MARKETING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

How marketing and communications can support your destination sustainability strategy
There is considerable confusion around how to promote sustainable tourism. It is a relatively new area of destination marketing and those with limited sustainability knowledge often feel under-confident about how to approach it and concerned about making mistakes that could attract negative attention.

In fact, although it should be supported by change taking place in destinations, sustainability promotion can be fed into the marketing mix and seen as another opportunity for NTOs to attract visitors and differentiate themselves. In that respect, it is actually quite straightforward.

In this knowledge booster we look at various approaches to the marketing and promotion of sustainability, utilised by destinations around the world.
Though almost all NTOs integrate social, cultural and environmental elements into the promotion of destinations, only a small minority have begun to strategically utilise the opportunities presented by sustainability.

Of those that do, there is a significant range in ways that this is approached, which would suggest that:

- Many destinations are starting to ‘dip a toe’ into this area, though some have gone further than others.
- There is no single “right” way. Each destination needs to choose the approach that best fits their proposition and strategy.
- Sustainability promotion should be considered as an integral part of an NTO sustainability strategy and, as with any other new strategic element, some level of communication can be undertaken at any time.
A destination does not have to be dominated by green space to promote itself as sustainable. It’s true that many of the destinations that have been doing so the longest have outstanding natural heritage. They have recognised the value of this to tourism and are keen to maintain it through improving sustainability. So are, of course, well placed to promote this.

But sustainability isn’t just about natural landscapes...
sustainable tourism is also about people, communities, culture and traditions.

It is about promoting, celebrating and encouraging positive behaviours that help improve environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Examples shown here include city tours guided by homeless people, graffiti art tours and farm to table dining experiences.
1. Inform and engage customers in sustainability
2. Promotion to support strategic sustainability objectives
3. Champion sustainable products
4. Promote intangible heritage
5. Reposition your destination
6. Responsible promotion
1. Inform and engage customers in sustainability

NTO communication channels are an ideal place to inform consumers about a destination’s approach to sustainability and to encourage sustainable behaviours amongst those who visit.
Some destinations opt to make public statements on their websites about their commitment to, and progress in, sustainable tourism. These need to be updated regularly to maintain relevance and show that genuine progress is being made.


https://www.visitgeorgia.ge/about-us/responsible-tourism
Pledges are sometimes used to anchor a commitment to sustainable tourism, as they can also function as the bedrock of a destination’s approach to social and environmental issues.

A pledge not only encourages visitors to make sustainable choices and behave in a way which minimises damage to the destination, it can also help enhance the perceived value and attractiveness of the destination in tourists’ minds.
Visit Iceland uses humour to engage visitors in responsible tourism and other aspects of Icelandic culture, in video tutorials covering everything from glacier safety, to hot tub etiquette and local food sustainability.

The series of films make up ‘The Iceland Academy’. Tourists are encouraged to enrol and take the courses before visiting. The campaign is effective in engaging visitors with relatively serious subjects in an entertaining way, while also highlighting Iceland and some of its unique cultural selling points.
Many destinations use their platforms to engage visitors in more responsible behaviour and signpost them towards more responsible holiday choices. These examples from Norway and Slovenia illustrate how visitors can be primed to consider sustainability prior to arrival and incorporate this in the holiday choices made.

Visit Copenhagen’s 10 ways to act sustainably
https://www.visitcopenhagen.com/copenhagen/activities/10-ways-act-sustainably
Visit Estonia, Finland, Palau and Copenhagen are among a number of destinations providing tips to help visitors behave more sustainably. These can sit on an NTO website and also be promoted via social media.
It’s also great to share news of successes. These underpin and augment destination positioning on sustainability, act as great low cost advertising and can also really help motivate stakeholders.
2. Promotion to support strategic sustainability objectives

The precise objectives will vary according to destination - but could include encouraging a shift in when holidays are taken, how they are taken and how they can best support other economic sectors.
Visit Portugal and Visit France use their Instagram feeds to smooth demand and encourage travel in shoulder seasons. Here both NTOs encourage autumn travel to regions which are heavily touristed in the summer.
Visit Sweden has taken things a step further by promoting specific activities that can be undertaken outside the usual summer season, such as autumn kayaking and year-round hiking.
Marketing and promotion is a powerful tool that can either exacerbate, or help to address, the problem of overtourism.

On the Visit Croatia website it is listed first of the top ten destinations. The impression given to visitors is that Dubrovnik should not be missed. Yet Dubrovnik has been highlighted as one of the most overcrowded cities in Europe. Likewise, Vietnam promotes all of its most heavily visited sites as ’must sees’ on its main website. https://vietnam.travel/home
In contrast the heavily touristed city of Amsterdam does not feature prominently on the Visit Netherlands website or social media feeds - though they do promote ‘hidden gems’.

Visit Germany and Visit Estonia also signpost visitors towards more out of the way areas.
How visitors travel is as important as when they travel. Visit Netherlands focus on cycling, with an extensive section on their website encouraging visitors to cycle by suggesting routes and providing practical tips. This is supported by additional information on social media feeds.

https://www.holland.com/global/tourism/activities/cycling.htm
Train travel is another form of environmentally friendly transport that can be promoted, for journeys to and from a destination and also within it.

Train travel is more climate friendly mode of transport, though this may not be enough of a selling point to influence the majority of consumers. Other, more experiential angles to consider emphasising include the ‘slow travel’ pleasures of moving across a country by train as well as the opportunity it affords to ‘travel like a local’.
Other NTOs actively use tourism promotion to provide support to other sectors of the economy. Tourism often supports the retail sector. But it can also bolster agriculture, fishing, crafts and assist local communities. Botswana Tourism and Visit Malawi both promote a range of community development initiatives, while Australia highlights projects aimed at fire-ravaged communities.
Visit Sweden use their website to promote design, fashion and even local manufacturing, all powerful elements of ‘Brand Sweden’ which help differentiate the destination.
Other examples of inter-sectoral support through tourism destination marketing include: Visit Italy’s promotion of handicrafts, Turespaña’s highlighting of agro tourism and Visit Cornwall which, in this example, is showcasing a cider farm.
3. Champion sustainable products

Giving a nod to those businesses that are taking a lead on sustainability in a destination not only gives them a promotional boost, but also tells a great story. It helps build a picture of an innovative, exciting place to visit.
NTOs can promote sustainable places to stay and things to do. This can be mainstream, such as Visit Britain’s promotion of sustainable accommodation. Or quirky experiences, such as bogshoeing in Estonia.

Local certifications such as Blue Flag and Quality Coasts are worth promoting as visitors are often increasingly keen to know this information.
As well as raising awareness of the destination and what it has to offer, showcasing new tourism products with positive environmental and/or social benefit indicates an innovative and interesting approach to sustainability. The range of what can be promoted by NTOs is limitless, from quirky new inventions to farms and restaurants selling organic and vegan food. Avoid making overt sustainability claims on a product’s behalf.

**Visit Germany**

Cleopatra would have been delighted to hear that one cannot only bathe in milk, but also wear it! A microbiologist and designer from Hannover, Lower Saxony, designs clothes that are partly created from powdered milk, with proteins, which are said to be good for your skin. With sustainability in mind, so-called ‘bio-clothing’ is increasingly becoming a hot trend. It’s time to go shopping in Germany!

**THELOCAL.DE**

**Designer creates clothes from milk – The Local**

A Hannover microbiologist and fashion designer is releasing a new clothing line with a twist: the clothes are partly created from powdered milk – aiding skincare.

If you are interested in tasting some of the local wild foods in Tampere, the Lahtua organic farm offers wild herb courses, forest tours and wellbeing talks finished off with smoke sauna and a dip in a lake.

Ahlan’s farm deli and café in the city offers locally produced foods and crafts. Here you can also find a collection of local heritage plants from the area such as a 100-year-old apple garden. You can also buy fresh milk of local landrace cows at their milk bar!
Journalists are often seeking sustainable stories and products in relation to tourism. Sourcing these stories for the media can have a positive impact on your destination brand.

Visit Portugal is going a step further by creating engaging sustainability stories themselves. This example highlights the destination’s surf offering and also positions Portugal as a responsible nation.
4. Promote intangible heritage

Promoting the ‘spirit’ of a place creates an unchallengeable point of differentiation which can be enjoyed in many ways and in many destinations (not just the tourist honeypots). It can be the very essence of your place brand.
There are infinite ways that intangible heritage can be celebrated through destination promotion, and celebrating differences authentically helps generate cultural value and keeps traditions alive. Visit Germany has recorded the sounds of Germany in 3D audio, while Visit Spain promotes Flamenco Day with a curated playlist which can be enjoyed remotely. While other destinations can compete on nature and tangible cultural assets, no other nation can claim flamenco, fado or Cante Alentejano!
But intangible heritage can cover a huge range of assets and is a rich source of fascinating stories for marketing.
It can also be the feeling, or the spirit of a place. Used creatively, the spirit of place can infuse marketing with a distinctive style and tone. This can evoke a strong emotional reaction in the audience, creating a desire to visit which can only be satisfied by a trip to the destination - because no other place offers the same feeling.
5. Reposition your destination

An increased focus on the social and environmental elements of sustainability can be used to help change and develop the way destinations are perceived, and which audiences they attract.
Destinations such as Mallorca have invested in sustainability initiatives and made a conscious decision to move away from being seen as just a place for nightclubs and beaches. This widens the appeal and helps attract new, more environmentally-conscious visitors.
Turkey is also aiming to broaden its appeal by emphasising low impact activities, such as walking and camping, not traditionally associated with the destination. This attracts new audiences and helps spread the economic benefits of tourism inland rather than being concentrated in the coastal beach resorts.
6. Responsible promotion

To keep messaging consistent and maintain credibility, destinations also need to ensure marketing is responsible.
Inclusion can be supported and encouraged by portraying destinations as welcoming and accessible to marginalised groups.
Reaching under-served audiences can often best be done via partnerships. Providing content and information that appeals to specific groups, while partnering with publications and influencers from a range of backgrounds, with a range of audiences, is an effective approach.
Highlight cultural differences respectfully. This is best done by celebrating difference and challenging assumptions, rather than objectifying people.
Illustrate animal welfare responsibly by focusing on wild interactions in natural settings where people and animals are physically distanced.

Wild whale and dolphin watching, bird watching and wildlife photography are all activities that illustrate a responsible attitude to animals.

Promoting contact with wild animals (even those in captivity) is best avoided.
Try to move towards using images that illustrate sustainable interactions with people and the natural environment. Hiking, sailing, kayaking, walking and swimming, rather than road trips and 4WD safaris.
It is important to ensure that the foundations are in place to genuinely move a destination towards being more sustainable before making sustainability claims in marketing and promotion.

However it is possible to ‘start small’ by, for example, showcasing sustainable products and experiences, avoiding or minimising the promotion of activities with negative social or environmental impacts and by providing responsible tourism tips for visitors.

Destinations can also create an unchallengeable point of differentiation by highlighting intangible cultural heritage and ‘spirit of place’.

Generally as a destination moves through the sustainability journey and improves the environmental, social and economic impacts of tourism in a destination it can start to weave more and more sustainability elements into the promotional narrative.