

Familiarisation Trip - Fam Trip"; An Effective Tool for Touristic Promotion and Development. The Case of the Fam Trips organized by TIF-HELEXPO in the context of the International Tourism Exhibition "Philoxenia 2016" & "Philoxenia 2017"

DIMITRIS KOURKOURIDIS

Researcher at the Exhibition Research Institute and Phd Candidate, School of Spatial Planning and Development AUTH, Thessaloniki, Greece

VICKY DALKRANI

Director of the Exhibition Research Institute, R&D Manager TIF- HELEXPO SA, Thessaloniki, Greece

KYRIAKOS POZRIKIDIS

CEO of TIF-HELEXPO SA, Thessaloniki 54124, Greece

YANNIS FRANGKOPOULOS

Assistant Professor of Sociology of Space, School of Spatial Planning and Development AUTH, Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

In the framework of the intense competition developed among touristic destinations, new and effective tools for touristic promotion are constantly being sought and developed. Under this spectrum and in an effort to offer an experiential approach to travel agents, tour operators and other tourism professionals, 3-day Familiarization Trips (hereof referred to as "Fam Trips") are organized in various regions of Greece. These Fam Trips constitute a means for the promotion of the specific host destination directly to selected and targeted tourism professionals who are thus provided with a "first hand" experience of the advantages that the specific destinations have to offer to their visitors.

In this report, a research on the effectiveness of the Familiarization Trip as a tool for touristic promotion and development is attempted. This research shall include two parts: initially, the careful study of the international bibliography on this topic and subsequently a focus on the specific case of the Fam Trips organized by TIF-HELEXPO in the context of “Philoxenia 2016 &2017” Exhibition. In particular, for the inspection of this case study, primary research was carried out with the use of questionnaires for the examination of the perceptions and opinions of the tour operators who participated in the specific Fam Trips, but also of the level of accomplishment of the basic objectives of the Fam Trips, namely the improvement of the image of Greece as a touristic destination and the intention of the tour operators to promote the particular host destinations and Greece as a country to their clients.

Keywords: Familiarization Trip (Fam Trips), touristic promotion, TIF-HELEXPO, Philoxenia

1. INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL APPROACHES - METHODOLOGY

Travel agents and tour operators are the main intermediaries of the tourism marketing system, as they do not simply assist tourists in making reservations and purchasing tickets, but also significantly affect tourists’ decisions by making recommendations. However, the mediation of travel agents may serve as either an advantage or a disadvantage for a destination. On the one hand, mediation can reduce selling costs; on the other, travel agents have great influence over the destination selected by their customers, simply by including or excluding a destination in or from their portfolio (Bennett, 1999).

Tourism intermediaries provide information on tourism destinations, even if travellers have not chosen to use their services. This source of information could be considered to be an induced image-making factor that is crucial for tourists’ perception of different tourism destinations (Gartner & Bachri, 1994). The image of a destination is shaped either by the experiences of tourists who have visited the destination themselves or through information they receive from external factors. According to Strydom and Nel (2014), the image originating from information provided by tourism intermediaries is equally important to the image shaped by tourists themselves. Consequently, tourism mediators are the first and most influential link in the tourism flow chain (Gartner & Bachri, 1994). Thus, the promotional efforts of both individual tourism service providers (at a micro-economic level) and destination promotion organisations (at a macro-economic level) are oriented towards finding optimal methods to motivate tourism intermediaries to promote the destinations to more tourists (Koutoulas et al. 2009).

Although technological developments, particularly concerning the Internet, have made tourism more independent today, Samenfink (1999) asserts that the role of

tourism intermediaries is more important than ever today, given that experiential knowledge of reality is more valuable than virtual knowledge provided via technology. However, tourism intermediaries' knowledge of reality requires personal contact and familiarity with the destination. This personal contact during a visit develops the dynamics of mutual relationships between tourism mediators and locals at the destination (Srivastava, 2012).

Travel agents, tour operators and tourism intermediaries in general must know and be familiar with a tourism destination in order to convince customers to visit it. An experiential approach for tourism intermediaries to become familiar with tourism services at a destination are information trips. Information trips may either include visits of the shareholders from particular destinations to the intermediaries (e.g. at tourism exhibitions or meetings at target-markets) or familiarisation trips organized for tourism intermediaries themselves to a destination. By becoming personally acquainted and familiarised with a tourism destination, tourism intermediaries can then play a leading role in transmitting a positive image of the destination and influence the decisions of potential visitors (Gartner & Bachri, 1994; Samenfink, 1999; Koutoulas et al. 2009; Mulec & Wise, 2014; Strydom & Nel, 2014). Thus, familiarisation trips, known as 'fam trips' in the tourism market, are recognised as one of the most effective ways to promote and showcase a tourism product or destination (Ahmed & Chon, 1994; O'Neill, 1998; Dore & Crouch, 2003; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Koutoulas et al. 2009; Alvarez, 2010).

Fam Trips could be defined as a promotional effort where tourism professionals (travel agents, tour operators, booking agents, trip organisers, etc.) are invited to a free tour of the destination area for the purpose of improving the destination's image and boosting bookings in the area (Perdue & Pitegoff, 1990). Thus, the primary goal of a Fam Trip is to provide travel intermediaries with first-hand experience of the advantages that a tourism destination can hold for visitors. (Kolb, 2006).

It should be noted that organising a Fam Trip requires substantial investment in time and money; however, if organised effectively, Fam Trips can serve as a productive way to promote a tourism destination (Davidson & Rogers, 2006). Nevertheless, according to the literature, Fam Trips are often cited in studies as a tourism promotion tool (Ahmed & Chon, 1994; O'Neill, 1998; Dore & Crouch, 2003; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Koutoulas et al. 2009; Alvarez, 2010), but their efficacy is not explored. An effort to assess the efficacy of Fam Trips was undertaken by Castelltort and Mäder (2010), who identified a correlation between cost and positive publicity, focusing however only on the special case of Fam Trips organised for journalists (press trips).

In summary of the above, according to the literature, in most cases there is no assessment of the efficacy of Fam Trips, while the measure of success frequently used is the number of tourism intermediaries participating in the trips and not the number of additional bookings made as a result of these trips, which would in fact be hard to measure. Therefore, it is of great research interest to indirectly explore the subject through the views and perception of tourism intermediaries participating in Fam Trips,

in order to examine their satisfaction with regards to these trips and their intention to promote the tourism destinations they visit.

This paper explores this very subject, i.e. the effectiveness of travel intermediaries' personal contact and acquaintance with a destination as a tool for tourism promotion and development. As previously noted, the research specifically focuses on the efficacy of the Familiarisation Trips organised by TIF-HELEXPO in the context of the Tourism Exhibition Philoxenia held in 2015 and 2016. On this basis, the central working hypothesis of our research concerns whether Fam Trips are an effective tool for tourism promotion and development. The efficacy of familiarisation trips is measured on the basis of the views and perceptions of their participants, with our interest focused on the fulfilment of the goals of the trips, i.e. the improvement of Greece's image as a tourism destination and the intention of tourism intermediaries who participated in the familiarisation trips to promote Greece abroad. Our research includes primary research through the use of a questionnaire with closed- and open-ended questions in order to record quantitative information on the efficacy of Fam Trips. The research was conducted during the period November-December 2016, collecting a total of forty one (41) questionnaires. The questionnaires were processed with the use of SPSS and MS Excel software.

2. PHILOXENIA EXHIBITION AND THE FAM TRIPS ORGANISED DURING THE EXHIBITION IN 2015 AND 2016

Philoxenia International Tourism Exhibition is the longest-lived tourism fair in Greece; over the course of three decades, it has made a substantial contribution to the growth of the country's tourism sector. In recent years, the organisation of the Exhibition has been continuously improving in comparison to the past. The improved image of the fair is reflected in the number of exhibitors, the coverage of exhibition space, as well as the increase in the number and quality of international hosted buyers invited to attend the event (TIF-HELEXPO SA, 2016).

In fact, in recent years, fam trips have been organised to selected tourism destinations as part of Philoxenia, with the attendance of hosted buyers participating in the fair, in order to promote Greek tourism. More specifically, the following seven (7) fam trips were held in 2015 and 2016 with the participation of seventy five (75) individuals in total: i) to the Regional Unit of Magnesia, with a duration of 3 days, 14/11/2015 - 17/11/2015; ii) to the Regional Unit of Pieria, with a duration of 3 days, 14/11/2015 - 17/11/2015; iii) to the Regional Unit of Serres, with a duration of 2 days, 14/11/2015 - 16/11/2015; iv) to the Regional Unit of Magnesia, with a duration of 3 days, 20/11/2016 - 23/11/2016; v) to the Regional Unit of Pieria, with a duration of 3 days, 20/11/2016 - 23/11/2016; vi) to the Regional Unit of East Macedonia and Thrace (Komotini & Alexandroupolis), with a duration of 3 days, 20/11/2016 - 23/11/2016;

vii) to the Regional Unit of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace (Kavala & Xanthi), with a duration of 3 days, 20/11/2016 - 23/11/2016.

3. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH: QUESTIONNAIRES

3.1. Research Framework - Identity

Following our central working hypothesis, which, as previously noted, concerns the efficacy of Fam Trips as a tool for tourism promotion and development, primary research was conducted on participants in the Fam Trips organised by TIF-HELEXPO in the context of the Philoxenia Exhibition in 2015 and 2016. More specifically, this research examines the views and perceptions of participants concerning the strengths and weaknesses of Fam Trips, as well as their overall satisfaction from the trips; at the same time, the extent of success of their key goals is examined, i.e. the improvement of Greece's image as a tourism destination and the intention of tour operators to promote Greece to their customers.

The research was conducted using a questionnaire specially prepared for the needs of this paper. Our questionnaire consisted of nineteen questions in total, distributed into five sections as follows: i) the first section included questions concerning personal data of the respondents; ii) the second section included questions concerning the enterprises that the respondents represent; iii) the third section included questions concerning the assessment of the tourism destination; iv) the fourth section included questions concerning the assessment of the Fam Trips; v) the fifth section included questions concerning the efficacy of the Fam Trips.

The questions included in the questionnaires were mainly closed-ended questions of all types (dichotomous, multiple choice, Likert scale, etc.) in order to collect quantitative information. However, certain open-ended questions were also included, where respondents answered freely, in order to collect qualitative information as well.

The questionnaires were completed electronically, as e-mail messages were sent to our research population; where necessary, clarifications were provided electronically. The duration of our research was two months, as it was conducted during the period November-December 2016.

3.2. Sample Description

As part of our research, 41 questionnaires were collected from a total of 75 participants in the Fam Trips held in the context of Philoxenia 2015 and 2016. Our sample covers 54.7% of the research population and is deemed adequately representative, as it is in line with the general characteristics of the participants in the Fam Trips.

The gender of the population is somewhat even, with 53.7% being men and 46.3% being women. In terms of age, the highest concentration of our sample belongs to the middle and older age groups, with 46.3% belonging to the 36-50 age group and 26.8% to the 51-65 age group. Another important characteristic of the participants in our research is their significant experience in the tourism sector, with 53.7% of our sample having been working in the tourism sector for over 15 years. As regards the fields covered by our research participants, 61%, i.e. the majority, are General Tour Operators and Travel Agents, 26,8% are active in the MICE/Corporate field and 12.2% come from the broader tourism sector (eg press, corporate etc).

Our research participants were mainly owners or high-ranking executives of the enterprises they represent. More specifically, 51.2% of our research participants are owners-presidents of the enterprises they represent, 19.5% are directors and 12.2% are heads of departments / foreign market sectors.

The size of the enterprises represented in our sample is reflected in the annual turnover and the number of employees of each enterprise. Thus, the majority of the enterprises in our sample are quite large, with substantial turnover and numerous employees. Finally, a fact worth noting is that the overwhelming majority of the enterprises represented in our sample (90.2%) already recommend Greece to their customers as a tourism destination.

3.3. Research Results

This paper analyses the results of the research concerning an assessment of the efficacy of the Fam Trips carried out. Initially, respondents expressed their impression of Greece as a tourism destination prior to their participation in the Fam Trip for various individual categories. As shown in diagram 1, Greece concentrated the most positive impressions of respondents as: “historic – cultural destination, destination with a variety of resources and gastronomic tourism destination”. On the other hand, respondents had an average impression of Greece as: “exclusive summer destination, destination for alternative tourism, combination of the above two points and destination with a huge impact from the economic crisis, affecting the visitor”. Finally, Greece concentrated less positive impressions as: “destination with fluctuation of social conditions, which influence the visitor and destination with strong (negative) influence from the refugee issue”.

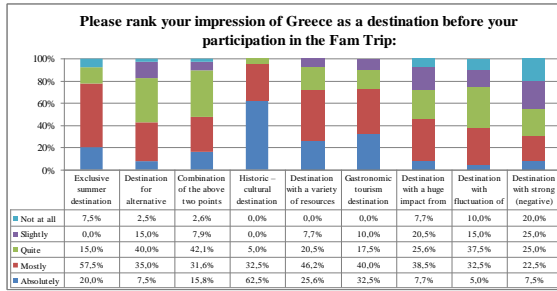


Diagram 1. Ranking the impression of Greece as a destination before participation in the Fam Trip

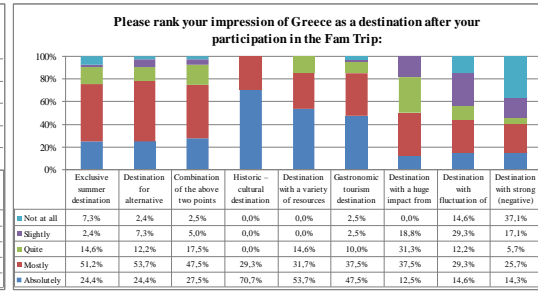


Diagram 2. Ranking the impression of Greece as a destination after participation in the Fam Trip

The respondents' impression of Greece as a tourism destination after their participation in the Fam Trip was clearly improved. As shown in diagram 2, assessments were more positive in all individual categories, however still following the above-mentioned trend. The differences in these two questions (before and after the Fam Trip) primarily demonstrate the substantial contribution of Fam Trips towards improving the respondents' impression of Greece as a tourism destination.

As regards the respondents' views on the contribution of their participation in the Fam Trips towards improving their general impression of Greece as a tourism destination, the results are impressive. As shown in diagram 3, 56.1% stated that their general impression improved greatly after the Fam Trip, 29.3% that it improved a lot, 12.2% that it improved to an average extent, while only 2.4% stated that it did not improve. These answers demonstrate the substantial contribution of Fam Trips, towards the improvement of the general impression of Greece as a tourism destination, as expressed by the most important professionals of the international tourism market.

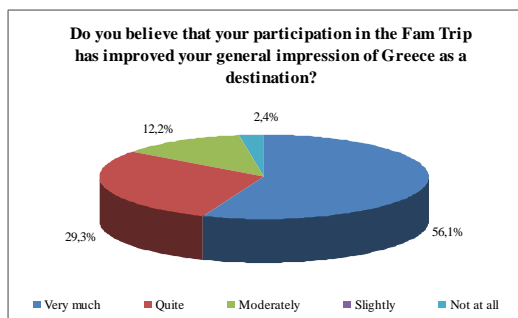


Diagram 3. The participation in the Fam Trip has improved the general impression of Greece as a destination

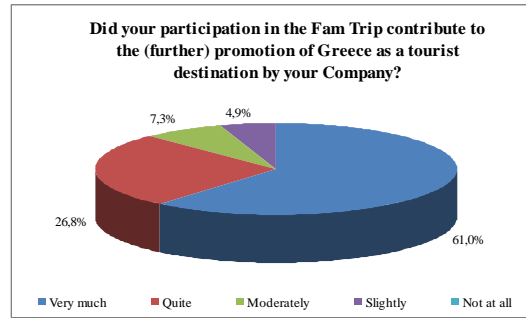


Diagram 4. Fam Trip contribution to the (further) promotion of Greece as a tourist destination

Finally, the results of the respondents' answers regarding whether their participation in the Fam Trips led to further promotion of Greece as a tourism destination by their companies were even more impressive. As shown in diagram 4, 61.0% of respondents stated that this occurred to a very large extent, 26.8% to a large extent, 7.3% to an average extent and 4.9% to a small extent. These answers demonstrate in a qualitative manner the measure of success referred to in the literature, which is the number of additional bookings made by tourism intermediaries who participated in the Fam Trips.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Initially, it should be noted that, as confirmed in theory, the main tourism intermediaries (travel agents, tour operators) of the tourism marketing system serve as privileged factors that shape tourist impressions of a destination, compared to broader groups of the tourism delegation population. Thus, the role of experiential first-hand contact of tourism intermediaries with the tourism reception population concerns a psycho-social process of identification with the 'other' and the overcoming of 'us/them' in the process of structuring the tourism impressions of Greece as a destination. This process is particularly valuable for Greek culture and civilisation, particularly during the current conditions of crisis and contradictory publicity concerning the country and its inhabitants.

On the basis of the central working hypothesis and the case study, which concerns the examination of the efficacy of the Fam Trips organised by TIF-HELEXPO in the context of Philoxenia 2015 and 2016 as a tool for tourism promotion and development, we highlighted their efficacy and substantial contribution.

As demonstrated through our primary research, the contribution of Fam Trips takes place on two levels, with the one leading to the other. On the one hand, Fam Trips make a contribution at the level of perception that tourism intermediaries have of Greece as a tourism destination, improving their image of Greece (56.1% responded that their general impression improved to a very large extent). On the other hand and on a more practical level, the improved perception that tourism intermediaries have of Greece as a tourism destination, results in further promotion of our country as a tourism destination to a significant extent (61.0% responded that their participation in the Fam Trip, led to further promotion of Greece as a tourism destination by their companies).

In summary of all the above, we could say that the Fam Trips organised by TIF-HELEXPO are an important, highly targeted tool for the tourism development and promotion of our country, achieving remarkable financial results. Finally, certain proposals for expanding this research in the future should be formulated. Our research could, potentially, be enriched by qualitative research including the statements of stakeholders via interviews, thus recording qualitative information. Furthermore, our research results could be further analysed through the formulation of research hypotheses and cross-checking of other parameters, such as the country of origin of tourists (e.g. Germany, England, etc.), the particularities and preferences of visitors, the

expectations of particular groups of tourists (e.g. sea, sun or alternative, including winter destinations), the age - demographic profile of visitors (e.g. elderly individuals, religious tourism, youth, alternative, etc.).

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