

3

Co-branding and Strategic Communication

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By means of collaboration, the sum of the work becomes more than its individual parts (Liburd, 2013). This also goes for communication about sustainable tourism development, where meanings created on the basis of the sum of communication exceed the meanings introduced by individual communicators' messages. This chapter introduces the notion of sustainable tourism development communication and discourses as complex and dynamic meaning-making processes that transcend what individual actors bring to the conversation, thus emphasizing such discourses as informed and co-constructed by the plethora of actors that communicate about this issue. Hereby, communication becomes more than a matter of *giving* or *sending* information; it becomes an issue of *sharing* information and by doing so, creating and advancing knowledge through collaborative meaning-making processes.

The chapter first introduces and criticizes traditional communication models, paving the way for understanding branding and communication of sustainable tourism development as an issue far more complex than that of converting sustainable tourism development branding and communication strategies to flashy ads and catchy taglines. Thereafter, interactive branding and communication models are introduced to acknowledge that sustainable tourism development is not only a matter of what is 'done', but also a matter of what is 'said' by different actors. This leads to discussions of different, sometimes opposing, versions of destinations as well as of tourists' active participation in constructing knowledge on sustainable tourism development and destinations. The chapter ends with reflections on the wider implications for sustainable tourism development of seeing branding and communication not as something 'done' by someone to someone, but as collaborative meaning making processes.

Many definitions of communication ignore the interactive and collaborative nature of communication and emphasize the *sending* of messages. The popular *transmission model of communication* conceptualizes communication as one-directional transmission of messages and assumes that communication is about the transmission of information, ideas, attitudes, emotions etc. from one person,

group or organization to others (Theodorson & Theodorson, 1969). The classical Shannon and Weaver (1949) model emphasizes the sender's transmission of messages through a channel and reduces other elements to either 'noise' or 'feedback' from receivers. At its core, the transmission model of communication is thus concerned with how 'we' get 'our information' passed on to largely passive recipients. This take on communication is highly relevant insofar we wish to understand what one actor brings to a conversation. But this traditional take on communication under-prioritizes the critical role of interactivity in the communication process; predominantly because it casts one actor as an active sender and reduces the performances of other actor(s) to that of listening. Bauer (1964:319) points to understandings of advertising (and branding, I propose) based on the transmission model to be imbued with notions of "the exploitation of man by man" where "the communication does something to the audience, while to the communicator is generally attributed considerable latitude and power to do what he pleases to the audience".

The notions of senders as powerful and effectively 'doing something' to receivers, and of receivers as subdued to whatever senders inflict on them, are imbued with ideas of communication as asymmetrical in terms of power, impact and activity levels. Bauer's (1964) criticism of the transmission model and its underlying notion of senders 'doing something' to largely passive recipients can also be extended to classical understandings of branding. Traditionally, branding was seen as images marketers 'put' into consumers' minds by means of advertising and promotion. However, according to associative network memory theory, and as applied by Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991), brands are represented in consumers' minds as sets of nodes and links that form the associations that give meaning to a brand. Accordingly, brand value (or equity) is not something that marketers 'make' as brand values and meanings are actively formed by, and reside in the minds of individuals (Keller, 1993). The following explores branding and strategic communication as grounded in co-creation and interaction.

Interactive and collaborative communication

In contrast to the transmission model of communication, the *interactive model of communication* (Blumer, 1969) is based on the fundamental assumption that communication involves not only *exchange*, but also *creation* of meaning. Communication hereby becomes a symbiotic process through which messages and meanings are co-created, constructed, re-constructed, de-constructed and often transformed as dialogues between actors inform both parties and lead to more advanced understandings. At its core, the interactive model of communication thus focuses on how shared understandings, meanings, realities and cultures

evolve as actors engage in, shape and construct communication, hereby portraying communication as a more symmetrical process where it becomes less relevant which party initiated the communication process (i.e. by being the 'original sender' or the 'marketer') and far more relevant how communication evolves and creates new, possibly more informed, meanings about issues such as sustainable tourism development.

Although the transmission model of communication has been highly influential, today, the dominant discourse is that communication is not simply a matter of one-way transmission of intended (and consequently rather 'fixed' and static) meanings, but a matter of interactive communication between agents. Therefore, contemporary research (e.g. Blichfeldt & Smed, 2015; Gyimothy, 2013; Rosengren, 2000) first and foremost points to communication as multi-directional processes of collaborative meaning-making that are interactive and participatory. Complexities increase dramatically when communication is defined as interactive and as 'new' media make it easier for actors to join online conversations, social media may fundamentally change the asymmetrical power relationships that have traditionally characterized mass communication. Traditional theories of mass communication and branding originate from a time and context where media institutions (such as radio and television networks) were the only actors with the capacity to disseminate messages and content to large (mass) audiences. Furthermore, these traditional media institutions used channels that allowed for information to flow in only one direction. However, with the development of the Internet, "individuals and organizations of only modest means become content selectors and editors in their own right. Opportunities for self-expression once denied by the old media are celebrated by the new media" (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001:370). In practice, this means that communication through 'the new media' potentially redistributes power from 'elite' senders to users and as the number of users that may join on-line conversations is large, "Internet content is literally unbound" (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001:372). The following vignette exemplifies how communication through new media may fundamentally change messages and content as viewers comment on, and add new meanings to a video launched by a travel agency.

Vignette 1: Do it for Denmark or Do it to Denmark?

In 2014, the Danish travel agency Spies launched the video 'Do it for Denmark' (available at: <http://doitfordenmark.parseapp.com/>), aiming to increase Danish customers' awareness of Spies' city break holidays. The video claims that Spies is on a mission to 'save the future of Denmark with romance'. Falling birth rates and an aging population are introduced as problems, which the Danish government has not been able to solve. With the video, Spies