Quality by Keeping the Identity or How to Obtain Competitive Advantage in Romanian Rural Tourism

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Abstract

The article is developed starting from the next algorithm: \textit{quality + identity preservation = competitive advantage}. This equation represents the key for obtaining the competitive advantage in the actual Romanian rural tourism. This algorithm has a European background and was a real recommendation coming from the Eurogites and other tourism organizations at the first Romanian rural tourism congress, in May 2011 at Alba Iulia.

\textbf{Keywords:} Rural tourism, quality, competitive advantage, Qualitool.

Introduction

The rural tourism has taken a large scale in our country; this phenomenon is supported by the fact that Romania meets the natural conditions for practicing this form of tourism. One reason often invoked in recent years in the practice and expansion of this form of tourism comes from the desire of people from towns to return home, to the birth places and to the calm, simple, bucolic way of life.

Although Romania is still enjoying the air of the old patriarchal villages for the maintenance of customs, the beauty and wilderness of many landscapes, warm hospitality typical of Romanian tourism is still faced with a serious obstacle - large but not impossible - namely, the poor quality services generated on the one hand by the lack of professionalism, training staff and on the other hand by the lack of perspective on the activity and / or of the area.
Development of rural tourism and providing a quality service cannot be achieved but without preservation of the environment and creating a balance between man and nature, as part of the offer (Nistoreanu, Gheres, 2010). The information and the education regarding the environment offers, for each human being, more liberty, a more profound understanding of the processes and phenomena which compose the real life, in an environment with a quality which should guarantee the dignity and the welfare of everyone (Radulescu et al., 2008).

1. Quality in European rural tourism

Klaus Ehrlich, General Secretary Eurogites, presented at the first Romanian rural tourism congress the situation of the European rural tourism:

- 80% of Rural Tourism organizations use a Quality Classification or standardization system, 2/3 of them are defined and run by the organization itself (under their direct control);
- the client/tourist is used to this orientation from domestic markets, but international diversity is confusing and not transparent;
- critical importance of virtual trust on Internet;
- create a new system is not realistic - existing systems will not change.

EuroGites - is the European Federation of Rural Tourism which includes representative organizations to ensure development of rural tourism in the geographical area of Europe. This federation includes 35 organizations from 28 countries: Austria, Belarus, Belgium (3), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia (2), Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy (2), Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania (ANTREC), Serbia (2), Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland (2), United Kingdom.

Minimum product and assessment standard: recommendation for criteria specifications that Rural Tourism services all over Europe should comply with:

- product Criteria are generic;
- assessment Criteria are defined in two steps:
  - structure based on the Expectation and Satisfaction Clusters found by investigation;
  - requirements are specified with exact values or – at least – minimum scores wherever possible.

Product Standards:

- situated in the countryside, in a village, or in a small town;
- rural surrounding, with evident characteristic of traditional farming, agriculture, or high nature values;
- tourism is not the main activity or source of income in the closer area;
- good conservation of environment, quiet and "peaceful" setting, no noise or pollution;
- authenticity of the accommodation and ambience;
- hospitality = personal attention by the host;
- small-scale capacity of the accommodation unit;
- social and environmental sustainability in the context of a multi-functional activity in the countryside;
- connection with the local community and traditional culture;
- local products and gastronomy;
- culture (folklore, crafts, traditions, heritage, ... ).

Excluding criteria are: urban or industrial setting or surrounding; mass - or highly developed tourism areas; noise, risk/danger, visual and other pollution.

Assessment Standards:

- list of 51 specified criteria: equipments (19), surroundings (8), services (8), personal attention, “experience” (7), security and safety (9);
- two levels of parameters:
- Absolute minimums for any rural service in Europe.
- Requirements for access to international marketing.
- “Umbrella” structure - member organizations are responsible;
- deviation by 20% allowed but must be compensated.

Table no 1: Selection of criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>How they were defined</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Criteria that are considered in more than 80% of the systems, and have obligatory minimum requirements</td>
<td>Room size, Bed size, Sanitary facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Criteria that are considered by 50% of the systems, and/or allow compensation amongst each other</td>
<td>Leisure Facilities, Equipment Items, Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Criteria that are considered by less than 50% of the systems, allow compensation, or are country-specific</td>
<td>Sauna, Air Conditioning, tea-making facilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from the presentation of Klaus Ehrlich (General Secretary Eurogites)

Foregoing, emphasize that the quality of rural tourism can not be achieved without maintaining a healthy environment, having a high economic value, aesthetics and ethics, and maintaining such an environment requires preservation in good condition of all its components: species variability genetics and ecosystems. (Radulescu, Radulescu, 2012)
2. Qualitool – European skill development tool for quality in rural tourism services

To provide clear guidance to EuroGites minimum international quality assessment standards for rural tourism accommodations, this training tool was developed under the project Qualitool (2008–1-LV1-LEO05–00125), financially supported by the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme.

The Qualitool products have been developed by the project partners:
1. EuroGites, the European Federation of Farm and Village Tourism
2. BAAT, Bulgarian Association for alternative tourism
3. Guest Inn, Greek Network of Rural Accommodation
4. RAAR - Andalusian Network of Rural Accommodation
5. Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia, Agriculture and Forestry Institute Celje
6. Latvian Country Tourism Association “Lauku ceļotājs”

The training tool consists of:

- **Quality self-check**: is an on-line self-check which allows to benchmark the guest house, B&B or cottage with the EuroGites minimum international quality assessment standards for rural tourism accommodations. The standard criteria are grouped in five parts representing the clusters:
  - Equipment - 19 criteria
  - Surroundings - 9 criteria
  - Services at the accommodation and in surroundings - 9 criteria
  - Intangible aspects such as personal attention, privacy, or ambience - 7 criteria
  - Security - 9 criteria

Each part can be edited independently from the others and each element of the group is numbered. To take advantage of this application each new user must register in a form on-line, on the site [http://quality.eurogites.org/register](http://quality.eurogites.org/register).

- **Inspection manual**: the inspection manual explains application of each item in the list of the EuroGites minimum international quality assessment standards for rural tourism accommodations ([http://quality.eurogites.org/manual](http://quality.eurogites.org/manual)). Rural tourism providers will use it as guidance and quality inspection bodies will use it as a reference during on site visits.

- **Virtual training module**: is an on-line application that standard criteria are explained by examples discussed in pictures, with rural accommodation in different countries. “Good” examples are on the green background and “Bad” examples are on the red background. The pictures from the EuroGites site represent 5 countries: Bulgaria, Slovenia, Greece, Spain, Latvia.

Perspectives:
- European Trademark, registered;
- use of brand (decided at annual meeting June 2011);
- certification process under the concept of “umbrella”;
- integration in the upcoming “Europe Tourism Quality” label of the EU.

3. Conclusion

Having in mind a saying expressed by UNWTO representatives at the first Rural Tourism Congress held in 2011 at Alba-Iulia “There can’t be sustainability without quality” and taking into consideration that the rural tourism is listed among current Romanian Tourism Authorities concerns, as one of the six competitive products of the Romanian tourism (Stancu, 2009) – an option also expressed and assumed by the new country brand “we still have this authenticity, we do not show fake smiles, we offer authentic warmth and sincere hospitality...it’s all about the tranquility of the countryside life”, I consider that this communication has achieved its goal, revealing the need for implementing the QUALITY by IDENTITY PRESERVATION algorithm or how can competitive advantage be achieved in the Romanian rural tourism.

Also:
- Qualitool European project is a viable option for Romanian rural tourism, offering real opportunities for national rural tourism businesses, creating, the possibility for Romania’s subscription service on the map, at least European, of the contemporary rural tourism;
- QUALITY by IDENTITY PRESERVATION is the successful algorithm for obtaining the competitive advantage, in the current rural tourism;
- without claiming to have exhausted all quality problem in Romanian rural tourism, I think I offered a real prospect of this area by presenting this project so appreciated by Europeans.

References

5. *** Klaus Ehrlich – PPT Presentations.