

# Destination image and juveniles perception

– does it still match?

## A case study of Crans-Montana

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Destinations are defined as places that attract visitors for a temporary stay (Pike, 2004, p.11). Research on destination marketing and branding has gained importance in the last years (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009). More and more countries and destinations are working on the development of a certain destination image.

The destination Switzerland, in particularly the case of Crans-Montana, has developed a distinct brand image over the years. Interestingly, it is not researched so far whether there is still a fit between the existing destination image of Switzerland and the actual perceptions of the tourists. Woodside & Lysonski (1989) consider perception in terms of tourism context as a major influential factor in decision-making processes for tourists. Each tourist analyses and interprets information from tourism destination in its own way. Gao & Zhang (2009, p.2) state that tourists pre-experience a particular destination through various sources about the destination attributes. Moreover, the authors argue that tourist destinations consist of a number of attributes that differentiate them from each other. Within the literature on destination marketing there is some research on destination perception, inter alia by Driscoll, Lawson and Niven, 1994 and Echtner & Ritchie, 2003.

Thus, the objective of this paper is to investigate if the existing destination image of Crans-Montana still matches with juveniles' perceptions about the destination. In the first step the authors reviewed the existing literature, followed by a survey conducted with young visitors/tourists. Having reported the main findings, the authors point out recommendations for further research with the limitations of this paper that the study was exploratory in nature and was intended as a pilot study. Findings should give an indication about a fit or mismatch of the given Swiss destination image. Hence, this piece of research should fill a gap in the existing research on destination branding.

**Key words:** Destination image, tourist perception and consumer behavior

# **Destination image and juveniles perception – does it still match?**

## **A case study of Crans-Montana**

### **Introduction**

The objective of this research paper is to investigate on destination image and the perception of travelers. The main focus is to explore if a current destination image of a destination, in this case Crans- Montana, still fits within the perception of juvenile travelers.

Various researchers have focused on destination marketing and destination image and the perception of tourists (e.g. Marino, 2010; D`Silva and D`Silva, 2008). The results of this academic research vary, specifically while exploring the moderating effects and measurement of destination marketing and its perception. There is some agreement that an existing destination with a given destination image might be in need to be adjusted to be in line with current and potential tourist's expectations (e.g. Bozbay and Ozen, 2008).

The authors conduct a survey with a simple-random sample of the chosen population (young tourists) in the age between 16 and 30 to research in-depth the match of destination image and perception of tourists. The outcomes are discussed using a case study approach of the destination Crans-Montana. The analysis of the data collected does show some mixed results, whereas some of the findings are in line with existing research, others are indeed controversial. Therefore, the recommendations are to regularly assess its status and adjust the given destination image if necessary.

### **Literature review**

Collins (2008, p.75) defines tourism as a “temporary movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live and work, generally for pleasure, although there is a growing sector for business tourism, and their activities during their stay at these destinations”. Further, tourism can be identified as an “industry which operates world-wide including travel, hotels, transportation and all other components that, including promotion, serve the needs and wants of travelers” (Goeldner *et al*, 2006, p.5). Lots of areas are researched within tourism, for example destination branding, eco-tourism, sustainability,

amongst others. This research intends to focus on the destination image and its perception, using a case study approach of a Swiss tourism destination, in this case Crans-Montana.

### **Tourist perception vs. destination image**

Various academics have researched on the topics *destination image* and *tourist perceptions*, inter alia D' Silva et al. (2008), Beerli et al. (2004) and others. Rashid et al (2008, p.2) critically reviewed destination image literature by arguing, that "in tourism literature, most of the attention has been devoted to understanding the formation of image, the measurement of destination image, factors influencing it, the relationship between image of and preference for the destinations and destination evaluation". Further, the authors supplement this statement that "definitions of destination image are varied and the frequent usage of 'impressions' or 'perception'" has been used by researchers to describe the destination or the area (Rashid et al, 2008, p.2).

### **Destination marketing**

As with any other products or services, the effective promotion of a tourism destination requires a strategic marketing analysis, including enquiries about the needs, wants and expectations of tourists. A destination needs to be positioned in relation to its competitors, and indicating its relative advantages. The process of positioning should aim to identify the destination with an image, perception, concept or characteristic which captures its essence and broadens its appeal to its targeted clients (Rossides, 2010). Rashid et al. (2008, p.1) state that "a tourism destination is reviewed as an amalgamation of places that generating not just experiences, but provide a memorable destination experience to the tourists. The challenge for today's tourism marketers is that tourists have to be enticed since the tourism destination is an intensely competitive and many destination competing with one and another to attract the similar segment of potential tourists, or repeated visitor".

The underlying concept of destination marketing, which was pioneered as an area of study by authors such as Philip Kotler (2006) and others, is that all places – cities, regions, countries – are subject to challenges as a result of global, political and economic changes, as well as normal processes of evolution and decay. Faced with scarce resources, and a growing number of competitors, destinations have to rely increasingly on their own local resources if they are to survive and prosper. Despite the powerful internal and external forces that

challenge them, however, destinations have the collective resources and people to improve their relative competitive positions (Rossides, 2010).

### **Destination branding**

Kwortnik and Hawkes (2011, p.7) argue that “a destination brand is essentially the promise of an experience, one that the traveller desires and that the destination delivers”. Cai (2002, p.723) defines a destination brand as “perceptions about a place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory”. Destination branding is a relatively new concept applied to destinations and consists of marketing activities to create a logo, promise, and image that are accurately perceived by consumers. Ritchie *et al* (1998, p. 2) define destination branding as “a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience”.

### **Destination image**

There is increasing interest and demand for destinations – countries, regions, cities – to develop and market themselves as brands. These destinations, often organized through the form of a Tourist Board or a similar, quasi-governmental organisation, seek to differentiate themselves from the competition – other destinations – through their unique selling points, appealing to both national and international audiences (Rossides, 2010)

The research of destination image can be traced back to the early of 1970s. Rashid *et al* (2008, p.3) state that destination image is basically defined as a mental picture or impression of a place, a product, or an experience held by the general public (Milman *et al.*, 1995), or a compilation of the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination (Crompton, 1979).

### **Destination image vs. perception of tourists**

In a marketing and tourism context, perception is considered as a major influential predictor in directing decision making and consumer behavior (e.g. Richardson & Crompton, 1998;

Woodside & Lysonski, 1998). Each individual selects, organizes and interprets received information in a unique way. This image depends on both a specific stimuli which are related to the environment and the individual's own characteristics and situations (Beerli *et al.*, 2004). Destination perception accumulates attributes, both physical and mythical (Correia *et al.*, 2007). Tourists pre-experience a particular destination through various sources about the destination attributes. Schiffman and Kanuk (1987, p.174) state that "perception is the process through which people see the world around themselves". The authors argue that perception does not have to be the truth, in some cases they are formed without actual experience and often they are a subjective observation of the world. Having this definition in mind, it is clear that changing existing perceptions of tourists about a destination is challenging. Best is to enable tourists to experience the local destination themselves.

Research on tourist destination by many researchers has focused on the relationship between satisfaction of the customer as well as the quality of the various services. Service has various features like intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability. An attractiveness of a tourist destination can be viewed as consisting of unique local features, cultural attributes, natural resources, infrastructure, services and others (D' Silva *et al.*, 2008).

Nowadays, destination marketing is an essential component of any destination to promote its destination, to build a brand and to create a strong destination image, which in turn should lead to increased customer loyalty. However, it is important to keep in mind the perception of current and potential customers and if necessary to adjust the destination marketing. In times of globalisation and stiff competition between various destinations all over the world, the customer orientation is key. Therefore destinations have to try to fulfil the needs, wants and expectations of these customers and aligning those to the given destination image.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts an inductive approach in order to first "get a feel of what is going on, as so to understand the nature of the problem" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007, p. 118). The research objective is to investigate the match of the destination image and perception of young people, therefore, no hypothesis has been developed.

## **Research design**

The authors have chosen a mixed method research design, combining both approaches qualitative and quantitative research. In the first step the authors contacted by email the person in charge for marketing at Crans-Montana Tourisme, to investigate the current destination image and branding of Crans-Montana. Then the authors have developed the survey instrument, a questionnaire to collect information of the chosen population of young people to indicate their perception of the destination image of Crans-Montana. Participants have been asked for their opinion on a five-point Likert scale. To ensure validity and reliability of the questionnaire the authors have discussed the survey instrument with three marketing and tourism professors from a reputed hotel management school. The population consists of young people, aged between 16 and 30. The sample, in total 75, was carefully chosen out of young people, just arrived in Switzerland, aiming to stay for educational purposes in Switzerland.

## **Destination image of Crans-Montana**

As indicated, the authors have chosen Crans-Montana as the case, and they have interviewed tourism experts in order to get their view on the given destination image.

Crans-Montana describes itself as “a small town in the mountains, and located on the sunniest hillside in the valley with a Mediterranean character”. Furthermore Crans Montana promotes itself as “a place that nature has shaped for holidays and that “Crans Montana aims for excellence” (Bianco, 2010). Therefore, Crans-Montana promotes itself as having “from bed & breakfasts to luxury chalets, from guesthouses to dream five-star hotels, from chic bars to wild clubs, from quick bite to gastronomy by well-down chefs, the choice of experiences on offer is virtually infinite and is sure to meet everyone's desires.” (www.Crans-Montana.ch).

## **Data collection and survey**

The survey instrument, a questionnaire, has been developed by focusing on the research topic of destination image and perception of young people. The following questions have been used in order to understand and analyze young people’s perception of a destination. It starts with enquiring demographic data such as age, gender and continent of origin. Next, the authors have asked the participants for their knowledge about Crans-Montana, followed

by questions about their perceptions about Crans-Montana. The data were collected in August/September 2010.

**Data analysis**

A total of 75 questionnaires have been sent out, with 50 being received and the response rate has been 66.6 percent. Respondents are divided into groups according to their gender which 54 percent were male and 46 percent female. The tables 1, 2 and 3 show further details regarding their age group, gender and continent of origin.

**Findings**

Tourism activities in Crans-Montana were first mentioned in 1905. Today, *Crans-Montana Tourisme*, the local tourism office, is in charge for almost all promotional activities as well as the destination branding of this touristic area. During the last five years Crans Montana renewed its logo and design, “because we wanted to show that Crans-Montana is a dynamic resort where a lot is happening: events- activities-gastronomy... Crans-Montana suffered from the image of being snobbish, old, and we wanted to show that it is absolutely not the case. The new logo looks more modern and up-to-date and therefore is able to attract a wider range of different customer segments“(Interview Bianco, 2010).

Next, the data collected from juveniles are presented, starting with the demographics of the respondents.

*Table 1, Age of respondents*

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	16-21	44	88.0
	21-25	6	12.0
	Total	50	100.0

The ‘age of the respondents’ results show that 88% are in the age between 16 and 21 years old and only 12% between 21 and 25 years of age.

Table 2, Gender

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Male	27	54.0
	Female	23	46.0
	Total	50	100.0

The results for gender are well balanced showing that 27 respondents were male and 23 female.

Table 3, Country of origin

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Europe	6	12.0
	Asia	30	60.0
	America	4	8.0
	Africa	4	8.0
	Oceania	2	4.0
	N/A	4	8.0
	Total	50	100.0

Interestingly most of the participants come from Asia (30x), the next bigger group from European countries (6x), followed by America and Africa.

The following questions have been developed to investigate tourists' familiarity and expectations with the chosen destination.

*Table 4, Awareness of the destination*

**Where did you first hear about Crans Montana?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Home country	7	14.0	14.3	14.3
	Switzerland	38	76.0	77.6	91.8
	Other	3	6.0	6.1	98.0
	N/A	2	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total		50	100.0		

The majority of respondents (38x) have heard about Crans-Montana in Switzerland, meaning they were not aware of this destination in their home country. Interestingly, a small number of participants have already heard about Crans-Montana in their home country.

*Table 5, Awareness of destination attributes*

**Are you aware of the logo and slogan of Crans-Montana?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	8	16.0	16.0	16.0
	Yes	21	42.0	42.0	58.0
	I don't know	21	42.0	42.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

The results are somewhat mixed, however, almost half of the respondents are aware of the logo and slogan of Crans-Montana, the others are not aware of or did not specify.

*Table 6, Rating of destination activities*

Please indicate the level of activities of Crans Montana. Crans Montana offers a choice of activities

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	3	6.0	6.0	6.0
	2	1	2.0	2.0	8.0
	3	7	14.0	14.0	22.0
	Neutral	16	32.0	32.0	54.0
	5	14	28.0	28.0	82.0
	6	8	16.0	16.0	98.0
	Strongly agree	1	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

The majority of the participants are in the neutral part of agreement in terms of rating the activities which Crans Montana offers.

*Table 7, Rating of destination attractiveness*

How would you rate that Crans Montana offers a warm and friendly environment?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Highly disagree	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
	2	1	2.0	2.0	4.0
	3	9	18.0	18.0	22.0
	Neutral	9	18.0	18.0	40.0
	5	11	22.0	22.0	62.0
	6	14	28.0	28.0	90.0
	Strongly agree	5	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Rating Crans-Montana’s environment the respondents show quite mixed results with a slight imbalance in favour of this statement that Crans-Montana offers a warm and friendly environment.

*Table 8, Rating of Crans-Montana’s variety of leisure and other activities*

**How would you rate that "Crans Montana offers a variety of leisure and relaxation activities"?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	2	4.0	4.0	4.0
	2	3	6.0	6.0	10.0
	3	3	6.0	6.0	16.0
	Neutral	12	24.0	24.0	40.0
	5	14	28.0	28.0	68.0
	6	11	22.0	22.0	90.0
	Strongly agree	5	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

If asked how would they rate that "Crans-Montana offers a variety of leisure and relaxation activities", the participants show again very mixed results but stay mostly on the neutral position.

*Table 9, Rating of destination brand promise*

**How would you rate that "Crans Montana meets everyone's desires"?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NA	2	4.0	4.0	4.0
	Strongly disagree	4	8.0	8.0	12.0
	2	3	6.0	6.0	18.0
	3	11	22.0	22.0	40.0
	Neutral	12	24.0	24.0	64.0
	5	13	26.0	26.0	90.0
	6	4	8.0	8.0	98.0
	Strongly agree	1	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

If asked for a rating of the following statement that “Crans Montana meets everyone's desires”, the respondents are more on the neutral position regarding this statement.

*Table 10, Rating of destination customer orientation*

How would you rate that Crans Montana offer good customer service in Crans Montana?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid NA	6	12.0	12.0	12.0
Strongly disagree	1	2.0	2.0	14.0
2	2	4.0	4.0	18.0
3	8	16.0	16.0	34.0
4	11	22.0	22.0	56.0
5	10	20.0	20.0	76.0
6	9	18.0	18.0	94.0
Strongly agree	3	6.0	6.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

The majority of respondents agree with the statement that the destination offers good customer service.

## Discussion

The analysis of the data show some interesting results which are partially in line with existing research on destination image and perception of tourists (e.g. D’Silva, 2008; Beerli, 2004)

The key points of the findings are:

- Mixed results regarding awareness of the destination Crans-Montana,
- The perception of young people referring to the destination of Crans-Montana contains mainly entertaining and winter ski resort attributes,
- The rating of destination attractiveness shows mixed to neutral results.

The findings of the survey indicate that almost half of the respondents are well aware of Crans Montana as a destination, knowing its logo and slogan. It seems that once arrived in Switzerland, the young people learn fast about the different destinations.

On the other hand, the people in charge for promoting Crans-Montana might review their promotional activities in relations of a huge number of young people not having heard about Crans-Montana in their home countries. Again, the question arises if Crans-Montana is doing enough to promote its destination for new target markets. Johnson et al, (2006) state the importance of youth tourism and its increasing numbers, which can lead to increased success of a destination financially and image related.

If asked what comes to their mind with regards to Crans-Montana, the respondents demonstrate some knowledge about Crans-Montana and its image and activities. Here the keywords are pubs, ski, snow (including cold etc) and shopping, quite in line with Crans-Montana's image (see appendix).

On the other hand the respondents have mixed approaches regarding the offers. With regards to the rating of the activities Crans-Montana offers, the respondents indicate a quite neutral or indecisive position. This finding may lead to the question of Crans-Montana is in need of adjusting or shaping its destination image to match with potential customers perceptions.

A majority of participants agree with the statement that Crans-Montana offers a warm and friendly environment. The participants are more positive regarding the offer of a variety of leisure and relaxation activities, indicating that they acknowledge the offers. Regarding the statement that "Crans-Montana meets everyone's desires" the respondents are somewhat indecisive. The same is given for the rating of the customer service in Crans-Montana. This finding should alert the tourism managers in charge to review their given brand promise.

All over the results show that there is some space for improvement for Crans-Montana and its stakeholders to promote better their activities and underline much clearer their statement and missions. It looks like that the current destination image of Crans-Montana is quite acknowledged but does not fit within all aspects and facet's into the perception of young people.

## **Limitations**

Limitations of this paper are that the study was exploratory in nature and was intended as a pilot study. Furthermore, the following limitations have to be discussed; chosen population,

sample size, questionnaire design and the issue of a longitudinal study. The sample size, in this case 75, might be too small to cover the population. Unfortunately due to financial and time constraints it was not possible to enhance the sample size. Despite the fact that the authors contacted various tourism and marketing experts the questionnaire design might not give the full opportunity to reveal all relevant aspects. Lastly a longitudinal study would give a better insight in changes of tourist's perception over time.

In terms of bias it has been noted that the majority of the respondents came mostly from one continent – in this case Asia – therefore the results have to be viewed with an advice to caution.

### **Further Research Directions**

The implications for practitioners and stakeholders, such as tourism offices, hoteliers etc in destination are that they should conduct more research on the perception of young people/tourists, current and potential to be able to fine-tune and adjust if necessary their destination marketing. One of the problems for all stakeholders in destinations is the fact that the customers are not loyal anymore at all and trends are changing quicker and quicker. Things (destination) which have been "cool" today might not longer seen "cool" or trendy in a couple of years, and nothing is worse than the fact that current and potential customers perceive a destination as old-fashioned or out-of-date.

Further research should be directed to destination branding, using the case study of Crans-Montana, followed by the next step researching the gap in perception of young tourist and the senior generation. Lastly, the authors plan to extend the study with respect to tourist perception of ski resorts in general.

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### **Others**

Email interview Mr. Xavier Bianco, Crans Montans Tourism, 2010-09-29

## Appendix 1

### *Young tourist's perception about Crans Montana*

#### What comes to mind when you think of Crans Montana?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
Alcoholics	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
Beautiful, and peautiful	3	6.0	6.0	8.0
Club, Disco, Clubbing	9	18.0	18.0	26.0
Cold	2	4.0	4.0	30.0
Expensive	1	2.0	2.0	32.0
Golf resorts	1	2.0	2.0	34.0
Les Roches	1	2.0	2.0	36.0
Mountains, fresh air	4	8.0	8.0	44.0
Nothing	1	2.0	2.0	46.0
Old people, do not invest	1	2.0	2.0	48.0
Pace, relax	1	2.0	2.0	50.0
Shopping	5	10.0	10.0	60.0
Ski, ski resort, ski related	12	24.0	24.0	88.0
Small, less than expected	1	2.0	2.0	90.0
Snow	2	2.0	2.0	92.0
Something	1	2.0	2.0	94.0
Switzerland	1	2.0	2.0	96.0
Tourist visit	1	2.0	2.0	98.0
Travel destination	1	2.0	2.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

The keywords are pubs, ski, snow and shopping.