



Case study

A tourist kit 'made in Italy': An 'intelligent' system for implementing new generation destination cards



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HIGHLIGHTS

- An integrated and flexible offering of services is discussed.
- The benefits of new and intelligent tourist cards are highlighted.
- The involvement of a large postal operator in the tourism sector is discussed.
- The paramount role of trust in respect to electronic alliances is addressed.
- The potential for the tourist kit model to be replicated is investigated.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the advantages and the potentiality of the 'tourist kit', an Italian solution based on the concept of a prepaid card that is issued by a large postal operator. The destination card can be reloaded by tourists according to their needs and its validity is not restricted to short periods. Thus, the kit provides tourists with an integrated, practical, and flexible tool capable of making their stay more enjoyable as it allows cardholders to choose and buy many products and services at discounted prices. The kit creates customer loyalty by utilising smart technology aimed at collecting accurate tourist information. This model deserves attention because it is probably the world's first case of a large postal operator entering the tourism sector with the proposal of an integrated and advanced destination card scheme. This research also discusses interesting opportunities and challenges related to the implementation of new generation tourist cards.

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1. Introduction

This article explores a project that has the potential to provide a significant growth path and new stimulus to destinations and assist them to achieve or improve their competitiveness. The research was inspired by the launch of the 'tourist kit', an initiative supported by the largest Italian public postal operator (Poste Italiane) and shared by the public Destination Management Organisation (DMO) of an Italian region (Basilicata) in an effort to increase the number of tourists visiting a city (Matera) that features a UNESCO heritage site (The Sassi and the Park of the Rupestrian Churches).

The topic discussed in this article deserves attention because it is probably the world's first case of a large postal operator entering the tourism sector by proposing an integrated and advanced tourist card scheme. Although, in the past, research articles have already described interesting cases of alliances between the tourism industry and credit-card-issuing banks (Chen & Tseng, 2005; Vogt, 2011), the strong involvement of a postal operator in the tourism field is a novelty.

The tourist kit, officially revealed to the public in early December 2013, aims to develop a new system that will support the development of tourism by enhancing integration between cultural heritage, Information Communication Technology (ICT), and Italian entrepreneurship. In this way, the tourist kit fulfils the role of a 'passkey' to the local tourism system.

The kit is based on the tourist card scheme, but the formula

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developed by Poste Italiane introduces several different and original elements. The initiative has attracted the interest of other Italian regional and local policy-makers, who have asked academic institutions to study the practicability of introducing the model in their areas. Thus, the instrument is expected to be adopted by other Italian destinations in the near future.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the 'potentiality' and the 'novelty' of the tourist kit in order to understand whether this pilot project deserves to be imitated, with opportune adjustments, by other Italian or foreign destinations. Consistent with the early development stages of the tool, it was found that exploratory research would better serve the purposes of the paper. Indeed, since it is a recent initiative, the quantification of some variables at the moment is not significant in assessing the effectiveness of the project.

The research is structured as follows: at first, this article provides some details about the features of the tourist kit, while also clarifying the data and methodology that were used in the research design. Then, the paper reviews the literature investigating tourist cards and relevant related topics such as the strategic functions of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), networking, and trust in tourism. Successively, a comparative study of tourist cards in major European cities is mentioned. The research then presents qualitative findings returned from focus groups and interviews, and also discusses the architecture of the tourist kit in order to highlight both its strategic potential and certain weaknesses. To address the drawbacks, this paper proposes certain actions that could be taken to improve the underlying formula. The final section contains concluding remarks and suggests possible implications by illustrating directions for further research.

2. Methodology

The 'potentiality' and the 'novelty' of the tourist kit hinge on the technological contributions of a large postal operator. To investigate 'why' and 'how' a postal operator can transfer its technological expertise and knowledge to the field of tourism, an exploratory qualitative approach is particularly relevant (Maxwell, 2013). More precisely, a unique in-depth case study has been used. As outlined by some authors (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Friedman & Miles, 2002; Yin, 2014), a case-study method is most likely to be appropriate for 'why' and 'how' questions, just as the single-case design is eminently justifiable whenever a case represents a rare or unique circumstance, or is of a revelatory nature. These theoretical conditions underlie the present study because it addresses a rare case (the strong involvement of a postal operator in the tourism field) and benefits from special access to information (e.g. to key informants) in order to discuss the launch of the project in depth.

The work was conducted in three stages.

The first stage was based on secondary research (articles and books), focussing on a review of prior literature with the intent of identifying existing knowledge that would be relevant to this study. Concerning secondary data, various other sources (press articles, research reports, the company's annual reports, and websites) were examined in an attempt to achieve an initial overall understanding of the main competences and business activities developed by Poste Italiane.

The second stage concentrated on an analysis of a study on tourist cards in 14 major European cities. The authors of that study were contacted in order to gain an understanding of some of the methodological aspects used in their survey. The website for each tourist card cited in the report was visited in an effort to better explore the types of services offered by the destinations.

The third stage concerned collecting qualitative information and expert opinions, which provided a great depth of knowledge on the

research area. The critical success factors were identified after conducting focus groups, unstructured discussions, and semi-structured telephone interviews.

In particular, the focus groups involved two key informants who were managers involved in the initiative: the Poste Italiane manager responsible for the tourist kit project and the general manager of the Basilicata's regional promotion agency. The findings that emerged from the focus groups enabled the identification and clarification of some critical issues concerning the tourist kit. The two managers were invited to speculate on potential and future developments of the tourist kit in order to predict how tourism as a whole can benefit from it. A verbatim record was made of their statements.

The findings from the focus groups formed the main platform of a discussion with a small number of experts (mainly academics and consultants), who helped to identify critical issues but also innovative aspects of the tourist kit. These experts were selected for their contributions to relevant literature and their active participation in international tourism and ICT conferences.

The literature reviews, focus groups, and expert opinions emphasised that the success of the initiative is mainly related to its ability to foster cooperation among the different stakeholders and to satisfy their needs. This highlighted the importance of conducting semi-structured telephone interviews with owners of certain facilities (i.e., hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, museums, and shops) associated with the tourist kit scheme. A standardised but open-ended approach to questioning was employed. Notes were made of all of the questions asked. The interviews were conducted with the aim of ascertaining the reasons why these owners agreed to participate in the tourist kit scheme, and whether they had discovered aspects that could be improved.

The adopted methodology has allowed the gathering of qualitative information useful to improving knowledge and discussion of the case. The analysis was performed over almost one year. More specifically, the period during which the research was conducted on the case study spanned from July 2013 to May 2014.

3. The tourist kit

The tourist kit is the result of an initiative by Poste Italiane, which signed a co-marketing agreement with an Italian public DMO to promote tourism in Matera, a city in the region of Basilicata. Recently, Matera has been announced as the European Capital of Culture for 2019.

The main goal of the project is to increase the number of Italian and foreign tourists to the destination through a technological integration of services. This will assure the best use of the cultural and environmental sites as well as the development of local entrepreneurship. The formula implemented by Poste Italiane takes advantage of ICTs and provides visitors with a practical tool with which to make their stay more enjoyable thanks to the availability of integrated offerings. The final version of the kit is anticipated to facilitate the process by which tourists can build a dynamic and personalised package, enabling them to calculate the total cost of services chosen for their tourism experiences in advance. Poste Italiane works as a product aggregator that, as a result of its high level of technological expertise, has developed a 'new' product by combining basic products or components thereof.

The intervention of Poste Italiane, the largest Italian public postal operator, stems from its strategic business model, which is based on service integration, diversification, and innovation. Poste Italiane is a company with over 150 years of history. It was founded in 1862 as a national postal service. This original activity has been progressively integrated with new business areas, primarily in an effort to compensate for the decreasing volume of the postal service

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