

KARELIA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES
Degree Programme in International Business

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CREATING AN AUTHENTIC BRAND IMAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE
ECOTOURISM. CASE STUDY: PALENQUE TOURS COLOMBIA

THESIS
February 2017

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THESIS
February 2017
Degree Programme in International Business
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Title
Creating an authentic brand image for sustainable ecotourism

Commissioned by Palenque Tours Colombia

Abstract
Sustainable ecotourism services are designed to benefit both the tourists and the local society and environment. The green megatrend brings up the problem with greenwashing, which causes difficulties in recognizing the most authentic brand in the industry.

Aim of this study is to gather data that guides to successful branding strategy to create authenticity for the brand image, and to work as a guidebook in branding decisions. The research is relevant for all sustainable ecotourism companies, but the findings and suggestions are focused for Palenque Tours Colombia's benefit, who is currently focusing on branding.

The study gathered the most crucial tools and channels to create authentic brand image, starting from the first impression. The research was made based on primary and secondary data: a combination of theoretical research about service branding, and practical research with a qualitative survey concerning authentic brand image from target consumers' perspectives.

Through the findings, the importance of emotions evoked by a brand was highlighted. To be able to evoke wanted emotions, it is important to practice social marketing through the most selected channels, where eco-tourists look for services and information. To support the brand awareness, getting involved with locals is highly recommended.

Language
English

Pages
Appendices 1
Pages of Appendices 3

Keywords
sustainability, ecological, green marketing, tourism, branding, brand image, authenticity, Colombia, Palenque Tours Colombia

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Green lifestyle has been one of the main megatrends for the past few years (Sitra 2014-2016), which has led the market for green products and services to enlarge in a way that's different than in past decades (Olsen, 2010). We are living the decade where consumers' environmental awareness is applied to buying decision, either caused by consumers' green lifestyle or the trendiness of it. Companies are finding more ways to act green, and so is tourism industry. Some countries, such as Colombia, provide more resources for sustainable ecotourism than others. Colombia has a great potentiality for sustainable ecotourism because of its rapid growth of tourism and wide biodiversity, including 52 national parks. In May 2014, Colombia was selected as the best ecotourism destination by the World Travel Fair. The massive increase of the number of visitors in Colombian natural reserves is one of the indicators of growing interest towards ecotourism in Colombia (Oxford Business Group, 2014).

The International Ecotourism Society described ecotourism in 1990 as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people". Ecotourism, sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, geological tourism, green tourism; there are several specifications used to define tourism that not only provides services to a traveler, but also supports the environment; its' nature, society, economy and culture. This paper concentrates both on sustainable tourism and ecotourism combined, and to be able to present these both specifications at the same time we use the word "sustainable ecotourism". But how to prove authenticity for a sustainable ecotourism brand? Acting green can be measured in many levels; while other company is providing the minimum level of sustainability, the other company is providing the maximum level of sustainability, and some companies are just simply greenwashing. All of these companies promote their

sustainability, but how does the customer recognize which is the most authentic one?

1.2 Aim of the study

The main subject of this thesis is how sustainable ecotourism companies create an authentic brand image, and how does the cooperation with non-profit organizations support branding. The study is meant in general for all sustainable ecotourism providers, but concentrates giving suggestions to Palenque Tours Colombia, which is a sustainable ecotourism company operating in Colombia. A traveler who prefers sustainable choices for touring seeks for noticeable elements that support company's sustainability, but one can never be sure without physical evidence, because the purchase is most likely done from far distance. Tour service is an intangible product and a consumer is able to review the service's sustainability only after the experiment. What ways a consumer uses to find sustainability supporting information of the company and what are the elements that makes the sustainable ecotourism company authentic?

This paper is meant to be a handbook of the basic concept and most crucial matters in service branding; finding out what are the key elements of an authentic sustainable ecotourism brand, how to promote its' authenticity and which are the correct channels to do that, and how we utilize the cooperation with non-profit organizations to highlight authentic brand image. Through findings from theoretical part and practical research giving consumers' point of view, this paper gives branding instructions to Palenque Tours Colombia.

1.3 Methodology

The research includes both primary data and secondary data. Secondary data is used in chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4, which mostly consists of literature. Primary data is used in chapters 4 and 5, which consists of author's own experience of Colombia and Palenque Tours Colombia, interview of Maxime Barral, the

Marketing Director of Palenque Tours Colombia, and a survey research. Survey is a qualitative research and was tested before publishing by an international cast with age range of 24-45, and designed to be internationally appropriate. Survey is used to bring consumers' point of view to the topic and its results and suggestions.

Besides survey, a conversation was started in two globally known traveling forums in ecotourism section, asking as a traveler how to recognize an authentic sustainable ecotourism provider.

The conclusions and suggestions are formed using theory of branding, especially utilizing Keller's brand equity model, and findings from the survey that show what are the key elements of an authentic ecotourism brand from customers' point of view, and what are the channels used to look for information. Palenque Tours' Marketing Mix analysis is reviewed to present the basic business core to support the branding suggestions. With the review of current cooperation with non-profit organizations and the answers received from the survey, it is possible to analyze the power of the cooperation in branding, whether it is a powerful tool to get more authenticity.

1.4 Outline of the report

First part includes general information about sustainable tourism in general and applied to Colombia. The final section of this part presents how sustainable tourism and non-profit organizations often collaborate with each other, and what are the benefits of it. Second part presents theoretical information about branding and its objectives, and the key factors in creating the objectives. Besides information gathered from different sources, Keller's brand equity model is presented which is an analysis that covers the main parts of branding and factors affecting the brand from the half of consumer. The second part also presents factors affecting consumers' buying decision.

After theoretical part, the case study is presented. It presents three examples of current cooperation with non- profit organizations. Current marketing strategy and the environment is shortly presented with the support of Marketing Mix 7 P's analysis. The aim in case study chapter is to review the current situation in Palenque Tours Colombia and present the company's actions and branding goals, that needs to be taken into consideration when giving suggestions in the end of the study. In this chapter, we apply the earlier theoretically presented Keller's brand identity model to Palenque Tours Colombia to identify the current situation with the brand. Since the branding strategy is recently planned, some parts of the analysis lack information when it comes to the existing results of brand image. Case study also presents the survey and its conclusions. The final part concludes the whole study, presents the problem areas that were found before and during the study, and gives branding suggestions to Palenque Tours Colombia.

1.5 Palenque Tours Colombia

Palenque Tours Colombia is a sustainable ecotourism company operating in Colombia. The office stands in Medellin, which is the capital of the coffee-region Antioquia located in central Colombia. The company however provides tours all over Colombia, from half-day tours to two week- tours. Majority of tours are related to hiking and visiting different organizations or small family businesses (coffee and cacao farms), but the variety of tours also offers city tours in Medellin area and Bogota. Palenque Tours offers mainly tailor- made private tours, which can be modified to fit customers' wishes. Through a local middle man, they offer fixed group tours few times a week in Medellín as well. Palenque Tours has several partners and resellers, and their tours are listed in several international online booking websites.

Palenque Tours is operating in sustainable ecotourism in a way that supports local small businesses and non- profit organizations, and effects on local economy by provoking the growing tourism. The wide variety of nature based tours around the Colombia are implemented in an eco-friendly way, and

Palenque Tours is always spreading awareness of Colombian environmental issues to its customers and online followers. Besides the sustainability of tours, the office and its staff itself have sustainable values and lifestyle. The company was founded in 2011 by Markus Jobi, who has over 20 year living and traveling experience of Colombia (www.palenquetourscolombia.com).

One of the main challenges operating in tourism industry in Colombia has been the country's bad image, which has improved year by year due to the positive improvement in crime. Tourism providers and the government are actively attracting new tourists to the country, and besides seeking for new tourism destinations privately, the governmental department of tourism is actively arranging hikes for tourism providers, including Palenque Tours, to discover new potential destinations.

To be able to view branding methods, it is important to know the basic marketing concept to support branding decisions. To describe Palenque Tours' business core, the 7 P's Marketing Mix is presented (Booms, Bitner, 1982):

Product: Practicing ecotourism: Environmentally and socially sustainable tailor-made tours with cooperation of local non-profit organizations and other projects. Variety of tours differ from nature hikes to city tours and durations are from half-day tour to several- day tours.

Price: Used pricing strategies are optional pricing and cost plus pricing. Price of a tour is calculated per the number of participants, base costs and added profit for the company and cooperating organizations. Depending on the tour, regularly the price includes transportation, accommodation, meals, local guides, different language variations and insurance. Tailor made tours can include extra arrangements with extra costs if a customer wishes so. Leisure spending does not include to the price.

Place: Tours are implemented in Central Colombia, The Pacific Coast, The Caribbean Coast and The Amazonia. The main office takes place in Medellín,

Colombia, and the customers can directly come to the office or plan their tours long- distance via internet or phone. Besides direct selling, several retailers and collaborating organizations take place around the Colombia. For example, city tours in Bogotá are often arranged through a partner/middle-man in Bogotá.

Promotion: Promotion for customers is mainly implemented via Internet, using especially Google advertisement and social media promotion. The promotion consists of tour advertisements, other publications regarding to Colombia, ecotourism and recent news, blog publications and customer feedbacks. Promoting for other companies to get more partners is usually done in fairs or other direct ways. Since the tours are mainly tailor-made, Palenque Tours does not have special sales offers, but depending on the season of the year they highlight different tours on their website during different seasons. Travel blogs are also used as a promotion tool by agreeing on a special offer with a blogger in exchange to a blog publication of the tour. Besides blogs, Palenque Tours aims to get public recognition in local and international media.

People: The office includes five full-time workers; company and product manager/ designer (founder of the company), marketing manager, sales manager, financing manager/ accountant and logistics assistant. Besides the base group, Palenque Tours have 1-2 part-time workers and international interns helping all the departments, and tens of local part-time tour guides. The base group handles customer service and partner connections and design and implement tour arrangements.

Process: A tour process starts when Palenque Tours receives a tour request, and the responsive person from the office is in active communication with the customer and involving partners of the tour. After planning and setting up the price, the customer must pay a security deposit in advance to confirm the tour, which is half of the tour price. During the tour, the responsible person must stay in close communication with all the involving employees or partner organizations of the tour (e.g. the guide and driver) to ensure the safety and

satisfaction of the customer. After the tour, customers are asked to leave feedback on different channels such as TripAdvisor and Facebook.

Physical Evidence: Everyday office activities and behavior is environmentally friendly and the staff member and office appearance is relaxed but professional. Physical evidence such as website and logo is designed to promote sustainability by its appearance, e.g. using earthy colors. If the customer is not able to visit the office physically, he receives a description of the tour which gives the information of the location, accommodation, transportation etc. Official confirmation forms are not used, but when the customer has placed a deposit and sent a copy of passport information, the responsive person of the office personally confirms with the client. An active communication is extremely important when the customer is not physically on the spot, to create as trusting and safe process without physical evidence.

2 SUSTAINABLE AND ECOLOGICAL TOURISM

2.1 Sustainable and ecological tourism

Sustainable and ecological tourism are both expertise of tourism industry, which practices tourism respecting and developing environmental matters. The difference between regular and sustainable and ecological tourism is that when regular tourism can cause damage to the destination's nature, economic and cultural environment, sustainable tourism aims to protect small family businesses, cultural heritage and develop the local economy, and ecotourism aims to protect natural flora and fauna (Unesco, 2010). Because the objectives of environmental protection are the key element in sustainable and eco service providing, the price for services is often higher than in regular tourism.

The term "sustainable tourism" is often used as a combination of nature-based tourism, ecotourism and social tourism, even though theoretically they all have different specifications (Sustaining Tourism, 2014). Services that are offered in sustainable tourism and ecotourism are meant to benefit tourists, locals and the company, when regular tourism is meant to benefit just the tourist and the company. The idea is to spread awareness of environmental and cultural problems and possibilities of the destination while experiencing traveling itself, and to create a special experience while supporting the environment and acting sustainably. Often this kind of services are combined with local environmental or cultural projects, that are managed by non- profit organizations (Sustaining Tourism, 2014).

Tourism is a growing industry and one of the main economic sectors in the world, which stresses out the importance of sustainable tourism since the world is living more in the terms of "thinking green" megatrend (Sitra, 2016) and fighting against climate change. Along other objectives, climate change is one of the main objectives of today's sustainable tourism, and the industry plays an important role in it (UNWTO, 2016). UNWTO published a press release of their latest Conference of Parties (COP 22nd Session) on November 16th, 2016,

which discussed the latest relation between sustainable tourism and climate change; "Sustainable tourism creates opportunities and assembles partners to help transform the industry towards low emissions and more efficient and less polluting operations. We must make tourism and every other industry contribute to our climate change action and a sustainable future", said Patricia Espinosa, the Executive Secretary of UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2016), which perfectly summarizes the aim of this UNWTO's program.

2.2 Sustainable tourism in Colombia

Colombia is a perfect example of a potential destination for sustainable ecotourism. It has the second largest biodiversity in the world right after Brazil, and nearly half of the country is covered by the Amazon basin and its wildlife. Because of its history with drug trafficking and lack of safety, Colombia still struggles with negative country image, which why it is not the first choice for a regular tourist. Colombia has several cultural, social and natural problems, which is the reason why sustainable tourism plays an extremely important role in the country. One example is the local farmers, who with the help of government and private sectors are now growing legal crops instead of illegal ones (UNODC, 2016). Since the country has been fighting against illegal drug cartels, at the same time it has also encouraged farmers to switch growing cocaine plants to organic coffee and cacao plants, honey and handcraft work. This process has been implemented with the help of UNODC (United Nations of Drugs and Crime), which helped sustainable tourism to grow and so fore boosted the local economy. This development has encouraged locals not only switch illegal farming to legal farming, but also creating and running eco-lodges, which plays a significant role in ecotourism. Regarding to the UNODC's publication from January 16th, 2013, the eco-lodges have proven to be extremely popular for alternative tourism. Some of these lodges are directly supported by UNODC, but due to its popularity there are plenty more in different areas of Colombia ran by private organizations.

Tourism in general in Colombia is increasing year by year. Last year in 2015 tourism increased by 12,2 %, which is 0,1% more than in 2014. When we compare the number of incoming tourists between 2006 and 2015, the increase is over 140%. Most significant change happened between 2012 and 2013, when tourism increased by 43% (Ministry of trade, industry and tourism Colombia, 2016).

The typical areas to provide ecotourism in Colombia are the Amazon basin, the Caribbean coast, the Pacific coast, and the country area of Antioquia. Especially the coast areas have several national parks where lots of different ecotourism companies provide hiking and other ecological services, and other areas like Antioquia provide a mix of ecological and social tourism, such as supporting local farmers (coffee, cacao, sugar cane, etc.). These areas often include eco-lodges that were mentioned earlier in this chapter. In the cities, it is possible to find sustainable tourism as well along regular tourism, which is mainly social tourism that supports cultural and social organizations.

2.3 Collaboration between sustainable tourism and non- profit organizations

Collaboration between sustainable tourism and non- profit organizations is very beneficial for both sides, and is a perfect symbiosis to support each other's actions. Relationships with individual companies are the most crucial role player in managing and funding a nonprofit organization. Cooperation with an ecotourism company is one example of a relationship with a private company, which is a remarkable source for funding the organization's operations and spreading the awareness (R. Hunter Wilbur, Smith, Bucklin, 2000).

In the 1s edition (2015) of "Collaboration in Tourism Businesses and Destination Handbook" by Dogan Gursoy, Melville Saayman and Marios Sotiriadis is presented 4 cooperation channels between tourism businesses and other businesses. The 4th channel is public-private partnership (PPP), which defines a

collaboration either with public sector (governmental) or private sector (private non-profit organizations and other organizations). PPP is often used in tourism companies and other industries, that share similar ethical values with companies from other industries, and so fore can create a successful relationship for company's sustainability and fulfilling each other's services and strengthening company image. PPP partnerships are not usually official contracts; They are friendly agreements where services and actions are brainstormed and implemented together. The most crucial characteristics of successful PPP in private sector are the following features (European Commission, 2006; Kilicer, 2003; Uzun, 2007; Vikas & Lather, 2010):

1. Having a shared set of values about the cause of the collaboration
2. A clear guidance and targeted strategy to reach the main flexible goal
3. Having an approach plan with clearly set methods showing the responsibility of each partner
4. Flexible alliances which are willing to adaptations, changes, and transformation
5. Transparent mechanism for discussion, negotiation and agreement

In Colombia PPP collaboration is very important for both sides. Colombia is not a mass tourism destination, and for that the travelers in Colombia seek for alternative tourism. Alternative tourism is more often about culture, society and nature than regular sightseeing, and even country's negative sides can work as an attraction. Nonprofit organizations that are working to develop these matters, benefit from the tourists by spreading worldwide awareness and receiving financial and mental support from the tourism provider. In some cases, the organizations can receive direct financial support from the tourists as well. Usually the "product" created by the collaboration between NPO's and sustainable tourism companies is a tour that is implemented together. It can be a walking tour, workshop, hike or other kind of a visit of the organization where a tourist gets familiar with the organization's work and goals.

3 BRAND STRATEGIES AND BRANDING DECISIONS

3.1 brand building

Brand building defines the process of designing and creating value, image and identity for a brand. Product branding and service branding are different from each other and demand different branding strategies, because product branding includes branding tools that define a tangible item, while service branding, instead of being tangible, is rather emotional. The first step in brand building is to define the brand itself and the message, image and emotions that the brand wants to appeal. After defining the purpose, it is important to choose the correct channels and use them the correct way to reach the brand's target group, and to appeal the wanted emotions through different channels. In general, all the aspects of brand building include the perception of consumers, and without consumers' psychology there is no brand (Powell, 2013).

3.2 Key factors in branding process

Branding strategy and process starts with identifying the business strategy itself. Through business strategy, a company can start developing a brand expression that shapes the customers' experience of the brand. It is important to define brand expression before marketing strategy, because the decisions made in marketing strategy are all conducted to brand expression. When brand expression is successfully communicated through marketing channels, the brand forms its recognition and image, and the relationship with consumer behavior can be defined (Van Gelder, 2003).

Branding process includes several terms, such as **brand equity**, **brand positioning**, **brand elements** and **brand strategy**. These terms include different objectives identifying the brand, such as brand awareness and brand image (*brand equity*), targeting, competition, differentiation, and brand mantras (*positioning*), criteria, brand elements and its criteria like memorability, adaptability, transferability, protectability, meaningfulness and likability (*brand*

elements), and product/ service strategy, pricing strategy and channel strategy (*brand strategy*). One of the key factors before planning all mentioned objectives above, is to identify values of the brand and whether its brand equity is customer- based or product- based (K.L. Keller, 2008).

Brand equity defines the value of a brand in the market compared to other brands. Brand equity is built by brand image and awareness, which drives consumers to buy the product or service even though other brands next to it would offer the same functionality and quality. **Brand positioning** determines brand's position in target customers' mind. The stronger position is, the better advantage it has in the market competition. Strong brand position also means that it has uniqueness and features that differentiates it from competitors. To support the positioning process there is creation of brand mantras, which is a written few-word indicator to the wanted position in consumers' mind. It is not a public slogan; it works more as a hidden message to consumers and as a base stone inside the company. **Brand elements** define all the factors around it, such as slogans, names, logos, symbols, icons, illustrations and characters. To be able to define all the elements, you need criteria that usually are adjectives that describe the elements. These can be for example: memorability (easy recall of the brand), likability (the brand is found appealing and interesting), adaptability (updatable and flexible to its environment), meaningfulness (credible and suggestive), protectability (legal and competitive), and transferability (ability to across product categories, cultures and boundaries). **Brand strategy** combines all the factors mentioned above, and defines the whole strategy how the factors will be successfully implemented to customers. There are different strategies depending on what the brand offers, such as service branding, retail branding and product branding. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, brand strategy is closely implemented with business strategy (Keller, 2008).

3.3 Service branding

Service branding is closely connected to emotions, because it is something that is delivered and experienced, while in product branding customers get a tangible touch of the quality and design. In service branding it is crucial to combine the complete operational process to the service itself, because the whole buying process between a customer and a company is about an experience (Parker 2014). Even though the bought service itself would have been exactly what the customer was expecting, the whole experience can be ruined if there's inconveniences in communication or customer service. These inconveniences that affect the customer experience, will give rather negative brand image than positive, which can spread through public feedback or word of mouth. Referring to Leonard L. Berry, 1991, in *Discovering the Soul of Service*, to strengthen consumers' trust on "invisible", it is extremely important to have a strong brand in service business, which is occurred by creating a personality to the service that differentiates it from its competitors and creates an emotional relationship between the customer and the company. Service brand can be described as a storytelling, because it needs to explain what happens, how it happens and why it happens. Service brand has a performance-based nature, which means that the core of the service brand comes from the actual source of performance and the customer-based brand equity and positioning is determined by the quality and experience of the performance, which is a major factor in customer value.

3.4 Keller's brand equity model

Keller's brand equity model (also known as CCBE) identifies the main characters of customer-based brand equity, which is a convenient tool to use in service branding. The model consists of 6 blocks divided into two sides (rational and emotional), which are combined with 4 fundamental questions from customer's point of view to help the brand to identify its *brand identity*, *brand meaning*, *brand responses* and *brand relationships*. The questions are in following work order:

1. Who are you? 2. What are you? 3. What about you? / What do I think or feel about you? 4. What about you and me? / What kind of association do we have? / How much of a connection we have?

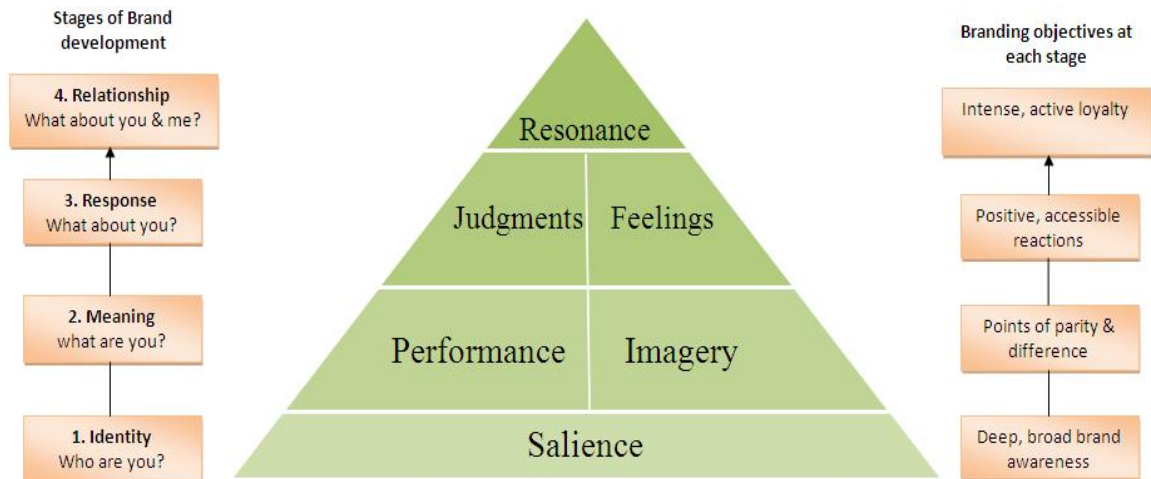


Figure 1. Keller's Brand Equity Model (Source: Keller 2013, p. 556)

Keller has divided the model illustrating pyramid into 6 blocks and named them “**the brand building blocks**”, which structures the process of successful branding. The process of significant brand equity is complete, when the brand has identified all 6 blocks and made it to the top of the pyramid. Depending on the brand, one can lean more to the left side which is more “rational route” or to the right side which is more “emotional route”. According to Keller, the strongest brands existing have built up the pyramid equally leaning on both rational and emotional sides at the same time.

The objectives of the 6 brand building blocks are **salience, performance and imagery, judgements and feelings, and resonance**.

The first step (brand identity) is **salience**, which means recognizing the brand's identity and measuring the awareness of the brand, in what circumstances the brand comes up to the customers and if it is the top-of-mind option, meaning whether it is the first brand to appear in mind in a certain market. One good example for this section of an existing brand that has a strong brand identity and awareness is Nike, which is the top-of-mind option with its logo and mantra, when you think about sports and sport equipment. Brand awareness measures the customer's ability to recall the brand and link it to the right logo, mantra or

symbol in the right situation, and to identify the expected quality and design. Stronger the brand awareness is, more competitive strength it has in the market. Brand awareness can be measured in two levels: **Breadth of awareness**, which measures the recognition of the brand in usage and purchasing decision (brand image, quality and price combined), and **Depth of awareness**, which measures how deep in customer's mind the brand is, and how easily it comes to mind in right circumstances.

First part of the second step (brand meaning) is **brand performance**, which measures the product/service performance to customer's expectations and needs, and if the given expectation meets with customer's experience. Customers view of performance can be measured with **reliability** (harmless performance capability in long-term), **durability** (compatibility with existing environment and technology) and **serviceability** (warranty and customer service). These three views are more relevant with tangible product performance, but when it comes to service performance the views are measured by **service effectiveness** (if services and its quality meet with customers' requirements), **service efficiency** (easiness and efficiency with communication and performance), and **service empathy** (the level and authenticity of customer orientation in communication and service performance).

Second part of the second step (brand meaning) is **brand imagery**, when customer measures the brand from an abstract point of view and whether the brand meets customers psychological and social expectations and needs, and forms an opinion of a brand image by intangible experiences. An opinion can be formed directly through own experience or indirectly from the way and content of promotion or from other's opinions and experiences; by word of mouth. The four main intangibles linked to a brand are **user profiles** (1), **purchase and usage situations** (2), **personality and values** (3) and **history, heritage and experiences** (4). These intangibles are also often linked to demographic factors that the brand evokes, such as gender, age, race and income. They can also be

linked to psychographic factors like attitudes, possessions, careers, social or political issues.

First part of the third step (brand responses) is **brand judgments**, which means the outcome of the brand performance and imagery put together, and customer forms an opinion and personal evaluation of the brand itself. Judgements are divided into four main types, which are **brand quality** (perceived quality of the product or service and customer value and satisfaction), **brand credibility** (expectations behind the brand such as expertise, trustworthiness, and likability) **brand consideration** (relevancy of the product or service and brand's role in purchasing decision and usage relevancy), and **brand superiority** (uniqueness and diversity in the competing market from the customers' point of view).

Second part of the third step (brand responses) is **brand feelings**, which measures the outcome of social message and feelings evoked by the brand. Every tool and objective used in whole marketing process and brand building is an influential factor that effects on either negative or positive feeling that the brand evokes. Depending on the customer personality and customer relationship, the feelings formed about the brand can be either strong or mild. While forming feelings about the brand, customer assembles questions in the back of his mind, such as the purpose of the brand, its relationship to customers and evoked feelings. One way to highlight the importance of evoking feelings is to directly use **emotional branding**, which can be divided into 6 important following types (Kahle, Poulos, Sukhdial, 1988): warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval and self-respect. In his analysis, Keller stresses out that even though the brand gets all types of customer responses, the ultimate important matter is the positivity of responses.

The final, fourth step (brand relationship) is **brand resonance**, which focuses on the coherence between customers' brand identification and relationship with the brand, whether there is a psychological bond between them that generates engaged customer loyalty. This resonance between loyalty and psychological bond is divided into four categories: **behavioral loyalty** (customers' attitude and

relationship with the brand affecting on how often or many products or services are purchased), **attitudinal attachment** (customers' behavior of favoring and "loving" the brand affecting on brand image, loyalty and purchasing), **sense of community** (loyal customers' relationship to other loyal customers forming a community and a social phenomenon) and **active engagement** (customer invests personal resources to cherish the relationship with the brand). These four categories are divided into two dimensions: **intensity** (attitudinal strength and community sense) and **activity** (frequency and engagement using and purchasing the brand).

(Keller 2008, p. 97-121).

3.5 Combining green marketing and service branding

Green marketing means creating a marketing strategy that benefits both company and society in a sustainable way. It is important to set realistic and achievable goals and commit in environmental responsibilities. This commitment means active interest, encouragement and support from the company's management, that will reach the company staff. Green company strategy includes every step of the planning process, research and development, producing process and marketing process and turns them into sustainable and more ecofriendly way, and most importantly, is aware and foresees recent and upcoming environmental issues (Polonsky, Mintu-Wimsatt, 1995)

To receive trust and authenticity, communication and honesty of company's actions is the main key. It is important to be open with the target audience, to avoid bad publicity caused by misleading the audience with company's so-called environmental actions. A company that has strong values and promotes sustainability, are often to be valued by publicity who share similar values, such as environmentalists and preservationists. Whether the case is facing problems in being sustainable in some area or finding new successful opportunities in sustainability, sharing it with publicity in an authentic way gives the company a positive brand image and builds trust. Open communication encompasses

interaction with the government as well, and respecting their policies in environmental issues (Polonsky, Mintu-Wimsatt, 1995).

Green marketing often tempts to practice social marketing, which is included to a matter of communication between the company and audience. It is a combination of general social goals and company's marketing tactics, that promotes and spreads awareness of social issues (such as recycling) (Polonsky, Mintu-Wimsatt, 1995).

Frank B. Cross presents the green perspective of **SWOT** analysis in "The Weaning of Green", 1990, that include following main factors:

As **opportunities** Cross has determined competitive advantage in green marketing comparing to regular marketing. Companies with green marketing strategy increases their own awareness of social issues and therefore by promoting them, increases the awareness of consumers and drives them into more sustainable consumer behavior. As **threats** the uncertainty of environmental issues and their impacts takes the biggest role. In one moment, a former major issue can change into less harmful issue due to new studies, and loose the power in marketing. As an extremely important **strength** Cross points out the importance of well-developed long- term organization plan that is in continuous alert with environmental changes and conforms with the changes in economic and scientific environment, and so fore is not overturned by new and existing threats. Another highlighted strength is the environmentally aware management, which is the key to ensure the company's green activities and accuracy of environmental policies and programs being carried out. As an obvious opposite, one of the key points in **weaknesses** is company's weak planning, that increases consumers' skepticism of proliferation in green actions. Often a weak organization plan indicates a weak link between companies promoted thoughts and realistic actions and behavior, and so fore loses its authenticity. Some organizations tent to underestimate societal trends and their impact on companies, which leads to a failure in business outcome because the

deserved attention did not happen due to the misevaluation of the power of social trends.

The main key in service branding is awaking feelings and experiencing. Before experiencing the service, feelings must be awoken to get attention through right way of promotion. The Australian trade Practices Commission (TPC), has published guidelines that include a checklist to avoid green marketing backlash. The TCP authorizes companies green claims in Australia, and to avoid the need of investigation they have pointed out features of an authentic green marketing, that can be directly linked to green promotion. Here are few examples that can be linked to authentic promoting: 1. *Using authentic meaningful terms and pictures*, 2. *Clearly stating the operations' benefits*, 3. *Beneficial product/service characteristics*, 4. *Claims that can be proven*, 5. *Sharing details of achieved benefits*.

3.6 Factors affecting consumer's buying decision

Investigating consumer segmentation and behavior, consumers are usually divided into three segmentation groups: demographic, psychographic and geographic. Demographic segmentation comprises consumer features such as age, generation, gender, social grade, religion and ethnicity. Psychographic segmentation comprises features such as personality, interests, activities and opinions, and geographic segmentation comprises the location of the consumers. To find a correct way to successful promotion and sales is to identify compatible features from these segmentations, especially demographic and psychographic specifications when it comes to understanding consumer behavior. When business is operating internationally targeting several different geographic segments, cultural differences play an important role. Culture is the core that shapes consumers' psychographic features, and must be well investigated to avoid communicational misunderstandings between the company and a consumer, and to turn different cultural aspects into advantages.

In service branding it is important to create a great experience in every step of the consumer-company interaction. Even one inconvenience can affect to consumers' buying decision in future, and has an influence on brand loyalty relationship. S. M. Keaveney, 1995, identified most crucial behaviors by service companies that leaves a poor customer satisfaction and negatively influences on customer loyalty. The behaviors are divided into different failure categories, which include technical problems with the service (such as billing failures), employees found to be impolite, uncaring and unresponsive, inability to manage different situations in a proper customer-oriented way, existing high prices or an extreme increase of prices, inconveniences with timing and location, ethical issues and disagreements, and attraction by a competing company that makes a better offer. These main examples why current customers switch to a competing service provider emphasizes the importance of company's internal variables, such as behavior, training, well-being and communication.

Existing megatrends play an important role when it comes to consumer behavior and buying decision. For many years now sustainability and acting green has been one of the leading megatrends (Sitra 2016) that can be seen in companies' actions around the world in different fields. The word "green" has become very attractive in consumers' minds, and slowly in past decades has formed a consumer group called "alternative consumers" (Harrison, Newholm, Shaw, 2005). Alternative consumerism consists of green, ethical and fair trade related factors affecting in buying decision. Due to the environmental consciousness, services and products start to be divided into "good" and "bad" groups by the society, and gives an image of making decision between saving the world or not saving the world. Green consumerism is still considered as a niche, but is actively seen in wide range of business fields, from cosmetics to car industry.

Studies show that the growth of green consumerism started to increase already in 90's. A survey made by Dagnoli in 1991 found that 83% of American consumers prefer buying environmentally safe products, and L. Joseph found in his survey that 23% of American consumers consider environmental impact in

purchasing decision. Regarding to the annual study of global consumers by Euromonitor International (2011) evaluated by Lydia Gordon, green descriptors are influencing on buying decision more than ever, females being a bit more concerned by 56%. Quality, price and recommendations are still the leading factors affecting in buying decision, and the following factors in order are environmentally friendly, fair trade, sustainably produced, strong brand name, support of local communities and organic. The publicity in media concerning animal cruelty effects on 46% of the respondents, who are willing to spend more money to prevent animal cruelty. The study also shows that most of the green consumers are vegetarians, and that vegetarians buy more frequently ecofriendly services or products. They pointed out “green/environmentally friendly” and “supports local communities” the most important factors in green buying behavior. One of the most important findings of the study is that future consumers are attracted to brands that combine sustainable green operations with affordability, and will most likely buy services/products that are socially and ethically responsible combined with high quality and value.

4 CASE STUDY: PALENQUE TOURS COLOMBIA

4.1 Current marketing strategy and collaboration with NPO's

Palenque Tours' marketing strategy is mainly concentrated marketing. In concentrated marketing concept the single target segment is tourists who are ready to use more money when traveling and choose sustainable tourism over regular tourism. These kinds of tourists who seek for tailor-made private tours, are usually 30+ years old couples or families from middle-class household or higher and are willing to use more money on traveling. According to experience, most of the tourists are from USA or some singular countries from Europe such as Germany, France, UK, Netherlands and Switzerland. That's why Palenque Tours' marketing channels such as their webpage, Google Adwords and social media are concentrated on these countries.

The reason why Palenque Tours' marketing strategy slightly leans on differentiated marketing besides its target segment, is the participating tourists of fixed group tours. These tours are organized through a middle-man, and usually consists of 20 to 35 years old single travelers who have a lower budget for traveling. These consumers usually capture the attention and get the information through a middle-man, and in some cases, don't even know that Palenque Tours is the actual tour organizer. Palenque Tours does not directly target on this segment (fixed group tours) like they do for the other segment (tailor-made tours), because the middle-men already are concentrating on them. However, it must be considered as Palenque Tours' audience as well. On this paper, we concentrate on the target audience, which are the direct customers buying tailor-made tours.

Palenque Tours collaborates with several non-profit organizations and family-based small businesses. These organizations and businesses are actively included in Palenque Tours' services, and are implemented together. For example, Palenque Tours Colombia and Casa Kolacho operate together with Graffitour, by organizing a fixed group tour two times a week (max. 30 people

per tour) through a middle-man; Toucan Café (Spanish language school for foreigners). Casa Kolacho is a non-profit organization that aims to help local youngsters of Comuna 13 with the help of street art. In addition to these fixed tours organized by Toucan, Palenque Tours arranges private Graffitours directly to customers.

Second example is Fundación Aiunau, that concentrates on rehabilitation and protection of Colombian endangered wild animals, specialized in taking care of sloths, armadillos and anteaters that were injured by illegal traffickers. Aiunau gets governmental support, but according to its owner it doesn't cover all the costs of living and running the organization. Palenque Tours arranges a tour that combines a visit to Aiunau and a nature hike in ecologic national park nearby. A short visit to Aiunau includes receiving information about the current situation with illegal animal trafficking and how the organization operates, and part of the visitors' tour fee goes to supporting Aiunau financially.

Third example is Chocó Tourism Alliance, which was founded to support the life of the local communities living in Chocó and to work for the benefit of their economy, environment and society. Small towns of Chocó often face adversities caused by the nature, such as flooding and landslide, and because of their low standard of living the buildings and streets get badly wrecked and people get injured, or even die. Together with Chocó Community Tourism Alliance, Palenque Tours arranges private tours to Chocó. These tours take several days and include everything; transportation to Chocó, program of ecological and social tours, and eco-lodge accommodation. From every tour, 10% of the revenue goes to different local projects regarding health, construction and education. Final example are the coffee and cacao tours, that are implemented with local small family businesses. These tours are organized often, and besides getting to know the family story, history behind the business and the farming process, they include workshops where the visitor experiences the process.

4.2 Current goals in brand image

The most important branding goal for Palenque Tours is to get an authentic brand image. The aim is to create an authentic brand image from the very first impression and strengthen the image through the whole process between Palenque Tours and a customer, and to avoid to create a question of greenwashing. Palenque Tours wants to express their motivation to the environment and society through their services, and to make it clear that money is not the first objective on their goal list. They want to convey the emotional commitment to the environment and society, and leave the business concept and profit to the side. The reality is, that Palenque Tours have competitors in tourism industry that offer similar tours with lower price. Palenque Tours tries to overcome price difference with quality and brand identity. The goal besides emotional commitment to traveling, responsibility and to the country is to highlight the concrete quality of tours. The aim is to reach strong brand imagery and brand position in customers' mind, so that customers' own values and psychology meets with offered service, and price is not the most important factor in buying decision.

4.3 Challenges and advantages in differentiation

Green megatrend drives companies to ecolabel their products even though they have very little or nothing to do with sustainability. Greenwashing is unfortunate growing event in tourism industry due to the popularity of nature and environment themed tour services, and companies are trying to imitate their competitors' success by abusing eco labeling. Tourism industry is the same all around the world, but details differ with cultures. When it comes to buying a service from far distance, more questions appeal, and more investigation is usually done. For example, South America and Europe have several differences, which means that due to cultural prejudices Europeans might doubt South American companies' reliability when it comes to buying decision and comparing companies with each other. All tourism companies in Colombia are fighting the same issue, which means that it can be challenging to find a way to

differ from competitors and give more reliable image than others. Due to the culture, companies in Colombia color their actions even more than Europeans or Americans are used to, and that's why it's easy to practice greenwashing in tourism industry. Even though the services might seem very similar to a customer between different ecotourism companies, the core of the company is what matters, but might be difficult for a consumer to see. The challenge is in showing company's personality behind the tour services in a way, that it differs from the competitors. All the companies are offering the same product, so the final decision comes from the psychological bond with the company, but if company is not expressing itself and its values well enough, there's nothing that differentiates it or proofs that instead of greenwashing or misleading the company is authentic.

Competition in Colombian tourism industry is growing due to the growth of tourism, and there are few major sustainable tourism and general tourism providers that have the lead in tourism market in Colombia. One of the biggest competitors to Palenque Tours is SeeColombia, that offers both general tourism and ecotourism. From its website, it is already possible to tell it is a big company with several regional customer landlines and hosts as well a travel guide and a travel blog, and has international press awareness. The front page shows enthusiasm towards traveling and easiness to contact in English. Among smaller profile competitors in sustainable ecotourism, the main competitors are Colombia Eco Travel, Colombian Paradise, Andes Ecotours, Colombia Wild Ecotours and Worldwide Ecotours. Half of these competitors above can be seen very similar with Palenque Tours according to the first impression from the website, especially with Colombia Eco Travel who presents themselves in very similar way. However, the competitors with not-so-well designed visuality, have features that might overcome the design of the page: TripAdvisor's certificate of excellence. Special mentions by internationally known travel guides bring more trust towards the company, and when they are presented at the front page, it already gives a lot stronger trusting image than any other. However, special mentions like that presents the quality of the service, not the authenticity of

sustainability. Partnerships with environmental or social associations strengthens the trust in responsibility.

Palenque Tours' advantage comparing to its competitors is their visual expression on their website, because it is more culture neutral with its professional design. It was only recently re-designed to look more professional made by professionals, instead of the old version made by the company staff themselves. Even though the services between competitors seem similar from customer point of view, Palenque Tours has potential to differentiate with the core of the company; the staff. The staff running the company is a mix of locals and foreigners, which brings more trust to the company and more multilingual skills. The same thing is with SeeColombia – they also have an international staff. What separates them, is the story behind the business and why was it founded in the first place. Palenque Tours staff is more like a family than a regular office team, that does trips together and celebrates different occasions together. They all have different relationships with each other already before working together, and they all enjoy the work they do. What is different from the other competitors, is that besides having tens of local guides, even the office team works as guides. When it comes to trips with high profile customers, the founder of Palenque Tours is the tour guide himself. Besides him, the sales director as well works as a guide several times per month. These things bring more down-to-earth feeling to the company, giving the image of real interest towards the customers and traveling in Colombia. When personal stories are added to the experience, it creates more bonding and deepens the relationship between Palenque Tours and the client.

4.4 Keller's brand equity model applied to Palenque Tours Colombia

Keller's brand equity model is designed to identify brand's identity characteristics, branding objectives and customer-based brand equity. The aim of applying the model to Palenque Tours Colombia is to identify the four stages of brand development to be able to view concretely what and who is this brand, which makes decisions between branding tools easier. This is the first time that

Palenque Tours concentrates on brand matters only, and the first time such analysis is utilized.

1. *Identity: Who are you?*

Palenque Tours Colombia wants to be consumers' top choice when it comes to tourism in Colombia, and the top choice when creating collaboration with other organizations with sustainable acts and resellers. Acting locally and providing services to customers outside the local area, it is challenging or even impossible to create a top-of-mind image for new customers who search for possible tour providers. However, the top-of-mind image and high *depth of awareness* can be developed to customers who have experienced the service, and due to that satisfying experience the brand will get recognition to new potential customers through recommendations and general discussion about Colombia or ecotourism by the experienced customers.

Palenque Tours' ideal brand image combines good sustainable acts with extraordinary traveling experiences. Their logo presents sustainability with its green color and deep spiral, and recently published slogan says "Everybody travels but few make a difference". The company has an unofficial mantra that is "using tourism as a way to do good deeds", which is the description from the founder of Palenque Tours Colombia, Markus Jobi, why he established the company in the first place. That is the message that they want to convey to their customers through all their actions, website, logo and slogan. However, it is not officially set as a mantra. Importance of *Breadth of awareness* (brand image, quality and price combined) is very critical for Palenque Tours, since they have higher prices comparing to regular tourism due to privately tailor-made tours and being able act sustainably. When the customer is deciding between companies, Palenque Tours wants the customer to be open to spend more money for a good cause and high-quality traveling experience.

2. *Meaning: What are you?*

To be able to fulfill consumers' expectations, Palenque Tours stays in close contact with the customer during the planning process, and takes into account

customers' additional requests and wishes to the tour plan. When it comes to "V.I.P" clients (big groups and influential/ famous customers), a lot of requested additional services are added to the tour with additional cost, which can be very different from the original plan. Palenque Tours promotes high quality tailor-made tours, so many of the customers already have wishes to adapt to the original tour plan, and that way create strong expectations towards the company. The aim is to design and implement those wishes as fittingly as possible and discuss about the ups and downs to avoid inconveniences. Some problems outside of Palenque Tours' control can already be foreseen by experiences, and those possible problems are usually informed to the customer before the trip. One example is transportation to Nuquí (Chocó), where the only transportation option is flying with small private airplanes that are dependent to weather conditions, that can rapidly change in Colombia. This causes often cancellations and changes from the airline company and airport arrangements.

Being ecotourism company, Palenque Tours aims to inform people how their participation is affecting to local sustainability as the customers expect. The non-profit organizations are presented separately on the website, and how the tours are concretely helping the organizations is explained under the description. However, not everyone does a specific research looking for proof, so the brand itself should already convey the authenticity without those details, when a potential customer is comparing between ecotourism companies. Brand meaning should be in place, since consumer can't get any tangible proof of the authenticity of the brand. Palenque Tours has just recently created a proper detailed marketing plan, which means that there has been no official branding strategy before. The new marketing strategy includes a social media plan, where the company shares images and information about current news, events and other information regarding to the environment, sustainability or tourism. It is also a way to monitor what kind of publications get more attention and who are the followers, but since the plan is recently started, the project of finding a correct way to promote the brand and get the target customers' attention is still in progress.

3. *Response: What about you?*

Brand judgements are monitored through customer feedback. Palenque Tours encourages all the customers to leave public feedback to TripAdvisor and social media for everyone to see. Even from short comments it's possible to put together all the main factors of brand judgements (brand quality, brand credibility, brand consideration, brand superiority), and see if the quality and relevancy met customer's expectations that formed before implementation, and if the customer felt the service as a unique experience. In this case TripAdvisor is the most crucial channel to share feedback, because even one negative feedback can turn customers away. Sometimes these negative comments can form just from a light misunderstanding, which why communication between Palenque Tours and the customer is the most important factor to control brand judgements. On the other hand, Palenque Tours considers that a page full of short and extremely positive feedbacks can give unauthentic vibes of the company. The aim is to get positive and honest comments at the same time. The comment can include problems that possibly occurred during the trip, but with efficient customer service the customer will remain a good experience and points out how well the problems were resolved by the company. Currently Palenque Tours have 156 feedbacks in total on TripAdvisor, from which 146 are excellent, 9 very good and 1 from the middle. In sustainable tourism brand feelings is in key role, because they are not only operating for their profit but also giving profit for local associations and businesses. Customers choosing sustainable tourism are usually people who care in some level about environmental or social matters, which why branding sustainable tourism is rather emotional branding. Authenticity and uniqueness are factors that go together when it comes to competence in sustainable tourism, and the purpose of the company should be clear to the customer. Customer whose own values meet with company values, is more likely to spend more money on that service. Palenque Tours wants to receive authentic and honest customer feedback, even if they include some setbacks. The wanted recommendation rate has to be high, but at the time to make the company humane. If all the comments are extremely good without any criticism, it might seem unhuman to the customer.

4. *Relationship: What about you and me?*

Brand resonance is more visible when it comes to selling everyday services and products, but in tourism it is rather intangible, and the result of a strong brand relationship and behavioral loyalty is rather emotional involvement and creating some level of social phenomenon. Palenque Tours' customers are buying once in a lifetime experience through tours, relating to the fact that traveling is temporary and buying tour services is out of customer's ordinary life, and most of the customers are coming from long distance. Even though being extremely satisfied with the tour, they are unlikely to buy another tour in near future, but they are likely to recommend the service, which is the key factor in receiving new customers and getting more long-distance visibility. By giving public feedback and recommendations, following, posting and commenting on Palenque Tours' social media pages, following the blog and receiving newsletter is in Palenque Tours' case consumers' attitudinal attachment, sense of community and active engagement.

5 SURVEY: CONSUMERS' PERSPECTIVES

5.1 Introduction of the survey

The survey was made to bring potential consumers' point of view to the study. It was aimed for travelers who choose sustainable tourism over regular tourism, and already have some information or experience on sustainable ecotourism. The aim of the survey is to guide Palenque Tours to utilize the received information of brand characteristics and channels to promote its authenticity. The survey is a qualitative questionnaire with 15 questions, including both closed and open questions. The aim was to make it effortless to answer, and on the test run it took 3-5 minutes per person to fill out the questionnaire (Appendix 1). The distribution of the survey happened mainly via two most internationally known traveling forums, and in different traveler/expat groups in social media from 30th of November until the end of December. To receive responses from Palenque Tours' existing customers, they shared the survey on their social media.

The questionnaire included questions that enabled dividing participants to different demographic and psychographic groups. This way we are able to divide the results into two groups: Palenque Tours' target segment and all the respondents for a general view. The questions asked were gender, age, home country, occupation, income class and 5 different preferred traveling habits.

The questions that are directly related to recognizing authenticity of a sustainable ecotourism company included the used sources to find sustainable tourism services, how important the participant finds the collaboration between sustainable tourism and local environmental/cultural development of the travel destination, which characteristics indicate his/her choice of sustainable tourism and how he/she recognizes these characteristics chosen above.

The final question was related to branding, asking the participant to describe sustainable tourism with three emotions. Branding a service is mainly feeling

related, with the received answers we are able to identify which feelings are evoked by the customers in sustainable tourism, and utilize this information in branding decisions. For a participant, the question was more like a fun and creative ending to a questionnaire, meanwhile the answers give a great perception for the company.

5.2 Results

The first part reviews who were the participants behind the responses. The total received amount was 91 responses from 20 different countries, including following countries: USA (13%), Germany (12%), Finland (12%), Brazil (4%), UK (4%), France (4%), Australia (4%), The Netherlands (4%), Sweden (4%), Switzerland (3%), Italy (3%), Colombia (3%), Chile (3%), Russia (3%), Canada (2%), Mexico (2%), Scotland (1%), Belgium (1%), Ethiopia (1%) and Spain (1%). 5% of the respondents did not share their country of origin. The aim was to receive responses around the world to get a worldwide view, but at the same time to concentrate on Palenque Tours's case and receive answers from their target countries in marketing, such as USA, Germany, France, Switzerland, UK and The Netherlands.

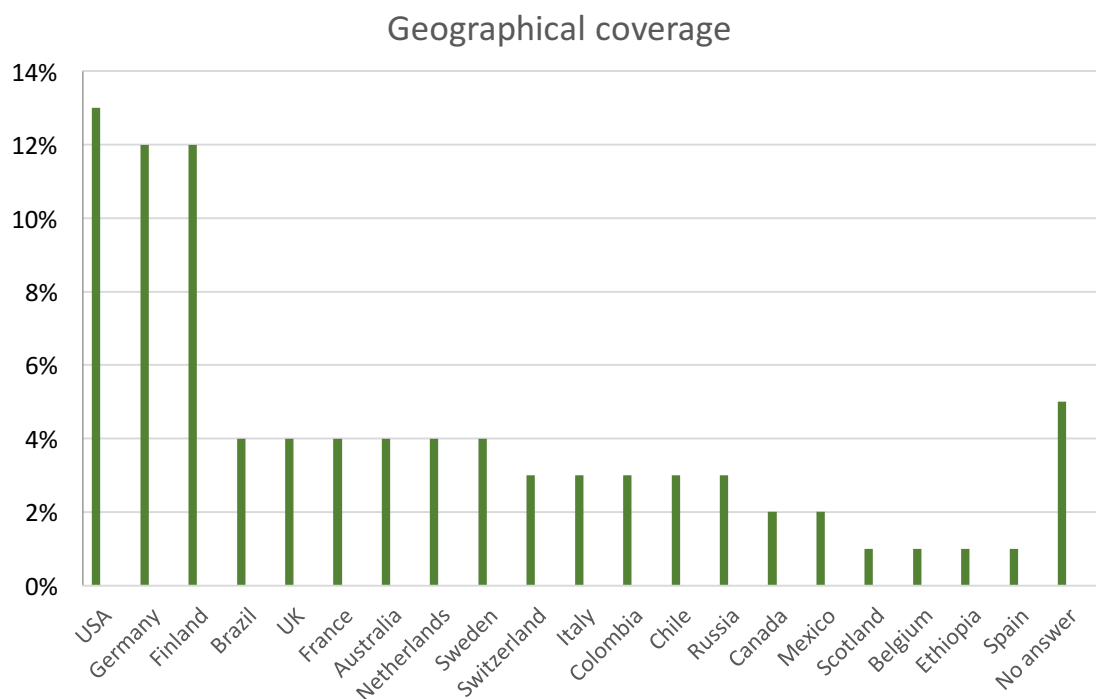


Figure 2: Geographical coverage of the participants

Majority of the respondents were female (60%).

Most of the respondents were between 25-34 years old (46%), second largest group was between 18-24 years old (42%), then 35-44 years old (7%), 45-54 years old (3%) and finally 55+ years old (1%).

Most of the respondents were employed (49%). Rest of the group were students and unemployed ones, but no one of the respondents was retired.

Majority by 62% considered themselves/their household to middle class. Rest of the participants who considered themselves lower than middle class and higher than middle class were very even, and 7% of the participants did not want to specify their income class.

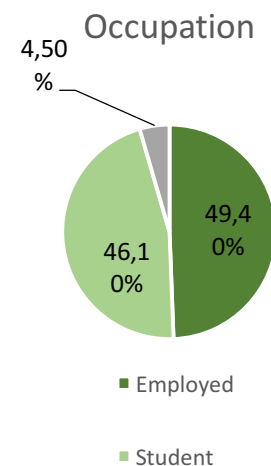
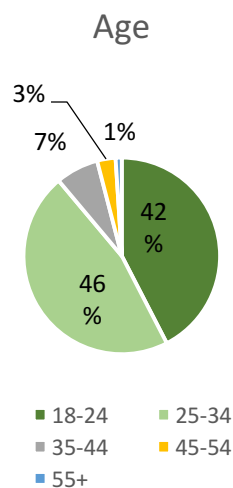
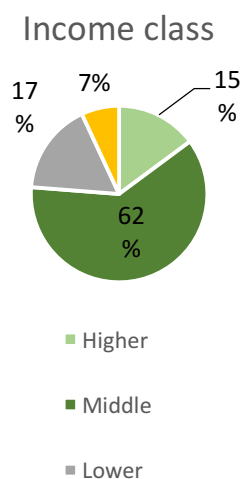


Figure 3: Income class

Figure 4: Age

Figure 5: Occupation

Question about traveling habits was divided into 5 different parts: length of the travel, preferring to travel alone or with company, cost of traveling (accommodation and mobility), and whether the participants prefer to participate in fixed group tours or tailor-made private tours and what time of the year they prefer to travel in. Participants who prefer medium- term traveling (app. 14-31 days) and Long- term traveling (1-12 months) were equal (42% each), and minority by 17% preferred short- term traveling (app. 3-10 days). Over half (53%) of the respondents prefer to travel with a friend or group of friends, and

second biggest group prefer to travel alone (30%). Minority prefer to travel with family (17%). Majority prefer low cost traveling (58%), and second largest group prefer high cost traveling (39%). Minority of the respondents preferred luxury traveling (2%). The difference between preferring to participate in fixed group tours and tailor- made private tours was very small, but slightly over the half preferred tailor- made private tours (51%). Majority of the respondents prefer to travel during the summer and spring, but since it was an open question, half of the respondents specified the answer in other ways, from which majority of them were anytime without preferences, during destination’s low season, and when it’s warm and sunny at the destination.

After gathering psychographic and demographic information to know the audience, we gather the responses about identifying authenticity and tools that are used to look for information. Most used sources for finding sustainable tour services were Internet search tool (90%), word of mouth (71%), social media (54%) and travel guides (42%). Options that only few respondents selected were magazines/ articles (18%), ecotourism associations/ websites (15%) and travel agencies (12%). 6% added another source that were forums and hostels.

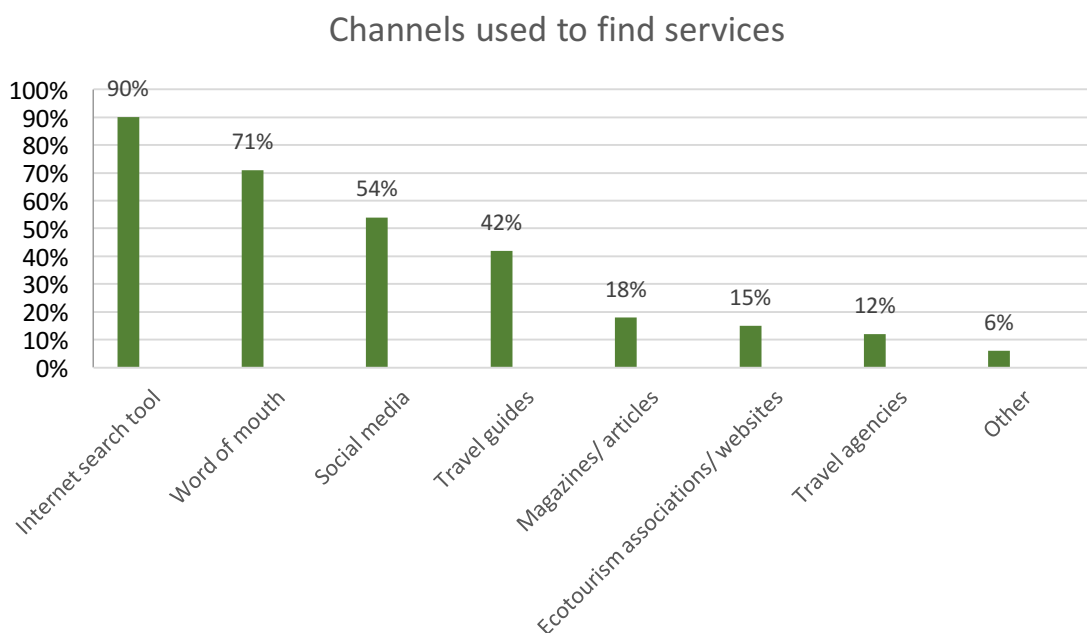


Figure 6: Channels used by participants to find tour services

Majority of the respondents found collaboration between sustainable tourism and local environmental/ cultural development of the travel destination very important. On the scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important), 42% chose 5, 39% chose 4 and 16% chose 3. Very small group answered it is not important: 2% chose 2 and 1% chose 1.

Importance of collaboration between sustainable tourism and local environmental/ cultural development of the travel destination

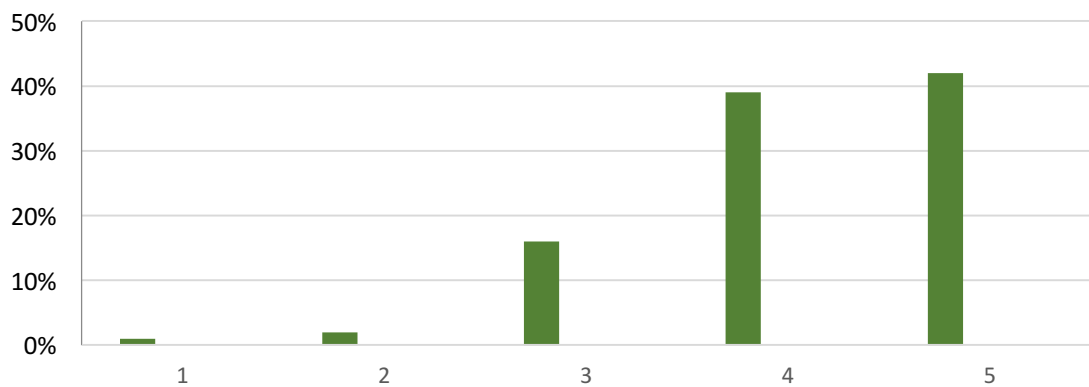


Figure 7: Importance of collaboration between sustainable tourism and local environmental/ cultural development of the travel destination rated from 1-5

Chosen characteristics that indicates his/her choice of sustainable tourism were close to each other. Characteristics that stood out the most were collaboration with local small/ family businesses (76%), sustainability inside the company within everyday practices (46%) and equally (44%) collaboration with other environmental/cultural associations and activity in sharing awareness of local/ national problems and development. Besides the 4 most chosen characteristics, 40% chose certifications of sustainability as an important factor. Rest of the chosen options were very equal in following order: variety of tours implemented with environmental/ cultural associations, variety of hiking/ nature tours, sustainability of mobility in tours, sustainability of accommodation in tours, sustainability of meal options in tours, awards and special mentions of sustainability, voluntary work included in tours and finally, publications made by other environmental associations.

Chosen characteristics that indicate sustainable tourism

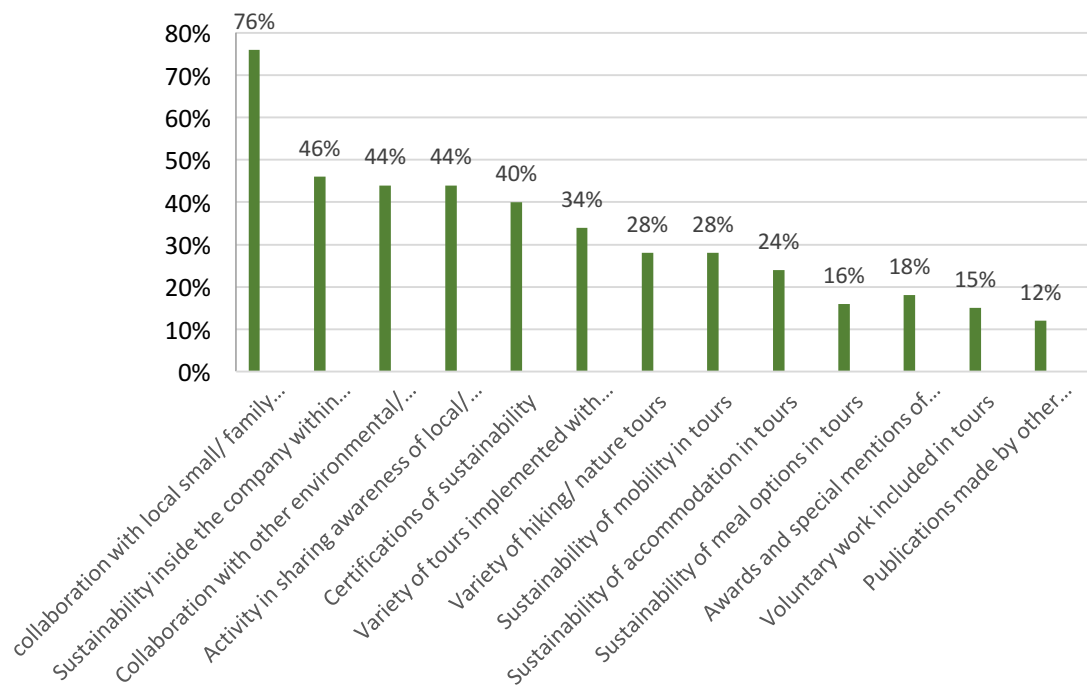


Figure 8: Characteristics that indicate participants' choice of sustainable tourism

The open question asked the participants how they recognize the authenticity of the characteristics they chose in the earlier question. Some of the participants left this part blank, and only 67% answered. Majority of the respondents answered that after receiving the available information and by that making the decision to trust the company, the real recognition comes by own experience during and after the tour. Some of the participants brought out the issue of using ecotourism just as an advertisement (greenwashing), which why it can be difficult to identify authentic ecotourism company just from the outer shell. The main points that were mentioned more than two times and few singular points that are useful to the study and stand out are following:

- Customer reviews: reading how experienced customers felt during the tour and if they talk about company's level of sustainability
- Confirming already received information (from a website or agency) through company's social media
- It comes from a feeling

- Analyzing the offered service and its price, whether it seems truthful or the tour includes non- ecological components
- Talking and asking advice from the locals
- Looking for publications made by other parties or mentions by the government, that proof the company's sustainability
- Checking if the company is certified
- Analyzing the company behavior: how they seem to act within everyday practices and during the process with a client

Final question was directly related to branding, and the aim was to gather feelings that are evoked by sustainable tourism. Respondents listed three emotions that came to their mind when thinking about sustainable tourism, and majority of the answers were very similar to each other. Many of the answers included a word "ecofriendly", which in this case are left out since its rather obvious feature than an evoked feeling. Here are the most common used feelings gathered in groups by their similarity:

- Happiness, Joy, Thrilling
- Love for the planet
- Caring, Hopeful, Safe, Supporting, Trusting
- Togetherness, Respectful, Awareness, Responsibility
- Honesty, Compassion, Fair
- Freedom, Peaceful
- Satisfaction
- Unforgettable

5.3 Conclusions of the survey

Geographical coverage was successful, especially the fact that most responses were received from the USA. For general analysis about authenticity of sustainable ecotourism, it was important to reach countries around the world, but for case study purposes it was important to reach Palenque Tours's target

countries. The primary plan was to receive at least 100 responses, but in this study, qualitative perception is more relevant than quantitative perception.

The survey brought the needed concrete information of what channels are used and what characteristics are the most essential in sustainable ecotourism. Consumers use mostly internet to look for information that support the company's authenticity, and most common way is to check social media after getting "the right" feeling through company's website. To find sustainable tour services in the first place the most common tool is "googling" it, and after the consumer found potential services, he/she starts to look for evidence. Besides internet search engines, consumers tempt to trust other people's opinion about a service, its sustainability and quality. These people can be consumer's family or friends, unknown people around the world who via Internet rated different services and gave advice on forums, or other travelers or locals met at the destination.

The survey was meant for people who choose sustainable tourism over regular tourism, which means most of them have a great experience in traveling and presumably some level of knowledge about ecology and sustainability in everyday life. One participant described searching for authenticity proofing information of a company as self- education about sustainability in general. The decision to pay more for sustainable tour services comes from an inner feeling and consumer's personal values. Majority of the participants found collaboration with local development very important in sustainable tourism industry. This means, that many of the potential customers are looking for services that not only protect the environment, but also help the environment in development, meaning that they are more interested of services that for example help maintaining organizations that work for development, which mostly operate nonprofit.

The chosen characteristics that indicate sustainable ecotourism were mainly related to collaboration within services and company behavior. Customers seek mostly for services that collaborate with local family businesses or other small

businesses and environmental or cultural associations. What they need before making the buying decision, is the proof of the collaboration; proof that they support the work of local family businesses or help the environmental organizations to develop or maintain their operations.

When it comes to company behavior, the consumers feel sustainability inside the company within everyday practices is very important, which why it was the second- most selected indicator in this question. If the services are sustainable, the source of it should be sustainable as well. Another important thing related to company behavior is the activity of sharing awareness of local problems and development related to the environment and society. Like one of the eco travelers said, the finding process at the same time is educating yourself, and consumers feel like it is important that the company is involved in educating the customers. This activity can be evaluated when customers are looking at the company's social media for authenticity supporting information.

Feelings that are evoked in customers when thinking about sustainable ecotourism were rather sensitive than strong feelings; instead of extreme, sustainable tourism is more involved with hope and respect. To consumers, sustainable ecotourism is something that brings happiness and satisfaction through a unique experience in cultural exchange and togetherness and evokes compassion and care towards the destination's society and nature. They feel sustainable tourism is inspiring, which explains the perception of importance in sharing awareness and educating consumers. Many of the participants mentioned the word "freedom" and "peace", which can be related to morally right buying decision. When making decisions inside the company in branding, these feelings are useful to underline in every decision. Feelings are the most important link when it comes to creating a certain kind of brand image and brand positioning, and as shown in this study, most of the buying decisions are made based on a feeling; the feeling that the company's appearance give. The experiment itself fulfills the expectations that were formed when having a certain kind of prejudice from the company's visual appearance.

What was important, was the chosen preferred traveling habit in participating tours. Majority of the respondents prefer participating in tailor-made private tours, which usually are more expensive than fixed group tours. With this response, we can assume that the involved audience was the correct kind of audience: sustainable tourism is mostly provided through tailor-made private tours, from one person to a bigger group.

5.4 Conclusions applied to Palenque Tours Colombia

Besides general analysis, the paper concentrates on analyzing Palenque Tours' target client group. This means, that when the younger audience from 18-24 years old are counted out, it still leaves the majority of the respondents in total with the approximate age from 25-55+ years old. From this group, the respondents who rather prefer fixed group tours instead of private tailor-made tours are counted out. Now the remaining group consists of people who usually participate tailor-made private tours and are Palenque Tours' average client age range, and mostly from the countries they target in: USA, Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands and France. Besides the target countries, there are singular participants from Italy, Canada, Australia, Scotland, Brazil and Chile.

Most common channels to use in finding sustainable tourism services were Internet search tool, word of mouth, social media and travel guides. All these four options were very equal, and only few people choose magazines/ articles and travel agencies. Ecotourism associations/ websites is the least used channel. Six percent of the whole audience wrote their own source, which were forums and hostels. Most of the group find the collaboration between sustainable tourism and local environmental/ social development of the travel destination very important by choosing the number 5 on the scale from 1-5. 4 was the second most chosen option, and 3 was third most chosen option. None of these participants chose 1 or 2, which means that the target consumer segment prefers involving services that help or maintain the development rather

than participating services that only protect but doesn't develop environmental or social issues.

Most chosen characteristics that indicate his/her choice of sustainable tourism was by far collaboration with local small/ family businesses, which can be linked to the previous result how the consumers feel it's important that sustainable tourism is collaborating for development. Second most chosen characteristic was sustainability inside the company within everyday practices, and with small difference the third most chosen option was the company's activity in sharing awareness of local/ national problems and development. Rest of the options were selected with unnoticeable differences in following order: Collaboration with environmental/ cultural associations and variety of tours implemented with local small businesses/ organizations (equal), variety of hiking tours, sustainability in accommodation and mobility in tours (equal), certifications of sustainability, and finally publications about the company made by environmental associations, awards and special mentions of sustainability and sustainability of meal options in tours (equal).

Most common methods to find out about the company's sustainability in this group were reading testimonials and reviews and evaluating the company website by its content and tours. They make the buying decision based on a feeling that the reviews and company webpage and Facebook evoke. Some of the participants find out what kind of information company shares about the environment and country in general, and that way tries to ensure company's values. Some participants brought out actual interaction with the locals and the company itself, asking the locals opinion and asking the company directly about their values and philosophy. Many from the group mentioned, that they find out about the authenticity by participating the tours.

5.5 Forum discussion: How to recognize an authentic sustainable ecotourism provider?

Two discussions were started as a traveler in two most well-known traveling forums; TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet. These discussions were started in the very beginning of the study to support the research. The question was, how to recognize an authentic ecotourism provider from a fake one, and are there some characteristics to take into consideration? In the question, I used South America as a traveling destination. Both discussions on two different sites received only one response each. However, the responses came from travelers from age of between 30-40 years old, and were long answers with proper details. The discussion also pointed out the problem of greenwashing, since many companies claim to provide sustainable tourism when in fact they don't. Here are the most relevant features/ advices gathered together:

- Personal values meeting company values: Look for characteristics in a company that you personally consider sustainable
- Sustainable decisions made within the company's everyday practices: cooling solutions, plastic waste etc.
- The meal policy within the tours; if they have sustainable options and are locally produced
- Verifying authenticity with previous customers, via travel blogs and forums
- Company attitude: encouraging for responsible acts or staying silent?

The answers gathered from these two discussions can be closely related to the result of the survey; finding out how the previous customers feel about the company, analyzing the components within the tour and the company behavior, whether they act responsibly inside the company and do they spread awareness and encourage the consumers.

6 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Conclusions of the study

In this research, many of the participants brought up the issue of recognizing an authentic brand from a greenwashing brand. These findings can help sustainable ecotourism providers to differentiate from its competitors and green washers, but at the same time it makes things easier to the consumer who's having hard time to separate a greenwashing brand and an authentic brand. With theoretical research about creating a service brand and practical research about brand authenticity from customer point of view, the research gives relevant suggestions in authentic brand image building to sustainable ecotourism industry.

Due to its intangible existence, service branding is closely connected with emotions. The study shows that people tempt to link rather sensitive emotions to sustainable tourism, that encompasses such feelings as compassion, happiness, freedom and hope. In service industry, the product is delivered by an experiment, and the satisfaction and quality of the product is reviewed only after it has been experienced. Outside the basic business concept, the success of a service providing company is in consumers' hands; how they express their experience to the next potential customer, who is still considering his buying decision between different companies. This way, a certain type of brand image and its position is formed and passed to the next potential consumer, but to succeed with the brand, company needs acts that meet with the wanted image. Consumers who choose ecotourism over regular tourism, are group of people who share similar values with different details, which why social marketing plays a big role in creating a trustful image and reaching consumers' values. Study showed that sustainability inside the company within everyday practices is one of the key characteristics, which can be utilized in social marketing and spreading awareness of local or global issues. If company shares how sustainable they are and what kind of sustainable acts they do inside the office, they can explain why they do it and share its importance to the audience who is

expecting them to do so. The more research is made by a consumer, the more authentic image the company gets. But how many consumers are willing to spend a lot of time to find proof for the company's authenticity? The first impression forms the first and most important feeling. When focusing on sharing more authenticity supporting information through the channels that were found out to be the most used ones, more easily the company proves its authenticity while giving the first impression.

Sustainable ecotourism and non-profit organizations work in a symbiosis, meaning that they both have something beneficial to give each other. The study shows that people find the collaboration between sustainable tourism and local development very important, and as an indicator to sustainable tourism one of the most common chosen options were collaboration with local small/ family businesses and environmental/ cultural associations. Not only the collaboration between tourism provider and NPO's is one way of practicing sustainable tourism, but the consumers find it is one of the major indicators in sustainable tourism industry. This means, that the information about the collaboration should be used in branding, because it is a proofing factor that creates authenticity to the brand. Tours that include supporting and interacting with local organizations and family businesses should be highlighted in each channel, giving as detailed information as possible.

6.2 Recommendations to Palenque Tours Colombia

The goal is to create a brand image, that gives the consumer a feeling of doing a good deed through a unique travel experience. Palenque Tours already have right kind of brand elements that visualize the core: the logo presents sustainability with green colored spiral and the slogan says "Everybody travels – few make a difference". Colors, symbols, pictures, sounds, words; all these are tools to evoke feelings, and when we identify the feelings that surround the business, it's easier to visualize the core of the brand.

Palenque Tours haven't established an official brand mantra so far, but if when concretizing a branding plan, also its main tools should be concretized. The brand mantra is an invisible sentence, that should be a base for creating brand elements, setting a position and creating an image: it is the invisible core. Invisible means, that it is not a public slogan – it is something that the company knows, and consumers should figure it out through the brand's psychological communication. Palenque Tours says, that the reason why they practice sustainable tourism is not the business and industry itself – it is their tool to help the environment. That is a brand mantra. This statement should be the official source for all branding decisions and especially, when it comes to pictures and descriptions behind them in social media marketing, and before doing publications that promote the brand, it is advisable to consider if the visuality or the text convey the mantra message to a reader. This way Palenque Tours is getting more close to the wanted brand positioning, which means how the brand is linked and considered in certain situations in peoples' mind. The wanted position is an extra-ordinary experiment that no-one else in Colombia offers, and at the same time is a friend of the locals and a friend of the clients; helping both to fulfill their life experiments.

Many of the potential customers ask advice from the locals, and Palenque Tours wants to be the first one in mind. When thinking about Palenque Tours Colombia, they want to leave out the word "tour business", and rather think it as a place where you receive a unique culture exchange by getting to know the reality of the culture and environment, support it and share life experiences with the locals. Creating an identity and a face is what branding is about; story-telling, rather than giving detailed information about the business concept itself. To help to form the story and the image, we need visible elements that recall the company in different situations, such as logo, slogan and other illustrations.

When the link between brand equity, positioning and elements has been found, the correct brand strategy is needed, which is mainly about using correct channels to reach the target consumer group. Findings from the survey presents the most used channels to find sustainable tourism services and

information that support its authenticity. To find tour services, the most chosen option was Internet search tool, meaning that the consumers mainly Google it. It is for sure now, that Google plays a big role when it comes to reaching the customers, and company's Google settings should be reviewed each day, and something that might be beneficial to pay attention to: adding key words that not only are about the business and sustainable tourism itself, but also keywords that support finding suggestions what to do in Colombia and how to get to know the culture and society in Colombia. When it comes to Google advertisements', using keywords that can be linked to the characteristics, indicators and feelings that the research pointed out, the company is already giving more authentic image than its competitors. This happens already before the potential customer clicks the link and visits the website, where he/she sees the obstacles that support the already evoked feeling of the brand.

One of the most common channel was word of mouth, including customer reviews, testimonials and locals' opinions, whether they are familiar with the company. Surprisingly many consumers pointed out asking opinion of the locals. When thinking about it, locals may not have any information about a company that provides services for only travelers if they are not somehow linked to the company, so this is a great tool to differentiate. Palenque Tours is supporting the community with its services, but mainly via collaborations. It could be beneficial to get locals attention in Medellin, since the office stands in Medellin. Throwing a small event every now and then to the locals does not only give more community supporting image to the brand, but also increases the awareness among the locals. Events can be about cultural exchange or informational events about sustainable tourism, and can be hosted for different type of groups, for exclusively to hotel/finca/hostel owners or generally for locals that are interested of themes that Palenque Tours services are dealing with. The events don't have to be major things, they can be small online events as well, for example hosting a social Facebook event of a waste-free day. It can be a minimum input from Palenque Tours but the benefit of waking attention among the locals is worth to try. When these kinds of events are hosted in social media, it immediately gets the traveler's attention too, who is searching

for further information about different companies while trying to make a purchasing decision. It is something that creates differentiation in a very authentic way: it evokes compassion, togetherness and commitment, and many other feelings that the consumers link to sustainable tourism. And as we have presented in this study; feelings play the main role when it comes to purchasing decision in this industry.

Social media plan should include sharing stories about Colombia and its culture and nature, its problems and information who Palenque Tours is helping by their different collaborations, since most chosen indicators of sustainable tourism were collaborations with local family businesses and environmental or cultural associations. Due to the study, we can suggest Palenque Tours to concentrate on publications that highlight tours that include collaboration with family businesses and other local associations especially during the preferred season.

Another detail that can be added to social media plan, is highlighting sustainable practices inside the office. Like the study showed, people find it as an important indicator that the company itself acts sustainably, and creating identity to a brand is about sharing personal details that show the company's personality. Sharing singular detailed things on social media how Palenque Tours's office for example prefers vegetarian/vegan food, or what small things make the office more sustainable exposes the heart itself behind the sold services. At the same time, it is also sharing awareness to the followers. In brand design, it is highlighted that the main thing that sells in a brand is not the product – it's the company. When consumers' and company's values meet, things like price loses its importance and customer relationship is formed.

This paper was made to help Palenque Tours Colombia to make correct branding decisions and to share most important things that effect on company brand, and how it is built. These findings indicate Palenque Tours to make correct branding decisions in a way that strengthens its authenticity.

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Research survey

ATTENTION: This survey is made for travelers who prefer sustainable tourism services over regular tourism services.

This survey is made by an International Business student from Karelia University of Applied Sciences (Finland) for a thesis research, which concerns authenticity of ecotourism brands. The aim is to find out what are the characteristics of an authentic ecotourism brand from customers' point of view, and how does the collaboration with local non-profit organizations affect on brand image and its authenticity. To be able to have as accurate result as possible, the survey includes questions that enables dividing participants into different psychographic and demographic groups.

Participants will be anonymous and received answers will be used for thesis purposes only.

Survey includes short questions and takes only 5 minutes.
Thank you for your effort!

Gender:

Male

Female

Other

Age:

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55+

Home country:

Occupation:

Employed

Not Employed

Student

Retired

Which income class you consider yourself into?

Lower than middle class

Middle class

Higher than middle class

I don't want to specify

Choose your preferred traveling habit from each section:

1.

Short- term traveling (app. 3-10 days)

Medium- term traveling (app. 14- 31 days)

Research survey

Long- term traveling (app. 1 month – 12 months)

2.

Traveling alone

Traveling with a friend or group of friends

Traveling with family

3.

Low cost traveling (backpacking, hostels, low cost mobility e.g. bus)

High cost traveling (hotels, restaurants, higher cost mobility e.g. airplane)

Luxury traveling (paying for comfort, first class accommodation, first/business class mobility)

4.

Participating in fixed group tours

Participating in private tailor- made tours

What time of the year you prefer to travel?

What sources do you use for finding sustainable tour services? (multiple answers allowed)

Internet search tool

Social media

Magazines/ Articles

Travel guides

Travel agencies

Ecotourism associations/ websites

Word of mouth

Other: _____

How important do you find the collaboration between sustainable tourism and local environmental/cultural development of the travel destination?

Not Important 1 2 3 4 5 Very Important

Which of these characteristics indicates your choice of sustainable tourism? (Choose 1- 5 most important options)

Sustainability inside the company within everyday practices

Publications about the company made by other environmental associations

Certifications of sustainability

Awards and special mentions of sustainability

Sustainability of mobility in tours

Sustainability of accommodation in tours

Sustainability of meal options in tours

Variety of hiking/nature tours

Collaboration with local small/family businesses

Collaboration with other environmental/cultural associations

Variety of tours implemented with local small businesses/organizations

Activity in sharing awareness of local/national problems and development

Voluntary work included in tours

How do you recognize the authenticity of the characteristics you chose above?

Research survey

Describe sustainable tourism with three emotions:
