The Effectiveness of Unique Selling Propositions in Promoting Tourism in the Caribbean Region

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Brief Background

- The Sun-Sea-Sand-Sex model of tourism in the Caribbean has begun to face significant challenges (Weiler & Dehoorne, 2014).
  - Since the early 2000's, the island nations began to realize that the generic sun-sea-sand-sex formula doesn't offer them any more competitive advantage (Henthorne, George, & Smith, 2013).
  - Increasing realization of the need to identify and market "uniqueness" in destination offerings.
    - At least since early 2000's, the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) has been encouraging member nations to identify elements that make each of them unique so that marketing dollars are not wasted in competing against one another (Hill, & Lewis, 2015).
    - Authors like Poon (1998) and Henthorne & Miller (2003) urged that the only way the Caribbean can sustain its tourism in the 21st century is by means of unique innovations in products and processes.

Invent if you cannot Discover!

- It was hard to identify island specific uniqueness in the Caribbean and the marketing response was to construct it (Mosedale, 2006).
  - Interpret and reinterpret the value of tourism resources until that process resulted in the identification of something unique (Chambers & McIntosh, 2008).
- Based on sought and found ideas, these destinations unleashed various promotional campaigns (Croes, 2006).
  - Over time, these campaign focus areas emerged into unique selling propositions (Henthorne & Miller, 2003; Miller & Henthorne, 2006).
- In fact, success stories of the USP approach in tourism are not many (Deslandes & Goldsmith, 2015).
  - *Tourism is a highly subjective, interpretative, and experiential product; it does not have an obvious core, to which the experiences of all customers could be anchored (George & George, 2004).*
  - *Many tourism destinations are diverse in attractions, have diverse interest groups, and overstressing a single USP will obviously create losers (Daye, 2010). It may turn out to be a myopic strategy, too (Henthorne, George, & Miller, 2016).*

What are Unique Selling Propositions, by the Way?

- Identifying some kinds of uniqueness is a crucial element of the marketing process; especially, it is essential for successful positioning with a meaningful difference (Frazer, 1983; Kippenberger, 2000; Laskey, Fox & Crask, 1995; Schlegelmilch, 2016).

- Unique selling ideas over periods of refinement could transform into the core competency of a business (Knox & Bickerton, 2003).

- The concept of the unique selling proposition and its application to advertising is generally credited to Reeves (1961).

- Richardson and Cohen developed a hierarchical scale for analyzing marketing slogans, which ranged from "Level 0: No proposition" through "Level 4b: Unique selling proposition".

A Sample of USP Informed Tourism Promotional Slogans in the Caribbean

- Dominica: "The nature island of the Caribbean"
- Suriname: "The Beating Heart of the Amazon"
- Jamaica: "Get All Right"
- Anguilla: "Tranquility wrapped in blue"
- Antigua: "The beach is just the beginning"
- Aruba: "One happy island"
- Barbados: "Long live life"
- British Virgin Islands: "nature's little secrets"
- Cayman Islands: "Wherever you find your smile, you'll find ours"
- Curacao: "Unique Caribbean island paradise"
- Dominican Island: "Has it all!"
- Grenada: "The spice of the Caribbean"
- Haiti: "experience it"
- Martinique: "The flower of the Caribbean"

Research Questions

- RQ1. As the Caribbean country destinations continue to evolve and mature, is there still a continuing trend toward the increasing use of the USP approach?

- RQ2. What is the relationship between the attraction diversity of a destination management area and the level of USP usage in that destination area's promotional campaigns?

- RQ3. Does a destination's attraction diversity significantly moderate the relationship between the USP usage and tourist arrivals?

- RQ4. How do businesses differentiate themselves within the homogeneity implied by their destination's USP statement?

The Research Method

- Mixed method study
- Key data sources
  - Tourism statistics data drawn from CTO
  - Jamaican cruise tourist arrival data
  - Archived data on web based tourism promotional campaigns
    - Especially, *taglines* used by national tourism websites during 2004, 2009, and 2014.
- Qualitative, open-ended, interviews with select Caribbean tourism industry practitioners
  - Interviews carried out during the CTO annual conference 2014
- User review data on Caribbean attractions, accessibilities, and amenities
  - TripAdvisor reviews, tweets, etc.
- Software Used: SPSS / PASW, IBM ManyEye, IBM Watson, MS Excel

Data Analysis

- Word Cloud Analysis
  - The word 'Caribbean' appeared highly prominent across all slogans, across the entire, study period.
  - Most destination countries in their official campaigns recognize that this word is the truest representatives of the spirit of the Caribbean.
  - Mood analysis on user reviews using IBM Many Eyes™ indicate the word Caribbean generated the greatest positive mood, across the years.
    - Countries may be at a loss, if them stressing their uniqueness means abandoning the shared spirit of the Caribbean!
  - Heightened stress on 'Nature' is evident, since 2009.

Contd.

TripAdvisor™ User Review** Vs Official USPs

** Data accessed using IBM Watson Analytics software's social media module

Most Common Words across Official Tourism Slogans

	Frequency/Year		
Keyword	2004	2009	2014
Caribbean	12	6	5
Island	6	3	4
Experience	2		
Secret	2		
Little	2		
Explore	2		
Paradise	2		
French	2		
Nature	2	5	3
Treasure		2	
Beautiful		2	2

Note: These numbers represent the number of slogans in which each of these keywords occur.

Overall Changes in the Levels of USP Used

Level 0: No proposition

Level 1: Proposition equivalent to "Buy our product"

Level 2: Proposition equivalent to "Our product is good"

Level 3a: Proposition gives a product attribute, but virtually any [tourism destination]
could claim the same attribute

Level 3b: Proposition gives a product attribute, but many tourism destinations claim
the same attribute

Level 4a: Proposition gives a unique product attribute which is not a product benefit
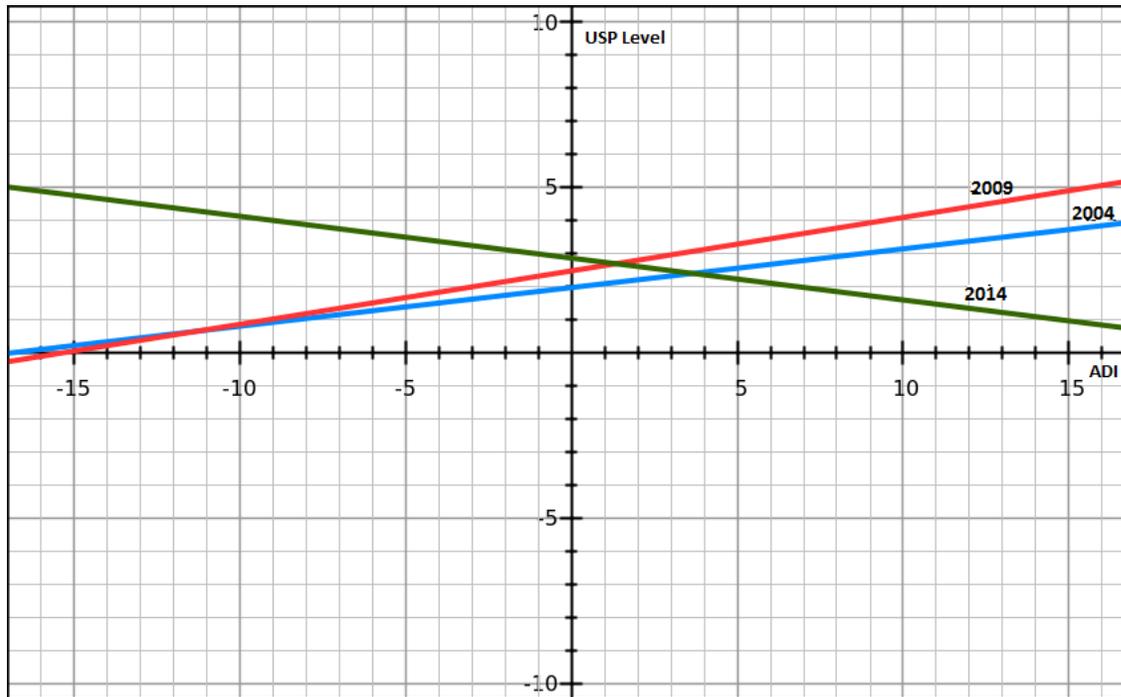(i.e., does not "sell")

Level 4b: Unique selling proposition

Source: Richardson and Cohen (1993)

Changes in USP Level 2004-2014

- 2004 USP Level
- 2009 USP Level
- 2014 USP Level
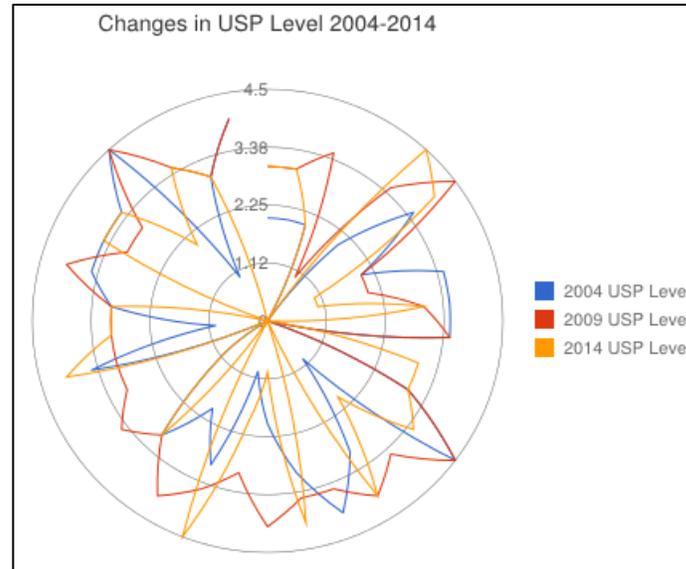
Range of USP Values in 2004, 2009, and 2014

USP Level	2004	2009	2014
Highest	4.50	4.50	4.50
Lowest	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mean	2.50	3.21	2.29
Standard Deviation	1.28	0.91	1.51

USP Level as a Function of Attraction Diversity

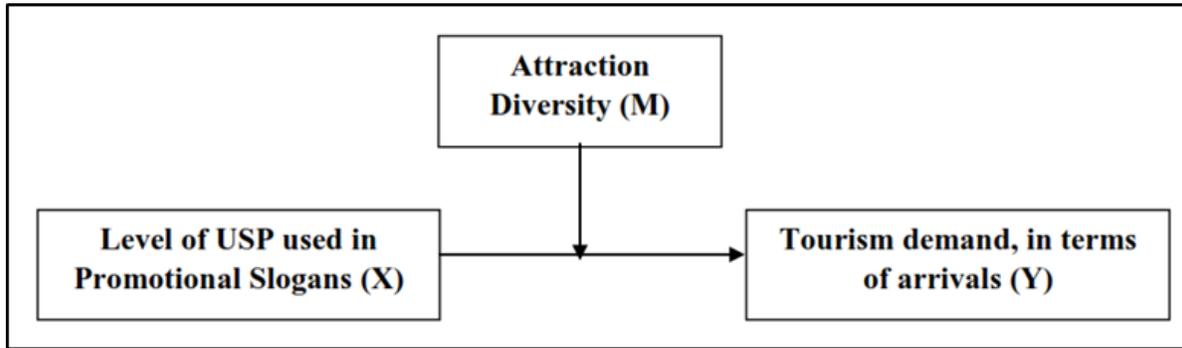

2004

$y = 0.117128x + 1.972817$

2009

$y = 0.161789x + 2.477685$

2014

$y = -0.126659x + 2.864197$

Attraction Diversity, USP, and Tourist Choice: A Combined Model

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R^2	Standard Error of Estimate
1*	.369	.136	.135	.92138
2**	.476	.227	.225	.78127
3***	.589	.347	.346	.71934

Note: * = ADI predicting arrivals; ** = USP predicting arrivals; *** = ADI x USP predicting arrivals

Hidden Undercurrents in the Determination of the USP

- Theme 1: The Power of Networks
  - Networks of small businesses to gain power
    - Also, sustainable, responsible business practices
- Theme 2: Media Relations
  - Better media management to *manufacture consent*
- Theme 3: Politics of Populism and Nepotism
  - Political decision making according to the popularity (a.k.a. vote winning potential) of an idea
- Theme 4: Survival of the Fittest
  - Align with the national USP campaign, unless you are strong!

Recapping the Findings

- RQ1: *As the Caribbean country destinations continue to evolve and mature, whether there is still a continuing trend toward the increasing use of the USP approach?*
  - Answer: Initially YES. 2009 data shows significant increase in the number and level of USP slogan used; Yet, 2014 data shows decline in both.
- RQ2: *What is the relation between the attraction diversity of a destination management area and the level of USP usage in that destination area's promotional campaigns?*
  - Based on 2014 data, higher attraction diversity of a destination country generally meant using only lower levels of USP in its promotional slogans.

- RQ3: *In the context of cruise tourism in the Caribbean, does the choice of USP used in the destination marketing campaign or a destination's attraction diversity impact tourist choice?*
  - *Both impacted. However, the interaction effect of these two produced a significantly larger effect.*
- RQ4: *How do businesses differentiate themselves within the homogeneity implied by their destination's USP statement?*
  - Businesses whose products and services align with the USP slogans were the gainers
  - Align with the national tourism promotional thrust, unless you are strong – or, extremely unique to be able to attract a significant niche.
  - Lobbying and politicking was common
  - Cooperative formation of small businesses helped them to withstand the powers that be.

Implications for Theory

- This research made a unique contribution to understanding how the choice of USP slogans is influenced by the diversity of attractions in a destination area.
  - The moderating role of attraction diversity in the effectiveness of USP was established.
  - To this extent, it introduced the construct of *attraction diversity* into the nomological network constituting tourism knowledge.
    - Also developed a valid methodology to measure attraction diversity in tourism destination areas.
- This research helps in clarifying our understanding about the nuanced political process involved in the USP choice in tourism destinations
  - The pressure to align with national tourism promotional focus
  - Network formation for lobbying, for community based tourism development
  - Role of mass media

Implications for Practice

- Government support for a particular USP is a key determinant of the direction in which tourism growth happens
  - Aligning with the official USP helps businesses leverage the benefit of national tourism marketing
- It could be myopic to stress any single USP in diverse destinations
  - Unless the inherent contradictions among the stakeholders in a diverse destination can be resolved with a higher order harmonization
- USP use in the promotion of attraction diverse destinations might lead to disconfirmation of tourist expectations
  - This could lead to dissatisfaction, complaining behavior, and behavioral disloyalty.
- A notable gap exists between what destination marketers consider as USPs and what tourists consider are the key values of destinations
  - Governmental determination of USP statements could do better by drawing from tourist expectations and experiences.

The Next Phase

- How about 2017?
- What are some of the other alternatives, now that the USP use is declining?
- Advances in information and communication technologies have led to firms finding ways to reach different customer segments with different USPs (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).
- Indications from the qualitative interviews are that private tourism business in the Caribbean are moving to *Individualized Selling Propositions (ISPs).*
  - Web usage data and social media analytics aid them in this effort
  - A natural progression of this research would be to understand how these ISPs interact with various government sponsored USP campaigns

Thank you!