# Marketing Strategies for Responsible Tourism: Challenges and Opportunities

## Bistra Vassileva

University of Economics-Varna bistravas@ue-varna.bg

#### Abstract

On a global scene, concerns about global warming, destruction of the environment, erosion of cultures and lifestyles, and millions of people still living in poverty, are increasing (International Centre for Responsible Tourism, 2012). The number of initiatives aimed at saving some part of the environment, or improving the living conditions for the world's vulnerable people, increases steadily. According to the Ethical Consumer Markets Report (2012:2) markets for ethical goods and services have remained resilient throughout the economic downturn. Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest growing economic sectors. In 2015 the number of international tourist arrivals surpassed 1.2 billion with a forecast to reach 1.8 billion in 2030 according to the UNWTO. Within this continuing growth of tourism there is a growing trend and a raising consumer awareness for sustainable and responsible tourism. Since more than 90% of tourism companies in EU are small businesses, individual entrepreneurs or family houses, they do not have a capacity to exploit the opportunities offered by these new 'green' markets. Present paper provides results from a transnational study among micro and small tourist companies in seven EU countries - the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Northern Ireland, Bulgaria, and Malta. The research is conducted online and focuses on the attitudes toward CSR, the effect of CSR on company strategy, including marketing and brand strategy. Based on research results several implications about marketing strategies for responsible tourism initiatives launched by micro and small companies are presented.

**Keywords:** marketing strategy, brand strategy, responsible tourism, CSR.

JEL classification: M31, M37

## 1. Introduction

On a global scene, concerns about global warming, destruction of the environment, erosion of cultures and lifestyles, and millions of people still living in poverty, are increasing (International Centre for Responsible Tourism, 2012). As a response to these problems, a number of initiatives aimed at saving some part of the environment, or improving the living conditions for the world's vulnerable people, grows steadily. According to the Ethical Consumer Markets Report (2012:2) markets for ethical goods and services have remained resilient throughout the economic downturn. United Nation DESA (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) proactively promotes the notion that national sustainable strategies of development should explicitly consider cities as main pillars for building sustainability (Vos & Van der Geest, 2013:76), including responsible tourism. The idea about "...formulation of environmentally sound and culturally sensitive tourism programs as a strategy for sustainable development of urban and rural settlements and as a way of decentralizing urban development and reducing discrepancies among regions"

has been launch as Agenda 21 in 1992 during the United Nations Conference on Environment & Development which was held in Rio de Janerio, Brazil (1992:50).

This paper provides results from a transnational study among micro and small tourist companies in seven EU countries - the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Northern Ireland, Bulgaria, and Malta. The research is conducted online and focuses on the attitudes toward CSR, the effect of CSR on company strategy, including marketing and brand strategy. Based on research results several implications about marketing strategies for responsible tourism initiatives launched by micro and small companies are presented.

## 2. Responsible tourism and CSR: "push" vs. "pull" approach

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest growing economic sectors. In 2015 the number of international tourist arrivals surpassed 1.2 billion with a forecast to reach 1.8 billion in 2030 according to the UNWTO (2016). Within this continuing growth of tourism there is a growing trend and a raising consumer awareness for sustainable and responsible tourism. Since more than 90% of tourism companies in EU are small businesses, individual entrepreneurs or family houses, they do not have a capacity to exploit the opportunities offered by these new 'green' markets.

During the last years there is a growing debate around "the Myth of sustainable tourism" (Sharpley, 2010), pro-poor tourism (Ashley, Boyd & Goodwin, 2000), responsible tourism (Chafe, 2005; Francis & Goodwin, 2003), ethical tourism (Weeden, 2002; Francis & Goodwin, 2003). Jacquemin & Thomas (2016:19) claim that many of the disadvantages associated with tourism are actually characteristics of growth and globalization. However, Thomas (2014) brings up the issue of the capacity of some development organizations to make tourism an effective tool for reducing poverty. Responsible tourism initiatives and/or projects could be hindered in many ways. First, the complexity of the environment and the diversity of the local context require both a visionary and detailed operational thinking. It is quite difficult to simply transfer one good practice from one place to another. Second, successful entrepreneurial process depends on specific knowledge and skills acquired by the company which is willing to develop responsible tourism products. In most of the cases these companies are SMEs or family businesses. They do not have enough expertise and/or business capacity to go effectively and efficiently through the whole planning process in order to launch an innovative product to the market and to succeed to keep it vital. Third, the stakeholders' attitudes toward exploitation of tourist resources, especially those of local communities in remote but suddenly attractive areas are far from sustainable way of thinking.

The role of CSR in building brand identity and brand reputation has become increasingly important amidst signs that consumers are becoming more cynical about corporate promises in the areas of environmental awareness, ethical practices in areas ranging from legal and regulatory compliance, HR management and social accountability. The perceptions of consumers to CSR activities are, therefore, a major concern for marketers and marketing scholars.

CSR is rooted in the recognition that businesses are an integral part of society and that as such they have the potential to make a positive contribution to social goals and aspirations. Given the increasingly important role which marketing plays in corporate governance (Nath & Mahajan, 2008), the question, therefore, of the strategic role which CSR can play in marketing strategies for responsible tourism is an interesting one. The implementation of CSR could be done by two different approaches. Some people see business as sitting in the middle with both societal and political pressures coming at it from the outside. This consists the "push" side of the CSR framework (Vassileva, 2009). The second point of view is to perceive the CSR as coming from the business idea (the "pull" side). The main difference between them depends on the drivers which are used to stimulate responsible behavior of the companies. The main drivers for the implementation of the "push" approach into the practice are the standards. The "pull" approach relies mainly on self-regulation or on initiatives launched by the companies itself. The balanced use of both approaches ("push-pull") depending on the complexity of the environment and the local context could facilitate the successful implementation of responsible tourism initiatives.

The increasing importance of CSR at the corporate board level coincides with a growing interest among scholars in corporate marketing as a distinctive model of marketing in its own right. Balmer & Greyser (2006) call this the "corporate model" of marketing. The components

of this model are strongly aligned with current conceptualizations of CSR: they include the 'stakeholder' orientation (including future as well as present stakeholders), 'organizational support' (coordinated organizational activities which support the stakeholder orientation); an 'end-focus' which goes beyond the profit motive and a 'societal application' which takes into account the future societal needs of stakeholders and sensitivity to "the organization's inheritance where applicable" (Balmer, 2001). Taken as a whole, these components of corporate marketing are clearly an extension of CSR orientations. Although Balmer & Greyser (2006) do not explicitly describe the relationship between CSR and its impact on the corporate brand, their most recent adaptation of earlier work in this area strongly resonates with CSR debates.

## 3. Methodology

The study consists of qualitative stage (desk research and in-depth interviews with experts) and quantitative stage (online survey with representatives of micro and small tourist companies). It covers seven EU countries - the Netherlands, Italy, Spain (Extremadura), Portugal, Northern Ireland, Bulgaria, and Malta. The questionnaire consists of four sections. The first section focuses on the attitudes toward Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), including associations regarding responsible tourism, best examples of responsible tourist companies, the most important characteristics for a responsible tourism company, and the main benefits of applying CSR activities. The second section deals with the components of CSR activities and their effect on company strategy. The third section is devoted to the components of marketing and branding strategy of tourist companies. The fourth section contains questions aimed at assessing demographic profiles of respondents (Table 1).

Characteristics	BG	PT	NL	NI	IT	ES	MT
Ownership							
State company	4.55	7.14	-	13.04	-	10.00	-
Municipal company	-	-	-	4.35	14.29	16.67	-
Private company	86.36	71.43	90.00	78.26	71.43	43.33	70.59
Co-operative	-	-	10.00	4.35	4.76	3.33	11.76
NGO	4.55	-	-	-	-	6.67	11.67
No answer	4.54	21.43	-	-	9.52	20.00	5.88
Number of employees							
1 to 9	68.18	71.43	45.00	43.48	61.90	56.67	41.18
10 to 50	27.27	-	50.00	47.83	28.57	20.00	52.94
51 to 250	-	7.14	5.00	8.70	-	6.67	-
250 +	-	-	-	-	-	3.33	-
No answer	4.55	21.43	-	-	9.52	13.33	5.88
Market share							
1% - 5%	50.00	35.71	20.00	34.78	9.52	10.00	41.18
6% - 10%	4.55	-	-	21.74	4.76	3.33	5.88
11% - 15%	-	-	-	4.35	-	13.33	-
16% - 20%	-	7.14	5.00	-	-	3.33	-
> 21%	-	7.14	-	-	-	-	-
Don't know	31.82	21.43	50.00	39.13	38.10	46.67	29.41
No answer	13.63	28.57	25.00	-	47.62	23.33	23.53
Respondent's experience in company							
1 year or less	-	7.14	5.00	26.09	9.52	-	5.88
2 to 4 years	18.18	21.43	40.00	39.13	33.33	13.33	23.53
5 to 9 years	22.73	14.29	15.00	21.74	23.81	33.33	11.76
10 years or more	50.00	35.71	25.00	13.04	28.57	43.33	52.94
No answer	9.09	21.43	15.00	-	4.76	10.00	5.88

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents, %

Note: BG-Bulgaria, PT-Portugal, NL-the Netherlands, NI-Northern Ireland, IT-Italy, ES-Spain, MT-Malta.

Source: Author's work

The definition of responsible tourism according to the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism (2002) was used throughout the survey, namely: "Tourism that maximizes the benefits to local communities, minimizes negative social or environmental impacts, and helps local people conserve fragile cultures and habitats or species."

The questionnaire was translated in the following languages: Bulgarian, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian. LimeSurvey platform was used to configure the questionnaires. The survey was administered online (June-July 2016). A total number of 127 respondents participated in this survey.

## 4. Results and discussion

## 4.1. Qualitative research stage

The following topics were discussed with experts in the field of tourism, specialists from tourism companies and associations, and responsible tourism enthusiasts in partner countries:

- How to raise the awareness level for responsible tourism?
- How to become responsible?
- How to promote a responsible image?
- How to set up a local network of responsible tourist companies?
- What kind of online platform to develop to support micro and small tourist companies for responsible initiatives?

According to the interviewed experts, the key impact and benefits of responsible tourism which could be used to raise the awareness level should be analyzed in three different aspects: ecological, cultural and economic. These benefits can be summarized as follows. First, support of local economy. Substantial part of responsible tourism activities includes buying local products or using services provided by local companies. These activities deliver as a result a higher revenue for the local people. Economic benefits include not only the generated income for the local community, but they also stimulate employment both directly and indirectly. Second, improvement of living conditions. Responsible tourism contributes to the awareness of nature, stimulating people to take care of it and thereby leaving a preserved nature for future generations. Third, increasing awareness of sustainability in general. Responsible tourism provokes people to think about sustainability and responsibility, even being on a holiday. Forth, special travels. According to the experts the holiday could add value to travelers by meeting new cultures and/or local people. Fifth, preservation of culture and nature

The main concern with mass tourism (both sea-side and winter tourism) is its ecological efficiency. There is a serious concern about the negative effect of the widespread construction of hotels, restaurants and tourism infrastructure (such as sea-side cafes, ski-tracks, barges etc.) on natural environment. According to the interviewed experts responsible tourism should be promoted as an alternative for mass visited locations providing benefits such as: escape from the busy city lifestyle, leaving behind the noise and pollution, and experience wild undamaged nature with the quiet and beauty it provides.

Several types of communication channels appropriate for promoting a responsible image are pointed out during the interviews: digital communications (website, a Facebook page, a Twitter account or other social media accounts or the use of a digital newsletter), printed materials (e.g. flyers at the Tourist Information desks) and audiovisual communication (expensive, but with a large reach). The social media channel is considered as a key communication tool. According to the experts it is difficult for many SMEs in tourist and hospitality industry to allocate resources to implement CSR practices in their activities. The predominant number of them don't have specific knowledge and skills which are necessary to develop and to implement a CSR policy and/or strategy.

## 4.2. Quantitative research stage

Attitudes toward Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

In this section of the questionnaire the following topics are analyzed: 1/Associations regarding responsible tourism, 2/Best examples of responsible tourist company, 3/The most important characteristics for a responsible tourism company, 4/ Main benefits of applying CSR activities. The main associations of Bulgarian respondents regarding responsible tourism are connected with preserving the nature, sustainability, restoring tourist resources, and focus on local communities. The words associated with responsible tourism mostly mentioned by Dutch respondents are as follows: sustainable, green, environmentally friendly, responsible and care for nature. Maltese respondents have various perceptions of responsible tourism, e.g. ecotourism, tourism based on sustainable behavior, tourism activities that respect the society and environment they operate, promoting local heritage, trade and culture protection of natural assets, agro tourism, green tourism. Most Spanish respondents indicated that responsible tourism has elements related to the respect for the environment and nature, and that is committed to reduce CO<sup>2</sup> emissions (including energy efficiency). Many of the respondents also indicated that responsible tourism means not only respect for the environment but also for culture and locals of the destination and for the employees of the tourism establishment or company.

The most important characteristics for a responsible tourism company are identified using a rank scale.

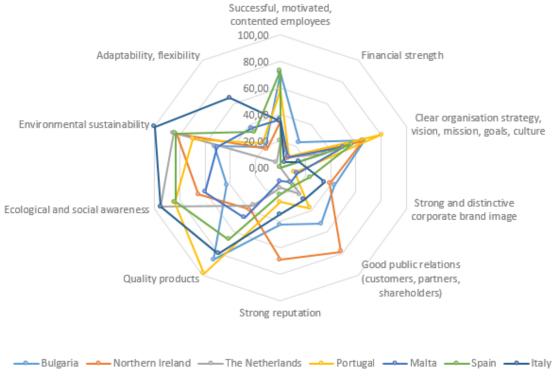


Figure 1. Importance of characteristics for a responsible tourism company, profile analysis, total % Source: Author's work

The respondents are asked to rank the five most important characteristics for a responsible tourism company among ten characteristics which are provided. Despite the slight difference among analyzed countries (Figure 1), the most important characteristics which should be possessed by a responsible tourism company include the following:

Ecological and social awareness;

- Environmental sustainability;
- Providing quality products;
- Clear organization strategy, vision, mission, goals, culture;
- Good public relations (customers, partners, shareholders).

Twelve benefits of applying CSR activities (Figure 2) were presented in the survey form. The following five benefits were considered main benefits by respondents:

- Customer satisfaction;
- Trust-building among stakeholders;
- Influence on organization values, culture, mission, goals;
- Contribution to societal issues;
- Recognition by the public and stakeholders.

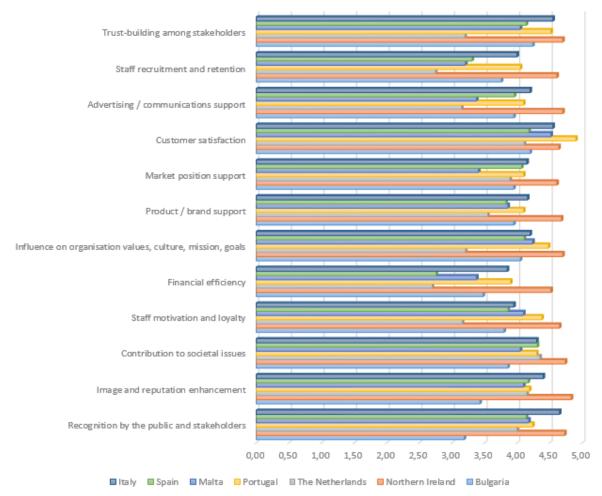


Figure 2. Main benefits of applying CSR activities by countries, mean

Note: The following measurement scale is used: 1 = Not benefit at all, 3 = Relative benefit, 5 = Strong benefit Source: Author's work

Financial efficiency was evaluated slightly contradictory by Bulgarian respondents. Financial efficiency wasn't mentioned as a benefit of applying CSR by the predominant number of respondents (Mode = 2) while the Mean suggests that it could be considered as a relative benefit. Such difference could be explained by the variation in respondents' perceptions (i.e. there are respondents with opposite attitudes). Similar observation has been done in previous research (Vassileva, 2009).

Components of CSR activities and their effect on company strategy

Analyzed CSR activities are divided into three groups: 1/ Community and environmental responsibility; 2/ Ability to attract, develop, and keep talented people; and 3/ Use of corporate assets.

Regarding the importance of CSR activities to respondents' company strategy they are divided into three groups: 1/ Community and environmental responsibility; 2/ Ability to attract, develop, and keep talented people; and 3/ Use of corporate assets. Within the first group the following CSR activities were considered the most important by respondents:

- Ethical practices Northern Ireland and Portugal;
- Non-polluting, safe and non-toxic products the Netherlands and Italy;
- The sense that the company is aware of its place in the environment and conscious of its need to contribute Malta and Spain;
- Environmental, socio-economic, health and safety, and community awareness Bulgaria.

BG	NI	NL	PT	MT	ES	IT
2,00	1,00	3,00	1,00	2,00	2,00	2,00
3,00	4,00	1,00	2,00	1,00	5,00	1,00
3,00	2,00	4,00	6,00	4,00	6,00	5,00
4,00	4,00	5,00	2,00	3,00	4,00	3,00
2.00	2.00	7.00	4.00	4.00	7.00	4.00
2,00	2,00	7,00	4,00	4,00	7,00	4,00
3,00	3,00	6,00	5,00	3,00	3,00	5,00
1,00	4,00	2,00	3,00	4,00	1,00	5,00
BG	NI	NL	PT	MT	ES	IT
4,00	2,00	3,00	6,00	3,00	3,00	2,00
4,00	4,00	4,00	2,00	2,00	4,00	4,00
2,00	4,00	5,00	3,00	5,00	5,00	5,00
1,00	1,00	2,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
3,00	3,00	6,00	5,00	3,00	4,00	5,00
4,05	4,70	1,00	4,00	4,00	2,00	3,00
BG	NI	NL	PT	MT	ES	IT
4,00	2,00	3,00	3,00	4,00	3,00	5,00
1,00	2,00	2,00	4,00	2,00	4,00	4,00
2,00	2,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
2,00	1,00	2,00	2,00	3,00	2,00	2,00
3,00	3,00	3,00	4,00	4,00	4,00	3,00
	2,00 3,00 3,00 4,00 2,00 3,00 1,00 4,00 2,00 1,00 3,00 4,05 BG 4,00 1,00 2,00 1,00 2,00 1,00 2,00 1,00 2,00	2,00 1,00 3,00 4,00 3,00 2,00 4,00 4,00 2,00 2,00 3,00 3,00 1,00 4,00 4,00 4,00 2,00 4,00 1,00 1,00 3,00 3,00 4,05 4,70 BG NI 4,00 2,00 1,00 2,00 1,00 2,00 1,00 2,00 2,00 2,00 2,00 2,00 2,00 1,00 2,00 1,00	2,00	2,00         1,00         3,00         1,00           3,00         4,00         1,00         2,00           3,00         2,00         4,00         6,00           4,00         4,00         5,00         2,00           2,00         2,00         7,00         4,00           3,00         3,00         6,00         5,00           1,00         4,00         2,00         3,00           BG         NI         NL         PT           4,00         2,00         3,00         6,00           2,00         4,00         4,00         2,00           2,00         4,00         5,00         3,00           1,00         1,00         2,00         1,00           3,00         3,00         6,00         5,00           4,05         4,70         1,00         4,00           4,05         4,70         1,00         4,00           4,00         2,00         3,00         3,00           1,00         2,00         3,00         3,00           1,00         2,00         3,00         3,00           1,00         2,00         3,00         3,00 <t< td=""><td>2,00         1,00         3,00         1,00         2,00           3,00         4,00         1,00         2,00         1,00           3,00         2,00         4,00         6,00         4,00           4,00         4,00         5,00         2,00         3,00           2,00         2,00         7,00         4,00         4,00           3,00         3,00         6,00         5,00         3,00           4,00         4,00         2,00         3,00         4,00           BG         NI         NL         PT         MT           4,00         2,00         3,00         6,00         3,00           4,00         4,00         4,00         2,00         2,00           2,00         4,00         4,00         2,00         2,00           1,00         1,00         5,00         3,00         5,00           3,00         3,00         6,00         5,00         3,00           4,05         4,70         1,00         4,00         4,00           4,05         4,70         1,00         4,00         4,00           4,00         2,00         3,00         3,00         4,00</td><td>2,00         1,00         3,00         1,00         2,00         2,00           3,00         4,00         1,00         2,00         1,00         5,00           3,00         2,00         4,00         6,00         4,00         6,00           4,00         4,00         5,00         2,00         3,00         4,00           2,00         2,00         7,00         4,00         4,00         7,00           3,00         3,00         6,00         5,00         3,00         3,00           1,00         4,00         2,00         3,00         4,00         1,00           BG         NI         NL         PT         MT         ES           4,00         2,00         3,00         6,00         3,00         3,00           4,00         4,00         4,00         2,00         4,00         4,00           2,00         4,00         5,00         3,00         5,00         5,00           1,00         1,00         2,00         1,00         1,00         1,00           4,05         4,70         1,00         4,00         4,00         2,00           4,00         2,00         3,00         3,00<!--</td--></td></t<>	2,00         1,00         3,00         1,00         2,00           3,00         4,00         1,00         2,00         1,00           3,00         2,00         4,00         6,00         4,00           4,00         4,00         5,00         2,00         3,00           2,00         2,00         7,00         4,00         4,00           3,00         3,00         6,00         5,00         3,00           4,00         4,00         2,00         3,00         4,00           BG         NI         NL         PT         MT           4,00         2,00         3,00         6,00         3,00           4,00         4,00         4,00         2,00         2,00           2,00         4,00         4,00         2,00         2,00           1,00         1,00         5,00         3,00         5,00           3,00         3,00         6,00         5,00         3,00           4,05         4,70         1,00         4,00         4,00           4,05         4,70         1,00         4,00         4,00           4,00         2,00         3,00         3,00         4,00	2,00         1,00         3,00         1,00         2,00         2,00           3,00         4,00         1,00         2,00         1,00         5,00           3,00         2,00         4,00         6,00         4,00         6,00           4,00         4,00         5,00         2,00         3,00         4,00           2,00         2,00         7,00         4,00         4,00         7,00           3,00         3,00         6,00         5,00         3,00         3,00           1,00         4,00         2,00         3,00         4,00         1,00           BG         NI         NL         PT         MT         ES           4,00         2,00         3,00         6,00         3,00         3,00           4,00         4,00         4,00         2,00         4,00         4,00           2,00         4,00         5,00         3,00         5,00         5,00           1,00         1,00         2,00         1,00         1,00         1,00           4,05         4,70         1,00         4,00         4,00         2,00           4,00         2,00         3,00         3,00 </td

Table 2. Importance of CSR activities to respondents' company strategy, rank

Note: The rank is based on Mean; The scale range is 1 = Not important to 5 = Very important.

Source: Author's work

As for the second group of CSR activities, there is a full consensus among respondents from different countries that 'High ethical standards' determine the ability to attract, develop, and keep talented people. Only Dutch respondents ranked 'Flexible, 'humane'', enjoyable work environment' as the most important characteristic. There is a consensus for the third group as well. 'Ability to act socially responsible, environmentally sound and sustainable' was evaluated as the most important activity when using corporate assets. According to Bulgarian respondents 'Ability to withstand market fluctuations' is the most important characteristic within this group, while for the respondents from Northern Ireland this is the 'Ability to act according to the professional ethical code of conduct'.

The comparative analysis of the overall rank of the importance of the factors which affect customers' and stakeholders' attitudes toward company's reputation reveals a moderate difference (Table 3).

		(	Custon	ners' a	ttitudes				S	takeho	lders'	attitude	es	
FACTORS	BG	N I	NL	PT	MT	ES	IT	BG	N I	NL	PT	MT	ES	IT
Quality of service given by the staff	2	4	1	3	1	2	5	6	7	4	2	5	2	7
Financial performance	5	3	7	8	8	7	6	7	4	5	7	2	6	6
Image/reputation	3	1	3	4	3	3	4	2	1	2	4	4	1	5
Quality/strength of management	6	5	6	6	7	5	3	1	5	5	8	1	4	4
Quality of products/services	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	3	6	3	1	4	1	2
Honesty/integrity	3	2	5	2	4	1	1	4	3	7	6	6	2	2
Longevity/sustain ed performance	4	6	7	7	5	6	2	5	2	6	3	3	5	3
Social and corporate responsibilities	7	7	4	5	6	4	1	8	6	1	5	7	3	1

Table 3. Importance of the factors which affect customers' and stakeholders' attitudes toward respondents' company's reputation, overall rank

*Note: The rank is based on Mean; The scale range is* 1 = Not important to 5 = Very important.

Source: Author's work

Despite the slightly difference between the results for the overall and individual ranks the author definitely concludes that the most important factors (ranked on the first three places) affecting both customers' and stakeholders' attitudes include the following:

- Quality of products/services;
- Image/reputation except Portugal and Malta;
- Honesty/integrity the Netherlands;
- Longevity/sustained performance Italy;
- Social and corporate responsibilities Italy;
- Quality of service given by the staff Portugal and Spain.

Next the importance of the factors which affect development of the company strategy over the next 3-5 years are assessed. The top five factors (based on their overall rank) which will affect development of the company strategy over the next 3-5 years as pointed out by the respondents are as follows:

- Providing good quality products/services;
- Caring for customers;
- Concern for the environment;
- Keeping staff motivated;
- Keeping prices reasonable.

Regarding the general attitudes toward main ecological issues all statements are positively confirmed by the respondents, especially that global warming and pollution is a reality that increasingly endangers tourism in many destinations around the world. Another important issue which was mentioned below as a barrier to implementing responsible recreational initiatives in the near future is related to the need of informing and educate customers about their contribution to global warming when they travel so that they assume more responsibility for the choices they make.

## Components of marketing and branding strategy

In this section of the questionnaire the following topics were analyzed: 1/ Elements affecting company's brand image, 2/ Tools (benefits) used to promote the respondents' company / brand on the foreign markets, 3/ Information about responsible recreational initiatives.

Product and service are indicated by respondents across the participated countries as the most important components of their marketing strategies which verify the abovementioned importance of these two factors. Distribution is considered the least important element to the company's competitiveness by Dutch and Italian respondents.

Marketing mix elements	BG	NI	NL	PT	MT	ES	IT
Product	4.86	5.00	4.80	4.84	4.7	4.61	4.63
Brand	4.10	5.00	3.89	4.05	4.1	4.21	4.16
Service	4.81	4.96	4.65	4.95	4.8	4.90	4.56
Price	4.50	4.87	4.25	4.32	4.5	3.86	4.37
Distribution	4.19	4.87	2.29	4.00	3.7	4.00	4.05
Communication	4.33	4.96	3.63	4.58	4.3	4.41	4.58

Table 4. Importance of marketing mix elements to company's competitiveness, mean

Source: Author's work

The company's brand image is affected mainly by service quality and reliability, and customer orientation.

Element	BG	NI	NL	PT	MT	ES	IT
Service quality and reliability	95.45	100	100	80.95	66.7	90.00	90.48
Experience, competence, know-	68.18	91.30	50.00	76.19	60.0	66.67	71.43
how							
Innovation capability	22.73	87.91	15.00	52.38	23.3	50.00	57.14
Specialization	45.45	73.91	35.00	9.52	26.7	43.33	52.38
Customer orientation	95.45	100	95.00	80.95	56.7	70.00	71.43
Speed, timeliness	72.73	82.61	30.00	57.14	43.3	46.67	71.43
Flexibility	86.36	82.61	30.00	47.62	46.7	53.33	66.67
Cooperation-partnership	54.55	82.61	20.00	33.33	20.0	56.67	57.14
Creativity	68.18	82.61	10.00	52.38	26.7	56.67	66.67
Excellence, leadership	54.55	95.65	10.00	61.90	26.7	73.33	61.90
Style, prestige	45.45	82.61	20.00	52.38	16.7	53.33	52.38

Table 5. Key elements affecting company's brand image, %

Source: Author's work

Flexibility, speed, timeliness, creativity, and experience, competence and know-how are also considered as important elements which affect company's brand image.

One of the final questions was related to the frequency of use of some tool/benefits to promote their organizations on foreign markets, on a scale from never, rarely, sometimes, seldom or regularly. Product and service, image, social media, website, price, eco-friendly (although with the same result as 'sometimes') are more used on a regular basis and value added, catalogues and printed materials (although with the same result as 'sometimes'), sustainable, healthy, bio diversity are said to be used on a seldom frequency.

## 5. Conclusion and implications for future research

One of the main principles of the Small Business Act for Europe (Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan) states that 'the EU and Member States should enable SMEs to turn environmental challenges into opportunities. They should provide more information, expertise and financial incentives for full exploitation of the opportunities for new 'green' markets and increased energy efficiency. Climate change, scarcity of energy supplies and sustainable development

are key challenges for SMEs, which have to adopt more sustainable production and business models?

The demand for environmentally friendly products and services opens the way for new business opportunities. Responsible tourism initiatives represent such business opportunity. Based on the research results it is clear that many SMEs in tourist and hospitality industry face difficulties to allocate resources to implement CSR practices in their activities. The predominant number of them do not possess specific knowledge and skills which are necessary to develop and to implement a CSR policy and/or strategy. It is vital to increase tourism SME's efficiency and capacity to adapt to these challenges and to turn them into opportunities.

The role which CSR plays in developing responsible tourism/destination brands and corresponding brand strategies is vital but it needs further investigation. Special attention should be placed on the emerging debates around CSR and brand-building as a 'push-pull' cycle within strategic marketing process.

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