



## ASPECTS REGARDING THE PROMOTION OF RESOURCES AND DESTINATIONS FOR BALNEOTHERAPY TOURISM THROUGH SPECIALIZED FAIRS AND EXHIBITIONS

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### Abstract

*Starting from the premise that one of the main issues negatively affecting the Romanian balneotherapy tourism development – despite the country having resources of extraordinary variety and quality – concerns the promotion of this type of tourism, an exploratory research was undertaken in order to evaluate how the resources and destinations for balneotherapy tourism are promoted through specialized fairs. Though conducted on a rather small sample, the study objectively reflects the actual interest given to balneotherapy tourism promotion through fairs and exhibitions in Romania.*

### Keywords:

Balneotherapy tourism, promotion, resources and destinations, tourism marketing, tourism fair/exhibition

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### 1. Introduction

The promotion of tourism resources and destinations implies a specific form of communication, consisting in the transmission, on various ways, of messages and information meant to inform the tourism operators and the potential tourists about the resources and destinations' characteristics and also about the component elements of tourism products that are available/ offered (Neacsu, Snak, Baron, 2010). It is also targeted the development of a positive attitude towards the resources and destinations as well as achieving favourable modifications of tourists' mentality and habits, influencing their purchasing and consumption behaviour.

### 2. Tourism fairs – a complex promotional activity

Tourism fairs take the form of short integrated promotion campaigns which allow reaching an important mass of potential consumers, offering the opportunity to address various categories of participants and enabling different promotional materials dissemination to an interested audience.

The complexity of this means of promotion is conferred mainly by three aspects: the great diversity and number of participants, the multitude of objectives and the possibility to associate a great variety of promotional techniques.

#### 2.1. Tourism fairs participants

The tourism fairs and exhibitions bring together several categories of participants. Obviously, in the center are the

visitors, they are the most important, as exhibitions are mainly addressed to them. Generally, the visitors are potential tourists – the final consumers – the demand bearers - the target of promotional actions, but visitors may also be companies which are not exhibitors.

The participants who can use tourism fairs as a promotion means – typically the supply bearers – may be: tourism agencies, tour-operators; representatives of: resorts, spas, accommodation and catering facilities; balneotherapy, recreation and amusement centers; cruise operators; specialized trainers (universities, faculties, highschoools, other education centers in the field); resource administrators (salt mines, mineral waters etc.); transport companies (airlines etc.), tourism press, publishing houses; tourism professional associations, associations for tourism promotion; entertainment services and equipment providers; tourism miscellaneous sellers; financial services providers, insurance companies; software developers and information services providers; various services providers. This kind of fairs are usually attended by official representatives from tourism ministry and national authorities, embassies, foreign tourism offices, domestic or foreign territorial representatives.

A participant or tourism operator may be exhibitor, co-exhibitor – provided it is present on a stand – or it may get the right to promote itself on the exhibition premises through various means of advertising (flyers, banners, audio / video spots etc).

## 2.2. The objectives of tourism fairs attendance

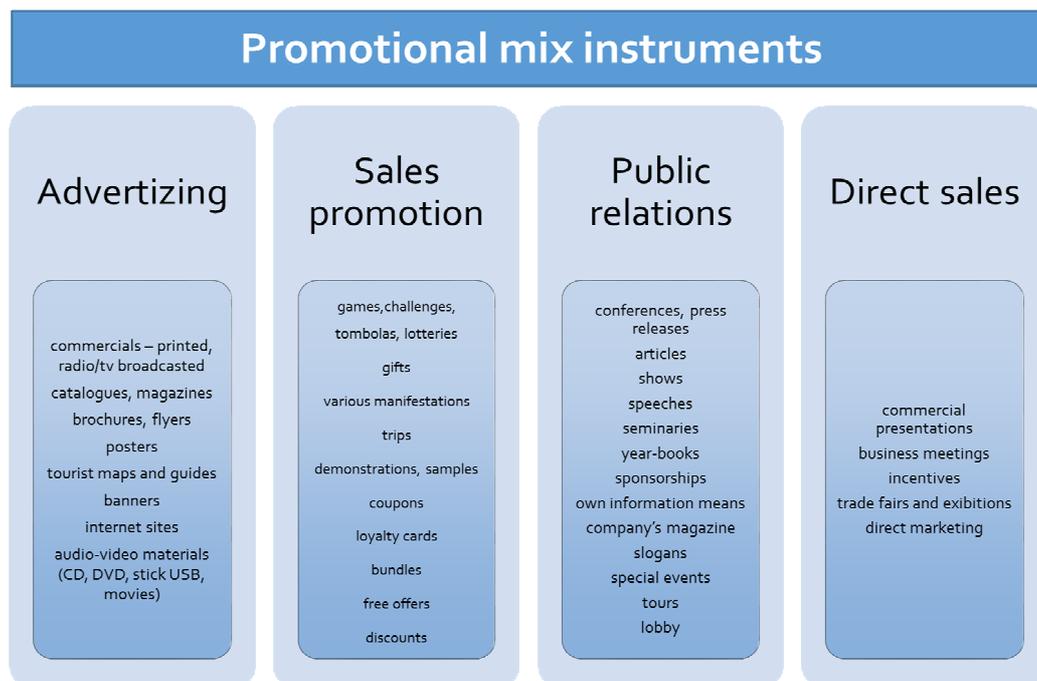
Generally, what the visitors of tourism fairs seek is: to inform themselves regarding the offer available on market at the time, to find products that satisfy their needs and wishes, to obtain price offers, to learn about what is new in the field. To reach their goal, they talk to the exhibitors' representatives at their stands, gather printed advertising materials, attend related events organized during the fair. On the other hand, the exhibitors have a much more charged agenda, due to numerous objectives that they may pursue, such as: presenting their offer to the public, presenting their offer to (potential) partners, launching new products, making direct sales, relationship building/ maintaining with the clients, creating potential clients databases, market research – of the needs and desires of potential consumers, exchanging expertise, studying competition, improving their image, promoting their brand, signing contracts/partnerships, gaining press attention.

## 2.3. Mixing the promotional techniques at tourism fairs

Starting with a series of criteria that may underlie the promotion activity classification such as: the recipients of promotional activities, the communication channels used, the efficiency of their use, the content of the promotional actions, specialists (Anghel, 2009, Stancioiu, 2004) distinguish four major categories of promotional activities: advertising, sales promotion, public relations and personal sales. The domain of promotion activity is very wide and encompasses various instruments that form the promotional mix, as may be observed in figure no.1

Tourism fairs provide a great opportunity for combining different promotion instruments, which, when professionally done, facilitates the accomplishment of the exhibitors' marketing objectives.

Figure 1. Promotional mix elements related to tourism fairs



(Source: after Stăncioiu F. 2004)

## 3. Methodology of research

The research underlying this article was carried out during the spring edition of Romania's Tourism Fair, which took place between 13-16 March 2014.

Assuming that one of the main issues negatively affecting Romanian balneotherapy tourism development – although the country has varied resources of excellent quality – refers to the promotion of this type of tourism, the aim of this exploratory research is to assess how the resources and destinations for

balneotherapy tourism are promoted at the moment through specialized fairs.

The research objectives were:

- To identify the categories of participants with activities in the balneotherapy tourism that were present at the manifestation (that use this mean of promotion);
- To assess the importance given to this event by means of allocated resources and repeated use of this kind of manifestations.

To identify the goals for participation in the fair and the extent to which they are considered to have been achieved.

Recording, by means of direct, personal observation, elements of positive or negative influence on promoting the balneotherapy tourism, mainly related to the participants' activity at their stands, without excluding other matters of interest.

Due to the aspects intended to be captured, mainly qualitative, but also to the time constraints, this field research employed the structured interview method. The subject selection was done ad hoc, the sample consisting of exhibitors operating in the field of balneotherapy tourism that were present at their own stand by the time they were reached to. Questionnaires with open and closed questions were used to gather information and 13 participating exhibitors answered. The average duration for an interview was 30 minutes. Interviewed persons were owners, managers or permanent employees of the respective units, they were not collaborators hired for representation only during the fair.

The third day of the event – Saturday – was chosen for the research, considering the following reasons:

-It usually is the day with the greatest flow of visitors – potential tourists (being a non-working day, with a visiting programme between 10 a.m. and 18 p.m., thus longer than Sunday's).

The more intense traffic allows the observation of several aspects like the interest shown by visitors and the way of expressing thereof; the efficiency and effectiveness of the personnel; the interaction between the representation personnel and the potential clients.

The exhibitors got some time to form an opinion regarding some aspects on which they will be surveyed, being the third day of the fair.

For many exhibitors from outside the locality is the last day they participate at the fair.

#### 4. Research findings and discussion

Held twice a year in spring and autumn, the Romanian Tourism Fair is an exceptional framework for the presentation of tourism products in a lively atmosphere, conducive to interaction. In 2014, the Spring edition of Romania's Tourism Fair, hosted by Romexpo in six pavilions covered an area of 16,000 square meters and was held on 13-16 March. It brought together over 280 participants from Romania and other 23 countries and was visited by over 30,000 people. Among the 20 related events that took place during the fair, it was organized a Conference of The Romanian Spa Owners Organization, which aimed to bring to the fore development opportunities for the Romanian balneotherapy tourism.

There were identified the following categories of participants directly involved in the balneotherapy tourism, or participants whose activities directly influence the development of this type of tourism: economic agents owning accommodation facilities with or without cure/ spa centers located in balneotherapy resorts, travel agencies whose offer includes many balneotherapy tourism products, associations or firms promoting destinations with balneotherapy tourism resources, balneotherapy resources administrators, central or local public authorities having a role in the development and promotion of balneotherapy tourism resources and destinations, professional associations and training providers.

The 13 interviewed persons represented: hotels and hotel complexes featuring treatment facilities that use natural cure factors existing in the area where they are located, county councils and municipalities/mayoralities that encompass balneotherapy tourism resorts in their territorial area, tourism development and promotion associations from certain counties that include balneotherapy resorts, travel agencies primarily selling balneotherapy tourism products, also holding a substantial number of accommodation units in resorts, companies administering salt mines arranged for therapeutic purposes, managers of an important internet portal covering inclusively the balneotherapy field. An exhibitor representing an accommodation facility without own cure center, but located in the immediate vicinity of balneotherapy facilities (not belonging to the competitors), in a leading resort, refused to participate in research. It insisted on the lack of any link between the unit and the balneotherapy profile of the resort – actually certified by law – and considered that admitting there were cure centers in the resort would direct potential customers to competition – those hotels with in-house treatment facilities.

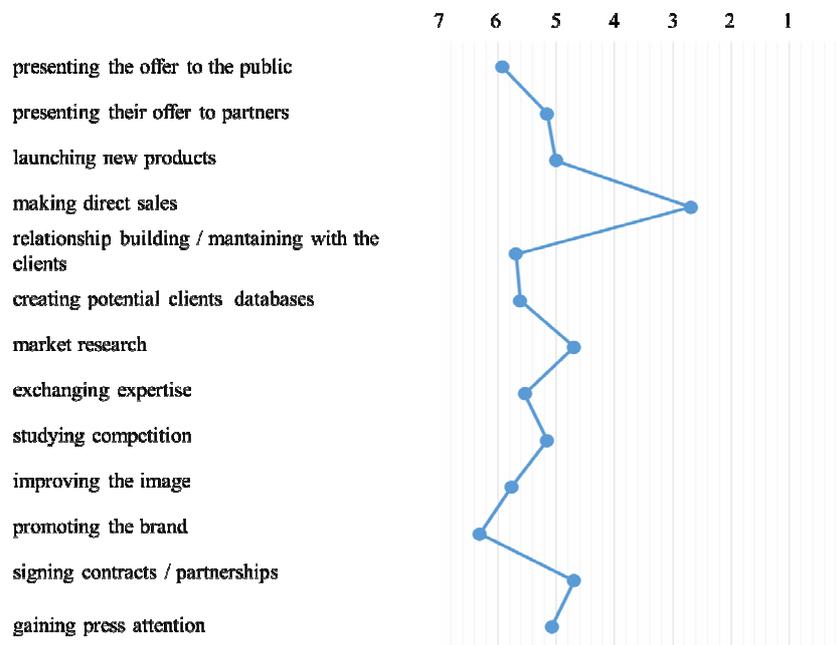
The interviews revealed the following:

- more than half of the surveyed participants were companies, privately owned.
- most participants were represented at the Fair at the highest level, being present at the stand, even if not permanent: general managers, marketing managers, founders, shareholders, hotel managers, chief receptionists, project managers, chiefs of service, specialized inspectors and also a mayor.
- stands were generally small, six of them occupying only 6 sqm (the minimum acceptable), five occupied between 10 to 20 sqm and one only occupied 117 sqm, while the rent per square meter varied between 90 to 100 Euro.
- nine participants assigned 2 or 3 employees at the stand, the rest allocated 5, 8, 10 or 15 employees.
- interviewed exhibitors spent between 2000 RON and 68250 RON for promotion at this fair.

- as means of promotion the majority opted for conventional printed advertisements such as flyers, leaflets, posters, catalogs, only a few having roll-ups, video-tv for image presentations, cd, dvd, magazines, maps to offer; 3 participants had presentation films; 2 participants held tombolas and visitors could win packages with accommodation, breakfast and spa included; one organized a press conference; one offered free vouchers; one offered discounts on certain packages acquisition during the fair; one organized demonstrations.
- the individualization of the stands was done with posters or, in some cases, using traditional objects from their region, handicraft items, specific items like salt crystals (displayed or offered as gifts).
- 6 exhibitors used slogans, of which only 3 expressed concisely ideas of health and relaxation related to balneotherapy tourism.
- 7 of 13 interviewees were supported to participate in the fair by third parties: the Romanian Spa Owners Association or the Commerce and Industry Chamber of Bucharest negotiated lower rates for stand rental and helped with the press conference organization; county councils, mayoralities, associations, economic agents, business partners provided promotional materials, furniture and technical equipment for the stands.

- only 2 of the 13 participants in the study benefited from co/financing of the promotion activity through European funds.
  - in 2013, 11 subjects participated in tourism fairs organized in the country; 7 abroad (in countries like Germany, England, Hungary, Moldova, Austria, Poland – most of this fairs taking place in the capital cities of the mentioned countries) and 2 subjects did not participate at any tourism fair.
  - in 2014, 12 subjects intend to participate in other tourism fairs besides this one, of which 8 will attend fairs in the country, 6 abroad (in countries like Russia, Austria, Germany), 2 do not indicate the location and one is not going to participate at all.
- The interview participants were asked to appreciate, on a scale of 1 to 7 the extent they consider the Tourism fair suitable for achieving the 13 objectives mentioned earlier in this article. The answers indicate that the fair is considered „suitable” and „very suitable” for achieving most goals except for direct sales. It was considered that mostly can be achieved brand promotion and presentation of the offer to the public (fig.no.2).

Figure 2. The extent to which the Tourism Fair is considered appropriate for achieving the participants' objectives



Also, the study participants have been asked to prioritize their participation objectives in this edition of the Tourism Fair according to the importance (1-most important, 13-least important). Thus, in the top three ranked the presentation of the offer to the public, the

presentation of the offer to the partners and improving the image, in this order. Last ranked direct sales (fig. No.3), showing that in the case of tourism fairs the communication function is dominating, while the commercial function is of limited importance.

Figure 3. Objective prioritization



Finally, the study participants declared they have been satisfied with the organization of this edition of the fair, considered that visitors have shown a high interest in their offer and appreciated that participation in the fair was very useful.

Through direct observation were recorded the following:

- the stands of the exhibitors with activities related to balneotherapy tourism were not located in central halls;
- not all the exhibitors paid attention to arranging the stands in an attractive manner;
- persons at the stands were predominantly females;
- half knew well their balneotherapy tourism offer, ¼ turned to additional helping materials to complete their explanations, ¼ had had limited knowledge;
- some visitors asked specific questions, seeking detailed information;
- the number of visitors at the observed stands was considerably lower compared to other stands;
- some exhibitors violated the contractual obligation to strictly comply with the fair program, leaving their stands before the end of the event.

The current scenario of this exhibition visit brings a small percentage of tired people (with little time until the closing hours left, carrying heavy or voluminous bags, full of advertisement materials, thinking about dream holidays in foreign countries) into side-pavilions, with insufficiently attractive stands, some abandoned before the end of the program. Basically, only those really interested visitors will stay more at the stands promoting the balneotherapy tourism and will interact

with the representation staff. Thus, it is not capitalized the great opportunity offered by the tourism fair to inform many thousands of visitors and, why not, to convince them that is worth to include balneotherapy destinations in their holiday programme, as these allow the practice of multiple forms of tourism.

Given that the stand space distribution is done by the organiser by halls sectorisation, surface requested, fidelity and registration date (according to the framework contract), it is necessary to find solutions to occupy an area situated in the center of the main halls. Authorities, together with organisations, businesses and other entities with activities related to balneotherapy tourism, must work together to promote the Romanian balneotherapy tourism offer, since the development of this type of tourism is considered priority by experts and authorities as it capitalizes to the highest degree the natural tourism potential of the country. So, it is advisable that the visitors' attention to be focused on domestic balneotherapy tourism, which should be presented at least as attractive as other domestic or foreign offers. Certainly, the travel agents are generally interested in selling external travel packages as these bear more consistent sales fees and the foreign tourism services providers offer substantial support to promote their offer (info-trips, trainings, presentation sessions, updated information and so on).

Particularly important is the promptness in providing answers to questions and the accuracy with which detailed information are provided, especially when

those are requested, as these demonstrate a good knowledge of the offer and may be, for some visitors – potential clients –, an indication of how the provider is prepared to deliver quality services. When presenting the balneotherapy offer, there are some specific knowledge required mainly related to natural cure factors (types, characteristics, location, how they work etc.), the methods of use, the facilities for treatments, the indications for treatment – types of conditions addressed, possible contraindications and warnings, the costs involved, any facilities offered by the state or other entities, regulations and so on.

In order to improve the promotion activities of the resources and destinations for balneotherapy tourism through specialized fairs and exhibitions, several measures can be taken, such as:

- the presence of a higher number of representatives of all categories of administrators or service providers coming from the balneotherapy tourism field;
- occupying stands better placed in the fair halls;
- a more attractive design of the stands and a better organization of activities within the stands or the related events;
- training the representation staff (for acquiring specific knowledge and promotion/selling skills and techniques);
- increasing promotion budgets by accessing European funds and their judicious use;
- respecting the exhibition program.

## 5. Research limitations and suggestions for future research

The main limitation of this study is the small number of subjects which does not allow the generalization of the results.

Further research can be conducted periodically at each fair edition for comparisons and monitoring the development of certain aspects or units. Other studies may be based on questioning the persons apparently interested in specific types of tourism products immediately after visiting a stand, to discover the level of satisfaction with the existing products and their presentation and the role these played in increasing the purchase intentions or making purchasing decisions. Also, to assess the level of knowledge about the products and the presentation/sales skills of the representation staff, mysterious client research may be conducted.

## 6. Conclusions

Participation in tourism fairs is an effective means of promoting tourism resources and destinations in general. Organizers try and even succeed in attracting visitors in a large number, but it depends on each

exhibitor that, by judicious use of the most appropriate promotional techniques, to exploit the opportunities offered by tourism fairs in order to capture the attention of potential customers, create interest, stimulate the desire and eventually lead to action.

*This article disseminates findings of a research undertaken for the Phd. Thesis.*

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