

Applying an open systems public relations model to destination image development

Berendien Lubbe

Abstract

Public relations is essentially a communications function concerned with relationships, image and image development and it is from this perspective that the subject is viewed. A literature survey of the use of public relations in tourism indicated that no structural theoretical framework for its application in destination image development has been postulated. This was found to be the case in both tourism and public relations literature. In this article, such a framework is devised. Adapting an existing open-systems public relations model to represent the process of establishing a tourism relationship between a tourist-generating country and a tourist destination does this. This model was used as the foundation for formulating a public relations strategic framework.

1 Introduction

Public relations is often mentioned by tourism marketers as an instrument in the promotion of tourism and some studies have indicated the suitability of public relations as a tool in promoting a destination's image (Gartner & Hunt 1986; Tilson & Stacks 1997; Avraham 2000;), but the theoretical foundation on which this suitability is based has not yet been comprehensively argued in the literature.

In this paper the conceptual suitability of public relations to the development of a tourist destination's image is described by

- *analysing* the concepts of destination image and public relations
- *adapting* an existing open systems public relations model to represent the process of destination image development
- *Formulating* a public relations strategy, as derived from the model, which can be applied in any tourist destination seeking to improve its image.

2 Defining destination image

In analysing definitions of destination image, certain elements can be identified which are important for destination marketers in their selection of appropriate strategies to promote destinations.

Crompton (1979) defines *destination image* as 'the sum of all those emotional and aesthetic qualities such as experiences, beliefs, ideas, recollections and impressions, that a person has of a destination'.

It is evident that individuals form images based on their personal and individual frame of reference. This view that destination image has a 'personal' or 'individual' characteristic implies that destination image is more than the physical or commercial attributes of a destination. This view of image is supported by a number of researchers, both in the psychological and tourism fields (Mayo 1975; Goodrich 1978; Pearce 1982; Fridgen 1984; Mill & Morrison 1985; Coshall 2000; Sirgy & Su 2000). MacKay (1993) describes the importance of this characteristic of destination image to tourism destination promoters where she states the destination image is subjective knowledge and, in portraying a destination to potential tourists, more than the destination itself is portrayed:

Portrayal of natural scenery may imply experiencing nature; portrayal of landmarks and historic sites may indicate heritage appreciation; a focus on people in advertised images suggests social interaction. The potential symbolic interpretation is plural. However, the mandate of a destination is to control that image. By striving to meet the mandate, destinations are potentially controlling more than tourist destination image. Meaning and cultural construction or obstruction may be occurring also.

Crompton's definition also describes destination image as being formed from a number of sources. These sources range from first-hand experience of a destination to ideas or impressions. Destination marketers must take this into account in the formulation of communication strategies and according to established theory; the adoption model (which will be described later) can be applied here.

Reynolds' definition of image as 'the mental construct developed by a potential visitor on the basis of a few selected impressions among the flood of total impressions' (Fakeye & Crompton 1991:10) suggests that there is also a *sifting process* and that not all information gained on a region is necessarily included in the image that is ultimately formed. He says that image formation is a creative process in which impressions are elaborated, embellished and ordered. The diffusion of information process, which will also be fully explained later, can be used to describe this process.

The influence of *time* is also a significant factor in destination image. The definition provided by Reynolds suggests that destination image formation is also a process, which takes time. It also takes time to change an image. Garter and Shen (1992) say that changing an area's image has been hypothesised as being a slow, tedious process except when something happens that receives mass exposure. In this regard they talk about 'autonomous change agents'. In their study of the effect of Tianenmen Square on China's tourism image they showed that certain components of the image changed more dramatically than others. An analysis done by Gartner and Hunt (1986) of the change in the image of Utah over a twelve-year period (1971-1983) showed that the image of a particular state or, as Gartner and Hunt say, 'perceptions nonresidents hold about the attributes of certain activities and attraction present within a state', changes slowly. This change they ascribe to a mix of organic and induced influences. The well-established

theory by Gunn (1972) states that destination image can be either organic or induced, the organic image being derived from non-tourist sources such as media reports on world events and geography and history books, and the induced image being the result of promotional efforts of a tourist nature (that is, under the direct control of the destination).

The ability of a person to describe and recount his image is part of Chon's (1990) definition of image that states that image is 'the set of meanings by which an object is known and through which people describe, remember and relate to it. That, is an image is the net result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings expectations and impressions about an object'. This definition not only highlights the theory that destination images accord with the personal motivations and values of the individual, but also that destination image reflects a *relationship* between the individual and a destination. When viewing destination image as a relationship, which is established and maintained between a tourist destination and potential tourists and other groups in a tourist-generating country, promoting the attributes of the destination is not sufficient. A tourist destination cannot only promote an image that will influence potential tourists to visit that destination, but must also ensure that the image has the capacity to meet the needs and expectations of potential tourists. In his review of recreational travel motivation and satisfaction, Chon (1989) explains that a tourist's motivation to travel is primarily a function of two factors: firstly a recreation traveler's perception of the attractiveness of outcomes related to his or her travel objectives, and secondly the travelers previous images of the destination and what he or she actually sees, feels and achieves at the destination in this context. Coshall (2000) suggests that image is a series of perceptual beliefs, ideas and impressions of a destination, which, in turn, are influenced by past promotions, reputation, opinions of tour operators, and peer evaluation. An individual's perceptual beliefs determine a destination's potential for satisfaction; they generate expectations in the mind of the consumer (Chon 1989; Chaudhary 2000). Chon says that there are probably four different sets of possible combinations of the expectancy and evaluation of the destination area. Table 1 illustrates each possible combination and its marketing implications.

Table 1 Expectation and performance evaluation: marketing implications

Expectation	Evaluative outcome	Satisfaction/dissatisfaction and marketing implication
High	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Likely to result in satisfaction with the area visited by first-time visitors. ● Likely to attract many first-time visitors. ● Likely to build good reputation. ● Likely to result in repeat visits by first-time visitors.
Low	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Likely to result in dissatisfaction with the area visited. ● Likely to attract few first-time visitors. ● Likely to result in few repeat visits by first-time visitors.
High	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Likely to result in dissatisfaction with the area visited. ● Likely to attract first-time visitors. ● Likely to build negative reputation in the long run. ● Likely to result in few repeat visits by first-time visitors.
Low	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Likely to result in satisfaction with the area visited. ● Likely to attract few first-time visitors. ● Likely to build good reputation in the long run. ● Likely to result in repeat visits by first-time visitors.

Source: Chon (1989:5)

A subsequent empirical study by Chon (1992) indicated that a destination is acting in the mutual interests of both the destination and the public only if the outcome of the travel experience matches or supersedes the expectation created by the image. Overemphasis of a destination's attributes results in greater levels of dissatisfaction by visitors and has implications for the destination as summarised in Table 1.

Relph (1976) describes the image of a place as its identity and says that such an image consists of all the elements associated with the experiences of individuals or groups and their intentions towards that place. He says that within one individual the mixing of experience, emotion, memory, imagination, present situation and intention can be so variable that he or she can see a place in several distinct ways. There are sharp distinctions between individuals. Every individual has a more or less distinctive image of a particular place. This is because each individual has his or her own mix of personality, memories, emotions and intentions which colours his or her image of that place and gives it a distinctive identity for him or her. According to Relph (1976) a *common social image* can be established because individual images are constantly being socialised through the use of common languages, symbols and experiences. People also share aspirations that provide for common social images of places. Groups and communities can develop identities of places of significance to that group or community that reflect group interests and biases. The distinction made between groups and communities is based on the formality of the structures. Groups are formal and organised and views are formalised

through specific interest and actions groups, whereas communities are spontaneous and fluctuating social forms of knowledge but can nevertheless reflect group norms and interests, albeit less formally. Relph (1976) says that personal eccentricities and attitudes are subsumed to the dominant image of the groups, perhaps to gain either the functional or political benefits of the sense of personal security of group membership. This common ground of agreement about the identity of a place is called the *consensus identity*. Groups that form common images of destinations should therefore be the target of destination marketers.

Against the background of what a destination image is, the overall objective of destination image development should be seen as the establishment of a 'desired' perception or image of the destination in order to:

- create sufficient awareness of the destination so that the destination is selected as a possible place to visit
- increase its attractiveness to potential tourists, so that the likelihood of choosing that destination from amongst various alternative is increased
- fulfil high expectations or achieve a positive performance evaluation.

The moment potential tourists place a destination on their list of alternatives, Chon (1989) says, they have constructed & *primary image* of the destination. He explains the concept of primary image on the basis of the so-called 'push' and 'pull' factors of recreational travel motivation. He regards the 'push' factors as an individual's needs and motives, and the environmental cues arising from the attractiveness of a region as the 'pull' factors. He also says that these two forces acting together function as antecedent events for an individual's travel motivation. In other words, an individual who is motivated to travel has linked his or her needs ('push' factors) to the perceived attributes that certain destination have that are important to him or her in satisfying those needs ('pull' factors).

In summary, it can be said that certain elements are central to the concept of destination image. Destination image is made up of more than the attributes of a destination; it is a personal relationship that an individual has with the destination which reflects the perceived ability of the destination to fulfil the needs and expectations of the individual. It is derived over time and from various sources. It can be recounted to others and, in the sharing of the image, can become a common social image held by a group. In seeking to create a positive image of a destination, promoters must seek a process that is conceptually suitable to the elements identified in destination image.

By definition, public relations is essentially a function concerned with image, public opinion and the establishment and maintenance of positive relationship between individuals, institutions, social groupings, organisations and even governments. The theoretical principles and concepts on which public relations is built make it the most appropriate process for developing the image of a destination in such a way that it supports and fulfils all the elements identified in the destination image.

3 Defining public relations

Moore and Kalupa (1985) say that the basic objective of public relations is to measure, analyse and influence public opinion, which develops from the attitudes of individuals comprising the public. A public can be seen as a group of people with similar interests who have a common opinion on a subject. Public opinion, therefore, is an expression of a belief held in common by members of a group of public on an issue of general importance. Public opinion expresses the image that is held of an object, institutions or even a tourist destination. As Kelman (1965) points out, researchers should be interested not only in the descriptions of what the object is like, but also in the conceptions of the object that are implicit in the ways in which the individual relates himself or herself to it (this includes behaviour towards the object). When reviewing Chon's definition of image, which says that image is the 'set of meanings by which an object is known and through which people describe, remember and relate to it... it is the net result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings, expectations and impressions about an object', (Chon, 1990), the conceptual similarity between destination image and public relations is evident. Chon sees image as the set of meanings that describes an individual's relationship to an object while public relations is primarily concerned with the development of relationships between people and institutions. Where a number of people (a public) share the same image of an object, a public opinion can be expressed or as Relph (1976) indicated, a common social image can be established. An image, expressed through public opinion, depicts the nature of the relationship between a group of people and an object. Public relations is concerned with the opinions expressed by publics about a destination and its goal is to achieve a positive tourism relationship between the relevant publics and the destination.

A positive image of the destination is a prerequisite for the effective marketing of a destination. Unlike marketing where the final aim is to produce a transaction that is directly reflected in an organisation's sales and profitability, the final aim of public relations is to develop and sustain positive relationships. The goal of public relations is therefore more than an economic one. It is to create a positive climate and to establish and maintain a positive destination image, so the tourism trade can effectively market its products and services in the tourist-generating country. The importance of public relations in the development of destinations, be they regions or cities, has already been established in studies (Tilson & Stacks 1997; Avraham 2000). Two phases can therefore be distinguished when a tourist destination wants to build a tourism relationship with a tourist-generating country. The first phase covers the development of a positive destination image, which can be called the public relations phase. The second phase covers the actual targeted marketing of tourist products and services and can be called the marketing phase.

Public relations is concerned with all those groups that can and do have an impact on the destination and not only the customers (potential tourists). These groups may include

media, government agencies or any other group that has some connection with the destination and can influence its image. These groups are called publics.

Social systems theory is the general theory that is most often applied to public relations and provides the foundation for the process of developing a destination's image. 'Systems theory sets forth an 'ideal' or model environment showing how public relations processes and practices promote adjustment, adaptation, mutual understanding, and two-way communication between organizations and the key publics in their environments' (Baskin & Aranoff 1988). One of the most important reasons for adopting a systems perspective on public relations management is the adaptive ability of systems to achieve goals and maintain balance in the face of the so-called *environmental change pressures* (all those social forces and issues which affect people) and which systems theorists call matter, energy, and information inputs.

4 An open systems model of public relations as applied to destination image development

Baskin and Aranoff (1988) say that 'systems theory provides a framework for reconciling an organization's goal with the expectations of society and its publics'. In terms of destination image, the reconciliation of the destination's goals - to achieve a positive tourism relationship - with the expectations of the publics in a tourist-generating country is what is sought. This reconciliation requires an ongoing exchange of information between the destination and the publics in order for each to understand the other and the adaptation of both the destination and the publics to an ever-changing environment to maintain balance in the relationship. In so doing, a positive destination image can be developed and maintained.

A social system can be defined as a set of interacting units which endures through time within an established boundary by responding and adjusting to change pressures from the environment in order to achieve and maintain goal states (Cutlip, Center & Broom 1985). In destination image development the 'set of interacting units that endures through time within an established boundary' can be seen as the destination and the publics. The 'destination-publics' system therefore consists of the destination and the publics that are interacting with one another. The destination component in the system is relatively easy to define, but the publics are more abstract. The tourist destination is the destination as a whole as well as its tourist attributes. The relevant publics can be described as all those groups who participate in, or have an influence on, the construction of a primary image of a destination. This cannot cover only potential tourists, since they are as yet either largely unaware of the tourist potential of the destination, or they may have a negative perception of it.

The publics must therefore initially include all those groups who have some relationship with the destination, such as opinion leaders, potential tourists, the media, travel agents

and tour operators. The publics will change as awareness increases and a positive image is established, that is, once a primary image is constructed, a positive destination image has to be maintained. It is the task of the public relations manager (practitioner, researcher) to apply the systems approach in order to define the publics. Each different situation or problem will produce its own publics. An important point to note in the social systems approach is that the boundaries of a system are not dependent on the proximity of its parts, as is the case with physical and biological systems. This makes possible the creation of systems across international boundaries, particularly in relation to tourism development. The role of public relations in destination image development is illustrated in Figure 1.

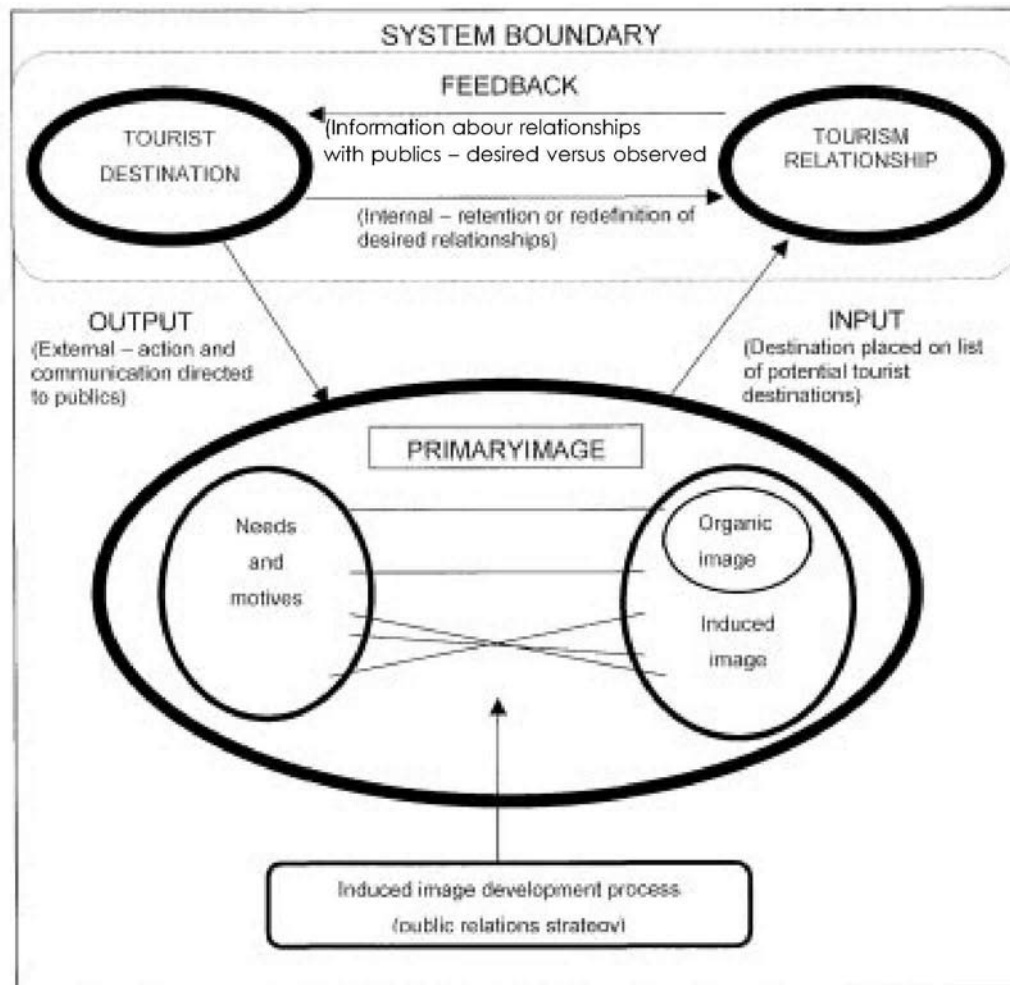


Figure 1 An open systems model of public relations in destination image development

In the development of a tourist destination's (country) image in a specific market (a tourist-generating country), a positive tourism relationship between the two countries is being sought. The 'goal state' is therefore a positive tourism relationship. Tourism interaction takes place when one country seeks to generate tourists from another. In the process an interdependent relationship is created whereby the tourist destination seeks awareness, familiarity, knowledge, understanding, acceptance and ultimately increased foreign tourism arrivals. On the other hand, the publics in the tourist generating country seek a positive tourism experience which can meet their needs, motives and expectations. The desired relationship depends firstly on the creation of sufficient awareness of the destination to allow for the construction of a primary image. This ensures that the destination is placed on a potential tourist's list of alternatives. Then a desired image must be maintained in order to provide a positive climate (public opinion) in which the destination's tourist products and services can be marketed most effectively. This should ultimately result in increased levels of foreign tourism. If no primary image is constructed then the system cannot function, since there is no basis for tourism interaction between the two countries and a relationship cannot be established. In order to establish sufficient awareness of the destination to enable a primary image to be constructed, an analysis of the current state of awareness of the destination is needed (the organic image) to determine whether the problem is a lack of knowledge or a negative perception of the destination. Furthermore, to determine whether the destination can meet the needs, motives and expectations of the potential tourists, and how these are currently being met must also be the subject of research. This provides the basis for the formulation of the public relations strategy. However, this system continues after the establishment of the primary image and includes the development and maintenance of a desired destination image that will enhance the relationship between the tourist destination and the tourist-generating country. Once the relationship has stabilised, open-systems public relations constantly monitors the environment in order to maintain the 'goal states'.

Forces in the environment impact and change the relationships between a tourist destination and a tourist-generating country. These forces can lead to a change in the way that a tourist destination is perceived (the image held of the destination). Environmental forces can impact on either the destination or the publics, or both. The influence of the forces themselves is, more often than not, felt through the way in which they are communicated, rather than through personal experience. For example, news reports on political instability, high costs or outbreaks of disease can affect the perceptions of the attractiveness of certain destinations, and consequently the relationships between the destinations and their publics in tourist-generating countries.

Forces that change the social or economic status of individuals also affect attitudes and opinions. For example, a recession in educational values can change an individual's status to the extent that previous needs and expectations are changed, and as a result perceptions of a destination's potential to meet the new needs and expectations are affected. Therefore,

applying the open systems approach to public relations calls, first and foremost, for the purposeful scanning of the environment to anticipate and detect changes that affect the relationship between the destination and its publics. In this lies the essence of public relations as a communications process. Adapting the system through a constant exchange of information to maintain balanced relationships is the goal of open systems relations.

Once the publics affected by those environmental forces that impact on the destination image have been identified (because, as already mentioned, public relations is not concerned with total public opinion but with 'actionable' public opinion), corrective action can be taken. Public relations must therefore be selectively sensitive to those publics that affect the destination and are affected by the destination. This calls not only for specifically defined publics, but also for research skills to monitor the publics' opinions and the destination's image. Changes in the environment affect the knowledge, predispositions and behaviours of relevant publics towards a destination, but, in the open systems approach, public relations has the capacity to initiate corrective action. Corrective action can be taken internally (within the destination) to ensure that the desired image reflects the reality of what is offered, and if it does not, to reassess how the destination can meet the needs and expectations of the publics through induced agents. These efforts are specific communication campaigns based on public relations strategies. The adaptations and adjustments that take place in the system through corrective action are based on the feedback that is obtained. Feedback may be positive or negative, depending on the way the system responds to it. Positive or negative feedback is reflected in changes of opinions or behaviour. Positive feedback means that a primary image of the destination is constructed as awareness of the potential of the destination to meet the needs and expectations of the publics is created. Thereafter the marketing phase can commence in the positive climate that has been established through reinforcement of messages. Negative feedback, by contrast, means that the gap between the publics' image of the destination and the desired image has widened.

This calls for counteractive measures to limit the gap. But open systems have the ability not only to react but also to anticipate change and to actively influence their environments. This they do through the utilisation of two-way communication. As Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985) state: 'Simple, relatively closed systems react to inputs from outside events and objects as they occur. Complex, relatively open-systems actively probe and monitor the environment in order to detect or, better yet, predict changing conditions.'

The effects sought in this model are the achievement and maintenance of a desired tourism relationship which is in the destination's and the publics' mutual interests. Whatever may conflict with these mutual interests is changed or eliminated.

Public relations has an obligation and responsibility in its representation of images. According to Sullivan in Pearson (1989) public relations is charged with the responsibility of delivering true information to large audiences. Although he displays a certain

scepticism about the possibility of producing accurate images, it is precisely because of this that he says that public relations must be *overcautious, indeed unreasonably cautious, about the images it proposes*. He says that images are, by definition, incomplete interpretations and messages sent by public relations practitioners and are based on images that the practitioner has about the reality of his or her institution (or destination), images that represent an interpretation of reality, not an exact picture of it. Cultural background, emotions, life experiences and processes of selective perception also affect images. As a result of this, Sullivan says that an important moral responsibility of public relations is to recognise the incompleteness and be overly cautious about the image it represents.

The open-systems approach to public relations is specifically based on two-way communication and mutual understanding, which means that a desired image should not be a product of how a destination wishes to be seen, but rather a reflection of the reality of how a destination can meet the needs and expectations of its publics. As explained above, the effects sought in this model are the achievement and maintenance of a desired destination image which are in the destination's and the publics' mutual interests. This is central to the ethical nature of public relations.

Considering the potential benefits of tourism development and the inadequate understanding of the use of public relations in tourism development, the question arises of whether public relations has been most effectively utilised in establishing a destination's image as a desirable tourist destination for foreign visitors. When applying proactive (or the open-systems approach) to public relations, communication strategies are designed for the sharing (not just giving) of information and for the solving (not just explaining away) of problems (Cutlip *et al*, 1985). This implies that public relations as an open system is capable of adapting to the constantly changing environment and influencing the environment towards change.

5 The public relations strategy for destination image development

Public relations has been positioned as a purposive, goal-directed and problem-solving management function using both corrective action and communication to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. In proposing a strategy for destination image development a number of aspects have to be taken into account. Firstly, the only effective way in which public relations can be operationalised is through a four-step process. This process is made up of four distinct but interrelated and interdependent phases: research, planning, communication (implementation) and evaluation. Problems are solved and issues managed by applying the four basic steps in the public relations process. A strategy to increase awareness of a destination must therefore incorporate the principles by which the four-step process operates. Secondly as is depicted in the model of public relations in destination image development (Figure 1), a mutually beneficial tourism relationship between a destination and its publics begins with the establishment of a primary image,

which is the result of increased awareness; in other words, *latent* publics are changed to *aware* publics. The processes through which a latent public becomes an aware public, and ultimately an active public by adopting the new ideas, are called the diffusion and the adoption processes respectively. These processes are therefore fundamental to the public relations process and strategy. A third aspect that must be taken into account when formulating a public relations strategy is its international application. The strategy is formulated by the tourist destination country (based on the identified 'push/pull' factors) but has to be applied in the tourist-generating country, which means that local conditions and value systems must be taken into account.

6 The public relations process

The first phase in the public relations process is the identification of the problem (for example, what is the level of awareness or current image of the tourist destination). This is done through fact-finding, secondary and/or primary research and allows the problem to be properly defined and explained, and provides supporting evidence for the existence of the problem. In this phase initial differentiation of the publics relevant to the problem is also done. According to Broom and Dozier (1990) research is at the core of how the public relations function is managed. It elevates the function from the intuitive enterprise of the artist and makes it part of management system rather than merely a communications technique.

The second phase, planning and programming, includes making decisions based on the results obtained from the research phase about the opinions of relevant publics, their potential impact on the destination's image and the goals and objectives that must be attained. After these decisions have been made, specific strategies must be formulated to enable the objectives to be achieved. One of the most important aspects of planning is the setting of objectives. These objectives form the criteria according to which the entire programme can be evaluated. In accordance with the systems approach to public relations, the objectives, based on the identified problem, should reflect the interests of the relevant publics. The public relations objectives relate to increasing awareness of the destination's attributes on the basis of the factors that determine primary image, namely the 'push/pull' factors. In this way the messages that are communicated serve the interests of the publics because they are based on their needs and motives. Public relations is operational in the *functional* rather than *functionary* mode. Relevant publics for which specific objectives are set should be analysed in terms of their communication needs, which cover aspects such as the contents of the message and appropriate media or channels.

Specific message design, timing and frequency of messages can be viewed as part of the communication phase. The communication phase also entails budgeting and allocation and scheduling of tasks and responsibilities by the public relations practitioners. The importance of the selection of the correct message and media strategies cannot be underestimated, as once plans are implemented, the suitability of messages and media is

quickly ascertained. Adjustments to these plans may become necessary as new information or feedback becomes available. Further research into the relevant publics' opinions may become necessary. Feedback on communications in the implementation phase is an important initial measure of the success of a programme. The operational aspects of implementing plans and programmes on a day-to-day basis include frequent (monthly, weekly, daily) scheduling of tasks, allocation of responsibilities and financial and other resources.

Finally, evaluating the results to the programme or assessing its effectiveness and modifying it for future effectiveness completes the public relations process. This assessment determines to what extent the objectives of the programme have been met. Evaluation techniques can be determined in the research and planning phases and follow-up studies can be done to assess any image changes due to the public relations campaign. The 1986 study by Gartner and Hunt was a replication of the initial study done twelve years earlier and provided an analysis of the change in the image of Utah as a tourist destination over the twelve-year period due to promotional activities. Results of an evaluation can lead to new programmes being formulated, since new issues or problems may become evident in the evaluation phase of the public relations process. This characterises the cyclical nature of the process. The four phases of the public relations process are cyclical since the planning, implementation and evaluation steps are guided and motivated by the information and insight gained in the first step. These phases also overlap since, based on the open-systems approach, the process is in a continuous state of adjustment to a changing environment.

7 The diffusion and adoption processes

The second aspect of the theoretical framework within which the public relations strategy must be explained is the diffusion process, that is the process whereby a *latent* public becomes an *aware* public. As previously explained publics are not static; they vary from one situation to the next and also from one time to the next, and they are dynamic as are their relationships with the destination. In the open-systems approach to public relations in destination image development it was shown that a public can begin as a *latent* public, where a problem or issue is still not unrecognised by them, and can move through the stages of awareness, becoming the so-called *aware* publics, and active involvement when they can be called *active* publics. In Figure 1 it was illustrated that a primary image of a destination is established only by converting a *latent* public into an *aware* public. Thereafter, as awareness increases and more individuals place the destination on their list of potential alternatives a positive tourism relationship between the destination and the tourist-generating country is established. Although the 'conversion' from latent to aware publics is ultimately sought in the *primary* public (potential tourists), the campaign can be conducted through *intervening* or *moderating* publics who have sufficient influence over the *primary* publics (for example opinion leaders, travel agents). The process through

which a latent public becomes an aware public, and ultimately an active public by adopting new ideas is called the *diffusion process*. Although a travel experience may not be a new idea, a 'new' destination requires the same acceptance (adoption of the idea) before a tourism relationship can be established. Baskin and Aranoff (1988), on whose theories the ensuing discussion is based, define the term diffusion as 'the way in which new ideas are adopted in society'. Rogers in Kotler (1991) makes a distinction between the diffusion process and the adoption process, stating that the diffusion process is 'the spread of a new idea from its source of invention to its ultimate users of adopters', while the *adoption process* is 'the mental process through which an individual passes from first hearing about an innovation to final adoption'. Publics or target audiences are social systems that public relations practitioners seek to influence. It is therefore important to understand how the diffusion of information and the adoption process can be applied to the public relations process. The term 'critical paths' is used to describe the way in which information is spread through certain channels that have an influence on the adoption of new ideas by target publics. Baskin and Aranoff (1988:161-162) say the target publics move through five stages, which show how they are influenced to change. The stages are

- *Awareness*. People are aware of the idea or practice, although their knowledge is limited
- *Interest*. People begin to develop an interest in the idea and seek more information about it
- *Evaluation*. People begin to mentally apply the idea to their individual situations. Simultaneously, they obtain more information and make a decision to try a new idea
- *Trials*. At this point, actual application begins, usually on a small scale. Potential adopters are primarily interested in the practice, techniques and conditions necessary for the application
- *Adoption*. The idea it is adopted once is proven worthwhile.

In applying the adoption process to the development of a destination image and the promotion of a new tourist destination, the fourth step can be excluded since potential tourists cannot 'try out' a new destination. Gitelson and Crompton (1983:2) explain it as follows: 'unlike the retail consumer in a store, the vacationer can neither directly observe what he or she is buying, nor try it out inexpensively'.

Baskin and Aranoff (1988) also say that the five basic channels of influence are used to persuade publics to adopt new ideas.

- *Mass media*. Electronic and print media such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines. There is also a growing reliance on the Internet for the promotion and sales of tourism and most products and services. Almost all companies and tourism promotional organisations now have Websites (Tierney, 2000).
- *Biased intermediaries*. These are individuals or groups that stand to benefit from another's adoption (such as sales persons).
- *Unbiased third parties*. These include consumer groups, government agencies and other groups or individuals that have credibility.

- *Significant others.* These are friends, relatives and others who are admired by potential adopters.
- *Personal experience.* This involves actual use of innovation.

Figure 2 illustrates some of the critical paths for the adoption of new ideas. In this figure primary and secondary paths of influence have been traced, following the most important and second most important channels at each stage of adoption. In the early stages of awareness and interest, mass media are most effective. In the critical stages of evaluation and trial, however, the emphasis shifts to significant others. Finally, at the point of adoption, personal experience becomes the primary channel. The secondary or support path begins with significant others, moving to unbiased third parties at the evaluation and trial stages and then back again to significant others at adoption.

In formulating a public relations strategy for destination image development the critical paths provide an indication of the level of utilisation of various media and, given effective utilisation, the levels of success that may be achieved.

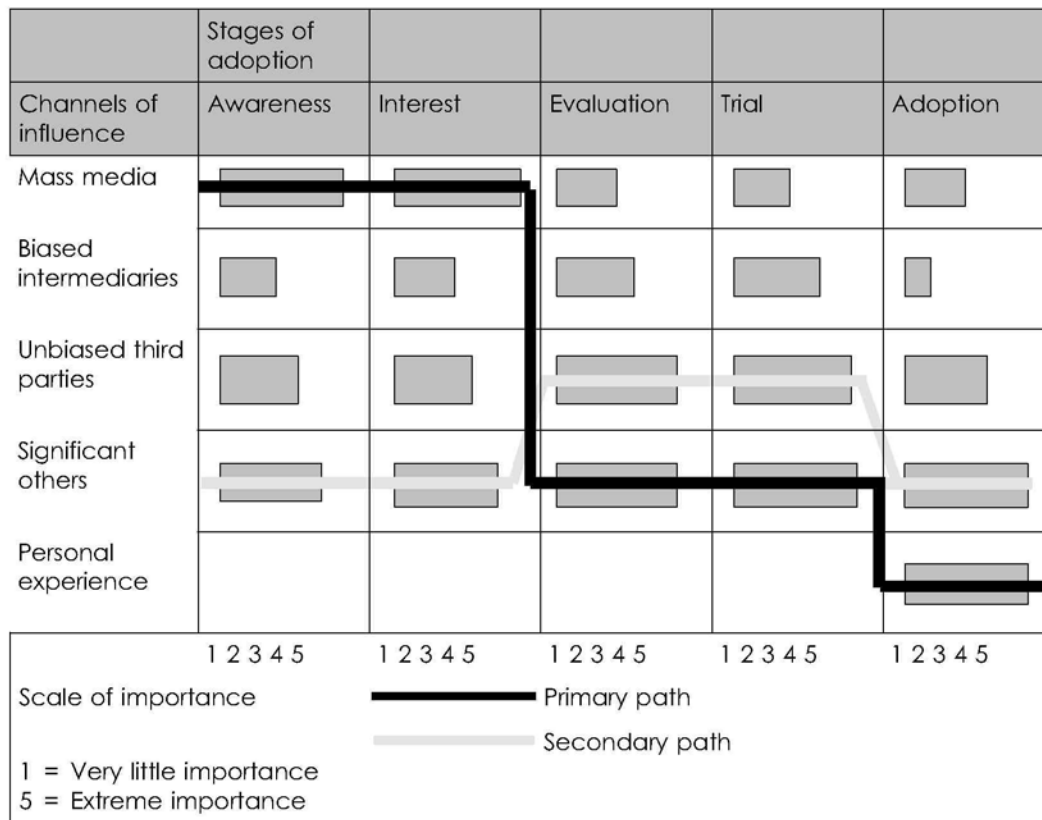


Figure 2 Critical paths of influence in the adoption process

Source: Baskin and Aranoff (1988:161)

8 Public relations in an international context

The basic principles of public relations are applicable anywhere in the world (Moore & Kalupa, 1985). What is different in the application of public relations in a foreign country is that a different approach is required based on the value systems, customs, traditions, biases, preferences and communication networks that exist in that country. In formulating an appropriate public relations strategy for a tourist-generating country, information is required on acceptable methods of communicating messages. Whilst universally accepted principles may apply in the formulation of the strategy, the communication media and channels may be culturally bound. One way of determining what is acceptable in communication strategies is through secondary research and/or primary research by obtaining the opinions of the relevant publics in this regard.

The theoretical framework of this process of destination image development provided above is illustrated in Figure 3.

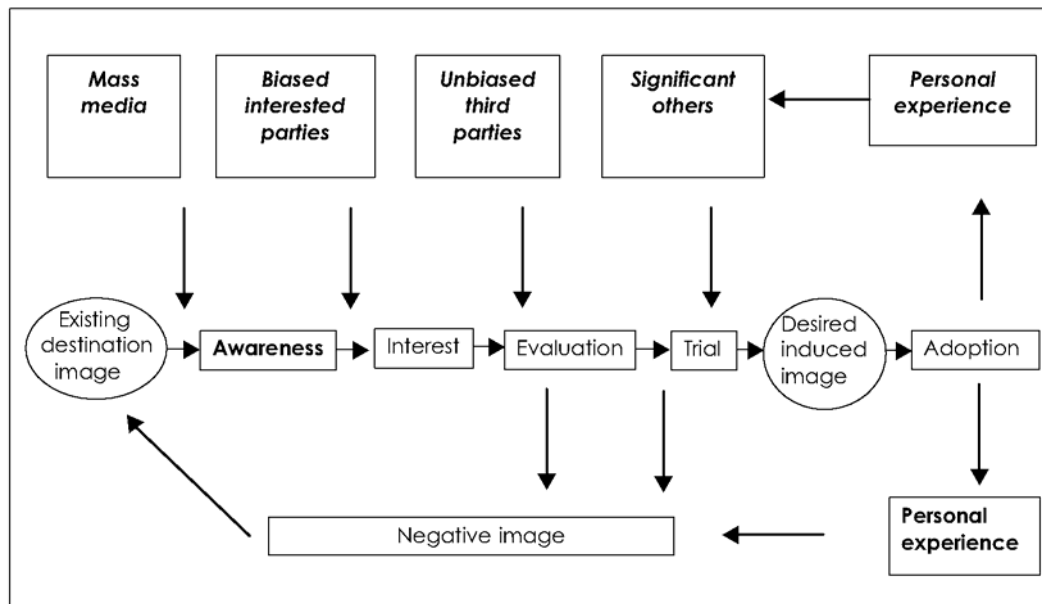


Figure 3 Process of destination image development

In this figure the existing destination image is depicted as the start of the process. This existing destination image is determined during the research phase of the public relations process and indicates the current attitudes and opinions of the tourist destination held by the relevant publics (such as potential tourists). During the research, the relevant publics are identified. Identifying relevant publics is of fundamental importance, as this

identification lays the foundation for goal- and objective-setting as well as the correct selection of communication strategies. The research effectively covers the problem definition phase, which Broom and Dozier (1990) describe as 'research and fact-finding' where, in essence the following question is asked, *What's happening now?* The actual planning phase in which a public relations strategy is developed can begin once the above question is answered. Broom and Dozier say that the following question should guide the planning phase: *What should we do and why?* To answer this question the first step is to set an overall goal. Broom and Dozier describe a *goal* as a global statement of programme results, indicating the more general and ultimate outcome that the total programme is designed to achieve. On the other hand, they describe objectives as the specific results to be achieved by a specified date for each of the well-defined target publics. In destination image development a desired destination image can be seen as the overall goal of the public relations strategy. A desired destination image means that awareness is increased to the extent that the target publics form a desired image of the destination, which will contribute to the establishment of a tourism relationship between the tourist-generating country and the destination. The objectives that are set for each public must:

1. Give focus and direction to developing programme activities,
2. Provide guidance and motivation to those working in the programme, and
3. Spell out the criteria for the impact of the programme.

The objectives set for target publics also provide the criteria for evaluation once the strategy has been implemented. The process that must be followed to achieve the objectives can be described as the communication strategy in which various channels of influence are utilised. When the aim of public relations is to change a *latent* public to an *aware* public, the strategy to be formulated relies heavily on the processes of diffusion and adoption that broadly cover the phases of awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption.

In applying the diffusion and adoption processes to the promotion of a new tourism destination, the fourth step can be excluded since potential tourists cannot 'try out' a new destination. However, although the primary publics (the target markets) cannot 'try out' a new destination, the intervening publics (those groups who have influence over the primary publics) can and should personally experience the new destination on a familiarisation basis in order to provide word-of-mouth recommendations. These intervening publics are those described under the channels of influence as *biased intermediaries, unbiased third parties, or significant others*. Other channels of influence are *mass media* and *personal experience*. Personal experience therefore has two connotations, the first being the personal experience of the primary publics once the idea (the new destination) has been adopted.

Certain critical paths of influence occur for the adoption of a new idea and primary and secondary paths of influence can be traced whereby various channels are important at

different stages of adoption. This was illustrated in Figure 2 where the primary path was shown to begin with mass media being most important in the early stages of awareness and interest, and shifting to significant others in the evaluation and the trial stages, with personal experience being the most important at the adoption stage. The secondary path shown in Figure 2 begins with significant others and moves on to unbiased third parties at the evaluation and trial stages and then back again to significant others at adoption. Marx and Van der Walt (1993) note that each type of communication channel has a specific role to play during the transfer of information and are complementary. The importance of the various channels varies according to the risks experienced by the individual, where factors such as complexity of the new idea, price and lack of comparable information from which to evaluate the idea, all play a role. In Figure 3 the stage of adoption is depicted after the public relations goal has been achieved. The public relations goal is to achieve a desired image, whilst it is the task of marketing to ensure adoption through final selection of the destination amongst the alternatives and to ensure visitation of the destination. The channels of influence in Figure 3 are depicted according to the primary path of influence as explained above.

Since public relations is an open system and a continuous, cycle process, constant monitoring and evaluation of the destination image must be done so that adjustments to the communications strategy can be made. As shown in Figure 3 the image achieved may not be as desired, which would mean an adjustment has to be made. Furthermore, once the destination has been visited the tourist becomes a member of the 'significant others' channel of communication and wields an influence over the attitude and opinions of relevant publics. A negative image has to be corrected by once again utilising the correct channels of influence recommended in the public relations strategy.

Summary

In this paper the relevance of public relations in the development of destination image was examined by analysing the concepts of destination image and public relations. An established open system model of public relations was adapted to illustrate the use of public relations in destination image development. Finally the importance of the adoption and diffusion models was illustrated in the formulation of a public relations strategy for destination image development.

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