

The role of media in the development of regional tourism

By Dr Nalaka Godahewa Phd., MBA, BSc.Eng(Hon), FCMA,FCIM

The theme of today's UNWTO conference is "mainstreaming tourism in media" and we are scheduled to discuss a number of related topics.

I am privileged to be here with you, addressing this important conference to share some thoughts on the topic "the role of media in the development of regional tourism". I believe this topic is of great significance to all emerging tourism markets and particularly to Sri Lanka, as we are going through an important phase of tourism development in our country.

Today we see a situation where the global tourism industry is growing at a steadily phase reaching 935 million arrivals by the end of 2010. Last year global tourism bounced back with 6.7% growth from a 4 % drop in 2009. During 2010, the Asia Pacific region showed the second biggest growth of 12.6 % in tourist arrivals. Further 8-9% growth is projected for 2011 which is good news. In Sri Lanka, tourist arrivals grew by 46% in 2010 reaching 654,000 arrivals by the end of the year. So far during the first two months of 2011 we have maintained a 30% growth rate.

However in tourism, no can be complacent as it is a highly sensitive industry.

Mr. Francesco Frangialli, the former UNWTO Secretary-General once expressed the view that modern day tourism is highly dependent on media reporting. He said so because today, a vast majority of travel decisions are made by people who have never seen their intended destination first hand for themselves. Many people are travelling, making their travel decisions on their own with little or no help from

tour planners. To make these decisions they use information from multiple sources of media which include tv, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, movies, and Internet.

Tourists usually decide on the destination first, based on what they have heard or seen from media. Having decided on the destination, whether it is France, Spain, South Africa, Thailand, Maldives or Sri Lanka, they then seek specialist assistance to decide on the accommodation, travel arrangements, tour guide support etc. The stronger the destination positioning and brand recall, greater the chance of attracting these new tourists. Therefore, branding and positioning the destination is a very important aspect for all emerging tourism markets. Media contributes immensely towards achieving this objective.

Media is a complex subject which has evolved with time. The first printed pages appeared more than 500 years ago. In 1900, there was no radio, television or internet. Newspapers dominated the media market, with virtually no competition. However, during the last century, dramatic developments have taken place in mass media. The first radio broadcast took place about 100 years ago; The first Television broadcast took place about 75 years ago; Internet was born about 50 years ago; first generation cellular networks became popular about 30 years ago; Search engines came into the picture about 25 years ago. Media today has evolved into a multi-faceted force that has become an integral part of our life, influencing almost everything we do. Media is no longer confined to one way communication. Using available technology and social media we can now communicate and interact with one another anywhere on earth instantly. Today information virtually has no barriers thanks to this media explosion.

When we talk about the role of media in the development of regional tourism, there is a tendency to get our minds fixed on traditional media such as tv, radio, newspapers, magazines etc. But I think it is important that we understand that media today is a far more complex subject than that. For example, social media such as facebook, flickr, youtube, twitter, mobile blogs and RSS feeders have introduced a whole new era of communication. We must observe these trends carefully and understand how each of these developments will influence the future growth of tourism.

In order to make best use of the traditional media, one should understand what the media themselves see as their primary role. In general, the role of mass media in global society has been evolving over the past century towards the following:

- Providing information and amusement
- Checks and balances in social accountability
- Shaping the public agenda and priorities
- Protecting the environment or public interest
- Promoting global best practices
- Contributing towards sustaining social value systems

So, it is important for governments and tourism promotional organizations, to understand and appreciate these roles of traditional media and work closely with them to promote tourism in a manner that your own objectives will not conflict with the objectives of the media. A lot of effort is required to build trust and understanding between each other to generate maximum support from the media for respective destination positional efforts. For example, when Singapore ended its decade long ban on gambling and introduced two casino licenses they were extremely careful how the media was handled so that any negative sentiments were kept under control.

With social media networks one has even less control. With social networks such as face book and twitter having memberships bigger than populations of some of the world's largest countries, using modern technology where information could be shared within seconds across the globe, one has to focus more on actual delivery than destination promotion. Today, if your tourism product does not meet the customer expectations you can no longer hide it , with all these modern social media around. Hence countries such as Sri Lanka, which are currently in the process of rebuilding our brand should heavily focus on product improvements and service delivery. By doing so,we can expect that social media will automatically promote the destination.

Development of tourism is not limited to increasing the number of hotels, restaurants, and other such facilities, rather it has far more to do with creating the culture of tourism and the way it is perceived by the people. In doing so, the media too can play an important role. The local media, in particular, can work closely with the governments and the tourism promotional institutes in achieving these objectives. I remember once when we were travelling in Vietnam in 2006, the chairman of BOI observed that all newspapers carry positive news items about private sector development work. At certain stages of development, countries require this kind of media alignment and regional tourism development efforts are no different.

Tourism today has grown into a responsible global industry. We all know that media has immensely contributed towards this development. Over the years media has contributed towards shaping tourism into a responsible industry by promoting the following good practices;

- Protection of the environment and minimizing negative social impacts of tourism

- Generating greater economic benefits for local people and enhancing the well-being of host communities.
- Making positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and promoting the world's diversity
- Providing more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues
- Providing opportunities and access for physically challenged people

While media has contributed positively to the development of the global tourism industry, there have been occasions where media publicity has adversely affected tourism in several countries. Media, when not handled well, can have disastrous effects on tourism. For example, when there is bad news or a crisis the impact on tourism can be devastating. As former secretary general of UNWTO Mr. Francesco Frangialli stated, "Tourists are scared away from destinations caught in round-the-clock disaster coverage, causing communities dependent on tourism to lose their source of livelihood. I believe it is because of this reason that the WTO also has repeatedly called on the media to avoid over-sensationalizing the effects of disasters.

We can draw our attention to a number of events which got widespread negative publicity directly affecting the tourism industries of respective countries

- 2001 - the 9/11 attack on World Trade Centre, USA
- 2003 - SARS Outbreak in China
- 2004- Indian Ocean Tsunami

- 2008- Mumbai terrorist attack
- 2011- Japanese Tsunami and Nuclear crisis , to name a few.

But on the other hand it is important to mention here that there are also examples where media directly helped destinations effected by disasters to bounce back. A classic example was the 2002 bomb blast in Bali which was a direct attack on tourism, killing 202 people. The impact was devastating in a place where 25% of regional GDP depended on tourism. However public media stepped in, and started a continuous dialogue with the Indonesian Government. They publicized a series of steps taken by the government to address the issue, how the evidence was investigated to capture the bombers ,how government officials met the families of victims and shared their losses. The world was reminded that Balinese people have a gentle and religious outlook, and this played a key role in the recovery of Bali's image as a safe and charming tourist destination. In order to show that Bali had recovered, the government stimulated domestic tourism. Media showed the world that hotels, beaches, shopping areas and other tourism attractions have returned to normalcy. These efforts helped rebuild tourism in Bali.

During the last 3 decades, Sri Lanka was also a victim of negative publicity, which was largely related to the country's battle against terrorism. We were perhaps misunderstood, and as a result, misinterpreted on many occasions by international media. This had a direct impact on tourism development in the country. During the 1999-2009 period , global tourism grew by 45% but tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka grew only by 4% from 430,000 to 448,000. But in reality there wasn't a single major incident where a tourist got attacked,

kidnapped, or killed in the country during the whole period Sri Lanka was battling terrorism. While the war was going on in the north and east, the rest of the country functioned normally. Even the occasional terrorist attacks on chosen targets had reduced drastically over the years. But for those watching news elsewhere, Sri Lanka appeared like a complete warzone, as the focus of media was mainly on the trouble areas.

The solution to negative publicity from traditional media actually came from another source of media. In April 2006, the Defence Ministry of Sri Lanka launched a website which shared military information with the public in an unprecedented manner. Users could log in and check the daily progress of government troops which were advancing into enemy territory. The movements and strategies of the enemy were on public display. Very soon this site became the most popular source of information for the public with the number of hits per day exceeding 9 million, almost 50 % the population of the country. The public access to the truth was the best answer. Until the end of the war in May 2009 the website contributed significantly to defeat any false propaganda by providing round the clock information to local and international viewers.

For Sri Lanka, tourism was a stagnant industry for almost 30 years due to the terrorism issue that we were facing. However, now that the war is over, it is time for us to be more focused and develop our tourism industry. We have set ourselves a target of 2.5 Mn tourist arrivals per year within the next 5 years. In order to achieve this we need to maintain about 30 % growth year on year. We want to achieve these numbers while adhering to the best practices of sustainable and responsible tourism. We are highly conscious of the need to protect our natural environment, cultural heritage and the need to distribute the economic benefits of tourism to a larger cross section of the society. As I mentioned earlier we are aware of the

role media can play in assisting us to achieve these development objectives.

Our strategy is twofold. Firstly we focus our efforts towards creating an environment conducive for tourism. During the last 1 ½ years after the war, a lot of infrastructure development, transport solutions, policy changes, introduction of new tourism regulations, introduction of high quality standards, manpower planning for the industry have been initiated. This work will continue for the next 2-3 years. Secondly, we want to encourage foreign journalists to visit the country and experience the ground reality for themselves. We would like them to take a positive message back home and share with their networks. The idea is simple, let the product speak for itself and let the media promote it.

Before I conclude I would seek your permission to say a few words about destination branding in Sri Lanka. Since we are starting more or less a fresh, we have a unique opportunity to build a clear positioning strategy for the country. Our country positioning will revolve around 3 of our actual strengths, starting with authenticity which is inherent in our country with a more than 3000 year old history. The second is the advantage of being compact, with a total landscape of 65,000 square kilometers where you can cover the entire island within a few days. Third, but not last, is the diversity that is unmatched by any other tourism destination. Diversity of our tourism product ranges from pristine beaches like Maldives or Mauritius, ancient heritage sites like Egypt or Greece, rainforests like Congo or Amazon, art & culture like India or Thailand, waterfalls like Zambia or Canada, wildlife like Kenya or South Africa, scenic beauty like Switzerland or Myanmar, gemstones like Madagascar or Burma, spices like India or Indonesia, to colourful festivals like China or India. Sri Lanka is a natural wonder and that's why we call it the wonder of Asia.

Some of you must be visiting Sri Lanka for the first time. Some of you may have visited us in the past. Those who have visited us in the past may agree with a common view that visiting Sri Lanka is a refreshing

experience. We hear this all the time. That's why we have branded the country as "Refreshingly Sri Lanka, the Wonder of Asia".

We hope that media would agree with us and support us. I cannot see any reason why they wouldn't.

Thank you very much !