized, accompanied with competition in the

trampling of the grapes, selling exhibition of grapes and wine, as well as competition for the best vineyard. Although most of the events are used to support the existing image of the village, creating a new event would be an effective way to create a new image of this region in the minds of urban consumers. This would greatly affect the positioning of rural products in urban markets. In the promotion of such events and destinations, we could use the help of foreign countries practice that know how to make the interesting from the simplest facts, especially when it comes to the hometowns of celebrities. Such festivals are Glenn Miller of Iowa, or Judy Garland Festival in Minnesota. In addition to celebrities, we can use many other subjects, the Festival of White daisies could easily be started, so the Avala tower gatherings, as the Miroč mountaing gatherings became popular or religious gathering, Lady of Medjugorje, in Croatia.

**Attractions That Could Be Bought:** Our country has significant rural eco resources upon which healthy organic food could be successfully produced. Representatives of Ministries and the National Association for the development of organic production, "Serbia Organica", agreed that the Serbian demand for organic products is growing, but the future of the industry lays in exports to European markets. Natural food without chemical additives is not found in all parts of Serbia, because only a small number of stores in Belgrade and Novi Sad in its range have products of organic origin. Food from organic farming is presently produced on 2400 acres. There are about 80 registered organic producers in Serbia. The largest portion, almost 90% of organic products from Serbia is directed to export markets of the European Union, United States and Japan. We live in difficult and turbulent times and have less and less time to think about environment, the food and ourselves we use in our diet. Only when the damage to our health is recognised we begin to understand what we lost and how it is difficult to recover. Village and rural areas offers tremendous opportunities, not only to improve our health from time to time, but also to permanently bond ourselves to the rural eco pantry. In the developed world, there are concepts of healthy foods relied mostly on food production in rural and attested areas. Such food could be bought in supermarkets and is often called organic, eco or healthy, natural food, green treasury etc. Some hotels invest in advance for certain bio cultures at certain hosts, and thus promote a healthy natural organic food that is served in their hotels. The state should use credit policy, low interest rate loans and grants to encourage and help rural people in the controlled production of healthy food with the application of HACCP. Mediation of state institutions between the hotels and producers of organic food on the other side would be very important, which could be best seen in the example of Greece (Skuras, Dimara & Petrou, 2006). In branding of these products, retail environment as well as their packaging is of great importance. Generally, the service environment includes external and internal appearance of buildings, with additional furniture, equipment, etc, but also the spirit of people indoors, and a host of other factors. Service ambience plays an important role in facilitating service delivery activities. The service environment should provide information to tourists on services offered. It also plays an important role in the socialization process of employees and visitors, communicating the expected behavior, roles and relationships between employees and guests.

The service environment represents at the same time a kind of service package, and should be designed to affect the image of the product, but also to cause sensory and emotional reactions. The service environment serves to differentiate the company from the competition or similar centers. It should also affect the socialization of consumers, enabling them certain roles, behavior and relationships. Numerous elements affect the spirit. Environment, the most important are: music (e.g. Faster tempo and louder music raises the level of vibrancy and activities of people), smells (a strong influence on mood, emotion and evaluation, and purchase intentions and behavior in the store), colour (warm and cool colours have different effects on consumers), temperature, lighting, noise. Retail space with farm products should be inspired with rural motifs and consistently reflecting the brand image. Purchase of rural products can easily become a family entertainment and an unforgettable and exciting experience, if consumers are enjoying what they see, smell, hear and feel. It is very simple to organize branded entertainment playgrounds, such as small farm with cows, pigs, chickens and other animals near the parking lot, which would be the attraction for kids and parents. It is possible to play original cartoons where they the addresses of rural households from which products come could be read. The whole environment should provide great credibility in terms of freshness of products, so consumers could enjoy a variety of flavours, and be served with coffee, juice, or buy some traditional Serbian food at the kitchen that exists inside the store during their tour. These e-shops should be focused on providing what is usually related to Serbian village products: quality, freshness, abundance, and a friendly atmosphere. Good packaging of rural products is necessary for several reasons. In addition to marking and

shortening the time for seeking such products, it should establish sensual relationship with the product also. Its design should be such to emphasise itself on the shelves, and thus increase our expectations and even force us to think about buying this product category. Budgets for advertising these products are very small so packaging is the element that will attract customers' attention. To be functional, it should enable the product:

- Easy visibility and recognition
- Information
- To create emotional needs and
- Provide product protection, shipping, handling and storage until use.

The current packaging design of rural products generally looks the same. Besides the basic functions to protect the goods from the farms to shop, and provide the relevant product information (weight, composition and product bar code), it must also tell a story which will create an emotional dimension to the brand. New living trends such as the environment, humane treatment of animals, caring for the environment, healthier lifestyles and increasing need to explore new products support the branding of healthy foods and transmission of sensory and emotional message through interesting packaging.

## 5. Conclusion

The positioning of Serbian rural areas in the world market implies the existence of a quality tourism product, design of a communication strategy that would make the tourism product become recognized also the tourists prefer it to other competing destinations. Therefore it is necessary to keep in mind that destination image is one of the important factors in creating a destination brand. Branding this form of tourism means communicating values, mission and vision to tourists. For Serbian village to become a brand, it must cause a feeling of credibility of its own quality. The modest additional offer of households could be overcome by linking with other forms of tourism, but what should be done mostly is to raise awareness of rural tourism entrepreneurs, and convince them that tourism is a great opportunity. Considering the life of tourists is becoming more complex and faster, and they have less time to spend, the ability of brands to simplify the decision where to spend your vacation is priceless. Branding of Serbian village is a long-term process and the results could not be achieved in the short term. The brand must fulfil and surpass all expectations of guests - related to products / services, and experiences that await them, as guests should always be surprised with little things. Branded destinations or products are synonymous with certain quality. Satisfied tourists could easily re-opt for a rural household, where loyalty allows predictability and certainty in demand. It is necessary to ensure good and continuous communication that will give tourists a good reason and clear explanation of reasons why they should choose Serbia, as a rural tourism destination. The brand should be always represented through visual identities such as logo, slogan, promotional material, internet presentations, etc. The positioning of Serbia as a relatively new rural tourism destination should always emphasise the belonging to the rural tourism products, tourist product of Serbia, and then point to the diversity of its elements compared to competitors in the region.

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