Defining tasks and creating financial innovations: Challenges of a Swedish local DMO

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Abstract:

The current discourse on what defines the M in DMO, destination *management* or *marketing* organization, is not characterized by consensus. Industry practitioners have even proposed that DMOs will cease to exist or at least that there is something profoundly wrong with their business model. Furthermore, funding resources of DMOs are scarce and financial innovations are needed. This paper explores what two types of destination stakeholders, members and destination leisure property owners, perceive as important tasks for the local DMO, their views about the DMO as well as attitude towards funding. Based on previous research on DMO tasks and funding two empirical studies of DMO members as well as leisure property owners at the leading mountain destination of Åre, Sweden are implemented as web based surveys. The results support the proposed difficulties of identifying who is the customer of the DMO and hence how to best develop a sustainable financing model.

Introduction

The current discourse on what defines the M in DMO, destination *management* or *marketing* organization, is not characterized by consensus. Pike and Page (2014) argue that the term management implies control which most DMOs do not have in terms of mandate or resources. Pike and Page (2014) also claim that using destination management organizations as a generic term confuses the need for management with the mostly marketing function they actually undertake (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013). Management issues are not the responsibility of destination marketers but under the jurisdiction of government departments and ministries, municipalities, conservation groups, developers, and private sector umbrella lobbying organizations.

There is not only disagreement on the definitions and main tasks of DMOs among academics. Industry practitioners have even proposed that DMOs will cease to exist (Thompson, 2013) or at least that there is something profoundly wrong with their business model (Gonzales, 2013). The arguments are based on major changes in the market place such as; the focus on direct relationships controlled by the consumer (with significant impacts on destinations who do not own the product), the DMO rationale of collective brand building is being disrupted by global players such as Google and Facebook who provide effective marketing with clear ROIs even for small businesses, and tourists want and expect more information than a DMO can provide facing abundant technological solutions to customers for the provision of information (Thompson, 2013). Gonzales (2013) further propose 5 disruptors; the collaborative economy or the peer-to-peer movement, UGC (user generated content) and social platforms, the dominance of online travel agencies in the distribution system, growth in use of mobile technology, and ambiguity about who is the client (the visitor, the member, the politician, the locals, etcetera) which is closely linked to where the DMO funding is raised and with this inherent risks of dissatisfying the visitor (Gonzales, 2013).

DMOs exist in many shapes and sizes with a variety of organizational structure and financing models. In Sweden we have in recent years seen a development towards less governmental, especially on regional and local levels, involvement and funding and more private stakeholder initiatives. Unlike many other countries, in Sweden there is no possibility to implement a local tax for tourism. Therefore, there is a great need to find alternative sustainable financing solutions and efficient organization of DMO tasks that accommodate various stakeholder needs.

Laesser and Beritelli (2013) suggest that we should view destinations as network structures and that there is a need for knowledge on how to deal with different stakeholder logics or rationales and to explore the awareness of stakeholders (including residents) to what extent they perceive that they are part of a system, a destination system. Also, from a practical perspective funding resources of DMOs are scarce and financial innovations are needed (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013) or there is a risk that non efficient and less effective DMO models will impede increased competitiveness.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what two types of destination stakeholders, members and destination leisure property owners, perceive as important tasks for the local DMO, their views about the DMO as well as attitude towards funding.

Literature review

Destinations are systems of organizations and businesses (private and public), activities and attractions that collectively attract visitors and aim to satisfy their needs (Laws, 1991). Destinations are the place where tourism takes place (Leiper, 1979) and have become the biggest brands in the travel industry (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2002). A recently published paper which summarized the consensus of the latest St Gallen conference on Advances in Destination Management recognizes that, although the general consensus was to agree to disagree on the definition per se, destinations are "geographic entities; a cluster or (latent) network of suppliers; or additionally, as a network of suppliers activated by visitors' demands"…"they are productive social systems with specific business aims and non-business related goals" (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013).

Destination organizations today are increasingly recognized as not only marketing organizations but also other management activities are included (Presenza, Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005) and, at least in Sweden, there is a tendency towards working on less informal network based collaboration into more corporate organizational structures (Bohlin & Elbe, 2007). Pike and Page (2014) similarly state that a large number of nations, states and cities now fund (or at least support; authors comment) a destination marketing (or management; authors comment) organization as the main vehicle to compete and attract visitors. Researchers have proposed that the roles and tasks of DMOs' are marketing (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) or comprehensive marketing such as product, pricing, promotion and distribution (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013), coordinating destination stakeholders (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Presenza et al., 2005), lobbying (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013), formulating strategies, representing stakeholders' interests, and developing products (Heath & Wall, 1992), planning (Laesse & Beritelli, 2013) and sustainable resource planning (Gill & Williams, 1994) evaluation and monitoring of quality (Kozak, 2002; Müller & Berger, 2012), management of resources, internal marketing, training and research (Sainaghi, 2006), service coordination (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013). In a large study of Swedish mountain tourism destinations, Bodén and Rosenberg (2004) suggest that DMOs have moved from being focused on destination services to attracting guests, develop the destination and its offerings as well as strategic leadership.

Volgger and Pechlaner (2014) state that there has been little attention by researchers to the relationship between DMO success and destination success as well as the major success determinants of effective DMOs. Research has suggested, but not fully validated, that DMO success is determined by networking capabilities, transparency of evidence of performance, resource endowment, and professionalism in operational work, as well as power and acceptance (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014). Also, since a

DMO's budget is closely linked to its core tasks, members as well as other destination stakeholders should have a thorough understanding of why certain tasks are more effectively fulfilled by the local DMO (Dredge, 2006).

Additionally, Bieger, Beritelli and Laesser (2009) underline the importance of funding and resources for fulfilling the tasks of the DMO. There is, however, a lack of literature on design principles and the implementation of financing models for local DMOs that are financially sustainable as well as perceived as fair and agreed by the destination community (Bernet & Bieger, 1999; Bieger, 2001; Torluccio, 2006).

Bieger, (2005) propose that there are three main sources of funding for a DMO; public, commercial and membership fees. Bodén and Fuchs (2009) found that the financing principles of local DMOs in Sweden do not meet new management challenges. Results of case studies of three mountain destinations in Sweden show that there are four main reasons to revise current principles of the fee-based funding of the local DMO, a) firms do not contribute financially with a reasonable share according to their economic capability, b) DMO members show weak confidence in the present financing approach, thus, provoking free-rider problems, c) the economic benefit from DMO services is not recognized by individual firms, and d) turnover and share of tourist spending is not considered as an appropriate allocation key for the calculation of fees since it is not obviously linked to the level of profitability. Furthermore, a new principle should be based on sustainability, fairness, simplicity and transparency as well as business and destination benefits. In Sweden, as opposed to in many other countries in Europe, there are no possibilities to finance DMOs based on a local overnight tax or alcohol tax and also no basis for local taxation of second-home owners. Therefore changes in the fee-based funding principles for businesses in a destination can, and perhaps should, also be complemented with the introduction of a guest fee similar to kurtaxe or overnight fees that exist in other countries.

Methodology

Empirical data for this study was collected at the leading Scandinavian mountain destination of Åre, in the north of Sweden (accessible by train, air, and car). Tourism is a major industry in the region where Åre is located and play a major role for local and regional wealth generation. The DMO of Åre, Åre Destination AB, is privately owned and has approximately 70 share holders (ski area operator, hotels, retail and business associations) and approximately 250 members. The current DMO was established in 2007 based on the previous association of Åre businesses which was established in 2000. Since 2000 the local municipality, the business association and subsequent DMO, together with the main stakeholder of Skistar (Ski area operator), have collaborated on an ambitious long term vision and plan for the development and growth of the destination.

Total membership fees per year for Åre Destination AB is approximately 660 000 Euro. The marketing budget for the destination, DMO and individual stakeholders, is roughly 4.5 Euro in total. The destination of Åre has approximately 3000 inhabitants, 770 000 commercial overnights per year (85% in winter but with strong growth in non-shoulder seasons), an estimated total of 1.5 million overnights per year, 1 million ski days, 27% international visitors, and offers all-year around tourist experiences. Also, it is estimated that more than half of the total number of beds at the destination is owned by leisure property owners and these may be used commercially (for rent) or not. Destination growth can be exemplified by an increase by 54% in number of businesses in the municipality as a whole in the last ten years, increasing number of inhabitants, and an increase in local tax revenue of 34% between 2004-2010.

The first step of this research was conducted through focus group interviews with a total of 11 members of the DMO as well as 28 leisure property owners (cabin/cottage, apartment). The purpose was to explore the topics of destination attributes, destination attractiveness and competitiveness, destination management and DMO operations and funding, destination innovation and development, significant changes and future trends and market position, in order to develop a survey for the study. During the summer, fall and winter of 2013/2014, 2 web surveys were implemented. The response rate for the web survey among DMO members, distributed through e-mails with 2 reminders, was 26%, in total 85 responses. Survey items covered topics such as trends and innovation in tourism non-winter season, awareness and management of the DMO as well as benefits from DMO operations.

Since there is no official record of leisure property owners at the destination, the web survey for leisure property owners was distributed through e-mails, 330 in total, available from contact records at the DMO, with 2 reminders. This was complemented with snow-ball sampling via advertising of a link to the survey in the original e-mail as well as on the website of Skistar where leisure property owners with rental agreements can review their property booking settings and actual bookings. The survey is still on-going but by 31st of December 2013 the number of responses was 187 on which the presentation of preliminary results in this paper is based. The topics consisted of ownership profile, use of property in Åre, destination attractiveness, importance of destination characteristics, satisfaction with destination offers, management of destination, engagement with DMO and need for information, membership and funding of DMO.

The survey items in both surveys were measured with multiple-choice questions as well as statements with level of agreement on a likert-type scale (1-7) and open ended questions.

Results and discussion

Results DMO members

As seen from table 1 the descriptive results of the DMO member survey show that a majority of respondents have an optimistic outlook on their businesses.

Statement/Agreement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean
Profitability will increase next year	8%	1%	21%	27%	15%	17%	11%	4.3
Sales will increase next year	8%	4%	16%	23%	15%	20%	15%	4.5
My business has unused capacity	7%	19%	5%	10%	11%	12%	45%	5.3
My business will invest in the next 3 years	8%	12%	11%	16%	20%	9%	23%	4.5
Investments and development at the destination is critical for my business	11%	3%	23%	7%	16%	21%	20%	4.6
Competition for my business will increase in the next 3 years/%111%	7%	11%	12%	20%	31%	11%	9%	4.3
My industry will grow in the next 3 years	5%	9%	26%	15%	27%	12%	5%	4.1

Note: 1= Do not agree, 7= Fully agree

Table 1: Future outlook

92% of the respondents agree that there should be a DMO with similar organizational structure and ownership as today. Most members are aware of what the DMO does (mean 5.2) and table 2 shows existing and preferred tasks. The results indicate that there is only one area where there is a high level of agreement on what the DMO currently does and should do and that is strategic management, followed by marketing towards the MICE segment.

DMO task	Current	Preferred
To be a sounding board for members	52%	64%
To market the destination in MICE segment	**80%**	**71%**
To market the destination in leisure segment	66%	**71%**
Strategic development, vision and planning with municipality	**84%**	**88%**
Development projects which no single business can handle	70%	66%
Member benefits/discounts	53%	27%
Organize training	**80%**	58%
Product development for new travel motives	41%	20%
Digital distribution/booking	34%	34%
Sales of products	28%	19%
Host destination web site & social media	**89%**	**69%**
Operate tourist information centre	39%	37%
Marketing partnerships	59%	39%
Represent tourism with other stakeholders (e.g. municipality)	78%	**75%**
Employ village maintenance host	**81%**	66%
Contracts with land owners	69%	**69%**
Develop and operate tracks & trails	58%	47%

Note: Figures in bold represent the top 5 tasks (multiple choice question).

Table 2: DMO tasks

Table 3 shows the results for the perceived benefits and satisfaction by members for the tasks performed by the DMO. The most significant benefit corresponds to the current and preferred task by the DMO, namely strategic management. In general, means appear to be low since only 2 tasks reach a mean satisfaction above 4.5, represent tourism with other stakeholders and employ village maintenance host. The general mean for member satisfaction with DMO performance is 4.5.

DMO benefits & satisfaction	Benefits (mean)	Satisfaction (mean)
To be a sounding board for members	3.1	3.4
To market the destination in MICE segment	4.3	4.4
To market the destination in leisure segment	**4.7**	4.1
Strategic development, vision and planning with municipality	**5.0**	4.4
Development projects which no single business can handle	**4.6**	3.9
Member benefits/discounts	2.5	3.4
Organize training	3.8	4.2
Product development for new travel motives	3.0	3.5
Digital distribution/booking	3.0	2.7
Sales of products	3.1	3.0
Host destination web site & social media	**4.7**	4.4
Operate tourist information centre	4.0	3.8
Marketing partnerships	2.7	3.2
Represent tourism with other stakeholders (e.g. municipality)	**4.7**	**4.6**
Employ village maintenance host	4.3	**4.6**
Contracts with land owners	3.9	3.8
Develop and operate tracks & trails	3.9	4.3

Note: Figures in bold represent means above 4.5 (1=do not agree, 7=fully agree).

Table 3: DMO tasks

78% of the respondents intend to remain members of the DMO in the coming 3 years. However, the results show a low level of involvement by the members (mean 3.6, to what extent do you feel involved in the main business of the DMO). Yet, a higher mean (5.2) is shown for likelihood of recommending others to remain or become members of the DMO hence indicating some satisfaction with DMO performance. The main motives to be a member are shown in table 4.

Membership motive	Mean
Collaboration between businesses is important for destination attractiveness	6.2
Businesses must work together towards visions and goals	**6.3**
I want to collaborate with other businesses	4.7
Being a member is my contribution to destination development	6.0
I'm a member because I have always been a member	2.7
I feel forced to be a member	1.9

Note: Figures in bold represent highest mean (1=do not agree, 7=fully agree).

Table 4: Membership motive

In the comments about current destination weaknesses one respondent commented and referred to the lack of funding for municipal responsibilities and the lack of consensus about future developments. Many other comments also concern the responsibilities and weaknesses at the destination concerning various common goods and public locations.

”There is not enough consensus about what Åres future should look like. The municipality will have problems in running the municipal responsibilities because of a small tax base in relation to the large number of guests. Many simply trust their gut feeling instead of facts when making investments.”

Results also show that 74% are positive towards the introduction of an overnight fee (kurtaxe) and that these new financial resources should be used for improving the quality of public space, investments in public space and trails, marketing of the non-winter season, and funding local transportation. This fee should be visible to the visitor. Most comments seem to support the need for this and that it is the only way to improve global competitiveness. However, some comments state that it might be difficult for the DMO to implement, or concerns about customer perceptions of price levels, and that the system needs to be perceived as fair and beneficial.

> *“It works in the Alps and it’s time for Åre. We can show the tourists that their small kurtaxe fee makes a difference. For example can the kurtaxe be used to provide free lift trips, discounts on activities, improvements of trails, etc.”*
>
> *“I’m against all types of fees that are supposed to be shared equally in some way but where now one agrees on how and that the money mostly ends up in a black-hole where it is stated that it benefits everyone. Transparency is impossible today. Seems like a congestion charge”*

Results leisure property owners

So far, little knowledge exists about leisure property owners at the destination in terms of number, profile, usage, perceptions and motivation, management and funding as well as perceptions about the role of leisure property owners as destination stakeholders.

The respondents have owned a leisure property in Åre on average 7 years (median, min 1, max 34). The majority (53%) own leisure property also elsewhere in or outside Sweden. Respondents do not have plans to become permanent residents in their property (77%) or sell their property (64%). The property is mostly used by the owners and their family and 60% of the respondents let their property either through a commercial agent or through private contacts. Owners spend 23 days (median) in Åre every year. Furthermore, the property is mostly used, by the owners themselves or others, during winter season (median 10 weeks) compared to during the non-winter season (median 3 weeks) which corresponds to the profile of destination visitation in general. These results also indicate that a large volume of unused accommodation capacity exists at the destination. The majority of respondents (61%) would like to spend more time at the destination and the most important reasons for them to do that is more available leisure time (4.7), the availability of more and cheaper transportation (mean 4.6), and improvements of quality of the physical environment in Åre (mean 4.4).

The results show that the mean satisfaction is 4.5 for the financial performance of the investment in leisure property at the destination. Respondents do not seem to be worried about a down-turn in the financial performance of their property investment (mean 2.7). However, the financial aspect of owning a leisure property is not important (mean 5.1, 1=financial aspect most important, 7=financial aspect *not* important).

In table 5 the results show that the municipality and the DMO is perceived by the leisure property owners to have the most central roles in management of the destination.

Destination management	**Mean**
The municipality has a central role in the management of the destination	**5.4**
The main lift operator has a central role in the management of the destination	5.2
The DMO has a central role in the management of the destination	**5.4**
The DMO including leisure property owners have a central role in management of the destination	4.6
The DMO together with leisure property owners and the municipality have a central role in the management of the destination	5.0
The DMO together with the municipality, the main lift operator, leisure property owners should manage the destination	5.0
There is no need for management of the destination	1.4

Table 5: Destination management

Regarding the involvement by leisure property owners in development of the destination the results shown in table 6 show generally low means with only 1 item above 5.0. Respondents think that there should be an opportunity for these stakeholders to be members of a destination management organization although they are not currently involved. However, there is weak support regarding their financial contribution to destination development. The open comments indicate that in order to contribute financially they would like to be actively involved and have good opportunities to communicate ideas and feedback. Also, respondents state that their involvement and contribution should give them something tangible or concrete evidence of destination effects in return. The mean amount that respondents are willing to pay for a membership is 67 Euro/year (median 50 Euros, max 500 Euros).

Involvement	**Mean**
There should be an opportunity for leisure property owners to be members of a development management organization	4.9
Currently I'm actively involved in issues of destination development in Åre	2.3
It is important to be updated on the developments in Åre	**5.3**
I am updated on what is going on in the development of Åre	4.2
It is important to have the possibility to communicate ideas and comments about destination development	4.6
Today there is a possiblity to communicate ideas and comments about destination developement	3.3
I would consider being actively involved in destination development in Åre	3.5
I would consider being a member of an organization to support the development of the destination	4.2
Leisure property owners should contribute to the development of Åre by being members of a destination organization	4.0
Leisure property owners should contribute financially to destination development (e.g. attractions, event, quality improvement, marketing)	2.8
Leisure property owners should contribute financially to the management and maintenance of the destination (e.g. public areas, sanitation/cleaning, natural area protection)	2.8
If I'm offered the opportunity within 1-2 years to be actively involved in destination development I would be interested	3.3
If I'm offered the opportunity within 1-2 years to support destination development by being member of an organization I would be interested	3.7

Table 6: Leisure property owner's perceptions about involvement in destination development

In table 7 the results for what tasks the DMO should operate in order to motivate leisure property owners to become members is presented. The most important task for DMOs is marketing Åre to an international market. However, in general the results show very low mean values which can perhaps be attributed to the fact that leisure property owners do not necessarily perceive themselves as destination stakeholders and hence it is difficult to identify the benefits they would prefer in order to become members of a DMO.

DMO tasks	Mean	
Market Åre to international segments	**2.1**	
Development of products and experiences for all Åre segments	1.8	
Responsible for the experience of public places together with the municipality	1.9	
Responsibility for strategic sustainable development (e.g. natural area protection)	1.8	
Support enthusiasts who engage in development of the local society (e.g. culture, sports, education)	2.0	
Training to support a more welcoming and service oriented Åre	1.9	
Collect, summarize and distribute information about what is happening in Åre	1.9	
Provide reports about the development and impact of tourism	1.7	
Organize networking opportunities to meet locals	2.0	
Organize networking opportunities to meet other leisure property owners in Åre	1.9	
Organize business networking opportunities	1.9	
Organize networking opportunities to meet business owners in Åre	1.8	
Invitations to VIP events in association to major sport events etc	2.0	
Offer opportunities to be actively involved in development projects to improve destination attractiveness	1.9	
Offer discounts in local shops	1.9	
Offer discounts in local restaurants	1.9	
Offer discounts on commercial accomodation bookings	1.7	
Offer discounts on conference bookings	1.7	
Offer discounts from local trade	1.9	

Conclusions and implications

The studies presented here show explorative findings concerning the main tasks and views on DMO funding by members of a local DMO and leisure property owners at the destination of Åre, Sweden. From a theoretical perspective results further inform the discourse on whether DMOs focus on management or marketing and our understanding of effective DMOs which then support destination competitiveness and success. Furthermore, the results provide input for innovation in financing models for DMOs as well as attitudes and views on management and funding.

Both stakeholder groups agree that there should be a DMO although the members have a more clear view on the tasks than the leisure property owners. The latter therefore seem not to understand the effectiveness of collective tasks by a DMO (Dredge, 2006). Furthermore, although the most significant benefit as well as current and preferred DMO tasks as perceived by the members is clearly to focus on strategic development, the results also show that they have different ideas about what the focus of DMO tasks is and should be. Additionally, lack of clarity in terms of a marketing or management focus of the DMO may explain the low mean values of benefits and satisfaction with DMO tasks from the member perspective as well as the low level of involvement.

Leisure property owners do not seem to perceive themselves as part of the destination system (Laesser and Beritelli, 2013). Destination management is perceived to be the responsibility of the DMO and the municipality and respondents are not currently involved in destination development issues. However, on the one hand the results indicate that leisure property owners would like to be actively involved with the DMO although not by financial contributions, and on the other hand they have no clear view on how the DMO can benefit them.

The majority of DMO members support the introduction of a new financing model (overnight fee) to be used mostly for improving public space and marketing. However, similarly to the literature (Bernet & Bieger, 1999; Bieger, 2001; Bodén & Fuchs, 2009; Torluccio, 2006) they point out some challenges of implementation such as how customers will perceive the fee and how it benefits the members.

In conclusion, the results of these two studies support the proposed difficulties from an industry perspective to identify who is the customer of the DMO and hence how to best develop a sustainable financing model. From a practical point of view it can be considered whether a separation of management and marketing tasks in a destination into 2 different organizations can solve some of these problems. The management tasks are then focused around maximizing guest satisfaction and should therefore be funded by various types of visitors (e.g. an overnight fee) with a clear benefit supporting their financial contribution towards strategic destination development (e.g. new attractions, improved quality of tourism offers in public space, improved accessibility to destination offers). The marketing tasks are instead focused on maximizing business profitability through destination branding and optimization of marketing activities aimed at market growth.

The social implications of these studies are perhaps most evidently linked to the destination as a system of tourism activities with a variety of aims and goals by different stakeholders. Subsequent solutions of the management and marketing tasks of a destination need to clearly focus on who is the customer in order to minimize goal conflicts, the need for constant compromising, and lack of effectively executing DMO tasks to increase global competitiveness and sustainability.

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