Marketing Strategy of Rural Tourism: A Case Study of Yim Tin Tsai, Hong Kong

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Abstract: Rural tourism, which integrates agriculture industry, folk customs, natural landscape and traditional tourism, has become one of the most popular choices for leisure activities and holidays. In the rural revitalization context in China, rural tourism is also developed to village conservation and sustainability development. However, some released projects did not achieve the expected results and finally ended with declined business or disputes. The paper took Yin Tim Tsai, a small village in Hong Kong as an example, discussing the marketing strategies and the feasibility of its tourism, and provide recommendations to promote the rural tourism marketing.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Marketing Strategies, Yim Tin Tsai.

1. Introduction

Rural areas are no longer interpreted as the places where only agriculture activities lie in. Changes have been taken place in China, where rural tourism industry rose in 1980s. According to statistics, China's leisure agriculture and rural tourism attracted more than three billion people in 2018, with an income of more than 800 billion yuan. In the past two decades, China has been implementing rural revitalization strategy. In Hongkong, the Special Administrative Region government promulgated New Nature Conservation Policy and other village conservation strategies since 2004 (Zhang, 2020). The supportive policies promoted the development of rural tourism. Meanwhile, rural tourism plays a vital role in promoting tourism economy, local culture preservation and village sustainable development.

With the increasing number of tourists and people's enthusiasm for rural tourism, the scale of rural tourism industry continues to grow, and the industry competition is becoming increasingly fierce. Although the rural tourism market expanded some villages have already achieved rural revitalization through rural tourism, there are also cases failed attracting adequate tourists’ attention, owing to ineffective marketing strategies. Therefore, how to formulate a marketing model base on the local conditions and build influence around tourists has become an issue that cannot be ignored.

2. Background

2.1. An overview of Yim Tin Tsai

Yim Tin Tsai means “Little Salt Pan” in Cantonese. It is a small island, rich in history and natural scenery, located 15 minutes by ferry from the Sai Kung pier in Hong Kong. The historical significance, biological diversity and cultural heritage makes it an idea destination for tourists.

This island was once the home to 500 to 1,200 people who lived on fishing and salt-extraction in 1940s, when it was at its peak population. But as the rural life on islands gradually became more difficult, the population began to decline due to migration. By the 1960s, the only primary school faced closing as the last students left Yim Tin Tsai for higher education. The island’s salt pan also shut down because the salt product was not as competitive as the cheaper salt from mainland China and Vietnam. The last villagers left by the 1990s. This small village stayed abandoned until 2000, when descendants of the original villagers went back to Yim Tin Tsai and started revitalizing the island (Xinhua Net, 2020).

2.2. The Rural Tourism Development in Yin Tim Tsai

The restoration project of Yim Tin Tsai officially started from March 17, 2013, and completed in September, achieving the goal of tourists capacity of 300 people and salt pan restoration. In 2015, Yim Tin Tsai restoration project won the UNESCO Asia Pacific Cultural Heritage Protection Award (Award of Distinction) (Takungpao, 2013).

Today, the island has been revived thanks to villagers’ effort and conservation policies released by Hong Kong government. Tourism volume have grown in Yim Tin Tsai. Since it is easy to explore this island with natural scenery and distinctive Hakka culture on foot, Yin Tin Tsai attracts day trippers, nature enthusiasts, study tour groups and other different tourist groups. The Salt & Light Preservation Centre is a charitable organization on the island, responsible for promotion and conservation of Yim Tin Tsai cultural relics and the inheritance of religious culture, through planning tour services, workshops, and thematic experiences. The organization, along with the local villagers, is devoted to village development and preservation, making Yim Tin Tsai revitalization combined with culture, religion, biology, and tourism (Salt & Light Preservation Centre, 2022).

3. Ps Marketing Mix Strategy

According to McCarthy (1960), the 4Ps marketing mix framework is a tool used in marketing. The mix strategy is aimed to determine the point of difference of products and brands, in other words, the only quality that distinguishes the products from competitors. The framework includes 4 elements: product, price, place and promotion. By keeping the marketing mix strategy in mind, marketing professionals can better concentrate on what are the key points so as to help organizations make tactical decisions when launching new products or updating existing products.
4. Marketing Strategies of Tourism in Yim Tin Tsai

4.1. Product

Rural tourism products, from the perspective of entrants, are the rural tourism resources and facilities that rural tourism operators must have, providing rural tourists with all the goods and services required for the whole process of rural tourism. From the perspective of demanders, rural tourism products refer to the experience that rural tourists pay a certain amount of money, time and energy to satisfy their desire for rural tourism. Rural tourists obtain psychological and spiritual satisfaction by purchasing and consuming rural tourism products (Zhang, Liu, Xiao & Yu, 2019).

Product mix refers to the complete set of products and/or services offered (Armstrong, Adam, Denize & Kotler, 2014). With the help of local conservation policies, in the past few years, 4 tourism product lines (also known as the width of product mix) were developed in Yim Tin Tsai: Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival, the Yim Tin Tsai saltpans, Hakka village, Yim Tin Tsai exhibition centre and the mangroves (see Table 1). Length refers to the total number of programs or spots in each product line, and depth refers to the number of variations within a product line.

For example, utilizing the advantage of local salt pans, the saltpans project restored the traditional way of sea salt extraction, which was almost a lost traditional skill; The Hakka village visit recorded the unique traditional history of this island, including St Joseph’s Chapel which built for Rev. Joseph Freinademetz, the first western missionary visiting the island; Hakka heritage exhibition centre was established with support and recognition from the villagers and turn the island into an “open museum” (Yang, 2020). Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival of different concepts was held successfully with support and recognition from participants as well as the public. Now, many artworks have become permanent exhibits on the island after the festival.

Table 1. Product mix of Rural Tourism in Yim Tin Tsai

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourism concepts (the width of product mix)</th>
<th>The Yim Tin Tsai salt pans</th>
<th>Hakka village visit</th>
<th>The Mangroves eco-trip</th>
<th>Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contents of projects (the length of product mix)</td>
<td>● Experience the traditional way of sea salt extraction</td>
<td>● Hakka ethic architecture</td>
<td>● The Jade Bridge</td>
<td>● Art exhibitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Sea salt extraction workshop</td>
<td>● Tasting Hakka cuisine and Sweet Steamed Buns workshop</td>
<td>● A sea view of “Moses dividing the sea”</td>
<td>● Video and photo competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● St Joseph’s Chapel</td>
<td>● Mangrove ecological landscape</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Yim Tin Tsai Heritage Exhibition Centre</td>
<td>● Centennial Camphor Tree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Price

In the rural tourism marketing mix, price is the only factor that generates revenue, while other factors appear as costs. The price is determined by mutual negotiation between buyers and sellers and is the basis for the exchange of products. Buyers and sellers negotiate with each other and finally reach an acceptable and mutually satisfactory price (Zhao, 2020).

The pricing of tourism in Yim Tin Tsai varies depending on different programs. According to the price list provided by Salt & Light Preservation Centre (2022), the consumption in Yim Tin Tsai has been lower since 2022 (see table 2). The discount strategy offers discount for kids and the elderly, attracting them and their guardians to visit. It also adopted the bundle price strategy. For example, a round ferry trip only costed $70, tourists could enter the Salt pan and Heritage Exhibition Centre for free by holding the ferry ticket. Therefore, with a through ticket, tourists would be more willing to stay longer and experience other projects on the island.

Table 2. Price of group tour in Yim Tin Tsai

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fees (transportation included)</th>
<th>$70</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups appointment (book 30 days in advance)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site appointment</td>
<td>$70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discounted tickets (for kids aged 4-12 and the elderly aged over 65)</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees (transportation not included)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group visitors with appointments</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent visitors without appointments</td>
<td>$20 for Heritage Exhibition Centre $20 for Salt pan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fees include guide service and workshop</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guide service</td>
<td>$45 for a two-hour trip $65 for a three-hour in-depth travel $65-$100 for thematic trip $100 for workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customized Services</td>
<td>The program charged varies depending on the situation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3. Place

Place strategy is very important for the promotion of rural tourism products and brand image. Place strategy of rural tourism refers to the locations of tourist attractions, the distribution channels that help transfer tourist products to tourists, the transportation and so on. When designing rural tourism distribution channels, the characteristics of the rural tourism product itself, consumers, competition, operators and the environment should be considered.

Yim Tin Tsai can be reached by a kaito (a small ferry) from the Sai Kung Public Pier. Among the numerous kaito operators on the pier, tourists could look for those with the Yim Tin Tsai flag. The kaito only runs on Saturday, Sunday, and public holidays. Tour groups can adjust their kaito schedule if applying online. Sai Kung reception and reception on the island provided payment, consultation, visit reception and kaito arrangement services (Salt & Light Preservation Centre, 2022).

In 2021, to reduce the influence brought by COVID-19 and allow local and overseas tourists enjoy the Arts Festival even at home, 360-degree virtual reality function was available on the official website of the Arts Festival to display the scenic spots and artworks in Yim Tin Tsai. Participants can further understand stories of the scenic spots of the island and the creative concept of the artworks through the audio guides on the website (Tourism Commission, 2021).

4.4. Promotion

The promotional strategy for rural tourism consists of tools such as advertising, personal selling, sales promotion and public relations. It should deliver a clear, consistent and compelling message about the rural tourism product in order to communicate effectively with consumers.

As the Salt & Light Preservation Centre is a charitable group and most of conservation work still relies on community and voluntary participation, there are not much commercial advertising to promote Yim Tin Tsai rural tourism. Marketing public relations is the main promotion strategy. Marketing public relations refers to promoting a product or service by creating hype around to occupy the earned media coverage. The first PR strategy is social responsibility. Yin Tin Tsai rural tourism was developed around three themes: Catholic culture, Hakka culture and ecology. The themes emphasize the social responsibility of culture and ecological diversity conservation that Yim Tin Tsai tourism takes. Social responsibility is embodied in campaign slogans, practices and so on. On Yin Tin Tsai owned media, Yim Tin Tsai Festival and Salt & Light Preservation Centre official website, there are often PR campaigns released, such as the “Sky, Earth and Human” annual concept, Salt and Light farming experience project. There is also a notice on island that all wastes brought by tourists should be taken away when leaving the island to protect the environment. Community engagement is also an important PR strategy in Yim Tin Tsai. The restoration and management of the village adopts the concept of "ecomuseum", which means the community take the responsibility of collecting, displaying, research, education, and promotion of Yim Tin Tsai culture. At the same time, the governance process also pays attention to the joint participation of local villagers, so that local the social and cultural value can be maximized (Agapito & Chan, July 2019).

5. Problem Analysis

5.1. Product Mix Lacked in Length and Depths

According to table 1, the product length of Yim Tin Tsai tourism is 12, the number of product lines is 4. It could be inferred that the average product length is 3, which indicates that each tourism project only contains three spots or programs. In addition to length, the depth of product mix is limited. Depth refers to the number of variations offered within a product line (Armstrong, Adam, Denize & Kotler, 2014). As to rural tourism in Yim Tin Tsai, most of programs tend to be fixed. Although the arts festival has different themes every year, the layout of activities has not been changed rapidly so far. In 2022, the Salt & Light Preservation Centre announced a treasure hunt games for travelers, however, the contents remained the same.

This could be resulted from the governance model of local community participation. In order to keep the authenticity of village, the product design rural tourism put emphasis on the island history and the willingness of villagers. Therefore, the risks towards rural conservation and villager’s interests must be considered before new projects are developed. However, lacked in length and depths, the product mix might not satisfy the consumers’ diversified needs. Especially for those who have visited Yim Tim Tsai, they might not choose to travel again since there would be nothing new to them.

5.2. No Complete Prices Standard for Consumption on Island

The charge list above (see table 2) shows some of the charged activities on island. However, some consumers complained that the consumption on island had not a clear pricing standard, such as participating different workshops, consumption on local souvenirs and customized tour guide. The bundle pricing strategy simplified the pricing process, lowering the selling costs and making consumers take less effort on travel decision-making. But if the contents in the price bundle are ambiguous or dynamic, this strategy will be counterproductive. Furthermore, the complaints from consumers could become bad publicity on social media, which would be unfavorable for the reputation of Yim Tin Tsai and visitor volumes.

5.3. Limited Transportation and Channels

The only transportation to get to Yim Tin Tsai is the kaito ferry. Also, the only pier to get on board is in Sai Kung, where are no subway lines. Tourist in Hongkong downtown areas should take a 60-minutes-bus or taxi to the pier and wait for the kaito 20 minutes in advance. There are 6 shifts departs from Sai Kung pier and 4 shifts departs from Yim Tin Tsai pier from Tuesday to Sunday. The schedule depends on whether conditions as well. This brings inconvenience for tourists especially international travelers who want to visit Sai Kung and other islands round. During Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival, when the tourist volume reaches the peak, the transportation might be overloaded.

The sells channel for Yim Tin Tsai will be another constraint. Tourists could only book tickets on site or make appointments in advance, while booking online has become popularized. Most of tourists are getting used to booking services on travel applications, such as Agoda and OpenRice for accommodation, My Hong Kong Guide for geographical
information and TripAdvisor for tickets and transportation. If
the visitors were not Hong Kong locals and had to plan their
whole trips in Hong Kong beforehand, obviously they would
prefer booking on applications to making appointments by
phone or e-mails. In case visitors decide to change the travel
plan, they can cancel or change bookings with several clicks.
It is essential for Yim Tin Tsai to increase and upgrade the
sells channel, so as to bring convenience for consumers.

5.4. PR Risks
Marketing public relations helps to build brand image and
reputation for Yim Tin Tsai tourism in a cost-saving way.
However, the PR strategy has limitations. Firstly, although
there are many marketing campaigns, success is not
guaranteed. If the strategy is not well-executed, the village
will run the risk of getting no response from the target
audience. For example, the theme of Yim Tin Tsai arts festival is
“Sky, Earth and Human”, which means the target consumer
group participates in the festival for the artworks of
corresponding concepts. Since the artworks in Yim Tin Tsai
are completed by artists local and overseas, they could fail to
convey neither the concepts nor the village culture. In that
way, the PR strategy will lose the effect because the
consumers cannot get what they expect to see. Or sometimes
the strategy was not the problem, the key message may be just
not impactful enough and passes the target audience by. For
rural tourism in Yim Tin Tsai, the promotion slogans often
only focus on words like nature, quietness, and farming
experience, while the iconic features of villages are not
indicated. When travelers plan their trips and skim on
websites, the homogeneous slogans will make them confused
about the point-of-difference of these rural tourism projects.

Secondly, managing public relations is highly dependable
on the willingness of third-party endorsers to publish the
content, which means that the subject of promotion has less
direct influence or control over PR campaigns. It takes a lot
of time to finalize the news release and photos of campaign
and promotional content, but only a few of journalists and
editors will read and decide to post the content. The
information of Yim Tin Tsai tourism is mainly posted on their
self-owned official website, while on influential travel media
hardly any information could be found. Even after Yim Tin
Tsai successfully held the arts festival for three years and won
the UNESCO Award, the news was not widely spread on
social media. Promotion is crucial for tourism before public
holidays and other tourism season. however, it cannot be
known exactly when the PR content will be posted as well as
in what way the content will be presented. Therefore,
although the PR content build the reputation for Yim Tin Tsai,
it might not reach the target audience with an impressive
image.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Develop the Length and Depth of Product
Line Based on The Existing Projects
Considering the conservation policy and the restoration
progress of Yim Tin Tsai, the marketers can develop the
length and depth of product line on the existing tourism
projects, so that the consumer experience can be improved
with least impact on the original product strategy and ecology
on island. To develop the length of product mix, Yim Tin Tsai
can create and add new content to the current insufficient
tourism projects. At present, Yim Tin Tsai has not developed
any seaside tourism project. It can take the advantage of
natural landscape and ecological system, combining with
Hakka traditional fishing culture, establish marine sightseeing
tour projects and fishery experiencing projects. Integrating
arts elements in Yim Tin Tsai Art Festival and other projects
could be another effective way. Every year a number of
artworks stands out in Yim Tin Tsai Art Festival, but they
usually be displayed in forms of painting, architecture, and
crafts. Local Hakka culture can be blended in a variety of
artistic and cultural activities, such as rural landscape sketch,
Hakka folk song concerts, the Hong Kong village history and
culture open lectures, etc., to enrich the tourists’ experience.

According to marketing segmentation, marketers can
provide different segments with different tourist options in
each project to improve the depth of product mix. Based on
behavioural segmentation, four segments can be identified as
the target consumer groups of Yim Tin Tsai, which are casual
visitors, nature lovers, history seekers and arts lovers. These
four groups of customers usually focus on different parts and
have different preference during their trip. The Yim Tin Tsai
tourism product mix gives priority to ecology sightseeing and
culture exploration. Furthermore, the cultural experience is
mostly in the form of education and learning, so the tourism
project may be more attractive to visit study groups and
researchers. While for young casual visitors and those who
just visit the village to escape from the busy city life, some
sectors in the tourism project often cannot offer content as
what they expect most. Therefore, more options can be added.
For example, there can be an interactive zone in the Heritage
Exhibition Centre, which aims to hold activities and
interactive programs to look back in the village history.
Cooking experience can also be merged into the sea salt
extraction workshop. After the sea salt being extracted,
visitors can try cooking with those salt. Such approaches
above help improve the depth of product mix, meet more
consumer demands and add enjoyment to the trip.

6.2. Build A Charge Standard Supervised by
The Government and Village Committee
As to the issue of no unified charging standard on island,
the government, the village committee and the Salt & Light
Preservation Centre should work together, analyzing the
unreasonable pricing of all products and services, referring to
other Hong Kong tourism’s charge standard and tourism
consumption of the past few years, finally revise a integrated
charge standard for Yim Tin Tsai. The revised standard should
contain all the tourism projects, transportation,
accommodation, and other consumption. Pricing higher than
market price or dynamic pricing should be avoided.

Bundle pricing can still be adopted as one of the pricing
strategies, only if the bundled products and services are
explained with details. Services like customized guidance,
group visits and accommodation are allowed to have dynamic
prices depending on peak/slack season, which should be
notified with the range of price variation. Last but not least,
the complete charge standard should be posted on the Salt
& Light Preservation Centre official website to the public as
well as other official media channels, getting ready for
supervision from market administrative departments, Yim Tin
Tsai village committee and tourists. In the meantime, tourists’
complaints and feedback towards pricing need to be paid
attention to, as it is a vital way to supervision.
6.3. Improve the Transportation Conditions and Develop Multiple Marketing Channels

In order to improve tourists’ satisfaction and boost the tourist volume, transportation conditions Yim Tin Tsai tourism need to be improved. First of all, there could be one more Kaito shift for early in the morning and another in the evening, for those who want to go on a deep in-depth travel the island, or those who plan their trip within half of a day. Secondly, the tourism situation of Sai kung and surrounded islands needs to be investigated to develop a kaito route starting from Sai Kung pier, via Yim Tin Tsai pier and other tourist island. The integrated route makes it convenient for tourists travelling around islands around Sai Kung as well as drive the tourism economy in other rural areas. Finally, Yim Tin Tsai needs to improve the public transportation on the island. Bike rental service can be provided on island, which will bring different travelling experience and be correspondent to the requirement of ecology conservation. Walking inconvenience problem cannot be ignored since there are the elder people, kids, and the disabled people. So it is suggested that the tourists centre prepare an electronic sightseeing car travelling between tourists sites, so that the inconvenient tourists can hop on and hop off. The sightseeing car can also play a role of safety inspection on the island in case of emergency or accidents.

Yim Tin Tsai can develop multi-channel sales mode. For instance, the ticket purchase link and customized service booking should be attached on the official website. The rural tourism can also develop distribution channels by cooperating with mobile travel applications, travel websites and offline travel agencies. The different distribution channels bring convenience for travelers to book services and plan their schedule in advance, which reduces the resistance of the tourist’s consumption.

6.4. Manage digital communication for PR enhancement

Promoting through public relation contributes to positive reputation and clear brand positioning of rural tourism. However, the efficiency and effect of public communication is limited. In the context of information revolution, rural tourism requires digital communications for promotion and marketing public relations if it wants to gain more market share and attract more potential customers. On social media platforms and video-sharing websites such as Facebook, TikTok and YouTube, social media account managers of Yim Tin Tsai tourism can encourage tourists to post texts, photos, and videos of their trip in Yim Tin Tsai, or share and retweet the original posters and manage relation with them. These experiencers will become the online key opinion leaders, sharing what their feel about the tourism in Yim Tin Tsai on public media and personal social media in forms of blogs, tweets, vlogs, etc. This helps with leading positive attitude towards Yim Tin Tsai tourism, intensifying publicity to enhance the effect of PR management.

7. Conclusion

Facing the problem of population loss, destruction of ethnic culture and traditional architectural heritage, the conservation and revitalization of traditional villages has become critical in China. As a significant approach to rural revitalization, promoting rural tourism needs more attention and effort. Based on 4Ps marketing mix strategy, the paper analyzed the current marketing strategy of Yin Tim Tsai tourism and the potential risks in the process of implementation, finally put forward suggestions for improvement. However, marketing rural tourism should be corresponding with Hong Kong local conservation policies as well as the collective interests of villagers. How to maintain the authenticity of traditional culture and prevent gentrification are also worth further discussion.

References


