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PROMOTION OF RURAL TOURISM ACCOMMODATION SERVICES SALES

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The rapid development of rural tourism business is attractive to researchers of various social sciences. Rural tourism is usually studied in the general context of service economics and management aspects, without highlighting the peculiarities, objective and subjective difficulties of sustainable development. Successful business development in rural tourism homesteads is not possible without a good knowledge of its environment evaluation and research-based marketing decisions. The complex process of organizing services requires appropriate strategic steps and is impossible without sales promotion activities. The complex use of advertising, direct marketing, public relations, personal sales, and strategic tools to increase sales stimulates interest and creates a connection between the consumer and the service provider. Rural tourism homesteads often do not have marketing strategies, do not use strategic tools for sales promotion, do not follow the latest scientific insights, therefore homesteads do not fully use their potential. Guidelines for sales promotion of rural tourism accommodation services, stating that homesteads should pay attention to their brand, websites, social accounts, targeted advertising, marketing strategy and the latest scientific literature related to tourism, would be a useful tool to increase homestead sales more effectively. This article aims to reveal the possibilities of sales promotion of rural tourism accommodation services.

The main research methods: analysis of scientific literature sources; statistical data analysis; content analysis and other methods. The aim of research – to identify the sales situation of rural tourism accommodation services and to develop guidelines for sales promotion.

Keywords: promotion, rural tourism, accommodation services, sales.

INTRODUCTION

In Lithuania, rural tourism generates new revenues, contributes to the strengthening of the country's image, has a social impact in rural settlements and promotes the preservation of traditions. This branch of tourism helps local communities to attract greater investment without compromising existing natural or cultural facilities (Falak et al., 2016). In order to achieve efficient and profitable functioning of rural tourism, it is important to analyze the development tools, methods and marketing factors of this sector, which is rarely found in modern Lithuanian scientific literature (Atkočiūnienė, Plioplys, 2018). Accommodation services are one of the most important in the tourism niche, so market participants are looking for new ways to diversify them with non-traditional services or innovations (Priporas, et al., 2017) and the authenticity of rural tourism is especially useful here. In order to increase the productivity of rural tourism, it is important to pay attention to the factors used in this sector to promote the sale of services, especially emphasizing the application of innovative marketing tools on the Internet (Vanagienė, Pranskūnienė, 2017). According to Cox (2015), the sales promotion measures applied to accommodation services influence the consumer's assessment of services, and a small study of this phenomenon does not allow to single out the most effective sales promotion strategies for accommodation services.

Scientific problem: sales promotion is widely studied in the field of tourism, but literature on a specific rural tourism sector is still lacking (Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2014). As a result, there is a lack of specific guidelines for service providers in this sector to increase operational efficiency. This problem is partly investigated by foreign authors Cox (2015), Park et al. (2014), Vukovic (2018), Mandarić et al. (2017). Lithuanian authors: Išoraitė (2013), Vanagienė and Pranskūnienė (2017) also examined the topic of sales promotion in rural tourism. Therefore, it can be said that the problem in question is relevant, but the information is not detected enough. Problematic question: how is the sales promotion situation of rural tourism accommodation services assessed and what sales promotion guidelines to offer?

The object of research – promotion of rural tourism accommodation services.

The aim of research – to identify the sales situation of rural tourism accommodation services and to develop guidelines for sales promotion.

The main research methods: analysis of scientific literature sources; statistical data analysis; content analysis and other methods.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. Theoretical features of service organization and sales promotion

The service is created according to the needs of consumers and sold when demand arises, thus making a profit for the seller and a service for the consumer and at the same time contributing to the growth of the country's gross product. The organization of the service is a very complex process, which requires a lot of time, financial and human resources, and it should be noted that the sale of the service is different from the tangible product (Arto et al., 2015). Each service starts with an idea that would benefit an individual or a group of people. In large companies, the creation of new services often brings together think tanks with the help of experts, stakeholders or volunteers who nurture and control the process of implementing new initiatives (Van den Ende et al., 2014). Having a specific idea for a service, the next step is to organize it. The strategic marketing process is a deliberate series of steps to help you identify and achieve your goals. Even more, you will discover what your customers want and develop products that meet those needs. Here are the steps to a successful strategic marketing process. Business analytics and consulting services require specific steps to be taken into the organizational process to create a service or product that competes effectively in the market (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Essential Steps for a Successful Strategic Marketing Process (Weller, 2017)

For an organized service to be effective and allow the organization to thrive, you need to have a specific vision. In the workplace, people progress only if they understand what is expected of them, what is defined by the set tasks and goals (Elnaga, Imran, 2014). When selecting specific user groups, the focus should be on the profile of the specific user. Once all the necessary information about the consumer has been clarified, further strategic steps can be taken. Creating and developing a strategy for every company is crucial to working effectively (Andrews et al., 2017).

When applying an existing business strategy, it is important to focus on communication with the consumer. A purposefully conveyed advertising message encourages the purchase of a service and the recommendation of it to others, which is often more valuable than advertising on television or other social channels (Koschmann, Wanberg, 2016). The next step, already having the message you want to broadcast, is to find the right channels. Advertising messages can be broadcast on television, radio, flyers, leaflets or in digital form, the choice of a suitable network for advertising determines the visibility and effectiveness of the message (Ozerturk, 2018). To ensure that the service is profitable and remains efficient, it is important to monitor its progress and continuously improve the entire efficiency system to achieve maximum results.

Summarizing the complexity of the service reveals a complex organizational process that requires a lot of time, financial and human resources, and concrete steps to achieve the goal. To create an effective service, you need to start with goal setting and data collection and analysis, which allows you to better understand the competitive market and position your service in it. After deciding which group of people, the service will be intended for, strategic actions can be formulated. Later, you need to focus on the sales of your service and the communication networks used to reach your customer.

2. The concept of service sales promotion

Businesses and companies strive to create services that can meet consumer expectations but at the same time maximize profits. A service is worth nothing if not enough attention is paid to its sales promotion and awareness raising. Sales promotion, which consists of marketing tools, is a communication channel connecting businesses and the consumer that attracts the customer, a service offered (Chang, 2015).

Most often, successful service prosperity is associated with a well-chosen comprehensive marketing strategy that helps attract and retain the user. According to Vukovic (2018), when developing a service marketing strategy, it is important to identify your market, segments, clear goals and select appropriate measures, and allocate the necessary budget to them, to apply them according to consumer expectations. A purposeful marketing communication strategy helps to introduce the consumer to your product or service, thus increasing the income earned by the company, but it is important to pay attention to all aspects that have a direct impact on sales promotion.



Figure 2. Components of a marketing communication strategy (Familmaleki et al., 2015).

The comprehensive marketing communication strategy presented by Familmaleki et al., 2015) (see Figure 2), requires attention and resources to ensure the effectiveness of all its components. Advertising is integral to business; it builds customer interest and trust in the brand. While every company understands the importance of advertising, a common mistake becomes choosing the wrong advertising method or consumer segment (Wang et al., 2016). For advertising to be effective, it must be tailored to the specific type of user. The content must meet the values, hobbies, and expectations of the user. Once a targeted ad is created, it needs to be presented in the right format and in the right space, depending on the user (Dwivedi et al., 2015). Extensive marketing opportunities create a lot of room for improvisation.

Sales promotion tools are very diverse: some are price-oriented – discounts, promotions, coupons, which often entice people and encourage the choice of new products or brands, while others are not price-oriented – various lotteries, loyal customer programs that create brand interest and promotes customer loyalty (Balathandayutham, Anandanatarajan, 2020). Detailed consumer knowledge and individualization of the marketing process can result in specialized advertising or service, depending on the user's characteristics or level of brand loyalty, thus creating a greater image of the consumer's focus (Beheshtian-Ardakani et al., 2018). Existing public relations in all organizations consists of: internal communication is the sharing of information within a company or organization, and external communication is the means taken to form a consumer opinion. According to Koszembar-Wiklik (2016), the role of public relations is crucial for the success of a company in adapting to the new user of today. Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and more. online platforms are a key tool for businesses to reach thousands of users quickly and without significant investment, so their active and targeted use should be one of the most important priorities for companies, as shown by the study by Allagui, Breslow (2016).

RESEARCH RESULTS

To get a clearer picture of the sales promotion of rural tourism accommodation services, it was decided to perform an analysis of online-social networks in order to analyze the sales of accommodation services from the point of view of rural tourism homestead owners and their external online activities.

Sample of the study: 326 rural tourism homesteads submitted by the selected rural tourism association, which exactly correspond to the population required for the study.

Research method: analysis is the collection, processing, and discussion of the required data. During the expert evaluation, data analysis complements the research to formulate more realistic and reliable results (Bilevičienė, Jonušauskas, 2011). In this case, it was chosen to analyze the social networks of rural tourism homesteads to reveal how active they are in the online space, which is one of the main factors of sales promotion (Wiranata, Hananto, 2020). The activities of websites, Facebook, Instagram and TripAdvisor accounts were analyzed, which, as the literature analysis showed, are the most important in rural tourism. Analysis tool: during the analysis, the activities of rural tourism homesteads were analyzed and summarized in Microsoft Excel. Attention was drawn to the homestead websites, based on the insights of Vanagienė and Pranskūnienė (2017) that they must be interactive, up-to-date, and easily accessible. It was considered whether the homesteads

have websites at all, if a positive answer was recorded, then it is further monitored whether the reservation system, photo gallery, page is available in different languages and whether additional services are provided. The activities of homesteads on Facebook, Instagram and TripAdvisor were further analyzed, considering the importance of social media observed in the literature analysis. Account possession, activity, popularity among users, quality of presentation was considered, based on the insights of Chatzigeorgiou (2017) to get a better picture of homestead activities in the social space.

The analysis of the obtained data showed that the promotion of sales of rural tourism accommodation services in the current Lithuanian market is not yet a phenomenon understandable to all market participants. In order to achieve the aim of this work, which is to identify sales promotion of rural tourism accommodation services and present guidelines for this process, it was decided to conduct two studies: analysis of information on rural tourism homestead websites and social networks, a study to create a clearer picture of the promotion of accommodation services from the point of view of the owners of the homesteads themselves, and to monitor how this is reflected in their external activities. During the analysis of online social networks, attention was paid to the online platforms used by the homesteads of all members of the Lithuanian Rural Tourism Association (LRTA) to create a clearer picture of the specific positioning of homesteads in the market. According to the research, it was found that as many as 38 percent. all rural tourism homesteads belonging to LRTA, the number of which reaches 326, do not have websites. Moreover, many homesteads do not create a strong brand image because their contact emails, the postal addresses are not related to the names of the homesteads, and the pages themselves are not operational, they lack relevant information, and the photos are of poor quality. To maximize the flow of consumers, information must also be available to foreign travelers. Of the 196 homesteads belonging to LRTA, which have websites, only a little more than half – 58 percent. information is also provided in English, and even fewer homesteads advertising their services in other languages: Russian. – 35 percent.; German – 8%; Polish – 2 percent. and only one homestead provides its information in the Latvian language of the neighbors. No other languages were found on the websites of the homesteads. For the modern consumer who likes a self-contained way of organizing travel and quick communication in a public space, it is important that information is easily accessible, and the rural tourism business should take this into account in its operations. It is important to mention that apart from the fact that a proportion of homesteads do not have their own websites (12 percent) homesteads, on their websites have reservation systems through which the traveler can order accommodation without any intermediaries. Other homesteads use intermediary reservation systems, such as the LRTA website or the online platform Booking. As for the variety of services provided on the homestead pages, it has been observed that most homesteads do not try to offer exclusive services to the consumer.

The analysis showed that in terms of other services offered in addition to accommodation for travelers, which can become a competitive advantage, almost 90%. homesteads offer a visit to the sauna, so it does not help homesteads stand out. However, only 39 percent. homesteads additionally offer other services. Among the offered additional entertainment that can be chosen during the stay are common: educational programs, kayak rental, various excursions, tastings. Only more than half of the homesteads provide meals – 52%, and the remaining homesteads only provide the opportunity to prepare for themselves by installing kitchens with household appliances.

The dominance of a single account is clearly visible in the use of social media (Table 1).

Table 1. Indicators of the use of social accounts of rural tourism homesteads (composed by the author)

	Number of homesteads in use	Percentage among all rural tourism homesteads belonging to LRTA	"Like" click rate	Minimum "Like" Clicks	Maximum "Like" Clicks
Facebook account	245	75 percent	2121	1	16984
Instagram account	81	25 percent	413	0	3868
'TripAdvisor' account	99	30 percent	-	-	-

The use of a Facebook account among rural tourism homesteads is even more active than the use of websites. $\frac{3}{4}$ of all LRTA homesteads, i.e., 245s, use this social network in their activities. The number of clicks on the "Like" pages in accounts ranges from 1 to 16,984, and the average number of likes on the account is 2121, which indicates a high enough activity on this platform. Most homesteads are active on this platform and use it for contact information, photos, events and services. Only $\frac{1}{4}$ Lithuanian rural tourism homesteads use the Instagram social account – 25 percent. Some homesteads have accounts, but they are completely empty or have only a few photos. The homestead with the most followers reaches 3868, and the average number of followers is 413. The use of TripAdvisor, the most tourism-related social platform, among homesteads is 30%. (99). Such figures from Instagram and Trip Advisor show that the potential of these social platforms has not been exploited and that potential tourism users have not been reached.

The emergence of innovations to continuously improve in a competitive market is extremely important in the activities of rural tourism homesteads. As can be seen (see Table 2). The biggest influence on homesteads is made by customer feedback, with which 43% partially agree and 37% fully agree. respondents. Although other aspects that may influence the introduction of innovations in rural tourism homesteads differ more, the opinions of the latest research appear to have the least influence

(17% – strongly disagree, 13% partially disagree, 47% – disagree). than do not agree). Such indicators show that homestead owners are weakly inclined to follow the latest scientific literature on rural tourism and apply their insights in their activities.

Table 2. Factors influencing the emergence of innovations in homesteads (composed by the author).

	Strongly disagree	Partly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly agree	Strongly agree
Customer reviews	3,33%	0%	16,67%	43,33%	36,67%
Directions of projects announced by external organizations to receive funding	6,67%	6,67%	33,33%	43,33%	10%
Competitor analysis	6,67%	13,33%	40%	33,33%	6,67%
Insights from the latest research	16,67%	13,33%	46,67%	20%	3,33%
Participation in conferences, exhibitions, or other business meetings	3,33%	10%	26,67%	46,67%	13,33%

In summary, it can be stated that although the sales promotion situation in Lithuanian rural tourism is assessed not bad, homesteads need information about the purposeful implementation of this process. External analysis of homesteads' online accounts shows that the main users are websites and Facebook, but they lack the activity, modernity and application of the latest trends. It was noticed that the use of other sales-increasing social networks – Instagram and TripAdvisor – is not very active among rural tourism homesteads, as a result of which potential customers are not reached. Such insights can be directly related to further social research conducted by members of the Lithuanian Rural Tourism Association providing accommodation services, which showed that the latest scientific literature related to rural tourism activities is not followed, leading to less understanding of marketing tools and strategies and technological innovations. In order to promote sales, rural tourism homesteads usually choose websites and social networks, using paid advertising methods and sponsoring personalities or other pages in exchange for increasing popularity, as well as offering discounts and additional services free of charge. To create a stronger direct connection, the owners of homesteads consider it important to participate in various tourism exhibitions, some of them and other activities organized by cities or municipalities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Rural tourism business is a branch of tourism and economy reflecting the authentic traditions of Lithuania, which can become a representative tool for improving the country's image. Rural tourism also brings significant added value to regional communities by attracting new investment, creating jobs, promoting the environment, and raising the profile of areas. Rural tourism accommodation services allow the client to try accommodation in an authentic style environment, get acquainted with regional traditions, culture and feel a closer connection with nature.

2. An analysis of the promotion of accommodation services in rural tourism homesteads shows that the owners who are themselves engaged in public relations lack competencies in this area. Not all rural tourism homesteads have websites, and even the existing ones often do not have reservation systems, not all the necessary information is available, photo galleries are of poor quality. Homesteads mostly use the social network Facebook to communicate with consumers, but there are no online marketing strategies that can increase the profitability of homesteads, so their potential is not fully exploited.

3. The guidelines for the promotion of rural tourism accommodation services state that in order to increase the sales of their accommodation services, homestead owners should pay attention to the following aspects: appropriate branding, representative website, use of social media, user profile advertising, marketing strategies and also to follow the latest scientific literature on rural tourism. The effective use of these guidelines in the activities of homesteads will not only increase the sales of the homesteads themselves, but will also contribute to the growth of the gross domestic product. To make the guidelines for the promotion of rural tourism accommodation services even more effective, the Lithuanian Rural Tourism Association should invest in further research of this process and inclusion of expert insights in these guidelines.

4. It is recommended to create a suitable brand with which the consumer would immediately link the service and to have a representative website, as the homestead websites show the homestead's professionalism and quality standard. It is also to actively use social media channels and have a marketing strategy. The ad must be created according to the relevant user profile.

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