

The Marketing of Tourism in English: How the Capital City of Vietnam, Hanoi is Promoted on the Internet

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Introduction

Tourism is now a global economic and social activity and English is the dominant international language in the tourist industry. The internet is a new and powerful tool which now permeates all aspects of tourism from initial information gathering to advanced bookings and reservations of airline flights, hotels and package tours.

In this article we will use a case study of Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam to discuss some general marketing issues and then focus on the way in which Hanoi is advertised and promoted in English particularly on the internet. We will attempt to compare Hanoi with some of the cities it has to compete with in the ASEAN region and try to reach some conclusions on how Hanoi's cultural tourism marketing efforts using the English language could be improved.

Vietnam is a country which has undergone substantial economic growth since the early 1990s after a lengthy period of colonialism, war and communist central planning. The government has now chosen to engage enthusiastically with the global market economy and part of this process has been the opening up of the tourism sector. As a result, the number of international tourist arrivals in Vietnam increased from 1,300,000 in 1995 to almost 3,000,000 in 2004. In the case of Hanoi the figures grew from 390,000 in 1997 to 700,000 in 2001. (Hanoi People's Committee 2002).

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Changes in Marketing in the Modern World

Modern marketing theory has developed considerably in recent years. According to Blythe, the marketing concept has gone through five different incarnations – product orientation, sales orientation, consumer orientation, societal marketing and relationship marketing. (Blythe 2001 p.3). The product and sales orientation phases were essentially about persuading customers to buy a product. Consumer, societal and relationship marketing are more about building up life-long relationships with consumers and demonstrating social responsibility. These seem to be very important ideas when we are analysing cultural tourism. After all, one of the most important signifiers of a successful tourism marketing campaign is the proportion of tourists who return for a second or subsequent visits. This is currently very low in the case of Vietnam and Hanoi and is one of the urgent marketing issues that need to be addressed.

The theme of the first World Tourism Marketing Summit in 2004 was the 'Power of Marketing'. The Executive Panel of the Summit spelt out the importance of marketing in their opening statement:

'Marketing, in its many guises, is the strongest means we have to communicate with our target consumer. By fine-tuning our approach and building an intricate understanding of the attitudes and preferences of our customer, we can make even more of this powerful tool. As a tool, marketing spans the promotion and launch of a product or destination to the evaluation and analysis at the other end of the commercial process – measuring the performance to see if the optimum has been achieved from the financial resources available. Research, performance measurement, insurance, hospitality, media and branding all come into play. So exactly what methods are most effective in maximising marketing impact? How can we tailor these methods to fit specific needs?' (WTMS 2004).

Tourism is now an extremely competitive industry and anything that can give a destination an edge over its rivals is vital. In the 21st century good marketing is one of the factors that can give a place an advantage. Tourism is also an industry that is subjected to constant change, not least because it is very sensitive to many different types of international events. The three main threats in recent years have been terrorism, disease and natural disasters. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, the spread of SARS and avian flu in several Asian countries since 2003 and the massive Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 were real setbacks for the world tourism industry. At the same time, tourism market segments continue to evolve reflecting demographic and lifestyle changes. For example the growth of senior citizen or 'grey tourism' and the expansion of the budget youth traveller or 'backpacker' market. Tourism destinations, be they countries, cities, resorts or individual attractions need to be aware of these changes and know how to respond to them.

Reflecting on the above changes, Shaw and Williams argue that the tourism industry is essentially in a state of flux:

'Mass tourism reflects one of the most intriguing dilemmas for tourism analysts – the question of whether there has been a shift in the regime of accumulation in tourism, from Fordist mass production and consumption to more individualized and flexible post-Fordist forms. The view expressed in this book is that the demise of mass tourism is exaggerated, and that anyway it is more useful to think of the coexistence of different regimes of accumulation or the 'tourism industry polyglot' (Shaw and Williams 2002 p.270)

If the tourism industry is constantly changing, marketing must become more sophisticated. These days marketing is much more than

advertising and selling. It requires a great deal of research into market segments as well as involvement in product or service development. Marketing is also now very closely tied to customer satisfaction. Ensuring customer satisfaction in a service industry such as tourism poses its own special difficulties and challenges as outlined by Weaver and Lawton who suggest that the very nature of tourism as a service is very different to a manufactured product. (2000).

A key issue in tourism is that the main services provided are recreational services and hospitality. These are intangible products which makes it very difficult for customers to compare different offerings. Mahoney and Warnell suggest that it is very important to have a detailed marketing plan to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing. (Mahoney and Warnell 2002). The plan should include an assessment of the market environment, a community profile of resources available, market identification, marketing objectives for each segment, marketing strategies, an implementation plan, the marketing budget and a method for evaluation and change.

A marketing plan provides a framework for intensive marketing efforts. It is also a good place from which to start our discussion of tourism marketing in Hanoi. However, our research on cultural tourism in Hanoi casts doubt on whether most of the tourism agencies involved in marketing Hanoi's tourism products have such a detailed marketing plan.

Internet Marketing in English

Internet marketing in English by a variety of different agencies in Hanoi will now be analysed and the situation in Hanoi will be compared with other cities in the ASEAN region.

Marketing by Government Agencies

It is probably best to start with national government and local government agencies. The national body responsible for marketing tourism in Vietnam is the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT). It is somewhat surprising to discover that (according to the WTMS website) neither VNAT nor any representatives of the Vietnamese government or the Hanoi local government attended the first ever World Tourism Marketing Summit held in November 2004. This is despite the fact that the summit was held in China, Vietnam's closest and most important neighbour. In addition, the summit was attended by all of Vietnam's tourism competitors in the region including Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. Finally, tourism marketing must have been very much in the minds of Hanoi's tourism administrators when they were involved in a major marketing campaign of their own – the celebration of Hanoi's 990 Anniversary in 2000.

However, VNAT is the first to admit the shortcomings of its marketing efforts. It does not even have a marketing department. Here is a comment from one of its Marketing Executives:

'There is still a lack of market research and market planning due to shortage of experts and marketing budget. There are no representative offices of VNAT in major generating markets and still lack of update information for the market orientation and market entry' (Nguyen 2001).

One way to assess VNAT's marketing strategy is to visit the organisation's website - and try to assess the impact on the international visitor who is thinking of visiting Hanoi. The website is available in five languages – Vietnamese, English, French, Japanese and Chinese. This is useful and makes Vietnam accessible to its main tourist markets

especially China. The section on Hanoi is easily available by searching the site by location. This section contains a long list of individual cultural tourism attractions in Hanoi focussing strongly on temples and festivals. This is good and plenty of detail is provided. However, what is lacking is any attempt to project a positive 'place image' of Hanoi. There is no general discussion of the fascinating street life and general ambience of the city. This seems to be a major marketing opportunity missed. Contrast the VNAT website with the Thai government's official tourism website. This is the description of Bangkok given on that site:

'Bangkok is one of Asia's most cosmopolitan cities. Created as the Thai capital in 1782 by the first monarch of the present Chakri dynasty, Bangkok is a national treasure house and Thailand's spiritual, cultural, political, commercial, educational and diplomatic centre.

Bangkok exceeds 1,500 square kilometres in area and is home to one-tenth of the country's population. Major tourist attractions include glittering Buddhist temples, palaces, timeless "*Venice of the East*" canal and river scenes, classical dance extravaganzas, and numerous shopping centres'. (www.tourismthailand.org 2005)

The seductive use of phraseology such as 'national treasure house', 'glittering Buddhist temples' and 'classical dance extravaganzas' immediately grab the potential tourist's attention and make her or him feel that Bangkok must be a wonderful place to visit. This is in total contrast to any attempt by VNAT to evoke romantic and intriguing images of Hanoi.

VNAT's printed guide book does slightly better. (VNAT 2000). Several pages describe the climate, the rivers, the transport system and the different districts. However, it is very dry and reads more like a school geography text book than a modern, exciting tourist guide. Whilst the

provision of basic information is an important part of marketing of a tourist destination, something is also needed which grabs the reader's attention. In his discussion of how to determine the objectives of tourism marketing messages, Holloway observes:

'Consumers should be reached at three different levels by the communications process – at a cognitive level, consumers must be made aware of the product and understand what it can do for them, at an affective level, consumers must be made to respond emotionally to the message, to believe it and to be in sympathy with it, and at a behavioural level, the message must make consumers act on what they have learned; in short consumers must be motivated to buy the product' (Holloway 2004 p.201).

It seems that VNAT may be failing at what Holloway calls the 'affective level'. Tourism customers must be made to engage emotionally with the 'Hanoi experience'. Otherwise they may decide to go to Bangkok instead. Despite its shortcomings, VNAT did have some success with its general 'millenium' campaign when it used the slogan 'Vietnam: Destination for the New Millenium'. However, this focussed on the whole of Vietnam and not on Hanoi in particular. Also, unfortunately, this slogan is still being used despite the fact that the millennium is six years old.

Hanoitourism is a state-owned company which promotes and organises tourism in Vietnam. However, an examination of the company's website indicates that, despite the name, there is not a particular focus on Hanoi. (www.hanoitourism.com.vn). Instead Hanoitourism focuses on organising tours for different market segments. To find out more about how the city government markets tourism we have to go to the new Hanoi city government website which was inaugurated in 2004. (www.hanoi.gov.vn). This site is called the 'Hanoi Portal' and carries the heading 'Hanoi People's

Committee'. Languages are available in Vietnamese and English. There is no Chinese version which seems unfortunate as Chinese visitors are the largest group of foreign tourists visiting Vietnam and Hanoi. The site is very new and the reader can experience many technical problems in using it. The English is also poor and not up to international standards. This is unfortunate because modern internet marketing seeks to reach a wide international audience. It cannot be particularly expensive to engage the services of a proficient native-speaker of English to proof-read a vital 'place image' website such as this.

On the left-hand side of the Hanoi Portal website is a section entitled 'Visiting Hanoi'. This takes the reader to the following sub-headings:

Beauty Spots And Relics In Hanoi

- Distinotive beauty spots and historical relics
- Architecture of Ha Noi
- Religious Beliefs Works
- Museum and Monumental House
- Work of Cultures

Hanoi Tourism routes

- Tourism Potential
- Tourism Routes
- Sight-Seeing
- Contact Address

Some of these sections contain useful, factual information, but, as with the VNAT site, there is no attempt to engage the emotions of the potential tourist. They are rather dry and sterile and the reader is left without a particularly strong sense of excitement about the city. There are also some spelling and grammatical mistakes such as 'Distinotive beauty' and 'Work of Cultures'.

The 'Hanoi Portal' is an attempt to market Hanoi to the world in English especially for the purposes of attracting foreign investment and promoting tourism. The weaknesses of the portal could be blamed on the fact that Vietnam is a poor country which is only just emerging into the modern world and the market economy. However, this excuse may not be sufficient. Producing a good website in good English is not so expensive and there are plenty of excellent English speakers amongst the Vietnamese population who could advise the Hanoi government. It may be that Vietnam and Hanoi are not yet 'open' enough to take advantage of the full range of international marketing and promotion skills which are available.

A good contrast with the 'Hanoi Portal' is the website of the government of Kuala Lumpur, one of Hanoi's key competitors in the region. (www.kualalumpur.gov.my). This website is very professionally produced and attractive. It also uses evocative language which makes the investor or tourist want to go there. For example:

'Better known as KL to the locals, the city is a heady mix of history and culture intertwined with mushrooming skyscrapers and office towers. Kuala Lumpur is the best example of a city that has managed to preserve the best of its cultural heritage and combine it with modern conveniences to offer a wholly unique experience to visitors.'

Another government website which is somewhat disappointing is Vietnamtourism. The front page of this website is quite well produced and includes quotations from many foreign guidebooks. However, the page on Hanoi is missing altogether, probably due to a technical problem. (www.vietnamtourism.com.vn)

The above problems will have to be overcome, because, as people like

Kotler have pointed out, 'place marketing' is of vital importance in the modern world. (Kotler 2001). Hanoi faces fierce competition not only from KL but from other capital cities such Singapore, Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila. Newer destinations are also emerging which are located in smaller and poorer countries than Vietnam. For example, Phnom Penh in Cambodia. The website of the city government of Phnom Penh certainly makes an attempt to excite the potential visitor as follows:

'A mixture of Asian exotica, the famous Cambodian hospitality awaits the visitors to the capital of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Situated at the confluence of three great rivers the 'four arms' of the Mekong, Tonle Sap and Bassac forming the "four arms" right in front of the Royal Palace Phnom Penh is the commercial, political and cultural hubs of the Kingdom and is home to over one million of the country's estimated 11.4 million people. It is also the gateway to an exotic land...the world heritage site, the largest religious complex in the world, the temples of Angkor in the west, the beaches of the southern coast and the ethnic minorities of the north-eastern provinces.' (www.phnompenh.gov.kh)

It seems that the government of Vietnam and its tourism arm, VNAT and the city government of Hanoi will have to make greater efforts in the marketing of Hanoi in the future. In the modern world, a city's website will undoubtedly be the first place that a potential investor or tourist will look for information. It is therefore essential that these sites are of the highest professional quality. Hanoi has many cultural tourism treasures, so it should not be hard to present them in an attractive way. In addition all the above competitor cities use the word 'Welcome' prominently on the first page of their websites. Surely it would not be difficult for the Hanoi website to offer a similar warm message to those who look at it?

Hanoi's 990th Anniversary in 2000: A Marketing Opportunity

Despite the problems associated with their website promotions, Government agencies have made one serious and successful attempt to market Hanoi to a wider world in recent years. This was on the occasion of the 990th anniversary of the founding of Hanoi as Thang Long in 1010. The government produced a website devoted to this event. (www.mofa.gov.vn). The website is entitled '990 Years of Thang Long – Hanoi' . It contains a lot of useful information, but, again, the English is poor which is off-putting for the foreign reader. For example:

'In September this autumn Hanoi looks more beautiful and attractive. Not only do tourists from afar, but also its inhabitants find themselves thrilling. It is easy to understand: we are going to live in a historical atmosphere of the great events in the past - the 55th birth anniversary of the August Revolution and the 990th founding anniversary of the capital of Hanoi. In order to mark this 990th anniversary (early in October, 2000) a lot of programmes have been under preparation to reflect the main events of the ancient capital of Thang Long nearly one millennium ago.'

However, the 990th anniversary of Hanoi was an important event and it occurred at a time when the city was in the process of embracing the market economy. The mayors of various cities around the world were invited to attend the celebrations and a week of cultural events was held in October 2000. The city government also made considerable attempts to clean up the city, build new pavements and make the environment more attractive. All of this was laudable and tourist arrivals increased substantially, but after the end of the year 2000, it is reasonable to suggest that more could have been made of this major marketing opportunity. Reading the material produced by the government on that important occasion, one gets the sense that there was no real attempt to

sell and market Hanoi as an interesting and exciting tourist destination. It appears that those responsible for publicising the event may not have had a deep knowledge of modern marketing techniques. Rather they sold the anniversary as a unique event and in this respect, it was successful.

According to the Vietnamese government, Hanoi has established useful contacts with many cities in the world:

‘Hanoi has so far established its relation of friendship and co-operation with 25 capitals and major cities in the world such as Ile-de-France in the fields of environment and urban management, cultural heritage, education and training; Tokyo in the fields of training urban managers and trainees for the year 2000; Brussels (Belgium) and Toulouse (France) in the areas of improving the living conditions in the country and the preservation and rehabilitation of the historical centre of Hanoi Capital. In addition to them Hanoi has a lot of projects of cooperation with such capitals as Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Varsawa and La Habana. For the time being Hanoi is working out a number of pre-feasible projects about the movement against drugs for aid, about the reception of a scheme on the anti-blind programme in suburban districts financed by the CAMA organization in the USA, about the anti-HIV and AID project financed by the US Board on Population.’(www.mofa.gov.vn)

The success of the 990th anniversary and these links with sister cities around the world are real achievements and they will help to provide a firm foundation for the development of Hanoi as a city connected to the rest of the world in the age of globalisation. However, in the future, it is important that far better marketing techniques are used to spearhead these efforts.

Marketing by Private Agencies

There are a large number of private agencies involved in the marketing of cultural tourism in Hanoi. They include domestic and foreign companies, travel agents, guidebook publishers and media such as television and radio. We have selected three guidebooks in English as a sample of the type of marketing approach they take when attempting to promote Hanoi to a wider audience. The two foreign books are very widely used by Western tourists visiting places such as Vietnam. They are the Lonely Planet and the Rough Guide. The local publication comes from VNAT and represents the government view.

Unlike the official government websites, foreign guidebooks do not shirk from attempting to give general evocative impressions of Hanoi. The Lonely Planet book says the following:

‘A city of lakes, shaded boulevards and verdant public parks where beggars fight over a plate of discarded noodles and prosperous shop owners exemplify Vietnam’s new economic reforms – the seat of power, where absolute power corrupts absolutely’ (Storey 1996).

The Rough Guide introduces its readers to Hanoi as follows:

‘Hanoi is a surprisingly low-key city with the character of a provincial town – quite unlike brash, young Ho Chi Minh City. Its central district is a mellow area of tree-fringed lakes and shaded avenues of classy French villas dressed up in jaded stucco. Despite first impressions, though, Hanoi is bursting at the seams, and nowhere is this more evident than in the vibrant, intoxicating tangle of streets known as the Old Quarter, the city’s commercial heart since the 15th century’ (Dodd and Lewis 1996).

The two foreign guidebooks are quite similar in the way in which they

list and describe Hanoi's cultural tourism attractions. They also concentrate on giving useful information to the tourist and are critical when they feel that visitors should be warned about the shortcomings of Hanoi's service sector. The local VNAT guide on the other hand gives only detailed information and resists the opportunity to actively promote Hanoi as an exotic tourist destination. Of course, it is not necessarily the role of guidebooks to actively promote or market a destination. Nevertheless, the way they present their view of a city is of great interest to marketers and tourists alike.

A more active type of private sector marketing is represented by the conference held recently by the American Chamber of Commerce in Ho Chi Minh City. (Vietnam Investment Review 2005). This meeting was attended by more than 200 local and foreign tour operators, airline representatives and hoteliers. The main purpose was to improve the marketing of Vietnam to the United States audience. The conference heard that, although the number of American visitors has gone up in absolute terms, the proportion of Americans as a percentage share of international visitor arrivals has fallen in the last 10 years. The meeting also discussed cultural tourism in Hanoi and people used phrases such as 'the architectural and historical magic of Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi'. This is the type of language that needs to be used much more aggressively in any marketing campaign if Hanoi is to compete realistically with other cities.

Marketing by private sector agencies is very diverse and widespread, but, so far, there has not been any concerted or organised campaign to sell the 'Hanoi image' in key tourist markets and segments. One way forward will probably be via a much stronger tie-up with the media. This was one of the themes of the World Tourism Marketing Summit where a number of speakers suggested that 'media strategies are undoubtedly indispensable components of overall marketing strategies' (WTMS 2004).

Other forms of Marketing

There are several major cultural tourism attractions that bring people to the city of Hanoi. These include the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and the Temple of Literature. However, the general atmosphere and ambience of the place and the street life represented by the city in general and especially the Old Quarter and Hoan Kiem Lake seem to be very important.

As mentioned above, there is little attempt by the Hanoi city government to market Hoan Kiem Lake despite its unique attractions. Hanoi is probably the only major capital city in the world which has such a beautiful lake at its centre. The lake does feature as the main picture on the front page of the 'Hanoi Portal', but there is not much attention given to detailed or evocative description. Many writers have pointed out that the presence of an iconic building or other type of structure is of great help in establishing a 'place image'. It seems that Hanoi could use Hoan Kiem Lake for this purpose. However, the quality of the photographs need to be good and the lake itself needs a sharper focus such as the Ngoc Son temple.

When undertaking research for this article, we attempted to discover how institutions such as the History Museum and the Temple of Literature marketed themselves. There is little evidence that they have a marketing plan or even a leaflet that can be distributed to tourists. Probably the only information that can be obtained is from travel agents, tour operators or guidebooks. Material which is distributed by the individual attraction seems to be only available after tourists have entered and bought a ticket.

Another area of advertising and marketing which seems to be barely developed at all is media such as television. There seems to have been a

plan under discussion by VNAT in 2003. Under the headline 'Vietnam plans advertising on CNN to lure more tourists', VNAT made the following announcement:

'Vietnam National Administration for Tourism (VNAT) plans to launch a global tourism promotion programme on CNN to capture the interest of international tourists.

The authority has asked the Ministry of Finance to allow it to sign a USD100,000 contract with CNN for broadcasting the programme for one year. A VNAT official says it has discussed the contract with CNN but the contents and publicity volume will not be specified until the ministry gives approval.

The cable television channel is aired in many countries around the world and will bring Vietnam's images worldwide, VNAT official says.

The programme will be launched after the ministry's approval. VNAT will consider more publicity programmes later. VNAT plans to set up offices in America, France and Japan and to hire advertising firms to promote Vietnam's tourism worldwide. In December last year, Peter Martin Associates Inc (American) introduced to VNAT its programme to promote Vietnam tourism in the US. The authorities have also worked with other foreign companies but have yet to select official promoters. Vietnam has promoted its tourism industry via websites and field trips for tour operators and foreign journalists, and have not yet used television channels or advising companies for the purpose.' (Vietnam Economy 2004)

Of course, this campaign was intended to be for the whole of Vietnam. And, as yet, there is no evidence that it has been approved by the Ministry. We could not find any marketing plan which includes a global

TV promotion campaign for the city of Hanoi.

Conclusion

In our discussion of the marketing of cultural tourism in Hanoi, it should be pointed out that almost all of Hanoi's tourist attractions fall under the heading of 'cultural tourism'. The general cultural ambience of the city, the food, the temples and pagodas, the Ho Chi Minh legacy and the museums are the main attractions. Thus, tourism in Hanoi is cultural tourism. It is that type of place. Other types of urban tourism such as 'theme park tourism' (e.g. Disneyland in Los Angeles), retail tourism (e.g. Hong Kong), nightlife tourism (e.g. Macao or Las Vegas) and convention tourism (e.g. Singapore) are almost non-existent. Hanoi is quintessentially about Vietnamese culture, history and heritage.

Yet, we are forced into the conclusion that, in the year 2006, the marketing of Hanoi seems to be seriously underdeveloped and inadequate. There is no evidence of a detailed marketing plan or strategy of the kind deemed to be essential by most marketers. Such advertising and promotion activities that are currently engaged in by VNAT or the Hanoi city government fall well short of international professional marketing standards. VNAT does not have a marketing department. Even a quick survey of the marketing campaigns of Hanoi's key ASEAN competitors such as Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur illustrates the problem. For example, there is a glaring difference in quality between the English websites of these cities and sites such as the Hanoi Portal.

Because of the lack of published material in Vietnamese or any other language, we can only speculate about the shortcomings of the Vietnamese national and local government marketing efforts. One reason is undoubtedly the fact that they are very new to the field. There are hardly any advanced business schools specialising in marketing,

especially marketing in English, in Vietnam or Hanoi. Most of the managers in the Vietnamese government also lack experience especially of other countries. There also needs to be a more open administrative approach which is necessary in capitalist business enterprises such as marketing especially advertising and promotion. Vietnam is still a poor country and Hanoi is a poor city compared to others in the region. In all probability, they do not have a huge marketing budget.

Despite all the above reasons and excuses, Vietnam will have to do much better in the marketing of tourism in English and Hanoi will have to take a leading role given its position as the country's capital city and cultural centre. Vietnam has deliberately chosen to enter the world market economy as a way to develop its economy. But this global economy is fiercely competitive, and no more so than in the tourism sector. At the moment Hanoi is a new and inexpensive destination. It has a fresh and intriguing appeal. However, before long, the city will have to concentrate on wooing back tourists for repeat visits. Otherwise, a promising industry will simply wither on the vine.

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