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**THEMATIC EVENINGS: ANALYSE OF A PR PROJECT IN A**  
**TOURISM COMPANY**

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*Abstract*

The traditional methods used for communication in Public Relations prove sometimes to be insufficient or without expected results on targeted campaigns. Even small companies need to rethink and invent new strategies in such a way that their products and services have the desired impact to customers. The purpose of this paper is to make an analysis of a communication strategy which is less used in public relation: conceptual events named thematic evenings (TE) having as main items locations for possible cultural, gastronomic or recreational tourism. This paper is a retrospective study on a number of 15 events which took place during two years being designed in order to facilitate and spread specific cultural and touristic values from different parts of the world to the public. I made a multifactorial analysis taking as landmarks the number of participants, sociological distribution on age and professions, formal and informal impact of these thematic events. We discuss the outcomes, on medium and long term reflected on oral and written feed-back from customers. My own contribution is represented by the concept, design, logistic and realization of these conceptual events and the analysis of the feed-back taking into account different criteria. The results and the conclusions of these 15 conceptual events are detailed in the text with tables and graphics which reflect the socio-professional distribution of participants and show the interest to cultural tourism in the west part of Romania.

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**Keywords:** Public relation, thematic evenings, conceptual events, communication strategy, tourist experience.



## 1. Introduction

Many small organizations don't fully understand the role of a PR specialist in their business. There is a lack of specialists in communication on labour market, so the work of a PR specialist is hardly appreciated (David, 2015). Although, because of new generations on specialists in communication, this job begins to be recognized in public institutions, family business or big companies. Managers started to call PR companies to help them improve their images (Grunig, 1992).

The question of most of the managers is: why do I need a specialist in public relation in my company/organization/public institution? Bernard Dagenais (Dagenais 2002, 2003) gives some answers to this inevitable question. So, he thinks that public relations are practiced because we cannot live without communication, or because drawing attention, or in order to inform, to create a climate of sympathy, to resolve a problem, to manage a challenge, to improve an image, to defend us, to influence public opinion, to answer journalists' or public questions or to deal with socioeconomic complexity of nowadays. Whether is about one or all of these reasons, companies begun to understand the role of PR specialists became as important as the role of a specialist in human resources, financial or material resources (Marconi, 2007, Newsom, 2010).

The present article studies a specific PR instrument which is a conceptual event, and which we called Thematic Evenings (TE) designed and realise in a small travel agency in Timisoara, West Romania. We constitute them into a larger project of 15 events, as a promotion campaign (Rus, 2009). They consist in a monthly event performed in the same place (a calling gallery of modern art, having a good visibility) with a well prepared scenario: a conferences hold by a native speaker from different locations of the world, slide presentation, short videos, artistic moments and artefacts, free discussions and a small buffet of traditional gastronomy. At the end, a tombola was organised with more prizes, a free travel into the region and small artefacts.

## 2. Problem Statement

PR Problems in tourism

- There are several major problems in contemporary tourism from which small companies are extremely affected (Ryan, 2010). The first problem is competition with online platforms (which encourage individual tourism). Platforms like booking.com or trivago.ro encourage people to make their own reservations online, although all that someone can find about a hotel is some pictures and a short description. People are attracted by special offers or discounts so they book their travel online, even they don't have the opinion of a specialist about those place. The lack of proper information is completed with internet searches, forums or other social media sources.
- Compared to the '90s when most of reservations and vacations were made trough travel agencies, nowadays most of reservations are made trough online platforms. This affect the activity of small travel agencies: tourism advisers, formely important in companies, reduce in numbers or are hired because clients consider them unnecessary.

- Individual documentation is another problem. Most of the tourists read and discover places on internet: blogs, articles, forums, so they don't appeal to travel advisers (a lot of ourists think that they have to pay for a consultation with a specialized travel adviser in a agency).
- Discouragement of clients because of bad services might be one of the reasons why they don't make a reservations with a travel agency. If the potential clients hear a negative story from another tourist, they don't want to have the same experience and they accuse the travel agency for all the problems. In this respect , travel forums are the most important means for both favorable and unfavorable opinions and influence actively the choices of potential custommers.
- In Romania there are a lot of so-called „ghost companies” – travel agencies who disappeared with clients' money and they don have the vacations which they paid for.

### **3. Research Questions**

Analyse of a new PR method in tourism: thematic evenings, a conceptual event who wants to re-establish customer confidence in touristic products sold by a travel agency.

#### **3.1. The PR concept in a travel agency**

The PR concept in a travel agency refers first of all on creating a positive image of the company (seriousness, readiness, kindness, etc.). In travel, the potential tourists want to be sure that they travel with a serious, professional agency which takes care of them during all vacation. Seriousness, readiness, kindness are qualities which are very appreciate on travel advisers and on travel companies (Weiermair 2000).

My general research question for this issue was: how a specific PR campaign (thematic evenings), performed in a given time interval (2 years) could restore and promote valuable travel values? From this general question more specific and particular questions arise, connected with particulars scope and items (Marconi, 2007).

Loyal customers can be obtained when they feel that the agency take care of them before, during and after their vacation. They can be motivated and encouraged with discounts, e-mails with special offers and other special promotions so they can feel that they have a special personal relation with the travel agency. Our question was: Could TE improve the customer loyalty?

Differentiation from competition can be a challenge, because almost all companies use the same PR strategy and ways to promote their services. A PR specialist can improve the image of the company, with ideas differentiating one agency from others through events or a particular strategy (Kotler, 2008) Can TE be a useful strategy for differentiation?

Active feed-back from clients is a method for customer loyalty and also for maintaining a good, positive image (for example testimonials from clients published on site). Encouraging satisfied customers to publish references on forums or personal social media pages is very effective, because it doesn't come directly from the company but from lay people. The question was: if, and how can improve TE the feedback?

Authenticity is one of the most appreciated value for tourist experience (Sharpley, 2010). Suggesting authentic experiences, penetration behind the touristic artificial veil and interaction with ~real

life~ might be a strong argument for the choice of a travel agency services. By calling native speakers and presenting various aspects of the “inner life” of different places, TE by themselves are prone to encourage the search of authenticity and the feeling of understanding things and places from inside. Is TE such a mean? Did we succeed?

All these PR methods can be developed by a passionate PR specialist. Many travel agencies don't understand the necessity of him and use all employees for these kinds of activities. The differentiation is huge, because another employee doesn't have enough time and knowledge to develop PR strategies, so these are treated with superficiality.

### **3.2. Traditional Methods in Touristic PR**

There are several traditional methods used by most of travel companies: offline methods (posters, banners, catalogs, flyers, SMS, phones) and online methods (website, social media, e-mail marketing, newsletter) (Coman, 2004).

Participation on tourism fairs is one of the most important activity from which a company can be known. But these methods are used by all companies, hence particularisation of agencies is difficult.

Promoting tourism by PR activities includes encouraging public desire to visit some touristic destinations, organizing trips on those places, ensuring good travel conditions and also the safety of tourists. Tourism promotions is mainly based on classic methods: inoor and outdoor promotions through posters, banners, flyers, brochures and catalogues and also through burning of promotional objects, mass-media and social media promotions. Periodically, travel agencies organize events on which they promote their destinations using catalogues, presentations videos and they go to travel fairs.

### **3.3. Differentiation and specification**

*Differentiation* consider all PR means and instruments to built a different image from concurency. What TE was designed for was to differentiate the company from the more or less indistinct mass of similar travel agencies in the area, making possible custommers be aware about the novelty and interest of such perspective.

*Specification* means the particular methods used for specific events to create a positive image of the company. In the market area we discuss, TE were for a long time specific for the company, which arose to be known as “those who organize TE, calling natives, presenting nice videos and giving nice food”

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

This paper makes an analysis of a communication strategy which is less used in public relation: conceptual events (TE) having as main items locations for possible cultural, gastronomic or recreational tourism. Our purpose was double:

1. To improve by a new method of PR the image of the company, promoting such values as differentiation, specification and authenticity and evaluate the outcomes (Balaban, 2008)

2. To evaluate if and how such a method might bring general benefits for PR as a discipline (Cmeciu, 2013)

#### **4.1. Motivations**

The two main motivations of the study were to improve and boost the contact between the company and customers, on one side, and between the customer's and the possible locations to travel, on the other side. TE was designated as a method to go beyond the well-known consumerism of tourism industry (Ryan, 2010). For customers TE had as main objectives

- Resonating with local values can inspire to visit a destination
- People feel that they are inside a new world through stories, food, pictures, music
- Thematic evenings combine a cultural event with a touristic one.

#### **4.2. The trip before the travel**

The education dimension of TE cannot be under evaluated: in the conceptual event participants are invited to gaze into a different and mostly unknown world. One of the theory on tourism experience emphasise the role of gaze and the factual visual framework of most PR campaigns (Ryan, 2010). TE were design for more than a simple gaze, although the visual dimension (slides, videos, objects) were major part of it: it was design as a virtual "trip before the travel" trying to go beyond the clichés used in industry. Before TE we conceived an information campaign consisting in posters which were regularly spread on media, both social media, newspapers and traditional places where posters could be seen (Figure 01 and Figure 02). The complete list of TE is presented below (Table 01). There were two main aspects which tried to create and recreate the local atmosphere:

- The invited speakers are originals from the country or place in discussion and the short conferences were generally constructed on their own personal experience and its reconsideration after taking contact with Romanian culture (most of them having residency in Timisoara). As such they had double perspective, from both sides and they could know and understand what could be of interest for participants and relieve the specificity of local culture and life.
- The objectual framework consisting in pieces of folk art and gastronomy. These added new dimension in the trip, not just visual, but tactile and tastily as well. Taste, shapes, colours dances, music and gastronomy had attendance to provide a multidimensional and multisensory trip before the eventual journey.



**Table 01.** list of TE

- June 2013: INDIAN STORIES
- JULY 2013: MEDITERRANEAN STORIES
- August 2013: NORDIC STORIES
- September 2013: ITALIAN EVENING
- October 2013: DANUBIAN WINTER
- November 2013: SPANISH EVENING
- December 2013: TOP 10 WINTER DESTINATIONS IN 2014
- February 2014: WINTER STORIES
- March 2014: SPRING ESCAPE
- April 2014: FAIRYTALE DESTINATIONS
- May 2014: EUROPE DAY STORIES
- October 2014: 1001 ORIENTAL STORIES
- December 2014: WINTER FAIRYTALES
- March 2015: SPRING ESCAPE
- June 2015: INDIA – INNER HAPPINESS

The hypothesis that leads to design these conceptual events TE was that a multidimensional experience sensorial and cultural would be a better way to promote new locations and arouse interest.

## 5. Research Methods

We made a multifactorial analysis taking as landmarks the number of participants, sociological distribution on age and professions, formal and informal impact of these thematic events. We discuss the outcomes, on medium and long term reflected on oral and written feed-back from customers.

### 5.1. Feedback forms

Every participant had to complete a questioner about their preference on travel and their budget for next trip. One of the questions was about the evaluation of TE (in degrees from 0 to 10), if these could decide them to visit specific locations and questions about improvement of TE.

### 5.2. Feedback and commentaries on social media and forums

We prospected Facebook, twitter, Instagram and travel forums to observe the wave of impact in social media by shares, likes and comments. From time to time, few commentaries on forums appeared mostly favourable.

### 5.3. Feedback in the travel agency (at the office or site)

During the study period all visitors in the agency office were asked where from do they know about the agency and the travel they want to make.

### 5.4. Observation

In all TE were made photos and videos and based on them we made an analyse of reactions, feedback, interest points.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Number of participants

As seen below in graphic 01 at the beginning, in June 2013 the number of participants slightly less than 20. After four events, in October 2013 it reached 40 participants, to gain a peak of participants in January 2014 (70). These increase in the number of participants we considered as a success of both promotion and organization of TE and interestingly the place described in the event apparently was not major impact factor. From the peak number in January, there was a relative stabile number during the spring months (between 40 and 60) and decrease during summer vacation with a new pick a 70 in December 2014. An important factor that influenced participation was most seemingly the period of the year and vacations times.

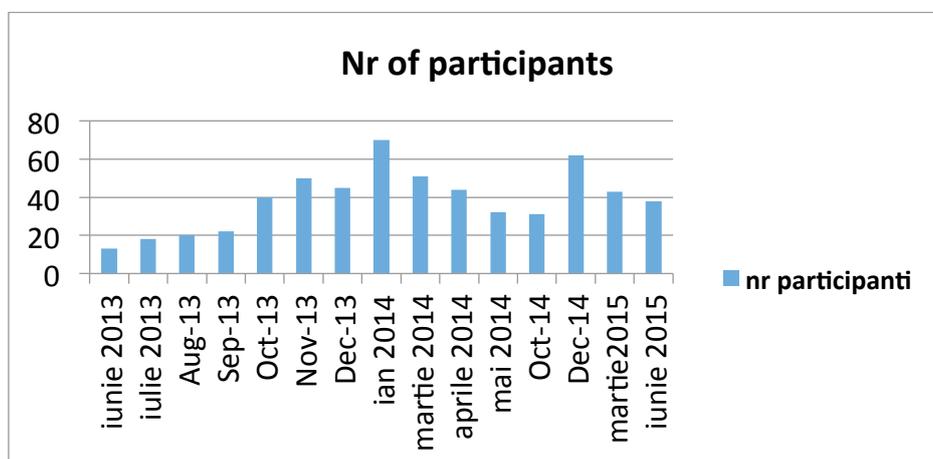


Figure 03. Number of participants

## 6.2. Age distribution

As seen in Figure 01, 49% are middle age persons. The second category (between 16 – 25) is mostly students and young people accustomed with social media who find out about these events from internet events created on Facebook. The third category is elder people with relative stable economic situation who can eventually afford vacation in suggested locations. The relative consist number of children (9%) can be explained by the fact that in some three events we invited school children to perform artistic moments (for Christmas, Mother's day and Easter) and afterwards they remain as participants and tasters of traditional sweets. The small number of people in retirement may be explaining by general lack of means of this category in Romania. Similar studies about customers of travel agency in Germany or France revealed much larger number of retired people making tourism in these two countries. On the other hand, in the questionnaires about what was the reason why they come a frequent answer was because they want to see an event about a strange location as a show, not necessarily as customers. For them, tombola and possibility to gain a trip was another reason.

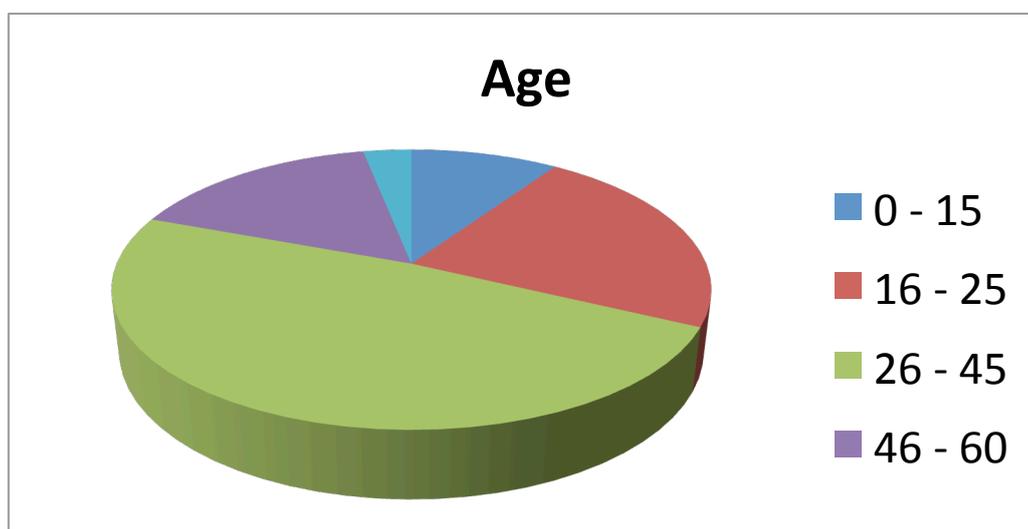
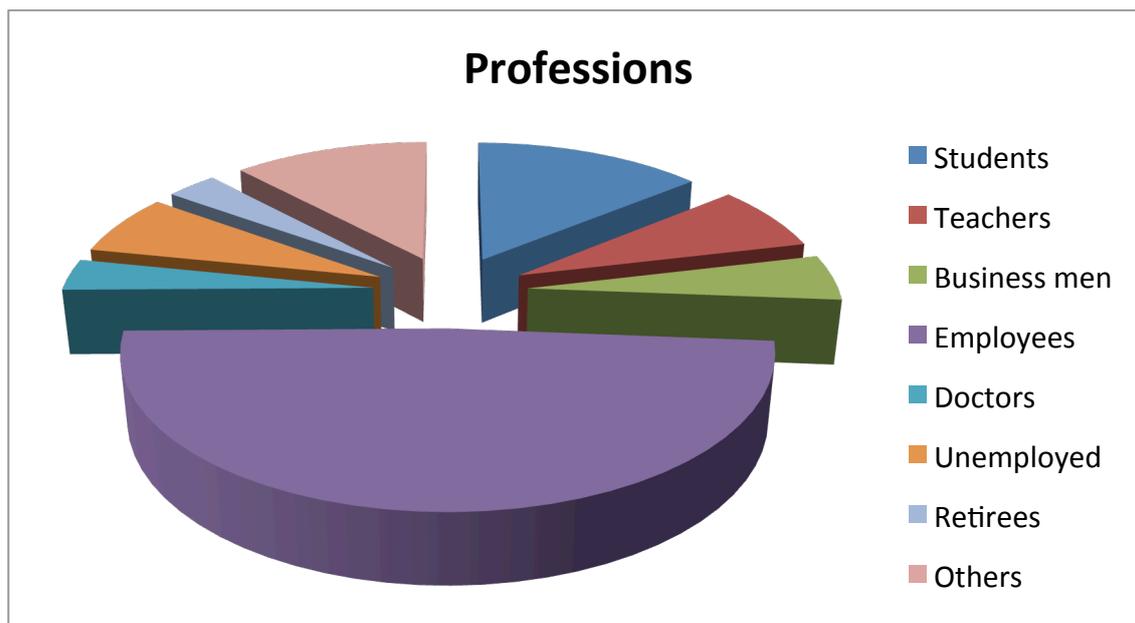


Figure 04. Sociological distribution on age

## 6.3. Profession distribution

We can build a profile of the attendance at TE: most of them (approx. 50%) are employees and middle age which are the most possible potential customers. The second category is represented by students, most probably by curiosity then intention to buy soon a trip. For the rest of categories we have relatively even distribution between self-standing people like doctors, teachers and business men.



**Figure 05.** Sociological distribution on profession

The main positive outcomes in the questionnaires refers to:

1. The creation of a social and cultural event with an exotic issue
2. Transparency of the company towards customers: one of the usual positive comment was participants could feel that the company is not just an abstract entity, but a human enterprise which cares about the needs, tastes and impression of possible customers. By these events not only the company became more visible, but the people who work in the company and the way it conceive the relation with the public became approachable and closely human. This step of passing from an abstract entity to a human enterprise was afterwards reflected in the calls and emails at the office: people already knew which whom they deal with.
3. The internet and social media presence was highly appreciated (more than 70% of responders both in form and content). Many feedbacks for TE came later on Facebook, Instagram or twitter.

## 7. Conclusion

We cannot state a general conclusion for the concept of TE because of the reduced number and manufactured way we performed it. All in all it was an experiment through which we tried to perform a multidimensional PR campaign with both commercial and educational purposes. For this reason our conclusions are limited and temporary leaving space for further development:

- Conceptual event campaign had a greater impact on public than was initially planned.
- The first intention was to create a brand reinforcement by differentiation and specification.
- The people gather as in a club where they can listen travel stories.
- 78% of the public was the same at all TE, so we can see people need interaction, to be part of a community with similar wishes, to create connections with other people with whom they can travel together. Most of the participants were between 26 – 45 (281) and the less were over 60.

- More than just selling some touristic products, this agency creates a lot of sympathy, has made a lot of friends and constant collaborators, and manage to be known on local market as a serious, implicate, a company with human faces behind.
- The participants have completed questionnaires at the end of each thematic evening, and this revealed the fact that the main gain which they had were the new things they learned.
- TE transformed the agency from an average tour operator into a well-known company in the area recognized by its implication on cultural, social and entertainment events.

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