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Central Northeastern Thailand Tourism Branding, Supporting The ASEAN Economic Community

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Abstract

Central Northeastern Thailand Tourism Branding, supporting the ASEAN Economic Community, the objectives are: to study the existing markets; analyze the provinces' tourism branding; and propose guidelines for the northeastern region's branding. The research methodology is the mixed method of quantitative and qualitative; the literature and research reviewed were incorporated with the field survey in the upper northeastern region. The questionnaire used a quota of 382 samplings. The qualitative analysis of the stakeholders' interviews revealed. With the information acquired the researcher developed the central northeastern branding. Finally, the data was analyzed from tourists' behavior for an initial branding in excellent rank.

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Keywords: Tourism; Branding; ASEAN; Thailand; Central Northeastern.

1. Introduction

In the past, the government was mainly behind the promotion of nation branding, such as tourism and investment. However, in the 21st century not only does the government support nation branding, but people both inside and outside of the country also get more involved in the promotion of nation branding with an approach strategy. Furthermore, private sectors are participating more in the process of nation branding through Public Private Partnership (PPP). The reason why more groups of people are turning to support nation branding is because the trend of democracy is spread widely, bringing about western-like political values globally. As a result, the public is more aware of politics, such as direct democracy, showing their own ideas through a variety of media, participating in

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directing the national administration including policy setting, and showing the move forward to public policies. The evidences can be readily found in many places. For example, the Slovene government hired a private company to design a market research-study-based campaign to examine people's attitudes from all walks of life. Moreover, Mexico City had a competition for designing brand identity of the city. The competitors in Mexico, other nearby cities and even foreigners were welcomed in the competition having a winning prize of one million pesos (or 75,000 U.S.). Also, the U.S. established a non-profit organization named "Brand USA" in collaboration with government and private sectors (Public-Private Partnership or PPP) in order to launch campaigns advertising American tourism for countries around the world. For all the reasons thereof, national branding promotion in the 21st century requires a rigorous assessment (Kriengsak, 2012).

Tourism Authority of Thailand (Manager Online, 2011) stated concerning the current situation on nation branding that "in the past, each province advertised its own brand, sharing similar strategies without the concern of its identity; meanwhile, tourists preferred visiting places having their own identity. However, although Tourism Authority of Thailand used to encourage each province to use a plan for promoting branding, it seems many places failed to proceed".

According to ASEAN Tourism Forum hosted by Thailand during 10-14 October 2010, tourism services and qualitative tourism competition were promoted in order for ASEAN to become one of the world-class destinations and therefore tourism information was advertised on behalf of ASEAN (ASEAN Brand). In 2011, the meeting agreed to change the theme from 'Visit ASEAN' to 'Visit Southeast Asia, Feel the Warmth' which was more well-known to tourists than the word "ASEAN" (Thailand Press Release, 2010).

Preparing to join the Asian Economic Community requires research on province branding for tourism of provinces in the upper northeastern region of Thailand in order to gain some market shares in ASEAN.

The researcher has suggested guidelines for the development of tourism branding for the central northeastern provinces. The tools employed for the development are as follows; a branding manual, exhibition booth activities, a tourism manual, a project website, tourism brochures and souvenirs. The current research is entitled "Central Northeastern Thailand Tourism Branding, supporting the ASEAN Economic Community". It is a part of the project plan "Enhancing the Capacity of the Northeastern Region to ASEAN One Destination". This is a kind of applied research, integrating the knowledge of philosophy, sociology, and economics.

The objectives are:

- (1) To study the existing market of tourism;
- (2) Analyze the provinces' tourism branding;
- (3) Propose guidelines for the northeastern region's branding.

2. Literature Review

Referring to tourism branding, the brand was defined by Wheeler (2012) as "the whole variables bringing about meaning to products as well as the mindset of people derived from surroundings possibly, including memories since childhood."

Venkatachalam & Venkateswaran (2010) stated that "geographic locations, such as organizations or products are able to determine brand and objectives of branding. In other words, making people aware of pleasant location contributes to good image" Hassan, Hamid & Bohairy (2007) found that most of the tourism activities happened at destinations. Grängsjö (2003) found that the concept of tourist attractions should focus on both customers and producers. The success of destination marketing is not only from push factors called (the force of market demand) but also from pull factors (supply-side factors), vitally affecting the success of making product brand especially, from destinations. Kotler et al. (2006) revealed that product branding was the most effective weapon. Marketers facing with tourists (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004) stated that successful brands needed to be able to pass their expectations from a memorable experienced journey in explicit relation to destinations. The image of product or organization in the perspective of target groups makes its product or organization uniquely different from others. (Wongmontha, 2009) defined the word "Brand" as an abstract thing because it was an image in the target groups' mind. Brand is a living memory as well as a covenant between an organization and a target group. (Kriengsak, 2012) stated about the concept of nation branding, they aim to strengthen the nation's competitive potential in order to attract investors, tourists, skilled labors and also to be powerful on the stage of international negotiation. Oruma

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