

Challenges of Marketing Micro Tourism Businesses in Mountain Destinations: A Case from Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges of marketing micro tourism businesses in Obudu Mountain Resort in Nigeria. It utilizes a qualitative case study research strategy and fourteen (14) interviews were conducted with the proprietors of the existing micro tourism businesses who were selected using snowball sampling techniques. The study found out that inadequacy of disposal income, inadequate and inefficient telecommunication infrastructure (ICT), absence of networks among tourism business owners and lack of proper understanding and integration of the local tourism entrepreneurs with the management staff of Obudu Mountain Resort are the main obstacles to the marketing of micro tourism businesses in the case study area. The paper concludes with an emphasis on the need for relevant stakeholders to address the issues so as to ease marketing and ensure the survivability and long term sustainability of the businesses.

Keywords: Micro businesses; Tourism; Marketing; Obudu mountain resort; Nigeria

Introduction

Marketing of micro and small businesses is central to the entrepreneurial process and its deliberation often involves an informal, unplanned activity that depends on intuition and energy of the owner [1,2]. With its cardinal position in venture prosperity and sustainability, it has become one of the worrisome management issues that have been posing serious challenge to micro and small tourism businesses [3,4]. The myriads of marketing challenges of micro and small tourism businesses overwhelmed some of their operators and could be the reason why many of them are compelled not to give it much attention.

However, even with marketing obstacles, a significant number of micro and small tourism entrepreneurs have adopted marketing strategies in order to market their businesses to potential customers most especially those into providing accommodation and restaurant services. For instance, in a study conducted by Jaafar [5] on Malaysian small hotel industry, managers use information technology such as websites, call centers, and government portals to promote their hotels. Beside this, majority of micro and small hotels and restaurants in Asia depend on word of mouth (WOM) as a way of getting repeat visitation [6]. The operators of Bed and Breakfast businesses which, according to Chen [7] are an effective way to revitalize rural communities that have suffered from economic and social-cultural difficulties, mostly rely on word-of-mouth advertising to market their businesses. In addition to all of these, some restaurant operators have also used marketing tools such as the use of collateral material examples which include brochures and fliers, newspaper advertising, fliers, coupons, gift certificates, Internet, telemarketing, and special promotions [8].

While there exist a substantial study on marketing issues of micro and small tourism businesses in other part of the world (America, Europe, Australia and Asia), there seems to be a paucity of research with respects to the marketing challenges of these businesses in Sub-Saharan African tourist destinations. Although sub-Saharan Africa has not really exploited much of its tourism potential, but in the last decade, it has consistently posted one of the highest tourism growth rates averaging approximately with average growth rates of +12% in 2006 and +6% between 2007 and 2010 [9-11]. This alone is much to believe that relatively much progress is made in tourism development

in sub-Saharan Africa even if a lot more is anticipated from it. So it has become imperative that issues relating to marketing of micro and small tourism and hospitality businesses in the sub-Saharan Africa needs to be brought to the fore of academic debate. This is because doing so will help to draw the attention of destination management organizations to provide some sought of support for these businesses since the individuality of these businesses often contribute to the individuality of experience and a unique sense of place for tourists and enhance some aspect of destination competitiveness [12,13].

The marketing strategies of micro and small tourism businesses and the challenges encountered could be destination specific or otherwise, since every destination has its own uniqueness even though there may be some commonalities. In Nigeria for instance, micro and small tourism businesses in the host communities Obudu Mountain Resort have adopted some marketing strategies as a way of struggling to survive in the competitive tourism sector and are faced with some challenges capable of limiting their capacity to grow well. Thus, the main objective of this study is to investigate the challenges of marketing micro tourism businesses in Obudu Mountain, a resort destination in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Micro and small tourism businesses encountered obstacles in marketing which hamper their capacity to reach out to potential tourists. These hindrances are common features of micro and small tourism businesses in developing countries. For instance, the operators of small hotels in Malaysia have some weaknesses in terms of lack of knowledge and skills in running the business which has affected marketing [14].

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A study of 104 rural tourism entrepreneurs indicated a lack of access to finance and methods of marketing as their main constraint [15]. Furthermore, a survey of 80 backpacker accommodation enterprises in South Africa indicated that inadequate marketing and financing, but mostly the lack of support from local governments, contributed to micro and small business entrepreneurs' problems [16]. Similarly, in the study of Lee [6], a significant number of operators of Bed and Breakfast are very much concerned of their inability to meet up with the relatively high cost of marketing as a result of their low financial capacity.

As pertinent as the internet is in providing access to a wide audience in the tourism and hospitality sector, the financial cost and time spent setting up and maintaining the internet services has been an impediment to its adaptation among micro and small tourism entrepreneurs [17,18]. Even where internet is set up for micro and small businesses, one of its drawbacks that many potential consumers' experiences is the low speed access or low bandwidth connection to the Internet via modems [11]. Karanasios and Burgess's [19] research on internet access in Malaysia and Ecuador found that the three most commonly-cited obstacles concerning small tourism entrepreneurship internet adoption are unreliable information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, the cost of adopting and utilising ICT and lack of relevant knowledge and skills to maximise its potential. In a related study of Russin and Gaur, it was evident that marketing challenges namely service management and under-utilization of the social media among others are identified as some of the key emerging sales and marketing issues faced by the hospitality industry. For small firms in the tourism sector in more developed countries, Standing and Vasudavan [20] classified some of the most important barriers to adoption of the internet for marketing as lack of staff expertise, operating costs and the difficulty of providing adequate training. Similarly, Poon [21] noted that many small firms have difficulties realizing the benefits of Internet technology and as such tend to dedicate a little consideration to practical questions of web site management.

As a way of reducing the effects associated with impediments to marketing of micro and small tourism and hospitality businesses, Page et al. [22] opined that the operators of these businesses should join membership of tourism organizations and other business associations for some support. Accordingly, Medina-Munoz and Garcia-Falcon, [23], Telfer [24] and Tinsley and Lynch [25] suggested the existence of a strong collaboration on the development strategies between a tourism firm and other tourism businesses and organizations in tourism destination. Frazier and Niehm [26] argued that micro and small firm owners/managers use networking as a source of knowledge for the improvement of operations and the marketing strategies of their respective firms as this may provide different resources and serve as another opportunity for the firms, such as in the case of a strategic alliance between a trade organization and a government organization [24].

Research Methodology

Obudu Mountain Resort is one of the renowned tourism destinations in Nigeria and it is a nature based tourism destination (non-skiing mountain destination) situated in Obanliku local government area in Cross River State at an altitude of 1,575.76 m above sea level [27]. It is also the only relatively organised and well managed mountain tourism destination in Nigeria with the presence of active micro tourism businesses run by the local communities' inhabitants. Hence, the reason it was chosen as a case study. A qualitative case study

research paradigm was used to obtain data in order to understand complex social phenomenon and to get an in-depth understanding of the impediments to marketing micro tourism businesses [28,29].

Following the position of Yin [29,30] and Cresswell [31], the snowball sampling technique was used to select samples to be interviewed as the researchers do not have much knowledge of the number and the location of the micro tourism businesses in the case study area. So the first person who started a micro tourism business (a hotel) in Obudu Mountain Resort host communities was used in locating other businesses. Thus, fourteen (14) micro tourism businesses were located in all. They include: two (2) hotels, six (6) provision shops, three (3) alcohol shops and three (3) restaurants were located. The two hotels were found in Apah-Ajilli and Keji-Ukwu community and one (1) restaurant was found in Ikwette community close to the entrance gate of the resort and the remaining eleven (11) businesses were located in a market square which is rectangular blocks of shops built very close to Obudu Mountain Resort by the local authority as a way of providing opportunity for the locals to derive some benefits from the tourism activities in their environment. Table 1 shows some characteristics of the sampled businesses.

Semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the proprietor of the micro tourism businesses. This was used to enter into the world of the participants because of its ability to bring the interviewer close to the interviewees so as to collect a wide range of information [31,32]. In all fourteen (14) interviews were conducted with the proprietors of the businesses in their business premises and each of the interview lasted for a duration of 40 to 50 minutes. A digital recorder was used to record the interviews with permission of the respondents as suggested by Matthews and Ross [33]. After the interviews, the recorded conversations were transcribed verbatim immediately. This was done in two weeks with the aid of Dragon 12 voice recognition software which helped in facilitating and reducing the trouble associated with transcription. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed text manually which consisted of fragmenting and connecting, and coding into themes [32,34]. Through series of examination and re-examination broad themes were arrived at and the findings were presented using them and their associated comments (quotes).

Findings and Discussion

Inadequate disposable fund

During the interviews, all the interviewees mentioned inadequacy of disposable fund as the key factor militating effective marketing of their businesses. This findings support the position of Keller who opined that micro, small and medium tourism entrepreneurs do not have the resources to gain new customers causing them to rely on customer repeat visit instead of adopting an integrated or strategic marketing approach [3]. Also, insufficient disposable resources needed to expand the scope of activities of micro and small tourism businesses are a prevalent complains [35]. In addition, local tourism entrepreneurs often have low endowment of human capital and financial assets limiting their entrepreneurial intent to small scale, low productivity firms and reduced capability to effectively market their businesses. According to respondents, "The money I make from this business is not even enough for family up-keep if not, I would have love to maintain a website (R1)". "There is no fund to commit into marketing. If I need to advertise, I need money, so it's just difficult to market a pity business like mine (R5)".

Types of Business	Location	Year Established	Interview Participants (R: Respondent)	Sex	Educational
					Qualification
Hotel	Apah-Ajilli	2005	R1 (Proprietor)	Male	University Degree
	Community				
Hotel	Keji-Ukwu	2006	R2 (Proprietor)	Male	Polytechnic Diploma
	Community				
Restaurant	Ikwette	2009	R3 (Proprietor)	Female	Primary Certificate
	Community				
Restaurant	Market	2008	R4 (Proprietor)	Female	Primary Certificate
	Square				
Restaurant	Market	2007	R5 (Proprietor)	Female	Primary Certificate
	Square				
Provision	Market	2008	R6 (Proprietor)	Male	Secondary Certificate
Shop	Square				
Provision	Market	2008	R7 (Proprietor)	Male	Primary Certificate
Shop	Square				
Provision	Market	2008	R8 (Proprietor)	Male	Secondary Certificate
Shop	Square				
Provision	Market	2009	R9 (Proprietor)	Male	Secondary Certificate
Shop	Square				
Provision	Market	2010	R10 (Proprietor)	Male	Secondary Certificate
Shop	Square				
Provision	Market	2008	R11 (Proprietor)	Male	National Certificate of Education (NCE)
Shop	Square				
Alcohol	Market	2007	R12 (Proprietor)	Male	Secondary Certificate
Shop	Square				
Alcohol	Market	2008	R13 (Proprietor)	Male	Secondary Certificate
Shop	Square				
Alcohol	Market	2009	R14 (Proprietor)	Male	National Certificate of Education (NCE)
Shop	Square				

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the Interviewees.

This impediment affects the level micro and small tourism and hospitality businesses can go in reaching out to tourists' outside their environment and gives room for large firms which are mostly owned by foreigners to take most of the tangible benefits of tourism development in rural peripheral areas. Thus, enormous foreign currency leakage is experienced in developing countries thereby reducing the multiplier effects of tourism development [36] and the extent to which micro and small tourism enterprises may benefit from the opportunities that tourism presents to a community [37].

Interviewees indicated willingness to embrace any flexible medium of obtaining financial support to boost the activities of their businesses so that they could be well advertised to local and international tourists. But, numerous impediments regarding accessibility to micro financial institutions are issues that worry them. As noted by one proprietor of a provision shop, "I have ones approached micro finance banks for some money to support my business. At least if I have enough money, I can advertise my business even if it is through radio services but their conditions are not favourable. Repayment period is short and that I have to open an account and run it for at least three months (R6)". Situation where micro loans are becoming difficult to obtain from financial institutions are terrible happenings that are unhealthy in the drive to stimulate the development of micro and small tourism businesses. To this end, Oji opined that micro finance institutions should increase loan repayment period so that micro and small entrepreneurs would have greater use of the loan over a longer period for the acquisition of capital assets and technology [38]. There are few interviewees who

reported approaching the communities "Local Bank" executives and could not secure loan. The insignificant number that received loan, got sum of money that was not even enough to support the businesses let alone having a proportion of it disposed into marketing. Accordingly, a respondent stated that, "even when our local bank loan me some money, it was very little and i spend everything in buying stocks for my provision shop (R9)".

Additionally, majority of the respondents are of the opinion that their local government authorities should do more than just building blocks of shops for locals to rent by showing much concern on the growth and sustainability of tourism and hospitality businesses which effective marketing can guarantee. They advocate for a situation where a significant proportion of the local government authority yearly revenue allocation would be readily made available to existing and prospective tourism entrepreneurs at no interest rate. According to an interviewee, "our local government is meant to serve us and be concerned about our wellbeing particularly that of our business. I aspect our local government to provide us with interest free loan to support our businesses (R13)".

Inefficient telecommunication network services

Efficient telecommunication network with high speed internet services has been increasingly important to the travel and tourism industry and represented a significant opportunity for businesses to distribute their products and services directly to consumers [39,40]. As essential as these services are to the experience of both local tourism

entrepreneurs and local and international tourists, its current inefficient nature in all the surroundings of the Obudu Mountain Resort is believed to be negatively affecting the marketing of the existing micro tourism businesses. This was reported by majority of the interviewees and one of them who runs a hotel commented that, "Terrible network service experienced here does not allow me to market my business through the internet. Telecommunication network service fluctuates very much here (R2)".

Evidently, the finding of this study indicates that the degree of fluctuation varies according to location and affects the marketing of these businesses differently. For instance, while the tourism business operators at the bottom of the mountain and at the mountain top (market square) complained bitterly of total lack of network services, those at the mountain top in the communities closest to where the main facilities of the resort are situated do experiences highly fluctuating network services at some location close to their business premises. As noted by an interviewee, "I have tried using my Facebook page to invite people as friends but the terrible network situation here is actually making it difficult... Although I have succeeded in inviting some people as friends on Facebook, chatting with them smoothly to tell them about my business from this environment is frustrating (R12)". Also as remarked by a female respondent, "I rely on potential tourists who get my number mostly through tourists who have visited me before. So I do receive calls from them when I am outside this environment. But when I am in my business premises, I can't call anybody and i do not receive any call from anybody which means perhaps I would have been missing many calls from potential tourists. If network here is good, I would be communicating with many people telling them to help me advertise this business to their friends and well-wishers (R3)". All of these findings affirmed the assertion of El-Gohary, who opined that electronic E-marketing is still a relatively new concept, particularly for organizations operating in developing countries that have limited resources, bad infrastructure, and strong competition [41]. It further implies that rural peripheral tourism areas in developing sub-Saharan Africa are lacking in adequate telecommunication infrastructure.

Furthermore, majority of the respondents reported that they have made effort to complain to the management of the mountain resort on the inefficiency of ICT infrastructures and absence of it in some locations. But, the management has always told them that ICT providers would not afford that kind of investment because of the peripheral nature of the environment. The aforementioned development will not only affect marketing directly but it will also affect the experience of both local and international tourists who are known to be intensive mobile device users as noted by Lamsfus et al. and who would want to enjoy their device when they are on vacation in any tourists destination and in this case in Obudu Mountain Resort [42]. Failure of tourists to make calls and connect to internet could affect revisit intention and if this happens, the survivability and sustainability of the existing micro tourism businesses that rely mainly on tourists' patronage will be jeopardized. Thus, according to a respondent, "Because of absence of telecoms network service here, tourists that visit us to eat and take some drinks often complain of inability to communicate with their friends and business partner from our location. We feel bad about this. Infact there was some group of tourists that made negative comments about this issue and I think this will affect their revisit intention (R4).

Absence of network among micro tourism businesses

The study result revealed that the majority of the interviewees (10) advocated for the need for some sort of cooperation among the existing micro tourism businesses for the purpose of marketing since

all of the business operators are currently battling with inadequacy of funds to dispose into marketing using the media. Indeed, many of the entrepreneurs believed that tourism networks would help ease and reduce the cost of marketing individual business but, there exist nothing of such among them presently. A statement by a respondent confirms this claim, "Ordinarily we are supposed to have a kind of network among the businesses here to ease marketing. There is nothing like that, everybody here is just struggling to get a share of the market. There is no organised marketing here (R7). Network relationship exists in many forms [43] and it offers a range of benefits [44,45] one of which is collective marketing of goods and services of tourism business operators to local and international tourists. However, this finding appears to be more consistent with Go and Williams's earlier observations that the industry has yet to learn to share knowledge and capabilities to become more efficient as a networked community [46].

Additionally, interviewees also reported that lack of trust among themselves and other stakeholders is the reason why coming together for the purpose of marketing and other beneficial activities has become difficult. They also maintained that the management of the Obudu Mountain Resort is not doing enough to incorporate them into their marketing plans as important stakeholders in destination development and competitiveness. This finding corroborates earlier study on cooperation in tourism, suggesting that successful collaboration requires trust, recognizing interdependence, generating a collective vision and objectives and commitment among stakeholders [47]. Nonetheless, majority of the interviewees advocated for the inclusion of their products and services in the websites of the mountain resort as they hold a strong notion that by so doing, the management of the resort will be doing them a great favour and showing willingness to carry them along in the development activities and most importantly in advertising their products and services. To this end, an interviewee remarked, "I would appreciate if the management of the resort market our goods and services alongside theirs on their website. I think even others will like it. At least we will be saving such much cost and be happy with the management".

Lack of understanding and integration with the management of the resort

This theme emerged during the interviews with the hotel owners who reported that they often use the tour guides as marketing officers and pay them some token depending on the number of tourists they were able to convince to patronise them. This marketing strategy is in addition to other strategies adopted by the hoteliers. It was evident that the tour guides appears to be more in touch with incoming tourists as many of them positioned themselves at the entrance of the resort to capture tourists that arrives the resort. In most cases, the tour guides win the mind of the tourists to lodge in any of the two hotels perhaps because the micro hotels offer lower lodging charges than the resort accommodation facilities. So, as they are leading the tourists to the hotels, they often encounter issues with the management staff of the resort. The hotels proprietors reported that the resort staff sometimes accused them of discouraging tourists from patronizing the resort accommodation facilities which leads to occasional conflict.

As noted by the interviewees, proper understanding and integration of local entrepreneurs with the management staff of the resort is crucial for peaceful coexistence and long-time sustainability of tourism businesses and the tourists' destination. The lack of cohesion between local tourism entrepreneurs and other tourism stakeholders such as government and private agency has a great deal of impact on the

sustainability of tourism businesses and by extension on the tourism destination itself in rural environments [48-50].

The two proprietors of the hotels questioned the functions of the local authorities and the Cross River States Tourism Bureau in charge of tourism development activities of the state. To them the Bureau and local council needs to bring the resort staff and all the micro tourism entrepreneurs together for harmonious relationship so that both parties will understand that they are all important stakeholders in the business of Obudu Mountain Resort. At the moment it appears that effort by the hoteliers to make the resort staff understand that they host the resort and so they ought to be the biggest beneficiary of its existence and be allowed to operate freely so long as they haven't come directly to the resort accommodation to draw tourists hasn't yield any tangible outcome as the resort staff do not see it that way. This scenario confirmed the view that when the interests and attitudes of local community members are not taken into consideration, the views of the more powerful participants may prevail and one of the resultant effects is conflict among stakeholders. According to a respondent, "The Cross River State Tourism Bureau that is supposed to help integrate us with the resort staff has not done that and so the resort staff do not see us as partners in the development of the resort as they think we are a threat to them (R1).

Although the above findings are peculiar problems to tourism professionals [48], no micro or small tourism businesses in tourists destination can operate successfully without adequate support from government and private agencies in terms of policies and actions that encourages their activities. Thus, development of co-ordination mechanisms among the formal bodies, between the public and the private sector, and among micro and small tourism firms is essential for the highly fragmented tourism industry [51].

Conclusions and Future Research

This paper is set out to investigate the marketing challenges of micro tourism business operators in Obudu Mountain Resort in Nigeria. The value of this paper lies in unveiling of the problems that micro tourism entrepreneurs encounter in marketing their products and services in an increasingly competitive market in mountain destinations in a sub-Saharan African country. Firstly, inadequacy of disposable fund for marketing and the inability of micro financial institutions to provide flexible access to micro loans as evident in this study is an impediment to marketing micro tourism business in Obudu Mountain Resort host communities by their operators. Situations like this limit the capacity of micro tourism businesses to expand [52]. The local government authority of Obudu area has a responsibility to provide the lead in helping the locals' access micro loans. Even if it may be difficult for the local authority (Obanliku) to directly provides this fund currently because of the very little monthly allocation been received from federation account through the corrupt state governor who in most cases short-change the local council of its actual federal allocation, there is need for it to be more focus on easing the process of accessing micro loans by micro tourism entrepreneurs using its will power and connections.

One of the marketing predicaments of operators of micro tourism businesses in Obudu Mountain Resort is the epileptic telecommunication network services. Perhaps a reason for the incidence of this problem could be the remoteness of the area coupled with its terrain. But, many would argue that such altitude could even be the most appropriate location for mounting telecommunication infrastructure (ICT) for the sake of achieving efficiency. Meanwhile,

providing adequacy and ensuring efficiency of ICT infrastructure in Obudu Mountain by the providers could be driven by the extent of return on investment derivable from such remote environment given the seasonal nature of influx of tourists to the area and the likelihood that ICT facilities in the area would not generate much revenue for the providers in off peak periods. Nonetheless, the necessities of efficiency of ICT infrastructures cannot be overemphasized and its demand urgent attention from Obudu Mountain Resort destination management organizations. This is because ICTs, especially the Internet, through its ever-increasing globally distributed infrastructure, have proven to be a very effective tool for the delivery of inexpensive multimedia information, marketing promotion, distribution and coordination of tourism. However, the demand for ICT infrastructures will not occur overnight. For guaranteed success, a carefully planned phase-by-phase approach will have to be adopted, taking into consideration the financial and technical resources available at any given moment.

Essentially, the formation of networks by micro and small tourism businesses can help to ease marketing challenges as collectively product and services of these businesses would be advertise to potential tourists. This networks which could be both formal and informal in nature tie businesses together and provide a safety net against business risks [53]. A typical of such informal networks has been observed in Evrytania (Greece) where the area's remoteness has induced businesses to form close association and connection with each other and support their activities as a means of coping with the area' slow accessibility and distance from the main economic centres. Furthermore, there is the need for the Obalinku local government authority, Cross River Tourism Bureau and other relevant stakeholders involve in the business of managing the mountain resort to fully bring together the operators of the existing micro tourism businesses and member of staff of Obudu Mountain Resort for the purpose of fostering better understanding and integration necessary for the attainment of reduced conflicts and long term sustainability of the destination. Evidence abounds that allowing community participation in tourism development as owners of tourism businesses contribute to peaceful co-existence of the locals and the destination operators which also enhance the sustainability of the activities of a destination [54-58].

As with most tourism study and case study research, this paper also has limitation. One major limitation associated with the study is that the research focused on only one tourism destination. Therefore, the research findings may not be generalized for other destinations. Other destination may present similar findings or differ significantly. Future research should be conducted in other mountain destinations in other developing countries to expand the debate on the issues hindering the marketing of micro and small tourism businesses.

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