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## **Korean tourism marketing: The need for a clear message**

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**Having a constructive and systematic policy on tourism is important in promoting and sustaining tourism. Countries with successful and prominent tourism industries show a consistent message and one that leads to success. In Asia, countries such Thailand and Malaysia have a successful and consistent message while in Africa; countries such as Kenya utilize a message that resonates with potential tourists. On the other hand, Korea, which has a plethora of wonderful historical and cultural interests that could entertain and attract tourists, has failed to succeed in becoming seen as a global tourist destination. The potential for growth in the tourist market in Korea is immense and while tourism has not necessarily stagnated, it has yet to be fully developed or promoted properly. An issue that has limited the success is that the Government organizations do not have a clear or consistent message when marketing Korea overseas. The message is fragmented, underdeveloped, and misplaced to many potential global tourists. It is important for tourist organizations within Korea to re-examine their strategies and to ask difficult questions such as are we overemphasizing nationalism in its marketing? Are we targeting the correct people or are trying to tell people what to visit rather than telling them why to visit? I believe that the main organizations involved with Korean tourism are misdirecting both the message and the target market and this is hindering Korea's growth as a destination. Therefore, this paper attempted to show the problems within the Korean tourism market and deliver a critical analysis of marketing policies that could help Korea develop a more consistent and uniformed marketing strategy.**

**Key words:** Korea, tourism, marketing, strategy

### **INTRODUCTION**

Having a constructive and systematic policy on tourism is important in promoting and sustaining tourism. Countries with successful and prominent tourism industries show a consistent message and one that leads to success (Litvin and Mouri, 2009). On different continents, one can evaluate successful countries and their policies. For Europe, Ireland has a clear tourist message and successful that consists of promoting a sense of landscape beauty and peacefulness through campaigns such as the "wild Atlantic way" and "Causeway coast" (Failte Ireland, 2013). In Asia, countries such as

Thailand and Malaysia have a successful and consistent message of selling sun, sand, and adventure. While in Africa, countries such as Kenya utilize an adventure and passion message that resonates with potential tourists (Trang, 2013). On the other hand, Korea, which has a plethora of wonderful historical and cultural interests that could entertain and attract tourists, such as Andong, Namiseom Island, traditional markets, and majestic country scenery, have failed in becoming seen as a global tourist destination (Williamson, 2013). The main aspect of this failure to become a global destination has been the

fragmented and ever changing branding and policies. According to Trang (2013), Korea has invested heavily in its marketing image but it has still to attain the status as a global destination because as Williamson (2013) stated, the message is fragmented, underdeveloped, and misplaced to many potential global tourists.

Can Korea compete with the Great Wall in China, Mount Fuji in Japan, the islands of the Philippines or the relaxed beaches of Thailand? This is one of the most important questions that should be asked at the governmental level, and if the answer is no, then what marketing strategy should those organizations focus on to improve the image of Korea? If the answer is yes, then why is it that Korea is still relatively unknown as a global tourist destination and what can be done to change this perception? It is this author's opinion that the Government and its organizations do not have a clear or consistent message when marketing Korea overseas. This paper outlined the main issues with the Korean Government's policies and gives several recommendations to improve its tourism strategy.

## **Tourism in Korea**

### **Tourism importance in Korea**

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and is an important part of many countries strategic plans (Kim a Yoon, 2013; Trang, 2013). Korea, placed among many exceptional tourist destinations has over the past few decades begun to realize and place a greater importance of tourism as a form of economic power and as a national branding tool (Dinnie, 2009; Seo et al., 2009; Trang, 2013). When you think of Ireland you think of green fields and pubs; when you think of Thailand, Indonesia, or Malaysia you think of beaches and cultural tourism; when you think of Australia you think about Koalas and coral reefs. When you think of Korea, the most common thought is North Korea (Ravi, 2009; Williamson, 2013). For tourism to succeed in Korea, there must be an overhaul of what it means to be "Korea." Korea is an emerging tourist destination and as such is trying to differentiate itself from its stronger neighbors. Organizations within Korea, such as the Korean Tourism Organization (KTO) and the Ministry for Tourism, Culture, and Sport (MTCS) are attempting to create a unique image for Korea. Unfortunately, the message is not focused and changes too often to create a consistent message for foreign visitors. This is not to say that Korea has not been relatively successful in attracting visitors as there are quite a few visitors from Japan and China. Yet, there is an over reliance on these consumers and the overall image if Korea is not as popular or memorable as those same countries.

The KTO and MTCS have invested billions of dollars into Korean tourism and the results have been positive but very limited (Kolesnikov-Jessop, 2010). According to the 2013 KTO survey data (KTO, 2013a) for 5 consecutive

years there has been an increase of visitors arriving in Korea, with Korea attracting over 12 million visitors in 2012 for the first time. The majority of these visitors were from Japan and China (over 55%) and predominantly young and female. Visitors from Europe and North American were limited but have continued to grow at a smaller rate than other nations. An interesting finding from the KTO data was that the majority of those visiting desired to visit Korea after viewing Korean drama and pop music on the television and through the internet. This could well have been because of the Korean wave as many countries in Asia have Korean Broadcast Service (KBS) International available. KBS International shows Korean dramas, pop music, and tourism adverts daily and the combination of these most likely plays a role in the decision making process.

While Korea may not have the most spectacular destinations in Asia, there are a plethora of areas that could increase visitors from non-Asian countries as well as continuing the growth among Asian countries (Ford, 2011). To do so Korea must reevaluate their National brand image and develop areas that are memorable to visitors. The foundations are there for this to happen but to move forward the KTO must initiate a multiple plan that incorporates both the government and private enterprises. By doing so, many of Korea's cultural and outdoor attractions will become just as popular as its economic attractions.

### **National Branding**

Trang (2013) stated that Nation branding is one of the most important tools in marketing tourist destinations. The role of brand awareness has an importance in our daily lives and attitudes. From Coke, Pepsi, Apple, Samsung, to Honda, each product has a brand that correlates with an image that we either approve of or not. Tourism likewise, is based on images and experiences and as such a good image or experience is an extremely useful marketing tool. If your first experience in a country is unfriendly people, poor hospitality, or fear, then most likely you will not go back to that country and will tell others of your poor experience. National branding is not easy and many countries struggle to conceptualize a focused message and it is not a one size fits all approach. For example, if you compare the United States of America (US) to New Zealand, there are some major differences. First, geographic size, with the US being much larger and more diverse than New Zealand it has more tourist options. Second, is demographics, the US is a much more diverse country than New Zealand and thus again offers more options. What this means is that New Zealand may have greater success with a nation branding strategy because of its size and demographics, while the US may have a more regional branding strategy or even city wide strategy. For instance, many visitors to the US go to New York, San Francisco, or Chicago and therefore a city or state branding is maybe more

appropriate than a nation branding strategy.

The idea of being a strong destination country appeals to the Korean government and is the main reason why they have invested so heavily into the promotion of the country. As a relatively young economically developed country that is trying to shed its image as a “dangerous” destination, it is important to have a positive and friendly image. According to Van Ham (2001), having a negative image can be an issue for potential tourists and customers trust and satisfaction. A brand according to the American Marketing Association (AMA) is a term, design, or combination of those to help differentiate goods and services from competitors. A brand is a powerful tool which can illicit a positive memory if used properly and negative memory if poorly managed (Kim, 2005). Korea as a country has a brand image of an electronic superpower and as a country still in conflict with North Korea (Williamson, 2013). Korea’s brand, while strong economically, is not strong as a tourist destination due to a non-focused and mismanaged strategic plan. An analysis of other countries tourist brands such as popular destinations such as New Zealand, Thailand, Ireland, or China reveal that their plans are not placed in a vacuum but are integrated into the overall national brand. The governments invested not only in quality designs but an integrated marketing campaign that was broad and focused on the positives of the countries as a whole (Kim, 2005).

Korea has many images associated with it and these if promoted properly can give a competitive advantage for the country competing with its neighbors. According to the KTO some of the most prominent images are Kimchi, Seoul, Busan, Kpop, Kdramas, history, and beautiful countryside (KTO, 2013b). Specifically, Kimchi, Kpop, and Kdrama are presently well known in Asia and beyond. Thanks to the Korean Wave or hallyu, Korean culture which has become well known throughout the world and is a strong brand image for the country (Trang, 2013). Indeed, Markessinis (2010) and Trang (2013) stated that many tourists had a positive image of Korea but yet; the KTO and MTCS have failed to grasp the benefits of the Korean wave. The KTO and MTCS should have utilized the Korea Wave as a component of an overall strategy to complement other tourist activities such as cultural, food, or medical. Instead, it appeared that the Korean Wave became a stand-alone brand strategy that was successful but limited. Another reason has been a lack of organization in promoting tourism; the KTO has created many different slogans and symbols over the past decade and yet they barely last a year before being changed (Lee, 2014; Williamson, 2013). It is very difficult to create a strong national brand and a tourist destination by continually changing your message.

### **Mixed Messages**

The original slogan for Korea was “the land of the morning calm,” certainly today one cannot say Korea is

calm anymore with its pursuit of economic power. The slogan though, highlighted the mystique of Korea to many who had never visited before. This slogan gave the impression of a relaxed and peaceful place that today while peaceful, is certainly not relaxed with its “balibali” culture. With the onset of the 2002 World Cup, the government changed its slogan to “Dynamic Korea,” which highlighted the explosive growth of the country in the 1990’s and early 2000’s, yet many locals and tourists could not say what was dynamic about Korea and the marketing of the slogan was poor internationally (Lee, 2014). Other slogans followed to the cost of millions of dollars in design over the next decade to include “Korea Sparkling, Korea be inspired, and Korea 2012-2013 – visit Korea year, these though, failed to ignite or catch the imagine of both foreign tourists and the local population. According to the Do (2010) the Korean government has spent millions of dollars in consulting and creating presidential committees to help design these slogans. Yet, they failed to adequately promote Korea in the desired manner. In fact, it was not the slogans that promoted Korea during the early 2000’s but rather it was television and music. Why did the governmental message fail? Why was millions of dollars spent creating slogans that did not connect with the local population or entice international visitors? One of the main problems was the disconnect between what the slogan was supposed to mean and what it actually meant to visitors. If you examine previous slogans for other Asian countries such as Singapore (uniquely Singapore), Philippines (its more fun in the Philippines), Thailand (amazing Thailand), Vietnam (Timeless Charm), or Malaysia (Truly Asia), you can visualize what the slogans mean. For Singapore, the diversity of the people creates uniqueness in Asia; for the Philippines and Thailand, you picture the beaches, islands, and the people; For Vietnam and Malaysia, you can picture the historical culture, food, and structures. The slogans connect with the people, culture, and country. On the other hand, Korea’s slogans fails to make that connection and this is in part due to a strategic failure to encourage partnership between government and private enterprise.

While the slogans have generally failed to connect with potential visitors, Korea still does receive a significant number of visitors from Japan and China but this is not down to tourist marketing but rather specific needs. Many Japanese and Chinese visit Seoul to purchase products that are much cheaper than in their home countries and in fact, Korea has its “national sale” during vacation periods for China and Japan. According to Lee (2014) and Kang (2013), Korea has been too dependent on Chinese and Japanese visitors and is too susceptible to political tensions that can decrease these same visitors. Additionally, many of these visitors became interested in Korea due to the Korean wave and not the KTO. Another area of mixed messages has been the promotion of Korea food as a reason to visit Korea. While this is an excellent idea, the Ministry of Culture Sport and Tourism and

Korean Tourism Office have also failed to fully support or integrate private enterprise in promoting food especially to the western audience. Again, relating this to countries such as Thailand and Vietnam where food is a positive value for tourism, tourists do not have a good understanding of what constitutes Korean food other than Kimchi. This is a failure of the tourist organizations (Curley, 2013). Placing advertisements in Magazines or sending students abroad to promote food without other potential marketing avenues means that any promotion is set up to fail. Considering the success of Korean Drama and Korean music, Korean food should be an easy extension of hallyu to promote in relation with other aspects of Korean culture.

### **Korean Wave**

The success of the Korean wave has led to a large influx of visitors from Asia. The government has attempted to introduce the Korean Wave as Korean culture and to use it as a form of “soft diplomacy” and promotional tool (Kim, 2010). This has worked for visitors from Asia with increases from people coming from Japan, China, and Taiwan. These visitors came to Seoul to see the streets where dramas were filmed, to visit stores and buy products that were on the drama. While these numbers are significant, the Korean government and the KTO strive to attract more non-Asian visitors. In trying to attract non-Asian visitors, the KTO has opened Korean tourist centers in many countries around the world and has added the legendary Korean singer Psy as a world ambassador. The inclusion of Psy as an ambassador is a potentially smart move because of his success with Gangnam Style and Gentleman songs (Cha, 2013). His presence on social media can certainly impact non-Asian countries as well as Asian countries. This presence though is a risk because Psy is not known to conform to conventional actions and is not the typical Korean spokesperson.

Psy’s success overseas has seen the successful singer collaborate with many international and well-known artists and while one cannot base a strategy on only a few music hits, Psy has been able to create a buzz about Korea that lead to more inquiries into Korea culture. In fact, the Korean Wave is an excellent branding tool that could intrigue people into trying to learn more about Korea but only if used properly in conjunction with other aspects of a strategic brand. For example, many people visit Hollywood to see stars or movie sets, people visit Disneyland to see cartoon characters from their childhood but these are all marketed in conjunction with regional strategies. If you visit Hollywood, you visit Los Angeles or San Diego; if you visit Disneyland you visit other theme parks. In general, these are not stand-alone plans unlike the Korean Wave. The government has failed to build on the Korean wave to include other aspects of the Korean tourism industry except for bus tours around Seoul – Korea is more than just Seoul.

### **METHODOLOGY**

To analyze the success or sustainability of Korean tourism branding, the researcher and one colleague analyzed domestic English newspapers and both paper and web-based articles. The literature review gives a detailed outline and analysis of the problems and issues in relation to the message being delivered by the KTO. The reason for choosing English newspapers based in Korea was due to English being one of the most common languages for tourism purposes. Through this content analysis, the author analyzed the current state of tourism branding in Korea and the different segments of the tourist sector. The results and discussion of the analysis is given in the following section that highlight the sectors with the most potential and how to connect those sectors to one message.

### **DISCUSSION AND RESULTS**

#### **A Different Direction**

After enormous investment financially, has Korea attained a competitive comparison with its neighbors in the tourism market? As noted previously, Korea may not have an Eiffel tower, Great wall of China, or Mount Fuji but it does have some exceptional markets that if fully developed could help bring in both more Asian and non-Asian tourists. The Korean government should learn from its previous mistakes in emphasizing not so catchy slogans and focus on rebranding on such avenues as cultural and medical tourism in conjunction with the Korean wave.

#### **Cultural Tourism**

Cultural tourism is a myriad of different activities such as historical sites, landmarks, festivals, and cultural experiences (McKercher, 2002). Cultural resources can be an increasingly positive addition to countries tourism and Korea has enormous potential. Cultural tourism can enhance the image of a country, create an identity, and promote growth in regional areas. Korea has an incredible amount of hidden treasures that could entice visitors but they are not widely known or promoted as a strategy by the government. Lickorish and Jenkins (1997) stated that the government should play an important part in developing, maintaining, and creating a platform of success for cultural tourism. The Korean government has taken steps to promote cultural tourism but as yet these have not been successful. The government should increase its cooperation with other sectors within Korea including business, religious, and individuals. By doing so, the government can integrate cultural tourism into the local and regional areas while bringing businesses in as part of infrastructure and religious societies in as part of human resources.

One example of cultural tourism that should be marketed and developed is the temple stay program. The temple stay program was developed just after the 2002 World cup by the Jogye Buddhist in order to sustain and attempt to increase the number of tourists visiting Korea and to promote Korean Buddhism to international visitors. A temple stay is a cultural experience program where people will stay and gain experience of temple life and a harmony with nature (Kim, 2007). The program started successfully with many international visitors participating and having a positive experience. Originally, there were 14 temples involved, that have now increased to over 70 and the number of participants has increased from 6,000 to over 600,000 (Kim, 2007). The program involves creating a stress free and relaxed environment where people can reflect on their life and future. This is a perfect example of something that many non-Asian visitors could be interested in doing and would be a competitive resource to challenge other countries. While the government has supported the program it could and should do more to market it better. Rather than promoting bulgogi or Bimimbap food overseas, promoting a temple stay would be more inviting and more inline with visitor's ideas of Korea and Asian culture. Food could be attached to the idea of the temple stay but food by itself is not a sustainable tourist concept.

Research conducted by the OCED showed that those who attended a temple stay had a positive experience and the majority did so to experience Korean traditional culture (OCED, 2009). This is important because it highlighted the potential benefit of marketing culture rather than just food, Kpop or Kdrama individually. The success of a limited program demonstrated how a private program could be successful and with a proactive government attitude towards these programs, they could be come more successful. The government should help develop infrastructure and facilities that are needed to improve the temple stay program. They should also attempt to create a package with the temple stay that is specific to the region or area. No temple stay is the same and to market it as universal would be a failure, therefore, the government and private enterprise should develop unique activities within each region, create facilities that are of an international standard, and train people to be able to explain fully the importance of the program to the individual and to Korea. Once these partnerships have been developed, the marketing strategy can be formulated to promote the role of spiritual and religious significance as a national brand.

### **Medical Tourism**

Another area that can be developed and promoted to enhance the nation brand is medical tourism. Medical tourism can be defined as those who travel for medical, dental, or surgery with an extended stay. In comparison to its neighbors in Thailand and Singapore, Korea's medical tourism is relatively small but growing and the

government is now beginning to promote it. The government has designed legislation to improve travel hospital infrastructure, and international partnerships. Healthcare costs are much less in Asia than in Western countries and this is a massive push for international visitors. Additionally, the ease of access and safety of medical procedures in Asia is a massive pull factor. According to a KTO medical survey the revenue from medical tourism has tripled in the last decade to nearly 15 Billion dollars (KTO, 2014). In Korea, nearly 200,000 people travelled for a medical procedure in 2012 and the majority of them came from China, USA, Russia, and Japan.

A major push for the influx of medical tourists is of course the cost but also the influence of the Korean wave and the concept of Korean beauty. Cosmetic surgery is the number one area in Korea for medical tourism. Again, this is an opportunity to improve the national brand in conjunction with other aspects of Korea such as the Korean wave. The government should continue to make it as easy as possible for people to travel for medical tourism purposes, create facilities that cater to specific nationalities (the one size fits all approach should not be used). The government should also highlight the strength of traditional medicine as an alternative practice and create an avenue where they can use the well developed information technology to have medical professionals and potential visitors interact before going to Korea. Of course there are problems that the government must overcome to have a sound marketing strategy, the concept of tiered pricing is extremely important and as Handley (2010) stated, if Korea continues to be seen as over-pricing foreign visitors, they will lose these potential visitors and revenue to their neighbors. Part of this is due to a lack of unity in medical tourism services and to improve this the government must create an organization that oversees the recruitment and stay of medical tourists. By having a structured and organized plan, medical tourism can also be used to improve the concept of a national brand.

### **Conclusion**

Tourism in Korea has a lot of potential and opportunity. The country has spacious outdoors, a long cultural history, and excellent infrastructure. One of the biggest issues with tourism in Korea is the government's marketing of its tourism as for the past decade a lot of money has been spent on deigning slogans to brand the Country. These slogans were ambiguous and failed to correlate into a positive image for the country. Despite Korea not being as famous as its neighbors as a tourist destination, Korea has some unique and excellent activities and treasurers that can certainly be attractive to international visitors.

The Korean government needs to reevaluate its strategy and focus less on trying to glamourize through catchy slogans and focus more on promoting activities

that are in line with the countries culture such as spiritual, outdoor, or medical tourism. In addition, a major issue with marketing in Korea has been the decision making of what to promote and where to promote. The government needs to move beyond Seoul and promote the other regions which are much more appealing to many tourists. While Seoul is a great city, it offers nothing unique that cannot be found in many other large cities. Yet, if you go outside Seoul you are blessed with amazing outdoor places and friendly people. There is more to Korea than just Seoul. A final challenge that needs to be addressed is the decisions making in promotion tools, for the most part, elderly men who may not be so informed to today's tourism market do the decision-making. The government must involve or learn from other governments on what has worked but also importantly what has failed and why. They should also engage in research with people in different regions around Korea to analyze what is important. The Korean government has recently unveiled a new slogan – Imagine your Korea. The slogan is an improvement on the previous slogans because it allows freedom to think or dream. The slogan allows potential visitors imagine what they could be doing in Korea rather than a government slogan telling them what they should be doing.

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