

Brand Pushkar (Destination Branding On The Planks of Culture and Religious Heritage As USP)

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INTRODUCTION

PUSHKAR AS A BRAND

Tirth Raj Pushkar, abode of Lord Brahma is a small town situated 14 kms. North West of Ajmer city (Rajasthan state) in the Aravali ranges and stands as a testimony to the rich culture of Rajasthan and religious heritage of India. It is considered as one of the most sacred pilgrimage places of Hindus and a holy dip in the Pushkar Lake is essential for all. A colorful and lively huge cattle fair is held every year on Kartik Purnima and lacs of pilgrims and ascetics gather here. Pushkar is located at 24.12 longitude and 74.36 latitude, at a height of 530 meters from the sea level. It has semi arid climate and is surrounded by hills. The soil is sandy and typical vegetation is found here which includes Neem, Babool, Khejada etc. Rose is the most important crop of Pushkar. Pushkar also has a lake which has 52 Ghats and the water around these Ghats is believed to have some miraculous powers. There are more than 400 temples in Pushkar. Some of the temples were built in 11th century and even before 11th century. Lord Brahma's temple, The Warrah temple, The Rangnathji's temple, The Apteshwar Mahadev temple, Ma Gayatri's temple and Ma Savitri & Saraswati's temple are some of the famous temples in Pushkar.

The branding of a destination can be planned based on primary elements like environment or some secondary elements like services etc. Some nations market their tourist locations boasting of having unique culture and heritage. But in today's competitive environment, where you have more producers than customers, high decibel advertising is common and the need to get noticed by the targeted buyer is all the more significant. In a world where customers are no longer looking for satisfaction and delight but for ecstasy or an experience of a lifetime, marketers need a 'poke yoke' branding strategy and excellent advertising execution to catch attention.

Pushkar is a very unique tourist destination in itself for two reasons. First, for the domestic travelers from near and far, it is a place of worship of Lord Brahma, the God of creation worshiped only at Pushkar in the whole world. The cattle fair attracts huge local Rajasthani crowd. This makes the place a centre, where people from diverse cultures, speaking different languages and displaying their colorful traditional costumes gather around to trade and pay homage. The place is extremely peaceful and serene.

The second reason is foreign tourists. They come here to witness the rich culture and traditions. The simplicity of the people, the peaceful and stress free ways of their lives attract them to visit this place. Visiting this place is a unique experience, which practically takes the tourists into the realm of peace and a different world, may be a hundred years back as compared to some developed nations. Riding an elephant and sitting on a camel cart is like living a Harry Potter movie. The economy of the town depends on the tourists. As a matter of fact, this second type of tourist visits Pushkar to see the first one types (the local tourists).

According to Clay S. Timon, the brand architect of Olympic and Noble Prize, claims that there are four pillars for a successful brand. **These are differentiation, relevance, self esteem and knowledge.**

Now, what else do you need in a brand? Pushkar is highly differentiated and unique in itself. Truly speaking, because of The Lord Brahma Temple, it is absolutely unique. This is the first and foremost attribute of a good brand- "differentiation". There are three more basic attributes of a brand and they are **relevance, self esteem and knowledge**. Pushkar is considered a place with rich culture, traditions and it retains its heritage value. That's what makes Pushkar relevant to domestic and foreign tourists. Self esteem is what a tourist or customer lends to the brand, of course, only when delighted. Knowledge is having a through knowledge of your customer and his needs. Tourism has been ranked as one of the top revenue earners for any country in the world. Destination branding has resulted in fruitful gains for many states in India, for example, Kerala and many countries in the world, for example, Malaysia. But in spite of having all essentials in place, tourism is fast declining in Pushkar. It is certain that if something is not done, the inflow of tourists will be diverted to some other place in this competitive world.

We decided to conduct a descriptive study to find out how we can protect the brand "Pushkar".

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DESTINATION BRANDING

Branding is a tool to communicate the destination's attributes to targeted customers. The branding strategy would particularly differ in the case of a destination which is offering a unique intangible experience through its traditions, rich culture and heritage. When it comes to destination branding, it cannot be done the way you would do for a product. This way, we may miss out on the unique characteristics or there may be some limitations of that destination. A Destination's image plays an important role in influencing the tourist's decision making process. The recent terrorist attacks on India have already taken its toll; showing a steep decline in foreign tourists inflow. How people perceive the destination will inspire some segment of tourists to visit the place. As a matter of fact, what a destination offers should also match the requirements of the tourist also. This can be best understood in the case of newly married couples –which tourist destination would they like to visit? Probably a place which is romantic, has beautiful sceneries, privacy, luxurious hotel accommodations etc. These couples may not like to visit a place which has some religious value attached to it. Depending upon the type of tourists one would like to target, the branding strategy should focus on the needs of such customers and highlight the brand benefits.

TOURISM IN RAJASTHAN

Tourism in Rajasthan is now the third most significant sector after agriculture and industry. Tourism alone contributes to 13% of the state domestic product. Rajasthan contributes 11.2% towards the foreign tourist arrival in the country and 3.3% towards the domestic tourist arrival. In 2002 alone, Rajasthan had 620,000 foreign and 7 million domestic travelers. As far as the infrastructure is concerned, to support the inflow of foreign and domestic tourists, Rajasthan has about 1400 hotel rooms in 54 heritage hotels alone.

On a larger side, India attracted about 4 million tourists in 2006 and was able to generate US \$ 8.9 billion. In 2008 alone, this industry generated US \$ 100 billion and with the expected annual growth rate of 9.4%, India is likely to generate about US \$ 275.5 billion in 2018.

India is a very large country in terms of geographical area and its diversity. Every state possesses a competitive challenge in attracting the tourists and some of the southern states boast of 'Medical tourism', 'adventure tourism' and so on. Under such a scenario, Rajasthan has to protect and maintain its heritage USP but at the same time, it has to market itself to foreign and domestic tourists so well that the number of travelers shoots up and the per capita spending by them should also increase which is Rs. 400 per day in case of a domestic tourist and Rs. 800 in the case of a foreign tourist.

These figures are very encouraging but there are many a slip between a cup and the lip. The statistics took a nose dive after the terrorist attacks. The uncontrollable factors are understandable but how well we have been tackling the controllable factors is important.

This study makes an attempt to conceptualize a rationale for why the idea of "destination branding" is important and why should it be considered seriously by competent authorities so that the decision to visit a place should be influenced in favor of that particular destination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature is always like a guiding light in any research. Destination branding is very useful in communicating and highlighting the destination's value to the tourist. Although this is the general feeling by one and all, but Buhalis (2000) said that destination branding fails to address the unique needs and limitations of a destination as well as its particular geographical, environmental and socio-cultural characteristics. He also mentioned that the dynamics of interest and benefits sought by stakeholders makes it all the more difficult. According to him, a destination can be seen as a perceptual concept that can be interpreted subjectively by tourists depending on their travel itinerary, culture, demographic factors etc. Similarly, Sautter and Leisen (1999) mentioned that destinations are one of the most difficult things to manage and market due to the complexity of the relationships amidst local stakeholders. At the same time, Nielsen et al. (2000) suggest that destination branding can be successfully done like product branding because now, even destinations have to compete in the international environment or market and in order to enhance the awareness about the destination and communicating the unique benefits of it, there is no other tool available except branding.

A very practical approach was adopted by Chon (1992). He suggested that marketers must focus on functional and symbolic attributes of the destination while promoting it. This means that the branding strategies have to be developed

on dotted line as destinations have their own image and history. He said that travelers have pre-conceived notions/ image and expectations about a destination. These expectations are based on word of mouth, previous experiences, some reports and above all, advertising.

In a major work, Annette Pritchard wrote in 'Mood Marketing' that any destination wanting to brand itself faces three typical constraints. First is controlling the four P's of marketing which becomes very tricky in the case of destination marketing. Second is limited budget for the task and the third is over arching political considerations. Under such circumstances, the ideal way out according to Pritchard is the development of an emotional relationship with the tourists through highly choreographed and focused communication campaign. This will result in creation of a brand salience. Chon K.S. (1992) also suggested that there should be some congruity between the self image and the image of the destination.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The overall aim of the study is to analyze if destination branding is important and to find out the factors which can attract tourists. It also aims to find out the reasons which are responsible for the declining tourism in Pushkar.

The following objectives have been shortlisted for the study:

1. To find out why foreign tourists choose to visit 'Pushkar'.
2. To find out the attributes which attract them the most.
3. To find out their experience during the visit.
4. To gauge the level of promotions within and outside the country.
5. To identify the areas having scope for betterment of Pushkar as a tourist destination.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Initially, an exploratory pilot testing was conducted on 150 foreign tourists to identify the factors which would be considered and used in structuring the questions 1 and 6 in the final questionnaire. Question no. 1 deals with the most popular factors among tourists which attract them to visit Pushkar and question no.6 deals with factors indicating the area where Pushkar as a tourist destination requires betterment. The respondents answered on a 'three point interval scale'.

The rest of the questions are based on 'nominal scale'. This questionnaire was used as a tool to collect data from 571 tourists for the final descriptive research.

The respondents for the research (pilot testing and final data collection) were selected through restricted stratified sampling method.

In order to validate the authenticity of effectiveness of factors selected in question 1 (Five factors) and question 6 (twelve factors), a 'Chi square test' was run.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In the first question, five factors were identified in exploratory pilot testing as to why tourists choose Pushkar as a destination for their visit. These factors were:

- (a) Pushkar is a spiritual retreat. (b) Pushkar is a true Indian cultural zone. (c) Pushkar as a fun and frolic destination. (d) Pushkar as an economic preference. (e) Pushkar – a place offering peace and tranquility.

Whether these factors are significantly related to the making of a decision regarding the visit to Pushkar was tested by running a Chi square test. Null hypothesis claims that there is no significant relationship between the factors and the decision to choose Pushkar as a destination to visit. At 0.05 level of significance, the Chi square test value is 243.88 against the critical value of 15.50. Since the Chi square value is greater than critical value, it rejects the null hypothesis (Table 1).

It means that there is a significant relationship between the factors identified and decision to visit Pushkar. A further percentage analysis shows that tourists visit Pushkar because of two reasons.

- a) They visit Pushkar in search of peace.
b) They find Pushkar to be a true Indian cultural zone.

This clearly indicates that spiritual and cultural quotient of Pushkar attracts tourists and if this factor starts eroding, the destination will become less attractive to foreign travelers.

H0: Evidence of no significant relationship between reasons to choose Pushkar as a holiday destination.
H1: There is significant relationship between reasons to choose Pushkar as a tourist destination.

Table 1: Cross Classification of Reasons To Choose Pushkar

Observed Frequencies				
	L	M	H	Total
A	109	131	299	539
B	70	125	355	550
C	156	121	246	523
D	187	195	136	518
E	70	110	348	528
Total	592	682	1384	2658

Expected Frequencies				
	L	M	H	Total
A	120.05	138.30	280.65	539
B	122.50	141.12	286.38	550
C	116.48	134.19	272.32	523
D	115.37	132.91	269.72	518
E	117.60	135.48	274.93	528
Total	592	682	1384	2658

Data	
Level of Significance	0.05
Number of Rows	5
Number of Column	3
Degree of Freedom	8

Test Results	
Chi-Square Test Statistic	243.880
Critical Values	15.507
Reject the null hypothesis	

In the second question which is based on nominal scale, tourists were asked 'When did they decide to visit Pushkar'? Almost 44.88% of the tourists decided to visit Pushkar when they were in their own country. 41.17% tourists decide to visit Pushkar when they are already in India and just 13.95% are motivated to visit Pushkar when they are in Rajasthan.

The third question aims to find out how people decide to come here. The suggestion to visit Pushkar usually comes from friends (63.02%). Barely 21.89% tourists see some advertisements in different media and decide to visit Pushkar. The travel agents and operators, who are key figures in routing and scheduling the tours advice atleast (15.09%) of their clients to visit Pushkar.

When asked in question no 4 and 5, how do they rate their visit and would they like to visit Pushkar again, the replies were still encouraging. A good number of 82.88% would like to visit again; whereas 17.12% do not wish to visit Pushkar again. 37.67% tourists feel delighted after the visit and 44.74% of the tourists were just satisfied but an alarming 17.19% were not satisfied due to some or the other reason.

The question no. 6 deals with twelve factors identified in the pilot testing suggesting the areas where the scope of improvement is recommended. These factors include hotels (accommodation), guides, pundits, food, cooperation from general public, cooperation from shopkeepers, knowledge of foreign language, bureaucratic information, police cooperation, internet facility, accessibility to Pushkar and cleanliness.

Null hypothesis suggests that there is no significant relationship between the factors identified and the scope for betterment of Pushkar. A Chi square test at 0.05 level of significance indicates that the Chi square test value is 213.33 and the critical value is 33.92. This rejects the null hypothesis and establishes that there is a significant relationship between the two (Table 2).

H0: There is evidence of no significant relationship between areas identified by the tourists and scope for improvement to make it a better tourist destination.

H1: There is a significant relationship.

Table 2 : Cross Classification of Areas Identified For The Betterment of Pushkar As A Tourist Destination

Observed Frequencies				
	L	M	H	Total
A	209	197	120	526
B	198	187	93	478
C	174	161	139	474
D	208	172	131	511
E	206	187	100	493
F	205	184	119	508
G	209	197	94	500
H	223	172	74	469
I	209	179	71	459
J	225	138	137	500
K	200	175	127	502
L	118	182	236	536
Total	2384	2131	1441	5956

Expected Frequencies				
	L	M	H	Total
A	210.54	188.20	127.26	526
B	191.33	171.02	115.65	478
C	189.73	169.59	114.68	474
D	204.54	182.83	123.63	511
E	197.33	176.39	119.28	493
F	203.34	181.76	122.91	508
G	200.13	178.90	120.97	500
H	187.73	167.80	113.47	469
I	183.72	164.23	111.05	459
J	200.13	178.90	120.97	500
K	200.93	179.61	121.45	502
L	214.54	191.78	129.68	536
Total	2384	2131	1441	5956

Data	
Level of Significance	0.05
Number of Rows	12
Number of Column	3
Degree of Freedom	22

Test Results	
Chi-Square Test Statistic	213.333
Critical Values	33.92
Reject the null hypothesis	

A further percentage analysis indicates that the most important factor suggested by the tourists is cleanliness. As indicated by the tourists, the local 'Pundits' also bother them a lot and they should stop their unwanted activities. The third factor which requires attention is the internet facility which is not upto the mark in Pushkar.

The seventh question reveals that 82.27% tourists did not see any advertisement or promotion of any kind in their own country. Only 17.73% saw some form of advertisement in their own place.

The collective data in question no. 2,3,4,5 and 6 clearly indicates the following:

- Pushkar as a destination has not been marketed well abroad.
- It is only the word of mouth which is maintaining the inflow of tourists in Pushkar.
- The role of tour operators in promoting Pushkar is quite less.
- The foreign clients are not aware of Pushkar as a brand as its visibility is quite low.

In the end, a straight question to foreign travelers strongly indicates that they prefer Pushkar as a traditional place and also a place which has rich culture and heritage. A whopping 95.35% prefer its traditional looks but a small number (04.65%) would like to see it as a modern developed place.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

The study disclosed many things. It is very normal to see the modernization taking place all around but it should not happen at the cost of our culture and heritage which happens to be the most important factor to attract foreign travelers. The very first question reveals that foreign tourists come to Pushkar in search of peace and to see the true culture of Rajasthan and India.

The study also suggests that there is no significant promotion or advertisement within and outside the country. Foreign tour operators hardly take any interest in including Pushkar in their route list. There is also no sign of any substantial promotional activity anywhere to boost the tourism in Pushkar. That means branding of the destination is almost insignificant if not nil.

Foreign tourists have also categorically suggested that if the place improves on certain points like cleanliness, aggressive behaviour of pundits and internet facility, then it can attract a lot more people. Most pleasant finding was our policing. It requires least attention-it means majority are satisfied with their working, services and overall law & order situation.

PRESERVE THE TRADITIONAL LOOK & EXPERIENCE

Actually speaking, the traditional heritage look of Pushkar is being slowly replaced by modern facilities. Imagine an old time market place where things were arranged and sold in the same way as it used to be fifty years back. Customers were asked to sit and made comfortable. The exteriors and interiors of some restaurants or shops are like good old times. Unfortunately, it is being slowly replaced by modern fittings and decor. It is very clear that foreign travelers come to Pushkar to basically witness our rich culture and religious heritage. Unless we protect, develop and promote our own unique selling proposition, we might stand to loose the tourists who have equally attractive and economical destinations else where in the world. Take a simple example of camel carts which are being replaced by modern transport. We need to realize that it is the sheer thrilling experience of sitting on a camel cart which is not available in their country, whereas, the most advanced transport is freely available. It is the experience of shopping or commuting that the foreign traveler enjoys above everything else.

The Government needs to develop and promote such activities which result in enriching the cultural values. Pushkar Fair is one activity which is being organized annually. Training and funding of local handicraft artisans, displays and marketing of their products and even exports will result in promotion of tourism in Pushkar and the state.

Branding activities are a must. Participation in trade fairs, liaison with tour operators and other activities which create brand awareness and communicate the unique experience of it should be considered. Areas where tourists have suggested the scope of improvement should be considered. This will make the visit more satisfying and delightful. Since the tourists want to feel and experience the culture and heritage of the destination, a careful blending of tradition with modernity is advised.

PRESERVE THE LAKE PUSHKAR AND TEMPLES

The biggest worry is the near extinction of Lake Pushkar where people take a holy dip. The dying of fish in the lake is a common phenomenon. The rapidly falling water index in the soil is causing deforestation in addition to the man made deforestation. This has badly affected the wild life around Pushkar which was a great attraction once. Even the temples in Pushkar also require attention.

The domestic tourists visit the place because of the religious connect with the destination and if this starts eroding, then it will be difficult to maintain the sanctity of the location. If we concentrate on this aspect, the foreign tourists will frolic to the place with little branding efforts.

MARKET “PUSHKAR FAIR” WELL

This event is already an international event and is known all over the world but it needs more visibility. Heritage hotel owners and government need to focus their attention on making the brand Pushkar visible in the world.

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