

CREATING A SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE AGRITOURISM OFFER. A MARKET REQUIREMENT OR A MANIFESTATION OF SERVICE PROVIDERS' SYSTEM OF VALUES?

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ABSTRACT

Making a profit is usually the main goal of an enterprise's activity, regardless of its size and the line of business it represents. However, due to the considerable complexity, unpredictability and changeability of the contemporary economic environment, the ways of achieving this aim are also very important. One of the conceptions considered by enterprises which include the interests of various groups into their activity is corporate social responsibility (CSR). Presumably, an enterprise which engages in activity in a conscious and planned way, gains the trust and support not only of its employees, but also clients, suppliers and local community, which may become a significant factor of its competitiveness and development.

A form of activity where corporate social responsibility can be applied is tourism.

The aim this article is to indicate the planes of implementing the assumptions of corporate social responsibility in tourism, as well as to find the answer to the question whether socially responsible activity, implemented by the owners of agritourist farms, may influence the perception of the offer attractiveness.

The question in the title concerns issues broader than the article. Due to the contributory nature of the study, the authors focused solely on presenting the results of the study on the demand side.

Introduction

The fact that every aspect of human environment is influenced by various forms of economic activity is undeniable. This can be a positive or negative impact. It is only natural that the former is stressed more willingly and easier to accept. The latter often requires a stronger emphasis to make people aware of its existence. However, it is essential that problems are clearly stated, as it serves the purpose of building the sense of responsibility for finding solutions.

Creating the sense of social responsibility for business activity is a major issue in tourism as well. Its relations with the natural, economic and social environment are very strong (Cohen, 1978). Even though, in economic terms, the current and prospective leading trend is mass tourism, the "tourism of tomorrow" will certainly involve social responsibility (Goodwin, 2011; Leslie, 2012), whose assumptions should be taken into consideration with reference to both – the way of running the business and the tourists' behaviour.

The concept of responsible tourism is very close to the assumptions of rural tourism, but so far there has been no research on CSR implementation in this area (Sikora, 2012; Coles, Fenclova, Dinan, 2013).

The article is of contributory nature. Its aim is to indicate the planes of implementing the principles of corporate social responsibility in tourism, as well as to answer the question whether socially responsible activity of agritourist farms' owners may have an influence on the perception of offer attractiveness. Apart from the theoretical part, the article presents the results of surveys conducted among the actual and potential guests of agritourist farms.

The idea of corporate social responsibility and its implementation in the tourism industry

Social responsibility is considered to be one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century and plays an increasingly important role in the functioning of many organizations. It is being discussed at length by researchers, both its theoretical (Friedman, 1970; Carroll, 1974 and 1991; Epstein, Roy, 2001) and empirical (Dahlsrud, 2008; Heslin, Ochoa, 2008) aspects. Corporate Social Responsibility may be understood as making and meeting economic, legal, ethical and discretionary commitments, imposed on a given organization by the parties engaged in its activity (Maignan, Ferrell, Hunt, 1999), or as considering the society's current expectations by the organization in its activity (Commission of the European Communities 2001).

A form of activity where the idea of corporate social responsibility can be applied is tourism. A growing number of tourism enterprises are incorporating this conception into their strategies, trying in this way to have a positive influence on the environment, the quality of life in the local communities and the well-being of their employees (Bohdanowicz, Zientara, 2009; Font, Walmsley, Cogotti, McCombes, Hausler, 2012; Kang, Lee, Huh, 2010).

As shown by the literature data, the main motivation causing enterprises to take interest in CSR is the reduction of costs, which gives them a competitive advantage (Knowles, Macmillan, Palmer, Grabowski, Hashimoto, 1999; Stabler, Goodal, 1997). This confirms Wheller's thesis (1991) that responsible tourism is a marketing trick rather than an ethical planning mechanism. Implementing CSR is also related, however, to the attempts to meet social expectations as regards responsibility (Bremner, 2009; Cheyne, Barnett, 2001; Ian, 1996). Studies also point to altruistic motivations of implementing CSR in tourism (Ayuso, 2006; Tzschentke, Kirk, Lynch, 2004). Socially responsible activities in the tourism sector are varied, but they most frequently concern environment management, social dialogue and working relationships (Holcomb, Upchurch, Okumus, 2007; Karani, Day, 2011).

H. Goodwin (2011) points out that responsible tourism is not a separate, isolated phenomenon, but it permeates all forms of human activity and evolves along with people's changing needs and attitudes. Preparing and providing every type of tourist product, both on and outside the market, involves specific activities as regards organization, task planning, using assets, and broadly understood cooperation, employment or finances. All these planes create an opportunity to show responsibility in the social, economic and environmental aspect.

This also concerns rural tourism and agritourism, whose greatest value shows in creating offers based on bottom-up initiatives, rooted in local communities developing on the basis of their resources. As a result, social capital is built, the inhabitants' economic situation improves, unemployment is reduced and the community becomes more integrated (Idziak, 2011).

Research materials and method

For the purpose of collecting primary data, a survey questionnaire was used, which consisted of two questions and a personal details section. Question 2 was a matrix containing 11 detailed questions, rated on the 5-grade Likert scale.

A diagnostic survey was conducted among some inhabitants of the Wielkopolskie province, in February/March 2017. The researchers collected 72 correctly filled out questionnaires. With respect to the term "a large sample", used in statistics, that number was considered sufficient to run a contributory quantitative study. In general, a sample is considered to be relatively large if $n > 50$ (Matykowski, 1992). According to J.T. Roscoe (1975), in most studies, an appropriate size of a sample should fall between over 30 and less than 500.

The respondents were asked to rate the significance of some examples of socially responsible activities, included in the questionnaire as determinants of the choice of an agritourist offer.

Results

The change in the number of agritourist farms over the years has been the outcome of various factors, such as the tourist attractiveness of the area, the state policy at different levels of authority, the effectiveness and profitability of agricultural production, competition on the market, the seasonality of services, as well as the farmers' resourcefulness, motivations to engage in the activity, etc. (Konečný, 2014). The appearance of new suppliers on the agritourism market in subsequent years, as well as the large variety of goods makes it a highly competitive market.

The clear dominance of the economic elements over the social ones in the management of a small enterprise rarely motivates the entrepreneur to look for the pluses of competitive advantage in the social and intellectual sphere of activity. It turns out, however, that in the case of agritourist farms, signs of social responsibility in the legal, ethical or philanthropic aspect of activity may have an influence on the perception of the attractiveness of the offer by the actual or potential clients, who are among the most important stakeholders in the tourism business (Stawicka, 2016; Navrátilová, Lorinczová, Šišková, 2015).

Among the people participating in the survey, 41.7% were men and 58.5% were women. University education was indicated by 77.8% of the respondents, secondary education – by 19.4% and vocational education – by 2.8%.

People aged 30–39 (34.7%) and 40–49 (27.8%) made up the highest proportion of respondents. A less numerous group consisted of people aged 50–59 (13.9%) and over 60 (16.7%), while the smallest one – of those aged below 30 (6.9%).

The majority of respondents came from cities inhabited by over 500,000 people (58.3%). 45.8% described their financial situation as good, 43.1% – as average, only slightly over 8% – as very good and 2.8% – as bad.

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of responses obtained for some examples of socially responsible activities, which could be offered by the owners of agritourist farms. The results point to its significance for the assessment of offer attractiveness.

The functioning of small enterprises largely depends on the style and effects of the owner's activity. Their knowledge, skills and experience determine the quality of company management. It is the individual system of values which are important to the owner of a small enterprise that determines his/her approach to implementing the principles of social responsibility.

It seems understandable that the respondents indicated first of all those activities the effects of which benefited them directly. The majority believed that an important sign of social responsibility on the part of agritourism service providers, which has an influence on the choice of the offer, is honest communication with clients. It is particularly important in situation when information on agritourism facilities is very diverse and confusing (Havlíček, Lohr, Benda, 2010). As many as 87.5% of the respondents claimed that a situation when the marketing information (e.g. an advertisement) agrees with the actual offer definitely has some influence on the perception of the attractiveness of a given farm. It was described as fairly significant by 8.3% of the respondents.

An equally high importance was ascribed to respecting the client's privacy (sensitive data, contact details, etc.). Such behaviour was regarded as a significant or fairly significant element of the offer attractiveness by 81.94% and 13.89% of respondents, respectively.

Table 1 Socially responsible actions and the perception of the agritourist offer attractiveness (%)

	Definitely yes	Rather yes	Hard to say	Rather no	Definitely no
Employment of staff on the basis of a contract (job, order, etc.)	23.61	29.17	19.44	19.44	8.33
Employment of staff from the local society	31.94	41.67	9.72	12.50	4.17
Compliance with tax law in terms of conducted business	31.94	26.39	15.28	19.44	6.94
Raising own and employees professional qualifications	31.94	27.78	25.00	13.89	1.39
Compliance of marketing information (eg advertising) with the actual offer	87.50	8.33	1.39	1.39	1.39
Respecting customer privacy (personal information, contact, etc.)	81.94	13.89	1.39	1.39	1.39
Charity and social activities	16.67	31.94	34.72	11.11	5.56
Use of environmentally friendly products	45.83	44.44	6.94	1.39	1.39
Use of renewable energy sources	33.33	37.50	19.44	8.33	1.39
Waste segregation	48.61	25.00	15.28	9.72	1.39
Encourage the consumption of organic products	41.67	40.28	11.11	5.56	1.39

Source: own research.

In the respondents' opinion, other factors which have an influence on the attractiveness of the offer included solutions concerning environment protection and propagating pro-ecological behaviours, such as waste segregation or using environment-friendly products. Visible to the guests, they make assessment easier for them.

Respecting the tax law in business activity and considering various aspects related to the development of the local community are elements which the respondents believe to have a smaller impact on the attractiveness of the offer. A relatively large percentage of respondents did not see any relationship between the quality of service and the possibility of raising qualifications by the employees or the legal form of employment.

Charity activity in small enterprises is rather incidental and treated first of all as a marketing tool. Hence, it is probable that in this case, the respondents claimed more often than in the case of the other questions (34.72%) that it was difficult for them to say whether this particular type of activity done by the farm owner would improve the perception of the offer attractiveness. It must be stressed, however, that almost half of the respondents considered this element to be highly or fairly significant.

Conclusions

Enterprises are obliged to observe moral and social norms and models of behaviour at each stage, as well as in every dimension of their activity, and not only after reaching the desired profit threshold. However, the choice between the two standpoints depends on the entrepreneur, and practically results from his/her knowledge and level of awareness.

Social responsibility in tourism may be manifested on multiple planes. This does not mean, however, that enterprises wishing to take decisions in compliance with this conception must show responsibility on all planes at the same time. In the case of small enterprises, which agritourist farms certainly are, the level of the farm owners' awareness of the role of social responsibility and their readiness to react properly to the emerging social problems, may result in gaining a competitive advantage related, for instance, to the perception of the offer attractiveness by potential clients.

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