

ATTRACTING INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS TO UKRAINIAN DESTINATIONS

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According to statistics, Ukraine attracts more than 20 million foreign citizens every year. Visitors primarily come from Eastern and Western Europe, USA, Israel as well as from Canada. Thus, our country is the 8th most popular tourism destination in Europe.

It is true that we have a lot to offer. Ukraine is a destination on the crossroads between Central and Eastern Europe, between north and south. It has mountain ranges - the Carpathian Mountains suitable for skiing, hiking, fishing and hunting. The coastline on the Black Sea is a popular summer destination. Besides, Ukraine has vineyards where native wines are produced, ruins of ancient castles, historical parks, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches, mosques and synagogues and many more historic sites and interesting places.

However, the country's tourism industry is generally considered to be underdeveloped. Lack of due investment, low service standards, absence of appropriate promotion has led to stagnation in the sphere. Despite all these factors tourism does provide crucial support for Ukraine's economy. And Ukraine does have certain advantages, including much lower costs than other European destinations, as well as visa-free access for most people from Europe, the former Soviet Union, and North America. Thus, it is necessary to advertise abroad the advantages we have in order to attract as many international visitors to our country as possible. In this article we will try to think about possible ways of improving one's small or medium business (further referred to as SMEs = small and medium enterprises) so that the number of international tourists coming to our destinations was growing continuously.

Today, growth-minded SMEs in the tourism industry are looking for innovative and cost-effective ways to take full advantage of the rapidly increasing tourism market and compete with global players. Here are just a few of the strategies that small and medium-sized businesses can consider to boost their appeal overseas.

First is to think eco-tourism/adventure travel. Ukraine can become a global destination for eco-tourism and adventure travel as it has plenty of places where authentic wilderness, adventure and cultural experiences can be gained. Such sports as windsurfing, whitewater kayaking, ski mountaineering and rock climbing are becoming more and more popular nowadays and these activities can become advanced and popular in the Carpathian Mountains or anywhere in the country. Whatever the nature of your tourism business, be sure that you're taking advantage of the eco-tourism and adventure travel opportunities in your area. Even if your business is urban-based, you'll appeal to foreign visitors simply by helping them find local eco-tourism activities.

Second advice is to give your website global reach. If you want to appeal to international visitors, it's good business sense to make your website available in more than one or two languages. Chinese is a good choice as the number of outbound tourists from China is increasing steadily in the world today. Besides, UNWTO figures show that year on year, Chinese tourists spent 30 percent more when travelling abroad. You can also benefit from customizing your website to your target market with simple visual aids such as country flags. It is also a good idea to show your prices in local and foreign currency which can help you connect with international visitors and increase their ability to compare prices. Your website might also include some basic information on Ukraine, such as weather, currency, local customs and cuisine.

Third is to make your business multi-seasonal. Any tourism operator today knows that building an all-season capacity into your business drives growth and revenues. And this is particularly important to attract international visitors who as research shows aren't limiting their vacations to summer. If you're looking for ways to make your business an all-season affair, the first step is to assess the potential year-round activities in your area. Are there cultural activities, such as music festivals, that would attract visitors? Are there seasonal outdoor activities year round? You might consider adding a new dimension to your tourism business, for example offering spa services in the winter season. You could also team up with other local tourism businesses to share services and reduce your risk.

In addition, it is a good idea to advertise your business at international tradeshows. It's a proven marketing rule that person-to-person contact can generate sales. So, if you're shopping around for a tradeshow to exhibit your business, ensure that you choose one that gives you the best exposure and avoid untested venues. As well, prior to the show, be sure that your trade show team is properly trained to sell your business.

Some more recommendations to attract international visitors might include:

- focusing on conference hospitality, because conferencing is a niche service;
- luring new categories of tourists into the country;
- making trip planners and itineraries on your website more visible for users;
- producing theme micro sites;
- developing video and multimedia content and driving websites with visually attractive multimedia;
- integrating virtual reality applications, 360-degree tours or webcams to increase transparency of tourism product.

A good idea is to concentrate on the inspire-before-during-after phases of travel for consumers. According to the study conducted by Professor Dimitrios Buhalis from the eTourismLab, most destinations concentrate only on providing information for “before travelling phase”. “Few destinations use any technology for the during the travel period at the destination, or after the trip. Only a fraction of the available technology tools are used worldwide for promoting destinations online and the vast majority of destinations do not exploit all technological capabilities.” If you follow this advice, you show real concern for your customers. You ensure that you don't leave them as soon as they purchase a tour, but lead them throughout their travel and even after it.

It is also important to create a positive image for the country and our government has to invest heavily in marketing Ukrainian destinations abroad. Nowadays the situation is not as radiant as we would like it to be. For example, Ihor Ostash, a Verhovna Rada deputy, describes Ukraine's international image as “relatively negative rather than positive”. Martin Edmonds, a director of British Defense and International Security Research Centre says ‘Ukraine effectively has no image at all, simply because of total lack of information or awareness’. For sure, a lot of foreigners know practically nothing about Ukraine's resorts and natural wealth beauty. Besides, such problems as corruption, non-transparency of authorities and instability of legislation destroy our international image and have a negative impact on annual tourist flows as well.

In conclusion, it is necessary to stress once again that Ukraine is a wonderful country rich in myriads of worth seeing destinations. And if our tourism businesses organize and promote their tourism products properly, we will be able to boost tourism sales and substantially enhance the ratio of international tourists coming to our country and supporting our economy through the dollars spent.