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## Off-Season Tourism Experiences in the Baltic Sea Region Require New Customer Segments

16.12.2024

📍 Företagsekonomi | Granskat inlägg - Reviewed post



### Introduction

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region funded Light in the Dark project, focuses on extending the short tourism season that brings challenges to tourism companies located in the Baltic Sea coastal areas. During the fall 2024, the project offered workshops to small and medium-sized companies from Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which are interested in offering experiences outside of their main season. A total of eight workshops were arranged for a selection of SMEs along the coast of the Baltic Sea.

This blog will present the theoretical framework and discuss the main learnings from the first two workshops. First, it was important for the companies to acknowledge the

necessity to understand the needs of off-season customers. Secondly, entrepreneurs should make use of their own resources and competences as a reference point, when they start reflecting upon what new experiences they could offer customers in off-season.

## **Tourists identified as “Nature tribe” travel off-season**

According to Saarinen (2021) experiencing unique landscapes and engagement in different activities in nature is the core of tourism. Tourists, who encounter memorable tourism experiences, tend to revisit the destination and develop a relationship to the destination visited (Sthapit et al., 2024).

At the beginning of the Light in the Dark project, a survey (Light in the Dark, 2024) was conducted in six European countries. Based on the survey results, nature lovers were divided into three different groups. The first group appreciates local lifestyle, the next one wants to be nourished by nature, and the last group looks for active adventures in nature. The companies involved in the project started their own process by further examining the tourist group they identified as their main customer. It can be argued that customer understanding is the starting point for all product and experience design (see e.g. Komppula & Konu, 2017).

## **Crafting experiences**

One of the workshops focused on the development of new products that have the characteristics of an experience. Even if numerous motives for traveling exist, one of the main motives is to escape the daily routines and hopefully experience something unique that one cannot experience at home (Batat & Frochot, 2014; Horner & Swarbrook, 2020). The tourism industry must respond to these demands, and it can be stated that the tourism industry has become an experience industry (Skift, 2023; Andersson, 2007)

Hanefors and Mossberg (2007, p. 27) define an experience “as a personal phenomenon, something someone has been undergoing and which the individual, as a social and cultural being, at least partly creates himself”. It is often stressed in the literature that experiences and tourism experiences should include unique features that have positive value for the person involved (Lüthje & Tarssanen, 2013). The experience pyramid (see Figure 1 summarizes the key experience elements in tourism.

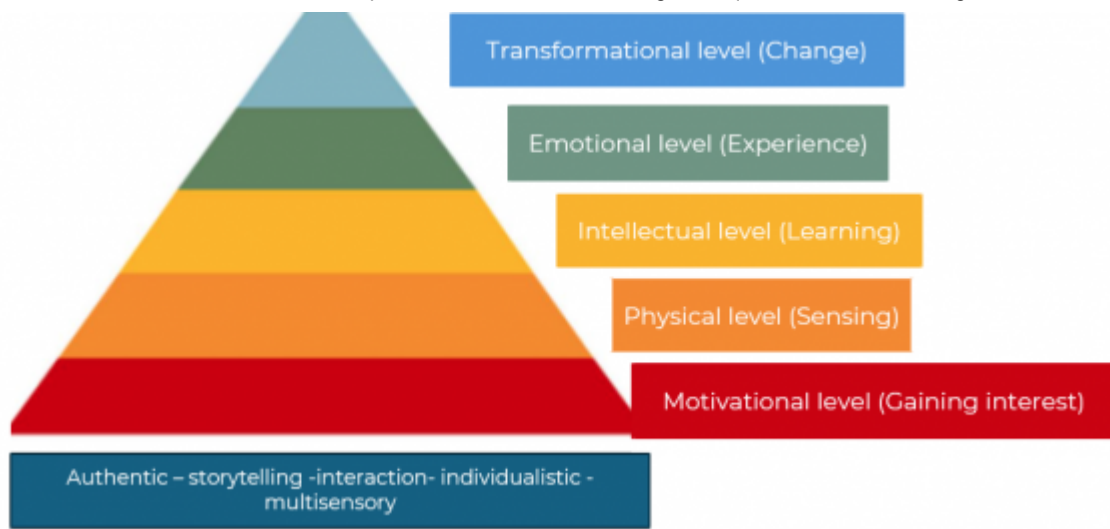


Figure 1. The experience pyramid (modified from Tarssanen, 2009)

According to Tarssanen (2009) good experiences in tourism are authentic, individualistic, and based on storytelling and interaction. Moreover, experiences should activate all senses i.e. be multisensory. The difference between a tourism product and an experience is that the experience offers more than gaining interest. The experience will make the tourist sense and learn, it will affect the emotions and, if possible, result in a transformation of the state of mind. How can a tourism entrepreneur then start the ideation process for new experiences?

## Customer understanding and opportunity map

Customer understanding is usually highlighted as the starting point for experience development (see e.g. Tarssanen, 2009). In the Light in the Dark project the survey, conducted at the beginning of the project, provided a good insight into what kinds of activities potential tourists to the Baltic Sea region would like to experience during off-season. Small and medium-sized tourism companies, however, usually have limited resources for innovation and hence product development must start from the existing resources. Consequently, the tool “opportunity map” was modified to fit this



Figure 2. Opportunity map (modified from Drivhuset, 2023)

The opportunity map offers companies a concrete tool to reflect upon their own resources, upon which they base their new products or experiences. In tourism, many experiences are offered within a network of companies and thus the existing contacts are extremely important to be elaborated.

## Reflections from the first workshops

The tourism entrepreneurs were exposed to the theory of product development and sustainable business model development, in order to improve the three experiences identified in the Light in the Dark survey in the target countries. The whole workshop process started with a discussion about potential customers interested in off-season experiences. Descriptions in the form of personas were prepared by the entrepreneurs. Next, the entrepreneurs discussed the main value that destinations located in the Baltic Sea region can offer tourists during the off-season. It was highlighted that destinations need to take the experiences offered to an emotional or transformational level (see Figure 1). Further, they were introduced to the opportunity map (by Drivhuset), to start reflecting on what their company could offer tourists during the off-season. The companies had a lot of competence and some unique resources, but generally lacked contacts and networks to be able to reach out to potential customers overseas.

## Conclusion

Crafting off-season tourism experiences that enable the traveler to feel, taste, touch, and immerse themselves in places they visit, is an intricate process that demands both knowledge and creativity from the entrepreneurs involved in the Light in the Dark project. The strong pull factors of the sun and sea during high season must be exchanged for new pull factors that fit the off-season and will attract potential new customers. These customers are likely to be international tourists, as the nature tribe identified as the key target group for unique experiences in the coastal areas of the Baltic Sea live in big European cities. Many travelers from the Nordic countries are not prepared to pay enormous sums of money for nature-based experiences, as they are used to spending time in nature since their childhood.

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