



A TOURISM INNOVATION CASE

An Actor-Network Approach

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Abstract: This article examines the innovations of a tourism company in the particular context of French ski resorts. Actor-Network Theory, applied to the tourism sector, constitutes the conceptual framework of the study. The results, following a multi-methods qualitative approach, show that the company's growth is related to the implementation of new associations between actors and non-human entities. Thanks to its "leader translator," the company manages to interest and enrol actors in its project. The analysis helps ultimately understand how, within a tourist destination, existing resources can be reconfigured to create unique and innovative products that will ensure a company's success. **Keywords:** winter sports resorts, destination management, SME, case study research, qualitative research. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, tourism innovation has increasingly become a topic of research within the tourism field (OECD, 2006; Peters & Pikkemaat, 2006). But studies in this area are still scattered and fragmented: Some analyse economic dimensions (e.g., Weiermair, 2006), others are focused on the determinants of dynamic change (e.g., Chan, Go, & Pine, 1998; Hjalager, 2000; Richards & Carson, 2006), or on the role of entrepreneurship (e.g., Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2004; Koh & Hatten, 2002). Amongst this literature, numerous articles have been written about innovation in Alpine resorts and the skiing industry (e.g., Flagestad & Hope, 2001; Pechlaner & Fuchs, 2002; Pechlaner & Tschurtschenthaler, 2003; Pikkemaat & Weiermair, 2003). Few of these papers, however, have focused on tourism in the French context, despite its relative importance in international tourism.

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France's position in international tourism is significant: According to the *World Tourism Organisation* (2007), it ranks first in terms of international tourist arrivals and third in terms of tourism revenues. Furthermore, it is a leader regarding winter sports with its 357 resorts out of the 4000 recorded worldwide (*Ministère délégué au Tourisme*, 2005). In France, the winter sports resorts market accounts for a large share of the tourism economy (*Ministère délégué au Tourisme*, 2008). However, winter sports are at a turning point here. The economic results are still favourable in major resorts but a number of cyclical and structural problems call into question their prosperity (*Agrawala*, 2007; *SEATM*, 1993). These problems have led to a slower growth for the vast majority of the resorts, and this trend affects all market segments and all activity sectors of these tourist sites.

Amongst French winter sports, skiing reigns supreme. The activity has been for a long time the "cash cow" that anchored the success of these tourist areas. French ski resorts have thus never really felt the need to diversify and therefore, resort activities essentially revolve around skiing. All product development and packaging are conceived around this activity. However, the necessary diversification of ski resorts is a problem that has repeatedly been raised in France since the beginning of the 1990s by various actors (*FACIM*, 2004; *SEATM*, 1993; *SEATM-BIPE*, 1991). Expansion into new areas is presented as an imperative to address problems that are both cyclical (lack of snow, school holiday schedules) and structural (inadequate product offerings in response to evolving customer expectations). Although one could note some elements of product diversification in the resorts, these result from haphazard evolution rather than from a concerted planning approach. Moreover, these new products all appear to complement and add to the skiing activity. It is therefore difficult to really talk about innovation in French winter sports resorts: These are essentially tourist areas with a singular focus on skiing.

In addition, French winter sports resorts represent a complex system involving a wide variety of actors. Most major stations are integrated resorts (e.g., Les Arcs 1950) created by a single operator who operates all resort activities. But French law (the so-called Mountain Law of 1985) now gives the municipality on which the resort stands the responsibility to manage and develop tourism in each resort. It then has the opportunity to take up management duties on its own (direct management) or to delegate it to a private sector operator. In the latter case, the delegation may involve only the operation of lifts (partial delegation) or both the operation of lifts and management of ski slopes (total delegation). Most major ski resorts in France operate under the latter model (*Marcelpoil & Boudières*, 2006). In addition, in a winter sports resort, a whole network of economic (independent tourism enterprises) and social (non governmental) actors revolve around these central actors (organizing authority and private operator). A French winter sports resort is thus characterized by a conglomerate of actors composed of tourist operators, local elected officials, and civil society.

Winter sports resorts in France are therefore a complex system of action with specific operating logics, composed of a multitude of actors

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